

## “Worthy Remains of a Beautiful and Historic Past”: The National Park Service Recognizes Historic Districts

John H. Sprinkle, Jr.

For 30 years the Historic Sites Act of 1935 was the primary legislative foundation for American historic preservation.<sup>1</sup> The act placed federal historic preservation leadership firmly within the portfolio of the National Park Service (NPS): it created a new type of federal designation (National Historic Site); it established the National Park System Advisory Board; and it provided the justification for programs to identify, classify, document, and recognize historic properties.



Hampton National Historic Site, Towson, Maryland, ca. 1915. Donation of this property as a unit of the National Park System in the 1940s helped to expand the federal recognition of properties nationally significant only for their architectural achievement.

The Historic Sites Act’s multiple mandates significantly impacted preservation practice nationwide and certainly foreshadowed the transformation enabled by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. While the Historic Sites Act made great strides in the creation of official memory and the management of change during the middle third of the 20th century, the National Park Service delayed in formally recognizing a fundamental concept in American historic preservation that had emerged during that period: historic districts.

Historic districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects, are the five categories of historic properties recognized by the National Register of Historic Places, the program that serves as the official federal list of important places in United States history. Historic districts encompass a “significant concentration, linkage, or continuity” of the other property types that are “united historically or aesthetically

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<sup>1</sup> Signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on August 21, 1935, the Historic Sites Act declared, for the first time, “a national policy to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings, and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States.” 49 Stat. 666.

by plan or physical development.”<sup>2</sup> As a planning tool, historic districts are vital because they embrace a combination of historic resources that recognizes both change and continuity within a community, while at the same time enhancing the efficiency of the overall recognition process. Historic districts are the administrative mechanism by which the National Register’s 90,000 listings can encompass 1.8 million individual cultural resources in 2019.

This article traces the historic preservation community’s evolving understanding of the importance of historic districts in the first half of the 20th century and the National Park Service’s gradual adoption of that category in its mission in the 1960s. The wider preservation community had been exploring and struggling with the preservation of key historic communities and thus laid the theoretical groundwork for such work, often seeking partnerships with the NPS. The Park Service’s work backlog, budget constraints, mission limitations, and reluctance to cooperatively develop and administer larger historic sites inhibited such partnerships. It was finally during the unprecedented extent of urban renewal projects during the 1960s and their threat to historic districts nationwide that the NPS, after serious debate, agreed to extend its mission to include historic districts. The 1966 act expanded the definition of historic preservation and so the agency’s authority and responsibilities.

This story highlights the important interactions and relationships between public and private preservation leaders and groups during the 20th century. While the NPS belatedly adopted approaches and standards urged by concerned groups, the agency ultimately reacted to evolving understandings of historic preservation and so expanded the boundaries of its public service mission.

### **A Constellation of Interests**

Charles Hosmer’s extensive treatment on the origins of the Historic Sites Act of 1935 details how diverse public and private interests coalesced to support passage of the bill that vastly expanded the practice of historic preservation within the National Park Service.<sup>3</sup> During the early 1930s, members of the General Society of the Colonial Wars (GSCW) became increasingly interested in the fate of material culture associated with American heritage.<sup>4</sup> In 1933, under the leadership of George de Benneville Keim

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Andrus, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, (Wash., DC: National Park Service, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926–1949*. 2 vols. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1981), 562–77.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Hale, *Origin and History of the General Society of Colonial Wars* (New York: General Society of Colonial Wars, 1967).

and Daniel Moore Bates, the group formed the Commission for the Preservation of Monuments and Marking of Historic Sites. Keim had previously worked to establish a historic marker program in New Jersey, and Bates looked to the Williamsburg model as a means to ensure the preservation of the colonial town of New Castle, Delaware. Since the 1890s the GSCW had its own program of marking important sites—including battlefields, fortifications, and the homes of prominent military leaders.<sup>5</sup>

