

Antoinette J. Lee

Historians Then, Historians Now

The framers of the National Historic Preservation Act did not target the history profession for transformation. Nevertheless, the Act served as a catalyst for turning a largely academic endeavor into one that today serves a diverse audience from a wide array of organizational bases. The major impetus for the transformation was the broadened vision on the part of the framers of the Act of what was historically significant. In the establishment of the National Register of Historic Places and subsequent state and local registers, the vision of community val-

ues was incorporated. The key words in the Act are found in the passage: “The historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people.”

The effects of the national historic preservation program were not immediately evident in the study of history. When I first became serious about history as a profession in the late 1960s, the academic curriculum seemed to have hardly budged since the early part of the century. However, change was already in the air. American civilization and other interdisciplinary studies had begun to impinge upon the otherwise quiet academic endeavors of historians. These and other interdisciplinary studies were intended to provide new perspectives on studying the past. They allowed students and professors to explore the past through the prisms of literature, art history, anthropology, archeology, sociology, and other disciplines.

Another factor in tugging at the boundaries of history was the American Bicentennial celebration of 1976. Initiated at least a decade earlier, the “Bicentennial Era,” as orchestrated by the American Bicentennial Commission, was a highly decentralized national celebration. Nearly every community, every organization, and every government agency felt obliged to “do something for the Bicentennial”—whether it was a publication, an exhibition, a conference, or another event. These observances emphasized state, regional, and local history as often as they marked the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The Bicentennial left an important legacy in the many publications that now are classics in their field. “The States and the Nation” series of the American Association for State and Local History, published by W. W. Norton & Company for the national Bicentennial of the American Revolution, is one notable example. The Smithsonian Institution’s major exhibition, “A Nation of Nations,” was a memorable event in raising the public’s consciousness about the immigrant experience. Many more examples could be cited.

The academic historians themselves sowed the seeds of their profession’s own metamorphosis. Beset with student unrest on numerous campuses in the 1960s, academics sought to make history



The graceful spiral stair from the Lanier Mansion, Madison, IN, is one of the most noteworthy features of the mansion. Built in 1840 by architect-builder Francis Costigan for banker James F. D. Lanier, the Lanier Mansion is one of the finest Greek Revival structures in America. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1993. Photo courtesy Indiana State Historic Preservation Office.

relevant to the social issues of the day and to tie their lives' work to addressing problems of race relations, the role of ethnic and cultural minorities within the majority culture, the declining condition of life in the inner city, and the nature of "community." They began to write about the history of ethnic groups, examine the forces that caused the development of neighborhoods, and pursue family histories. As the "new social history" gained a foothold on the academic community, it spread also to the professionals who worked for historical organizations and museums.

The forces of relevancy and community found a ready audience in the first generation of historians who worked exclusively in the historic preservation field. Entering this line of work at the time when the discipline of history itself was transforming was a fortuitous coincidence. Legions of survey and National Register historians set out to document common places in the landscape. Older residential areas, historic commercial districts, industrial centers associated with the origins of a community, engineering structures, and open spaces and parks were part and parcel of the substance of historic preservation work. No longer was history thought of as predominantly the study of the educated elite.

This virtual tidal wave of "new social historians" eventually became part of not only the historic preservation establishment, but also the

academic one as well. Studying the lives of everyday people living through national, regional, and local change is now accepted as the norm. A glance through the program of annual meetings of national historical organizations provides ample testimony of the prevalence of the new social history. Academic papers are delivered on a diverse array of topics, covering women's history, ethnic history, and the history of many other previously overlooked groups of people. Historic house and outdoor museums have reevaluated their collections and present interpretive exhibits on everyday people of the past. Today, the vast majority of National Register listings address important aspects of local history, whether historical trends in a locality, locally significant individuals, or local architectural and engineering developments. These properties represent community values and help define community character.

The evolution of the history profession over the past 30 years has not been without its casualties, however. A whole generation of historians, many of whom aspired to tenured academic careers, found themselves futilely battling up against an unforgiving job market, when the baby boom gave way to the baby bust. Even after the passage of a generation, the academic field looks little better as retiring faculty are replaced with temporary and part-time hires. The historical agency and historic preservation fields absorbed many of the historians produced during the past 30 years. Many historians went on to blaze new careers as historical consultants, corporate historians, and other variations on the public historian. They formed their own associations, which bridged the academic and public realms. Other historians gave up history entirely as a profession, returned to school, and applied their historical skills to entirely new professions, such as law, business, or public policy.

History as a profession has become much more diverse since the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act. A typical gathering of historians in 1966 would hardly recognize their profession should they witness a similar gathering in 1996. However, historians of today have much to learn from the historians of yesterday. Historians today are rightly bringing their professional concerns to everyday people, such that history as a subject is readily accessible to the general public. However, many localized studies remain just that. They tell the reader or observer much about what happened in that particular place, with



Built in 1812 by Dr. Julius LeMoyné, the LeMoyné House, Washington, PA, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of the property's second owner, Dr. Francis LeMoyné. He was one of America's most outspoken abolitionists and founder, in 1824, of the American Abolition Society. Photo courtesy Washington County History & Landmarks Foundation.

that particular set of individuals, and against that particular local trend. The national, regional, or even broader local context is lost amid a nearly microscopic focus upon details about particular properties or items of material culture.

In order to capture the imagination of the public more fully and thus support for history as a “living part of our community life and development,” historians should endeavor to reconnect their community histories with the larger historical forces of which their particular slice of history—and by extension, other related slices—was a part. This means that historians must relate the “downstairs” to the “upstairs,” and the “outbuildings” to the “main house,” and the whole property to the life of the nation.

