The term “historic preservation” suggests that only those objects that are worthy of the historical record are valuable enough to preserve. But how do we collectively decide what is and is not to be part of history? To help in decision making, preservationists rely heavily on a collectively agreed upon method called historiography, the science of producing history. Historiography does not only encompass how to write history books, which are only one stage in the production of history. It also comprises how to identify certain objects as sources of historical evidence (e.g. a five hundred year old house or a builder’s invoice), how to interpret them in relation to each other (to establish, for instance, if the house was built extravagantly or cheaply), how to determine their relevance in the structuring of a historical narrative (does the house represent the beginning, middle or end of a period). Because historiography underwrites the selection and valuation of objects as historic resources, changes in historiographical thinking have been a major engine of change in preservation practice.

Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) transformed twentieth century historiography with his notion of the longue durée. History, he argued, could not be properly understood by just studying strings of short events. Writing during the postwar period, he criticized traditional historians for focusing too narrowly on single events, like WWII, and depicting such episodes as changing the course of history. Where others saw disruptive shifts, he pointed out continuities across long periods of time. For example, he called attention to the persistence of certain cities as centers of wealth power over centuries, even as their systems of government changed when city-states were absorbed into national frameworks. The location of these cities, their proximity to natural resources, navigable waters and trade routes, were ultimately more influential phenomena in shaping the long course of socio-economic history than who happened to be in power during a particular decade. As a prisoner of war in Germany during World War II, Braudel wrote the first sketch of this idea in The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II (1949). He quickly became the leading voice in the Annales school of historiography founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, which emphasized the workings of long-term and large-scale geographic, demographic and ecological forces over traditional event-based narrative. Annales historiography was an important intellectual source for the postwar expansion of objects deemed worthy of preservation from single buildings to ever-larger and longer-lasting constructions, such as infrastructure. Preservationists in Warsaw, Florence and other European cities resisted tabula rasa urban planning, arguing effectively to reconstruct cities along the historic infrastructure of street patterns and lot sizes. In the 1970s and 1980s preservationists expanded their purview further by identifying and trying to protect the long-lasting imprints of human activity in nature under the rubric of cultural landscapes—a the term first formally used by geographer Otto Schlüter in 1908. Cultural landscapes encompassed a broad range of built artifacts, from the Balinese Subak System of terraces for rice farming, which UNESCO describes as providing continuity over two millennia to the Tri Hita Karana Philosophy, to Route 66 in the USA, which the NPS describes as an element of continuity in American road culture.

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