The National Park Service also had a vested interest in the movement toward an increased role for the federal government in historic preservation. Many of the policy recommendations found in the Historic Sites Act were first articulated by an “informal educational committee” created by the National Park Service in 1928, an effort that resulted in the agency hiring its first chief historian, Verne Chatelain, in 1931. In 1933 President Franklin D. Roosevelt laid the foundation by placing a wide range of historic properties under NPS stewardship. Accommodating this new mission, and anticipating an even greater role, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes proposed the creation of an NPS “Division of Historic American Buildings and Antiquities” in September 1934.<sup>6</sup> The agency had determined that its new portfolio of historic properties could not be “effectively administered and effectively developed” under existing federal law.<sup>7</sup>

Both of these groups tried to gain the attention and support of Gist Blair, a prominent Washingtonian who resided across the street from the White House, and who was a personal friend of President Roosevelt. Blair and FDR shared an interest in the preservation of their respective family homes. It was Blair whom FDR

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Ross Huston, *Honoring Our Colonial History: Tablets, Monuments, and Memorials Placed by the Society of Colonial Wars, 1892–2010* (Baltimore: General Society of Colonial Wars, 2011). For example, in 1937 the Society funded the reconstruction of a gate house at Stratford Hall, the Lee family home on Virginia’s Northern Neck. On either side of World War II, most reconstruction and restoration work at historic sites in the eastern United States referenced the patterns and practices established at Colonial Williamsburg. As noted by Charles Hosmer, “people looked to it as a model, as something to be imitated or improved upon.” *Preservation Comes of Age*, 65.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Ickes, “Memorandum for Mr. Margold,” September 28, 1934, NPS History Division Subject Files, 1926–1970, box 8, Records of the National Park Service, Record Group (RG) 79, National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP). With this memo, Ickes directed the preparation of draft legislation that would become the Historic Sites Act of 1935. The Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings was created on July 1, 1935. Arno Cammerer, *United States Department of the Interior Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior, 1935* (Wash., DC: National Park Service, 1935–1939), 190–91. “Memorandum to put in Mr. Chorley’s folder of things to take up with Mr. Rockefeller,” September 10, 1934. National Parks File, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives (CWF).

<sup>7</sup> Assistant Secretary of the Interior Theodore A. Walters to Louis Brownlow, Public Administration Clearing House, October 26, 1934. Folder 881, box 95, Series E, Cultural Area: Organizations and Parks, FA314, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller records (OMR), Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, New York.



Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes oversaw the expansion of the National Park Service's historic preservation mandate through the Historic Sites Act of 1935.

consulted with during 1933 regarding a proposal to create a commission made up of representatives from a range of historic and patriotic societies that would be charged with exercising “absolute control” over the language contained on historical markers across the country.<sup>8</sup> This concern for historical accuracy on official plaques and markers had been intensifying due to a controversial narrative applied to the imaginative reconstruction of George Washington's birthplace at Wakefield on Virginia's Northern Neck.<sup>9</sup>

Because of his patronage at Virginia's Colonial Williamsburg restoration and across various units of the National Park System, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., strongly influenced the formulation of the Historic Sites Act through a collection of subordinates. Former NPS Director Horace Albright, who had retired in 1933 to become an executive of the U.S. Potash Corporation, headquartered in New York City's Rockefeller Center, continued to play an important role within the operation of the National Park Service. Throughout the legislative process, Interior Secretary Ickes was in frequent contact with Kenneth Chorley, who had overseen much of the Virginia restoration and the creation of the Grand Teton National Park.<sup>10</sup> As another champion of the Williamsburg restoration, the Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin provided a public

<sup>8</sup> An Analysis of Two Plans to Provide a Policy for the Coordination of the Broad Relationships of Federal Government to State and Local Interests in the Maintenance of Historic Sources and Sites,” December 18, 1933, Historic Sites Act, NPS Park History Program Files, Washington, DC, (PHP). This memo compared the NPS plan with that proposed by Gist Blair.

<sup>9</sup> See Seth Bruggeman, *Here, George Washington was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), which expands upon his *George Washington Birthplace National Monument Administrative History*, (Williamsburg: College of William and Mary, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> For example, on September 9, 1934, Ickes asked Chorley if he had given any “further thought” regarding the creation of a new NPS division that could “take over research and archaeology and restoration work?” Chorley, who was then vice president at Colonial Williamsburg, proposed that Harold R. Shurtleff, the Williamsburg director of research, be appointed as the head of the new NPS division and that J. Thomas Schneider, a Harvard-trained lawyer, conduct a study of historic preservation practice in the United States and Europe as the basis for any new legislation. Folder 881, box 95, Series E, Cultural Area: Organizations and Parks, FA314, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller records (OMR).

voice in the gestation of the American historic preservation movement during the period, including impactful testimony before Congress as it debated the Historic Sites Act.