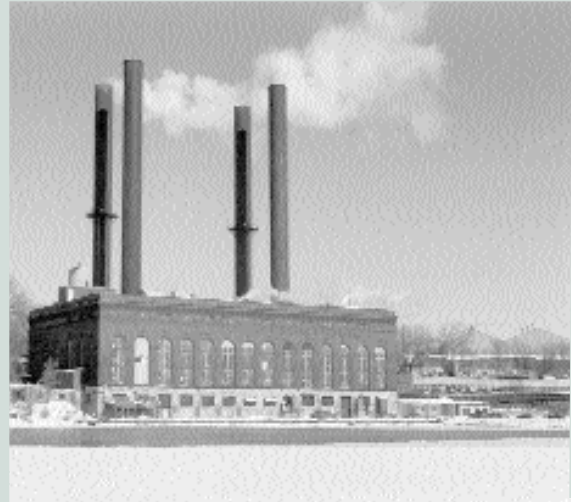
The new social history has enriched the study of the past for countless members of the

public, whose support for historic preservation has brought us so far from the mid-1960s. However, historians should not lose sight of the vast constituency that remains vitally interested in the transcendent historical themes of national politics, military conflict, and the work of great architects. The public appreciates the telling of history and will support the preservation and interpretation of that history when it has meaning to their own lives. Telling community history within its broader context should go far in using the past, evident in historic places, as the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act aspired, to “give a sense of orientation to the American people.”

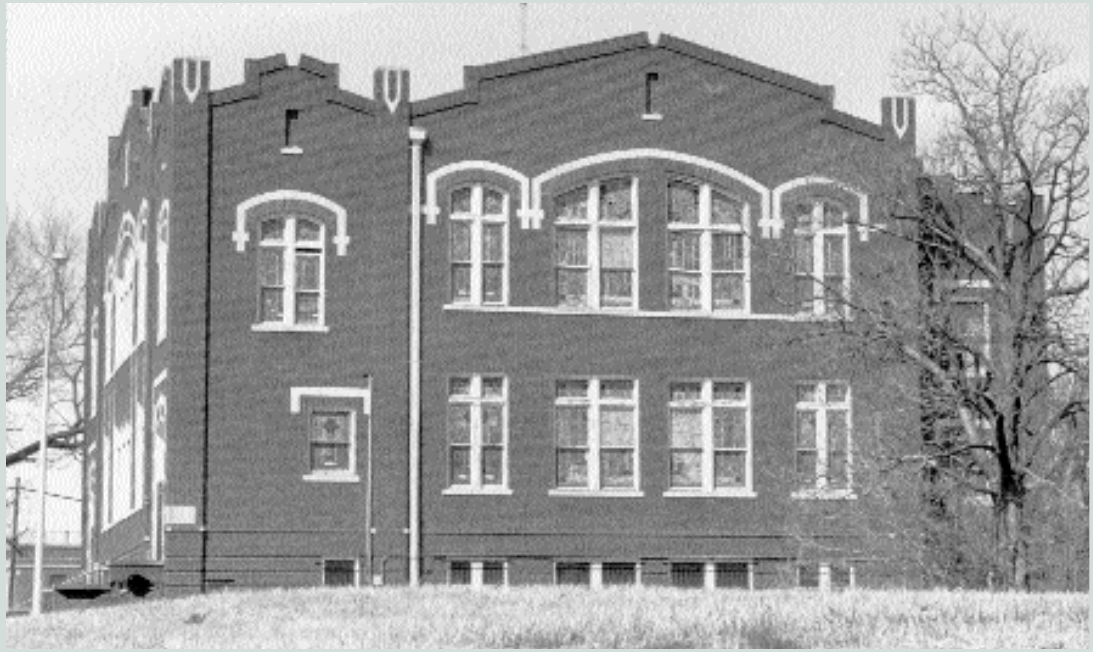
Antoinette J. Lee is Senior Historian for National Programs, Heritage Preservation Services, National Park Service.



This view of downtown Jackson Street in Dubuque, IA, shows the Key City Iron Works Foundry (1890) on the left and Farley and Loetscher Manufacturing Company (1903) on the right. They are significant turn-of-the-century industrial buildings in the riverport city. In 1986–87, HABS/HAER documented this historic district as part of its larger effort to record outstanding examples of the country's heritage through measured drawings, large-format photography, and written histories. Photo by Clayton B. Fraser for HABS/HAER.



The Twin City Rapid Transit Company Steam Power Plant, Minneapolis, MN, was constructed in 1903 to provide power to the Twin City Rapid Transit Company system. It enabled the street railway company to operate as the major means of public transportation in the city and adjacent communities for nearly half a century. With the changeover to buses, the transit company transferred this building to the Northern States Power Company in the early 1950s. Today, the building serves as a steam-heating facility for the University of Minnesota. This property was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of its important role in the city's transportation history. Photo by Jeffrey A. Hess for the Minnesota Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office.



In 1995, a stunned nation reacted to the human tragedy unfolding in Oklahoma City in the aftermath of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Several historic structures were also damaged in the bombing, including the late Gothic revival style church (1916) pictured here. A Historic Preservation Fund grant administered by the Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office provided for the preparation of a National Register nomination for the affected area and a historic structures report for Calvary Baptist Church, an important landmark for African Americans. The church has since received bricks-and-mortar funding from Oklahoma City, and the public's attention has been focused on the importance of historic properties in the community. Photo by C.R. Cowen, courtesy Archives & Manuscripts Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, 19687.TO.0030.55.59.35.



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