

# Teaching with the National Register of Historic Places

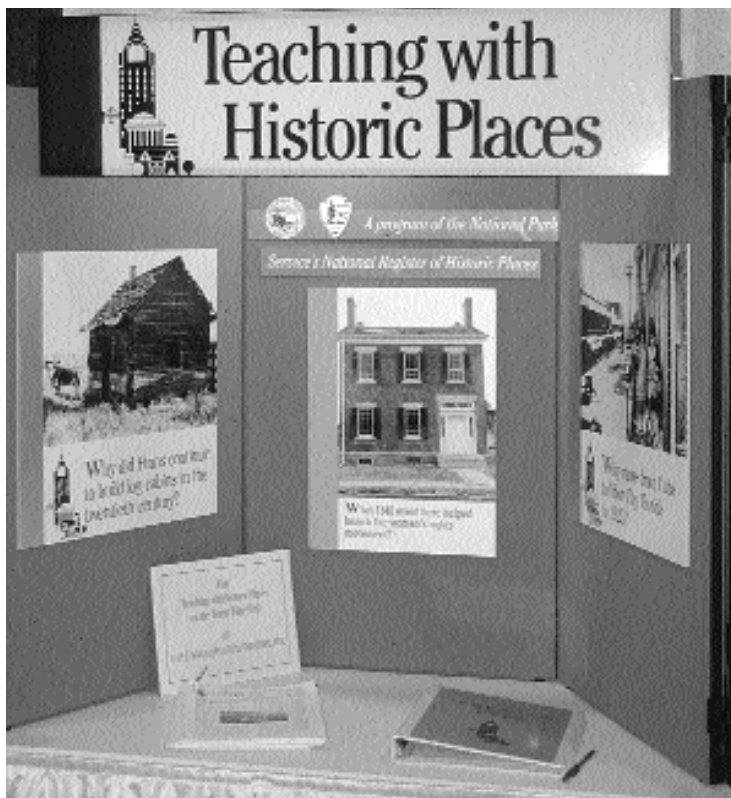
The historic preservation movement is rooted in the belief expressed in the National Historic Preservation Act that we must preserve historic places to give a sense of orientation to the American people and for their educational benefits. For those of us who work in the field, the values of historic places are obvious. If that were true for everyone, however, fewer of these places would be disappearing. The National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places provides recognition and assists in preservation. In the Service's National Register files in Washington, DC, is a unique and valuable collection of information about more than 72,000 historic places throughout the nation. Beyond expanding and maintaining the National Register, making information about these places available for public education and enjoyment is

our highest priority, as it should be a priority for all of us who want to see this irreplaceable legacy preserved.

One way we reach out is through our Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) program. Based on advice from a group of leading educators, preservationists, and interpreters in 1991, the National Register and the National Trust for Historic Preservation set out to produce educational materials teachers could really use. As recommended, we began both to generate curriculum-based lesson plans about registered historic places, which could be used in the classroom even if the students could not go to the sites, and also to develop workshops and publications to train preservationists, site interpreters, and teachers to work together. The Trust published our early lesson plans and continues to publish our *Teaching with Historic Places: A Curriculum Framework* and *How to Teach with Historic Places, A Technical Assistance Sourcebook*. As the previous articles attest, all of these have been used successfully.

The TwHP program is only one way in which the National Register has sought to attract and strengthen interest in historic places. About the same time we started the TwHP program, we began developing a series of travel itineraries, linking registered historic places, called Discover our Shared Heritage. Our goals are to encourage preservation by assisting revitalization of communities through heritage tourism, and to increase knowledge of and visitation to historic places. We also use the series as a demonstration project to empower communities to prepare their own National Register travel itineraries. The National Park Service and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers formed a partnership in 1992 to help create itineraries. In 1996, the National Park Foundation approached the American Express Company which agreed to be a corporate sponsor and to donate funds to assist in the design and printing of the five travel itineraries.<sup>1</sup> To date, more than 50,000 copies of the five printed itineraries have been distributed.

*Teaching with Historic Places exhibit at the 1998 annual meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies, Anaheim, California. Photo by Beth Boland.*

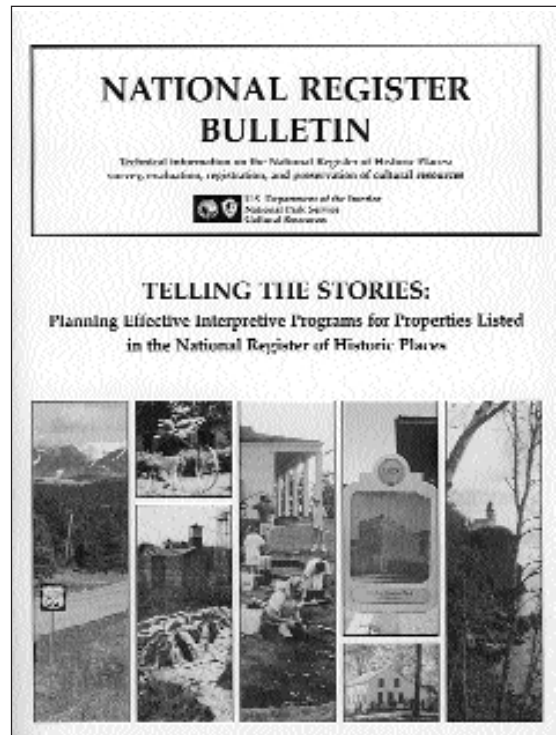


The National Register Bulletin on effective interpretive programs is another example of the Register's efforts to raise awareness of and appreciation for historic places. Courtesy National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service.

