

Scott Russell

## Historic Preservation in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas

**T**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 provisioning 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.

