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# The Role of Citizen Awareness in the American Historic Preservation Movement

Pregledni rad – Review

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### Summary

*Dr. Harper begins this essay by describing citizen awareness as a »broad range of activities undertaken by private individuals and groups outside the scope of government which have the effect of preserving our cultural heritage«, and he finds this kind of activity »essential« to the American preservation movement.*

*The essay then briefly reviews the history of the preservation movement. Since the United States is a relatively new nation with a limited history, by European standards, it only lately came to develop a formal preservation program. Also, Americans deliberately created a national government of limited powers leaving much initiative to local communities. As a result, government on both a national level and local level failed in a number of early preservation situations. It was left to volunteer efforts to save Mt. Vernon, the home of founding father George Washington, in the 1850s, and that citizen effort became the model for much of the 19th century. Citizen efforts created groups like the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, and it was wealthy industrialists like John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford who undertook the preservation of Colonial Williamsburg and the assembling of historic structures at Greenfield Village, respectively. Some government preservation did take place, such as acquisition of Civil War battlefields and protecting ancient Native American archaeology on government lands in the West, and during the Great Depression, other preservation work was undertaken to give employment to people out of work.*

*Not until 1966, however, when urban renewal and highway building projects destroyed large sections of cities with little thought to what was being lost, did Congress finally pass the National Historic Preservation Act and set up a process locating and registering the nation's significant historic structures. Under this legislation, each state is responsible for establishing a preservation office, partially funded by the national government, and to survey its built environment and list historic structures on the National Register of Historic Places. Even in this process, private citizens are widely used in doing the research and preparation of National Register nominations.*

*Dr. Harper concludes the essay by outlining the kinds of citizen efforts that have taken place in this home city and state, Charleston, West Virginia. These are very typical of any American city and are not particularly noteworthy. Yet, they include creation of historic districts, lobbying local government to pass protective legislation, and organizing neighborhood associations. A number of West Virginia communities use preservation to market tourism, and others use preservation as a part of downtown revitalization efforts through a Main Street program. Although Americans are used to such citizen efforts, he believes Croatian communities can also do the same. Beginning with small steps, one successful effort followed by another, Croatia communities can develop a significant citizen-based preservation movement.*

I have been asked to address the role of »citizen awareness« in the American historic preservation movement. By citizen awareness, I mean a broad range of activities undertaken by private individuals and groups outside the scope of government which have the effect of preserving our cultural heritage. In this process, the role of citizen awareness, or perhaps citizen involvement is a better term, for it requires more than just knowledge, is absolutely essential.

Perhaps a word of background. The United States is a relatively new nation; we have a limited history, and preserving our heritage has only gradually become important to us. For example, about the time that Prosper Merimee was developing the French Monument Service, the American Congress ridiculed a proposal by President John Quincy Adams to build a national observatory and a national university. Not only was there a certain anti-intellectualism as well as partisan politics in this response from Congress, but it generally was thought that such things were not the business of the national government. Education was for the states to accomplish as they saw fit. When such European thinkers as Violette-le-Duc was developing his »ensemble« theories, or John Ruskin was writing his *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, no American was thinking seriously about preservation. It was the early twentieth century before William Sumner Appleton, founder of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in 1910, developed sophisticated methods for »reading« a house, emphasizing the analytical values of the original architectural fabric, and creating the house museum as a teaching tool. England established its National Trust in 1894; the United States established its National Trust for Historic Preservation only in 1949. By American law, a building must be fifty years old to be historic, and we make exceptions even to that time limit; fifty years, however, is but a very brief span of time by European standards.

Americans have also found that government was not a very effective tool in a number of early preservation cases involving significant historic sites. We frankly constructed a political system that did not expect government to be an active agent in a broad range of activity, and in the nineteenth century, governments did not intervene in many areas we take for granted today. For example in preservation, the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia, where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were written, was allowed to fall into a state of disrepair, and the city of Philadelphia had to purchase the building in 1816 from the state to save it. Real restoration of the interior was begun by the Carpenter's Company guild some forty years later in 1856. The city of Boston and the state of Massachusetts both failed to save the John Hancock house in 1863. Hancock, the President of the Continental Congress and famous signer of the Declaration of Independence, now has only a plaque on the State House lawn in Boston to mark the site of his once imposing home. In the most amazing example, neither the state of Virginia nor the National Congress could be persuaded to act to save Mt. Vernon, the home of General and President George Washington, when it was threatened in the 1850s by developers who wanted to make the site into a resort hotel. Rather, it was private citizens, particularly women in the nineteenth century, who saved the house. The heroine was Miss Anne Pamela

Cunningham of South Carolina who organized the Mt. Vernon Ladies Association. They established chapters in each state, raised the needed funds, and within five years were able to purchase the property. The Mt. Vernon Ladies still own and manage the Mt. Vernon property, not the national government.

