

# PRESERVING PLACES: REFLECTIONS ON THE NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT AT FIFTY FROM *THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN*



A digital publication from National Council on Public History  
Tamara Gaskell, ed. October 2016

*History@Work* and *The Public Historian*

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# EDITORIAL NOTE: PRESERVING IN PLACE THE STORIES THAT MATTER

// TAMARA GASKELL

On October 15, 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the [National Historic Preservation Act](#) (NHPA) into law and formally established historic preservation as a priority of the federal government. Since that time, individuals and communities across the nation have used the structures and powers it established, such as the [National Register](#), state and tribal preservation offices, and the [Section 106](#) review process, to both draw attention to important and threatened places significant to our local, state, and national stories and to preserve those places so that future generations will also be able to connect with the stories that they hold.<sup>1</sup>

To commemorate and reflect upon the legacy of this act, and to ponder its future, *The Public Historian* commissioned a dozen brief essays that looked back upon articles on preservation published in its pages and considered them in the light of current ideas and practices. It then published these essays on the National Council on Public History's *History@Work* blog in 2015–16. Because those essays, in conjunction with the articles they comment on, comprise a useful reflection on the achievements and the limitations of the act, *The Public Historian* decided to gather them together in an e-publication to make them more accessible for consultation, study, or classroom use. We also commissioned two new essays that look to the NHPA's future. Mary Rizzo, who conceived of and edited the blog project, contributes an introduction that highlights some of the themes that emerge from these essays.

The NHPA recognizes that history, as rooted in place, plays an essential role in our sense of both individual and collective identity. Because of that, its use and interpretation have changed over time, and it must continue to do so. Though architecture has been and remains an important criterion for preservation, it is the stories that live in these places that ultimately are what matter and that we seek to protect. These stories are what give meaning—to places and to our lives.

1 <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>; <https://www.nps.gov/nr/index.htm>; <http://www.achp.gov/106summary.html>.



Representatives from the Jewish Museum of Maryland, Coppin Heights CDC, Association of Rosemont Community Organizations, Preservation Maryland, and Baltimore Heritage at the Hebrew Orphan Asylum. Built in 1876, the Hebrew Orphan Asylum is not only the first Jewish orphanage in Maryland, it is now the oldest standing Jewish orphanage in the United States. Photo by Baltimore Heritage (CC BY 2.0, via Flickr).

# INTRODUCTION: BUILDING STORIES

// MARY RIZZO

The apartment building in Chicago thought, “I’ve never seen *her* before,” and straightened itself to its grandest height. “You shoulda *seen* me in my heyday, honey.” The focal point of graphic novelist Chris Ware’s brilliant *Building Stories*, this building allows us to see the interconnected lives of the people who live in it, from a down-at-the-heel family in the first decade of the twentieth century to the one-legged woman who rents a room in the first decades of the twenty-first. While they interact with each other irregularly, their stories accumulate among the stately but crumbling walls of this formerly fine edifice. The structure contains these memories, becoming its repository and the catalyst for the stories that follow.

With the passage of the [National Historic Preservation Act](#) (NHPA)<sup>1</sup> in 1966, Congress seemed to agree that old buildings are important, especially as part of our collective, rather than personal, memory. As the act argued, the built environment was being irrevocably changed in the 1950s and 1960s by urban renewal and highway construction and “preservation of this irreplaceable heritage is in the public interest.” To preserve and protect, though, required the creation of a set of rules and a bureaucratic infrastructure. This bureaucracy came to include the [National Register of Historic Places](#), [National Historic Landmarks](#), and [state preservation offices](#),<sup>2</sup> whose job was to judge whether the nominated places were truly significant enough for preservation.

As we commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of the NHPA, it is clear that this law is a

complicated piece of legislation that has had both beneficial and harmful effects in the course of its history. To analyze the act’s impact, its strengths, and its flaws, and to make recommendations for the future, NCPH commissioned a group of experts, from archaeologists to activists to planners, to comment on the NHPA. They did so by responding to a series of articles that had been published in *The Public Historian* on historic preservation since the founding of the journal. As the editor of the series, I envisioned it as a dialogue across time. What had the leading journal in public history been saying about historic preservation over several decades? What would current leaders in the field think looking back on these pieces? Drawing from both, what would we learn about how we should adapt or change the act for the next fifty years?

This e-book contains all of the posts that we published on *History@Work*, plus two original pieces by Kim Campbell of the Historic Macon Foundation and Dan Vivian of the University of Louisville. There’s a wealth of knowledge here. My goal is simply to identify some of the common themes contained within.

In terms of the positive aspects of the act, the most important is, of course, its’ success in preservation. In many ways, the NHPA accomplished its goal—it helped to save buildings that might otherwise have been lost to urban renewal and development. The destruction of New York’s original Penn Station, which preservationists fought hard to prevent, is still counted as a major loss. But alongside it now stand many successes,



Photograph of an official National Register of Historic Places plaque. By Jonathunder. Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons.

more than ninety thousand, in fact, the number of properties on the National Register of Historic Places. This extraordinary number shows how the NHPA has helped cities and towns across the country retain a sense of place. Less tangibly than the buildings, though, is the sensibility that has accompanied the act: the idea that this Place Matters (in the words of the National Trust for Historic Preservation) has led, in many instances, to grassroots advocacy campaigns.

Secondly, the NHPA has been extremely beneficial to the field of public history. Alongside the creation of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1965 and the state humanities councils in the early 1970s, the NHPA was part of a flowering of state support for public history projects and research. Public historians learn their craft and pay their bills by writing National Register

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nominations, working at state historic preservation offices, and teaching others how to research their home's history. Suggesting the close relationship between the two are the number of articles published in *The Public Historian* about preservation. To choose the most significant articles on historic preservation from *The Public Historian*, we began with a nomination process (inspired, perhaps, by the NHPA) that included experts from the field and readers of *History@Work*. Using data-mining technology, I analyzed the complete run of the journal and found that between 1978 and 2013, the journal published a total of 820 articles that included the phrase "historic preservation." While the rate of publication on the topic fluctuated by decade (<http://ncph.org/history-at-work/tph-nhpa-nomination-reminder/>), this number suggests how important this topic is to public historians. What would public history look like if Congress had never passed the NHPA? It is hard to imagine.

But more important than these benefits are the criticisms that our writers raised, along with their suggestions for improvement. As elsewhere in public history, the conversation about inclusivity in historic preservation is an active and ongoing one. Historic preservation has often been dominated by elite whites intent on preserving monumental buildings connected to dominant political narratives. Dan Vivian notes that "gender and sexuality" is missing as a category of national significance for the National Register, while African American history is awkwardly described as "Ethnic History: Black." People of color have often been excluded from the preservation planning process, even within their own neighborhoods, issues considered by David Rotenstein and Sam Imperatrice. Or, worse, historic preservation has led to gentrification that resulted in their dispersal from their historic homes. As Darlene Taylor asked in her post, "When the preservation of heritage is the vision of the privileged few, is the American public being served?" Clearly, this is a key area for the future. How can we make sure that historic preservation is inclusive of the stories of all Americans?

A start is to move away from overly technical definitions of significance toward thinking expansively about community and story as the foundation of preservation. Understanding how the act came to be and its founding ideas is critical, as James Glass describes. A number of other writers suggest, though, that the NHPA has become rigid. Kim Campbell explains that continuously occupied buildings are often changed over time to serve their residents' needs. "In National Register terms, these modifications, which are often less than fifty years old, can change the character of the structure so much that it no longer has the necessary integrity to merit

listing as a contributing structure." Often these buildings are located in historically African American districts. As Carroll West argues, following from John Sprinkle's article in *The Public Historian*, the NHPA includes a guideline that properties must be at least fifty years old to be considered historically significant, but this is not a rule. Sites from the recent past have been preserved, though their age is seen as a major stumbling block. The main criterion is "exceptional importance." Such a subjective categorization leads to its own problems. What makes a property important? Is it architectural detail or its meaning within and to a community? And how do we deal with properties that don't fit neatly into categories? This question is considered by Brenda Barrett about historic cemeteries and Rebekah Dobrasko regarding bridges, roadways, and landfills.

As important is bringing in a wider array of professional voices into the preservation conversation. Natalie Perrin, Leo Vazquez, and Liz Almlie point out the need for historians to work closely with archaeologists, cultural resource managers, landscape architects, and government bureaucracies. Public historians, who have experience working with community groups and are also skilled historians, are ideally situated to mediate what can be contentious conversations. Ensuring that we have a place at the table will mean that we can "prove that history was relevant, democratic, and as important as aesthetic or economic claims for preservation" (Almlie). We can help to fight against the romanticization of the past as heritage, as Joe Watkins discussed.

This is what is at stake when we fight to preserve buildings—our memory and our history. On the last page of *Building Stories* the one-legged woman returns years later to her former residence. She drives past upscale boutiques and a Starbucks, harbingers of the gentrification of the neighborhood. The old building is for sale, next to an empty lot that will soon become a modern, glass-fronted apartment complex. Nostalgic, she wonders what happened to her elderly landlady and the other people she knew. But soon she has to leave for an appointment. The back cover shows the main characters around an inset image—a wrecking ball slamming into the building. In Ware's fictional world, there is no slowing the passage of time, as represented by the demolition of this place. In ours, there is an opportunity to fight to preserve the past for the present and the future.

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1 <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>.

2 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/index.htm>; <https://www.nps.gov/nhl/>; <https://www.nps.gov/nr/shpolist.htm>.

# CAN HISTORIANS HELP PLANNERS MAKE BETTER FUTURES?

// LEONARDO VAZQUEZ

POSTED JANUARY 6, 2015

Urban planners have accepted many of Stephen Grable's arguments in ["Applying Urban History to City Planning: A Case Study in Atlanta"](#) (1979).<sup>1</sup> Using a mixed-use development in Atlanta's Bedford-Pines neighborhood as his focus, he complained that planners ignored the insights of urban historians, who would have told them that one development could not curb the momentum of people moving away from the central city.<sup>2</sup> Without historical perspective, he suggests, planners, architects, and developers make unrealistic assumptions about human behavior, leading city officials to make poor decisions.

Today, however, planners take history more seriously. They include local history in master plans for cities or communities. Some planners have become historic preservationists, using their knowledge of land use regulations and urban design to protect older buildings and historic sites. Students in accredited planning programs are required to learn the history of planning and human settlement.

Given these advances, are Grable's arguments still relevant? Should urban historians get more involved in urban planning and development? As an urban planner with two decades of experience and little training in historical analysis, I think historians should actively seek to advise anyone whose work changes the form and functions of places—planners, developers, architects, community and economic development professionals, and, of course, public officials.

Grable offers four approaches to historical analysis to help planners and architects avoid similar mistakes: city biography, new urban history, oral history, and urban structuring. He recommends urban structuring because it "alone combines an awareness of environmental features with the historical developments that shape residential and commercial patterns." Instead of looking at a project in isolation, urban structuring challenges analysts to explore the "historical development of its various localities: neighborhoods, commercial districts, and suburban developments" (52). The goal is to see how the site in question fits within the context of the area and how the pieces came together.

This is similar to systems thinking, an approach emphasized in planning for decades. Systems thinking encourages practitioners to look at environments as a system made up of interconnecting parts. Any change in one part of the system has an effect on all others. Urban structuring contributes a historical dimension to systems thinking that can help practitioners analyze

an area in both space and time. For example, Grable's analysis of Atlanta didn't consider that when large numbers of people moved to the suburbs, problems of crime and congestion—supposedly urban issues—would follow. The bucolic green spaces that ex-Atlanteans enjoyed when they first moved out would become housing developments, parking lots, and rubberstamp fast food places. And now the population shift has reversed. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, by 2011, [the population in the city of Atlanta was growing faster than its suburbs](#).<sup>3</sup> Atlanta was not alone: in twenty-seven out of fifty-one major metropolitan areas cities were growing faster than suburbs.

Today, urban planners and architects ignore a community's history at their own peril. In the 1970s, many public officials were just starting to recognize the inherent beauty of century-old buildings. Today, a growing number realize the economic value of marketing the experience of visiting historic buildings, sites, and districts since this experience is one of the few things you can't purchase on the Internet. Cultural heritage tourism—based on selling access to history and culturally authentic



Downtown Atlanta as seen from the state capitol in 1889. Few would have expected that by the Twenty-first century the city would be growing faster than its suburbs. Photo credit: *Atlanta Journal Constitution*.

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experiences—is a growing field and a standard element in a destination marketing professional's portfolio. Historic preservation groups that in Grable's time were newly formed may today be vocal and influential advocates in urban development. In fact, I have heard some development officials in New Jersey grumble about what they call "hysterical preservationists."

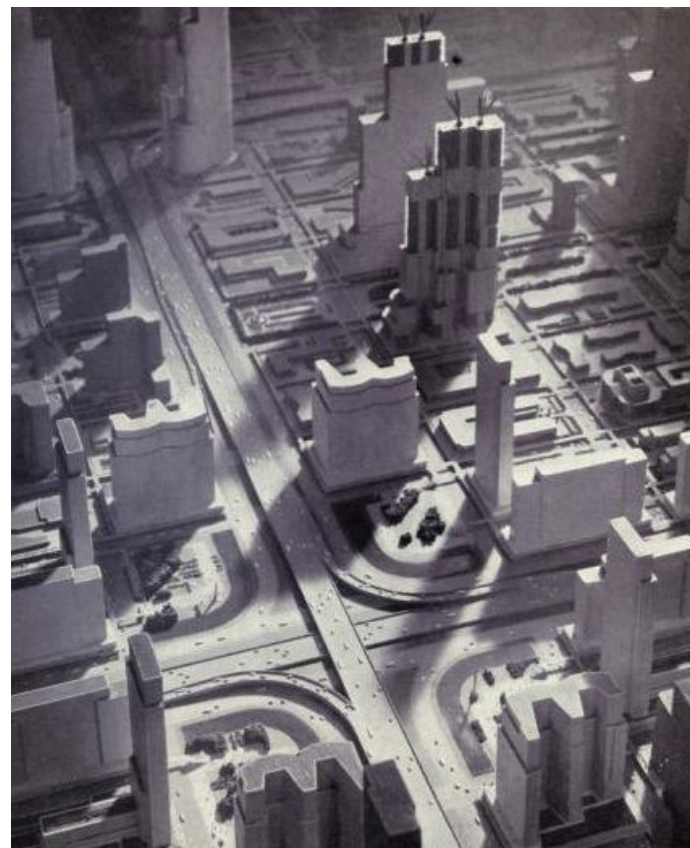
Deeper conversations between historic preservationists and urban planners can help both professions. In many communities, planners and architects believe that beautiful old buildings and sites should be preserved and protected. The question now, in an increasingly diverse society, is how to balance the interests of some members of the community to protect their heritage with the interests of others to showcase their own histories in the public realm. Much of the growth in cities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was driven by immigrants and migrants from other regions (such as African Americans moving from the South to northern cities). Should a Portuguese family be denied the chance to put decorative tiles on their house in 2014 because they would cover over Victorian-era clapboard? Should a young storeowner from the Caribbean, where colors are so vibrant, be required to paint his storefront in colors that have been approved by a local Design Review Board made up of older Anglo-Americans? This question gets into the sticky issues of power relationships among class, race, and ethnicity. For what one person might be an ugly building or a recognition of some trivial event is for another a symbol of his/her continuing stake in that society. Grable offers some good lasting advice for historians. Professional historians can play a role in teaching planning and design professionals other ways to look at a community's history. Planners, who are trained to analyze communities, can learn new ways of seeing places.

