“Every Story Told”: Centering Women’s History
Recognizing and interpreting women’s history is vital to understanding the complexity and diversity of our national story. In 2017 the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Preservation Leadership Forum, in partnership with the National Collaborative for Women’s History Sites (NCWHS), published a blog series highlighting the “places that have re-envisioned, re-invigorated, and redesigned how we tell the stories of women’s history in the United States.” This Forum Journal issue continues that discussion.

The introduction to the 2017 series emphasized telling these stories not in isolation but rather as part of the broader American narrative. Women’s stories intersect with every aspect of American society—including ethnicity, class, gender, politics and law, and culture. As Jon Jarvis, former director of the National Park Service (NPS), explains in the introduction to the 2012 “Telling the Whole Story: Women and the Making of the United States” workshop:

Women ... have been every ethnic/socio economic status, and fundamental to human society, yet women and girls are too often invisible in history. They provided much of our daily sustenance and support yet are omitted from much of our formal history. What happened historically and what we know as history are two different things. We need to work with parks [and historic sites—my note] to find these missing women, to uncover their lives and experiences.

While the articles in this issue explore different approaches to telling women’s stories, they all share a basic premise: that the experiences and roles of women are important to the narrative at
all historic sites, from those that focus on a specific woman or group of women to those that explore events prominent in our shared history.

To understand the full truth of these stories, we must keep in mind that all of history is viewed through multiple lenses. Gendered differences in perspective, roles, and experiences are common across cultures. And because of these differences, which have often resulted in the diminishment or loss of women’s viewpoints, it is often challenging to fully document women’s stories. To meet this challenge, we need to draw on every available opportunity and discipline.

WHY TELL WOMEN’S STORIES?

It is important to tell women’s stories, first and foremost, because we need them to provide a fuller understanding of the who, why, what, and where of our past. To tell the “whole story” we must recognize the contributions of the women who came before us.

Women’s stories are also vital for inspiring present and future generations—of both women and men. My own experiences have been significantly shaped by my education at Smith College, where I learned about the many accomplishments of its alumnae. Doctors, lawyers, leaders of the feminist movement of the 1960s, CEOs, authors, scientists—all provided examples of the possibilities open to my classmates and me. We graduated feeling empowered by these examples and by the words of Smith
College alumna Gloria Steinem who, at our 1971 commencement, urged us to go out and break barriers to achieve our goals.

Today, thanks to the growth of women’s studies, to the advocacy of groups such as the NCWHS, and to the power of social media, we are learning much more about women whose contributions have at times been forgotten. We are documenting the lives and the challenges of women who carried out the traditional roles of wife and homemaker, many of whom also worked outside of the home to support their families and communities, and recognizing that their contributions to our understanding of society’s cultural foundations are just as important as those of women whose achievements transcended their contemporary gender expectations.

Young people today can draw inspiration from women such as Pauli Murray, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Dolores Huerta, Harriet Tubman, and the “Rosies” who contributed to the World War II home front effort—all of whom are represented in recent National Historic Landmark (NHL) or national park unit designations. These women, together with so many others, have paved the way for those who are now serving as Supreme Court justices, cabinet officials, mayors and governors, scientists and engineers, astronauts and airline pilots.
Telling the difficult stories of women’s history can also begin to heal the wounds inflicted by the many forms of discrimination that have shaped our history and ultimately our present. In 2015 the National Park Foundation received a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to investigate the potential for healing social divisions by acknowledging difficult histories. The NPS has been working with the National Trust, NCWHS, and other partners to explore these relationships through the Multiple Voices forums funded by the Kellogg Foundation grant as well as at recent PastForward conferences.

The interpretation and education programs in our parks and at historic sites, as well as the documentation of sites through the NHL program and the National Register of Historic Places, provide critical opportunities for preserving and sharing difficult histories. It became clear, however, that many groups, including women, are poorly represented in these programs. And, as we worked to address these gaps, it also became very clear how important acknowledgement can be to previously unrecognized communities. The designation of new park units such as the Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front National Historical Park in Richmond, California; Stonewall National Monument in New York City; Harriet Tubman National Historical Park in Auburn, New York; and Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality National Monument (formerly the Sewall-Belmont House) in Washington, D.C., evoked strong emotional responses from the communities whose stories they represent, demonstrating the very real—and potentially very empowering—connection between acknowledgement and healing.

STORIES EMBEDDED IN PLACES AND OBJECTS
Why do historic sites provide such an effective forum for telling women's stories? Examining the tangible physical resources of historic sites—buildings and other structures, landscapes, material culture—expands our opportunities to understand the lives of the people who created and inhabited those places, many of whom left no written record. Interdisciplinary research that incorporates methodologies from archaeology, ethnography,
history, cultural landscape analysis, and history can help us gain a range of new insights.

Exploring the multiple meanings of objects and physical features at sites—such as commonly used household items or the domestic and work patterns revealed by the layout of a dwelling or community—can support more comprehensive understanding. The landscape and the surviving mills and community buildings of Lowell National Historical Park in Massachusetts speak volumes about the relationships between the mill owners, the management, and the workers. Visiting the tar-paper barracks at Manzanar National Historic Site in Independence, California, vividly illustrates the hardships faced by the Japanese Americans confined there during World War II. The Pond’s face cream jars found in Manzanar’s trash pits speak to the very real desire to hold on to some aspect of normal life despite its interruption. The proximity of the Belmont-Paul House, longtime headquarters of the National Women’s Party, to the Senate office buildings, the Capitol, and the Supreme Court reminds visitors of the battles, past and present, to secure the vote, political representation, and equal rights for women. The narrow span of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, still reverberates with the courage of the marchers who

Community members marked the 50th anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery March at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in March 2015.

