Fifty Years of Heritage
So Rich: The National Historic Preservation Act
The National Historic Preservation Act at 50: “A Living Part of Our Community Life and Development”

THOMPSON MAYES

What do you remember about 1966, the year the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) was enacted—if you were even alive? I remember watching *Get Smart* and *Bonanza* on our family’s *only* TV, which received signals through rabbit ear antennae. Our telephone was connected to the wall, and we dialed numbers. Cars were large, lumbering, and American made—Buick Skylarks, Chevrolet Impalas, and Ford Galaxies. Gas hovered around 31 cents a gallon. My mother bought groceries from Cashion’s grocery store in downtown Cornelius, North Carolina, not even thinking about the fact that it was an independent, local business—that was all there was. Eighty-eight percent of the United States population—about 196.6 million people—identified as white.\(^1\) Charlotte *was in the midst of an urban renewal project* that completely demolished the old African American Brooklyn neighborhood without adding new housing. I-85 was scraping its way across the red clay of the Carolina piedmont. A handful of people in the Fourth Ward of Charlotte were *maybe* beginning to worry about the loss of old Victorian houses. In our national life, President Lyndon Johnson pressed an ambitious agenda called the Great Society, even while deepening America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. The United States had not yet landed a man on the moon.

It’s almost as difficult to put ourselves back in 1966 as it is to predict 2066. In 1964 *President Johnson spoke* about a future that has now become our present:

> Many of you will live to see the day, perhaps 50 years from now, when there will be 400 million Americans—four-fifths of them in urban areas. *In the remainder of this century urban population will double, city land will double, and we will have to build homes, highways, and facilities equal to all those built*
since this country was first settled. So in the next 40 years we must rebuild the entire urban United States.

In the same speech, he lamented that “open land is vanishing and old landmarks are violated.” Little did Johnson imagine that some of those homes, highways, and facilities he envisioned being built would—50 years later—be the Midcentury places we are now working to save.

When preservationists recount the enactment of the NHPA in 1966, the story we tell usually revolves around *With Heritage So Rich*, the report of a Special Committee on Historic Preservation created under the auspices of the United States Conference of Mayors, and organized with the assistance of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (which had been founded in 1949). *With Heritage So Rich* remains one of the most evocative and powerful statements for historic preservation in the United States. It was distributed to every member of Congress, and its recommendations were the basis for the bills that became the NHPA.²

A TIME OF OPTIMISM AND VISION

Yet, as we think about the future of the NHPA, it’s worth taking a look at the broader context in which it was passed to consider the full reach of its vision. That broader context includes not only the devastating impacts of urban renewal and
interstate highway projects but also the aspirations and goals of President Kennedy’s New Frontier and President Johnson’s Great Society. Johnson’s vision for the Great Society was expansive, and he sought to improve dramatically the lives of all Americans. He appointed no fewer than 14 task forces on everything from poverty to civil rights to health, all of them seeking to examine a problem and fix it through federal policy—an idea that seems unimaginable in our present political environment.

Two key Great Society initiatives relating to historic preservation preceded the U.S. Conference of Mayors Special Committee. The first was a task force on the Preservation of Natural Beauty, which met on July 31, 1964. Its report contained key recommendations that were ultimately incorporated into the NHPA. The second was Beauty for America, the White House Conference on Natural Beauty, chaired by philanthropist Laurance Rockefeller, which met in May 1965 with 800 delegates serving on various panels—including Gordon Gray, then chair of the National Trust, on the townscape panel. In his call to the conference, Johnson wrote about the way that beauty—and he included historic districts and landmarks in the concept—can “enlarge man’s imagination and revive his spirit.”

Among the recommendations emerging from the conference was a broad agenda for recognizing and protecting historic places—including, notably, places important to local history and culture, historic districts, and even entire towns. These recommendations informed With Heritage So Rich and, ultimately, the NHPA.

This is the optimistic and progressive context in which the NHPA was conceived, drafted, proposed, passed by both houses of Congress, and signed into law by President Johnson. Although the idealism of the Great Society has largely been obscured—burnt away might be a better term—by the anti-war protests, assassinations, race riots, and distrust of government that followed, it was the progressive ideas and raw political power behind the Great Society initiatives that aligned the stars for broad-based federal legislation on historic preservation. Or as Gordon Gray put it, the “moon was right.”

The oft-quoted language of the preamble, which arose from the recommendations of With Heritage So Rich, was not initially
included in all of the bills (and is now unfortunately omitted from the recently re-codified version of the law), but it captures the optimism and deep humanism that are the philosophical basis for the NHPA:\(^5\)

> Congress finds and declares that—
> (1) the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage;
> (2) 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;
> (3) historic properties significant to the Nation’s heritage are being lost or substantially altered, often inadvertently, with increasing frequency;
> (4) the preservation of this irreplaceable heritage is in the public interest so that its vital legacy of cultural, educational, aesthetic, inspirational, economic, and energy benefits will be maintained and enriched for future generations of Americans;\(^6\)

The NHPA, signed into law the same day as the Department of Transportation Act, was part of a legislative program that sought to implement the vision of the Great Society, which also included the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Water Quality Act of 1965, the Motor Vehicle Air Pollution Control Act of 1965, the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965, and the Social Security Act Amendments of 1965 (creating Medicare), among others.

