



THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Perhaps I can frame my argument anecdotally. When I was in New Orleans a few years ago there was a controversy raging in the local paper, the *Times-Picayune*. The vampire novelist Anne Rice was fighting a developer's plans to expand an already gaudy nightclub because it sits on the site of a vacant car dealership where a key event transpired in Rice's fictional world. I'm a bit hampered because I haven't read Rice, but she was arguing (albeit in a self-promoting fashion) that the place needed to be preserved as she had depicted it because it had become important to the identity of New Orleans.

In a similar vein, on the fiftieth anniversary of Orson Welles's broadcast of the radio play based on H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*, I was a speaker at a commemorative symposium in the New Jersey municipality which contains Groves Mill, the fictional location of the landing in that adaptation. I found myself wondering what it meant that one of the most famous events in New Jersey history never happened.

The Rice controversy was well known to the citizens of New Orleans. Our audience in West Windsor, New Jersey, overflowed the auditorium. In both these cases it was not events of the past that dictated what people took interest in. It was the present.

The argument of this paper is, I hope, straightforward. It has two pieces. First, the concept of historical significance that the preservation movement uses is derived from an outmoded, positivist concept of what history is and how it should be approached. My second point is that when we attempt to bring our work into line with current historiographical thinking, we risk losing support both from our friends in the local history world who want a fixed, solid past that stays put and from our already-reluctant "allies" in the

worlds of development and land-use planning.

Historic preservation as we know it, though it has earlier antecedents, is a piece of the environmental conservation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which advocated the control of commercial development to enhance opportunities for outdoor recreation and to preserve areas of natural beauty. This movement was based in the well-educated and affluent middle-class of those decades that believed in the capacity of government regulation to bring about positive change. It shared to some degree the rights consciousness of the civil rights movement, and also its dream of an attainable world in which the quality of life could be enhanced for everyone.

As if to solidify the connection between preservation and environmentalism, President Lyndon B. Johnson was speaking to members of the National Recreation and Parks Association when he announced in October, 1966, that he would sign the National Historic Preservation Act. Describing the act, Johnson said it "will allow us...to take stock of the buildings and the properties that are a part of our rich history and to adequately preserve these treasures properly." Concluding the speech Johnson quoted President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "One day a generation may possess this land, blessed beyond anything that we now know; blessed with those things that are material and spiritual; blessed with those things that make a man's life abundant." He ended, "If that is the fashion of your dreaming, then I say hold fast to your dream because America needs it."

Historic preservationists, to oversimplify, merely added the past to environmentalism, or more precisely, they added to environmentalism a particular vision of the American past. Theirs was a version of the American story that assumed scarcities had been abolished; that saw an increasing availability for everyone of more and better goods; that envisaged a progressive elimination of class conflict, racism, sexism (later), and other limitations to a society in which all would prosper more than less equally. As the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act opens, "The spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage." This vision of United States history was very clear in its definition of who had been the important actors in history and it was linked tightly to the type of historical work the preservation movement was to do.

Let us look at the phrase "historical significance," taking "significance," the easier word, first. Significance is often used as a synonym for importance. Something with historical significance can simply be something important in history, however this does not tell us much. The term significance is rooted in the Latin for "sign"; it comes to us via the word "signify," which means to act like

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a sign, or to carry meaning. Significance is the quality of conveying some special meaning or import. Historical significance is carrying meaning about history. Where is this meaning carried? It is carried in the present, of course. There is nowhere else for it.

No one in this audience should be unfamiliar with the paragraph from *National Register Bulletin 15*, and elsewhere, which defines significance: "The quality of significance... is present in districts, sites,... and objects that possess integrity... and that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or that are associated with lives of persons significant in our past." I have abbreviated this, but you know it; it is close to a catechism for preservationists, the mantra of the movement.

This credo, however, looks suspiciously like a tautology. Significance is found in places associated with significant events or people. Well, of course it is. Maybe the authors of this passage were using the term significance in both senses; in the second and third cases, as a synonym for important, and in the first case, to convey the larger sense of carrying meaning. In other words, things that carry meaning about history are associated with important events or people from the past.

Thus, the issue of what is important is at the heart of this. Until comparatively recently "important" was defined in narrow social and political terms, and it was uncontroversial. Everyone knew what was important: the homes and other buildings associated with political, military, and business leaders—those who today are sometimes derided as the "dead, white men." Another close look at words might be instructive here. This field is known as historic preservation, not historical preservation even though historical is by far the more common adjective of history. I have a plausible speculation to explain this. Historic usually means important in history, well known, etc; historical means associated with things of the past. Simply put, even our label betrays our elitist origins.

