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PRESERVING OUR HERITAGE

BY HERBERT E. KAHLER

SINCE World War II we have observed a phenomenal increase in the number of historic sites and buildings set aside for public use and understanding. Likewise, we have observed a phenomenal increase in the number of visitors to these sites. The factors leading to this interest are fairly obvious. They are: the ease of getting to places with good roads and cars; the annual vacation and desire to go somewhere; the radio, movie, and television programs focusing attention on history and historic places; Centennial observances, such as the Pony Express and Civil War; the advent of inexpensive paperback books dealing with history; the increase in the number of historical magazines, especially those written for popular consumption, such as *American Heritage*; better illustrated textbooks and the growth of fine interpretive museums, such as you have at the Nebraska Historical Society in Lincoln; activities such as that of the American Pioneer Trails Association in marking historic places; and the spontaneous growth

Herbert E. Kahler is Chief Historian, National Park Service, Washington, D. C. This paper was presented at the spring meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society at Omaha, May 7, 1961.

across the nation of informal groups interested in some particular phase of American history.

For example, during World War II, businessmen, industrialists, journalists, and a few historians living in the Chicago area met to discuss Western history, and the group known as "The Westerners" was born. Similar groups or "corrals" have sprung up in many of the major cities of the Nation. Likewise, Civil War Round Tables have formed in approximately 100 cities, and once a month the members come to a dinner meeting to hear and discuss some aspect of the War. They are interested in events and where they happened, so once a year most of them schedule a field trip to a publicly-owned battlefield or historic site.

The movement to preserve written sources of American history goes back at least to the days of Columbus, but the movement to preserve physical sources of history such as historic sites for the public benefit began about one hundred years ago. The federal government did not take the lead in the movement. On the contrary, it felt in the 1850's that it had neither the authority nor responsibility for the preservation of such areas as Mount Vernon or Monticello when they were offered to the United States. In 1850 the State of New York acquired the Hasbrouck House, General Washington's headquarters, at Newburgh, New York, and placed it in the hands of the village trustees for preservation and exhibition. This is the first publicly-owned historic house in the country. We can find other evidence of public interest in this period. Miss Ann Pamela Cunningham, a pioneer in the preservation movement, organized the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association and launched the big drive to save Mount Vernon. By 1859 she had completed its acquisition.

Other factors that gave impetus to public interest in preserving the Nation's historic sites and buildings was the centennial celebration of our Independence and the establishment of state and national preservation societies. In 1876 Independence Hall in Philadelphia was first opened to public use as a great memorial to the principles of the

Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The earliest preservation society with state-wide interests—the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities—came into being in 1889 and was followed shortly by the Trustees for Public Reservations in Massachusetts and the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society in New York. Interestingly enough, the first efforts by the federal government toward historic preservation took place in the Missouri River basin area. In 1876 Custer and his immediate command were annihilated at the Battle of the Little Bighorn; ten years later the federal government set aside the area where Custer and his men fell. In 1899 the federal government took another important step when it set aside lands embracing the remarkable prehistoric ruins in southern Arizona known as Casa Grande.

An important stimulus to federal participation in historic preservation came from Civil War veterans. They were interested in the historic battlefields on which they had fought; these veteran groups were highly organized and politically powerful. As a result of their efforts, Chickamauga Battlefield in Georgia, the first of a substantial number of national military parks was established by Act of Congress in 1890. While other specific legislation continued to be introduced, the first milestone in general federal legislation was the Antiquities Act passed in 1906 during Theodore Roosevelt's administration. It authorized the President to set aside as national monuments sites on federal lands of great historic or scientific value.

We can trace a number of factors which accelerated the preservation activities by the federal government and which also influenced and assisted state programs. Prior to 1933 the federal historical properties were variously administered: some by the War Department, some by Agriculture, and others by the National Park Service. The Reorganization Act of 1933 grouped historical areas together under the National Park Service, and for the first time the United States had one central agency with one set of policies and one national program.

In 1933 another important activity began. The Civilian Conservation Corps gave substantial aid to historic sites in federal and state custody. It helped in building museums, trailside exhibits, roads and parking areas; it assisted in restoration projects, as for example at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, Fort Abraham Lincoln, and the Mandan villages in North Dakota. The federal government, through the National Park Service, supplied materials and manpower for these projects.

Since World War II four major federal actions have affected historical preservation. First are the large-scale reservoir projects inundating important historic landmarks and prehistoric remains. In the Missouri River basin the federal government has sponsored an archeological and historical salvage program. In addition to excavating archeological sites, this includes the identification, recording, and photographing of sites and buildings before they are submerged. In some cases it involves moving structures to higher ground.

Following the close of World War II, many military installations, some of which have historical interest, were declared surplus and placed on the market for sale. The Surplus Properties Act of 1944, as amended, permitted states and cities to acquire such places gratis if they agreed to maintain them for historical use. Fort Wayne, Michigan, and Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, have been transferred and are now being operated as local historical parks. The National Park Service participated in this program by evaluating the historical importance of the properties.

