

Using the National Register as a Teaching Tool

The National Register program is to American historic preservation as the Bill of Rights is to the United States Constitution: a powerful development of an earlier idea. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 did not create the National Register of Historic Places. The Act directs the Secretary of the Interior to “expand and maintain” a National Register of Historic Places.¹ The idea was already there. An official national survey and listing of sites of historic significance had been authorized by Congress in the Historic Sits Act of 1935.²

The great contribution of the fully operational National Register program, developed in the years immediately following the 1966 Act, was to establish a nationally agreed-upon system to identify, evaluate, and list historic sites of value, be they of local, state, or national importance. Developing such a system was no easy task, given the exceptionally wide range of the nation’s cultural resources, the multiplicity of ethnic and cultural lenses through which such resources were perceived, and the dangers inherent in reducing the connective tissue of past and present cultures to a single bureaucratic list. The 1966 Act itself, the later regulations, and the

National Register criteria gave bureaucrats, grass roots advocates, and scholars alike what amounted to checklists for thinking about preservation. “Repeat after me,” the National Register program was saying to the nation, “districts, sites, buildings, structures and objects significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering and culture,” possessing “integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.”³ “Repeat after me, Criteria A, B, C, and D.”⁴ The American preservation community learned that cemeteries, birthplaces, graves, religious properties, relocated structures, reconstructed buildings, commemorative properties, and properties less than 50 years old are no-nos for listing except when... [Fill-in-the-blank and listen for sighs of relief from sea to shining sea]. From the moment the program was put in place the National Register became a national teaching tool.

The National Register program as “teacher” transformed the fledgling Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, every newly formed state historic preservation office, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and countless private and local preservation organizations into virtual classrooms. William J. Murtagh, the first Keeper of the National Register, trained his staff, while leading the way by personal example, to criss-cross the country—by letter, phone, or in the flesh—to repeat the National Register mantras to thousands of “learners.” Starting in the 1970s, the National Register staff responded to their role as teacher by developing and disseminating a truly impressive series of “how-to” publications, now issued as National Register Bulletins, with more than 23 titles in print.

As formal historic preservation training programs began to develop in American colleges and universities, starting with the graduate program in historic preservation at Columbia University in New York in 1964, the information developed by the National Register program became part and parcel of formal academic education.⁵ Today,

From left, former George Washington University intern, now NCSHPO historian with the National Register, Shannon Bell, with summer 2001 interns Tania Uriarte-Méndez (University of Puerto Rico), Michael Briscoe (Mary Washington College) and Maya Harris (Howard University) with Keeper Carol Shull. Photo by Beth Boland.



the National Council for Preservation Education lists 10 undergraduate historic preservation degree and certificate programs, 18 graduate degree programs and 30 allied graduate degree and certificate programs.⁶

Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, created its Center for Historic Preservation in 1979. In 1983, Mary Washington College became the first institution of higher learning in the United States to establish a Department of Historic Preservation.⁷ In the fall semester of 2001, the Mary Washington College Department of Historic Preservation has 107 majors.⁸ All of them have used the National Register as a teaching tool.

Thirty-nine credit hours in the Department of Historic Preservation are required at Mary Washington College to complete the historic preservation major. Thirty-one separate courses are offered in the 2001-2003 Academic Catalog.⁹ The National Register program is included as a specific teaching component or resource in five of the course syllabi: HISP 102: Preserving Historic America; HISP 312: Landscape Preservation; HISP 405: Survey and Planning; HISP 471: Theories and Practice of Cultural Resource Management; and HISP 490: Senior Research Project.

HISP 102: The American Heritage is taught in multiple sections by several members of the Department of Historic Preservation faculty. This is an entry-level course in the major that teaches the history of historic preservation in the United States and the structure of the current national, state, and local preservation system. In

I think that the [intern] program is excellent. When I applied, I did not have a clear idea of how everything worked, but I wanted to try a new experience. And that experience has been better than what I initially thought it could be. I recommend this program to everyone who wants a challenge, an opportunity to grow and to gain professional experience.

Tania Uriarte-Méndez

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this course, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the structure of the National Register program, and the National Register criteria are studied in detail.

HISP 312: Landscape Preservation, taught by Professor Wendy Price, uses National Register Bulletin 18: *How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes*; National Register Bulletin 40: *Guidelines for Identifying, Evaluating and Registering America's Historic Battlefields*; and National Register Bulletin 41: *Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Cemeteries and Burial Places*.

There is a major National Register assignment in HISP 405: Survey and Planning, also taught by Professor Price. Each student is required to prepare draft sections of a National Register nomination with emphasis on the significance statement and architectural description. The students use fieldwork data developed in HISP 305: American Building.