All of this preparatory work bore fruit. Introduced in January 1935, the Historic Sites Act was signed into law by President Roosevelt on August 21, 1935. While the bill was moving through Congress, the National Park Service developed plans for its implementation, a process that started with the fundamental definition of what kinds of historic properties were worthy of federal preservation and presentation.

### **National Significance vs. Significantly Characteristic**

Within the conventional wisdom of the time, the obviously appropriate role for the federal government was in the identification, recognition, and stewardship of properties of national significance—places that “possess exceptional values in commemorating or illustrating the history of the United States.”<sup>11</sup> For the NPS this general function was especially prudent because its principal interest in efforts to identify historic sites was to regularize the formerly haphazard method of establishing new units of the National Park System. At first there were only two types of historic properties: those sites or buildings associated with great events or trends; or places connected to very important individuals in American history. The protection of nationally significant architecture, absent other historical associations, was established by the designation of Hampton National Historic Site (NHS) near Baltimore, Maryland, in the 1940s, and the consideration of archaeological properties soon followed suit. Unlike in Europe, the United States moved forward with a voluntary system of recognition, wherein the designation of National Historic Sites was a collaborative affair between the Interior Department and private owners that was memorialized in a cooperative agreement regarding the stewardship of the property.

This nationalistic vision of the kinds of places thought worthy of federal recognition as National Historic Sites contrasted with views held by some of the leaders within the emerging historic preservation movement. In early 1930 Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin reflected that “one of the most valuable results” of the ongoing Williamsburg restoration was the “awakened sense of responsibility for the preservation of the memorials and worthy remains of a beautiful and historic

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<sup>11</sup> Arno Cammerer, *United States Department of the Interior Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior, 1936* (Wash., DC: National Park Service, 1935–1939), 114–15.

past.”<sup>12</sup> Older communities across the the United States would benefit from the creation of a national commission to study the burgeoning historic preservation movement with an eye towards creating an endowment to “assist in preserving those things most typical of the past which if not safeguarded will vanish before the march of commercialism and materialism.”<sup>13</sup>

Such a commission could assist the federal government in “searching out and helping to safeguard” historic properties that were both “significantly characteristic” and “distinctly unique” in early American history.<sup>14</sup> In some ways, this approach was quite similar to the goals of the Historic American Buildings Survey, another federal program created at the same time. That survey sought to document a comprehensive portfolio of American architecture because it was “the responsibility of the American people that if the great number of our antique buildings must disappear through economic causes; they should not pass into unrecorded oblivion.”<sup>15</sup>

During the 1930s, despite the economic stagnation caused by the Great Depression, the threats to historic properties across the country were well documented. Highway construction and the installation of automobile service stations were often criticized for their impact on small towns. In Delaware, architect and town planner Electus Litchfield thought that the buildings, streetscapes, and trees of New Castle were worthy of conservation: where appropriate, restorations should be “conscientiously made” without necessarily any changes to a property’s occupancy or use.<sup>16</sup> Many communities had made use of zoning powers to deflect the “inroads of the spirit of commercialism,” but Reverend Goodwin thought that “something more radical and more far-reaching” was needed to address the multiple threats to American heritage.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> William A. R. Goodwin to Col. Arthur Woods, May 20, 1930, CWF Archives. Pastor of Williamsburg’s Bruton Parish Church, Goodwin (1869–1939) was the muse for John D. Rockefeller’s restoration of Virginia’s Colonial capital during the 1920s and 1930s. Woods (1870–1942) was a Harvard-trained bureaucrat who after World War I worked extensively for John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and was associated with Colonial Williamsburg from 1927 to 1931.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Charles E. Peterson, “Memorandum,” November 13, 1933, handwritten memo, Records of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS)/Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) Division RG 515, NACP.