Over two decades of planning practice, I rarely, if ever, consulted local historians. I was content to read the condensed, consensus version of a community's past. It was interesting, but not particularly useful for the future. Recently, I took on a project to plan a park in northern New Jersey. After reading Grable, I called the head of the city's historic society and invited him to be part of the project steering committee.

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1 Stephen W. Grable, "Applying Urban History to City Planning: A Case Study in Atlanta," *The Public Historian* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1979): 45–59, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/1/4/45>.

2 Unfortunately, we can't really know if Grable was correct. According to *Atlanta: Race, Class and Urban Expansion*, by Larry Keating, the project described by Grable added more than 1,400 units, but few were for low-income and moderate-income residents, as expected. Without further analysis, it is difficult to know whether the units attracted or



The Futurama exhibit at the 1939 World's Fair inspired many urban planners whose interests were in a hypermodern future rather than understanding the past. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

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helped retain residents in Atlanta, or just provided new housing for people who were committed to stay in the city.

3 Conor Dougherty and Robbie Whelan, "Cities Outpace Suburbs in Growth," *Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2012, <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304830704577493032619987956>.



# AN UNEASY FIT HISTORY IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

// LIZ ALMLIE

POSTED FEBRUARY 23, 2015

Eleven years after earning a 1966 PhD in history from Washington State University, J. Meredith Neil arrived to work as the first historian hired to the relatively large staff of Seattle's historic preservation office. He pulled strongly from his experience, and I'd dare say frustrations, in that new role for his 1980 article for *The Public Historian*, "[Is There a Historian in the House? The Curious Case of Historic Preservation.](#)"<sup>1</sup> Neil argued that historians needed to be involved in preservation to prove that history was relevant, democratic, and as important as aesthetic or economic claims for preservation. From South Carolina's equalization schools to Brutalist architecture, history has been successfully used to argue for the preservation of places that may not have initially been appealing for reasons of architecture or economics. Working for a [State Historic Preservation Office](#),<sup>2</sup> I have also seen that, while history and preservation often intersect, they do not always share motivations, people, or goals. The engagement of historians in preservation is critical, but the best preservation successes happen with a diverse network of support.

As postwar development made rapid and jarring changes to the built environment of American cities, supporters of the preservation movement sought a national and systematic way to prioritize and protect historic places, from which came the 1966 [National Historic Preservation Act](#) (NHPA).<sup>3</sup> The professionalization of preservation developed

quickly to meet the demand created by the NHPA. Neil argues that preservation was first implemented by planners and architects because they were used to working within regulatory systems, while historians coming out of academia were becoming professors or librarians. Neil saw a desperate need for "historians who believe that active involvement in public issues is as fulfilling as the teaching of class or the writing of scholarly papers" (38). He wanted historians to be trained and able to work with planners and architects to navigate the same systems so that "historic significance," which had been codified into the [National Register of Historic Places](#),<sup>4</sup> would have real meaning within preservation. Neil hoped that more historians would find public service fulfilling and have access to preservation training. Indeed, the numbers of public historians and traditional historians working on publicly engaged projects have grown steadily over the last couple decades.

To Neil in the late 1970s, the predominance of aesthetic- and economic-based preservation could too easily produce historic places that were "artificially extracted from their context" (34). Although Neil mentions that some preservation plans, like those for the Vieux Carré in New Orleans and for the City of Charleston (South Carolina), prioritized historical continuity, he worried that too many preservation efforts would freeze a place in time and effectively work against history. People who might be generalized as "aesthetic"



This historic postcard of Pioneer Square shows both large signs and metal fire escapes. Photo credit: City of Seattle archives.

preservationists were fighting for things that historians considered minutiae, like the retention of obsolete metal fire escapes or anachronistically small signs in the example of Seattle's Pioneer Square that he cites. Still today, aesthetics, economics, and history clash as we debate the design of new alley-facing garages in historic districts, the eligibility of 1950s modernized storefronts, the fate of "tin-can" water towers that cities have determined functionally obsolete, the street-appeal of a Craftsman porch on a small Colonial house, and the economic viability of a vacant rural church. When advocating for preservation in fragile funding and political environments, champions are sought among developers, Main Street advocates, and those in heritage tourism. Profitable re-use can be argued to decision makers who might think of historical significance as an amenity. Historic materials

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or craftsmanship are often up for sacrifice when restoration affects the profit margin (real or perceived). Although history and storytelling can be effective for advocacy amid the general public, history often takes a backseat when making the deal.

On the other hand, trends towards breadth and diversity have seemed to be mutually supportive between history and preservation. For example, the history of postwar and modernist buildings and landscapes seems to be finding a passionate following. High-profile cases, like the demolitions of the [Cyclorama building](#) at Gettysburg National Park and [Prentice Hospital](#) in Chicago or ongoing efforts for the [Miami Marine Stadium](#), [Peavey Plaza](#) in Minneapolis, or the [Orange County Government Center](#)<sup>5</sup> in Goshen, NY, have raised the profile of the Recent Past architecture and modernist architects, but disagreements persist among preservationists (let alone the general public) about what is worthy of limited time and resources. When the aesthetics of modernist or industrial architecture are questioned, how do you advocate for the history of buildings that some people consider ugly? How hard do you fight and who is willing to fight when funding or political support is absent or even stacked in opposition?

To successfully preserve a historic place you have to find at least one viable vision for the future of that place and persist in building the support that will make that future a reality. Many of us are trying to develop skill sets and bases of knowledge so that we can build strong

preservation networks of historians, planners, architects, landscapers, realtors, developers, craftspeople, bureaucrats, technology experts, technical conservationists, tourism coordinators, historic site managers . . . (deep breath) . . . who can all play important roles in saving historic places for memory, education, tourism, neighborhood revitalization, economic development, sustainability, smart growth, and so on. Preservation is increasingly diverse. These groups will not always share one vision. They will often honestly (and vehemently) disagree. Historians need to be at the table if it's history that we want to preserve. The key will be to continue to learn from and communicate with each other as we go so that we can find balanced solutions that work.

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1 J. Meredith Neil, "Is There a Historian in the House? The Curious Case of Historic Preservation," *The Public Historian* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1980): 30–38, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/2/2/30>.

2 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/shpolist.htm>.

3 <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>.

4 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/index.htm>.

5 <https://www.wmf.org/project/cyclorama-center>; <http://docomomo-us.org/news/learning-prentice>; <http://www.marinestadium.org/>; <http://tclf.org/landscapes/peavey-plaza>; <https://www.wmf.org/project/orange-county-government-center>.



**Right:** The FBI headquarters building in Washington, DC, is an example of Brutalist architecture that is under scrutiny to determine if it should be saved. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

**Center:** Interior view of the Gettysburg Cyclorama in the former Neutra building location. Photo credit: Library of Congress.

# ABOVE GROUND, BELOW GROUND, ON THE GROUND

## CRM IN PRACTICE

// NATALIE PERRIN

POSTED MARCH 3, 2015

Locations speak to multiple generations, cultures, and time periods. “Appreciating the complexity of the historic period,” according to Ted Karamanski in [“Logging, History, and the National Forests: A Case Study of Cultural Resource Management”](#)<sup>1</sup> (*The Public Historian*, 1985), is at the forefront of cultural resource management (CRM), no matter when or where you practice (30). But knowing which sources can reveal the layers of multiple historic contexts can be challenging, both in the field and in the library.

The layering of generations was at the crux of the challenges that Karamanski outlined in 1985 and that I face in my own career today. Although I’m formally trained in historic preservation and architectural history, over the past six years at Historical Research Associates, my duties have morphed to include managing archaeological investigations. I’ve learned the “archy speak” fluently enough to navigate the appropriate laws, and I am on a first name basis with a few state archaeologists. The adventure, however, has also brought me to the same conclusion Karamanski arrived at in his article: “Both archaeologists and historians are necessary, and their work must be integrated” (39). In many ways, not much seems to have changed in the regulatory environment, though the definition of “cultural resource” seems to be expanding every day.

In Karamanski’s day, for example, “no one ever seriously considered managing . . . former

timber extraction sites as historical resources” (28). I practice CRM in the Pacific Northwest, however, and logging and the company towns associated with the timber industry are my bread and butter. Our more pertinent question is whether a site is merely old or actually significant. For that, you need to know your history, which requires excellent field investigators from multiple disciplines.

Archaeologists and architectural historians are both trained in the research methods needed to develop a thorough historic context, although each utilizes different yet equally important sources. Without considering the comprehensive research historians can provide, archaeologists, for example, might not be aware of appropriate locations for survey. Archaeologists consider the flora, fauna, soils, and historic land-use patterns and bring exacting investigative techniques to the table. Preservationists and architectural historians provide the maps, historic photos, and general knowledge of construction techniques that inform understanding of discoveries in the field. Allowing any one discipline—be it archaeology, history, or historic preservation—to predominate in your investigations is a sure way to miss something in the field.

In a recent survey in Central Oregon, the historians uncovered information relating to



Today, the remnants of logging camps, like this one photographed in Oregon in 1941, require multifaceted historical investigation. Photo credit: Library of Congress.

the settlement patterns of a specific cultural group, single women who flocked to the high deserts of Oregon in part due to the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909. Women settlers, along with others, built simple but typical features on their homesteads: small, wood-frame cabins and sheds, a privy, a hand-dug well, and the occasional windmill. The period of prosperity of the high desert was short, and by 1920 the boom was bust. The rural nature of the project area meant that few, if any, historic maps would mark locations of such activities, but the knowledge at least gave both archaeologists, who tend to look down, and architectural historians/historic preservationists, who tend to look up, an idea of what resources might

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be encountered in the field. When combined, it created a trifecta of knowledge and expertise, a CRM Voltron, if you will.

Site testing was, and continues to be, an essential component of CRM investigation. Provisions for presenting the results of these investigations for future researchers, however, can be a challenge. I speak specifically of inventories, usually managed by the [State Historic Preservation Office](#) (SHPO).<sup>2</sup> In the thirty years since Karamanski described his experiences, some inventory systems are still skewed toward archaeology, while others rely on individual buildings with numbered addresses. Both of these create challenges in documenting resources that don't neatly fit the mold, including linear features, such as transmission lines and canals; cultural landscapes that include multiple layers of human occupation, both historic and prehistoric; and those resources that straddle the line between archaeological and historic, such as abandoned railways, paved-over streetcar tracks, and aging utility systems. Though the National Park Service created the [National Register Criteria for Evaluation](#)<sup>3</sup> in 1990, an excellent set of parameters within which to evaluate our cultural resources, it seems most states and federal agencies are still struggling with applying these parameters to the inventories of the ever-growing number of cultural resources being recorded throughout the country.

Lack of both uniformity and flexibility in inventory methods, forms, and databases present problems to those who record resources. Was the abandoned logging community recorded as a building, structure, historic district, or archaeological site? In what level of detail was the site recorded? Is the recordation focused primarily on archaeology, in which case there may be an in-depth description of debitage (waste material found at sites where stone weapons were made) but no comment on extant built resources? Or did an architectural historian record in exacting detail the cladding and windows on a creek-side cabin but fail to see evidence of four thousand years of occupation in the form of a lithic scatter? Is the prehistoric and historic context accurate, thorough, well researched, and properly cited, or was it based on a single secondary source? Alternately, is there a context at all?

In short, the best cultural resource investigations include the right staff and enough time and budget to do the job. Someone needs to look at the documents, maps, photos, and history books, someone needs to look at the ground, and someone needs to look at the



Michael Faulkner, Natalie Perrin, Brad Bowden, and Chris Knutson of HRA Portland collaborate on an archaeological find. Together, the team was able to pinpoint the date range of the find and trace it to an original homestead. Photo credit: Natalie Perrin.

landscape. This hasn't changed in the past thirty years, and if anything, we've come a long way in having the various disciplines work together. Karamanski's case study called for historians to change federal policy to place more importance on history in CRM. This change seems to be happening, both organically and as part of revised federal policies. The secretary of the interior has adopted [Professional Qualification Standards](#)<sup>4</sup> for history, archaeology, and architectural history, all of which emphasize the importance of research. And while the belowground and aboveground folks still like to pretend that their paths do not, should not, or cannot cross, Karamanski said it best: "Historic resource management is an interdisciplinary pursuit, requiring the cooperation of historians and historical architects as well as archaeologists" (29). Amen!

1 Theodore J. Karamanski, "Logging, History, and the National Forests: A Case Study of Cultural Resource Management," *The Public Historian* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 27-40, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/7/2/27>.

2 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/shpolist.htm>.

3 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/pdfs/nrb15.pdf>.

4 <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-1997-06-20/pdf/97-16168.pdf>.

