

HISTORIANS AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Elizabeth Lyon, Chief, Historic Preservation
Section, Georgia Department of Natural Resources

The eminent Georgia historian, Phinzy Spalding, when interviewed about his experience with historic preservation said, "It is our public understanding of our history that distinguishes us from a country like Russia which regularly and selectively revises its history." In keynoting the 1986 annual meeting of the Georgia Association of Historians, Jerry George effectively demonstrated that the public is very much involved in history. We as historians should ask ourselves what the public's understanding of its history is and what it is that contributes to our collective understanding of our history as a state and a nation. To us who work in historic preservation programs, it is evident that the public's perception of history depends not just upon the written record, the documents, and the history books, but is strongly influenced by the man-made historic environment. In fact, the Preamble to the National Historic Preservation Act which authorized a national preservation program, maintained that "the spirit and direction of the nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage." It then directed that those foundations should be preserved as a part of community life in order to "give a sense of orientation to the American people." The Act therefore challenged us to provide a public perception of the nation's heritage through the preservation of its physical remains. Historic preservation plays a role in developing and fostering the public's understanding of our history, and state historic preservation programs provide both a mechanism and an opportunity for involvement by historians of the academic community.

Let us first look at some of the opportunities. How is history used in state historic preservation programs? States are given, by the National Historic Preservation Act, the responsibility for the professional administration of a program of identification, evaluation, and treatment or preservation of historic and prehistoric properties. We must develop and maintain an inventory of historic properties through survey of the physical environment and research into the general history of the states. We must evaluate the significance of the properties in the context of the state's and nation's history through the application of the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is simply the federal government's official list of historic and prehistoric properties which are significant in either local, state, or national contexts. To be eligible for listing in the National Register, a property or district must have certain qualities or attributes and must be

able to meet certain criteria or tests. First and foremost, the property or district must be "historic". This means that it must be about 50 years old or older, an age requirement that attempts to put enough chronological distance between us and the past so that it is possible to make a more or less objective assessment of the property's historic significance. Second, a property or district must have maintained its physical historic integrity. If a property or district can meet both the test of age and of integrity, it then must meet at least one of four other National Register criteria.

First, a property or district might be associated with historic events, activities, or general development. For example, it could represent the historic events and activities of a community like a county courthouse, or a grist mill/general store, or a farm and plantation.

Second, a property may be associated with important persons in our past, like Liberty Hall, the home of Alexander Stephens, the Vice-President of the Confederacy, or the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic District in Atlanta which commemorates the life of Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement. The property or district does not have to be associated with someone of national or state significance, however. It could be associated instead with a person of local significance, like a house in Commerce which was the home of a local businessman and merchant who in the mid-19th Century played an instrumental role in getting the railroad to come through this town, thereby assuring a period of growth and development.

Third, an intact historic property or district may be eligible for the National Register by reflecting or embodying distinctive or characteristic architectural, engineering, or landscape qualities. It might be a good example of a style of architecture like a Greek Revival plantation house. Or it may be representative of a type of architecture like a group of shot gun houses in a minority neighborhood. It could illustrate the use of historic building materials like a rock house which is unusual in this state, or historic construction techniques like a banking building which very early utilized reinforced concrete framing. It might be associated with an important architect, engineer, local builder, or craftsman. Finally, a property or district could possess significant landscape features, like a formal Victorian garden or a turn-of-the-century suburb designed by an important landscape architect.

Lastly a property or district may be eligible for the National Register if it possesses archaeological significance. It must be judged to have the potential to yield information about some aspects of history or prehistory that we do not know much about, like a pre-historic soapstone quarry site.

It should be obvious to a body of historians that these four broad National Register criteria must be applied within a context. For example, a railroad depot in a small Georgia town could be evaluated in a theme group and related to the architecture of depots state-wide, and/or the transportation history of the state. However, a depot might be more significant and have a greater preservation value because of its role in the history of a community. Through the responsibility for indentifying and evaluating the historic and prehistoric resources of their states, the state preservation offices have created a body of historic and archaeological data which has great potential for use in the analysis and understanding of our history. Further, the man-made environment reinforces the information available in written documents, often revealing patterns not readily visible in written records. Consider a few Georgia examples of National Register listed properties.

The Nacoochee Valley Historic District in north Georgia is listed in the National Register because of its significance in 19th and early 20th Century architecture, landscape architecture, agriculture, commerce, industry, transportation, exploration and settlement, and community development. Because the valley has had a long history of human occupation, all of these areas of significance are represented either in remains and structures or in the landscape of the valley. It is easy to see the diverse research potential offered by the variety of settlement and land use systems represented in the prehistory and history of this area.

Broad historical phenomena, like suburbanization, can be observed in numerous historic districts that document the social history and development patterns of communities. Waverly Terrace in Columbus, for example, is an early 20th Century planned suburban development located in what was once the outskirts of Columbus at the turn of the century. Its houses reflect prevailing design principles and construction policies of early 20th Century middle class suburban housing. The district also represents the social history of the neighborhood, records the middle management level of its occupants, and reflects the family lifestyle of a suburban development. As the number of late 19th and early 20th Century residential historic districts listed in the National Register increases, the potential for understanding the social history of this phenomenon grows. In addition, the increasing number of downtown or commercial historic districts provide a basis for the analysis of community life and development, town planning, and commercial history.

Individual property and district National Register nominations reflect important aspects of the history of an area. However, they do so in somewhat of a piecemeal manner. It is possible to assess all of the resources of an area with a common identifiable history through a multiple resource area nomination.

