

Preserve America Summit Issue Areas Panel Report



Involving All Cultures

Executive Summary of Issue Area

The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), specifically the ability to nominate properties of significance to the National Register of Historic Places, offers opportunities to not only protect and preserve cultural resources, it also serves to create places of educational benefit to the public so that they may be connected to the past and their place in history. Certainly names of prominence, iconic structures, and architectural styles are well represented in the National Register. However, for the National Register to be truly representative of the history and cultures of the nation and for the NHPA to serve all those intended by the purpose of the Act, all cultures within the nation should be involved in the process and all cultures should be well represented. Involving all cultures in the historic preservation process not only gives due respect for the places of significance, but it furthers understanding, tolerance, and appreciation for the complex societies in which we live.

The panel of experts, composed of historic preservation professionals from tribes, states, museums, federal agencies, and cultural areas, from Hawaii to Puerto Rico, met several times in preparation for the Summit. Several themes, ideas, and actions items developed as a result of their interactions. The panel is very clear in asserting that there is work to be done in involving all cultures in the historic preservation process, but the law itself does not require change or amendment to achieve the goals set forth in this report. Rather, the onus is upon historic preservation practitioners to be as open to flexible and adaptive considerations of resources as the law allows. Change must occur in the way in which the process is applied and in the thoughts and considerations of those who review cultural properties. To achieve success in involving all cultures in the near future, the field of professionals, reviewers, and historic preservation panels and nominating groups must include representatives as diverse as the population they serve and the properties nominated must be evaluated for significance and integrity from the perspective of the cultures that view them as significant.

This report makes the following key points:

Diverse cultures must be empowered to use the process thus allowing recognition of their cultural resources. This will be achieved by including people of diverse cultures and backgrounds on boards and panels as agents in the process and by educating and training cultural groups on the preservation process, benefits, and means to attain protection and recognition of properties they deem significant.

There must be recognition of sites that reflect the cultural diversity of this nation, including natural and cultural resources that go beyond the built environment. Outreach is needed to bring places presently protected informally by cultural groups into the greater protection of the NHPA and National Register. The evaluation of these special places should begin with stories of the people and then progress to recognizing, preserving, and protecting their significant resources.

Expert Panel Focus and Methodology

The co-chairs and panelists, representing a cross-section of the country, cultural groups, and preservation professionals, met prior to the Summit at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, in New York, a fitting venue for a discussion of culture. The museum exists within the oldest tenement in a block of historic significance to those cultures beginning their history in the United States in that neighborhood. Apartments within the building have been restored to varying periods, exemplifying the lives of people over time in the building. The setting, and tour of the museum by our host, Ruth Abram, president of the museum, set the tone for our discussions. We are reminded that not all buildings of significance must represent famous names in history. They also dignify the history of people who contributed to the economy and growth of the country, but whose names we know only when we visit preserved sites such as the Tenement Museum.

We began our discussions by attempting to define “culture” and focused upon the evolution of the National Historic Preservation Act. The Act has evolved over time from the recognition of iconic buildings to the recognition of districts and landscapes; it should continue to evolve to include more properties of cultural significance, such as areas that appear as natural sites, but have cultural significance to Native people. These themes predominated the meetings of the co-chairs as they prepared questions for the expert panel in order to focus on the topic and give a basis for further discussion. The panel as a whole held a telephone conference prior to the meeting in New York and a subsequent telephone conference. Additional work of the panel in obtaining information and developing this report was accomplished through email correspondence.

The panel considered the materials on the Preserve America web site, as well as Bulletin 38, Traditional Cultural Properties, published by the National Park Service; an article by panel member Nancy Morgan, “Finding a Place for the Commonplace: Hurricane Katrina, Communities, and Preservation”; reports by the National Park System Advisory Board on National Parks in the 21st Century; and other related reports.

The panel chairs also conducted outreach to obtain input from State, Federal, and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (SHPOs, FPOs, and THPOs), tribal representatives, community members, preservationists, federal officials, and others. Several comments were received and all were acknowledged and incorporated into the draft document.