<sup>16</sup> Electus Litchfield to Daniel Bates, June 20, 1933, box 276, Papers of Charles E. Peterson, University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP). Public ownership of historic properties was not required—Litchfield proposed a system of tax exemptions to support preservation activities.

<sup>17</sup> Rev. Goodwin to Daniel Bates, March 23, 1934. NPS Files, CWF Archives.

By design, the national significance threshold limited the kinds of properties recognized by the NPS. More important was the inability of the agency to define historic districts, at varying levels of significance, as a recognized property type. It was not that the agency was unfamiliar with “area preservation” as manifested in the adoption of local historic preservation zoning ordinances such as those in Charleston, South Carolina. After exploring Beaufort, South Carolina, in 1936, two NPS historians recommended that not only should the entire town be included in the Historic American Buildings Survey, but also that its citizens should “be encouraged to pass a zoning ordinance” to help protect its picturesque historic qualities.<sup>18</sup> Since 1929 the Park Service had cooperated with the city of Alexandria, Virginia, to maintain, through a design review process, the “monumental character” of the George Washington Memorial Parkway as it passed through the city along Washington Street.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, among the first properties considered by the National Park System Advisory Board was the community of La Villita in San Antonio, Texas, an assemblage of vernacular buildings without the protection of nationally significant historical associations that had become blighted over time. One of the sponsors of the Historic Sites Act, Representative Maury Maverick, unabashedly used his influence to support the revitalization of the neighborhood through historic recognition, rehabilitation, and tourism.<sup>20</sup> While many of the first generation of designated National Historic Sites could easily be classified as historic districts, the NPS was primarily interested in historic properties that could be easily acquired and developed as additions to the National Park System.

### **Schneider’s Third Volume**

As significant as the expanded vision for a National Park Service’s role in American historic preservation was in 1935, perhaps even more telling were the options for program development that were not undertaken at that time. While the various interest groups were coming together in 1934, Rockefeller associate J. Thomas Schneider was assigned the task of surveying the state of historic preservation in both the United States and across Europe with the goal

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<sup>18</sup> Herbert Kahler and Ralston Lattimore, “Beaufort, South Carolina Field Report, September 11, 1936,” PHP.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Smith, “The George Washington Memorial Parkway: A Statement of Policy on Memorial Character by the Old and Historic District Board of Architectural Review,” *Historic Alexandria Quarterly* (Summer 1999), 1–10.

<sup>20</sup> John H. Sprinkle, Jr., *Crafting Preservation Criteria: The National Register of Historic Places and American Historic Preservation*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 154–56.



of producing a report that would lay the foundation for the expansion of federal involvement in the field.<sup>21</sup>

Completed in the fall of 1935, Schneider's report on the preservation of historic sites was divided into three parts. Parts I and II focused on the current practices in the United States and Europe, and served as the justification for the steps mandated in the Historic Sites Act. Part III provided a "detailed analysis" of the act along with recommendations for its implementation. This chapter was never formally published (or widely distributed) by the National Park Service because some of its proposals were contrary to agency policy and practice established after enactment of the Historic Sites Act.<sup>22</sup>

Schneider noted that the declaration of federal policy was necessary to "confine the direct activities" of the federal government only to sites and buildings of national significance. The plan was for a pyramid of recognition, with federal stewardship reserved for only the most important properties. The plan also encouraged cooperation with state and local governments, as well as private groups, in the preservation of properties with less-than-national significance.

Schneider presented an expansive view of what kinds of places might be considered nationally significant, with a compendium of nearly 100 properties, as gathered by NPS staff, thought worthy of consideration as National Historic Sites. These included "typical small New England fishing towns"; nine colonial capitals; "other towns: illustrating an important phase and rich in architectural remains"; "old sections of historic towns and cities"; examples of a "typical courthouse group" in Virginia; typical frontier mining towns; important religious sects' settlements (abandoned); and a typical Virginia spa.

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<sup>21</sup> Arno Cammerer, *United States Department of the Interior Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior, 1935–1939* (Wash., DC: National Park Service, 1935–1939), 190–91. J. (John) Thomas Schneider (1895–1976) was a Tennessee native who served as an aide to Gen. John Pershing during World War I, after which he graduated from Harvard Law School and went into private practice until 1935. Harold Shurtleff recommended Schneider to work on the background for the Historic Sites Act.

