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Saving Minnesota: Current Issues in Historic Preservation

DENNIS A. GIMMESTAD

In recent years, historic preservation in Minnesota has established a significant record. To be sure, numerous efforts extending over the past century have saved many individual historic properties. For example, the John H. Stevens house (1850) was moved from downtown Minneapolis to Minnehaha Park for preservation in the 1890s; the Henry Sibley house (1836) in Mendota and the Seppman Mill (1863) in Blue Earth County were preserved in the early 20th century. But only in the last three decades have preservationists looked broadly at the full range of types of historic properties and worked to preserve them not only as museum sites but for a variety of purposes.

During the 1960s, the Field Archeology Act and the Historic Sites Act created a state policy of recognizing and protecting archeological sites and historic properties throughout Minnesota. At the federal level, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 established the National Register of Historic Places and a State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in each state to implement the many aspects of the national program. (In Minnesota, the SHPO is a department of the Minnesota Historical Society.) Today, over 4,000 Minnesota properties representing all 87 counties are included in the National Register. Considerable activity is being undertaken by local heritage preservation commissions, county and local historical societies, and other statewide and local groups with preservation missions.

Over time, the preservationist's attention has broadened from a few significant houses to a wide spectrum of properties – industrial structures, ships, farmsteads, landscapes, skyscrapers – with locally significant properties recognized as crucial to our national heritage. Historic preservation is, of course, an ongoing activity, continually facing challenges ranging from changing notions of what's important to the natural forces of rust and rot. As the state enters the 1990s several preservation issues merit particular attention.

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What to Preserve?

"You can't preserve everything!" is a cry of despair often heard during a difficult preservation battle. Most preservationists would agree that the entire cultural/historical environment cannot be preserved, even with liberal preservation guidelines and generous resources. Some orderly process of selection is needed. The preservation process divides this activity into *identification* and *evaluation* of resources, and *registration* of those evaluated as significant (1).

Identification and Evaluation Issues

The process of identifying potentially significant historic properties has often consisted of looking at a single property and attempting to decide whether it is important. More and more, however, groups of related properties are being identified together, and evaluations are made based on an appreciation of the historical context of the group as a whole. Indeed, the current instructions for completing a National Register form include an entire section devoted to using the historic context of a property as a basis for evaluating significance (2). For example, rather than trying to decide if a single Queen Anne house is architecturally significant, all the houses of this style in a given area might be identified together, and then evaluations might be based on knowledge of how the style developed in this particular area and on comparisons of the examples which have survived. This more proactive survey process, which begins with an important theme and then locates and evaluates examples of that theme, can result in a better understanding of what a historic property represents, and, therefore, can contribute to better decisions about what to preserve.

The potential number of historic themes is as endless as the various perspectives of historians. Yet, if we are to ensure that a range of themes is included which represent the breadth of the state's story, a coordinated approach is needed. The challenge is to articulate a flexible framework of statewide historical themes or contexts for use in planning. Then, completed or in-progress survey work can be related to the state's history as a whole and information gaps can be identified for future work. The framework must be structured enough to allow for orderly planning but flexible enough to allow new perspectives to emerge. It must also be communicated to the public and allow for input from the public to influence its future development.

Thus far the SHPO, working with the Institute for Minnesota Archaeology, has produced a two-volume draft document that establishes 40 historic contexts for the period 12,000 B.P. to 1820 A.D.; continuing work is underway on the historic period from 1820 through the 1930s (3). Several local

preservation programs, including Faribault, Cottage Grove, Pipestone, Laneshoro, Northfield, Minneapolis, and Embarrass are also establishing systems of local historic contexts for use in preservation planning by cities and townships.

If we are to be successful in linking our history with the resources we preserve in a solid, methodical process, the continued development and use of planning tools which provide an articulated framework for that history is crucial.

Registration Issues

Properties are registered by national, state, and local units of government to give them official recognition and, especially, to afford them special protections. Properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places are afforded certain protection during federally financed or licensed undertakings; properties listed on the State Registry have limited protection during work carried out by the state and other units of government; and properties listed on local registers under local ordinances have protection when work is performed by local agencies or when work requires a local building permit. This system of official recognition is the central pivot in the preservation process, linking the identification of significant properties with a means to protect them. In order for a significant property to receive maximum protection, it should be listed by all three levels of government.

A crucial issue in registration in Minnesota is the need to revise the State Registry to make it a more viable registration tool and a better means of protection. Many state registers which were established in the 1960s (including Minnesota's) were eclipsed by the emphasis on National Register listing after implementation of the 1966 federal legislation. Recently, however, many state registers have been revitalized — or newly established — to complement the National Register and provide additional protection during state level development; a 1987 survey conducted by the National Trust for Historic Preservation examined 36 state register programs (4). Minnesota's State Registry — which contains no explicit criteria and which has the unwieldy requirement of direct action by the legislature for listing a property — needs to be reconsidered in light of the development of national and local registration programs and with an eye to the type of protection it can provide.