The National Register web site <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr>> has become the most effective means of making both the lesson plans and the travel itineraries available to the largest audience. Both programs have won recognition, praise, and awards from other web sites and reviewers. TwHP placed more than 50 lesson plans online by fall 2000, with more being added regularly. These lessons represent the regional, thematic, chronological, and ethnic diversity of the nation's rich history.<sup>2</sup> Fourteen travel itineraries were online by fall 2000, providing information on nearly 800 registered historic places. The both geographic and historic theme-based online itineraries include tours of registered historic places in Chicago; Seattle; Kingston, New York; central Vermont; along the Georgia-Florida coast; the Virginia Piedmont; underground railroad sites; "Places Where Women made History"; and sites associated with the Civil Rights movement. Numerous itineraries will be added to the ongoing series in partnership with a variety of organizations nationwide. The National Register's web site explains how local sponsors can apply to work in partnership with us to produce itineraries to add to the series.

The program allows communities, which do not have the technical capability or sufficient funds, to showcase their historic places on the Internet and makes good use of the documentation on registered historic places in the National Register files. Each itinerary describes, maps, and pictures national parks and other registered historic places. Itineraries include links to related web sites in the geographic area of the itinerary and beyond, making it easy to find out about community-based efforts to preserve historic places, tourism, and other related information. Itineraries and TwHP lesson plans link to each other when they feature the same places.

The Internet has increased our ability to provide information about historic places exponentially. The National Register web site has grown to more than 2,250 HTML pages with regular features celebrating the diverse historic places of our nation. Recently it has been visited on average by more than 35,000 users weekly. The site features an ever-expanding array of information from the National Register. The National Register Information System (NRIS), the computerized index to National Register listings and determinations of eligibility, is accessible over the web site and allows the public to search



for National Register properties by name, location, agency and theme. More search capability via the web is planned for the future.

National Register web features have received recent media coverage in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Historic Preservation*, *Hemisphere*, the National Center for Heritage Development, and *AAA World* and *Expedia* magazines, to name a few. Links between our web site and others are many and becoming more numerous all of the time. The web site has heightened interest in the National Register records. Last year alone, the National Register staff copied over 176,000 pages of National Register and National Historic Landmark documentation on request. We are seeking funding to begin digitizing National Register and National Historic Landmark records to make them more accessible over the web.

We are also finding that publishers are interested in information from the National Register and National Historic Landmark files. The National Park Foundation has contracted with several publishers on our behalf for books based on National Register and National Historic Landmark documentation. *African American Historic Places*, prepared in partnership with the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers, was published in 1995 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's

Preservation Press and is now made available from John Wiley and Sons. Since then, *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction* was published by The Johns Hopkins University Press. Several National Historic Landmark theme studies have been picked up by publishers. *America's Treasures: The National Park Foundation's Complete Guide to National Historic Landmarks*, another Wiley publication, came out in 1999. Now Oxford University Press is developing a series of books by prominent historians based on National Register listings.

Historic places need to be interpreted to the public. A battlefield that looks like an open field, a mountain sacred to an American Indian tribe, or a simple vernacular building associated with the underground railroad must have their stories told if they are to be understood. Even a historic main street may go unnoticed. Our newest National Register Bulletin, *Telling the Stories: Planning Effective Interpretive Programs for Properties Listed in the National Register of Historic Places*, includes tips on interpretive planning and showcases examples of ways to tell the stories using case studies describing effective public education initiatives at a variety of sites.

The National Park Service's work to use the National Register of Historic Places more effectively for public education through TwHP, the travel itinerary series, the World Wide Web, additions to the National Register Bulletin series, and

publications by independent presses has reaped many rewards. It has brought us new partners and the attention of individuals, organizations, and parts of the media that have not previously focused so directly on historic places. Preservation advocates understand the power of authentic historic places to teach what cannot be learned as well or in the same way if these links to our heritage are lost. We must redouble our efforts to teach with historic places, so that everyone understands their lessons so well that they too become committed to preserving our heritage.

#### Notes

- 1 These itineraries are now available for sale through the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers and by commercial distributors.
- 2 For more information on the TwHP web site, see the article by Theresa Campbell-Page and William Wright, p. 44.

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