Recognizing Cultural Heritage in the National Historic Preservation Program

Antoinette J. Lee

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 provides a broad mandate for preserving America's cultural heritage, including traditional cultural properties. Among the purposes of the Act is the statement that "the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people." Thus, in 1966, the framers of the National Historic Preservation Program viewed historic preservation as essential to contemporary community identity as well as to future generations of Americans.

The origins of the historic preservation movement in the United States lie in the commemoration of the nation's political leaders, such as at Mount Vernon, and military achievements, such as at national military parks. However, in parallel activities, explorers, naturalists, geologists, and scientists noted the great antiquity of the American Indian presence in North America and sought to protect their cultures from extinction. Scientific excavation of archeological properties associated with American Indian groups by Thomas Jefferson and his contemporaries provided early recognition of the significance of archeological properties. Throughout much of the 19th century, scientists and explorers who led expeditions throughout the West undertook archeological work on Indian pueblos, ruins, cliff dwellings, and Spanish colonial buildings. In 1892, President Benjamin Harrison, under the authority of the U.S. Congress, created the Casa Grande Ruin Reservation. The Antiquities Act of 1906 declared as a national policy the protection of antiquities on federal land.

The creation of the National Park Service in 1916 consolidated national parks and monuments previously assigned to the Department of the Interior and future national parks and monuments under a single bureau. In the 1933 reorganization of the federal government by a Presidential executive order, national monuments under other federal departments (War and Agriculture) were transferred to the National Park Service. These properties included American Indian sites such as Canyon de Chelly in Arizona and Bandelier in New Mexico. The 1933 executive order provided the foundation for the National Park Service's acquisition of properties representing a full scope of the nation's heritage.

The interpretation of African American history was frequently a secondary issue in the interpretation of Civil War battlefield properties that came under the National Park Service, particularly as the issue of slavery was addressed. However, the first property to enter the National Park Service specifically for its primary relationship to black history was the George Washington Carver National Monument in Diamond, Missouri, which was added in 1943. Thirteen years later, in 1956, the Booker T. Washington National Monument in Hardy, Virginia, was added to commemorate the achievements of the famous black educator. In response to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the development of African American studies in historical institutions throughout the post-World War II period, other properties associated with African American history were added to the national park system. They included the Frederick Douglass Home in Washington, D.C. in 1962; part of the campus of Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama in 1974; the Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site in Richmond, Virginia; and the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site in Atlanta, Georgia in 1980. As the years progressed, other cultural groups, such as the Japanese Americans, were recognized through the addition of properties such as Manzanar National Historic Site, representative of the relocation centers for people of Japanese descent during World War II.

For historic and cultural properties outside of the national park system, the Historic Sites Act of 1935 provided for the federal government to conduct a national survey of historic resources through research and investigation. While the results could be used to make recommendations for future National Park Service acquisitions, the survey results also were intended to call to the attention of States, municipalities, and the private sector the presence of such properties "which the National Government cannot preserve, but which need attention and rehabilitation." The survey of nationally significant properties continues today. More than 2,000 properties are now designated as National Historic Landmarks and include properties associated with America's cultural groups, such as sites significant in black history. Other ethnic groups have been studied for potential properties that could be designated National Historic Landmarks, including Chinatowns, Swedish and German settlements in the Midwest, and the Irish community in Boston. It is interesting to note that of the relatively small group of U.S. properties inscribed in the World Heritage List, several are associated with the heritage of American Indians: Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site in Illinois, Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico, and Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado.

The national mandate provided by the national park system itself and the National Historic Landmark program served as the foundation for the establishment of the National Register of Historic Places in the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The National Register is the nation's official list of its significant patrimony and provides federal recognition to properties of State and local, as well as national significance. The creation of the National Register coincided with a significant change within the historical profession itself. Academic programs, historical museums, and historical societies were caught up in the social upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s and sought relevancy with contemporary social concerns through the study of the histories of America's ethnic groups, histories of women and feminist movements, and neighborhood and family histories. The "new social history" found an outlet in the groundswell of grassroots preservation that the 1966 Act sought to support.

(***Lee***—*continued on page 8)*

(**Shull**—*continued from page 6)*

teria. Like the National Register bulletins, the videotape will be broadly distributed to encourage the appreciation of traditional cultural properties and their identification, evaluation, registration, and preservation. Another project is the publication of a series of regional travel itineraries that link National Register properties from National Parks to local historic districts to showcase the role of various groups in exploration and settlement, including those of traditional cultures.