<sup>22</sup> J. Thomas Schneider, *A Report to the Secretary of the Interior on the Preservation of Sites and Buildings, Part III: Recommendations* (Wash., DC: Department of the Interior, 1935). Mimeograph found among the NPS Park History program files, noted as Ronald Lee's copy. The report included a chronology of actions taken by the Congress in passing the legislation during 1935. The three volumes finally appeared in 1938. See: Arno Camerer, *Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior* (Wash., DC: National Park Service, 1938), 15–16.



This eclectic collection of recommended properties was consistent with the idea that one goal of the survey of historic sites was to present a panorama of American history, where the most significant and most illustrative properties might become incorporated into the growing portfolio of NPS-managed historic sites. Schneider was particularly concerned with historic sites threatened by modern infrastructure development. He enumerated 22 historic properties from 10 states, “not now preserved,” with little resemblance to the list of properties under consideration as new units of the National Park Service.<sup>23</sup> The concentration on areas, ensembles of buildings, or historic districts diverged from the agency’s traditional focus on individual buildings and sites.

Regarding the ownership of National Historic Sites, Schneider concluded that there was “no reason” why the federal government would have to “acquire titles to all historic properties which it may wish to preserve.” Clearly, there were two highly significant and well-known models for the private preservation of nationally significant historic properties, both in Virginia, at Mount Vernon, George Washington’s plantation; and at the Colonial Williamsburg restoration.

Reverend Goodwin and Thomas Schneider’s collective vision for the preservation of the unique and the typical was substantially different from one that embraced individual sites or buildings associated with nationally significant persons or events. The earliest work of the National Park Service’s Historic Sites Survey, created as a result of the Historic Sites Act of 1935 to identify National Historic Sites, demonstrated the challenges presented by the concept of historic districts.

### **Old Main, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois**

Some of the core difficulties that emerged from the new historic preservation mandates were apparent in negotiations for preservation of the Old Main building at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, one of the first properties considered for designation as a National Historic Site. The Gothic revival style institutional building was the only remaining site associated with the 1858 senatorial debates between Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. As representing an important moment in Lincoln’s political career, this property appeared to be an ideal candidate for commemoration of great events in American history.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Branch of Lands, *Proposed Area Resumes* (Chicago: National Park Service, 1947).

<sup>24</sup> Hosmer argues that the evaluation of this site set important precedents for the concept of physical integrity. *Preservation Comes of Age*, 693–95.



The Old Main building (built 1857), site of the fifth debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in 1858, is seated between the George Davis Hall (1911) on the left and the Alumni Hall (1898) on the right.

Anticipating the college's forthcoming centennial in 1937, local proponents sought honorific federal recognition soon after the Historic Sites Act was passed in 1935.<sup>25</sup> In May 1936 Janet Post, a prominent alumni and chair of the centennial committee, appeared before the second meeting of the National Park System Advisory Board to argue for the property's designation as a National Historic Site.<sup>26</sup> Post reported to Ickes that the Advisory Board, and its chair, Hermon Bumpus, were favorably impressed with the historic qualities of the property. The national significance of the Lincoln-Douglas debates was never questioned, and initial National Park Service review suggested that the site was the only one (of seven) that survived with substantial physical integrity and that consequently offered the "opportunity for a unique, inexpensive, and effective" collaboration with Knox College.<sup>27</sup>

Secretary Ickes also appreciated the Old Main and looked favorably on its designation, but he also wanted to assure the local proponents that there should be no immediate expectation of any federal acquisition of the property, as no funds had been either donated or appropriated for that purpose.<sup>28</sup> Reaching out to Chairman Bumpus regarding the status of the Advisory Board's review, the interior secretary was pleased to learn that the group had passed favorably on the proposed recognition. In early

<sup>25</sup> The college's former president, John H. Finley, who was then editor-in-chief of the *New York Times*, requested that the NPS provide a statement on the historical significance of the property in time for the institution's Founders Day celebration on February 15, 1936. Conrad Wirth (signed by Ronald Lee) to Fifth Regional Officer, NPS, January 16, 1936. NPS, Old Main, PHP.

