

# The Soapstone Local Historic Preservation District, Georgia

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In Georgia, historic preservation commissions are set up at the local level. These locally appointed commissions generally receive and review nominations of individual sites and buildings or larger districts based on criteria similar to those of the National Register of Historic Places. The elected County Board of Commissioners must then give its final approval to the nomination. Each site, building, or district has a set of preservation guidelines specific to that resource, often based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines. The preservation commissions, following the appropriate guidelines, then review projects that will impact buildings or disturb the ground within those designated districts or sites. Areas not included in specifically designated historic districts have no formal local protection.

In late summer 1996, an article appeared in the local paper about the destruction of an archeological site at Soapstone Ridge. A developer had bulldozed extensive areas of an ancient soapstone quarry site, one of dozens of such sites located along the 25-square-mile ridge. The article mentioned that the site was one of only three such sites on the ridge listed on the National Register. This should have triggered a Corps review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, but as it turned out, the appropriate Corps archeologist had not heard of the project because the developer had applied for a nationwide permit. Such a permit does not require the normal, in-depth environmental studies, including cultural resources studies.

At the behest of the DeKalb County Historic Preservation Commission (DCHPC), the county stopped the bulldozers, the Corps conducted a belated Section 106 review, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation had its say. But it was obvious to me, as a member of the DCHPC, that if the federal preservation mandates could not protect a site already on the National Register, it surely was not going to protect the rest of Soapstone Ridge in Fulton, Clayton, and DeKalb Counties, one of the last, large, undeveloped tracts near downtown Atlanta. Together with other members of the DCHPC and the local archeological society, we began the process of nominating Soapstone

Ridge as a local historic district with its own set of archeologically oriented preservation guidelines. The DCHPC could then enforce these guidelines on future projects, whether or not a Corps or other federal permit was required. (This has recently proven critical to the protection of the single remaining NRHP site in private hands.)

The first step in nominating the district was to assess the condition of the ridge since it was last examined archeologically in the 1970s. To do this we needed to know what sites had been previously recorded so we could say which ones were destroyed, damaged, or still in good shape, and make a reasoned argument before the County Board of Commissioners, who would ultimately approve or deny our recommendations. After some difficulty, we were able to obtain nearly all of the site forms. These were essential to identify and protect individual sites and to convince the County Board of Commissioners of the significance of the ridge and the danger posed by development. The local archeological society checked the status of the recorded sites and of development on the ridge. Using this information and information provided by the county on property boundaries, land owners, and land use, we developed a map showing what had been destroyed and what was worth protecting. Of the 43 sites revisited, only 24 were still intact. Nearly half the sites had been destroyed in the past 15 to 20 years. At this rate, all of the sites at Soapstone Ridge would be destroyed in another 20-30 years.

The sites date almost exclusively to the Archaic Period and are related to the exploitation of soapstone nearly 3,000 years ago. This information made the newspapers and got everyone's attention. Armed with the ridge's history, we then began development of an ordinance that would win the necessary votes on the Board of Commissioners. Even though most people seemed to support protecting our heritage, the majority of people in DeKalb, and the South generally, are loath to tell their neighbors what to do with their land. Our ordinance would have to be reasonable and justifiable to a lot of competing interests, most of whom had not the slightest interest in the rarefied atmosphere of National Register significance or the niceties of settlement patterning and lithic technol-

ogy. This is an important point. When dealing with non-archeologists on the local level, the importance of the resource needs to be very clear, especially when you are asking them to restrict their own and their neighbors' activities.

The first hurdle was to delineate reasonable boundaries for the district. We could have simply designated the entire ridge as a district, thereby forcing all homeowners on half-acre lots to obtain county approval to put in a garden; or we could have restricted the district to only the three National Register sites (one of which was already destroyed); or we could have done something in between. We chose something in between. If we had gone the first route, we would have had over 2,000 irate homeowners screaming for our blood. If we had gone the second route, we would have lost all the incredible information about soapstone extraction, trade, and ceremonialism that makes the ridge so important. After much thought and talking to politicians, local leaders, and others, we decided to include in the district only those tracts of land 10 acres or greater with some exceptions, and accept the fact that some sites on smaller tracts might be lost. This change substantially reduced the number of opponents to the ordinance from over 2,000 to fewer than 200. Ultimately, 8.5 square miles of undeveloped land were included in the district.

At the same time, we contacted archeologists in other parts of the country for advice on what to include in the guidelines for the Soapstone Historic District. Two points emerged as a common refrain from these interviews. One was to keep the lines of communication open with developers and landowners. The second was the need to be flexible and set up requirements that would allow for compromise and innovative approaches to preservation. The ordinance and the guidelines are available at the website:

<<http://www.mindspring.com/~wheaton/dekalb/dekalbcommission.html>>.

*DeKalb Historic Preservation Commissioners, Barry Hodges, James Reap, and Linda Chesnut, inspecting soapstone quarry outcrops at the McGarrity-Ethridge site, DeKalb County, Georgia. Photo courtesy the author.*



In DeKalb County, once a nomination has been officially submitted to the DCHPC, a 60-day building moratorium goes into effect in the nominated area. This is to prevent “preemptive development” of the site. Before the moratorium is over, the DCHPC must make a recommendation to the County Board of Commissioners to accept or reject the nomination. The moratorium caused the greatest furor of the entire process, but it also got us a lot of coverage on television and in the newspapers, which we ultimately turned to our advantage.

Also during the moratorium, the DCHPC was required to hold a public hearing. This was held at a school in the district and was very well attended. The purpose of the hearing was to inform those affected, and to receive their input. Because we had excluded the small homeowners, support for the nomination was over 90% among the attendees, most of whom were small landholders. This carried a lot of weight with the Board of Commissioners, and in particular with the member representing Soapstone Ridge, one of the votes we needed to win. It was also a chance to educate people about the sites. Native American representatives gave their input and performed a ceremony at the end of the hearing. All of these activities had an air of controversy, were occasionally colorful, and attracted the local television and press. Through various political maneuvers and jawboning behind the scenes, the Board finally voted to approve the district.

The new preservation guidelines were designed to keep the costs (and therefore the public outcry) to a minimum. We did this, in part, by having a two-step approach to site identification. The first step requires a reconnaissance letter. This can be done quickly by a consultant, or it can be done for free by the county's preservation planner. The purpose of this letter is to determine whether an intensive survey is needed. If the project area or only part of the area has been greatly disturbed or has no potential for having significant sites, an approval can be granted on the basis of the letter. If there is a possibility of significant sites, an intensive survey of all or part of the area is required. Significant resources found during the discovery phase are treated on an individual basis in consultation with the landowner/developer and the DCHPC.

A major lesson of the Soapstone Ridge nomination process is that such an effort can only be done with grass-roots support of, and involvement by, many people inside and outside of the preservation community. In my view, the biggest lesson to be learned is that real protection of sites is greatly enhanced, and may only be possible, at the local level.

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