

The National Historic Preservation Act Creating a 30-Year Partnership

As is frequently the case in such situations, most preservationists in 1966 didn't realize that they were participants in—or at least witnesses to—history in the making. When the U.S. Conference of Mayors' Special Committee on Historic Preservation issued its groundbreaking report *With Heritage So Rich* early that year, most preservationists greeted it with what is best described as cautious optimism. The appraisal of National Trust staff member Helen Duprey Bullock was fairly typical: Writing in *Historic Preservation* magazine soon after the report was released, Mrs. Bullock said that *With Heritage So Rich* "is not a...magic carpet that will float us to Utopia, but it is the best chart we have ever had to guide us to a better destination." This contemporary reaction to *With Heritage So Rich* seems strangely muted to us today, when the document is widely regarded as both a moving evocation of the value of preservation and an amazingly farsighted blueprint for the current structure of the preservation movement.

Similarly, when most of the report's recommendations took on the force of law with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) a few months later, few preservationists were able to foresee the sweeping changes that would come about as a result of this legislation. To cite a single example, at one of a series of meetings convened by the National Park Service to discuss the best means of implementing the provisions of the Act, the Assistant Keeper of the newly-created National Register of Historic Places predicted that the Register would be "an ever-increasing archive" that might eventually—someday—grow to include as many as 300,000 properties.

Predicting the future is always a risky business, and the benefit of hindsight makes it easy for us to be smugly amused by forecasts that miss the mark. But the fact that the Assistant Keeper's future vision of the National Register was off by such a wide margin (individual listings and contributing resources in the National Register already comprise nearly a million resources, and the total is still growing) merely underscores the enormity of the change wrought by the enactment and implementation of NHPA. The scope of that change, which transformed the size, the effectiveness, and the very nature of the American preservation movement, is

evident in the expansion which the National Trust has experienced over the past 30 years.

In 1966, the 17-year-old National Trust was still a small organization. That year, Trust membership topped 10,000 for the first time. Our full-time staff numbered less than 50, all of them based in Washington and at our nine museum sites. The opening of our first regional office still lay four years in the future. Our annual operating budget in fiscal year 1966 totaled \$784,000.

That budget received a welcome boost in 1969, when the federal grant-in-aid funds authorized by NHPA finally became available. Of the \$100,000 appropriated by Congress that year, \$82,500 was shared among the 25 states and Puerto Rico that had been able to raise the required matching funds; the remaining \$17,500 came to the National Trust. This appropriation of federal funds to the Trust, repeated annually—though by no means automatically—ever since 1969, has enabled us to expand our outreach efforts, strengthen the organized preservation movement, and help facilitate effective preservation at the grassroots level.

An example of this expanded outreach activity is the Trust's Consultant Services Grant program (now known as the Preservation Services Fund), established in 1969 as a source of small matching grants to help local organizations obtain professional advice in the planning stages of preservation projects. Initially created with a grant from a private foundation, the program eventually drew its funding from the Trust's general operating budget—which included, of course, our federal appropriation. While grants awarded through this program are small—none larger than \$5,000—their impact over the past 27 years has often been enormously significant.

In the early 1980s, a nonprofit organization in Chattanooga, Tennessee, was awarded a grant to hire an engineer to assess ways of preserving the historic Walnut Street Bridge, built in 1891 as the first permanent highway span across the Tennessee River and closed in 1978. The favorable engineering report laid the foundation for a decade-long effort involving private citizens and public agencies that culminated in a grand reopening ceremony in 1993. Now hailed as the world's longest pedestrian crossing, the restored bridge stands a stone's throw away from the striking new Tennessee Aquarium. A

century apart in age, the bridge, and the aquarium are the centerpieces of an ambitious, ongoing redevelopment effort that is restoring life to the riverfront and winning awards for the city.

Did the Trust's small grant turn the Chattanooga riverfront around? Of course not. Did it help? Definitely. This funding program, the product of a public/private partnership between the Trust and the federal government, has provided the catalyst for the creation of similar partnerships in hundreds of communities nationwide. Moreover, this program and others developed with federal assistance through NHPA have helped foster the notion—practically revolutionary in its time—that the public sector could play a supportive, productive role in local preservation efforts.

This, I believe, is the single biggest and most important change resulting from passage of the National Historic Preservation Act: With the enactment of this piece of legislation, the federal government became our partner instead of our adversary in saving America's historic buildings and neighborhoods. The change had been a very long time in coming.

The Historic Sites Act of 1935 had stated that it was thenceforth to be a matter of national policy "to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings and objects of national significance." But 30 years later, most people were questioning the depth and effectiveness of the government's commitment to preservation; in fact, as the pace of destruction increased, many began to wonder whether the government even understood what "preservation" meant. Almost every issue of *Preservation News* from the 1960s includes at least one grim photograph of a small huddle of preservationists looking on in anguished frustration as a cherished local landmark is demolished. It was the heyday of urban renewal and interstate highway construction. Historic buildings, even entire older neighborhoods, were toppling like dominoes. Beleaguered, embattled, and frequently sent down to ignominious defeat, preservationists identified misguided federal policy as the chief villain in the tragic acts of destruction that were tearing their communities apart.

The National Historic Preservation Act changed that scenario—not all at once and not completely, but dramatically. Suddenly there was a National Register of Historic Places, an official list of significant cultural properties of which the federal government itself was prepared to say, "This is important. This should not disappear." Suddenly there was a Section 106 to make federal agencies accountable for the harmful impact of their undertakings on properties of cultural significance, and there was an Advisory Council to promote responsible project planning and to provide a forum for public review, consultation, and resolution of disputes. Suddenly there was federal funding to help the states conduct surveys of historic resources and develop comprehensive statewide preservation plans and to help the National Trust meet the needs of private-sector grassroots organizations. Suddenly, in short, there was a framework for partnership. It wasn't—and still isn't—perfect, but it works amazingly well and has proven gratifyingly durable.

It boils down to this: By creating an effective public/private partnership, NHPA has given preservation a place at the decision-making table, an authoritative voice in the discussions that shape the look, the livability, and the future of communities. That alone is reason to recognize this legislation as one of the seminal documents in the history of the American preservation movement, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of its enactment, and to do everything we can to ensure that the partnership it set in place is perpetuated and strengthened.

Reviewing the events of 1966, preservation historian Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., once noted that our movement seems to make major leaps forward at 30-year intervals. If this trend continues, he said, "1996 should portend good things for preservation." We're still waiting to see whether this hopeful prophecy will be fulfilled. Even if "good things" do come to pass this year, the momentous achievements of 30 years ago will be hard to top.

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In rural Knox County, ME, Finnish immigrant families constructed the Finnish Congregational Church and Parsonage during 1921-25. Many names associated with the church and its parsonage have been lost to time as the community has become diffused. The church and parsonage were listed in the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of the property's association with the ethnic history of the Finns in Maine. Photo by Kirk E. Mohney for the Maine Historic Preservation Commission.