**FIFTY YEARS OF EFFECTIVE ACTION**

Like these other laws, over the next 50 years, the NHPA made a profound difference in the lives of all Americans. Yet, just as Americans are largely unaware from day to day that they breathe clean air as a result of the Clean Air Act, they are also often unaware of the ways in which their lives are better because of the historic places saved by the NHPA. These places exist in virtually every community in the country, and they give our lives the “cultural, educational, aesthetic, inspirational, economic, and energy benefits” set forth in the preamble to the NHPA.
For example, one of the first cases that used Section 106 review succeeded in stopping the construction of a proposed elevated highway that would have been rammed between the French Quarter and the Mississippi River—the heart of historic New Orleans. As the website for the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation puts it: “This case is an early model for why Section 106 was enacted and why it is essential. Citizens determined to retain this iconic historic neighborhood opposed government officials who wished to site a major highway that would forever alter its character.” More recently, the NHPA helped preserve New York City’s African Burial Ground, a place now widely thought of as hallowed—as sacred. The African Burial Ground is “one of the most significant archaeological and historic finds in the United States of the 20th century, expanding understanding and knowledge of the lives and contributions to New York and the nation of generations of the African American Diaspora.” The possible loss of either of these iconic places seems unimaginable today, and they are but two examples of the thousands of places that have been saved. Because of the NHPA, we can stay in a historic hotel converted from an old post office; we can work in a dramatic industrial building in Washington, D.C.’s Navy Yard that has been rehabbed for office use; and we can share the identity, memory, beauty, and history embodied in the thousands of places that remain in our lives.

In the 50 years since the NHPA was signed into law by President Johnson on October 15, 1966, the United States has been through wars, anti-war movements, crippling inflation, 9/11, and a devastating economic recession. We’ve been through booms that resulted in teardowns and McMansions. We’ve sprawled out into the countryside. We’ve abandoned some of our cities and overpopulated others. All this time, the NHPA has been working—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—to help save places that give Americans a sense of stability, belonging, identity, and beauty as the world around them changes. But it can do more.

FULFILLING THE VISION

Despite the many successes of the NHPA over the past 50 years, the inspiring vision of historic places serving as living parts of our
community life has not been fully realized. Our nation—our communities and people—continue to lose places of deep and abiding importance on a daily basis. While the NHPA alone cannot fully address that broad issue, it could function more effectively than it does. The National Trust’s 2012 report *Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, Back to Basics* identified concerns surrounding the implementation of the NHPA in the areas of public participation, funding, awareness, and—perhaps most fundamentally—the extent to which the ethic of historic preservation—its value—is imbued in federal agencies.

There are also long-standing criticisms of the NHPA from academics and practitioners, such as the perceived inflexibility in the application of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the undeniable reality that the National Register of Historic Places does not yet represent the full diversity of the American story—despite recent laudable efforts of the National Park Service to identify and nominate places important to women and LGBTQ, African American, Hispanic, Asian Pacific Island, and other underrepresented people.

Each time we have marked the previous anniversaries of the NHPA, the preservation community has reviewed the past and looked to the future. These looks forward identified some of the issues we still confront today, including perhaps the most significant one—making preservation relevant to more Americans and telling the full American story. The many people talking about preservation on the occasion of the 50th anniversary are articulating an impatience for change, a sense of urgency, and a sincere desire for historic preservation to more effectively serve people’s needs. The American people want their stories told and the places important to them honored.

The underlying vision out of which the NHPA grew was of an America that is more *fair* and *livable* for everyone. Johnson said, *The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. ... The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind*
and to enlarge his talents. It is a place where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness. It is a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community.

In every part of that statement, there is a role for older and historic places: we can use our older assets to foster a strong economy; recognize the histories of all Americans; extend the benefits of preservation to all people; learn at historic places; promote the tourism that sustains many of our historic towns and enlarges our minds; and maintain the beauty of old places that enhance our communities. But we are still grappling with some of the same issues 50 years later, from racial inequality to the balance between commerce and community—issues that are present in our preservation work every day.

Regardless of what one thinks of President Johnson, the rhetoric of the Great Society contained ideas that are still worth pursuing—like the concept of our historic places as living parts of our communities. Yet, even as we celebrate the 50th anniversary and acknowledge that we have not fully achieved the vision of 1966, our goal today is no longer to fulfill that vision from 50 years ago, but rather to articulate a vision for the NHPA today and 50 years from now. Let us be as expansive and forward thinking as Gordon Gray and the other visionaries of 1966. FJ

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1 According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2010 80.7 percent of Americans lived in urban areas and 72.4 percent of them identified as white, and in 2015 the population of the United States was estimated at 321.4 million. Data available at www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/00.


6 Italics added for emphasis.

7 For examples, see H. Grant Dehart, “The Future of the Preservation Movement,” Forum Journal 5, no. 5 (September–October 1991); “The Preserve America Summit Executive Summary,” Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (August 2007); Max Page and Marla R. Miller, Bending the Future:
For example, in the recently issued “A Vision for Black Lives, Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom & Justice,” the Movement for Black Lives demands action to “preserve and restore cultural assets and sacred sites to ensure the recognition and honoring of our collective struggles and triumphs,” stating that “there are too few acknowledged and preserved historical sites commemorating Black history.” Available at https://policy.m4bl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Cultural-Reparations-Policy-Briefs.pdf.

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TAKEAWAY

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Read a 1996 issue of the Cultural Resource Management journal devoted to the 30th anniversary of the NHPA.

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Read a 2007 Preserve America Summit report on the 40th anniversary of the NHPA.