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Findings

As stated in the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, “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.” It is time to reaffirm this vital principle and the Act’s objectives. This requires us to recognize and embrace the vast diversity that is America and to ensure that our nation’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage is honored and preserved.

We define “culture” as the practices, expressions, knowledge, skills, and lifeways represented in places that communities of people recognize as part of their heritage, transmitted from generation to generation to provide a sense of identity and continuity. Our definition recognizes culture in the tangible heritage of monuments, sites, and other structures of the built environment, as well as the intangible heritage of oral traditions, performing arts, and social and ritual practices.

The Preserve America Panel on “Involving All Cultures” met several times to prepare recommendations for the Preserve America Summit. Notably, the panel determined that the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) does not require amendment to realize the ideas for consideration set forth below. While satisfied with the Act’s standards and criteria, the panel nevertheless agreed that a variety of incentives and processes currently inhibit carrying out the spirit of the Act which so clearly calls for recognizing and protecting properties associated with the nation’s diverse cultures. The ideas for consideration that follow offer ways to alter the current processes which the panel identified as in conflict with the inclusive spirit and intent of the Act.

The following are recommended:

1. Evaluate National Register properties to discover areas of underrepresentation.
2. The evaluation of historic properties should be open, flexible, and inclusive of the viewpoints of diverse cultures by expanding the focus of preservation professionals and by including people of diverse cultures in the process.
3. Recognize the stories important to cultures. Identify the resources that express those stories.
4. Update National Park Service Bulletin 38 on Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs) to make it clear that by using existing criteria, historic preservation professionals should consider use by diverse cultures, thus representing experience over time in a discrete place. The guidance should include means and methods to represent and interpret the various cultures which occupied the site.
5. Explore the ways in which other fields have been culturally inclusive.

Ideas for Consideration

Idea 1: Evaluate National Register properties to discover areas of underrepresentation.

All historic preservation professionals must encourage and welcome applications by those who are either new to the process or are representative of an underrepresented cultural group. Outreach and education are critical to assist communities in using the NHPA process to protect their cultural resources. A study of properties on the Register would disclose areas of underrepresentation.

Discussion: The incentives and processes for historic preservation are heavily weighted in favor of properties whose champions know how to utilize the system. Consequently, properties of significance to groups that are unfamiliar with the National Register process or that historically rely on other means to recognize their most important cultural resources are unprotected and vastly underrepresented on the National Register.

To be effectively inclusive of all cultures, a study of the properties listed on the National Register organized by cultural group and property listed is necessary to understand which groups are underrepresented and to what extent. In addition to analysis and outreach efforts, educating our youth on the value of preservation is a key component to expanding our cultural understanding. Increasing opportunities for youth from diverse backgrounds will increase the diversity within this and related professions. In consideration of different styles of learning and preservation, information on tangible and intangible heritages should be incorporated into all levels of the educational system. Care must also be taken to use various forms of communication in sharing information and encouraging involvement by all cultures, not all of which have access to current technology.

Idea 2: The evaluation of historic properties should be open, flexible, and inclusive of the viewpoints of diverse cultures by expanding the focus of preservation professionals and by including people of diverse cultures in the process.

The National Register process, the application of integrity standards, eligibility criteria, and the make up of preservation boards, commissions, and staffs must be reexamined in terms of how they meet and/or advance NHPA’s original goal of being representative of the broad spectrum of cultural groups. Boards, commissions, grant reviewers, and staff must be from diverse communities to better recognize and evaluate the variety of attributes of historic properties. Integrity must be understood as more than structural, for example, to include spiritual places where sounds and viewsheds are factors. Eligibility, based on people, events, and technology, must include diverse perspectives.

Discussion: A bias toward the built environment over the natural environment and all other cultural forms inhibits full realization of the Act’s intent. Natural and cultural resources upon which cultures thrive have been protected for thousands of years, yet they are being destroyed at a fast pace in today’s world. Those who review and assess sites must understand the diverse attributes that make significant those cultural resources that go beyond the built environment. For example, Native people have managed natural resources in their cultural practices. These resources support cultures and societies. Without adequate access to knowledge and expertise, non-Native Americans may not understand or appreciate how the natural and cultural resources have become integrated as places of cultural significance. Without a full understanding of a property’s attributes and significance, decisions on treatment may fail to protect cultural meaning. There are specific ways to empower diverse cultures such as providing training in the process, facilitating grant writing, and obtaining public and private funding for historic preservation.