# HARVESTING THE ROMANCE OF THE PAST

// JOE WATKINS

POSTED APRIL 21, 2015

Growing up as an American Indian boy in Oklahoma, I struggled every April 22nd with “89er Day,” an elementary school mini-holiday that celebrated the 1889 opening of central Oklahoma to white settlement. We school kids were expected to dash across the playground and stake out “homesteads,” being careful to watch out for “wild Indians.” As the day wore on, we had “chuck wagon” lunches, sing-alongs, and square dances. The Oklahoma Land Run of 1889 marked the formal end of tribal reservations in Oklahoma, itself a Choctaw word meaning “[place of the] red people.” This was the romance of the past as it played out across innumerable schools in the Oklahoma of the mid-1950s.

Patricia Mooney-Melvin, in her 1991 article [“Harnessing the Romance of the Past: Preservation, Tourism, and History”](#) writes about a different sort of historical romance, using another kind of misremembered history as an example. As she describes, an elderly woman and young girl visit the Buffalo Bill Cody museum where the woman confuses Cody and Theodore Roosevelt. Taking place at a historic site, this story emphasizes both the enthusiasm of the heritage tourist and the need for a high level of historical accuracy at those sites.

The field of heritage tourism was relatively young when Mooney-Melvin wrote her article, and there were far-reaching questions about the extent to which the “expert” historian should be involved. Mooney-Melvin argues for historians to “infiltrate the tourism industry” so that some of the problems of presentation and interpretation are ameliorated or mitigated. Thus, the historian ensures historical accuracy while at the same time the interpreter at the site has the opportunity to turn that material into something to entertain the visitor.

While Mooney-Melvin was concerned about “harnessing the romance of the past,” my concern is that we are mainly “harvesting” the romance of the past by focusing on extracting as much profit as possible from our heritage sites. According to a study conducted by Mandala Research (2009), cultural and heritage tourists generally take more leisure trips than non-cultural/heritage travelers, prefer them to be “educational,” spend more money, and travel further. Visiting historic sites and attending historical reenactments topped the list of the most popular cultural and heritage activities. Knowing this, site managers and regional groups can at times be more interested in making money on a place than teaching about it.



**Left:** This 1899 poster for Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show suggests that Cody also “harnessed the romance of the past” throughout his career. Photo credit: Library of Congress.

**Right:** The Washita Battlefield National Historic Site interprets the site of a Southern Cheyenne Village attacked by General Custer. Photo credit: Joe Watkins.



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One solution for Mooney-Melvin was having a trained interpreter who's been guided by a historian present. But today, a cultural heritage tourist is just as likely to get information through a smart phone, tablet, or other electronic medium as they are from a historian or trained interpreter. The electronically informed visitor can get a sterilized picture of the past based only on bare "facts" devoid of historical context or can never interact with the "real" site at all. Current thinking argues for "packaging" multiple areas for cultural and heritage tourism travel, increasing the likelihood that customers will choose to spend time (and money) where they can get more "bang for the buck" (though not necessarily that they will learn more from it). If the historic information from the multiple sites is integrated into a strong information package, then this approach to regional or topical heritage can be beneficial. Poorly integrated information, however, can lead to what amounts to a haphazard rendering of heritage trivia.

Indeed, the National Park Service provides [self-guided tours](#)<sup>2</sup> of destinations chosen along a common theme such as "[Places Reflecting America's Diverse Cultures](#)"<sup>3</sup> or "[Preserve America Communities](#)."<sup>4</sup> For example, travelers to Baltimore have access to information on [forty-three different places of interest](#),<sup>5</sup> which increases the likelihood that the visitor will stay in the area and spend money. In this way, an invisible expert contextualizes the history beyond a single site, providing a programmatic approach to various "histories" and helping the visitor better understand the ways the histories are interconnected.

To be sure, as cultural and heritage tourism has grown, the inclusion of places of importance to underrepresented groups has led to the rise of multiple voices and multiple stories that illustrate multiple histories. One such example, the [Washita Battlefield National Historic Site](#),<sup>6</sup> offers many personal interpretations from American Indians of a well-recorded event. While these voices and perspectives are still a vast minority of the histories being presented, they are at least being given the opportunity to be heard in a way that was nearly absent in Mooney-Melvin's time. Our national consciousness concerning the contributions of underrepresented American communities to the fabric of American heritage continues to grow, and we will continue to add sites reflective and representative of those contributions.

The enduring legacy of the [National Historic Preservation Act](#)<sup>7</sup> is the depth of connections between places that mark the shared and private

heritage of American communities of the past with those contemporary communities that protect and revere them. Without the National Historic Preservation Act, many locations would have fallen under the blade of the bulldozer or the wrecking ball, reduced to unmarked rubble in community landfills. Internet access has created the possibility of "virtual" tourism, free from mosquitoes and sunburn, but it is important for us to weave together the human face with machine intellect to create a joyful experience for those who get off the couch and into the open air. Tourists and travelers should be entertained enough that they will absorb the multitude of interpretations about events that shaped America's history, but it is imperative that the information they leave with sufficiently portrays the importance of our mission—to protect the cultural markers of our singular histories in order to preserve the bricks that are the foundation of our shared heritage.

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1 Patricia Mooney-Melvin, "Harnessing the Romance of the Past: Preservation, Tourism, and History," *The Public Historian* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 35–48, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/13/2/35>.

2 <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/heritagetravel/discover-our-shared-heritage.htm>.

3 [https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/cultural\\_diversity/index.html](https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/cultural_diversity/index.html).

4 <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/heritagetravel/preserve-america.htm>.

5 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/baltimore/baltlist.htm>.

6 <https://www.nps.gov/waba/index.htm>.

7 <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>.

# BUILDING THE PUBLIC TRUST PRESERVATION'S MIDDLE AGE?

// RHONDA SINCAVAGE

POSTED MAY 5, 2015

When Madeline Cirrillo Archer published, [“Where We Stand: Preservation Issues in the 1990s,”](#)<sup>1</sup> she sought to assess the challenges facing a movement that was a quarter-century old. In 1991, historic preservation was soon to be an interest of mine. Now, as the director for programs and publications at the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#),<sup>2</sup> revisiting this article and the period it chronicled was an opportunity to see if the principles and thinking that drew me to the field and were the basis of my introduction to historic preservation still held true. Would the ideas and ideals still resonate with me (and others) today, twenty-five years later? How does preservation's maturity compare to its “young adulthood”? Where do we, in fact, stand as compared to Archer's predictions?

Archer highlights several key issues she perceives to be the big challenges for the field, including paying for preservation, establishing historic districts, ecclesiastical and nonprofit exemptions, gentrification, relationships with government, holistic preservation, and identifying what should be saved. Surprisingly, this could very well be a list of concerns for the movement in 2015. Granted, some of the major focuses of the field today, including sharing the history of underrepresented communities, the impact of new technologies, and confronting the looming threat of climate change, were not on the forefront of minds in 1991, but, for the most part, the concerns Archer remain.

I've been in meetings within the past year where questions nearly identical to Archer's are being discussed. We still seek innovative ways for funding historic preservation and bemoan the shortcomings of existing policies, such as the federal historic rehabilitation tax credit. Questions of whether the criteria for National Register listing and the [Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation](#)<sup>3</sup> (now nearly fifty years old) should be revisited are still debated. And there is ongoing discussion (and some movement) about restructuring the National Park Service so that historic preservation and cultural resource programs are more fairly and adequately served. Clearly, the author was spot-on in identifying the challenges in the coming twenty-five years. While this raises its own set of questions—Why hasn't more progress been made? Did we get sidetracked with other threats or priorities? Did our

attempts result in unsuccessful implementation? Were these issues too overwhelming and complex to overcome in twenty-five years?—perhaps the most important is: what can we learn from this?

At the time this article was published, the movement was very much in its “young adulthood” and, as such, was experiencing growing pains. Mature enough to have already learned from the mistakes of its infancy (such as the loss of Penn Station and countless battles over urban renewal) but still forming its identity, priorities, and direction, preservation at the time was faced with new challenges, such as ongoing criticism of gentrification, the proliferation of sprawl and “big box” retail, and questions of what and how to preserve. We've learned from these challenges, and today preservation stands more comfortably in its middle age. However, the movement needs to solidify certain priorities and directions that Archer identifies as crucial. Critically, it needs to engage a broader base of supporters.

As a field we find difficulty in communicating the value of historic preservation for preservation's sake. We have perfected justifying preservation in terms of jobs created and economic benefits, but as Archer observed in 1991, “While [these] economic defenses have been useful, the movement as a whole has been negligent in allowing money to dominate public discussions of preservation's value. There is real need for preservationists to identify, articulate, and communicate preservation's value in historic and cultural terms.”

This idea was not a new one (even in 1991), and one of the most striking revelations in Archer's article was the identification of this ongoing issue during the ‘teenage years’ of historic preservation—including recommendations from the 1979 National Preservation Conference in Williamsburg, which promoted the relationship of preservation to other quality of life issues, and a 1978 HUD publication, *A Future from the Past*, which states, “Building conservation is of more than just practical importance. It is essential to the health and humanity of a community environment. Just as is common during times of war, massive destruction of a community's physical fabric as a part of a plan for redevelopment can remove much of what provides a stabilizing

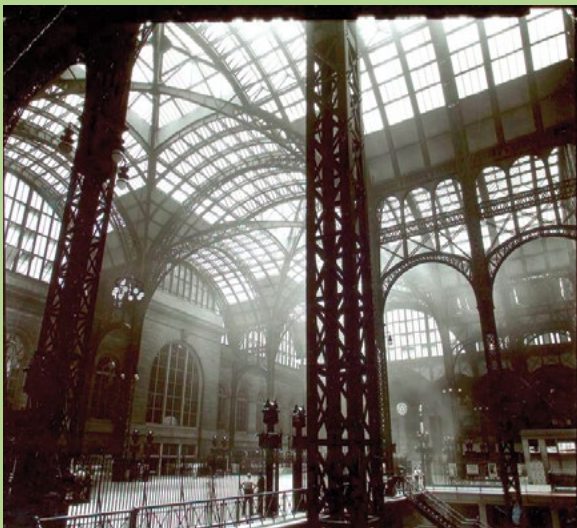
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**Above:** Brucemore in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was bequeathed to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1981. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

**Below:** Penn Station by Berenice Abbott, 1935–38. The original Penn Station, pictured here, was torn down in 1963. Photo credit: The New York Public Library. Photography Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs.



influence on people's lives. . . . That which they had identified as being their world ceases to be a part of them. . . . [Preservation] gives strength and permanence to its local community."

We are just now beginning to make progress on articulating the softer side of preservation, and the research of my colleague at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Tom Mayes, is at the forefront of this discussion. Tom, a fellow in historic preservation at the American Academy in Rome in 2014, has spent the past year investigating why old places matter (see his blog, *Why Do Old Places Matter?*). His research focuses on environmental psychology, emotional aspects, and aesthetic factors that challenge the field to rethink the way we message the importance of historic preservation and why people should care about it. This gets to the heart of what Archer states "could well be the most essential job of preservationists"—communicating the symbolic function of historic preservation to the public.

Even without this research, preservationists in the second twenty-five years of the movement had begun marketing what Archer calls a "humanistic preservation ethic." Simple but profound messaging that appeals to the broader public can be seen in engagement tactics such as [endangered places lists](#), [This Place Matters campaigns](#), "save me" messages on threatened buildings, and "heart bombing" places to show why old places matter.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the movement has reached out to more diverse audiences and has tackled difficult subjects. These include the [preservation of controversial or unpleasant pasts](#) such as the [Manhattan Project](#), [Japanese American internment camps](#), and [slave dwellings](#).<sup>5</sup>

These developments demonstrate that we have made strides in tackling what Archer describes as perhaps the greatest challenge

facing preservation—the advancing of its status as a broad-based popular movement while it changes its theoretical framework. With the fiftieth anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act upon us, national organizations and federal agencies are taking the opportunity to reflect on how the movement has developed and what we still need to accomplish. Summits are already being planned to engage not just preservation professionals but allied fields on how to make preservation more relevant to a broader audience. Archer's observations could and should be used as a resourceful tool to aid in these discussions.

"Where We Stand" concludes with a final thought that leaders should consider as we move beyond the movement's middle age: "The public must see and understand the logic behind the policy and strategy, especially as preservation broaden its traditional definitions. With public support that is widespread, clear and vocal, the preservation movement will come of age in the next century."

1 Madeline Cirillo Archer, "Where We Stand: Preservation Issues in the 1990s," *The Public Historian* 13, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 25–40, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/13/4/25>.

2 <https://savingplaces.org/>.

3 [https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/rehabilitation/rehab\\_stand.htm](https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/rehabilitation/rehab_stand.htm).

4 <https://savingplaces.org/11-most#.WAEIVcnzaiw>; <https://savingplaces.org/this-place-matters#.WAEI1cnzaiw>; <http://saportareport.com/its-time-for-atlanta-to-demand-design-excellence-lets-save-20-hilliard-st/>; <https://savingplaces.org/stories/heart-bombs-2014-five-events-showed-historic-places-love/#.WAEmscnzaiw>.

5 [http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/newsletters/17\\_2/dialogue.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/newsletters/17_2/dialogue.html); <http://forum.savingplaces.org/blogs/forum-online/2013/05/15/the-manhattan-project-interpreting-controversial-history>; <http://forum.savingplaces.org/viewdocument/preserving-the-sites-and-telling-th>; <http://slavedwellingproject.org/>.

# ROBERT M. UTLEY

## FOUNDER OF THE NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAM

// JAMES A. GLASS

POSTED JULY 7, 2015

An able administrator and respected historian, Robert Utley was selected at age thirty-four by National Park Service director George Hartzog to become chief historian. The new official spent most of his energies from 1964 to 1966 overseeing historians who made recommendations for the interpretation of historical units of the National Park System and others who compiled theme studies of potential [national historic landmarks](#).<sup>1</sup> But Utley also played a crucial role in developing the organizational structure needed to launch the new national historic preservation program.