Professor Douglas Sanford uses the National Register as a teaching tool in his class HISP 471EE: Theories and Practice of Cultural Resource Management. Students are asked to carry out an assessment of local resources using National Register inventories and state contexts.

Every historic preservation major is required under the supervision of an individual faculty member to prepare a senior research project, (HISP 490). This may include the preparation of a complete National Register nomination for an eligible property. In 2000, graduating senior Cory Kegerise, working with Professor Price as his advisor, devoted his senior research project to preparing a National Register of Historic Places nomination of Mensch Mill, Alburtis, Pennsylvania. His nomination form was submitted to the Mary Washington College Student Writing Contest sponsored by the Writing Intensive Program and was selected as one of six winners from a field of 24 finalists.¹⁰

The National Register program and its publications are also well integrated into the teaching and research components of many other courses including HISP 207: American Archaeology, taught by Professor Sanford. He explains, "I discuss the National Register in relation to the issue of determining the archeological resource's 'significance'—including the ins and outs of such terms as importance, relevance, representative quality, and research value. It also plays a major role in lectures concerning cultural resource man-

agement and the Section 106 process, including how ‘significance’ and being ‘on or eligible for’ NR listing is a key determinant in how CRM projects move from Phase I to II to III. The course’s second writing assignment involves the evaluation of a CRM archaeological report, and part of that task means interpreting how the authors/archaeologists handled the issue of significance.”¹¹

In HISP 302: Preservation Law and HISP 309: Preservation and Economic Development, Professor Price, who teaches both of these courses comments, “The National Register comes up in HISP 302 not just because of the tax credits, but in our discussion of federal legislation (especially the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Environmental Policy Act), state legislation and local ordinances.” The National Register comes up in Professor Price’s HISP 309 because of a discussion about state tax credit and abatement programs as well as economic development tools and programs relating to historic resources.¹²

HISP 305: American Building investigates American buildings from the prehistoric period up to the present day. Taught by Professor Gary Stanton and this author, the fieldwork for this course requires the examination, documentation, analysis, and description of a specific historic building. The standards for this project are based on those promulgated by the National Register and the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Professor Stanton comments that in his classes HISP 325: Vernacular Architecture, HISP 345: Computer Applications in Historic Preservation, and HISP 464: Laboratory in Public Folklore and Cultural Conservation, “The criteria of the National Register form part of our discussion, either comparing the NR with our discussion subject, or emphasizing that components of significance and context in these classes resonate with the concepts of the NR.”¹³

This author includes a National Register component in HISP 470: Historic Preservation in Scotland, which is taught as an annual three-week international summer school in cooperation with the Scott Sutherland School of Architecture at the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen. In this class, the National Register system is compared with the Scottish system of “listing” historic properties. The differing criteria for listing used in both countries are also examined.

The National Register program has also served as a valuable teaching tool at Mary Washington College by providing internships in the Washington office of the National Park Service for majors such as Barbara Copp and Michael Briscoe. This “hands-on” experience provides students with an opportunity to see the program from the inside out and to make important contact with professionals in the field.

The importance of the National Register as a teaching tool cannot be over-appreciated. Because it is the program that defines and supports the national, state, and local partnership that distinguishes American preservation at the present time, it must be intellectually coherent enough to protect a wide range of cultural resources and flexible enough to function efficiently in an increasingly unpredictable but always precious world.

Notes

- 1 National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended through 1992. (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.)
- 2 Historic Sites Act of 1935 (49 U.S.C. 303, Public Law 100-17, 1987).
- 3 NHPA, Title 4, Sec. 101 (a) (1) (A).
- 4 National Register Bulletin 16A, pg. 37.
- 5 William J. Murtagh, *Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America* (Pittstown, New Jersey: Main Street Press, 1988), 207
- 6 National Council for Preservation Education, Academic Programs in Historic Preservation Programs and Allied Fields. <http://www.uvm.edu/histpres/ncpe/chart.html>
- 7 William B. Crawley, Jr. “A Decade of Historic Preservation: Saving the Past for the Future,” in *Mary Washington College Today*, Winter, 1991.
- 8 Mary Washington College Department of Historic Preservation list of enrolled majors, October 19, 2001.
- 9 Mary Washington College 2001-2003 Academic Catalog, pp. 113-116.
- 10 Cory Kegerise, “HISP 490: National Register of Historic Places Nomination of Mensch Mill, Alburtus, Pennsylvania,” December 7, 2000.
- 11 Professor Douglas Sanford. E-mail to Brown Morton, “Re: CRM-NR article,” Oct. 10, 2001.
- 12 Professor Wendy Price. E-mail to Brown Morton, “Re: CRM-N.R. research,” Oct. 10, 2001.
- 13 Professor Gary Stanton. E-mail to Brown Morton, “Use of National Register,” Oct. 11, 2001.

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