The National Register and the National Trust for Historic Preservation have joined together in the new *Teaching with Historic Places* program to produce a series of lesson plans and instructional kits on using historic places in the classroom. A special issue of *CRM* devoted to *Teaching with Historic Places* was published in March of 1993. The very first lesson plan published in the series and reprinted in *CRM* was on the Knife River Indian villages in North Dakota. This native American site is important to a number of contemporary Indian tribes, who have expressed enthusiasm that a lesson plan that showcases the contributions of their people is published and available to use in schools nationwide.

The first kit of lessons now in production on "American Work: American Workplaces" is to include a lesson on Hopi lands that have been farmed since prehistoric times using specialized agricultural techniques which are still highly effective today. Young people will learn how innovative, creative, and adaptable the Hopi have been and how they have contributed to the development of agriculture in arid areas of the Southwest. With lessons such as these, young people will develop greater understanding and appreciation for the contributions of diverse cultural groups in our multicultural society. Traditional cultural groups can create their own lesson plans modeled on the *Teaching with Historic Places* lessons.

The National Register needs to hear from traditional cultural groups about what we should be doing to help them identify, register, protect, and educate Americans about their cultural heritage. The National Register can and should recognize the places that represent the heritage of all cultural groups. We must be mindful that some of the information about traditional cultural properties is not appropriate for release to the public, but if we care about cultural preservation, those of us who participate in studies to identify and document cultural heritage have the responsibility to assure that significant places and the information about them is used responsibly to educate our citizens about their values.

Carol D. Shull is Chief of Registration, National Register of Historic Places, Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service.

(**Lee**—*continued from page 7)*

From its inception, the National Register of Historic Places provided federal recognition of the national, statewide, and local historical values that were found in communities and their cultural groups nationwide. As historic preservation tools developed over the past 27 years at all levels of government, properties listed in the National Register became beneficiaries of financial incentives and environmental regulation. The process of identifying, evaluating, and registering properties for the National Register often served important educational purposes. Information accumulated during the nomination process is used for interpretive signs, brochures, and other publications and can be used for educational purposes.

It was largely in the area of identifying and evaluating properties at the local level of significance that much of the ethnic and cultural diversity in the National Register emerged. Preparers of National Register nominations are at the forefront of discovering and documenting Chinese mining sites in Idaho, Finnish and Czech settlements in South Dakota, and African Americans in Texas agricultural history. In the National Register Information System (NRIS), properties associated with African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Pacific-Islanders, European groups, and other cultural or ethnic groups can be sorted and pulled from the database. Although nearly 2,000 National Register properties are classified and encoded as associated with one of these ethnic and cultural groups, many more National Register properties could be associated with the nation's cultural and ethnic groups if additional documentation were available and properties reevaluated.

National Register Bulletin 38 was a milestone in the evolution of the National Register because it provided a specific mandate for addressing cultural and ethnic heritage and the heritage of "living cultures." The roots of the publication can be found in the ferment in historical and anthropological studies of the 1970s and 1980s and in the discussions of and publications on cultural conservation and American folklife and culture. Although not classified as such, a significant number of traditional cultural properties are listed in the National Register. It is important to note that eligibility for and listing in the National Register requires demonstrated significance under at least one National Register criterion. Many properties include aspects of traditional cultural significance, which were not documented in the nomination form at the time of submission to the nominating authority and to the National Register of Historic Places. However, these additional aspects, such as traditional cultural significance, should be noted where they exist and added to the documentation when feasible.

In recent years, the National Register of Historic Places has listed and determined eligible a number of properties specifically for their traditional cultural values. They include the listing in the National Register of Kuchamaa (Tecate Peak) in California, a sacred mountain unique to the ethnic identity of the Kumeyaay Indians, and a determination of eligibility for the Sandia Sandbars in the Rio Grande River, New Mexico, used by generations of the Sandia Pueblo people for rituals involving immersion in the river's waters. National Register Bulletin 38 provided important guidance for the identification, documentation, and evaluation of these properties. Doubtless, future National Park Service publications and technical assistance as well as those of other organizations and agencies, will draw attention to the heritage of America's cultural and ethnic groups in order to increase appreciation, protection, and interpretation.

Antoinette J. Lee is a historian with the National Register of Historic Places, Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service.