If the notion of historical significance suggests the carrying of meaning about history, we still need to know what history is. This can get messy. I will try to make it as neat as possible. There are two aspects to take up: the concept of history that is embedded in the NHPA, and, more importantly, in National Park Service rules and procedures, and the concepts of history that professional historians struggle to define and explain. These have grown very far apart from one another.

Let me refer again to Section 1 of the NHPA: "The increased knowledge of our historic resources, the establishment of better means of identifying and administering them, and the encouragement of their preservation will improve the planning and execution

of Federal and federally assisted projects and will assist economic growth and development.” In other words, from the first part of this, the past has an objective, knowable reality. In this view historical facts come before their interpretation. The patterns of the past are identified, not imagined, or invented. When historians find the factual realities of the past, they write them up for all to agree with because they are the truth, and they don't change. Historical data are information, they are not sources laden with many possible meanings that must be teased out with care.

This approach to history, which borrowed heavily from the natural sciences, was challenged by philosophers and others very early. Hegel recognized the essential duality in history: a duality that German, English, and the Latin based languages all share. History is both the past and the perception of the past.

As an aside, I have been told that at Independence National Park, they use the term historic when they are talking about the genuinely old stuff of the past, and historical when they mean the interpretive work we do in the present.

Take the phrase, “making history.” If I were to ask you to imagine what it looks like when people make history, I think many here would create a mind picture of people in the past doing something important: enacting a law, fighting a battle, or giving a speech, for some examples. Or if you've been influenced by the not-so-new-anymore social history, and you're clever, maybe you are imagining a schoolteacher, or someone changing a diaper. However, what if I said that when I think of people making history, I visualize scholars reading primary sources in archives in preparation for writing books and articles, or making movies.

To make short a very long and complicated story, the debate can be summarized like this. People have been writing modern history books for about 200 or 220 years, some would argue for longer than this: back to the late Renaissance or even to Thucydides. Gradually a complete shift in emphasis has occurred. The early writers believed they were recapturing the actuality of the past—“*Wie es eigentlich gewesen*,” in the famous formulation of Leopold von Ranke—how it actually was. The historian Carlo Ginzburg has called this Rankean view the open window school because historical evidence is transparent. It gives direct access to past reality. Gradually, however, historians became less certain that their data could be seen to represent reality in any theoretically valid way. Increasingly scholars have come to the view that the sources of the past have little authority independent of the interpretive frame applied to them. In the hands of the most radical practitioners of cultural studies, it all becomes fictive discourse: the text, the source, the document, artifact, or building does not matter. All that matters

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is the meaning applied to it in the present. Ginzburg suggests that these scholars have turned the open window into an impregnable wall that prevents any access to the reality of the past.

In my way of looking at things there is a middle ground. I do not know if there are realities to the past. Probably there are, or were. However, it is difficult to “know” them now. It was hard enough then. I want to borrow again from Ginzburg but also from the historian Carl Becker, who 70 years ago asked the Cornell University research club, what, where, and when are historical facts. He argued that “the historical fact is in someone’s mind, or it is nowhere,” because “it is the persisting historical fact, rather than the ephemeral historical event, which makes a difference to us now.” For Becker, “the actual past is gone; and the world of history is an intangible world, recreated imaginatively... The event itself, the facts, do not say anything, do not impose any meaning. It is the historian who speaks, who imposes a meaning.”

The past is dead to us except through our ideas about it in the present. The things which are significant to us are those from which we can take away some meaning. This is done in the present. But not as through an open window or as confronted by a brick wall.

For Ginzburg evidence is what he calls “a distorting glass.” It neither offers access to the past as an open window does to the outside, nor does it lack any relation to past reality. But interpreting historical evidence—verbal documents, archaeological shards, or buildings—requires what George Eliot called the “veracious imagination.” Historians have to reject the positivist tendency to simplify the relationship between evidence and reality. They can never take a direct approach to reality, their work is necessarily inferential, based on a specific interpretive framework. History is what historians say it is. It is an ever-changing dialogue over actors and evidence.

As an illustration of this let me mention the New Jersey Historic Sites Review Board with which I have been associated for more than a decade. From my first meetings we have debated inconclusively whether it was the report or the site that we were judging. This debate had two implications. That of which we were most aware, to be sure, was that a weak nomination did not offer the property as much protection as a strong one, because a good consultant could more easily attack the weaker report. But underneath this was the understanding that the narrative provided by the author of the nomination was shaping the meaning of the sites and structures we were considering even though the intellectual frameworks they were providing were often woefully incomplete. As I grew more familiar with the sources of local history, I became more sensitive to how the secondary works available to the consultants and dedicated amateurs who were writing these reports were themselves shaping

the way the documentation was being presented. Access to the past was strongly mediated by the way the story was told, and not infrequently by the obvious concerns of the present.