<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Philip S. (Janet Greig) Post to Harold Ickes, May 15, 1936, box 222, Harold Ickes Papers (HIP), Library of Congress. After graduating from Knox College in 1894, Janet Post served on the Knox College Board of Trustees from 1920 (after the death of her husband) until her own death in 1964. Post was a strong proponent of restoring the Old Main building.

<sup>27</sup> Verne Chatelain to NPS Director, "Old Main, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois," March 16, 1936. NPS Old Main PHP.

<sup>28</sup> Harold Ickes to "My dear Mrs. Post," May 18, 1936, box 222, HIP. Ickes hinted: "Perhaps someone, someday, will be interested to give it to us."



Old Main, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois, in its contemporary setting.

June, Ickes wrote a short note to Post: “You may consider Main Hall at Knox College as officially designated as a National Historic Site.”<sup>29</sup>

And yet the Old Main was never actually designated as a National Historic Site.<sup>30</sup> The centenary program noted that the designation was publically announced at the college commencement in 1936.<sup>31</sup> Although negotiations toward a cooperative agreement between the Interior Department and Knox College began soon after the announcement, Knox College officials, according to Charles Hosmer, never saw “any advantage to accepting federal assistance” and thus never executed what would have been the first cooperative agreement created under the Historic Sites Act.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ickes to Post, June 4, 1936. Attached was a June 3, 1936, telegram from Bumpus to Ickes and Ickes’s May 29th letter to Bumpus requesting the Advisory Board’s opinion. Thanking Ickes for his personal involvement, Post was certain that the national recognition would add “new courage” toward raising an endowment for the building. While the college had previously completed restoration of the building’s exterior, work on the reconstruction of its interior awaited additional funding. Post to Ickes, June 16, 1936, box 222, HIP.

<sup>30</sup> The agency’s 1936 annual report noted that Secretary Ickes had approved the Advisory Board’s “favorable action” on the Old Main, and in 1937 it noted that the cooperative agreement between NPS and Knox College had been executed. Arno Camerer, *Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior, 1936*, 115, and *Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior, 1937*, 45.

<sup>31</sup> *Official Program: Galesburg-Knox College Centenary, 1837–1937*. (Knox College and the City of Galesburg, Illinois, 1937), 25. Harold Ickes, Hermon Bumpus, and Conrad Wirth were members of the centennial’s National Honorary Committee.

<sup>32</sup> Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 693. Ronald Lee to K.D. McClelland, n.d., in response to Mr. McClelland’s letter of April 19, 1952, Old Main, NPS, PHP.

The issue was not any proposed federal acquisition of the Old Main, but rather the potential for National Park Service oversight of future developments within the campus setting.<sup>33</sup> In early 1937, while negotiations over the cooperative agreement were still progressing, Assistant NPS Director Ronald Lee dispatched Thomas Pitkin, an NPS historian, to study the problem of boundaries at the campus, as well as landscape architect Clifford Gates and architect Donald Littrell, to inspect the property.<sup>34</sup> Gates thought one goal would be to demarcate an area “sufficient in extent that the Old Main Building would be assured a proper simple setting and would neither be cramped nor subordinated by any future structures.”<sup>35</sup> Observing the ongoing reconstruction of the Old Main’s interior, Littrell thought it “regrettable” that the building was not being preserved “more nearly in its original state.”<sup>36</sup> In exchange for the National Historic Site designation, the National Park Service intended to “control replacement of all present structures” so that “no greater architectural disharmony” might be introduced into the site.<sup>37</sup>

As the site of a well-recognized historic event and seated within an educational environment, the Old Main building was an ideal candidate as one of the first National Historic Sites. Yet neither Knox College nor the National Park Service were willing to give up a measure of architectural or land use control in order to secure this distinction. The federal honorific was simply not valuable enough to the college. With only promises of technical assistance and no guarantee of the availability of any direct financial support, National Historic Site designation always came with a hint of the potential for eventual federal acquisition, a scent that deterred many potential candidates. This issue was further complicated anywhere there were multiple landowners, as was often found in urban settings, where the NPS sought to avoid any issues with “inholdings,” parcels of privately held land located within the boundaries of a national park unit. Eventually, Knox College officials revisited the status of the Old Main’s federal recognition in the

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<sup>33</sup> Ronald Lee, “Report on Historical Significance of Old Main Building, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois,” December 5, 1935, Old Main, NPS, PHP. NPS saw its role as being limited to consulting with the college regarding any proposed restoration of the building or further development of its setting, and perhaps in securing federal funding to support a college student interpreter at the site.

