



Surveying American History The Role of the National Park Service

To preserve places of national significance that retain exceptional value as commemorating or illustrating the history of the United States for the inspiration and benefit of the people¹

Since 1935 the National Park Service has been charged with the duty to identify and recognize the nationally significant places that best represent the American experience. The National Park Service's approach to history is characterized by a broad consensus about the principal themes, stories, persons and events that, taken together, provide a comprehensive text book on American history. In our National Parks and National Historic Landmarks, the complete story of the great American experiment is told and preserved for future generations. These special places are the best lesson plan for creating tomorrow's citizens.

In the same way that we create history every day, it is also true to say that places in our own experience can become historic as each generation ages. Perhaps, as with many things in the twentieth century, the pace at which we recognize the historical importance of places has increased. Not long ago, traditional history was confined to sites from the Colonial period through the Civil War. Now that the 20th century is history, we have a broad range of subjects to consider—"modern" stories like Rock-n-Roll, the Cold War, and suburbanization, as well as older stories to revisit, like the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery or the Underground Railroad, to connect with a new generation. For the generations born and to be born in the 21st century, the last 100 years will always be history. In our children's memory (and school books) Kitty Hawk and Little Rock are comparable to our own memories of Jamestown, Yorktown, and Gettysburg.

The National Park Service looks at historic sites both from the top down and from the bottom up. States, Tribes and federal agencies each study and evaluate historic properties that represent local, state, regional, and national events or trends. In our towns, cities, and counties, because of the passage of time, advancing scholarship, and imminent threats to neighborhoods, the range of properties thought to be historic by individuals, groups, and governments has expanded during the last quarter century. To our citizens, historic places are now not only the architecturally distinctive houses on the hill, but also the servant's quarters, and the landscaped settings in which the houses are seated. As time has passed and scholarship advanced, the National Park Service has responded to changing perceptions among our citizens as to what constitutes a historic place.

Through congressionally mandated projects, the National Park Service also studies certain American stories from the top down, with an eye to establishing new National Park Units or designating new National

¹ Language from the Historic Sites Act of 1935.

Historic Landmarks. In the last decade, Congress directed NPS to examine a variety of subjects in American history: the Underground Railroad, Route 66, labor history, Japanese Americans in World War II, civil rights, the World War II homefront, school desegregation, and the Lincoln Highway. These topics are often linked to newly established National Park Units, such as Little Rock's Central High School National Historic Site or the Rosie the Riveter World War II National Historical Park, and represent several major chapters in twentieth century history. Responding to requests by the historical community, Congress directed the National Park Service to revise the historic framework it uses to characterize the patterns of American history to augment its traditional chronological approach and to create linkages across the centuries between historic places.

The National Park Service is a leader in recognizing and preserving the places that tell the American story. Our 388 National Parks, 2347 National Historic Landmarks and 76,000 listings in the National Register of Historic Places form a pyramid of Federal historic recognition. The places we choose to honor as National Historic Landmarks are identified through a process that is rigorous, consensus-based, and involves exhaustive research and extensive consultation with the public. Only 3 percent of the listings on the National Register are National Historic Landmarks and on average, only about 20 new sites are granted this distinction each year. The National Historic Landmark nomination process is lengthy, deliberative and requires proponents for individual properties to demonstrate why a particular place is both nationally significant and has a high degree of integrity. The nomination process is also inclusive with extensive consultation between the National Park Service, property owners, local, state, tribal, and federal officials, and the general public, as well as review by the National Park System Advisory Board and its Landmarks Committee.

Since before World War II the National Park Service has surveyed our national story with the expressed purpose of preserving the most important and authentic places where history really happened. These places represent the triumph and tragedy, the diversity and uniqueness of America. Today, with a multitude of challenges to our nation, and with national surveys indicating a serious decline in historical literacy, we need America's historic places now more than ever. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Historic continuity with the past is not a duty, it is only a necessity." That is what the National Park Service is all about, the continuity of the American story.

National Historic Landmarks Survey
June 2003

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Materials\Drafts\Surveying American History the Role of the National Park Service.wpd