Ginzburg's distorting glass metaphor probably works well enough for scholarly discourse to proceed, but it gets one into trouble in the "real" world of business decisions and land-use planning. How many of us have faced an angry developer or a politician who only wanted to be able to predict what someone would later find was significant if he bought a parcel of land. It is precisely predictability that suffers here.

In 1991, New Jersey Governor Jim Florio appointed a "Task Force on Government Regulations." This task force evaluated a number of state agencies along lines of "Objectivity," "Timeliness," "Qualifications," and "Attitude." It gave the state historic preservation office a failing grade in all four categories. As chair of the review board, I wrote the chairman of the task force, questioning these conclusions. As to objectivity I wrote, as moderately as I knew how, "The office uses a set of written standards and criteria that are applied as uniformly as humanly possible. A certain amount of subjectivity is necessary in a field where judgments are necessary, but I should think you would have to show a pattern of arbitrary and capricious decisions before giving a failing grade. I am sure no such pattern can be found." The chairman of the task force answered my letter. He wrote: "Without getting into the details of your comments, let me point out that a certain amount of subjectivity is precisely what the development community finds intolerable, since its decisions must be based on predictable standards that can be precisely quantified early in the development process."

So, here is the rub. If meaning in the past is found in the present, what's to prevent somebody from deciding that what we once thought was unimportant is now extremely significant. My answer is: nothing; and ultimately that's the beauty of studying history. However, selling this to the many constituencies of the historic preservation movement is a challenge.

Moreover this only begins to answer the question of who defines historical significance. There are many in the preservation world who have little or no trouble with the notion that historical significance resides in the present, nor with the corollaries that it is carried on public, and that it will change over time. But although history is what historians say it is, what is meaningful about history is not determined by professionals in history-related fields. It is resolved through a broad social process in which historians play only a small role.

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Immigration and Naturalization Service had closed the previous November, was surplus federal property. GSA tried, unsuccessfully, to sell it. Today Ellis Island is the third largest museum in the New York area, and one of its most successful. It was not the past that changed. Whatever happened between 1890 and the late 1920s was over, when the papers were processed of millions of immigrants who had been steerage passengers on transatlantic ships. The meaning men and women gave to it changed: men and women with the ability to do something about what they believed. In illustration of the absence of historians from this process, take this. The dean of historians of American immigration, Oscar Handlin, did not lead the charge for a museum. He proposed that the surplus Ellis Island be used to house refugees from Hungary's unsuccessful 1956 rebellion against the Soviet puppet government.

The December 1996, issue of *Historic Preservation* had a story about tours of San Francisco that highlight aspects of the gay and lesbian past of the city. Now, who fifteen years ago could have predicted this? Furthermore it was not the authors of the few path-breaking books in gay or lesbian history who caused this change in attitude. The books and the tours are both reflections of the same broader social movement.

In New Jersey we have nominated to the state and national registers a number of factories, workers' homes, and other structures associated with New Jersey's labor and industrial history. These buildings, though they clearly carry meaning for many of us today, would probably not twenty years ago have passed the test of either architectural significance or historical importance. Nor is there unanimity that structures of this kind should be preserved. Some might attribute this simply to changing aesthetic tastes. However, it seems to me that entirely different, even conflicting, senses of how American history should be narrated are involved. There will always be some people who feel their past suffers by the way it is represented.

There is another danger here too. At a cocktail party once a state senator told me, "Well, if you're going to take that view, then it is all historical. Why don't we just save it all? Never build anything." And I know preservation professionals who privately take the view that, "It is all significant." All elements of all old buildings can be said, on some level, to carry into the present meaning about the past, especially the kind of history of "plain" people which historians have been depicting in the last decade or two. Does this mean it should all be preserved?

Consider the following case. In 1858, the first reasonably complete dinosaur skeleton ever unearthed was discovered in Haddonfield, New Jersey, just across the Delaware River from

Philadelphia. One cannot exaggerate the impact of this discovery. It was "a pivotal event in dinosaur paleontology," as the most recent book on dinosaurs of the eastern US calls it. Though the site is a national landmark it had never been listed in the New Jersey Register of Historic Places. When a nomination came before the Review Board to remedy this, I was skeptical. About seventy five million years ago an amphibious creature that we now call a Hadrosaurus died at sea. The ocean then covered that part of the Delaware Valley. Its bones drifted around the ocean before they finally dropped to the bottom where William Parker Foulke dug them up millennia after the sea retreated.