In 2002, as part of *The Public Historian's* Pioneers of Public History series, Park Service historian Ellen Foppes interviewed Utley ([“Present at the Creation: Robert M. Utley Recalls the Beginnings of the National Historic Preservation Program”](#)).<sup>2</sup> I, too, had the privilege of interviewing Utley in 1986 as part of my research for a doctoral dissertation at Cornell University. From that interview and review of documents at the National Park Service in Washington, I learned a great deal about Utley's importance as a shaper of both the bill that became law and the actions taken by the Park Service to create a federal-state preservation program. I also obtained copies of two other recorded interviews with Utley—one by Herbert Evison in 1973 and a second by Richard W. Sellars and Melody Webb in 1985. In this post, I will review the 2000 interview and comment on Utley's contributions to the framing of the National Historic Preservation Act and the national historic

preservation program that resulted, based on my own interview and those in 1973 and 1985.

The Foppes interview emphasized the primary interests of Utley during his Park Service career: setting policy for research by professional historians into the significance of historic sites owned by the Park Service, devising appropriate interpretations of each site, and making recommendations for the proper preservation of the buildings involved.

As chief historian, Utley's most lasting contributions involved the [National Historic Preservation Act](#).<sup>3</sup> Almost immediately, he wrote draft proposals for the service to cooperate with the US Bureau of Outdoor Recreation or the federal Urban Renewal Administration in advising local communities how to conduct historic preservation projects. As momentum gathered for national preservation legislation in 1965 and 1966, Utley and the legal staff of the Park Service drafted the first version of the bill that eventually became law as the preservation act. They adopted almost entirely the system already in use for grants-in-aid to the states by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation; the preservation bill would set up matching grants to the states for historic preservation. After the Johnson administration's bill was introduced in 1966, Utley wrote briefing papers for congressional hearings that explained how the federal-state program would work. Just as in the Outdoor Recreation program, state liaison officers (now [State Historic Preservation](#)



Robert M. Utley in 1967 when he was serving as chief historian. Photo credit: Robert M. Utley.

[Officers](#))<sup>4</sup> in each state would administer the grants and prepare state historic preservation plans to guide the expenditure of federal funds.

Soon after the act became law in October 1966, George Hartzog established the Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, to be modeled on some of the European monument services. In Utley's words, Hartzog was an “empire-builder” who was interested in expanding the Park Service's role into the historic preservation movement that was emerging during the 1960s in communities across the United States. Utley was appointed acting chief of the office and oversaw the creation of the new federal-state preservation

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program between late 1966 and mid-1967. Among his most important acts was to chair a committee of Park Service professionals who drafted the criteria for the new [National Register of Historic Places](#).<sup>5</sup> Utleý supported basing the criteria on two existing Park Service criteria—those in use for national historic landmarks and those used for evaluating surplus federal properties for historical significance before transferring them to state or local governments.

After Ernest A. Connally was appointed the first chief of the Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, Utleý as chief historian loyally supported his new boss. Although the office was initially intended both to implement the new act and to guide historic preservation projects in the parks, it soon became focused on external activities. Utleý participated in a series of eight regional programs designed to educate the states about “the New Preservation” embodied in the preservation act, which stressed the importance of historic neighborhoods, downtowns, and works of architectural significance, as well as individual historic landmarks. In 1972, he became director of the Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation and, for the next two years, worked with Connally to advocate within the Interior Department of the Nixon administration for a new federal historic preservation agency detached from the Park Service and focused on the growing preservation movement outside the park system.

In 1976, after returning for two years to a focus on historic preservation projects within national parks, Utleý left the Park Service and finished his federal service as deputy executive director of the [Advisory Council on Historic Preservation](#). The council oversaw federal agency compliance with [Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act](#).<sup>6</sup> Thus, Robert Utleý alternated in his career between his core interests of history in the National Park System and guiding the new external national historic preservation program. By every measure, Robert Utleý should be judged one of the parents of the law itself and the federal-state program that resulted.

Looking ahead, the program Utleý helped establish faces some challenges. After drastic cuts in the early 1980s, funding levels for participation by State Historic Preservation Officers (SHPOs) have only now returned to their 1980 amounts but are still substantially lower than in 1980 when inflation is factored in. Thus, the financial incentive for states to participate in the national program has shrunk over time, and with recent cuts in state funding, many SHPOs find it ever more difficult to carry out all of their responsibilities. The coordinating bodies at the federal level—the cultural resources staff



Robert M. Utleý (third from right) as a panelist at the Denver “New Preservation” conference, 1968. The National Park Service held eight regional conferences to explain the National Historic Preservation Act and its broad implications for preservation to the new state liaison officers for the act and interested members of the public. Photo credit: Washington Office, National Park Service.

of the Park Service and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation—are very small parts of the federal bureaucracy and, as such, often find it difficult to persuade each administration and Congress to bring more resources to the program. Another challenge involves the federal historic rehabilitation tax credit program, administered by the Park Service and SHPOs, which has brought billions in private investment to historic properties in downtowns across the country. It faces potential elimination in the new Congress. Few in the preservation movement would question the importance of the federal-state program as vital infrastructure for historic preservation efforts. As the program enters its sixth decade, all sectors of the preservation field will need to dedicate themselves to strengthening it if it is to prosper.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/nhl/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen K. Foppes and Robert M. Utleý, “Present at the Creation: Robert M. Utleý Recalls the Beginnings of the National Historic Preservation Program,” *The Public Historian* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 61–81, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/24/2/61>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/nr/shpolist.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/nr/index.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.achp.gov/about.html>; <http://www.achp.gov/106summary.html>.



# HISTORIC PRESERVATION SHINES A LIGHT ON A DARK PAST

// DAVID ROTENSTEIN

POSTED JULY 28, 2015

Between 2011 and 2014 the City of Decatur, Georgia, demolished 200 public housing units built in 1940, under the auspices of slum clearance. In 2013 Decatur's two city-owned former equalization schools were demolished for a new civic complex and police headquarters. In one gentrifying neighborhood, the private sector sent more than 120 former African American homes to landfills, continuing a cycle of serial displacement begun a century ago. In another neighborhood, a developer demolished a historic black church to clear land for new upscale townhomes. The widespread disappearance of African American landmarks began just two years after the City of Decatur released [a citywide historic resources survey](#)<sup>1</sup> that made no mention of the community's black residents, past and present, nor their historic places.

Robert Weyeneth's 2005 article, "[The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving a Problematical Past](#)"<sup>2</sup> gives readers a panoramic view of racialized space and its place in history and historic preservation. Weyeneth drills down to the period between 1890 and 1960 in the American South to examine the ways new buildings were designed and built to conform to what he calls the "spatial strategies of white supremacy" (12). More than a half century later, those familiar spatial strategies are evident in contemporary Decatur and other cities with municipal growth policies that embrace gentrification and demographic inversion. The result in cities large and small is the resegregation of people and landscapes.

Decatur's first African American city commissioner deftly connected the threads linking segregation, then urban renewal, and finally gentrification in her city. She has watched black Decatur disappear over the sixty-six years she has lived there. She compared today's gentrification with the last century's urban renewal. "It feels that way because the people are gone," Elizabeth Wilson told me in 2012. As I began documenting the erasure of African Americans from the historical record in Decatur, some residents there began to recognize the significance of what was being lost. "I work in Decatur and was shocked when I first saw these buildings surrounded by fences and then being torn down," wrote one reader in [comments on a 2013 blog post](#)<sup>3</sup> on the demolition of the city's equalization schools.

Equalization schools, facilities built to perpetuate segregated education throughout the South as communities anticipated, and then circumvented, court-ordered desegregation, are among the many types of places designed and built during Jim Crow to impose racial order throughout the South. Unlike monumental sites associated with what Weyeneth described as "connected with the triumph of individual and collective initiative" (41), equalization schools are well outside mainstream America's popularly held conceptions of Jim Crow for several reasons. They are, as Weyeneth observed, places that force people to confront a disturbing and uncomfortable past. "I Googled for articles to figure out what the heck was going on," said the same reader in [comments to the 2013 blog](#)

[post](#).<sup>4</sup> "What little I found did not touch on the historic significance of these buildings."

I began asking people to tell me where they would take visitors to Decatur to see places associated with black history in the city.<sup>5</sup> "There aren't any left," replied local preservationists and African American residents. As the city was completing construction of the new civic buildings where Decatur's black elementary and high schools had once stood, one lifelong African American resident told me that the places she used to bring younger family members and friends are all gone. But, she added, she'd take them to "the new building on Trinity, because there you'll be able to go in there and look at some history." For her and other black Decaturites, the only place to experience black history will be in exhibits prepared by the city in its new civic building. They and others may be able to see "some history," but we'll never be able to touch its cold masonry surfaces or experience its marginalization deep in our souls.

Weyeneth underscored the importance of experiencing historic racialized space beyond reading about segregation in static accounts. Visitors to these historic places include aging survivors from Jim Crow segregation, their younger family members, and people whose only experience with racism is drawn from the arts and the academy. Exposed to daylight and effectively interpreted, the preserved and protected sites from our dark past offer

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unparalleled educational opportunities. Once these places disappear from the landscape, their power to remind us that racism continues to be a factor that cuts across all American social strata is lost. The headlines from 2014 bear this out, from racial profiling in Decatur to the shooting deaths by police of unarmed black men in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City. Weyeneth quoted a St. Louis man who said that every community should preserve “at least one site associated with racial segregation in order to remind us that there are two racial universes in the United States” (37).

The architecture of racial segregation was the material culture of an institution, white supremacy, channeled through Jim Crow. The “rules of the game” were the legally sanctioned imposition of isolation and partitioning. Nearly a decade after “The Architecture of Racial Segregation” appeared, Weyeneth reflected on it and his career in his [2014 National Council on Public History presidential address](#).<sup>6</sup> In this essay, Weyeneth wrote about embracing the dark past: “the chapters of history that are difficult, controversial, or problematical” (13). That dark past, “The Architecture of Racial Segregation” reminds us, persists beyond the twentieth century’s built environment and into how we interact with the past in the present. That, I think, is Weyeneth’s enduring message for historians and preservationists today and fifty years from now.

1 *Historic Resource Survey Final Report* (City of Decatur, September 1, 2009), <http://www.decaturga.com/home/showdocument?id=2105>; Thomas F. King, “Blessed Decatur,” *CRM Plus*, February 5, 2013, <http://crmplus.blogspot.com/2013/02/blessed-decatur.html>.

2 Robert R. Weyeneth, “The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past,” *The Public Historian* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 11–24, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/27/4/11>.

3 <http://likethedew.com/2013/07/03/clinging-to-jim-crow-through-historic-preservation/#comment-951169103>.

4 Ibid.

5 David S. Rotenstein, “Decatur’s African American Historic Landscape,” *Reflections* 10, no. 3 (May 2012): 5–7; Craig Evan Barton, ed., *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001); Ned Kaufman, ed., *Place, Race, and Story: Essays on the Past and Future of Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Margaret Ruth Little, “Getting the American Dream for Themselves: Postwar Modern Subdivisions for African Americans in Raleigh, North Carolina,” *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 19, no. 1 (2012): 73–87; Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, *Historical Studies of Urban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

6 Robert R. Weyeneth, “What I’ve Learned along the Way: A Public Historian’s Intellectual Odyssey,” *The Public Historian* 36, no. 2 (2014): 9–25, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/36/2/9>.



**Left:**  
Trinity High School demolition, 2013. Photo credit: David Rotenstein.

**Right:**  
Segregated train station in Manchester, Georgia, 1938. Source: Library of Congress.



# THE FIFTY-YEAR STUMBLING BLOCK

// CARROLL VAN WEST

POSTED SEPTEMBER 22, 2015

Assessing properties for listing in the [National Register of Historic Places](#)<sup>1</sup> is rarely an easy process. Not only does it call for a combination of skills in architectural description and analysis, a convincing nomination relies very much on the ability of the author(s) to place the property in its historic context, and within existing literature about the property's period of significance. Then comes the application of what National Park Service bureau historian John Sprinkle has so wisely described as the “so-called” fifty-year rule: the property must be at least fifty years old unless it has “exceptional importance.” Sprinkle’s 2007 article, [“Of Exceptional Importance”: The Origins of the ‘Fifty-Year Rule’ in Historic Preservation.”](#)<sup>2</sup> for *The Public Historian* analyzes how the rule came into being, how it may be interpreted, and how it has impacted historic preservation in the United States for two generations.

Sprinkle correctly emphasizes that the rule was created largely to keep the process out of recent controversies and to place early priority in historic preservation to properties of deeper chronological significance. For the past decade, however, preservationists have repeatedly called for a need to protect and to appreciate the “recent past,” especially the 1960s, a period when American modernist design had few fans and many detractors. They feared the landscape of the 1960s would be wiped away

in a postmodern frenzy that valued one period of history over another. The advocates of the “recent past” have often found their efforts stymied by other well-meaning preservation professionals who hold up the so-called “fifty-year rule”: you must wait until 2017 or 2018 to save that property—and, of course, in the phenomenon of urban re-generation that wait to be fifty years old means the building will be long gone before a listing in the National Register of Historic Places is possible.

Sprinkle’s article cuts through the misconceptions to argue that the “fifty-year rule” is really a guideline. What determines significance is not age as much as the history associated with the property. Certainly that line of thinking has always guided my work with the National Register process over the last thirty years. Luckily I cut my teeth in the world of cultural resource management working with Marcella Sherfy, then the deputy state historic preservation officer for Montana.

Sherfy had come to the Montana Historical Society, the administrative base for the state historic preservation office, from the National Park Service’s office of the keeper of the National Register. Indeed Sherfy had

**From Left to Right:** Interior, Tabernacle Baptist Church, Selma, AL. Photo credit: Carroll Van West. The Beauvoir Estate, the home of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, seven months after suffering damage during Hurricane Katrina. Photo credit: FEMA. Civil rights activists halted while crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge during the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965. The bridge is now part of a National Park Service National Historic Trail. Photo credit: Penn State Special Collections. Izaak Walton Inn, Essex, MN. Photo credit: Carroll Van West.



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been one of the co-authors of National Register Bulletin #1 (there have been over forty more bulletins since) that discussed how to think about the “fifty-year rule” and how to apply it in the National Register process. Sherfy taught me that “exceptional importance” did not mean rarity, per se. Rather, it meant whether you could develop a persuasive historic context on the property’s significance, be it on a local, state, or national level.

