

TOWARD A RICHER SENSE OF PLACE: EXPANDING THE ROLE OF FOLKLORE IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION POLICY AND PROGRAMS

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The working group on Folklore in Historic Preservation Policy seeks to position folklorists and folklore methodologies as central forces in historic preservation. Because each nation has its own structure of preservation law and bureaucracy, we will focus on the United States, but we anticipate that portions of our work will be applicable elsewhere. For too long, despite laudable efforts by individual folklorists, the perspectives of our field have been absent from the major shaping policies and programs of federal and state historic preservation programs and major non-profit players such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

We want a place at the table as preservation increasingly is viewed as a green strategy, and as buildings are repurposed in the interests of sustainability. We want a place at the table as current trends in historic preservation, such as inclusion of cultural landscapes and vernacular structures of all kinds, a commitment to diversity, and revision of *National Register Bulletin 38 (Traditional Cultural Properties)*, all provide meaningful opportunities for folklorists to join the dialogue and help frame policies of the future.

Folklorists have the tools and already have created some models for leading preservation policy toward a richer sense of place, but our work is not as widely known or as influential as it can and should be. Thirty years have passed since the amendment of the National Historic Preservation Act (1980), which prompted the American Folklife Center's *Cultural Conservation* report (Ormond Loomis, coordinator, 1983), and it has been two decades since the AFC's seminal 1990 conference, "Cultural Conservation: Reconfiguring the Cultural Mission," and Mary Hufford's edited volume, *Conserving Culture* (1994), when folklorists and colleagues interested in these issues last joined together to strategize solutions and plans of action. We hope to bring our collective expertise and best practices to bear on policies that shape the 21st century preservation movement.

Since these seminal conferences and publications, much constructive work has emerged in the broader area of cultural conservation, most of it under the auspices of arts and humanities organizations in the form of exhibits, festivals, documentation, apprenticeship programs and the like, and in the emergence of national heritage areas. Far less energy has been devoted to historic preservation per se. A notable exception was the 1980s, when folklorists last were players in national policy dialogues. With publication of *Cultural Conservation*, a new era of cooperation appeared immanent, with the potential to transform the role of folklore and folklorists in the historic preservation movement and to expand the resource-centered purview of historic preservationists to the more holistic notion of cultural conservation.

During the 1980s, the AFC shaped the role of folklore in the national dialogue, with projects such as the *Grouse Creek Cultural Survey, Integrating Folklife and Historic Preservation Field Research* (Carter and Fleischhauer, 1988), the first attempt to combine architectural and folklife survey in a single project; and Mary Hufford's integrative approach to cultural conservation and place in *One Space, Many Places, Folklife and Land Use in New Jersey's Pinelands National Reserve* (1986). Much of the activity of this period culminated in the 1990 Cultural Conservation conference sponsored by the AFC, mentioned previously.

Throughout the past thirty years, a small group of folklorists have played key roles in the emergence vernacular architecture studies by providing documentation guides and methodologies, crafting models for the use of oral history as a key interpretive tool, and giving voice to the stories, skills, and contributions of ethnic, tribal, occupational, urban, and regional groups often overlooked by architectural historians (cf. Henry Glassie, Gerald Pocius, John Michael Vlach, Bernard Herman, Tom Carter, Michael Ann Williams, Nancy Solomon, and Steve Zeitlin, among others).

A crucial opportunity for folklorists came in 1990, when the National Park Service issued Bulletin 38, Traditional Cultural Properties, which provides a framework within the National Register of Historic Places process to protect "intangible cultural resources." While most Bulletin 38 applications have addressed American Indian sites, folklorists tested new ground with its use, for example, in a cultural resource study for siting a low-level radioactive waste facility, (Sommers, Lockwood, and MacDowell) and in listing the African-American town of Eatonville, Florida on the National Register, despite its lack of architecturally significant buildings (Bucuvalas). However, folklorists as a whole have had little engagement with Bulletin 38, and as a result, the folklore profession has little to no participation in important revisions of Bulletin 38 currently underway at the NPS.

Anthropologist Tom King, who drafted Bulletin 38, articulates some of the roadblocks folklorists face in his book *Places That Count: Traditional Cultural Properties in Cultural Resource Management*: "Although I found it stimulating to work with the folklife people, they never seemed to me to relate to the rough-and-tumble world I was involved in—the world of Section 106... The folklife people shied away from projects like the Tenn-Tom with righteous morality but did little to help the people whose traditional lives were upset by such projects—except to record their songs and stories for posterity, and to put on festivals to showcase their skills in the hope that they would thus be transmitted down the generations in some form or other. These are worthy enterprises, but they didn't engage the agents of change; they didn't confront the conflicts between tradition and modernity directly; they didn't help us with Section 106 review" (2003: 32).

