

Museum on Main Street

Exhibition Description

Between Fences

We live between fences. We may hardly notice them, but they are dominant features in our lives and in our history. Thousands of types have been invented, millions of miles have been produced, and countless rivals have seized post, rail, panel, and wire to stake their claims. In 1871, the Department of Agriculture estimated the total value of fences in the United States at 1.7 billion, a sum almost equal to the national debt. Our past is defined by the cutting point of barbed steel and the staccato rhythm of the white picket. Built of hedge, concrete, wood and metal, the fence skirts our properties and is central to the American landscape.

The United States as we know it could not have been settled and built without fences; they continue to be an integral part of the nation. Fences stand for security: we use them to enclose our houses and neighborhoods. They are decorative structures that are as much part of the landscape as trees and flowers. Industry and agriculture without fences would be difficult to imagine. Private ownership of land would be an abstract concept. But fences are more than functional objects. They are powerful symbols. The way we define ourselves as individuals and as a nation becomes concrete in how we build fences.

Between Fences focuses on every region of the United States. Its subjects include the defining of home, farm, and factory; the settling of the United States; the closing of the range in the South and its meaning to former slaves; and the making of fences, including a look at why Abe Lincoln became known as a rail splitter. It examines human relationships on an expanding scale: neighbor versus neighbor; gated communities; and the Mexican and Canadian borders of the U.S. The exhibition tells American stories through diverse fence types. The *worm fence*, one of the most widely built types in American history, attracted the attention of many eighteenth and nineteenth-century visitors to the United States; its unique design contributed to international understanding of American society. The *picket fence* plays a legendary role in the United States: it is the very symbol of home. Battles between farmers and ranchers, fought with *barbed wire fence*, were flash points in the nationwide debate over enclosure and access to land and resources. The *chain link fence* has come to surround playgrounds, factories, and houses. The industrialization of the fence - and with it, land and house - is essential for understanding contemporary life.

Between Fences will enlighten audiences who live surrounded by these familiar objects whose history and meaning they hardly suspect. They will discover how tightly the fence is entwined with politics, industry, and daily life. The ability to expose the unexpected within the familiar - while revealing to visitors something about themselves - will be the exhibition's great strength. *Between Fences* encourages visitors to feel the significance of a crucial aspect of their personal and national heritage. Fences, like barns, are tools that embody a culture and its values. By understanding both historic and contemporary fences, we can better understand ourselves as Americans.

The exhibition will engage children and adults while providing a setting for family communications and interaction between unacquainted visitors. The subject of the exhibition - boundaries, place, and space - will be central to the visitors' physical experience, as they walk between fences and through gateways. Each fence will be selected to represent a theme and tell a story that illustrates its theme in provocative ways. In addition to objects and images relating to the exhibition stories, fence materials will include tools, photographs, and publications including product literature, journals, postcards, and posters.