<sup>34</sup> Ronald Lee to Thomas Pipkin, February 20, 1937. Old Main, NPS PHP.

<sup>35</sup> Clifford Gates, “Old Main Building, Knox College,” March 22, 1937. Old Main, NPS, PHP.

<sup>36</sup> Donald Littrell, “Report on Old Main Knox,” March 20, 1937, Old Main, NPS, PHP.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Pipkin, “Report of Inspection of Old Main, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois,” March 9, 1937, Old Main, NPS, PHP. Pipkin proposed a cross-shaped boundary of open space that preserved views from each cardinal direction toward Old Main and excluded four extant buildings located at the corners of the block outlined by South, Cherry, Berrien, and Cedar Streets. Not surprisingly, the college recommended a much smaller rectangular boundary.

late 1950s, and the building received a new type of designation, that of National Historic Landmark, in 1961.<sup>38</sup>

### **NPS Adopts Historic Districts**

Historic districts were recognized by the National Park Service as an official property type only in 1965, primarily as a result of the impact of federal urban renewal programs on historic neighborhoods across the country.<sup>39</sup> During the late 1950s, the National Park System Advisory Board debated the concept of “historic community” and its application to federal recognition programs. The proposed definition included a distinction between active and extinct communities, to account for archaeological sites and ghost towns, where the interrelationship between structures was maintained so that the architectural and cultural qualities survived “without major distortion” by modern encroachments.<sup>40</sup> While the members saw the need for a clear definition of historic communities, they declined to recommend the creation of a new criterion.



NPS Chief Historian Robert M. Utley helped craft an expansion of the criteria used by the National Park System Advisory Board to include the concept of historic districts. This administrative categorization significantly impacted the recognition of historic properties with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966.

New grant programs sponsored by the Urban Renewal Administration (URA) during the John F. Kennedy administration exacerbated the NPS’s relationship with the wider historic preservation movement. NPS historian Robert Utley was given the task of exploring how his agency could contribute to URA-funded projects “without diluting or relaxing” the criteria of national significance. Since passage of the 1935 Historic Sites Act, the NPS had developed and applied

<sup>38</sup> Blanche Schorer and Charles Shed, “Old Main, Knox College National Historic Landmark Nomination,” Designated July 4, 1961, Old Main, NPS, PHP.

<sup>39</sup> George Hartzog to All Regional Directors, “Implementation of Thoughts Expressed at the Joint Meeting with the Urban Renewal Administration, March 4,” March 12, 1964, Admin Files 49–71, box 334, RG 79, NACP. William Slayton to George Hartzog, February 24, 1964, box 736, General Records of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, RG 207, NACP.

<sup>40</sup> National Park System Advisory Board (NPSAB) Consulting Committee (CC), September 16, 1959, NPS, PHP. This debate established an important concept: “There can be no hard and fast rule of percentages or portions of the whole that once existed that will determine whether the physical remains of the Community have integrity.”

standards that sought to recognize historic properties suitable for inclusion as part of a system of national parks. Already encumbered by too many sites supported by too little funding, the criteria were designed to deny, deter, and defer consideration of new historical units. Whereas few individual sites within areas proposed for urban renewal met the NPS standards for national significance and integrity, the value of many assemblages of buildings lay in their “collective capacity to recall the ways and forms of the past” that provided visual continuity between the past and the present. Referencing the statement of principles and guidelines developed at the Historic Preservation Today conference in 1963, the NPS adopted a new dimension to the definition of national significance, as noted by Utley:

When preserved or restored as integral parts of the modern urban environment, historic buildings not individually significant by reason of historical association or architectural merit may collectively assume significance to the nation in illustrating a way of life in its developing culture.<sup>41</sup>