To understand and apply the guideline, she even gave me what was then a property a bit older than forty years: the Izaak Walton Inn, built in 1939 in northwest Montana. The building was, basically, the town of Essex: a railroad bunk house, community center, post office, bar, and landmark for travelers. At the local level, history told us, it truly was of exceptional importance, and the building was listed in 1985. The inn was the first of several “less than fifty-year-old” properties that I had the privilege of assessing for the National Register of Historic Places. In the past ten years, especially, I have found myself applying the “exceptional importance” guideline to properties associated with the civil rights movement in the South. In Birmingham, Alabama, I worked with the local historical society, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, and church congregations from 2000 to 2004 on a National Register multiple property nomination that extended the period of significance to 1978, the year that Richard Arrington was elected mayor, an event that closed a chapter for a period of civil rights activism. Literature on Birmingham’s civil rights history is thick: scholarly consensus existed about important events, people, and places. The scholarship shaped my development of an appropriate historic context for assessing individual properties and informed my constant discussions with local property owners and those who had experienced

those years directly, as the multiple property nomination progressed and later individual property nominations were prepared.

A similar approach is proving valuable with the deep civil rights movement in Selma, Alabama. That multiple property nomination extends to 1972, the date of the “Selma Accords” that finally allowed for a majority African American membership in the city council. Just recently, two of the principals of the local movement, Rev. Dr. Frederick Reece and, the first African American mayor in Selma, James Perkins discussed with me the importance of the “accords” within the context of having seen the 2014 movie, *Selma*. Dr. Reece and Perkins strongly believed that the movement in Selma had not reached a conclusion until the accords and the 1972 election that put African Americans on the city council.

Throughout the work in Selma, Louretta Wimberly, the former chair of the Alabama Black Heritage Commission, has led the charge for a comprehensive identification of Selma landmarks associated with the civil rights movement. Wimberly spoke on this topic at the 2013 National Council on Public History meeting in Ottawa. When the commemoration of “Bloody Sunday” and its impact on the voting rights movement takes place in March 2015, Selma will also have several new National Register landmarks, from the Jackson House to Tabernacle Baptist Church, properties where the period of significance extends into the second half of the 1960s. True, Tabernacle Baptist could be nominated under architecture for the 1920s Classical Revival style, but is not the fact that it was the last place where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. held a mass meeting in Selma in 1968 of “exceptional importance” as well?

Selma in March 2015 had many more properties—thirteen—associated with the civil rights movement on the Alabama State Historic Register. The Alabama register calls only for a property to be forty years old. That difference between the National Register and the state register seems to indicate that the time is ripe to abolish the “fifty-year rule” so that more recent events and architecture can be considered.

That theme first emerged to me in 2006 during the [Advisory Council on Historic Preservation’s](#)<sup>3</sup> special meeting on historic preservation in New Orleans, in the wake of the destruction from Hurricane Katrina. I participated in several National Register–specific sessions where colleagues viewed the “fifty-year rule” as a stumbling block to a more inclusive National Register program and called then for its abolition. I was not convinced then and remain even more skeptical in the political climate of 2015. This is not the right time to approach Congress to rewrite the basic rules of historic preservation designation. Furthermore, as my experiences in Alabama clearly point out, there is no need for it. There is no “fifty-year rule,” except when we want to make it that way. It is an assessment guideline, and if the property is truly associated with an event of exceptional importance at the local, state, or federal level, there are ways, and precedents, to build your case.

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1 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/index.htm>.

2 John H. Sprinkle Jr., “Of Exceptional Importance: The Origins of the ‘Fifty-Year Rule’ in Historic Preservation,” *The Public Historian* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 81–103, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/29/2/81>.

3 <http://www.achp.gov/>.

# TRASHY HISTORY

## INFRASTRUCTURE AS HISTORIC PROPERTY

// REBEKAH DOBRASKO

POSTED OCTOBER 6, 2015

Everything is bigger in Texas, even its infrastructure. The state counts over fifty thousand bridges, with approximately half of them being at least fifty years old, along with historic roadways, culverts, retaining walls, irrigation ditches, paving materials, curbs, roadside parks, and Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) offices. All of these resources are under constant use and strain and often break due to age or overuse. TxDOT's mission is to update and improve the road infrastructure, abandoning historic materials and designs that no longer work for today's traffic needs. Are any, all, or some of these older examples of infrastructure worthy of preservation? Should infrastructure even be on the list of the "Nation's historic places worthy of preservation"? As a historian with the TxDOT, I handle questions regarding infrastructure as historic properties on a daily basis.

In 2002, historian Martin Melosi addressed some of the issues surrounding the preservation of infrastructure in his article "[The Fresno Sanitary Landfill in an American Cultural Context](#)"<sup>1</sup> in *The Public Historian*. Fresno Sanitary Landfill opened in 1937 as a municipal solid-, hazardous-, and medical-waste landfill for Fresno, California. Upon its closing in 1987, the property was the nation's oldest operating landfill.

In an effort to recognize "nontraditional" properties as [national historic landmarks](#)<sup>2</sup> (NHLs), Melosi nominated the Fresno Sanitary Landfill as an NHL under the themes of Expanding Science and Technology and Transforming the Environment. He also nominated the landfill

under the [National Register of Historic Places](#)<sup>3</sup> Criterion A, for Community Planning and Development and Health/Medicine, and Criterion C, for Engineering. The engineering and technology employed in the Fresno Sanitary Landfill was the first of its kind in the nation and became standard for municipal landfills across the country. Fresno was the first landfill to employ a trenching method for depositing and compacting waste, which was then covered daily with dirt to keep away pests such as rats. Because the landfill was a significant turning point in the history of waste management in the United States and retained a high degree of historic integrity, Melosi believed that it was worthy of NHL status. The National Park Service (NPS) agreed and listed the landfill in August 2001.

Once the NPS issued its press release with the list of new landmarks, newspapers and bloggers exploded over the news of listing a landfill.<sup>4</sup> The NPS quickly rescinded its listing, stating that it was unaware that Fresno Landfill was also an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Superfund site. While politicians used the listing to criticize national environmental policies, newspapers used the listing to poke fun at preservationists and the NPS. Critics of George W. Bush's presidency used the NHL nomination to point out hypocrisy. The director of the Sierra Club stated, "should the federal government be protecting a Fresno landfill . . . while trying to reopen the [California] coastline to offshore oil drilling?" (19) Media pointed out that



United Irrigation District Canal, Mission, Texas. Photo credit: Texas Dept. of Transportation.

other presidents saved sites like Pearl Harbor and Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthplace, while "the Bush administration has added its own hallowed place: a garbage dump in Fresno." Despite the criticism, the city of Fresno was proud of its new historic site and defended its listing. The NHL listing was ultimately reinstated, and the Fresno Sanitary Landfill is currently a national historic landmark.

From my position with TxDOT, I am critical of the preservation of infrastructure unless it is nationally significant. The [Advisory Council on Historic Preservation](#) (ACHP),<sup>5</sup> the agency responsible for overseeing the federal government's compliance with [Section 106 and Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act \(NHPA\)](#),<sup>6</sup> has already excluded two resources from daily project consideration: natural gas pipelines and the interstate system. Under Section 106 of the NHPA, federal agencies are required to assess the effects of their projects on properties listed in

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or eligible for listing in the National Register. TxDOT, as recipient of Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration funds, must comply with this section of the law.

I can only imagine the paperwork, the negotiations, and the arguments that would need to be made every time TxDOT proposed to do work on its interstate system. By recognizing that only those portions of the interstate system that are *nationally significant* are worthy of preservation, the ACHP minimized some bureaucracy and ensured that preservation attention will be focused on the most important aspects of the interstate system. Texas only has six interstate resources that are nationally significant (all are bridges significant for their engineering and design).

A possible solution, proposed by my TxDOT colleague Carolyn Nelson, is to change the National Register criteria considerations to add Consideration H: Infrastructure. The National Register, in addition to its four criteria of significance, also has what it calls “criteria considerations.” The considerations are types of historic properties—such as churches, cemeteries, and properties less than fifty years old—that are automatically not eligible for listing in the National Register. If a property is a criteria consideration, it must have exceptional significance to overcome its automatic ineligibility. Because infrastructure is common across the nation and undergoes many changes to keep it functioning, it should be automatically ineligible except when it can be proven to be significant to a national event, design, or person. The Fresno Sanitary Landfill is thus an appropriate resource to preserve, as it is the first of its kind and its technology changed how America handled solid waste. In addition to its national significance, Fresno had closed the landfill prior to its listing, thus ensuring that a conflict between continued use and historic preservation was not an issue for this resource.

The NHPA's 1992 amendment directs the secretary of the interior and the advisory council to “seek to ensure that historic properties preserved under the National Historic Preservation Act fully reflect the historical experience of this nation.” Infrastructure certainly is part of the nation's “historical experience,” but all infrastructure can tell an important local story. As agencies and preservationists continue to consider infrastructure as historic properties, we should take a critical look at the way we address infrastructure and those properties designed to be used, changed over time, and discarded when technology improves. Not all historic properties are able to be preserved. The next fifty years of preservation should be a time where we refine and redefine what a historic property is and how it is meaningful to the public and the people that preserve it. Will battles over cell phone towers and fiber optic lines be the preservationists' infrastructure battles of the future? Or should historic preservationists turn to alternatives to preservation, such as extensive documentation or modeling, for infrastructure?

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1 Marvin V. Melosi, “The Fresno Sanitary Landfill in an American Cultural Context,” *The Public Historian* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 17–35, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/24/3/17>.

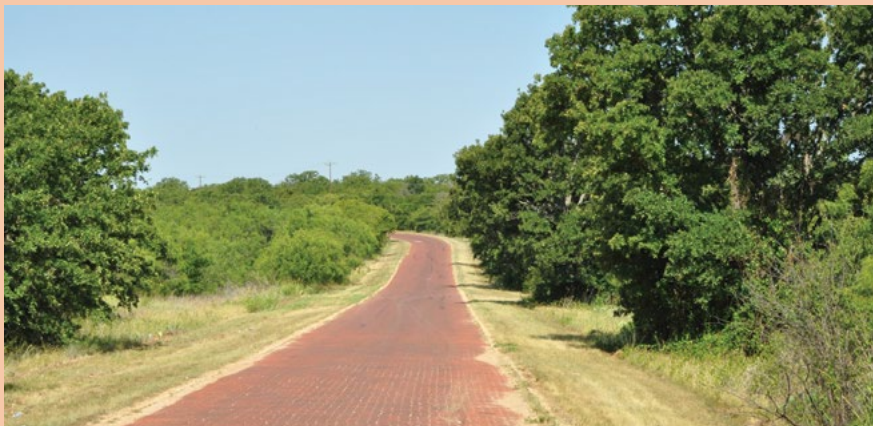
2 <https://www.nps.gov/nhl/>.

3 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/index.htm>.

4 [http://articles.philly.com/2001-08-29/news/25299445\\_1\\_fresno-municipal-sanitary-landfill-fresno-site-martin-melosi](http://articles.philly.com/2001-08-29/news/25299445_1_fresno-municipal-sanitary-landfill-fresno-site-martin-melosi); [http://waste360.com/mag/waste\\_fresno\\_landfill\\_value](http://waste360.com/mag/waste_fresno_landfill_value). Since the listing occurred in 2001, there is not a lot of information remaining on the web.

5 <http://www.achp.gov/>.

6 <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>.



Bankhead Highway (ca. 1924), Cisco, Texas. Photo credit: Rebekah Dobrasko.



# PENNSYLVANIA'S HALLOWED GROUND

## A ROLE FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

// BRENDA BARRETT

POSTED NOVEMBER 6, 2015

The saga of the Locust Grove Cemetery, an African American burial ground in the small borough of Shippensburg, is one that is repeated across the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In his article, [“From Troubled Ground to Common Ground”: The African-American Cemetery Restoration Project: A Case Study of Service-Learning and Community History](#)” (2008),<sup>1</sup> Steven Burg recounts his work with students to research and tell the story of the cemetery’s historic value and engage with its caretakers in the site’s preservation.<sup>2</sup> The Locust Grove project helped change the community’s perception of the cemetery from problem property to a respected historic site. While it was a success on many levels, the Locust Grove project highlights the challenge of using the [National Register of Historic Places](#)<sup>3</sup> as a preservation tool.

Let me confess that I am not a disinterested bystander on this issue. For the last several years, I have volunteered with the [Hallowed Ground Project](#),<sup>4</sup> a small group dedicated to conserving and honoring the burial sites of Pennsylvania’s United States Colored Troops (USCT). There are special challenges faced by those who care for African American cemeteries, which are highlighted in the work at Locust Grove and cemeteries that are similarly situated across the state.

The Hallowed Ground Project was founded to pick up the pieces from an earlier effort begun as part of Pennsylvania’s commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. In 2008 the state tourism program launched a number of innovative strategies to reach new audiences. To

spotlight the contribution of the state’s African Americans, they sponsored research to identify USCT veterans from the state’s muster rolls and then sought out the [USCT cemeteries](#)<sup>5</sup> as possible tourist attractions. This work identified forty-two such cemeteries, but they were far from visitor ready. Many of the sites were in disrepair, located in areas without any descendant population or where the caretakers were growing older and had limited resources. Others were totally forgotten and abandoned. By 2010 Pennsylvania had elected a new governor and state interest in the USCT cemetery project evaporated.

It is almost always the first step in starting a historic preservation project to seek recognition of the property’s historic value. In Pennsylvania, as in most states, the gold standard for historic significance is listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the official list of the nation’s historic places worthy of preservation, as authorized by the [National Historic Preservation Act of 1966](#).<sup>6</sup> However, for Burg and his students or the Hallowed Ground Project’s cemetery conservation efforts, there is a problem. The implementing regulations specifically state that “ordinarily” cemeteries do not meet the criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places unless they meet the additional requirements detailed in [National Register Bulletin 41 on Evaluating and Registering Cemeteries and Burial Places](#).<sup>7</sup>

As part of the preservation initiative for the Locust Grove Cemetery, Burg’s classes began determining the property’s eligibility for the



United States Colored Troops Marker, Conestoga Cemetery, Lancaster County. Photo credit: Brenda Barrett.