The success of the Mt. Vernon Ladies became a model for other such efforts. Mrs. William Holstein led the efforts to save Valley Forge, the important military site of the Revolutionary War. The adopted son of General and President Andrew Jackson led the effort to save The Hermitage, the Jackson plantation in Nashville, Tennessee, and a ladies group formed to help that effort. Likewise, there were several groups who attempted to acquire the Thomas Jefferson property of Montecello, before this was successfully done in the 1920s. These efforts were motivated by nineteenth century patriotic values, the inspirational and educational benefits of saving the homes of the »great men« of society.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, more interest came to be placed on aesthetics, on great architecture and pleasing design. We have noted William Sumner Appleton's formation of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. The work of that Society in saving important examples of New England architecture was but one of several efforts. The Massachusetts Historical Society saved the Whipple House; private efforts saved and restored the Paul Revere House (the oldest house in Boston in 1905); the Essex Institute began to preserve houses in Salem, Massachusetts. In a parallel development, Virginia formed her own Society for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. All of these are private, citizen organizations, not government projects.

In the twentieth century, some of America's most wealthy businessmen began to get involved in preservation, using their vast fortunes for a kind of public philanthropy. Inspired somewhat by the work of Scandinavians like Arthur Hazelius and the outdoor museums of Sweden and Denmark, they began to create some of America's best known preservation attractions. Automobile manufacturer, Henry Ford, gathered together in Dearborn, Michigan, a number of historic buildings (including inventor Thomas Edison's laboratory) known collectively as Greenfield Village. Sturbridge Village later did the same thing collecting and interpreting New England buildings. Better known, and using better preservation techniques because the buildings were kept on site and not moved, is the work of John D. Rockefeller, II, oil millionaire, who in 1926 began the restoration and reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg. Likewise, New York lawyer, Henry Flint and his wife, began restoration of Historic Deerfield in western Massachusetts in 1945. Similarly, Mystic Seaport, Connecticut, and Cooperstown, New York, were preserved *in situ*.

This is not to say that governments never accomplished anything in the field of historic preservation, but rather to say that governments had no systematic programs until the modern era, and anything that was accomplished by the government was by happenstance. For example, because of the Civil War, the national government came into possession of Arlington and the Lee-Custis mansion, now among the most visited sites in Washington, D.C. The same is true for Ford's

Theater where President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, and for several Civil War battlefield sites which were formally developed in the 1890s. In 1906, Congress acted for the first time to preserve the famous Indian pueblo sites and archeological features on government land in the southwest, and a decade later established the National Park Service, which initially dealt with the natural environment, but now is very active in managing sites in the built environment as well. Primarily as make-work or employment projects during the Great Depression, Congress passed the Historic Sites Act in 1935, which began the process of surveying and listing national historic sites. It also began two projects known as the Historic American Building Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record to document and record the built environment by producing measured drawings thousands of which are stored and continually added to in the Library of Congress.

The official historic preservation program of the United States government began just thirty years ago in 1966, but even this program is heavily dependent on citizen awareness and citizen participation. The Historic Preservation Act of 1966 created the National Register of Historic Places, protected sites listed on that register from federally funded or licensed projects by putting in place a formal review process, and funded State Historic Preservation Offices to carry out these activities in each state. This law was passed during a period of significant reform (such as Civil Rights, Medicare, War on Poverty programs) under the leadership of President Lyndon Johnson, and was a direct response to the Urban Renewal projects of the 1950s that had cleared large areas of our cities, but for which developers could not be found to rebuild on much of the vacant land. We had destroyed large segments of the built environment, devastated viable neighborhoods in the name of progress, only to find that the new was not necessarily better, and that neighborhoods cannot automatically be created in high-rise buildings. The reaction was to create a planning tool, a national register to include, ultimately, every historic site in the nation, and to set the states to work using what ever agency they choose to accomplish the task. Much of the actual work would be done, in practice, by citizen groups under professional leadership provided by the individual state preservation offices. Each state has had its own unique approach to this task.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the work being done under the 1966 Act. Instead, let me give you a few examples from West Virginia, activities I have been involved with, to show you specific examples of how our preservation program works. West Virginia is approximately the same geographical size as Croatia, but we have less than half as many people. Our State Historic Preservation Office has had only eight to twelve employees from time to time. They cannot physically visit and survey every building and site in the state, and so they rely on contracting and advising people to do the surveys. Some years ago, I did a physical survey and description of every property in the remote mountain community of Thurmond, which in the early twentieth century was the most important railroad center for the shipment of coal on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. Its current population is under 100, but the town was listed on the National

Register, and there is significant restoration going on there today.

