

# Boom Times in Colorado and their Effect on the National Register

*Begun in 1901-04, the Denver Tramway Powerhouse (NR—9/8/01) was substantially rehabilitated from 1998 to 2001, with the assistance of the federal investment tax credit for \$18 million in qualified costs and a \$412,400 grant from the State Historical Fund. Photo by Scott Dressel-Martin, courtesy the Colorado Historical Society.*

The 1990s came as somewhat of a shock to Colorado. Cities along the Front Range, such as Denver, Boulder, Fort Collins, Colorado Springs and Pueblo, saw unprecedented population growth. Almost overnight, foothill farms and ranches became enormous subdivisions. Megamalls seemed to sprout from the formerly rich agricultural soil in the rush to provide goods and services to the burgeoning population. The average price of a home in the Denver metro area climbed past a quarter of a million dollars by the end of the decade, and fleets of SUVs brought interstate traffic to a virtual standstill. Smaller towns in western Colorado experienced some of the same challenges, although on a somewhat reduced scale.

Economic booms are nothing new to Colorado. The discovery of gold and silver in the mid- and late 1800s led to enormous population growth. World War II had a similar effect, as defense facilities congregated in the places farthest

from America's coasts. The oil shale boom (and rapid bust) of the 1970s left its mark as well. This time it was a technology boom, as Colorado became host to hundreds of communications, software, and Internet companies. But this boom would be different. The newcomers were attracted as much by the quality of life as they were by job opportunities. And those who were already here proved to be very protective of the things that made Colorado "home." Fortunately, the state's historic resources have been high on that list.

Although no one can deny that historic resources have been lost, the story is largely a happy one. Open space programs have saved hundreds of thousands of acres for recreational use, local governments have embraced historic preservation as a land-use tool, and heritage tourism has blossomed into an important industry.

One reaction to this awakened interest in historic resources was the implementation in 1991 of a State Register of Historic Properties, based on the National Register model. That Register has had 285 listings in the 1990s, not including the concurrent listing of 326 properties added to the National Register in the 1990s alone. When combining the number of State and National Register designations, the total number of properties listed in Colorado shows a 39% increase over the previous decade.

The State Register has gained in popularity largely due to the creation of the State Historical Fund (SHF). The SHF was established by a constitutional amendment that legalized gambling in three National Historic Landmark communities in 1990, and is administered by the Colorado Historical Society, the same state agency that houses the state's Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation. That amendment requires that 28% of the gaming tax revenues be distributed to the SHF. Of that amount, 20% is returned to the three towns for their own preservation activities, and the remaining 80% is distributed through a statewide competitive grants program. To date, more than \$90 million have been distributed statewide to approximately 2,000 preservation projects.



The majority of these funds is spent on restoration or rehabilitation projects, and the legislation requires that all properties be designated in order to qualify for such grants. Designation is defined by administrative rule as including listing on the National, State, or local register of historic places. This flexible definition has led to an extraordinary increase in the number of cities and counties with historic preservation ordinances. There are now 76 such communities, 29 of which are Certified Local Governments. From the Town of Rico, with its wintertime population of 200 hardy souls, to the city and county of Denver with more than 500,000 residents, properties across the state are being designated and protected through local ordinances. Hundreds of properties have been locally designated in the past 10 years.

It has been estimated that SHF grants for “bricks and mortar” projects alone have been matched by more than \$200 million in other public and private funding. In addition, when grants of more than \$100,000 are applied to privately-owned properties, the owners are required to convey perpetual easements to appropriate organizations. This process has protected several important National Register buildings.

Use of the SHF is not limited to bricks and mortar projects. SHF grants have been used to fund architectural surveys, and thousands of properties have been surveyed statewide using SHF assistance. In fact, the number of potential survey projects is limited not by the SHF’s willingness to support such projects, but rather by the small number of qualified professionals capable of carrying out such surveys successfully. SHF can also assist with costs associated with hiring professional consultants to assist in developing nominations for designation. This, and the dedication of the current National Register staff, has led to a marked increase in the quality of the average nomination.

The existence of the two registers (State and National) has created an assumption that requirements for integrity are not as stringent for the State Register as they are for the National Register. This is paired with an assumption (clearly incorrect) that properties listed on the National Register are more significant than properties listed on the State Register. Unfortunately, these can be self-fulfilling prophecies.

The National Register is, of course, also the basis for the federal Investment Tax Credit program. More than 300 ITC projects have been carried out in Colorado, totaling more than \$530 million in qualified expenditures.

The state’s Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation has recently entered into an exciting project of digitizing the more than 1,500 site files that represent its National and State Register holdings. Survey forms, nomination forms, and related materials including photographs and SHF grant products have been digitized, and will ultimately be available over the Internet.

For those who continue to insist that designation impairs property values and leads to gentrification, a new report issued by the Colorado Historical Foundation should be of interest. That study, funded by the SHF, examined property values in residential neighborhoods in Denver and Durango, comparing designated neighborhoods with comparable non-designated areas. The report concluded that property values in the designated areas increased at a rate either higher than or comparable to nearby undesignated areas. Yet the study also concluded that designated historic districts continue to offer a significant level of affordable housing. Clearly, historic designation can be used as a tool to preserve and protect our many diverse neighborhoods.

A vast amount of work remains to be done in Colorado. Only a very small fraction of the state’s architectural and archeological resources have been inventoried. State and federal involvement in infrastructure expansion has necessitated an increase in the amount of time National and State Register staff must spend on developing determinations of eligibility, reducing the amount of time they can spend proactively developing survey and designation programs. The State Historical Fund helps to fill that gap by providing funding for communities seeking to carry out such projects. But grant-funded surveys still require staff oversight. Some projects on the radar screen include the development of a multiple property documentation form for mining resources, and developing contexts for roadside resources such as gasoline stations, automobile dealerships, motels, and drive-in movie theaters. Someday, our successors will struggle with the issues surrounding the preservation of the architectural heritage left behind by the current boom. In the meantime, there’s more than enough work to keep Colorado busy.

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#### Reference

“The Economic Benefits of Historic Preservation In Colorado,” Prepared by Clarion Associates of Colorado, LLC

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