National Register, in part to qualify the cemetery for possible state grant assistance. It was hoped this could open the door to funds to restore the cemetery. Plus, it would afford the cemetery some protection from federal or state projects like road widening. The good news was that the [State Historic Preservation Office](#)<sup>8</sup> determined that the Locust Grove Cemetery was potentially eligible for National Register status. However, the information requested to prepare a full nomination was extensive. It included preparing a context on the growth and development of the local African American community, a comparison to other

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African American cemeteries in central Pennsylvania, and an analysis of their role in their communities. To date the nomination has not moved forward; though Burg and his students were able to convince the state to install a [historical marker](#).<sup>9</sup>

Drawing from Burg's article and my own experience, I want to talk specifically about the challenges of evaluation and designation of African American cemeteries. Unlike issues such as historic preservation grant funding or the political vagaries of state tourism programs, we as historic preservation practitioners can do something about this issue. What better time than the fiftieth anniversary of the program to welcome inclusive participation in the National Register and to examine barriers that place nominations like the Locust Grove Cemetery on hold? What can state and national preservation programs do to recognize the historic resources of underserved communities such as Pennsylvania's African American cemeteries? Some suggestions:

- Recognize the defining characteristics and significance of these places. The forty-two African American cemeteries with USCT burials in Pennsylvania reveal a landscape of segregation and marginalized locations as well as a story of patriotism and the veterans who left a record of service. Historically, many African American communities had limited economic resources, and the only tangible remains are the cemeteries. While some may be overgrown or hard to read, they have strong spiritual and patriotic, as well as historic, association for members of the community.
- Develop a statewide historic context for African American cemeteries. Preliminary research on Pennsylvania cemeteries with USCT burials shows a very different picture than the history of Pennsylvania cemeteries that is provided on the state website, which starts with colonial graveyards and then jumps to park-like designed cemeteries. Another state web resource on black history [ed. note: apparently no longer available online] is informative but does not address cemeteries or burial practices. Preparing a historic context for these cemeteries would help recognize this important part of our past without the burden developing time-consuming justifications for every individual nomination.
- Ask the National Park Service to consider updating Bulletin 41 to provide guidance that reflects a more updated understanding of African American cemeteries. The National Register program has done a good job in addressing the topic of diversity through such initiatives as the American Latino Heritage Projects and African American Heritage. This could be an added initiative.



Memorial Day ceremony, Midland Cemetery, Steelton, PA, 2013. Photo credit: Brenda Barrett.

All of these steps would make it easier to evaluate the historic significance of these resources and help them gain the benefits of listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Then cemetery caretakers across Pennsylvania can focus on the more pressing problems of acquiring clear title to their property, repairing broken headstones and sunken vaults, and engaging additional partners in the unending maintenance needs of these hallowed grounds.

1 Steven B. Burg, "From Troubled Ground to Common Ground": The Locust Grove African-American Cemetery Restoration Project: A Case Study of Service-Learning and Community History," *The Public Historian* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 51–82 <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/30/2/51>.

2 Historic Site Report of the Locust Grove Cemetery, <http://webspace.ship.edu/jqbao/shipmuseumdoc/Locust%20Grove%20Cemetery%20Site%20Report--final%20draft--12-2007.pdf>.

3 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/index.htm>.

4 <http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/grandreview/category/hallowed-grounds/>.

5 <http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/grandreview/category/us-colored-troops/>.

6 <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>.

7 [https://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb41/nrb41\\_4.htm](https://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb41/nrb41_4.htm).

8 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/shplist.htm>.

9 <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/apps/historical-markers.html>.

# FIGHTING FOR A BETTER MEMORIAL?

// SAM IMPERATRICE AND MARY RIZZO

POSTED DECEMBER 10, 2015

In this latest post in our series on the [National Historic Preservation Act \(NHPA\)](#),<sup>1</sup> Mary Rizzo, former co-editor of *The Public Historian* and current assistant professor of professional practice at Rutgers University–Newark, interviews Sam Imperatrice about the article [“Geographies of Displacement: Latina/os, Oral History, and the Politics of Gentrification in San Francisco’s Mission District,”](#)<sup>2</sup> by Nancy Raquel Mirabel. Imperatrice was a community organizer in Brooklyn who worked on gentrification issues.

**MR:** Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. Can you start by telling me about the community organizing you did?

**SI:** I was a community organizer and researcher for a membership-based organization called Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE) in Brooklyn in the early to mid 2000s. . . . The biggest concern that we didn’t feel anyone was addressing was the development pressures coming to the area, lots of ground being broken on these new high rise condo developments. . . . The work I did was trying to pull together a motley crew of interests—small businesses, other community groups, public housing residents—and trying to link them to broader neighborhood and community issues.

**MR:** Assembling a motley crew sounds like a lot of public history projects! Let’s turn to Mirabel’s article. What was your overall impression of it?

**SI:** I really love the narrative style of this article. She walks through her process of understanding the role of her research and dealing with its political potential and limitations. And her realization that there’s no end to this process. There was this belief that these market forces would hit an equilibrium at some point, but what we’ve seen since the dot com bubble and in her reflections in 2009 is that it’s still happening even in the middle of this complete economic meltdown. It elicits a very strong policy response, and the policy responses we’ve had up to now are totally inadequate.

**MR:** She never quite gets to the policy response, though that’s not her point necessarily. In fact, the article ends very abruptly and angrily.

**SI:** I think what she’s saying is, if what we’re doing is fighting for a better memorial, I don’t want any part of that. There’s a salvage anthropology going on. This sense that we’ve got to collect these stories at all costs because this is an important community, important issues, important stories that we don’t want to be lost. But what is their political potential to actually change this process we’re in? She’s grappling with it. At the end, she’s concerned



**Left:** Houses in the Mission District of San Francisco. Photo credit: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Houses\\_in\\_the\\_Mission\\_District\\_of\\_San\\_Francisco.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Houses_in_the_Mission_District_of_San_Francisco.jpg). Permission: CC BY 2.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>.

**Right:** San Francisco Women’s Building, 3543 18th Street, Mission District, San Francisco. Photo credit: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Women%27s\\_Building](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Women%27s_Building). Permission: CC BY SA 3.0, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>.



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that there are all the memorials along the Embarcadero that are carefully culled from a distant past to paper over a more recent past of displacement in that area so they can talk about things that might be considered struggles, like labor strikes along the waterfront, but that doesn't have the sting or have the burn.

**MR:** She's really touching on the role of public memory.

**SI:** At one point she talks about how there has to be consent to forget to build new narratives and there's this painful liminal period where the people who have different memories from the newcomers are still there, these kind of walking ghosts in their own spaces that new folks have to pretend don't really exist to create their own stories. A colonization on top of the existing community. She doesn't want her work to be just capturing those things so that they can at some point be turned into that plaque along the pier. She doesn't come to resolution because we haven't come to resolution.

**MR:** The topic of the article is this oral history project she's leading. Is there a value in that kind of public history/oral history project to someone doing community organizing?

**SI:** I think absolutely. At FUREE, we had limited resources. We prioritized trying to capture these stories and funnel it in a constructive way. We had a series of meetings where we did memory mapping and charrettes in a community setting. But contextualizing that always because we were in the middle of an organizing campaign in light of what was going on. . . . It's incredibly invaluable in organizing work for people to understand and honor their collective stories. The problem comes with fetishizing that type of work. I don't see that's

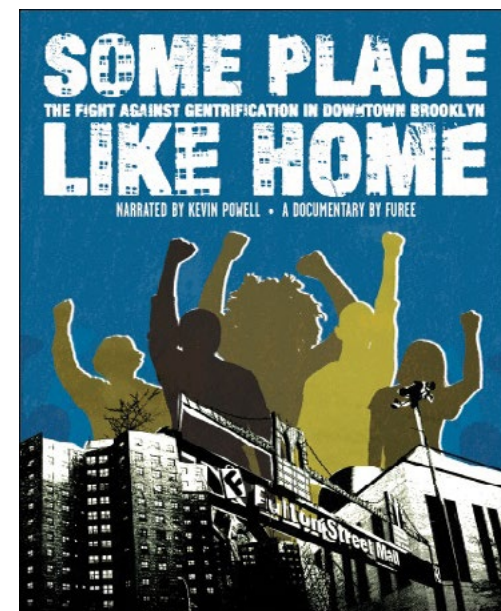
what's going on with Maribel's project, but I think that people who don't want the real policy changes that are helpful might be okay with funding or approving that type of project. She says they had to be very neutral and to get a broad understanding of what was happening in the neighborhood. Talking to the opposition and making the opposition feel safe is not something that can really happen in the middle of an organizing struggle. . . . Being an academic or public historian is a very different role than being a community organizer.

**MR:** How do public and oral historians make sure their work reaches community organizers and community members?

**SI:** In gentrification, it gets back to spaces. If you want things to be accessible, they need to be in accessible spaces. The Internet is becoming increasingly accessible in a lot of communities, but it's still not where it needs to be. And there's also just having an embodied experience can be really powerful. Gentrification attacks the very spaces where we can have those moments. Ultimately, there's something about collecting the material, but we have to collect being mindful of how we want it to live on after it's been collected. That's moving past the salvage anthropologies.

**MR:** The series of blog posts that this is a part is about the NHPA and our way to critically commemorate the upcoming anniversary of the NHPA. Do you have thoughts about historic preservation and its complicated relationship with gentrification?

**SI:** Do I go there? [laughs] The act, like a lot of legislation from its time, created new opportunities, but those exist in a world of intersectional oppressions. It doesn't do anything inherently to address those issues. As a tool, it can be used many



Poster for FUREE film. Photo credit: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/fort-greene/8844150638>. Permission: CC BY 2.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>.

different ways. You can use historic preservation legislation to make neighborhoods even more unaffordable. Or you can use them as a tool of community revitalization that's indigenous and organic. . . . It can be used tactically very well, but strategically it doesn't have the same aims and ambitions as most social justice work. . . . We need stronger laws and real commitment around affordability and people's right to stay in their communities. And that means taking on the rights of capitalists to generate profit. Cities are reluctant to do that, but that's what needs to be done. Historic preservation is just one way of maybe doing that.

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1 <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>.

2 Nancy Raquel Mirabal, "Geographies of Displacement: Latina/os, Oral History, and the Politics of Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District," *The Public Historian* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 7–31, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/31/2/7>.

# I, TOO, SING AMERICA

## INTEGRATING THE VOICES OF ALL AMERICANS IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

// DARLENE TAYLOR

POSTED JANUARY 1, 2016

Historic preservation exists to tell stories of our journeys as a people and as a nation, but somehow along the way the stories of America's African American, Latino, Asian, and Native American communities are erased or obscured as historians and preservationists tell the great American story. As we celebrate fifty years of the 1966 [National Historic Preservation Act \(NHPA\)](#),<sup>1</sup> America's historical record overwhelmingly favors a well-to-do minority. This anniversary should be characterized by a rigorous assessment, inventory, and look back at what has been preserved and what has been ignored. The challenge is to ask: When the preservation of heritage is the vision of the privileged few, is the American public being served?

The call of those who are not the dominant voices in American memory resonates with the title of a Langston Hughes poem, ["I, Too, Sing America."](#)<sup>2</sup> a poem of people, communities, and histories left out of the nation's collective story. It is a longing for inclusion. In this year of celebration, that historic poem challenges preservationists and historians to ensure a place for every American story, because there's damage to our national consciousness when a majority of the population is left out.

In ["Emphasis on the Public,"](#)<sup>3</sup> Leondra Burchall shares how the preservation of buildings, museum exhibitions, historic writings, and academic histories can be disconnected from the way individuals and communities experience history. When the historical record reflects only the perspectives of the powerful, Burchall notes, underrepresented communities are left to admire from a distance. To close the distance and make history relevant to all, museum officials, academics, historians, and preservationists must eliminate cultural bias. Those same arbiters of history must examine their storytelling practices and make room for other voices in local, regional, and national narratives.

As a cultural activist, I have supported and advocated for efforts that reflect the inclusivity of community voices, experiences, and perspectives. My work related to America's civil rights legacy prompted congressional

legislation to support museums and data collection that include marginalized communities. Engaging congressional leaders and state officials in conversations about America's rich heritage, I focused on connecting diverse audiences. As an artist, literature allows me a path to partner arts and action.

Literature, poetry, and visual arts provide vibrant ways to engage audiences and experience national storytelling in new ways. Former US poet laureate Natasha Trethewey's collection, *Native Guard*, offers a meditation on America's past and a counter to the erasure of contributions of others, as if they played no role in America's growth as a nation.<sup>4</sup> Her poetry teaches us. As survivors, we have a duty to tend to the gravestones of our fathers and mothers and those who laid down their lives in building this country. The legacy we inherit is inscribed across many monuments, such as the little school houses, businesses, front porches, casitas, inns, farms, waterways, and mountains where people labored, raised their families, shared music, and passed down stories.

The late Dr. Clement Price, in his roles as Newark (NJ) historian and member of the [Advisory Council on Historic Preservation](#),<sup>5</sup> and a trustee of the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#),<sup>6</sup> mentored me as a new preservationist. We shared African American traditions that valued ancestral knowledge and participation in family acts to preserve graves, churches, and cultural stories. In that regard, we both were raised in traditions that hold sensitivity for awareness and preservation, to save places that Price called "harbors for memory and ritual." We learned through practice from people untrained in formal preservation techniques, but who honored legacies.

Price inserted a new narrative into historic preservation in his essay, ["The Path to Big Mama's House: Historic Preservation, Memory, and African American History."](#)<sup>7</sup> He wrote of a simple bungalow, built in about the 1920s in South Carolina, a place where he reflected on the deep, meaningful, and subtle ways "the power of place and a personal interest

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**Top:** Harbor of Town of St. George, Bermuda, 2006. Photo by Aodhdubh at English Wikipedia. CC BY 2.5, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/>.

**Center:** The State House, in St. George's, Bermuda, built 1620. Photo credit: Aodhdubh at English Wikipedia. CC BY 2.5, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/>.

in preserving places and memories" dear to him shaped his scholarship.

This past year, America and the world were shocked by the murder of innocent churchgoers during a Bible study meeting in Charleston, South Carolina. The incident turned our gaze to the representations and interpretations of America's history. The Confederate flag was used as a symbol of hate, not history, in that act. This tragedy challenges us to examine our interpretations of heritage and to build deeper meaning and consciousness in understanding the past. It challenges us to remember with wholeness.

