

# Diversifying the Cultural Resources Profession

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**W**hen I visited with a group of students enrolled in the Historic Preservation Program at the University of Oregon last year, several students expressed their concern about the demographics of their preservation classes and the professional preservation conferences they attended. The field was doing so much to preserve the historic places associated with minority and ethnic groups, but nearly everyone they met in the field could be described as European-American. The students were mystified about why this was the case and wanted to know what could be done about it.

There are no easy answers to these concerns. The experience of ethnic and minority groups in the United States is a vast and growing one in the scholarly and popular literature. While many groups that are considered “minority” have been in the United States for centuries, others are relatively new arrivals and are still addressing basic living requirements. The well-known professions of law, medicine, and computer science are seen as major avenues toward the American dream and have become more diverse in the past few decades. The academic world of history is increasingly diverse, while diversity is less apparent in academic departments of anthropology, museum studies, and architecture.<sup>1</sup> However, like many cultural professions in the world of museums and historical societies, historic preservation is a relatively unknown and seemingly exotic field of endeavor. The field does not employ large numbers of people and it is very possible that many citizens have never met a preservation professional.

On one side of the coin, the cultural resources world has made tremendous strides in addressing the heritage of diverse cultural groups in the United States. State Historic Preservation Offices are conducting surveys of African American historic places. Historic rehabilitation projects are upgrading and increasing the supply of housing in historic buildings in ethnic neighborhoods. Organizations representing diverse cul-

tural heritage are increasing in number, as are minority and diversity committees and councils within established historic preservation organizations. Heritage tourism that addresses ethnic and minority history has become a very big business.

Even with these important advances, the members of the professions that participate in historic preservation—historians, archeologists, historic architects, curators, and others—have remained remarkably non-diverse.

Today, when I look back at my 1987 essay, “Discovering Old Cultures in the New World: The Role of Ethnicity,” in *The American Mosaic*, I note that little has changed in the demographics of ethnic participation in the preservation professions.<sup>2</sup> In that essay, I described the paucity of minority professionals in the field and suggested a number of remedies. I recommended that minority based schools offer training or career counseling in historic preservation in order to provide an introduction to the field. Colleges and universities that offer degree programs should recruit more vigorously ethnic and minority students. Preservation organizations should devote more time to developing preservation programs for elementary and secondary students as a way to introduce them to the preservation field.

Nearly a year ago, the National Park Service’s cultural resources programs established the Cultural Resources Diversity Initiative to address the need to increase the number of minorities in the historic preservation/cultural resources field at all levels of government, including the National Park Service, and in the private sector. The Diversity Initiative is a long-term capital investment effort that seeks to transform the demographics of preservation practitioners. It will build on the progress made in increasing the profession’s work on culturally diverse historic places. Because of the relatively large commitment to education and experience needed in order to work in historic preservation, the complexion of the field will not change markedly in the near future. The challenge is to lay the foundation for signifi-

cant change in the demographics of the field over a decade or two.

One of the Diversity Initiative's major purposes is to reach out to diverse groups and bring them into the national historic preservation program through the use of existing NPS cultural resources programs and tools. To this end, we are working with minority-based universities and organizations to develop training programs for their constituencies. We are working with others to develop curriculum materials for a basic semester-long undergraduate course in historic preservation/cultural resource stewardship that can be used by any college or university. We have established a Cultural Resources Diversity Initiative web site <[www2.cr.nps.gov/diversity/index.htm](http://www2.cr.nps.gov/diversity/index.htm)> and plan to produce a diversity newsletter later this year. At some time in the near future, we hope to develop a system of professional exchanges to introduce diverse professionals in related fields to cultural resources work and to send cultural resources professionals to work with minority schools and organizations.

This summer, the National Park Service welcomed the first three Cultural Resources Diversity Interns to our cultural resources offices in Washington, DC. We anticipate that this will serve as the beginning of a larger diversity internship program that, in future years, will place diverse students in NPS administrative offices, partnership organizations at all levels of government and in the private sector, and units of the National Park System. Having administered a similar cooperative internship program at the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the

late 1970s, I know the importance of internship opportunities in introducing young people to this field of work.

What will constitute success in diversity in the historic preservation/cultural resources field? That day will arrive when the professionals who make the decisions about the nation's cultural heritage reflect the diverse nature and views of our country. We will know we are successful when the diverse young people now in our colleges and universities consider historic preservation/cultural resources work as a life-long professional endeavor. The historic preservation field that many of us knew in the 1970s and 1980s will not be the same. It will be stronger because of whole nation's knowledge of and support for the task of preserving and interpreting the nation's diverse cultural heritage.



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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Maurice D. Cox, "Rebuilding Bayview: Community Design as Catalyst for Social Change," Sites of Memory Conference, University of Virginia, March 25-27, 1999, described the hiring of African Americans on the faculty of the University of Virginia's School of Architecture beginning in the 1980s.
- <sup>2</sup> Antoinette J. Lee, "Discovering Old Cultures in the New World: The Role of Ethnicity," in Robert E. Stipe and Antoinette J. Lee, eds., *The American Mosaic: Preserving a Nation's Heritage*, (Washington, DC: US/ICOMOS, 1987), pp. 180-205.

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*Antoinette J. Lee is Special Projects Director, Heritage Preservation Services, National Park Service, and the program leader for the NPS Cultural Resources Diversity Initiative. She is guest editor of this issue of CRM.*

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Cultural Resources (Suite 350NC)  
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