When a site is nominated for the National Register, it must first be reviewed by a panel of citizen experts – people from history, archeology, architecture, real estate, active preservationists, etc. – who agree on the historical merits of the site. All of these people are citizens, appointed by the state Governor, who meet three or four times a year for this purpose. I have served on this state review board, and served as Chairman for two years. For each nomination, each member of the review board is given a copy of the formal application with the supporting text. The state office personnel make a formal presentation of each site, and often local sponsors or organization representatives are present to support their nomination. At times, a nomination may be returned for further work, and a few are rejected. Normally, however, the staff oversight insures that each nomination meets the criteria. The review panel will vote, and if approved, the nomination goes to the National Register for their review and approval. The state review board is also responsible for broad policy decisions regarding the preservation program, for establishing the criteria and the priorities for awarding preservation grants, and in West Virginia, they also have oversight of museum and archival activities.

On the community level, historical and preservation organizations of various kinds play an important part in preservation work. During the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration of the Declaration of Independence, communities all over the United States planned celebrations. In Charleston, my city, our celebration committee, which I chaired, was supported with city funds, but the people on the committee all served as volunteers, and we had to raise additional funds. One of our projects was to undertake a survey of a large section in the east end of the city near the state capitol building. The city paid for a professional to organize and supervise the survey, but local volunteers worked also. We documented over 400 buildings, drew the boundaries of an historic district, submitted a nomination of the district to the National Register, and created the first historic district in Charleston. Then, we had to convince city council to pass protective overlay zoning legislation and to establish an historic district commission to oversee the protection process. All this took more time and effort, altogether some three years. Central to these efforts, we created a neighborhood organization, the East End Association, whose members lobbied city government to protect their neighborhood. The East End Association still meets and holds neighborhood events, goes to city council when they have problems, and have become a factor in city politics. We now have three historic districts in Charleston. None of this would have been accomplished without the efforts of aware and committed citizen participation. Unpaid, volunteer work by concerned citizens is the secret.

I could tell you of many other examples in West Virginia or across the United States. West Virginia is clearly NOT a leader in preservation, and Charleston is NOT the best example of preservation in West Virginia. Our work is very ordinary. Wheeling, a northern industrial city close to Pittsburgh, is a much better example of preservation than Charleston. They have more historic districts, have saved some major buildings including the building in which our state was born, have an excellent program to promote themselves as a Victorian city, and they have great late nineteenth century architecture which we do not have in Charleston. (The Charleston East End District dates from 1900–1925.) They have better citizen leadership and a more responsive city government that we have in Charleston. The tiny town of Branwell, in the southeast corner of the state, where several millionaire coal operators built mansions at the turn of the century, is now marketing that architecture with Spring and Christmas house tours, drama productions and publications. We have two dozen »Main Street« programs, a program associated with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, in which downtown revitalization efforts are focused on preserving the architecture of our small communities while at the same time restructuring the business and marketing efforts of the downtown business community. We have a state-wide Preservation Action organization that calls together local groups an annual meeting and also does some lobbying and consulting activity.

In many of these situations, there are public/private partnerships in which government and private individuals or organizations work together for community betterment. Such cooperative efforts come rather easily in the American political ethos, but I believe citizens and local government anywhere can come together for the general improvement of their communities. Governments are often willing to provide modest financial resources, if citizens do much of the actual work. While many of these citizen efforts have their successes, we must admit that there are failures as well. Leadership is crucial, and volunteer leadership is difficult to maintain over extended periods. Often citizens can be enlisted when crises arise, but then fade away when the crisis is passed.

Nevertheless, I would urge all of you to think seriously how you could bring about such efforts in local communities here in Croatia. Having lived among you for the past six months, I believe that local organizations and citizen networks of all kinds are essential for you to build the democratic society you have struggled and suffered much to achieve. On the local level, people know each other and share similar desires; projects can have limited scope and can be done step by step; the worst of central bureaucratic obstruction can be avoided. Great journeys begin with single steps; one success gives confidence to try another. Our ancestors build great cathedrals by just such efforts; surely we can preserve our communities' cultural resources by similar efforts. I wish you well as you pursue this task.

