

The National Register

A Road Map to Preserving a Sense of Place

Few places have as strong a sense of place as does Texas. Whether a sixth generation native or an adopted son who “got here as fast as he could,” as a popular bumper sticker reads, we all succumb to the pervasive mystique of place. Our unique history and historic landscape contribute to the sense that we inhabit a special part of our country. An important part of preserving America’s cultural landscape is preserving the historic resources of each of our states within a national context.

In times of high social mobility and in a marketplace which produces homogeneous cookie-cutter sprawl irrelevant to local history, real places are important in defining ourselves. Connections to historic places tie us to our culture and make us and it relevant; these connections nourish our civic culture.

One of the most effective tools for preservation in Texas is the National Register of Historic Places. Using the organizing concepts of the register and its contextual and criteria-driven processes brings a unifying approach to all Texas State Historic Preservation Office efforts. The National Register plays a role in practically every preservation activity in the state. The register guides our comprehensive preservation plan and gives focus to our efforts to preserve a broad and diverse historic landscape. No wonder it is the place to start. If one thing ties together all of our state historic preservation strategies, it is this tool. Let us take a look at how it is central to all the efforts in Texas.

Jacal/Rio Grande Valley



Historic preservationists find historic resources, make value judgments about those resources, and protect a broad cross section of as many significant resources as possible. The National Register process and criteria are invariably at the heart of each of these three activities.

Identifying Historic Resources in Texas

The results of identifying historic resources in any community are a self-fulfilling prophecy of what we are looking for—product of our research designs. The Texas cultural experience is a rich and diverse tapestry. Only understanding and incorporating the salient historical contexts into historic resource survey efforts will reveal a comprehensive inventory of Texas’ material culture remains. In a state that will soon have no ethnic or racial majority, it is essential to identify the contributions of all Texans. The ultimate goal of survey work is to determine what is eligible and nominate those resources to the National Register. We start, therefore, with the register criteria and encourage partners at the state, regional, and local levels to use them as their starting point. By casting our nets broadly for all resources 50 years or older and preserving the resulting information, future historians will have a chance to discover histories that are not yet known or appreciated. The National Register is the road map for identifying our diverse historic resources.

Making Value Judgments

The search to find tangible reminders of man’s activities in Texas’ geography over thousands of years has been wildly successful, but it is not complete. The Texas Historical Commission’s Texas Historic Sites Atlas <www.thc.state.tx.us> has more than 290,000 entries with many more to come. In a state with 2,842 miles of boundary, we will never save all of those things made by the hands of man. We must make value judgments about the resources and their importance in telling the whole story of Texas. The National Register is again our central organizing focus.

Our historic designation process involves assessing different levels of significance and pro-



Fort McKavett

viding the resulting protections. Both the Recorded Texas Historic Landmark and the State Archeological Landmark designations relate to listing or eligibility for the National Register. All valuing decisions are made with the National Register as a departure point in assessing relative importance. This affords a level of consistency that would be difficult otherwise. The National Register has been somewhat captive to those who are familiar with it and have the resources to facilitate information gathering to move the nomination process forward. We encourage individuals to undertake the process and develop “mom and pop” nominations. The results have been great National Register nominations by folks who have become quite competent at producing them.

Texas’ new comprehensive preservation plan calls for carving out a substantial amount of staff time to identify and work with Texans who want to nominate and save historic resources associated with the important contributions of Hispanic and African Americans. An effort to create a network for multicultural preservation efforts in Texas is also underway. Its purpose is centered on finding groups who are working to save what are likely to be our next round of National Register nominations. Identifying and evaluating these resources and involving their supporters offer an opportunity to grow and enrich the preservation community.

So, having identified and evaluated all of these important parts of our history, what is our challenge?

Protecting Valued Resources

The National Register in Texas serves as the threshold for eligibility for use of a wide array of preservation tools developed to offer hope for the

survival of valued elements of our history. The diversity of resource types in the National Register is amazing; each has its own set of advocates and assets available to our communities. Residential neighborhoods, commercial downtowns, industrial facilities, and many others await our imaginations for how they can be used for the civic and economic betterment of our lives.

Almost inexhaustible supplies of protection strategies have been and can be developed. State offices are becoming very sophisticated at developing an arsenal of tools to save particular resource types. Since the economic incentives for use of historic resources has been so thoroughly proven, one of our state’s most aggressive uses of National Register resources is the development and promotion of a statewide Texas Heritage Trails Program. This regionally-based program, modeled after our highly successful Texas Main Street Program, provides a manager who works with a local board to assess and develop a network of historic attractions providing excellent visitor experiences. The communities and their historic sites develop joint promotional strategies and work within broad program goals, co-coordinated by the Texas Historical Commission.

Finally, a new strategy being aggressively pursued by the Texas preservation office is the Visionaries in Preservation (VIP) Program. The program helps communities conduct a facilitated visioning process, analyze their character-defining community assets, and develop a fully articulated vision for what they would like their communities to look like in the year 2010. The facilitators will then assist the communities to develop an action plan for the implementation of the vision. The National Register will undoubtedly play a pivotal role in this process.

So, what and where are those special places that resonate with our sense of pride in being Americans, or citizens of each of its unique states? They are in our psyche and our being, but they are also in, or should be in, the National Register of Historic Places.

If we have a vision for where we want to go, we need to start with a good road map to get there. In Texas, that is the National Register of Historic Places.

F. Lawrence Oaks is the State Historic Preservation Officer and Executive Director of the Texas Historical Commission.

Photos courtesy the Texas Historical Commission.