

Katherine H. Stevenson

A Model Partnership

In a discipline where the passage of time is marked in eras and epochs and ages, 30 years is insignificant. But for American historians, and all who care about our history, the anniversary we mark on October 15, 1996, is a celebration of 30 years of enormous consequence.

On that day in 1966, in the midst of sweeping social change that brought new protections for civil rights, for the environment, and for the elderly, the protection of America's exceptional historic properties was declared a national policy.

For 30 years, the National Historic Preservation Act has given the National Park Service the authority to encourage and support efforts to preserve the tangible evidence of our past. Places that would have otherwise succumbed to the creeping erosion of wood rot or the swift blade of a bulldozer, have been saved for the benefit, education, and enjoyment of future generations.

These historic places answer a fundamental human need to know who we are as a people and as individuals. They define community. They remind us of our diverse roots. They are the authentic stage where American history was made.

No theme park or virtual approximation can equal the transcendent experience of standing where Brigham Young and his followers first saw the great Salt Lake Valley, or where young soldiers faced each other at Gettysburg, or where millions of immigrants saw America for the first

time, or where Anasazi people built majestic dwellings among the cliffs of the southwest, or where George Washington camped through a bitter winter with the American Army at Valley Forge.

While many historic sites are associated with great leaders and great events, many others commemorate everyday places where everyday people settled this country, raised a family and rooted themselves in the American landscape. They are found on Main Street, in our nation's rapidly disappearing countryside, our neighborhoods, our factories, our houses of worship, and our schools. The threads of the American story weave each together into the fabric of our history.

As the franchising of America gradually erases the look and feel of individual communities, historic places remain the signposts that distinguish one town from another. They are special, distinctive sites, pointed out with pride to inquiring visitors. They are fundamental moorings that connect us not just to a dot on the map, but to a place with a past, a present, and a future of which we are a part.

Communities and property owners seeking to preserve sites important to their local identity found an important tool in the National Historic Preservation Act: The National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is unique in the world in recognizing properties important to local communities. These places are listed not because a federal agency designates them, not because they commemorate the famous or grand,

Protecting Miami Beach's dense urban character and preserving its 20th-century buildings were the main reasons for listing the Miami Beach Architectural District in the National Register of Historic Places. Since then, the area has undergone a complete metamorphosis as once-seedy hotels and apartment houses have been transformed into vibrant hotels and tourist meccas. Many observers of the urban scene trace this renaissance of public appreciation and economic investment to the district's listing in 1979. Photo by Walter Smalling, Jr. for HABS/HAER.



but because local citizens took the initiative and mustered community support. It is a singularly American system of honoring our past.

Whether commemorating great events or the simple courage to head a wagon west, historic sites evoke our common adventure. Preserving these places often sparks a new adventure as neighborhoods are stabilized, community pride is strengthened, jobs created, and the local tax base enhanced. Community revitalization strategies based upon preservation rather than demolition have proven extraordinarily successful. In Miami, the Art Deco district was shabby and forgotten; now it is home to vibrant hotels and a tourist mecca.

Federal income tax incentives to encourage the revitalization of historic neighborhoods have generated a total private investment over 20 years of \$17 billion in our cities and towns. In Philadelphia alone, the tax incentives spurred private developers to spend more than \$2 billion of private money to bring back to active use nearly 2,000 projects. In St. Louis, a decaying and abandoned railroad station saw \$155 million of private development resulting in a thriving hotel, shops, restaurants, thousands of local jobs, and millions in local revenue.

In addition to tax incentives, the national historic preservation program leverages significant state and local investment through matching requirements and through catalytic effect. It pursues strategies that create private wealth, increase property values, and enhance the local tax base.

The national historic preservation program is not only a good buy for America but it is a model of federalism and reinvented government. The National Park Service provides a national framework and technical assistance that enables, supports, and empowers state, tribal, and local

decision-making. State governments exercise significant discretion in delivering program services to the public that best meet local circumstances. This intergovernmental effort accomplishes national policy goals not by ownership but through assistance, advice, consultation, and incentives, while respecting property-specific decisions as the province of the property owner and local authorities.

By working together, national preservation strategies have been protecting significant historic resources for 30 years. Since 1966, nearly 66,000 buildings, structures, sites, districts, and objects have been nominated by the public, Indian tribes and local, state and federal agencies and listed on the National Register. Truly an astonishing grassroots effort.

These accomplishments are shared by all partners in this "new federalism": 56 State Historic Preservation Offices representing state government, one thousand units of local government, Indian tribes, the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, colleges and universities, federal agencies, the private sector, and most importantly, private citizens working to preserve the places that make their communities special.

The National Historic Preservation Act spawned a national historic preservation program driven by local and state initiatives, supported by the private sector, and sustained by the federal government. It is a model partnership, a successful partnership and one all partners can point to with pride.

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Constructed in 1932, the mammoth Dirigible Hangar #1 was included in the Naval Air Station Historic District, Sunnyvale, CA, that was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The Sunnyvale base represents a distinctive episode in the development of U.S. naval aviation during the period from 1930 to 1945, when the Navy promoted the use of lighter-than-air craft to augment seaborne resources. This dirigible hangar is an exceptionally rare example of 20th-century engineering. Historical Photograph, courtesy U.S. Department of the Navy.

