

From Skeptic to Believer

Edwin C. Bearss

My first contact with the National Register, its forms, and procedures occurred in 1969, and the result did not make me a “happy camper.” In that year, the Washington Office History Division undertook to prepare what in the 1970s became the prototype of the National Park Service’s Historic Resource Study (HRS). The subject document—then called History Basic Data Study (HBDS)—was designed to give an overview of a park’s historic resources, both tangible and intangible, in a regional context. The resulting documented narrative provided the grist for the park’s interpretive and educational programs heretofore found in General Background Studies. Equally important, to meet the requirements of the National Register as established by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, properties were to be identified and evaluated. If deemed to possess the requisite significance and integrity, the historian preparing the HBDS would prepare forms documenting these properties to be forwarded to the Keeper of the National Register for consideration for listing in the National Register.

The History Division, in 1969, prepared three HBDSs. Erwin Thompson (since retired) addressed North Cascades National Park and Preserve, and I prepared the HBDSs for Redwood National Park and Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area. The format called for the National Register forms to be bound into the report. Since the forms had to be reviewed by a number of offices before being transmitted to the Keeper, this format proved cumbersome. Equally discouraging to Mr. Thompson and myself, as well as our immediate supervisor, was lack of guidance from the National Register staff as to what was required. Much of what was needed under the form’s two major headings—“Description” and “Significance”—were synopses of texts found in the narrative chapters of the report. In the days before word processors, this seemed to be a useless duplication of effort. Mr. Thompson’s and my initial experiences with the National Register did not engender much enthusiasm. Nonetheless, the NPS, as well as other

federal land-managing agencies, thus took initial steps to nominate properties deemed eligible to the National Register.

The Keeper of the National Register had determined that, as of the enactment of the 1966 legislation, the National Register’s core inventory was to consist of those units of the National Park System established because of their historical or archeological significance and the National Historic Landmarks. During the 1970s, a number of NPS areas administratively listed in the National Register were documented. But, like the documentation prepared as an element of HRSs, the data included in the Description and Significance sections was not of a high standard.

Meanwhile, in May 1971, President Richard M. Nixon signed Executive Order 11593, directing federal agencies to inventory, evaluate, and nominate to the National Register those properties for which they were responsible. The National Register process was linked to the agencies’ Section 106 compliance responsibilities under the National Historic Preservation Act. federal agencies in theory should have found it in their interest to facilitate their planning process to either nominate properties to the National Register or seek determinations of eligibility. All the while, the National Register staff fielded

and monitored first a trickle and then a deluge of forms submitted by federal agencies and the State Historic Preservation Officers.

In 1983, I became the NPS’s Federal Preservation Officer. Among my duties was to encourage the NPS to inventory, evaluate, and nominate eligible properties to the National Register, and to review and comment on the forms before transmitting them to the National Register. Three years before, in 1980, Congress had made a number of amend-

ments to the National Historic Preservation Act, and in the years since 1977, the National Register staff had taken steps to refine and streamline standards and guidelines for documenting and nominating properties. A thoughtful and helpful series of “How to” publications and bulletins had been prepared and distributed.

Upon reviewing the amendments and publications, and the forms being submitted by the parks, I found that since the mid-1970s there had been a giant leap forward in the educational and interpretive value of the data found under the Description and Significance sections. I also recognized the importance of upgrading the docu-



The Harry S Truman National Historic Site in Independence, MO, was the home of the 33rd president of the United States from 1919 to 1972 and became a unit of the national park system in 1982. Photo courtesy the National Park Service.

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mentation of those NPS cultural parks whose forms predated 1978 to identify the contributing and the non-contributing resources. Such action would benefit management in addressing its Section 106 compliance responsibilities. Managers of cultural parks administratively entered in the National Register were encouraged to document their parks to National Register standards to identify and distinguish contributing and noncontributing properties.

In 1986, the National Register staff, after intensive external and in-house review, adopted new forms and accompanying instructions. The new forms and guidelines highlighted and simplified the use of contextual statements to facilitate the nomination of multiple properties to the National Register.

At the Historians Workshop held at Harpers Ferry Center in March 1985, Chief of Registration Carol D. Shull and her staff familiarized attendees with the National Register and its value as a planning and interpretive tool. Participants were required to prepare and submit National Register forms. This exercise was a success, as a number of properties were either added to the National Register or those previously listed documented to current standards.

Use of the National Register as an ally in enabling the NPS to meet its legal and cultural resource management mandates changed me from a skeptic who saw the National Register as a widget counter to an advocate who strongly endorsed the identification, evaluation, and listing of eligible cultural properties. Equally important is the value of the National Register documentation as it had evolved since the late 1970s to park interpreters. To enable NPS interpreters to hone their research, writing, and communications skills, the National Register has held several workshops at which NPS interpreters prepare lesson plans. By doing so, they develop skills that benefit the parks and add to their professional status.

The contextual information, narrative history, and resource descriptions found in the later forms, with few exceptions, reach beyond the needs of the cultural resources manager and park boundaries. The last 10 years have seen an ever-increasing importance placed on heritage evaluation by all levels of government, as well as the private sector. Properties identified and listed in the National Register constitute a rich and diverse inventory featuring the nation's diverse history and cultural resources. The single property, multiple property, and district nomination forms document more than 62,000 cultural properties in the United States and constitute an invaluable education resource.

In furtherance of this, the National Register and the National Trust for Historic Preservation entered into a cooperative agreement to prepare lesson plans that highlight National Register properties to teach history as part of a new program called Teaching with Historic Places. Many of the districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects featured are NPS units or National Historic Landmarks. Approximately 40 Teaching with Historic Places lesson plans have been prepared. Some are already published, and others will soon follow.

Jim Percoco of Fairfax County, Virginia, a member of the West Springfield High School Social Studies faculty, was winner of the Walt Disney Company's Teaching Award as the nation's outstanding social studies instructor in the 1992-93 school year. In his heralded applied history class, Mr. Percoco's students focus attention on NPS areas and National Register properties.

The inauguration of Bill Clinton as 42nd President on January 20, 1993, coincided with the 250th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Jefferson, our country's third President. Information gleaned from the National Register was used by the National Trust in cooperation with the Preservation Alliance of Virginia, Georgetown Heritage Trust, and the NPS to produce a handsome educational publication, *Thomas Jefferson's Road to the White House*. Mr. Jefferson's route from Monticello to Washington, the stopovers, extant places, and sites are identified and described. In November 1800, the trip that took Jefferson five days to complete in either a one- or two-horse phaeton was traversed by President-elect Clinton and his party in a bus convoy in a matter of hours. The Clinton visit to Monticello, a National Historic Landmark in the World Heritage List, and the motor caravan to the Nation's Capital on the day before he took the oath of office were given high visibility by the national media. It also demonstrated the effectiveness of teaching with historic places.

As a park historian at Vicksburg National Military Park in the 1950s, I learned that the most effective interpretation of historic places and structures is on-site by a well informed and skilled professional. The presentation must be interactive, dramatic, and aimed at making the visitor feel that he or she walks in the steps of history. More than 36 years have passed since my primary duties were those of a park historian/interpreter, but this is an invigorating experience. Going into the field to share with others a feel for, love, and knowledge of America's past is a challenge that still occupies my weekends and annual leave.

To locate and secure information on historic sites beyond park boundaries that are frequently the focus of my interpretive tours, I have turned to the listings and documentation found in the National Register. This is woven into the site and structure oriented interpretive tours that since 1977 I have led for the Smithsonian Institution's Resident Associate Program and other organized groups or VIPs. Yes, I have become a believer.

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