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crossed it in their fight for civil rights. When I was a new mother during the sesquicentennial observation of the trail migrations, I rode over a segment of the Oregon Trail in a bone-crunching covered wagon; that experience increased my respect and empathy for the women who survived the trail with their families.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE INITIATIVES
In recognition of the opportunities that historic sites offer, in 2011 the NPS committed to expanding its efforts to “tell all Americans’ stories” both in its parks and through its national preservation partnership programs—the NHL program and the National Register. This commitment emphasizes collaboration between the research, documentation, interpretation, and education programs within our parks. Many partners, including the NCWHS, the National Trust, and state historic preservation offices, joined the NPS to support the research, interpretation, and preservation of diverse stories at sites throughout the nation.

One key strategy of this effort was funding NHL theme studies to provide the historic context that is critical to identifying and evaluating important stories and sites. Between 2011 and 2016, the NPS and the National Park Foundation funded theme studies for three groups whose stories are underrepresented in our official national narratives: American Latinos (2012), Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (2018), and the LGBTQ community (2016). In addition, in response to an NPS–Department of the Interior (DOI) proposal, Congress has been providing grants to support state and local surveys of underrepresented communities since 2014. These grants have funded projects such as a multiple-property nomination of sites associated with “The Latinos in 20th Century California”; city- and statewide surveys, respectively, of LGBTQ sites in New York City and Kentucky; a survey of African American sites in Milwaukee; and the identification of sites associated with the Moses Columbia tribe in Washington state.

In 2012 Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar announced a fourth initiative—one that would focus on women’s history, cut across these other theme studies, and build upon previous research. The DOI,
NCWHS, and the Belmont-Paul House (which is owned by the National Women’s Party) in Washington, D.C., sponsored the “Telling the Whole Story” workshop in December 2012. Hosted at the Belmont-Paul House, the workshop developed recommendations to improve women’s history programming at historic sites, encouraging the NPS and its partners to:

- actively seek out new parks, landmarks, and historic sites that acknowledge women’s contributions;
- recognize the presence of women across the full range of NPS sites through documentation, interpretation, and education programs; and
- revise existing criteria for listing properties as NHLs or on the National Register to eliminate the “institutionalized biases” that have prevented the listing of “women’s sites.”

These recommendations apply not only to NPS parks and programs but also to the efforts of other agencies and organizations managing historic properties. Thanks to the efforts of the NPS; NCWHS; and, through both its properties and advocacy, the National Trust—as well as many other public and private organizations—these recommendations are steadily becoming more widely adopted.

Many new NPS units tell the stories of significant women in American history and their work for justice and equality: the Harriet Tubman Park honors the courageous Underground Railroad leader and human rights advocate; the Belmont-Paul House was the longtime home base of the National Women’s Party and its fights for women’s suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment; and the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site in Little Rock, Arkansas, is one of several units that pay tribute to the women who joined the fight for Civil Rights in the 1960s.

The NPS and NCWHS have collaboratively developed training programs to help existing parks expand their thematic frameworks, as well as their interpretive and educational programs, to incorporate women’s stories. NCWHS historians, supported through a cooperative agreement with the NPS, developed documentation that led to the
NHL designation of sites associated with Marjory Stoneman Douglas and Pauli Murray. Other sites designated as NHLs between 2012 and 2017 recognize the achievements of Lydia Pinkham, Concha Meléndez Ramirez, Katrina Trask, Lois Wilson, and Myrlie Evers. New guidance for interpreting the NHL criteria, which is currently under development, will incorporate recommendations from the Multiple Voices forums and the 2012 workshop to eliminate obstacles to nominating properties associated with women and other underrepresented groups.

The National Trust is expanding its telling of women’s stories at its own properties. At Belle Grove in Middletown, Virginia, interpretative programs based on the life of Judah, a woman who was enslaved at the plantation, are giving visitors new insight into the lives of enslaved people. Through its National Treasures program, the National Trust has been a key partner in advocating for the preservation of Pauli Murray’s home in Durham, North Carolina. The Trust’s 2018 11 Most Endangered Historic Places list includes the homes of Mary and Elizabeth Freeman—the oldest homes associated with the free black community in pre–Civil War Connecticut—as well as the Picotte Memorial Hospital in Nebraska, which was founded by the first Native American women licensed to practice medicine in the United States.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION
The articles in this issue explore a variety of women’s stories at historic sites around the country, managed by both public and private organizations. Turkiya Lowe, chief historian of the NPS, discusses the evolving and intersectional interpretation of women’s history at sites in the national park system. Lisa Kathleen Graddy from the National Museum of American History explores the process of determining what items to collect from contemporary events such as the recent Women’s Marches. Karen McNeill’s and Donna Graves’ articles examine how buildings and sites—works of the renowned California architect Julia Morgan and The Women’s Building in San Francisco, respectively—can provide a platform for exploring race and class privilege and the interconnected histories
of multiple communities. And Meagan Baco of Preservation Maryland concludes the issue with a look to the democratization of the preservation field.

Democratizing preservation is an important step in the effort to expand our collective acknowledgement, understanding, and appreciation of the contributions of women to the “making of the United States.” Every site preserved in communities throughout the nation, every story told, every community empowered contributes to a greater recognition of the diversity and complexity of our shared heritage. And that recognition is essential to our nation’s continued progress toward meeting the promise of our founding documents—equality under the law and the opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all. **FJ**

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**AUDIO**

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