

Lecture 2: The Roots of Historic Preservation in the United States

Introduction and Announcements: This week's assignment included a lot of reading and a lot of raw data to consider. The reading load will not be as great in future weeks. The purpose of this front-loading of material is to prepare for future classes where we will discuss specific cases in detail. Note that the April 2nd class will be rescheduled to April 5th. Also, students should set up individual meetings with the professor to discuss paper topics.

Discussion Question: What is your favorite, or what in your mind is the most significant, historic place, one that has made an impact on you?

Students describe a wide variety of places around the world, including hometowns, world-famous sites, and museums.

Outline for this Class Session

review the Nora reading from last class session
discuss the survey that asked Americans about their attitudes about the past
Ruskin and Morris, nineteenth-century ideas about historic preservation outside the U.S.

Founding principles and roots of the historic preservation in the U.S.

Last class we discussed Nora's concepts of "sites of memory" versus worlds/environments (milieu) of memory. While there are criticisms to be made of the way in which Nora presents his argument in black and white, creating a sharp division between a traditional past and the modern way, the article is significant for its main point. Nora asks, where are we in relation to the past? He describes a "rupture" or a break (and note that Phillipot, one of the other authors we read for today, also used this word). We are surrounded by "totems" of memory: photos, books, artifacts, etc. He argues that there is a human need for connection to the past, but our way of connecting is particular.

The article also asks fundamental questions about memory and the insecurity, nervousness, and sense of "not belonging" in contemporary life. He argues that we accumulate more and more archives, and more preserved buildings, and we make more attempts to connect to the past because of a feeling of loss. In this sense, he shows how there is a rumbling background behind a lot of preservation battles.

Discussion of the survey by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen

Questions: Were the results a surprise? What did you think about the survey results? How do you think Americans feel about history?

The survey had a major impact on preservation professionals. Many historians, archivists, and museum curators considered it a surprise. Conventional wisdom had it that Americans did not especially care about the past. The survey became an important part of debates about historic preservation, museums, and interpretation of the past.

Ruskin and Morris

Ruskin is one of those thinkers, like Jane Jacobs, that is written about so often that people rarely read the work in the original. In some ways, his work has been reduced to a single catchphrase: "anti-scrape." Discussion questions: What surprised you or what did you find in Ruskin's writing?

Ruskin's writing reflects the major changes occurring in Europe at that time: a sense of political upheaval, the changes in building and society brought on by the Industrial Revolution (interchangeable parts, mass production). Christianity and ideas about the home, the domestic sphere, also feature prominently. The home is described as a place of moral virtue, safe from the changes of the workplace. He stresses permanence and argues strongly against restoration. He writes that restoration is a "lie." These words about restoration are the most well-known part of his preservation-related work.

Ruskin's writing raises some challenging issues to consider. One of which is that we don't really have a concept of architectural death. His work also pushes us to consider ruins and their meaning. Discussion question: do we have ruins as such, of the kind that Ruskin describes, in America?

Ruskin is known as "the father" of modern preservation.

Morris adds to this line of thinking. He writes that we should "stave off decay by daily care."

Discussion of Readings dealing with the roots of historic preservation in the U.S.

Question: what did you think about the letter arguing for the preservation of the Indian Mound in 1822? How do we make sense of a letter like this one in relation to genocide?

The two are not necessarily incompatible, as preservation and extermination accompanied one another. Claiming control over ancient sites was a way to access a sense of a longer history, a connection to the land and the artifacts without the living culture of the peoples.

Question: What about Mount Vernon and the descriptions of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association in the 1850s and 1860s? The centrality of women to the story is notable. What about Architecture? Was architecture the reason for the preservation of Mount Vernon?

No. It was Mount Vernon's association with George Washington and patriotic themes that early preservationists considered important. Interestingly, more than a century later postmodern architects found the odd and quirky elements of Mount Vernon's architecture a source of inspiration.

Question: What about the Boston case that Holleran describes? What was the reason for preservation in the cases he cites? Architecture or something else?

Holleran highlights the links between early preservation thinking and city planning. In this period, advocates and reformers were developing the principles of what to preserve and why. There was an increased focus on architecture beginning in the early twentieth century and continuing through to the present. There was also a new focus on certain individual structures: to display the building as an artifact, an approach to preservation that saw historic buildings as an "outdoor museum project." City Hall Park in New York is an example of this phenomenon.

Question: What was significant about the State House Dome and views in Holleran's argument? What were the preservationists trying to do?

They were interested in more than saving the structure, they were also concerned about the ability to see it from different parts of the city. This idea of protecting views was very unusual, coming years before zoning was established. Holleran's description of the Boston case shows that some of the most innovative ideas are not necessarily the ones closest to us in time. This case can be seen as an opening up, an extension of preservation ideas into something much broader.

Question: Several readings mention Appleton as a key figure, the creation of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA), and the professionalization of preservation. Why was Appleton so influential? What are the characteristics of these groups and their approach to preservation?

The fact that private groups were leading this campaign, not the government, is very important. Also, the emphasis on ownership and control of the site is notable. Appleton was a complex figure. He was an antiquarian, but also a modern businessman- he introduced the use of revolving funds into the preservation field. But he was also anti-immigrant and anti-Semite. His work at Revere House presents an interesting example of his attitude toward preservation and immigrants. We might also note how he is presented differently by the different authors we read for this week.