

Local Preservation Activities

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Local governments have found innovative uses for the National Register of Historic Places. A study of the effects of listing historic districts in the National Register in three Pennsylvania municipalities suggests that this federal program is compatible with local aesthetic, historic, planning, and economic interests.¹ Each local government studied has integrated aspects of the National Register program into municipal planning for cultural resources.

The cities of Williamsport and Easton and the borough of Bedford, demonstrate how three independent municipalities with different planning, economic, and preservation concerns view the effectiveness of the National Register program. These case studies reveal several key applications of the National Register program at the local level. The applications fall generally into categories of prestige, local planning and resource protection, public awareness, and economic development.

Prestige

Since the National Register was established in 1966, proponents have touted the honorary character of National Register listing as an incentive for nomination and listing. In the municipalities studied, prestige plays an important role among residents of the historic districts. Owners take pride in their homes and neighborhoods because of the national appellation. The program has also lent national credibility to local decision-making regarding designated districts. In Williamsport, an oft-times controversial local regulatory district existed 10 years prior to the National Register district. federal listing of the district (Millionaires' Row Historic District) along the exact boundaries of the local district justified the foresight of local preservation advocates and concurring city officials who recognized the unique character of the district and sought to protect it. Where local designation may be



The Hiram Rhoads House, ca. 1888, in the Millionaires' Row Historic District, Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Many of the elegant mansions in the district have been adapted to accommodate multiple dwelling units. Photo by Tanya M. Velt.

unpopular or considered parochial by opponents, National Register listing can vindicate local preservationists and supportive politicians. In Williamsport, the National Register significance of the Millionaires' Row continues to bolster local review board decisions against demolition of individual buildings.

Local Planning and Resource Protection

The case studies reveal how the National Register program contributes to local preservation planning efforts. The National Register program introduces local government officials/employees to the standards and processes for surveys and nominations, which helps establish an organizational infrastructure for future local cultural resource management methods, and zoning and development planning. In Easton, for example, planners view their downtown Easton Historic District as a template for future local district designation. The National Register program also serves as a catalyst for a cultural resource protection provision in the municipal master plan. Preservation-related components in a master plan evolve as the survey, nomination, and listing process occurs, and public awareness and appreciation of the community's historic resources grow. Planners responded accordingly in both Easton and in Bedford County.

Public Awareness/Education

Municipal governments should not overlook the importance of the National Register's educational capabilities. The program focuses public awareness on the significance of local historic properties and the importance of proactive preservation measures. Local governments interested in fostering public support for a historic district will find all stages of the National Register process—survey, public notice, and the nomination—convenient for newspaper feature articles. Public relations also seem to improve when state or federal preservation officials participate in local public meetings concerning the nomination of a historic district. State and national recognition of a district, even when it is eligible for the National Register for its local significance, engenders additional respect for, and stewardship of, historic resources in the district among residents and local government.

Local Economic Interests

A National Register district can also be an economic benefit to a local economy. The federal Rehabilitation Investment Tax Credit (ITC) program complements local economic programs for the upkeep and rehabilitation of older building stock. Easton has used ITCs in tandem with a facade restoration program (CDBG funds and local matching funds) and with a state-sponsored economic revitalization program providing tax abatements to property owners considering new construction and rehabilitation. Between 1985 and 1991, the ITC program in Easton resulted in 52 certified rehabilitation projects and more than a \$9,717,000 investment in the city's downtown historic district.²

National Register districts are also marketable tourism commodities. In Bedford, where the area's preeminent historic attraction, the Bedford Springs Hotel, has fallen into disrepair, the integrity of the Bedford Historic District



Transportation concerns pervade the history of Bedford, Pennsylvania. The Bedford Historic District includes this ca. 1936 Art Deco gasoline station for its association with early automobile travel on the Lincoln Highway (present-day Route 30). Photo by Tanya M. Velt.

provides a tourism substitute. In Williamsport, the Chamber of Commerce actively promotes the Millionaires' Row Historic District, and has reported increased tourism there since National Register listing in 1985.

One area of the National Register program ripe for improvement is communication between local governments, State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs), and the National Park Service. For instance, in none of the three municipalities studied did National Register listing of historic districts inspire local government to apply for Certified Local Government (CLG) status. CLG status makes federal Historic Preservation Fund monies available to municipalities, increases local representation in state historic preservation planning, and provides for local review of National Register nominations.

Public education is also vital to the National Register program at the local level and may require direct state involvement. Repeated incidents in all three municipalities reflect some public misconceptions and mistrust of the National Register as a regulatory device. However, in Bedford, where Pennsylvania SHPO representatives were most welcomed and viewed as knowledgeable and objective partners in the survey and nomination process, owner objections to historic district listing were minimal.

The National Register program is not a panacea for local preservation challenges. It is, however, a valuable tool for prioritizing resource needs, organizing governmental responses to those needs, educating the public, and providing economic assistance for rehabilitation.

Notes

¹ Tanya M. Velt, "The Influence of National Register of Historic Places Listing of Historic Districts on Local Preservation Planning" (Master's thesis, Cornell University, 1993).

² Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Bureau for Historic Preservation.

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packers transporting goods, saloon keepers, operators of gambling and opium establishments, herbal doctors, laborers, vegetable gardeners, farmers, butchers, and launderers. These people left archeological evidence of their activities upon the historic landscape of the Payette National Forest. The Chinese terraced and farmed hillsides to grow vegetable gardens for their own consumption and sold the surplus. The gardeners marketed their vegetables to the mining district community. Three Chinese terraced garden areas and two occupation sites are interconnected by a trail and are listed in the National Register. Another associated Chinese site, a cemetery, was recently nominated.

After 1870, the Chinese established their own segregated cemetery and mortuary. This cemetery was intended for temporary internment only. It was a Chinese custom that if they should die in a foreign land the bones of the deceased were disinterred for reburial with their ancestors in their homeland. For this privilege the Chinese workers paid Chinese companies a tax for returning the bones of the deceased to China. However, not everyone paid the tax and today several bodies remain at the segregated Chinese cemetery in the forest. Near this cemetery are National Register-eligible ruins of a Chinese company mining camp.

The Chinese company mining camp was investigated and recorded by archeologists with the USDA Forest Service and archeologists, students, and volunteers from the University of Idaho. This camp consists of a large common activity building used for shelter, preparing meals, and recreational activities. A residence, a blacksmith forge, two privies, a terraced garden, and a gold bearing placer hydrologic mine are also associated with the camp. Using the collected data, photographs, and maps produced by the archeologists, this property will be nominated under the multiple property listing in 1994.

The Payette National Forest's Cultural Resource Management Heritage Program has created six interpretive signs reflecting Chinese history, two exhibits containing artifacts of Chinese manufacture and utilized tools, a brochure used with the self-guided interpretive trail of the China Mountain Terraced Gardens, and four short informative papers about the Chinese presence in the forest. Because of the remote setting of the Warren Mining District within the Salmon River Mountains, the historic Chinese sites are accessible only during the snow-free period from spring through early fall. Chinese Americans from as far away as New York City and Hawaii have visited the China Mountain Terraced Gardens Interpretive Site, a National Register property.

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