History lives with people and is not stagnant; therefore it is essential to look for ways to include all identities and not to prejudice history by privileging one group over another. In her work with students in Bermuda, Burchall tackled the disparities in storytelling and allowed youth to find *their* stories and integrate them into the past. Through a workshop called "Bringing History to Life," youth in Bermuda's Historic Towne of St. George, a World Heritage site, used art to create interpretations of historic districts that gave them a voice in the narrative.

In addition to reinterpretations of what's already there, there needs to be a focus on underrepresented voices in determining which places matter—and on readying the necessary filings, surveys, and documentation to make that happen. The National Trust for Historic Preservation reports that there are 15 million people across America engaged in preservation activities and 50 million people sympathetic to preservation values. Even though many of these individuals may not see themselves as preservationists, the National Trust is working

to engage, educate, and give them the tools and skills to preserve the places that matter to their communities. These new advocates for historic preservation are strong partners in meeting the goals of the NHPA as they work to include the stories of marginalized communities.

In Houston, Texas, community and business leaders are partnering with government to rebuild Emancipation Park, which has been a place for gathering and celebrating the hopes of freedom and social justice since 1872. Efforts like this are alive in communities across the nation, where individuals are collecting stories and asking that they be part of the national memory through park sites, monuments, and the preservation of buildings and places of social change.

The Smithsonian Institution introduced the public to an expanded story of the American experience with its National Museum of the American Indian. A museum of African American history and culture is nearing completion on the Mall in Washington, DC.<sup>8</sup> A monument to America's civil rights journey is reflected in a statue of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Congress acted on legislation for a commission on the creation of a women's history museum. The National Park Service is actively researching and funding the story of American history as heard through the cultural voices of Latinos, women, and other underrepresented groups. President Barack Obama and Congress should continue to encourage inclusion of all voices in America's history—even though the places and artifacts of some populations may be fragile or dissipating.

Importantly, as historic preservationists reflect on the legacy of the fifty-year-old NHPA, it is essential that the future of cultural and



resource preservation be an inclusive movement with programming, skills training, and education for underrepresented voices. Traditional preservation organizations, their leadership, and those who grant dollars to support preservation programming must reflect the public they serve. To avoid what Burchall calls gazing from a distance, preservationists and historians must be rigorous in discovering talent and providing training among diverse populations. While funding for such initiatives may face challenges, it is imperative that preservationists, academic programs, and cultural organizations direct resources towards these efforts.

Historic preservation can only fully represent America's legacy, diversity, and the evolving spirit of the NHPA if the places that harbor memory and ritual and the people who tell the preservation story include all who sing "America."

1 <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>.

2 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/47558>.

3 Leondra N. Burchall, "Emphasis on the Public," *The Public Historian* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 62–68, <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/32/4/62>.

4 Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard: Poems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

5 <http://www.achp.gov/>.

6 <https://savingplaces.org/>.

7 Clement Alexander Price, "The Path to Big Mama's House: Historic Preservation, Memory, and African-American History," *Forum Journal* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 23–31, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/543388#img03>.

8 The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, opened on September 24, 2016.

Birdseye view of plan for Emancipation Park, Houston, TX. Provided courtesy of OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority-TRIZ #7



# THE NATIONAL REGISTER IN PRACTICE EFFICACY AND CHALLENGE IN MACON, GEORGIA

// KIM CAMPBELL

Despite condemnation in many academic history and preservation circles, the [National Register of Historic Places](#)<sup>1</sup> has proven to be a useful tool in historic preservation. In particular, the oft-discussed and frequently attacked historic tax credit born of the National Register has been instrumental for both historic preservation and community revitalization, though this is not to say that this system is without its flaws. Prevailing interpretations of the [Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation](#)<sup>2</sup> highlight issues with the National Register, including integrity and historical development that we must address going forward. Rehabilitation projects in Macon, Georgia, highlight both the potential for success and the current flaws of the National Register.

When asked to name a “historic city” in the state of Georgia, Macon is probably not the first place that comes to mind for most people.<sup>3</sup> For most, Savannah is the obvious “historic city,” with its long history and well-known stock of historic structures. However, since 2010, Macon-Bibb has led the state in the number of historic tax credit projects of every type, with 182 federal credit projects, 280 property tax freeze projects, and 301 state credit projects.<sup>4</sup> For comparison, Savannah produced 172 federal projects, 131 property tax freeze projects, and 127 state credit projects in the same period.<sup>5</sup> In 2010, Macon-Bibb County had 91,351 residents. Chatham County, containing the city of Savannah, recorded 265,128. So why is it that Macon-Bibb, with fewer residents and less of a heritage tourism record, has had such success with historic tax credits?

The answer resides in its National Register historic districts.

In June 2016, Macon boasted fourteen historic districts that encompassed over six thousand contributing buildings, many of which were vacant and derelict prior to 2010.<sup>6</sup> Macon’s economy, particularly in the area surrounding the historic neighborhoods and downtown, began to decline in the 1960s. The construction of a new indoor shopping mall outside the city center in the 1970s contributed to the sharp and steady descent. Macon’s economy was so depressed until the twenty-first century that there was simply no money to update or demolish a historic building. The result was a building stock in poor condition, but that was largely unchanged from its period of significance, making thousands of buildings eligible for historic tax credits.<sup>7</sup>

These tax credits became incredibly important when grassroots community revitalization efforts began around 2005. Without the incentive they provided, rehabilitation of a building for a new business or home was simply not a wise investment, given the value of the surrounding properties and the general absence of consumers with expendable income in the area. The ability to recapture between 25 to 45 percent of the investment in a historic structure provided



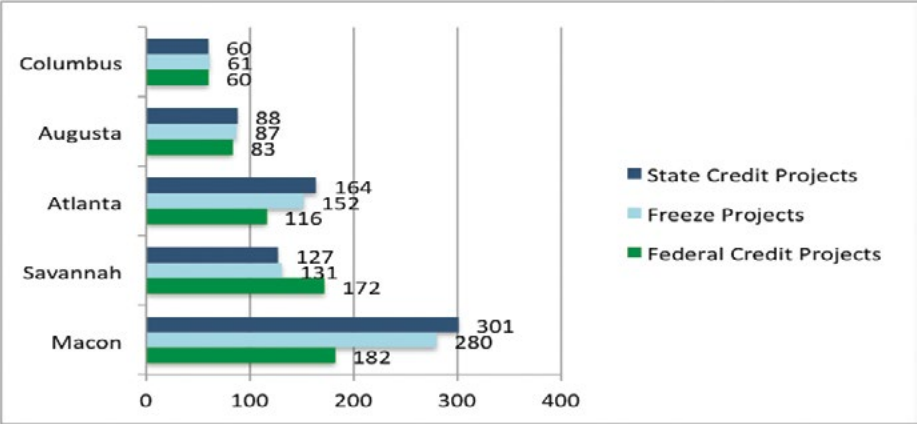
Bush Refrigeration Company, 1094 Columbus Street. Although inquired about more than once, this building's non-contributing status and resulting unavailability of historic tax credits scared developers away from rehabilitating this great structure. Image courtesy of Historic Macon Foundation.

enough incentive to developers to finally shift the focus of economic development away from the community's sprawling northern areas and back toward Macon's central historic districts. Even ten years later, these incentives remained necessary to raise the return on investment to a level where developers would consider rehabilitating historic buildings. If a structure happened to be non-contributing, the project would not go forward. National recognition of Macon's historic preservation and ongoing community revitalization efforts would not have been possible without its National Register historic districts, which allowed for historic tax credit projects.

Despite Macon’s phenomenal successes using historic tax credits, there are flaws in the National Register of Historic Places as it currently stands and is interpreted. For example, integrity of materials and design are very important for a building’s contributing or non-contributing status and therefore any potential rehabilitation project for tax credits. However, buildings that are continuously occupied are frequently adapted to their residents’ needs, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. In National Register terms, these modifications, which are often less than fifty years old, can change the character of the structure so much that it no longer has the necessary integrity to merit listing as a contributing structure.<sup>8</sup> In the South, this process occurs often in historically African American neighborhoods and prevents these districts from achieving National Register status.

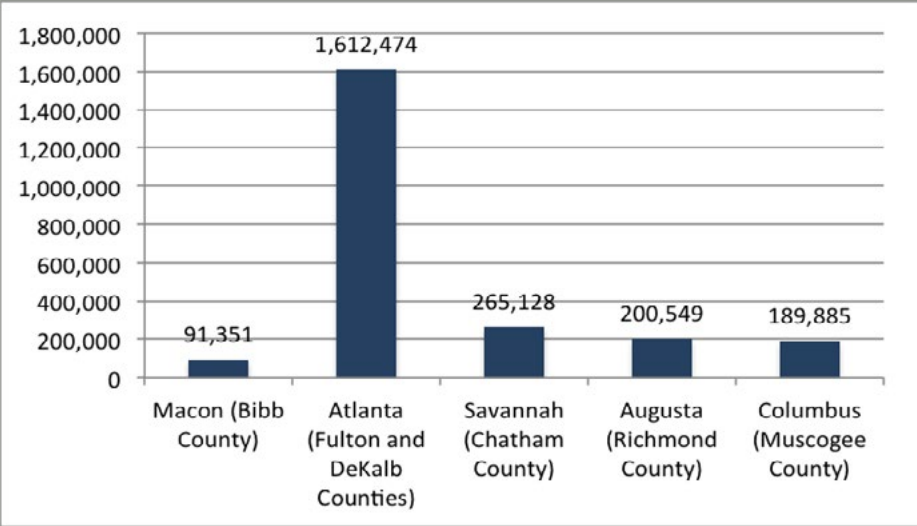
Integrity also influences rehabilitation plans. At present, the best treatment for features too deteriorated to repair is replacement in kind, which makes perfect sense when replacing wooden windows that have lasted more than a hundred years. But in a house that’s just fifty years old with character-defining vinyl tile floors, should those floors be replaced with modern vinyl that may only last ten years? At the state level in Georgia, interpretations of integrity have moved toward allowing “integrity of feeling”—basically a sense of ambience correlated to the period of significance—to substitute for integrity of materials. This reading allows developers to avoid in-kind replacement with hazardous (i.e., asbestos) or less permanent materials, but this interpretation has not yet been widely adopted at a federal level.

Related to integrity is demonstration of the continuation of historical development in rehabilitated buildings.<sup>9</sup> Macon’s largest National Register district, the Macon Historic District, has a period of significance that ends in 1942, largely because the last district update began in 1992. Macon’s downtown decline in the 1960s and ‘70s led to character-defining feature changes, some of which are now fifty years old. For example, plaster walls on the second and third stories of many buildings were not maintained for many years. In the language of the Standards, these walls now have a “modeled” appearance, showing the deteriorated plaster as well as the masonry behind. Tax credit projects are not allowed to preserve this “modeled” look, and instead usually have to take the wall back to its older flat finish. However, the downtown’s decline is a key part of Macon’s revitalization narrative, which deserves to be preserved. Without that severe decline, Macon would not have the quantity and quality of available historic building stock it has. Leaving the “modeled” plaster look in place



**Chart 1:** Tax Credit Projects for the Top 5 Producing Cities in Georgia from July 2009 to March 2016. Macon produced more tax credit projects in the between 2010 and 2015 than any other city in Georgia. According to Georgia’s Historic Preservation Division, Macon led the state in submitted applications for fiscal years 2012–13 through 2014–15 and is on track to submit the most applications for fiscal year 2015–16.

**Chart 2:** Population of Top Five Leading Tax Credit Project Counties in Georgia, according to the 2010 US Census. Macon-Bibb has less than half the population of the next closest county Muscogee, where the city of Columbus is located.





would be one way to physically demonstrate this historical development, while ensuring that a building is safe and usable in modern life. After all, rehabilitation is not meant to “freeze” a building in time, but to maintain its character while allowing for its continued effective use. Reversing fifty, forty, thirty, or even twenty years of changes does a disservice to future generations by hiding a building’s full physical narrative.

The [National Historic Preservation Act](#),<sup>10</sup> the National Register of Historic Places, and the historic tax credit system are by no means perfect. How the meaning of integrity will need to continue to change to address everything from mobile homes to Masonite siding and how to avoid eradicating parts of a building’s history are only two of the many issues preservationists in the United States will have to address in the next fifty years. However, despite the challenges presented by the National Register, it can serve as a powerful tool for historic preservation. To see this tool in action, just come down to Macon and see how the National Register works preservation success on the ground.



Capricorn Office Building, 535 D. T. Walton Sr. Way. Capricorn Records founded the genre of southern rock in the early 1970s and added this character-defining façade in 1973; however, that genre’s popularity declined and the company declared bankruptcy in 1983. This office building, which was the first integrated office in Macon, began to deteriorate quickly with several leaks after the business shuttered. Image courtesy of Historic Macon Foundation.



Interior, Capricorn Office Building. The water damage throughout the building was so severe that there were several collapsed sections of floor and some missing roof. In 2015, a local developer interested in saving this building and its history purchased the structure and planned to rehabilitate it using historic tax credits. Because of the façade, the building is currently non-contributing. Due to the structure’s deteriorated state, Georgia’s Historic Preservation Division determined it did not have enough material integrity to qualify for National Register listing. Georgia’s Historic Preservation Division did suggest that the building could qualify for the Georgia Register of Historic Places with an integrity of feel if it was restored to a “1970s” interior appearance. Image courtesy of Historic Macon Foundation.



Commercial Building in downtown Macon. It took years of water, neglect, and even fire to give plaster on masonry walls this character. Should that history of decline be entirely erased in a rehabilitation through the use of plaster or sheetrock to restore these walls to their original appearance? Image courtesy of Historic Macon Foundation.

I owe a special thank you to all the staff at Georgia's Historic Preservation Division. Not only do they answer all of my out-of-the-box National Register and historic tax credit questions, but they also took the time to provide the data for this essay. Thank you for all of your hard work and dedication to preservation in our state.

1 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/index.htm>.