Idea 3: Recognize the stories important to cultures. Identify the resources that express those stories.

When seeking to identify and protect properties of cultural significance, begin the National Register nomination process with the intangible and move from those stories to the tangible, the physical resources that embody the lifeways and practices to be preserved. The input of underrepresented cultural groups should be sought throughout the entire process, from the gathering of stories to determining the resources of cultural significance to the group.

Discussion: Identifying and determining significance is biased toward procedures embraced by the dominant culture. For example, the National Register process now starts with identifying a property followed by determining its historic significance. A more inclusive outcome would result from starting with the story of the cultural group followed by noting the tangible form of the resource.

Cultural experts disagree that all preservation must be done through the National Register process. However, the NHPA is our nation's accepted form of preservation and one that has collected our shared history for the past 40 years. For the next 10 years, we must consider the interdependence of communities and place and the irreplaceable connections that people have with their environment. This requires no change in the Act, but it does require a substantial alteration of the way the law is put into practice.

Idea 4: Update National Park Service Bulletin 38 on Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs) to make it clear that by using existing criteria, historic preservation professionals should consider use by diverse cultures, thus representing experience over time in a discrete place. The guidance should include means and methods to represent and interpret the various cultures which occupied the site.

Discussion: Historic Sites on the National Register traditionally limit their interpretation to the culture which has most recently “owned” the property, thus obscuring its importance to other related cultures. Bulletin 38, on TCPs, acknowledges the flexible nature of the Act by outlining a move from the built environment to a culture-based approach to the law. This should not be considered to be limiting, but as adding to the application of the Act. Consideration for the rights of groups and individuals and the concern for ownership and control of the knowledge accumulated in the process of identifying and evaluating the resources needs to be addressed and guaranteed.

Idea 5: Explore the ways in which other fields have been culturally inclusive.

Historic preservation professionals and practitioners in the United States should look at other models and the international preservation community to develop programs, strategies, and incentives that build upon our nation's cultural heritage to promote community pride and quality community development. The preservation community should be challenged to examine innovative strategies to educate and involve all cultures in pursuit of historic preservation. Preservationists should seek ways to encourage public-private partnerships and philanthropy.

Discussion: Preservation strategies have evolved over the last 40 years, but fall short of innovations that can foster inclusiveness in the next 10 years. Strategies that currently exist include:

- Heritage Areas - a strategy for large-scale living landscapes, the preservation of which is organized by local residents around a concept of their shared heritage.
- Geo-tourism - an innovative approach that promotes sustainable stewardship of local culture and its historic / natural resources. It is inclusive in every way, as it upholds utmost respect for the citizens of a particular destination, and the preservation of their environment and their heritage.
- Cultural Tourism (Community-based Tourism) - a strategy for promoting local pride and a popular desire for the preservation of all contributing elements that make up the sense of place.
- Strategies involving preservation education and opportunities for youth from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds to enter the field.
- Environmentalism and/or Eco-Tourism.
- Strategies used by folklife professionals that engage living arts and artists.
- Strategies currently used by library professionals and library advocates to diversify the field.

Conclusions

Beyond an academic definition of culture, our panel developed a working definition for use in our discussion, recognizing that any definition may be unintentionally limiting. Involving all cultures in historic preservation must begin with a two-way approach, both initiated by current historic preservation professionals and by community members. The effort requires reaching out and bringing diverse cultures into the process, which enables them to reach into the process to evaluate resources with new sensitivities. Youth from diverse cultures must be educated on the values of preservation and encouraged to enter the profession.

At the outset, a study of the properties on the National Register would serve to show deficiencies in cultural representation and provide a look at property types. This would serve as a baseline, to be reviewed in ten years to reflect on growth in inclusion and flexibility in application of the law. And finally, making historic preservation more inclusive requires additional human and financial resources.