

# Unlocking the Past

## The National Register in New York

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**F**or the past quarter-century a great many New Yorkers—SHPO staff, individuals, civil servants, and consultants—have been searching out and listing resources in the National Register of Historic Places. Today, just over 62,000 properties nationwide make up a record that surprises many. In the words of Joan Davidson, the incoming State Historic Preservation Officer:

*The National Register of the 1990s turns out to be something quite different, indeed something vastly more consequential, than I had assumed. It has become a document of social history, an encyclopedia of material culture, a revelation of the nature of community—even, possibly, a guide for planning the future of the built environment in our state.*

The National Register has entered the lives of most New Yorkers, sometimes loudly and with great public discussion, but more often quietly and unobtrusively. There are archeological sites such as Rogers Island which teach us about Native American and colonial life. There are Adirondack Great Camps and Gold Coast Estates to give us a glimpse of the lives of the fabled rich. Buffalo's Darwin Martin House and New York's Brooklyn Bridge remind us of the brilliant architects and engineers who worked in the state. And the mills of Cohoes and Rochester give evidence of the strength and fortitude of the laborers whose names have been lost but whose legacy remains.

Simply recording this legacy is not enough. We must use it. And that is something New York has managed to do very well. Between 45% and 60% of all tourists expect to visit historic places on their vacation in New York. Every year tourists flock to the Hudson Valley, inundating historic sites such as Olana and spreading out across the historic towns and villages of the region. Can it be any surprise that forward-looking communities like Ossining, Kingston, and Troy have created Urban Cultural Parks to identify and capitalize on their history? For communities like these, the National Register has provided a tool both for planning their futures and for economic strength.

There are nearly 400 historic districts in New York. Most of these are neighborhoods and small towns like the one I live in. Designation for these communities reinforces a sense of cohesiveness and pride. Here, the National Register has helped to preserve a whole style of life. People still walk. There are local merchants to be

found. And Lord help the highway official who proposes to cut the trees or widen the road. For these fiercely protective New Yorkers, the National Register has also become a sort of protective fence. Today, agencies are much more likely to recognize historic resources and to try to find ways to protect them than they were 25 years ago. In New York, more than 3,500 projects sponsored by state and federal agencies are reviewed every year.

Most owners take great pride in being listed in the National Register. At times initial skepticism has been replaced by institutional pride. The National Guard has become intensely interested in its past through researching the history of armories. Some, like the 7th Regiment Armory in New York City, display the artistry of grand Tiffany interiors. All of them tell the story of the institution and its place in the history of our country.

Individuals take great pride in pointing out that their house or their neighborhood is listed in the National Register. That pride translates into a greater sense of the fragility of their surroundings and a willingness to do something to protect them. The brochure of the Citizens Advisory Committee in Amagansett notes: "Once individual owners understand what they have, how valuable it is, who built and lived in it and a bit of its history, they will be less inclined to tear it apart." The process of researching, learning, and listing teaches us how much we have to save—and it points out how often we have failed to save. As the brochure concludes, "It is up to us."



This tramway shelter protects the principal escalator-lift which transported guests from the boathouse landing to the main lodge at Camp Topridge, in Franklin County, NY. Photo by Richard Youngken.



Moss Ledge Lodge is reminiscent of many guest quarters in Adirondack camps. Photo by Richard Youngken.

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