Perhaps one of the most interesting manifestations of public interest in historic preservation was the chartering by Congress of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Its activities are financed entirely through voluntary support and not through appropriations. It is an affiliation of national, regional, state and local organizations interested in the preservation of historic sites and buildings. It also has individual memberships. It is a clearing house for information on historic sites; it arouses public opinion

to threatened losses; it gathers, correlates, and disseminates information on policies, standards, techniques and practices in this field.

A fourth activity which was begun before World War II but gained momentum after that period is the National Survey of Historic Sites. Under the Historic Sites Act, the National Park Service is authorized to make surveys of historical properties, to accept historic sites under certain conditions, and to develop and exhibit them.

The opportunity to carry out the provisions of the Act fully did not arise until 1956. Under this program, studies identifying and evaluating sites are going forward.

In this survey, the field of American history is divided into twenty-two periods or themes. These studies, varying in length from 100 to 300 pages, will eventually be published. To aid in the evaluation of sites, a Consulting Committee of eight authorities in the fields of history, archeology, and architecture makes the preliminary screening. The results are then reviewed by the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments. This Board of eleven persons eminent in the fields of history, archeology, architecture, and human geography makes final recommendations.

The second phase of the survey, known as "The Registry of National Historic Landmarks," involves the issuance of certificates and markers to the owners of sites classified as of exceptional value. Thus far, fifteen basic studies have been completed, including the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the Santa Fe Trail, Great Overland Migrations, Military and Indian Affairs, and the Cattlemen's Empire. To date over 200 sites have been classified as of exceptional value.

The National Registry of Historic Landmarks is not completed, and there are still a number of fields to cover, such as the fur trade, mining, the farmers' frontier, and transportation and communication. As these studies go forward, additional sites will be announced.

From the studies finished it is evident that the Missouri Valley and nearby drainage basins have a rich heritage in terms of historic sites and buildings. Eighteen sites are eligible for National Landmark status, and in addition, eleven historic properties are in the National Park System. A look at the studies shows that for the Lewis and Clark Expeditions, five sites have been classified, three of which are in the Missouri Valley. They are: the Sergeant Floyd Monument, Iowa, where Charles Floyd, the only casualty on the Expedition is buried; Three Forks of the Missouri, Montana, called by Meriwether Lewis an "essential point in the geography of this western part of the Continent;" and Lemhi Pass, Montana-Idaho, the point where the Expedition crossed the Continental Divide and passed from American into formerly held Spanish territory.

In addition to these landmarks, the National Park Service at the present time administers the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, St. Louis, Missouri, which is near the site where the Lewis and Clark Expedition was organized and equipped in 1803; and Fort Clatsop National Memorial, Oregon, near the mouth of the Columbia River, where the Expedition spent the winter of 1805-1806.

The great routes of overland travel have continued to fascinate the public, and fortunately some well-preserved landmarks remain. On the Oregon Trail, three sites have been classified in addition to those already recognized as of exceptional value. These are Robidoux Pass, near Scotts Bluff, where extensive remains of the Oregon and California Trail of the period prior to 1850 have survived; South Pass, Wyoming, the easy passage across the Continental Divide; and Independence Rock, Wyoming, the "Registry of the Plains," with its large number of names and dates left by emigrants and travelers. In addition to these three sites, Chimney Rock, Nebraska, owned by your Society, has been declared a national historic site, while Scotts Bluff, Nebraska and Fort Laramie, Wyoming, have long been administered as units of the National Park System.

The Santa Fe Trail, which opened trade with the Southwest, has five sites included in the Registry of National Historic Landmarks. They are: Fort Larned, Kansas, the most important military post on the eastern part of the trail; Wagon Bed Springs, Kansas, important watering hole sought by all travelers over the desert route of the trail; Bent's Old Fort, Colorado, gathering place for traveler, trapper, trader, and Indian; Raton Pass, Colorado, the easiest passage across the major mountain obstacle on the mountain route; and Santa Fe, New Mexico, terminus of the Santa Fe Trail. In addition, the National Park Service administers Fort Union, New Mexico, which is on the Trail.

In the advance of the West, the military played a significant role in protecting travelers and maintaining peace with the Indians. The number of forts built was substantial. Some saw little military action and were soon abandoned and disappeared, while others continued to exercise wide influence in the region. Of the 102 forts considered in the study, the following in this region were selected as illustrating this phase of American history: Fort Snelling, Minnesota, the early northern anchor of the chain of forts extending as far south as Fort Jesup, Louisiana; Fort Phil Kearny, Wyoming, focus of Red Cloud's efforts to drive off the white man from the Bozeman Trail; Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in continuous use since 1827, and from which General Kearny's army set out for the War with Mexico; and Fort Robinson, Nebraska, storm center in the 1870's of Indian-white relations. The latter site is controlled by the U. S. Department of Agriculture, but certain historical features are operated under a lease arrangement by your Society.

One area of special interest to you, and which is being considered in our "Military and Indian Affairs" theme, is Fort Atkinson, Nebraska. Archeological research there by your Society, performed in part through funds provided by the Federal Government, has clearly identified and defined the stockade area. The significance of Fort Atkinson in

American history, according to criteria established by the National Survey, will be determined by the National Parks Advisory Board at its meeting this month in Washington, D. C.

