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Historic Preservation in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas

he Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas encompasses a string of 14 small islands situated in a remote stretch of the Western Pacific roughly 2,000 kilometers northeast of the Philippines. Saipan, the largest island with a land area of 120 square kilometers, possesses the bulk of the commonwealth's 60,000 residents. It is also the most developed with scores of hotels, golf courses and other commercial establishments catering to hundreds of thousands of tourists who visit the island each year. To the south of Saipan are Tinian and Rota, with much smaller populations and more modest development, and to the north are 10 rugged, sparsely populated islands that are difficult to visit since they lack harbors and airfields.

The islands were first settled in approximately 1500 B.C. by seafaring immigrants from Island Southeast Asia. These settlers constructed their villages and buried their dead throughout the islands, particularly in coastal beach areas on Saipan, Tinian, and Rota. In the early-16th century, the islands were visited by Spanish explorers and Rota became a reprovisioning stop for Manila galleons carrying silver from the New World to trading centers in the Philippines. A century and a

The House of Taga latte site on Tinian. These latte stones, which are five meters high, supported an ancient Chamorro residential structure possibly associated with Taga, a legendary chief



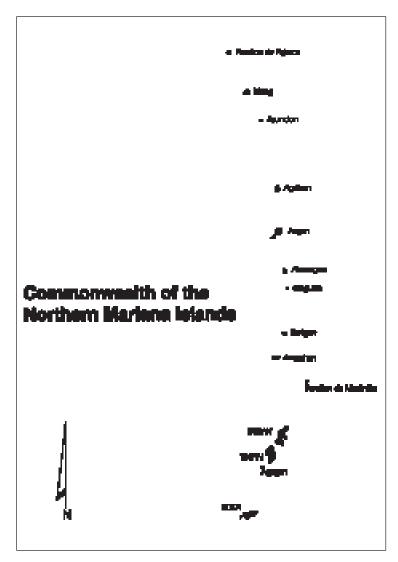
half later, a Jesuit mission was established on the islands. Within 40 years the mission had converted the islanders to Catholicism, a process which led to the collapse of the indigenous social order. After more than three centuries of colonial rule, Spain sold the Northern Marianas to Germany at the end of the 19th century. Germany, in turn, lost the islands to Japan at the beginning of World War I. During the 30 years of Japanese rule, the islands were developed as sugar plantations manned by thousands of Japanese agricultural workers. During World War II, Saipan and Tinian were scenes of fierce fighting between American and Japanese forces. In the summer of 1945, the war was brought to an end following atomic bomb attacks launched from an airfield on Tinian. Human occupation over this span of four thousand years has left a rich and complex patchwork of historic resources throughout the Commonwealth.

Historic preservation activities in the Northern Marianas began tentatively in the mid-1970s when a committee was formed to provide advice on preservation matters to a part-time staff. A few years later, thanks to its newly acquired Commonwealth status with the United States and to an amendment to the National Historic Preservation Act, the Northern Marianas became eligible to participate in the federal historic preservation program and to receive annual grants from the National Park Service.

In 1982, the Commonwealth Legislature passed Public Law 3-39, the Commonwealth Historic Preservation Act, which establishes the Historic Preservation Office (HPO), provides annual appropriations to support program activities and extends protection to historic, archeological and cultural resources in both public and private ownership. Presently, the HPO maintains its main office on Saipan and branch offices on Rota and Tinian. It is headed by the Commonwealth Historic Preservation Officer and possesses staff with professional expertise in history and archeology.

The passage of the Commonwealth Historic Preservation Act coincided with the tremendous development boom that transformed the once quiet and rustic Saipan into a modern tourist destination. Major resort development is also planned for Rota and Tinian and government homesteading areas are slated to be opened on several of the northern islands. To keep up with the development, the HPO has focussed much of its efforts on survey and identification. Over the past 15 years, dozens of professionally supervised archeological surveys have been completed and thousands of sites added to the HPO's database.

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Professional-level surveys have been supplemented by the work of the HPO's archeological technicians who are responsible for conducting reconnaissance surveys and recording sites. Thanks to these efforts, much of Saipan, Tinian, and Rota has been inspected.

In spite of strong developmental pressures, the HPO has given priority to the in-place preservation of significant sites, especially those that are associated with ancient settlement or that contain human remains. Most developers realize the value of preservation to their projects, and historic resources are now routinely identified and considered during the early planning stages.

When important sites cannot be avoided, the HPO requires the implementation of appropriate mitigation measures. This often involves archeological excavations designed to address research topics important to advancing our understanding of the islands' past. Mitigation may also involve interpretive development and reinterring human skeletal remains.

In recent years, the HPO has increased its efforts to educate the public in the areas of history and culture. These efforts include producing two publication series that present the results of archeological and historical research, conducting public lectures, organizing tours, and completing the interpretive development of important historic resources. Much attention has also focused on conducting archival research and recording oral histories and ensuring that the results of this research are made available to students, teachers, scholars and to others with an interest in the islands' past.

The centerpiece of the HPO's public education efforts is the Commonwealth Museum of History and Culture that is housed in the oldest historic structure on Saipan. In the planning stages for nearly a decade, museum construction was supported by revenues derived from the sale of artifacts recovered from the *Concepcion* shipwreck, an early-17th-century Manila galleon. Exhibit design is now underway and the museum is expected to open its doors to the public in early 1998. Once completed, the museum will showcase the cultures and history of the Northern Marianas to visitors and island residents alike.

As with other Pacific Islands, historic preservation and cultural resource management have a long way to go in the Northern Marianas. The issues are often complex and resources typically encompass far more than simply sites and buildings. In the Northern Marianas, it is the "culture" of a people that takes priority.

Additional Reading

Pacific Preservation: The Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Historic Preservation Plan. Division of Historic Preservation, 1996.

Protecting Our Past: A Guide to Historic Preservation Requirements in the CNMI. Division of Historic Preservation. 1996.

Proehi I Kuttura'ta: The Newsletter of the Division of Historic Preservation. Issued quarterly.

Russell, Scott. "Tiempon I Manmofo'na: An Introduction to Ancient Chamorro History and Culture," *Micronesian Archaeological Survey Report Series.* No. 32, Saipan, 1997.

Scott Russell serves as the Deputy Historic Preservation Officer for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, a position he has held for the past 15 years. He has been involved in a wide variety of activities in Micronesia, and has authored articles and books on the history and historic resources of the Northern Mariana Islands.