2 The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation are ten guidelines architectural reviewers at both the state and federal level use to determine the appropriateness of proposed treatments to historic buildings applying for historic tax credits. The National Park Service defines "integrity" as the ability of a property to convey its significance (i.e., its history and why that history matters). Integrity is traditionally determined by looking at seven factors: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. A building must have enough integrity present initially to be listed in the National Register, and the Standards are designed to maintain a building's integrity while updating it for modern use. "Historical development" is a term used to discuss how a building has changed over time. See <https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/rehabilitation/rehab/stand.htm>.

3 Macon-Bibb County is a consolidated city/county government. For the purposes of this piece, the terms Macon-Bibb and Macon will be used interchangeably. All tax credit statistics are counted by county, so other cities listed for tax credit comparison are actually the corresponding county numbers, with city names used to help identify the location.

4 One of the keys to both Macon's and Georgia's tax credit successes is Georgia's state preservation incentive programs. Georgia has two programs that both income-producing and residential properties are eligible for: the State Tax Credit for Rehabilitated Historic Properties, which returns 25 or 30 percent of the qualified rehabilitation expenditures (QREs) as a state income tax credit, and the State Preferential Property Tax Assessment for Rehabilitated Historic Properties, which freezes a structure's taxable value at the pre-improvement rate for eight and a half years. QREs are any expenses associated with improvements to the permanent historic structure under rehabilitation.

5 All tax credit data is from the Technical Services Unit activity report for July [1,] 2009 to March [8,] 2016, from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Historic Preservation Division.

6 This number of contributing historic buildings does not include historic structures, objects, or sites. A contributing building, structure, object, or site is one that is geographically within the boundaries of a National Register historic district and is one of the resources that led to the district being listed in the first place. Although contributing resources are not individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places, they are eligible for all the same benefits as individually listed resources, including historic tax credits.

7 A place's "period of significance" is the National Register term for the portion of time corresponding to the history, or significance, that allowed the place to be listed in the National Register. For example, the period of significance for a house listed for its original design and construction by a famous architect is typically the year the structure was

completed. That initial completion year represents the time the structure best matched the intent of the architect, which in that case is the reason the structure is listed.

8 Any building over fifty years old is considered "historic" in the United States. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 codified this fifty-year mark for the National Register by disqualifying any building that is not at least fifty years old from listing. The "fifty-year rule" can be superseded if the building possesses "outstanding significance" to history. For example, the Lorraine Motel, where civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, was listed in the National Register before it was fifty years old because of the impact that event had on our nation's history.

9 The "historical development" of a building is how it changes over time. By declaring a period of significance for buildings, the National Register actually discourages the continuation of buildings' historical development; if a building changes too much from its form at its period of significance, it will no longer have enough integrity to be listed in the National Register.

10 <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>.

# DOES HISTORIOGRAPHY MATTER FOR THE NATIONAL REGISTER

// DANIEL VIVIAN

Although historiography and the [National Register of Historic Places](#)<sup>1</sup> are rarely mentioned in the same breath, the latter is no less immune to shifting currents in intellectual thought than any other historical program. The fiftieth anniversary of the [National Historic Preservation Act](#)<sup>2</sup> affords an opportunity to consider how well the National Register has kept pace with historiographical change. For the most part, it hasn't. The continuing relevance and vitality of the program attests to the far-sighted vision of the National Park Service (NPS) staff who created the National Register criteria and areas of significance in the 1970s and to the creativity and resourcefulness of nomination preparers and state historic preservation office staff. That more than one thousand new properties are added to the National Register in most years is a sign of strength, not weakness. Yet without occasional updates, even the most vital programs eventually show their age. Modest changes aimed at maintaining relevancy promise to ensure the National Register remains fundamental to historic preservation in the years to come.

This essay suggests three revisions to published National Register guidance aimed at bringing the program into step with contemporary historiography. None are dramatic; all concern language and phrasing rather than substance or procedure. None would change the basic structure of the National Register. Rather, each seeks to bring fundamental pieces of the program in line with the way historians now think and write about the past.

*Areas of Significance.* To be listed in the National Register, a property must meet at least one of the four program criteria. The criteria are specified on page 37 of [How to Complete the National Register Registration Form](#)<sup>3</sup> and summarized briefly as follows:

- A. Important events or broad patterns in American history
- B. Association with a historically significant person
- C. Architecture and design
- D. Archaeology

A National Register nomination demonstrates the significance of a property through a “narrative statement of significance”—a history that argues for

the property's importance and compares it to relevant examples. In addition to crafting this statement, a nomination preparer must select one or more “Areas of Significance” and, if applicable, appropriate subcategories. Areas of significance are listed on pages 40–41 of *How to Complete the National Register Registration Form*.

Areas of significance are important for several reasons. Although created for the sake of data collection, during an era when historians saw computer databases as holding huge analytic potential, their main influence lies in how they inform the work of nomination preparers and what they indicate to people who use nominations as secondary sources. Areas of significance are central to the way the National Register classifies information—in effect, how it thinks about history. Dated, awkward, and anachronistic language stands out. Although capable historians write the narrative statement of significance to make the strongest possible argument for a given property using the most appropriate phrasing, the need to relate arguments to selected areas of significance nonetheless wields some influence. Moreover, since National Register nominations are public documents that tend to be used by school groups, local historians, and other interested parties, language matters. The information that nonspecialists obtain from a nomination depends in part on the areas of significance specified on Section 8 of the nomination form. This is the first place people look for information about the history of a property and why it is listed.

Given this, there is every reason for the NPS to carefully examine the established areas of significance and make revisions to reflect contemporary historical practice. “Ethnic Heritage: Black,” for example, has long baffled nomination preparers. “African American History” is a better classification for the vast majority of sites for which it is used.<sup>4</sup> “Social History” also shows its age. The broader category of “Social and Cultural History” would better accommodate many of the histories that “social history” is asked to recognize. “Conservation” remains relevant but has largely been superseded by “Environmental History,” a now vital field of inquiry that encompasses a greater range of human interaction with the natural world. Likewise, “Labor History” is conspicuously absent, as is “Gender and Sexuality.” Both of these

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categories have been important areas of scholarship for decades, yet neither is recognized by the National Register.

The definitions provided for the areas of significance also merit attention. Several could be better phrased, and some seem more celebratory than critical. The National Register defines religion, for example, “as an organized system of beliefs, practices, and traditions regarding mankind’s relationship to perceived supernatural forces,” yet scholars of religion generally use terms such as “faith” and “belief” when offering broadly inclusive definitions. “Perceived supernatural forces,” in this context, is misleading and might well offend some people of faith. Similarly, the National Register defines “military” as “the system of defending the territory and sovereignty of a people,” yet most historians would be quick to note that the United States has a long tradition of offensive military action.

Simply put, critical review of the listed areas of significance and appropriate revisions would be a significant step toward updating the National Register. Although most of the areas listed remain relevant, there are notable omissions, and some descriptions demand improvement.

*Amendments.* Experienced nomination preparers know a nominating authority (a state, federal, or tribal historic preservation officer) can seek to change the documentation for a listed property if reason exists. Page 71 of *How to Complete the National Register Registration Form* specifies common reasons

for amending documentation and the procedures for doing so. New information, physical changes to a property, and the desire to add areas of significance not originally specified are all valid reasons for amending a nomination. (Many properties listed for their architecture under Criterion C, for example, are also likely to meet Criterion A.) Amendments have an administrative role in that they make information about a property current when significant changes have occurred, but they also enhance the educational value of nominations. Improved historical and descriptive information makes nominations more useful to researchers, teachers, and avocational historians.

The single most conspicuous absence in the discussion of amendments is mention of how perspectives on the past change over time. Any history, no matter how well crafted, will eventually become dated. Historians’ questions and interpretations are invariably shaped by the circumstances in which they live. The National Park Service would do well to acknowledge broad acceptance of the constructivist view of history and emphasize opportunities to amend documentation to reflect new scholarship, new information, and differing interpretations. To be sure, the existing guidance accommodates such revisions. They specify “additional criteria,” “new areas of significance,” and “additional periods of significance” as valid reasons for amendments. Still, a plain-English statement would be useful. By acknowledging that history is a process of continual investigation and reevaluation, the NPS would encourage revisions to severely dated nominations and ultimately

Louisville, Kentucky, takes great pride in its public parks, several of which were designed by Fredrick Law Olmsted in the early 1890s. The Olmsted Park System of Louisville was listed in the National Register in 1982. Like many nominations of the era, the form contains limited historical information, and it also does not specify the boundaries of the listed property or indicate the resources that contribute to its significance. An amendment to update the documentation for the listing would greatly improve its educational value and use for planning purposes. Images courtesy of the author.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 37

make historical information presented in National Register nominations more useful.

*Subjectivity.* Since the National Park Service published the basic National Register guidance in the 1970s, approaches to studying the past have changed dramatically. The influence of the cultural or linguistic turn, with its attention to language, culture, signs and symbols, discourse, narrative, and various methodological and empirical dilemmas, has fundamentally changed the questions that historians ask about the past and the methods used in investigating them. Although heady debates about theory, knowledge, structuralism, poststructuralism, and the like have limited relevance to the National Register, they are not without influence. Probably the most important trend in this regard is increased recognition of the inherent subjectivity of knowledge. Historians have grown more circumspect in the claims they make about the past and their interpretations of historical sources. The collapse of faith in objectivity and the challenge of postmodernism have left no other options.<sup>5</sup>

Although practitioners have long recognized that the National Register's concept of significance is not an objective standard, the published guidance largely ignores questions about how significance is evaluated and what makes an argument for significance compelling.<sup>6</sup> [How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation](#)<sup>7</sup> includes information about historic contexts, evaluating properties in relation to relevant contexts, and examples of properties that meet each of the four criteria (pp. 7–24). What is missing, however, is mention of the fact that claims about significance are always substantiated by historical arguments. That is what the narrative statement of significance presented in Section 8 of the National Register

registration form does, after all. It makes a case for significance based on historical evidence, information drawn from secondary literature, and analysis of the property in relation to relevant examples. It presents judgments based on the methods historians use in investigating the past. Although not objective, a well-crafted statement of significance is a sound basis for evaluating the significance of a given property. Analytic rigor, cogent argumentation, and mastery of primary and secondary sources are the tools historians use in fashioning arguments about the past.

By explaining what makes an argument for significance convincing, the National Park Service would make the nomination process more transparent and thus strengthen the National Register, not weaken it. Demystifying the concept of significance would make the program more intelligible to the general public and build appreciation for the effort and thought that lies behind every nomination. It would highlight the research and analysis that goes into in each nomination and the associated review process. By the time a property is listed in the National Register, the nomination has withstood scrutiny from experienced professionals at the state and federal levels (and, in some cases, local) and review by a board of experts. The process is roughly comparable to that used in evaluating manuscripts submitted to academic journals and publishers. In short, although significance is to some degree subjective, the manner in which the National Register judges it is hardly lax. The review process reflects the conventions of historical scholarship. The National Register should take credit for the process; it deserves to be highlighted.

Although there are plenty of other possibilities for revisions, the three mentioned here would significantly strengthen the National Register

without extensive effort. They are high-reward strategies for aligning the program with contemporary trends in historical practice. Moreover, they would underscore the quality of the program and the standards it employs. After fifty years, the National Register remains a strong and effective means of recognizing properties associated with important events and people in the nation's history. A few revisions will make sure it stays that way and grows stronger over time.

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1 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/index.htm>.

2 <http://www.achp.gov/nhpa.pdf>.

3 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb16a/>.

4 Scholars such as George M. Frederickson have argued that race and ethnicity function in similar fashion. Race, Frederickson notes, can be construed as a historical collective rooted in a common set of ancestors. Race is therefore “what happens when ethnicity is deemed essential or indelible and made hierarchal.” See George M. Frederickson, *Race: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 154–55. Although Frederickson's point is well-taken, the one made here is also valid: African American history is a more familiar descriptor for histories recognized by the National Register that involve African Americans.

5 On these developments, see Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley, eds., *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History: Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

6 Michael A. Tomlan, ed., *Preservation of What, for Whom? A Critical Look at Historical Significance* (Ithaca, NY: National Council on Preservation Education, 1997); Randall Mason, “Fixing Historic Preservation: A Constructive Critique of ‘Significance,’” *Places* 16, no. 1 (2004): 64–71.

7 <https://www.nps.gov/NR/PUBLICATIONS/bulletins/nrb15/>.

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Tamara Gaskell is the co-editor of *The Public Historian* and public historian in residence at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, Rutgers University–Camden.



## // JAMES A. GLASS

James A. Glass is principal of Historic Preservation & Heritage Consulting LLC, served twice as deputy state historic preservation officer for Indiana, and for thirteen years was director of the graduate program in historic preservation at Ball State University. His 1990 book, *The Beginnings of a New National Historic Preservation Program, 1957–1969*, covers the role of Robert Utley in the founding of the national preservation program.



## // SAM IMPERATRICE

Sam Imperatrice is a former anti-gentrification and housing-rights organizer with a master's degree in urban planning. She currently homesteads in the Santa Cruz mountains and works professionally as a massage therapist.



## // NATALIE PERRIN

Natalie Perrin is an architectural historian and historic preservation specialist at Historical Research Associates, Inc., in Portland, Oregon. When not crawling through historic buildings, she enjoys paddling outrigger canoes and relaxing with the family.



## // MARY RIZZO

Mary Rizzo is assistant professor of professional practice in history and associate director of digital and public humanities initiatives in the graduate program in American Studies at Rutgers University–Newark.



## // DAVID ROTENSTEIN

David Rotenstein is a consulting historian based in Silver Spring, Maryland. He researches and writes on historic preservation, industrial history, and gentrification.



### // RHONDA SINCAVAGE

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### // DARLENE TAYLOR

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*Darlene Taylor is managing director of cultural heritage and community development at The Waterman Steele Group and a cultural activist engaged in preserving legacy and culture through storytelling. She is the recipient of fiction fellowships at A Room of Her Own, Kimbilio, and Callaloo and a former museum studies fellow at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.*



### // CARROLL VAN WEST

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### // LEONARDO VAZQUEZ

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### // DANIEL VIVIAN

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### // JOE WATKINS

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*Joe Watkins, chief, Tribal Relations and American Cultures, National Park Service, WASO.*

