

History Where it Happened

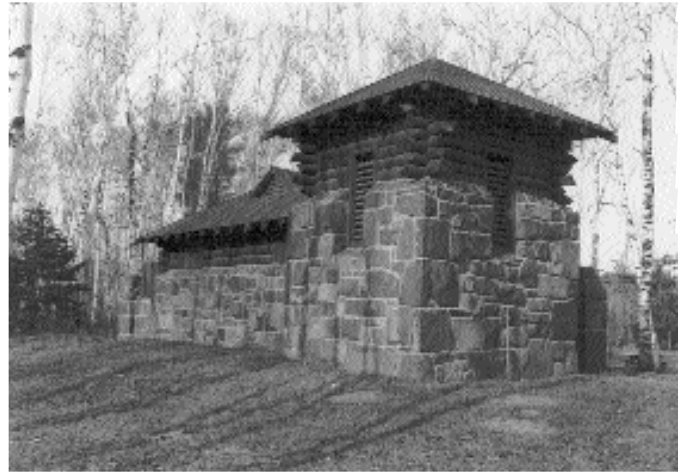
The National Register in Minnesota

Britta L. Bloomberg

The full resonance of the Minnesota story can be appreciated best when it is preserved in the particular places where it happened throughout the state: this commitment drives the work of the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office. Historic preservation staff often count the state's 1,411 listings in the National Register of Historic Places among the "collections" of the Minnesota Historical Society. It is no surprise, then, that the National Register is the very heart of the Minnesota preservation program.

An aggressive program to list properties in the National Register was initiated in 1977 with the beginning of the statewide, county by county, survey of standing structures. Staff, and later independent contractors, systematically identified and evaluated historic properties within the context of each county's history, and nominated properties to the National Register. In 1988 the survey was completed: an estimated 32,000 properties had been inventoried, and National Register listings represented all 87 counties.

The long-term benefits of the county survey are too numerous to count. The base-line inventory that was developed continues to be used daily by staff, as well as by state and federal agencies, local governments, and independent researchers. It shaped the system of historic



This water tower is listed in the National Register as part of the Jay Cooke State Park CCC/WPA Rustic Style Picnic Grounds multiple property nomination. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.

contexts that is in use today in planning the direction of continued survey and National Register priorities. National Register listings have been a source for increased interest in local history and renewed local pride, fostering numerous community preservation programs. Many of the cities that initiated programs following the county surveys have since become Certified Local Governments.

In the five years since the completion of the county survey, attention has turned to filling in the gaps. Properties that are better understood within a larger, statewide context such as state-owned buildings, and properties that have recently "come of age" for National Register consideration, such as those constructed under the federal relief programs of the 1930s, have been the focus of recent surveys.

National Register nominations for 515 buildings and structures in 22 state parks were prepared following a survey of over 800 properties constructed under the CCC and WPA in Minnesota State Parks. Like the experience with the earlier county surveys, immediate benefits for planning purposes as well as for fostering improved coordination with the State Historic Preservation Office were evident. The Department of Natural Resources' Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Plan (SCORP) released in 1990 addressed the need to fund the rehabilitation of these resources.

As the historic preservation field has embraced a more diverse range of properties, Minnesota's recent listings reflect a similar pattern. They include such properties as fragments of 19th-century overland transportation routes—Red River trails, military roads, stage roads, and portage trails—as well as geographic features of cultural significance. Cultural diversity is reflected in the nominations produced following a 1990 survey to



The Lena Olive Smith House (3905 5th Ave. S., Minneapolis) is associated with the prominent civil rights attorney, a founding member of the Urban League in Minneapolis and the first woman president of the Minneapolis National Association of Colored People. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.

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locate properties associated with black Minnesotans in the Twin Cities and Duluth.

An initiative to identify and protect historic shipwrecks in the Minnesota waters of Lake Superior, funded by the Minnesota Legislature in response to the federal Abandoned Shipwrecks Act, concluded in 1993 with production of a draft management plan. Once again, the National Register program brought direction to the project—the first step involved completing a multiple property documentation form as the framework for establishing the historic context in which to evaluate the properties. Underwater surveys, several nominations, and a complement of educational materials were also produced.

Since 1989, the office has conducted over 15 studies to examine potential uses for threatened National Register properties in cooperation with a range of communities and organizations. The reuse study format, sometimes characterized as a “swat team” approach for at-risk buildings, brings together a team of architects, historians, and other specialists for an intensive on-site consultation. The most recent success following one such study helped to identify a new owner who is restoring the Thorstein Veblen Farmstead in rural Rice County, a National Historic Landmark endangered for over a decade.

Local preservation programs have replaced the county survey as the department’s primary vehicle for creating a network of preservation partnerships. While the number of National Register listings increases at a slower rate today, the number of local programs is growing rapidly, more than doubling since 1991. A greater emphasis on education and training has accompanied the growth in local programs.

What is ahead for Minnesota’s National Register program? The work to identify, evaluate, register, and protect the state’s historic resources is never done. Major gaps still exist— archeological sites, for example, are seriously under-represented, an imbalance being addressed in planning future survey initiatives. Another priority is to form and strengthen partnerships with the state’s culturally diverse populations. Revisions to state law enacted by the 1993 Minnesota Legislature provide better protection for National Register properties at the state level. Partnerships and education are key. The plate is full, but the responsibility is shared with a growing number of players who also are catching the vision to preserve history where it happened in Minnesota.

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The Jesse R. Green Homestead in Gallatin County, MT, illustrates the state’s rural heritage. Photo courtesy Montana Historical Society.

members whose terms have ended. But mainly, we present certificates to owners whose property has been listed in the National Register during the previous two years. Mind you, these are literally just certificates, signed by the Governor with the calligraphic property name at the top. And every time, the turnout of owners is breathtaking. Four hundred miles of icy roads do not daunt ministers, school board members, local businessmen, Forest Service rangers, elderly homeowners, and city officials. Every time, we are amazed, delighted, and humbled by the enthusiastic, joyful attendance.

For me, that National Register certificate ceremony confirms that the National Register offers Montanans just what its authors intended: not regulation, not money, not public intrusion, but the extraordinary gift of praise and recognition. It tells me, as well, that recognition remains an especially powerful incentive.

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