For example, Marshallville, a southwest Georgia community, was listed on the National Register as a multiple resource area in 1980. This small community grew initially in response to the needs of the pre-Civil War plantation economy of the area. Residences and commercial buildings were built around a country crossroads to which the railroad came in 1851. A shift in agricultural emphasis resulted in the late 19th and 20th Century development of a commercial fruit industry. The new industry utilized the plantations surrounding the town and built new structures and commercial ventures to serve the new agricultural interests. During and after the 1920s, the town was influenced by John Donald Wade, whose association with the Southern agrarians and the publication, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition, brought national attention to this small south Georgia town. In addition to the plantations, commercial buildings, and town residences which obviously represent this history, other resources were also identified for the National Register nomination, including a model of the insulated peach-packing crate developed by one of the leading community peach growers and still preserved on his plantation, and a row of crape myrtle bushes which line the highway entrance to the town. These were planted under the direction of John Donald Wade to express his agrarian belief in the importance of cultivating the landscape beauty of the South. Without the historical context provided through the multiple resource approach, it would have been difficult to assess the significance of a peach-packing crate and a row of bushes as a part of this National Register nomination. Yet, these resources are among the community's most significant, and are closely associated with its history.

Often, the physical features of a district are essential to a full understanding of its history. For example, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic District and the adjacent Sweet Auburn Historic District with the modest yet substantial houses of the Black middle class, the rows of shops on Auburn Avenue which helped to foster the active street life that was characteristic of the community, and the churches and school structures which were the focus of community life, cannot be fully appreciated simply from a study of the city directories and other such written documents. These records cannot indicate the quality and imagery of the buildings which housed this community, named by an early community leader as Sweet Auburn Avenue, and a source of economic strength and preservation to the city's Black community.

These examples illustrate how state historic preservation offices in carrying out their responsibility to nominate historic resources to the National Register have produced a body of data and developed analyses which contribute to our understanding of historical patterns. This work demonstrates the value of the historic environment and its remains as artifact and data base. The physical evidence of the cultural record and the assembled

data base provides to historians an opportunity for further research and analysis not available elsewhere.

Each state preservation office has many gaps both in the inventory record and in the historic information available to provide the context for the evaluation of properties. We need more developed historic contexts, we need the basic research and analysis that historians can bring to the study of the state's history. Until recently, historians have not shown much interest in doing basic research into state and local history. I am reminded of a meeting, almost 10 years ago, in which I showed historians a slide of a small commercial building with iron columns crafted in the local foundry located in Gainesville, Georgia. The structure had housed a photographer's studio at the turn of the century. I noted that we had lost this small building because we did not have an adequate historic context on which to base a determination of National Register eligibility which could have forced a federally-funded project to take the building into account before demolishing it. Historians at that meeting said they did not care about this small building and its history. We have made great strides in the interim, but there is still a need to increase the interaction between the academic community and historic preservation programs. The need for basic historical research provides many opportunities for students and professors through internships, graduate student, and faculty research.

There is also a need for historians to become involved in the preservation decisions which are made about historic resources. What should be preserved, where it should be preserved, and why. For example, moving buildings used to be considered the only way to save them. Consider the loss of historic integrity and the selective revision of history which is the result. Historians need to be included in such decisions. Further, think about both the opportunity and responsibility of historians to influence the public's understanding of its history through the interpretive programs of historic museums and sites. Another opportunity presents itself in the increasing number of historic district preservation commissions which are now operating in our state as well as across the country. Take into account the need for adequate historical analysis on which to base the decisions which these commissions make regularly about demolitions and changes to historic districts. Similarly, because of the Economic Recovery Tax Act which provides substantial tax credits to developers who rehabilitate certified historic structures, state historic offices and the National Park Service continually face difficult demolition and rehabilitation decisions. For example, a typical type of frame row house in Savannah's minority community can often be preserved only through large-scale replacement of the original severely deteriorated building fabric. Such replacement is discouraged by the preservation standards used to certify projects. Should we,

therefore, based on the loss of original historical material, deny tax credits to developers attempting to preserve the form that gives distinct character to the only remaining Black historic district in Savannah. Such questions are symptomatic of difficult decisions that must be made about changes to room configuration, door openings, and rear stairs that are often characteristic features of the late 19th and early 20th Century houses that are now being rehabilitated in large numbers. What should be the role of historical analysis in making decisions for the adaptive reuse of our historic buildings?

Historians also have a responsibility, it seems to us, to participate in the development of public policy. Consider the fact that the city of Savannah is characterized by a collection of public green spaces, the squares which were the direct result of the city's regulations on development. Or, think about the opportunity for historians as well as archaeologists in the environmental review process for large federally-funded projects such as the Richard B. Russell Dam and Reservoir. The environmental studies for this project have produced a significant body of historic and archaeological data about the region involved. They have also provided the opportunity for basic research by historians, archaeologists, and their graduate students. Perhaps most important for historians is the opportunity offered through historic preservation programs to enhance the educational process. Not only do these programs provide important career development and basic research opportunities, but also the occasion to use the historic environment as a teaching tool. Through internships, field visits, and projects, students gain improved understanding concerning the environmental issues of change and continuity.

We hope that the growing interest in public history which the theme of this 1986 Georgia Association of Historians meeting demonstrates will continue to grow. Historians need to take a more active interest in the development of public historic preservation policy. We hope they will recognize the preservation program's need for sound basic research and analysis, and will enjoy the opportunity to participate. We hope they will accept the responsibility of preserving the man-made environment as data and physical record, and as a means of maintaining a sense of historical continuity.

In With Heritage So Rich, the book which laid the groundwork for the National Historic Preservation Act, Walter Havighurst observed: "The past is not the property of historians; it is a public possession. It belongs to anyone who is aware of it and it grows by being shared."