**Sažetak****R. Eugene Harper****Uloga građanske svijesti u američkom pokretu za očuvanje starina**

*Na početku članka autor definira građansku svijest kao »raznovrsne aktivnosti koje poduzimaju zainteresirani pojedinci ili skupine izvan krugova vlasti s ciljem očuvanja kulturnog nasljedja«, držeći kako je upravo taj vid djelovanja »od suštinskog značenja« za pokret zaštite spomenika u Sjedinjenim Američkim Državama.*

*U članku se ukratko iznosi povijest pokreta za zaštitu spomenika u Americi. Kako su SAD mlada država s razmjerno kratkom poviješću, nastajanje programa zaštite spomenika ondje je, po europskim mjerilima, zakonski propisano tek nedavno. Amerikanci su, naime, svjesno težili k tome da ograniče ulogu središnje državne vlasti želeći stvoriti više prostora za inicijative lokalnih zajednica. Jedan od rezultata takve politike bio je da vlasti – kako na državnoj, tako i na lokalnoj razini – u brojnim ranijim slučajevima nisu uspjele zaštititi spomenike. Na primjer, Mt. Vernon, kuća u kojoj je živio otac domovine George Washington spašena je 1850-tih godina tek zahvaljujući naporima pojedinaca. Takva vrsta angažmana ostat će uobičajena u najvećem dijelu 19. stoljeća. Nastojanjima pojedinaca stvorene su udruge kao što je Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, a moćnim industrijalcima Johnu D. Rockefelleru i Henryju Fordu pripadaju zasluge za očuvanje grada Colonial Williamsburg, odnosno premještanje povijesnih građevina u Greenfield Village. Neke mjere za zaštitu spomenika poduzimale su i vlasti, otkupljujući zemljišta na mjestima velikih bitaka Građanskog rata, odnosno*

*zaštićujući arheološke lokalitete s tragovima autohtonog pučanstva na zemljištima u državnom vlasništvu na Zapadu. Tijekom Velike ekonomske krize poduzeti su još neki zahvati zaštite spomenika kako bi se na taj način uposlilo dio nezaposlenih.*

*Tek 1966. godine, nakon što su – ne vodeći računa o štetnosti zahvata – novom izgradnjom i projektima izgradnje auto-cesta uništeni veliki dijelovi gradova, Kongres donosi Zakon o zaštiti povijesnog nasljedja (National Historic Preservation Act). Time započinje i popisivanje povijesnih struktura od nacionalnog značenja. Spomenutim zakonskim aktom svaka je savezna država obvezana osnovati Ured za zaštitu, djelomično financiran od državne vlasti, koji će nadzirati izgrađeni okoliš i voditi evidenciju povijesnih spomenika obuhvaćenih Nacionalnim registrom povijesnih spomenika (National Register of Historic Places). Građani, odnosno, zainteresirani pojedinci i nadalje imaju velik udio u prikupljanju podataka i u pripremi prijedloga za upis u Nacionalni registar.*

*Svoj članak autor zaključuje kraćim prikazom načina sudjelovanja građana u zaštiti spomenika u njegovom rodnom gradu Charlestonu, odnosno u državi Zapadna Virginia koji se, sami po sebi, ne razlikuju od sličnih aktivnosti u drugim američkim gradovima. Oni obuhvaćaju stvaranje povijesnih parkova (Historic districts), lobiranje kod lokalnih tijela uprave s ciljem da se ishodi donošenje akata o zaštiti i organiziranje mjesnih udruga. Mnoge lokalne zajednice u Zapadnoj Virginiji služe se dostignućima zaštite spomenika u svojoj turističkoj promičbi, odnosno primjenjuju metodologiju zaštite u sklopu revitalizacije gradskih središta prema programu nazvanom Main Street Program. Premda je u Americi taj način sudjelovanja građana nešto posve uobičajeno, autor drži kako bi i u Hrvatskoj lokalne zajednice mogle djelovati na isti način. Počam od manjih akcija koje bi postupno rezultirale sve većim uspjesima, lokalne bi zajednice u Hrvatskoj ostvarivanjem zamjetnijeg udjela građana mogle dodatno pridonijeti nastojanjima da se spomenici zaštite.*