

Our Past/Ourselves

Teaching with Historic Places

Beth M. Boland

Those of us working in the field of historic preservation can become so absorbed in the procedures and techniques of protecting the physical remnants of the past that we forget why it is important to do so. We should remind ourselves periodically that experiencing places “helps in making contact with those who were before.... It is a way to find them as human beings, as necessary as the digging you do in libraries.”¹ And like digging in libraries, exploring and studying historic places has enormous educational value.

Historic Places and Education

In *The Past is a Foreign Country*, historian David Lowenthal identifies “tangible relics” as a major source for learning about the past, and suggests that a past without them “seems too tenuous to be credible.”² For today’s students, the issue may be that, credible or not, it is too tenuous to be relevant or interesting. Real places provide substance to the themes and events students read about in textbooks. Real places from their own communities make an even stronger connection for students, and may spark an interest in history that helps them reach beyond themselves to learn of other times, places, and cultures.³

One of the limitations of places and things is that they are mute, and require interpretation; they instruct us best in conjunction with other sources.⁴ As many education, history, social studies, and geography professionals and organizations have recommended, an interdisciplinary approach works best. Use of historic places makes traditional educational techniques more complementary, and brings win-win-win results—for teachers, students, and preservationists. Teachers have one more means with

which to engage the interest of students, students earn knowledge from and an appreciation for cultural resources, and preservationists gain the stewards of tomorrow.

Teaching Tools

National Register List

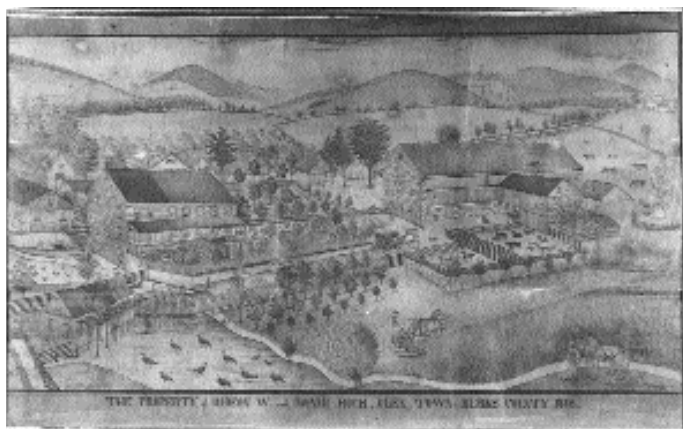
For teachers who want to enliven their classes with historic places, the National Register can help in several ways. As a list of more than 62,000 historic resources throughout America, it can lead to places that represent the stories, or pieces of the stories, educators want to tell about the past. Either the National Register office or the State Historic Preservation Office can provide a list of National Register properties in any geographic region. This information also is available at many libraries.⁵

A computerized database called the National Register Information System (NRIS) makes it possible to find places linked not only geographically, but by characteristics such as historic themes, past or present uses, or associations with important individuals. A teacher starting a unit on industrialism and the Gilded Age could identify properties associated with Vanderbilt, Gould, or other key figures; industrial complexes or company towns from the late-19th century; or local mills or factories. To focus on milestones of the Civil Rights movement, a teacher could find properties nationwide representing African American history since 1950. To explore how a specific community’s evolving demographics relate to trends in U.S. immigration and cultural diversity, a teacher could obtain a list either of local resources associated with various ethnic groups or of properties in several states associated with a single group. Requests can be narrowed or broadened depending on the geographic parameters, number of topics, or historic time spans specified.

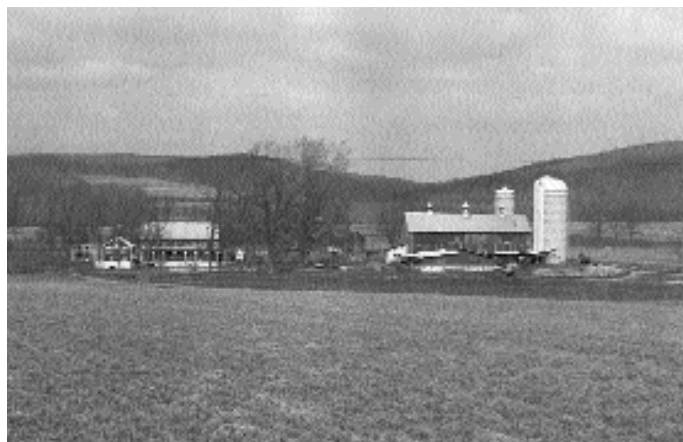
National Register Documentation

Once a teacher has identified historic places, he or she can obtain copies of the documentation on them. Historic properties are not limited to those listed in the National Register; investigations constantly bring to light places worthy of nomination and listing. The advantage of starting with National Register properties, however, is that

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Historic drawing of the Hoch Homestead from the National Register file for Oley Township Historic District, Berks Co., PA. 1882 drawing; Brader; photo: Ken Haas.



The Hoch Homestead in 1982, from the National Register file for Oley Township Historic District. Photo by Phoebe Hopkins.

these places have been documented already, and every property file includes considerable information useful to teachers: a physical description, geographical information and a map, a statement of historical significance, a bibliography, and at least one black and white photograph. Frequently, files contain other information as well, such as site plans, historic photographs, copies of primary documents, articles, or additional maps.

In many cases—particularly where local or thematic surveys have produced “Multiple Property” packages of nominations—studies in support of National Register nominations make important contributions to historical scholarship. Approximately 90% of National Register properties represent state and local history, and teachers would be challenged to find a more accessible summary of major historic themes, people, and events for many areas of the country. Documentation for properties listed in the last decade or so tends to be much more thorough than that of earlier nominations.