There is nothing meaningful about where these bones lay when they were discovered: neither about dinosaurs nor about those who study them. A plaque marks the spot, erected by the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences. It was catalyzed by an Eagle Scout's merit-badge project. I am in favor of preserving green space as much as the next person, but I am still wondering by what definition of historical significance does this area become a national historical landmark. Something very important in the history of science happened here, no doubt. However, how is the ability of this episode to remain meaningful to us enhanced by the preservation of the area where these bones sunk to the bottom of the sea? We might even be endangering our own movement by failing to recognize when we need the physical space or structure to convey meaning to the present about the past, and when we don't.

I think this case illustrates an important point. Those who say that it is all significant have learned only one but not both of the key lessons of the great changes that have swept through the historical profession in the last few decades. They have learned the implications of the social history "revolution": that there is a historical dimension to all aspects of the social world and that every element may be studied fruitfully when the sources allow. They have not understood the point I have been trying to make here. Meaning is socially made. Historical significance is about meaning in the public realm. It is all historical, but it is not all equally historically meaningful, i.e. significant.

Of course not all the mistakes come from elevating beyond their due the historical significance of resources. Far more often we fail to save things that should really matter. Take this case, also from southern New Jersey, though less within the orbit of Philadelphia. In Swedesboro, Gloucester County, municipal officials erected in the early 1940s what was quite probably the last segregated elementary school to be built in the New Jersey. In 1947 a new constitution banned segregated education. The building was in severe disrepair when its nomination reached the review board. The local school

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board wanted to demolish it in order to build a new building, which they needed badly. Inclusion on the state register would have made this impossible without a hearing before the state's Historic Sites Council. Even had the board won its case before the sites council it surely would have meant costly delays. On the other side, a group of alumni of the school dearly wanted the building preserved as a reminder of the segregated education they received, and of the deeper legacy of racism and discrimination. They had painstakingly done the work to bring the nomination forward. Though the nomination had important weaknesses, it amply made the case for the local importance of the building.

At a racially charged meeting—one group sat in one corner of the room, the other across from it—the board ultimately recommended the school for inclusion in the state and national registers. The deputy SHPO, probably overstepping his legal authority, overruled us. The defenders of the property enjoined the school board from setting loose the bulldozers, but this was only a temporary delay. The building was demolished about three months after the hearing, but the story does not end there.

During the hearing I reached the conclusion that the best course would be for the building to go on the register so the sites council could decide if it could/should be saved. It seemed to me that it was possible the building's condition was so deteriorated that it lacked architectural integrity. However, I did not want the review board to decide this. The sites council could do it, and if it granted the school board permission to tear the property down it had the power to recommend mitigating procedures, which the review board does not have. I remarked publicly during the hearing that I thought the building was surely eligible on associational grounds, but that I was not sure it had to be preserved because there were many ways the history of segregation could be recalled on the site. Architectural elements could be retained in the new construction, curricula could be introduced, plaques or markers could be required. I will never forget the way that a fellow member of the board, an African-American woman, looked at me and said, "You can only say that because you never attended one." It was a forceful reminder of the role memory plays in determining what is meaningful.

However, the affront to the supporters of this school and to the black community of Swedesboro did not end there. A year or so after the building came down, the New Jersey Historic Trust initiated a conference on historic preservation in the African-American community. After much discussion the Swedesboro school case was left off the program because the organizers wanted only case studies that "accent the positive." It was not only the local school board that

worked to erase this building's power to bear meaning; allies in the preservation movement did it too.

To my mind there is only one way out. We cannot return to a time when there was an official, unchanging version of United States history that went uncontested. We should not wish to return to a day when the preservation movement devoted itself only to the resources that reflected this version, the buildings of the wealthy and powerful. We will fail if we try to hide the complex ways that the present shapes the past.

We must bring people into the notion that we all define historical significance by struggling over what the things mean that happened in the past, and which things will be saved as memory aids. We must acknowledge that any particular recounting of the past risks violating someone else's way of thinking about it. This calls for reaching more deeply into the communities where we work. It is not the experts who will determine what is meaningful to whom and why. A broad social and political process will do this. We cannot control it, but concerns of the preservation movement will not even be part of this process unless we work to bring it to people where they live.