We can hardly leave the subject of military and Indian affairs without notice of some bloodshed. At Custer Battlefield, Montana, we have the clash between the Indians and whites that stirred the nation in 1876 and has continued to stir Custer fans to the present day. Less known, but equally dramatic is the engagement at Big Hole Battlefield, Montana, where Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce Indians defeated Colonel Gibbon and his troops and then successfully eluded military pursuit until he reached what he thought was Canada, only to find that his knowledge of the international boundary was in error, and he was captured at the Bear Paw Mountains. Both Big Hole and the Custer battlefields are units of the National Park System.

One of the significant chapters of American history is that dealing with free land. Homestead National Monument near Beatrice, Nebraska, commemorates "free land" and the homestead legislation that became law with Abraham Lincoln's signature in 1862. Next year will mark the centennial of the Homestead Act, and we are making preparations now for a new museum, parking area, trails, markers, and literature.

The open range and free land led to ranching operations which are faithfully carried on at such important places as the Tom Sun Ranch, Wyoming, and the Grant Kohrs Ranch in Montana, which have been classified as of exceptional value. In the badlands of North Dakota the ranching operations of Theodore Roosevelt in the 1880's are commemorated by the National Park Service at the Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park. Roosevelt's experiences in the West gave him the idea of the Rough Riders and influenced his thoughts on conservation.

After sites are evaluated, the obvious question arises—who is going to care for those that are nationally signifi-

cant? Judging from past experience, some sites will be lost, but we hope that most will be preserved by some responsible group — foundations, civic organizations, state agencies, or the federal government. Obviously, there is need for teamwork for the number of **sites** which the United States Government can administer **must be limited**. Since World War II, as many as 75 bills to add historical properties to the National Park System have been introduced in one session of Congress. The batting average for enactment per session is low, ranging from zero to three areas. Apparently, the Congress is not as eager as the constituents back home to add more units to the National Park System. Moreover, some of the sites proposed in the Congress are not concurred in by the Interior Department, since they do not measure up to the standards for inclusion in the System.

For each proposed bill the National Park Service must show before Congressional Committees that the area presents a significant chapter in the history of the United States that is not adequately represented elsewhere in the National Park System.

The Registry of Historic Landmarks is designed to focus nationwide attention on sites of major importance irrespective of ownership. These sites are of major importance to the nation and to the states and communities in which they are located. The results of the Registry are an immediate aid in planning federal, regional, and state-wide historic site programs.

What is the future of the preservation movement in this country? In one hundred years we have seen great strides made in historical preservation. In 1895 there were twenty historic houses open to the public, in 1910 nearly one hundred, and by 1933 more than four hundred. Today there are approximately 5,000. Most of these are in private or state ownership.

There are certain trends discernible that indicate an acceleration of this program. They are:

1. The growing number of grass root organizations, such as the Fort Atkinson Foundation.
2. Increased participation of state historical societies and park boards in historic sites work. The Nebraska Historical Society has been active at Chimney Rock, Fort Robinson, and Fort Atkinson. Likewise, the Wisconsin, North Dakota, and Minnesota Historical Societies have stepped up their activities in this field and coordinated their efforts with other state agencies.
3. Increased interest of regional and national historical associations in historic sites. The Mississippi Valley Historical Association has created an Historic Sites Committee; the American Association for State and Local History has joined hands with the National Trust and Colonial Williamsburg in a summer training program that includes the administration of historic sites.
4. Increased participation by foundations in historic sites programs, such as the grants of the Avalon and Old Dominion Foundations to the National Trust and the Reader's Digest Foundation to the restoration of Boscobel, a noted historic structure of high architectural merit in New York City.
5. Increased emphasis on tourism in this country and its economic values.
6. Increased space given in newspapers and magazines to preservation efforts and to the destruction of segments of America's heritage.
7. The current effort of municipal, state and federal agencies to join hands in a broad movement called "Parks for America." The program seeks to correlate planning for parks and historic sites at national, state, and metropolitan levels so that each can complement and supplement the other.

In closing, may I ask what is the value of historic sites and buildings? They are costly to maintain and frequently costly to acquire. In the first place, they help us understand contrast or change in history. For example, the wagon ruts of the Oregon Trail at Scotts Bluff are, indeed, a contrast to the ribbons of concrete we travel to reach the site.

At the entrance to the Nebraska Historical Society's Museum is this inscription, "The spirit of a people lives in its history."

Historic sites and objects help us understand *continuity* in history; they reveal how the present grew out of the past. The three-dimensional aspect of historic sites appeals to people. They can actually see and feel objects associated with great persons and great events. For example, the person who stands in the Assembly Room where the Declaration of Independence was adopted or on the field of Pickett's charge at Gettysburg, or in the Oregon Trail ruts at Scotts Bluff National Monument receives a vivid impression, a sense of identity with the past, which cannot come from any amount of reading. Strangely and interestingly enough, historic sites attract many who found history a dull subject in school. Someone once said in derision that history is the rattling of old bones. But a more perceptive person pointed out that the rattling was sweet music. As we look to the future we hope the sweet music will develop into a full and unforgettable symphony.