A second registration issue is the need to increase the number of local registration programs. The most comprehensive means of protection — including the review of building permits — happens at the local level. Many of the state's local preservation commissions are doing commendable registration work — but only 25 communities have enacted ordinances. This leaves the vast majority of the state's historic resources with no means of protection at the crucial local level. Better promotion of the benefits of a local registration program and possible incentives for local ordinances are needed if the full compliment of registration tools is to be made available.

How to Preserve?

Once historic properties are recognized, there is a range of strategies which can be selected and employed to ensure their preservation. The preservation process calls this activity "treatment." Obviously, historic properties are far too numerous for very many of them to be acquired by historical agencies specifically for preservation and most historic properties will continue to be owned by a variety of public

and private owners and used for a variety of purposes. Therefore, a high priority is to develop ways to motivate or require owners of historic properties to preserve them in a manner that is compatible with their historic character, while continuing in their traditional uses or adapting to new programs.

A range of *treatment issues* have been identified by the public and by preservation professionals during the SHPO planning process. These include:

State Tax Incentives. State tax incentives for preservation of historic properties have been established in several states, including a recently enacted program in Wisconsin. These programs can address a range of problems, ranging from the inability of low density urban historic properties to compete with high density new construction to the limited use potential of surplus buildings in an agricultural area where the population base is declining. Archaeological properties which are best preserved with no development also stand to profit from possible tax measures. A 1985 study by the National Trust for Historic Preservation found that states were using six methods to promote preservation through tax law provisions — exemption, credit or abatement for rehabilitation, special assessment for property tax, income tax deductions, sales tax relief, and tax levies (5). Measures such as these have great potential to motivate owners of historic properties to undertake appropriate preservation activities and need to be investigated for Minnesota.

State Grants in Aid for Preservation. Minnesota established a program of grants-in aid for preservation work on public historic properties in 1969; to date more than 175 properties have benefited from this program. The program was among the first established in the nation; however, the \$49,568 granted for preservation in FY88 has been far eclipsed by many other grants programs, such as a \$1,000,000 program in Massachusetts and a \$22 million program in New Jersey (6). Since public historic properties are not eligible for tax benefits, these grant dollars are essential if some of our most important resources are to survive.

Preservation Easements. Donation of an easement on a portion of a historic property gives the holder of the easement the authority to monitor changes on the property and may afford the donor of the easement a tax break. This type of protection can be particularly valuable in protecting properties where no local ordinances exist. The Preservation Alliance of Minnesota (PAM — a private statewide preservation organization) has a program to accept easements that needs to be aggressively developed for the potential of this tool to be realized. Particular attention needs to be given to changes in the interpretation of federal regulations that have made the donation of easements less attractive to property owners.

Better Integration of Preservation Planning by State, Regional, and Local Level Agencies and Organizations. Preservation will achieve its most effective results when it is integrated into the development plans of agencies, rather than being brought up as a last minute concern just before the earth movers swing into operation. For federal actions, the review process required under the procedures of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and administered by the SHPO requires federal agencies to consider historic preservation concerns in their planning.

This same sort of planning needs to be better promoted at the state, regional, and local levels of government, with the recognition that historic preservation is a public benefit and, as such, all units of government have an obligation to share in responsibility. The provisions of the Field Archaeology Act and the responsibilities of the Office of the State Archaeologist also need to be coordinated with this planning. Alliances with other non-governmental organizations hold further promise towards having preservation considered as a base line issue rather than as an afterthought.

Public Education. Certainly the preservation ethic has become much more widespread over the past few decades: still, ways to educate the public on the meaning of historic resources and on the benefits and techniques of preserving them remain at a minimal level. Creating a public desire to save important aspects of the historical/cultural environment might well accomplish more than many types of regulatory activities.

Preservation of "Second Tier" Areas. There is a growing awareness of the need to regulate change in areas of our landscape that do not necessarily meet the criteria to be designated as historically significant. These "conservation areas" may not require the same level of regulation as officially listed properties, yet they can contribute to the overall fabric of a city or rural area if properly treated (7). Currently, neighborhood groups are facing this challenge in several cities in the state, including St. Cloud, Hastings, St. Paul, and Winona. How to define and monitor these areas vis-a-vis the current preservation infrastructure needs to be addressed.

Focus on the Inherent Value of Preservation. In a laudable endeavor to win allies, preservationists have, in recent years, produced volumes of material showing how preservation makes economic sense; discussions of "adaptive reuse" emphasize the point that historic buildings can be useful and even turn a profit. While this is obviously an excellent means to promoting good treatment, the "heart and soul" of the preservation movement recognizes historic resources as inherently valuable — and advocates preservation efforts even when they may not reap other direct benefits. Volunteers who accomplish grassroots preservation for its own sake are one of the most eloquent expressions of this value. As parts

of the preservation system become more wedded to other objectives and to greater professionalization, the preservation community needs to develop ways to maintain strong focus on some core values for the movement as a whole.

To be effective in the next decade, planning for historic preservation needs to strengthen its abilities in both the reactive mode — in saving specific endangered resources — and in the proactive mode — in both identifying important resources and ways to facilitate their preservation before they are threatened. The issues and needs outlined above represent a few beginning priorities. Other strategies will span the range of the resources and the myriad of forces which affect our land and buildings.

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