

RECONSTRUCTIONS -- EXPENSIVE, LIFE-SIZE TOYS?

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The 1916 Organic Act mandates the National Park Service to preserve its cultural resources. The Act states that the Service is to leave its resources "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." Nevertheless, there is no mandate to recreate vanished historic structures. Traditionally, the Service has supported the reconstruction of numerous historic structures it believed necessary to interpret its various sites. However, there are numerous philosophical, economic, and practical reasons why reconstructions of vanished structures should not be attempted by the National Park Service.

Perhaps the most obvious drawback is that such structures are not historic. Reconstructions, while they may be accurate, are never authentic. They are modern copies of the past, and lack the innate quality of being historic structures. Because they reflect modern values and perceptions, because they are built with modern techniques, and because they possess no structural link to the past, reconstructions are marked with an absence of historic integrity.

Reconstructions are usually erected as props for the interpretation of a site. The per-

ceived need for a reconstruction implies that the site's authentic resources, entrusted to the National Park Service by Congress or the President, are inadequate in and of themselves.

The belief that we can "improve" a historic site through the introduction of nonhistoric elements runs counter to our commitment to leave our nationally significant resources "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." In fact, reconstructions frequently necessitate the destruction of original material, especially foundations. Such insensitivity to original historic fabric, regardless of condition or appearance, is due in large part to the absence of a strong commitment (throughout all levels of Park Service management) to the preservation of our cultural resources, an attitude was thoroughly attested to during the January 1979 Harpers Ferry Conference on Historic Preservation.

At best, reconstructed buildings only illustrate how the past may have looked, not how it did look. Reconstructions are plagued, on the one hand, by insufficient data to allow a truly accurate reproduction, and, on the other, by the almost unavoidable desire to beautify what was not always a

beautiful past. As a result, the Park Service misleads the public in their effort to understand past life styles. The contemplation of ruins, foundations, and other incomplete structural remnants from the past, when assisted by historic photographs, drawings, scale models, accounts from contemporary diaries, journals, and newspapers, can usually evoke a much more accurate sense of the past than reconstructions which often stray from the truth in their efforts to pander to modern aesthetic tastes and sensibilities.

Reconstructions are very expensive. Their costs include planning, extensive research, and the reconstruction itself. Added to this are the costs of furnishing a newly built structure, which involves planning, extensive reresearch, and acquisition of the furniture or the making of period pieces. These objects must be served and, therefore, must compete with many significant objects already in the Service's possession for which very limited curatorial funds exist.

To the expense of reconstruction are added the increased costs of interpretation, maintenance, and, in some cases, site development. Most of these costs are ongoing

and, in time, can amount to huge expenditures. A large and complex reconstruction will require additional interpretive staff to explain the site to the public. The structure also has to be maintained, thus requiring an increased maintenance workload. A newly built structure may also attract more visitors and, therefore, create pressure for additional site development such as increased land acquisition, a larger visitor center, expanded maintenance facilities, and additional parking facilities.

All of this absorbs funds which could better be used for the preservation of authentic historic sites, for the conservation of our 10,000,000 historic objects that are in dire need of professional attention, and for critically needed research that would enable us to understand better the truly historic resources that are under our control. As long as the Service has original cultural resources which are in need of preservation, the expenditure of funds for reconstructions and associated activities (totaling approximately \$14,000,000 in the current five-year program) could be considered in direct conflict with the spirit and intent of the Organic Act.

Without question, the issue of National Park Service involvement with reconstructions is frequently political in nature. In several

instances, the Service is obligated to administer sites which were reconstructed by a separate private or public organization. More often, the Service is "encouraged" to erect a "new" historic structure under local political pressure.

Seldom, however, do Park Service representatives make articulate, sustained, and persuasive arguments against proposed reconstructions. Although reconstructions should be considered only when "all prudent and feasible alternatives to reconstruction have been considered" (Management Policies V-17), proposals to reproduce a historic structure are regularly introduced and accepted with little, if any, consideration of the alternatives.

The gradual accretion of reconstructions under Park Service management tends to detract from the Service's truly significant and authentic cultural resources. Reconstructions, regardless of ownership, are not unique. Any private or public organization can erect a "historic structure." Indeed, reconstructed historic villages are proliferating across the United States. As a commercial enterprise, history can be, and indeed is, big business. As these reconstructions increase, the distinction between authentic survivors of the past and imitations of the past becomes less clear. The Park Service's collection of unique, original, and nationally signifi-

cant structures becomes confused and watered down by the continued addition of non-unique, nonhistoric reconstructions.

While the "Williamsburg syndrome" constituted the popular approach to historic preservation for several decades following 1927, the preservation community at large, both in the United States and in Europe, has grown to recognize the inadvisability of recreating our structural past. Organizations ranging from the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and the Restoration of Cultural Property in Rome, Italy, and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities have long acknowledged that reconstructions are in reality the "projection of fantasy into objects of the past."¹ The authors of With Heritage So Rich, the report of the Special Committee on Historic Preservation, which presented the philosophical foundations upon which the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 was based, summed up professional preservationists' attitudes toward reconstructions by labeling them "expensive lifesize toys, manufactured for children of all ages who have forgotten how to read." The report goes on to observe that "They may be effective instruments of education, amusement, propaganda or some kind of special pleading, but they have precious little to do with

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history, and absolutely nothing to do with historic preservation."²

In short, with its continued interest in reconstruction, the National Park Service has not kept pace with changing trends in historic preservation philosophy--a philosophy that has become more sophisticated in approach, more sensitive to and appreciative of original historic fabric, and increasingly more in tune with the original intent of the 1916 Organic Act to preserve nationally significant cultural resources. **CRM**

1. Paul Philippot, "Historic Preservation: Philosophy, Criteria, Guidelines," in Preservation and Conservation: Principles and Practices, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976. P. 371.

2. Walter Muir Whitehill, "The Right of Cities to be Beautiful," in With Heritage So Rich, New York: Random House, 1966. P. 53.

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