National Register Publications

A number of materials that the National Register program produces primarily for purposes other than classroom education also can benefit teachers. To assist those evaluating properties for possible nomination to the National Register, the National Park Service publishes technical bulletins on specific types of resources. These bulletins generally contain historical background, bibliographies, and guidance in understanding what these places tell us about local, regional, state, or national history. Such understanding is as essential for teaching or learning from properties and for justifying how they meet National Register criteria for significance.

Therefore, bulletins on topics such as cemeteries, battlefields, mining resources, post offices, and landscapes can help teachers interpret the cultural resources they find in their communities.⁶

National Register Participation

Once they are attuned to the physical history of their state or community, teachers and students are likely to identify important places that are not listed in the National Register. Direct participation in the process to research and nominate a property to the National Register is another option for educators. Teachers are well aware that students who “do” history demonstrate greater interest in and mastery of the subject. Participation has the added advantages of reinforcing the idea that history has value in “the real world,” and of demonstrating one way to translate learning into good citizenship.

Although completion of the entire process from identification to listing usually is beyond the scope of a single year’s class, it may be divided into stages and combined with other endeavors that provide each class with a sense of accomplishment. One class could conduct initial research, write articles for a local newspaper, and submit information to the local library. Another class could analyze how the property relates to broad national themes as represented by National Register criteria, design a school exhibit, and work with the State Historic Preservation Office to nominate the property to the state and/or national registers.

Teaching with Historic Places

The National Register is a co-partner with the National Trust for Historic Preservation in another key program to benefit educators, Teaching with Historic Places. Because teachers do not always have the time or the training to convert National Register information into instructional units, this program provides ready-to-use materials and also trains educators in methodologies for using historic places.⁷

The cornerstone of the program is a series of short lesson plans. Each lesson links one or more places listed in the National Register to broad themes, issues, and events covered in history and social studies curricula. Following a format designed for elementary through high schools, each lesson contains background information; learning objectives; maps, readings, and photographs from which students extract data; and activities that guide students in synthesizing and analyzing the information. At least one of these activities directs students to the history of their own communities.⁸ Also underway are more complex kits of lesson plans and other materials that will allow teachers to carry a single theme such as work or conflict through the school year.

One of the goals of the Teaching with Historic Places program is for teachers nationwide to use historic places as resources as easily as they use the written word. Program staff have offered several workshops on writing lesson plans.⁹ In addition, a curriculum framework that encompasses elements of the knowledge and skill base, intellectual content, available resources, and potential partnerships for the professional development of educators in this methodology is near completion. Portions of this framework have been tested in a one-semester graduate course at George Mason University in Virginia, and in shorter classes and workshops. Later this year, a course will be offered for teams of state preservationists and educators to enable them to develop creative learning opportunities in their states.

Notes

¹ David McCullough, *Brave Companions* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1992), x.

² David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 247.

³ For discussions of ways in which places instruct us, fit school curriculum, and relate to ongoing studies in educational reform, see: John J. Patrick, “Prominent Places for Historic Places: K-12 Social Studies Curriculum,” and Salvatore J. Natoli, “Notes on Location and Place,” *CRM: Teaching with Historic Places* 16 (1993): 8-11, 23.

⁴ Lowenthal, xxiii and 249.

⁵ The most recently-published cumulative list is the *National Register of Historic Places, 1966-1991*, American Association for State and Local History (Nashville, TN: 1991), which is available for purchase from The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036.

⁶ To receive a list of National Register Bulletins, write to the National Register of Historic Places, Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127.

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Noble, Bruce J., Jr. "Evaluating Historic Mining Resources: A National Register Perspective." *CRM* 12 (No. 2, 1989): 1-4.

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Lee, Antoinette J. "Recognizing Cultural Heritage in the National Historic Preservation Program." In *CRM: Traditional Cultural Properties*, edited by Patricia L. Parker, 7-8. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1993.

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Savage, Beth L. "Disappearing Ducks and Other Recent Relics." In *CRM: Cultural Resources from the Recent Past*, edited by Rebecca A. Shiffer, 23-25. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1993.

Shull, Carol D. and Keith A. Sculle. "Response to The Forum on 'Is There a Future for the National Register?'" *The Forum* 5 (April 1983).

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⁷ For more information on the Teaching with Historic Places program, write to Teaching with Historic Places, National Register of Historic Places, Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127.

⁸ For information on the educational philosophies embodied in this format, refer to Fay Metcalf, "Creating Lesson Plans for Teaching with Historic Places," *CRM: Teaching with Historic Places* 16 (1993): 12-13. For information on purchasing lesson plans, write to The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036, or call toll-free (800) 766-6847.

⁹ For information on writing a lesson plan for consideration as part of the series, write to Teaching with Historic Places, National Register of Historic Places, Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127.

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discovery process. They experience the excitement of researching and synthesizing material to create a historic context and reach an understanding of a resource that never existed before. Part of this is accomplished by having them work with primary sources such as street directories and Sanborn maps. They also experience the discipline of applying National Register criteria, making a decision of eligibility, and preparing the nomination forms.

The overarching goal of the reevaluation of the National Register historic district nomination is to simulate a professional experience in preservation—if one thing ties us together in the preservation field, it is working with the National Register of Historic Places. At the end of the semester, students are told: "You are ready." "Ready for what?" they ask. I tell them, "Ready to practice preservation."

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