However, folklorists themselves have looked critically at the way members of the

discipline have participated, or chosen not to participate, in the Section 106 and EIS process. In 1988 Miriam Camitta examined the implication of folklorists not being involved in the EIS for the Vine Street Expressway project in Philadelphia, as well as the moral implications of the concept of “mitigation” for the discipline (1988: 206-216). More recently, Peggy Bulger, in her AFS Presidential Plenary Address, was critical of the American Folklife Center’s withdrawal from participation in the Army Corps of Engineers’ Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Project. As Bulger concludes, “If we refuse categorically to work with the agents of change for ethical reasons, we also are refusing to assist tradition bearers and communities to confront and mitigate the effects of that change—and we leave a hole in the documentary record. We need to have more faith in ourselves.” (2003:387)

These remarks reveal some of the perceptual obstacles to our work, but they should also serve as a call to arms. Groundbreaking programs such as New York City’s Place Matters, and TAUNY’s Register of Very Special Places provide fresh models for collaborative approaches to conserving culturally and historically significant places. Initiatives such as Long Island Traditions offer integrative cultural conservation models that incorporate historic preservation.

Recent publications in historic preservation underscore the need for folklorists in preservation policy development. In his book, *Place, Race and Story*, Ned Kaufman, adopts the term “storyscape” as a key tool, and calls on folklorists to help craft standards and methodologies “that capture the power of stories” in what he calls “heritage conservation” (2009: 5). And, in “Traditional Cultural Places and the National Register,” Paul R. Lusignan outlines some of the issues to be addressed in the revision of Bulletin 38: “Among the ongoing issues...are: establishing appropriate boundaries, defining who is best suited to undertake identification and evaluation work, agreeing on what constitutes sufficient documentation, deciding how integrity should properly be considered, and determining how traditional cultural groups can best be defined. Each topic could be expanded into an independent essay or briefing paper” (*The George Wright Forum*, Vol. 26, Number 1, 42).

We have our work cut out for us. The ties among folklorists and preservation planners must be improved, as new pressures, including development and environmental regulations, threaten the built environment and cultural resources.

We propose the following strategic plan of work to improve these ties, gain a place at the table, and help craft policies that integrate folklore into the historic preservation movement. Our work is intended for two audiences: 1) folklorists, and 2) colleagues and preservation professionals in other fields, both of whom may be unaware of the full scope of folklorists’ contributions the field of preservation. Our proposed outcomes and activities are to:

1. Draft a position paper that has the following objectives:

a. Outlines the history to date of folklore and historic preservation. This will be accomplished through examination of key published works, programs, and projects. Each work group member will contribute toward this review.

b. Outlines impediments/challenges to folklorists engaged in historic preservation policy and programs. Through conversations within the work group members, with other folklorists, and with professionals in other disciplines involved in historic preservation policy drafting and implementation, we will discuss challenges to folklorists' engagement in public policy areas, with special attention to established government structures and programs in historic preservation.

c. Provides a rationale for the essential role of folklore in historic preservation.

d. Addresses gaps in National Park Service Bulletin 38 "Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties." Our hope is to engage NPS planners in the revision of this document, paving the way for a "place at the table."

e. Drafts policy recommendations of strategies to integrate folklore more fully into historic preservation practices in the short and long-term.

2. Improve the accessibility of resources and facilitate dialogue among interested parties. To this end, we will create an annotated resource guide that provides a compilation of print and Internet resources on folklore, preservation, and cultural resource management, to make the contributions of folklorists more accessible to a wide audience of colleagues and interested parties. At the 2011 AFS, we will explore establishing a listserv and a viable historic preservation section within AFS to continue the work begun by this working group.

3. Develop a pre-conference workshop and panels/forums at the American Folklore Society 2012 annual conference with folklorists and other preservation professionals that highlight best practices, challenges, issues, and future directions. The workshop/field trip will use post-Katarina New Orleans as a laboratory for hands-on exploration of challenges and strategies, including briefings by colleagues who have been working in New Orleans, and tours of selected projects and places that matter.

4. Network with colleagues across disciplinary lines to better identify issues and brainstorm solutions. Networking also will include individual work group member presentations at the meetings of the Vernacular Architecture Forum, National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers, National Trust for Historic Preservation, and related organizations.

The National Register office of the National Park Service is currently re-

examining the Traditional Cultural Properties bulletin and has created a working group consisting of National Register Chief Paul Loether, Interim Keeper of the Register Carol Shull, and historians Lisa Deline, Paul Lusignan, and Patrick Andrus. In the summer 2010, David Puglia, an intern from Western Kentucky University's Folk Studies program, was invited to sit in on the working group and the members of the group expressed interest in receiving more feedback from folklorists. Recent discussion with Ms. Deline indicated that the group is responsive to an ongoing dialog with folklorists about the concept of "traditional cultural properties." In the coming year we will set up direct meetings with the National Register staff and make plans for a sustained dialog with this working group. We also will network with our respective state historic preservation officers, contacts in the National Historic Landmarks program, and other state and local preservation professionals, as we develop our position paper.

5. Explore the possibility of seeking funding for a "next phase" conference similar to 1990's *Cultural Conservation: Reconfiguring the Cultural Mission*, to bring our work to a wider audience and to further collaboration and policy impact.