This policy change allowed the NPS to assist with URA grant programs and, more importantly, provided official federal acknowledgment of historic districts—by then a long-standing convention within the preservation movement, as a type of historic property worthy of stewardship. It recognized the widespread and adverse impact that other federal programs had on historic neighborhoods and embraced the concept of recognizing ensembles of buildings, as proposed by Reverend Goodwin and Thomas Schneider in the 1930s that were significantly characteristic of a historic community.<sup>42</sup> As the National Park Service implemented the mandate for an expanded National Register of Historic Places from 1966 to 1969, historic districts became an increasingly important aspect of the overall national preservation movement.<sup>43</sup> In that way, the National Historic Preservation Act was indeed the fulfillment of the vision for historic preservation practice that was first enacted with the Historic Sites Act of 1935.

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Utley to Chief, Division of History Studies, “A Program of Professional Assistance in Urban Renewal Projects,” November 4, 1964, NPS, PHP.

<sup>42</sup> NPSAB CC Minutes, September 16 and 17, 1959, NPS, PHP. Boundaries were seen as an essential component of any historic community, regardless of whether local government had applied preservation zoning ordinances to an area.

<sup>43</sup> NPSAB Minutes, October 5–14, 1964, p. 58; Robert Utley, “Professional Assistance in Historic Preservation in Urban Renewal Districts,” January 27, 1965; NPS Director to All Regional Directors, “National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings: Revision of Administrative Criteria of National Significance,” May 18, 1965, NPSAB CC, NPS, PHP.

## Conclusion

As the federal government embarked on the first comprehensive survey of historic sites, there was a diversity of opinion as to the kinds of places that might be cloaked in national significance. The initial work of the NPS's Historic Sites Survey was restricted by several factors, most of them designed to limit the number and scope of places to be evaluated by the Advisory Board. Limitations came from a narrowly defined concept of national significance. Until the mid-1960s the National Park System Advisory Board had not even considered all U.S. presidents to be nationally significant and worthy of official federal recognition. A more significant problem was that the agency's manifested destiny was focused on the fee-simple acquisition of historic sites, not toward cooperative management of a diverse set of parcels owned by other entities. At both of its great urban historic district projects, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and in St. Louis, Missouri, the NPS was the principle landowner. As a rule, the agency was distrustful of “inholdings” within park boundaries as well as conservation easements designed to protect park values, but that often led to administrative conflicts over land management issues. The principal goal of the Historic Sites Act of 1935, as interpreted by NPS leadership, was to identify historic properties that were nationally significant and also suitable and feasible for possible incorporation into a national system of protected areas. Constrained by tradition and practice as it embarked into the new field of historic preservation, the Park Service was unable to embrace either Reverend Goodwin's or Thomas Schneider's inclusive and eclectic vision of a system that preserved the “worthy remains” of American history. For three decades this park-centric approach shaped the kinds of places thought worthy for federal recognition and limited the ability of the agency to substantively assist local communities and other federal agencies just as the landscape of American cultural heritage was transformed during the baby boom generation. Facing the onslaught of ever-expanding urban renewal programs, it took a new generation of public historians to adapt and expand the administrative footings created by the Historic Sites Act of 1935 in order to officially recognize historic districts as an essential component of the country's historic landscape.

The NPS's decision to incorporate historic districts in its preservation criteria finally brought the agency's mission in line with accepted priorities and standards of the wider preservation community. It laid the groundwork for the “new preservation” paradigm that was articulated in the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. That delayed acceptance reveals much about the NPS's bureaucratic procedures and practices—about the difficulties, considerations, and internal limitations that were, and often still are, part of government management. Beginning in the 1930s,



the agency adopted a primarily episodic and heroic vision of American history that was ill suited for interpreting change through time, while its management and development approach to protected areas resisted partnerships and programs external to its traditional administrative and physical boundaries. Recognition of historic districts also signaled a generational change in the agency's leadership as the historians, architects, architectural historians, and landscape architects who had joined the agency at the time of the Historic Sites Act of 1935 retired just as the National Park Service was approaching its 50th anniversary. Expanding the envelope of what kinds of places were thought to be worthy of conservation, as seen in the incorporation of historic districts within the federal pyramid of official memory, would prove to be the hallmark of the practitioners that came of age in the generation after the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

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