Restoring a Female Presence: New Goals in Historic Preservation
Gail Lee Dubrow


2,177 words excluding footnotes

Although women have led the historic preservation movement, the history of women has not been adequately preserved. This situation is changing now, with diverse recent efforts by feminists to increase the visibility of women at the nation's historic sites and buildings. To understand these efforts, it is useful to review the impressive—but until now limited—participation and focus of women in the preservation movement.

Women were at the forefront of the historic preservation movement from the earliest efforts to commemorate the nation's origins. When the economic depression of 1830 slowed progress on Boston's Bunker Hill Memorial, a women's committee led by Sarah Josepha Hale urged female support for the monument's completion. The women of New England responded to the call. Their grandmothers had sacrificed husbands and sons to war. Now, in the midst of a business depression, housewives were encouraged through their "industry, economy or self-denial" to honor the memory of the Bunker Hill martyrs.¹ Mothers in the young Republic were offered an opportunity to instill in their children patriotic sentiment, "fervent gratitude toward those who laboured to secure our Independence and Liberty."² Leadership in fundraising was consistent with the supposed feminine virtues of self-sacrifice, devotion, and charity. Denied the direct expressions of national loyalty that military service and public office offered to men, women found surrogate means for patriotic expression in this activity. In the words of one observer, "the monument which was begun by men, was finished by women."³
Women assumed leadership in many early preservation battles. George Washington's home at Mt. Vernon was rescued from neglect in 1853 by Ann Pamela Cunningham who founded the Mt. Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union. The Old South Meeting House in Boston was saved in 1876 by Mary Hemenway. The survival of Fraunces Tavern in New York City is credited to Melusina Peirce. Women were responsible for preserving the Alamo, lobbying for the establishment of the National Park Service, opening the Mesa Verde Cliff Dwellings to the public, and more.4

Female discontent with the historic preservation movement was one aspect of the emergence of feminist consciousness in mid-nineteenth-century America. Pioneering physician Harriot Hunt reflected on the gender symbolism of the effort to complete the Bunker Hill memorial, to which she had contributed some years earlier. Hunt viewed the half-completed monument as symbolic of a culture that exalted the accomplishments of men over women. "Half a people make only half a monument," she wrote; "the other half the feminine makes it whole."5 Hunt lamented the fact that the memorial commemorated only male contributions to the American Revolution, having been designed for "John and Peter, not for Mary and Deborah." Optimistically she added, "[it] will not always be so."6

Discontent with the predominantly masculine focus of the preservation activities undertaken by fraternal organizations such as the Sons of the American Revolution led women to carve out a place of their own. In 1890, the Daughters of the American Revolution was formed in response to what founder Mary S. Lockwood termed "one-sided patriotism" on the part of the Sons of the American Revolution.7 Incensed with the traditional view of women as men's helpmates, both in history and historic preservation, and determined to win recognition for the men and women who had achieved American
Independence, the DAR embarked on an ambitious program of commemorative and preservation activity.

In addition to erecting shrines, monuments, and memorials throughout the original thirteen states, and saving the headquarters of Washington and other Revolutionary leaders, the DAR preserved the homes and marked the graves of many American "Marys and Deborahs." The society raised funds for the Mary Washington Monument Association, erected a memorial in Arlington Cemetery to the nurses of the Spanish-American War, marked the birthplace of Benjamin Franklin's mother, and honored Revolutionary War heroine Deborah Sampson, who had disguised herself as a man in order to fight. These preservation activities were defined in rather masculine terms (favoring the sisters and mothers of notable men and women engaged in male-specific activities such as the military), and reflected a narrow preoccupation with the Anglo-American heritage of the DAR, Colonial Dames, United Daughters of the Confederacy, and Native Daughters of the Golden West. Still, these activities were the first organized efforts to preserve the built environment associated with women's history.

While women's clubs worked closely with the DAR on many preservation projects at the turn of the century, the more explicitly feminist agenda of club women influenced not only their choice of heroines but ultimately the kinds of places they saved. Rhode Island women's clubs spearheaded efforts to erect a statue to Anne Hutchinson, the Puritan religious dissenter. Elsewhere and through innumerable commemorative schemes, clubwomen sought to elevate feminist leader Susan B. Anthony to the level of Washington and Lincoln in the national consciousness. (In 1942, the effort by the Rochester Federation of Women's Clubs to place a tablet at the house where Anthony had
lived and worked for forty years, ultimately resulted in the complete restoration of the building.10)

The organizational strength and financial resources of middle- and upper-class women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century gave them power and prestige in the historic preservation movement. However, women's organizations suffered declining influence after 1920, and then the Depression dealt a staggering blow to women's clubs by reducing their membership and depleting their resources. So too, in the eyes of many, there were far more pressing causes. As the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, Carrie Chapman Catt, remarked about the battle during the Depression to add Susan B. Anthony to the carvings at Mt. Rushmore, "I am inclined to think that women are never going to get their full share of monuments in this world, but I do not think that that is important,"11 later adding that memorials seemed superfluous when "the people of our land are in such need."12

If economic and political conditions combined to constrict women's influence, developments within the architectural profession and the field of preservation itself completed the process by which women were relegated to the periphery. Women's status in preservation hinged on the outcome of a schism that emerged in the movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Andrew Green and Edward Hall of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, on the one hand, viewed their mission in lofty terms to "quicken the spirit of patriotism" by preserving historically Significant places. William Sumner Appleton, of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, on the other, focused strictly on preserving architecturally
distinguished historic buildings. As long as historic and patriotic values prevailed, the field of preservation had ample room for amateurs. However, the gradual ascendency of Appleton and his allies in the architectural profession signalled declining influence for women in the historic preservation movement, as new standards were set for professionalism and, for the first time, technical expertise was required.

Evaluating the architectural significance of buildings, and then carrying out technically accurate restoration, required skills that architects alone claimed to possess. Yet for the most part, women found formal architectural education denied to them. A few determined individuals secured such training; there is evidence, for example, of women architects as measurers and delineators in the Historic American Buildings Survey. But the goals of federal documentation projects and preservation programs alike tended to reinforce the exclusion of female preservationists and women's history. The Historic American Buildings Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record (two New Deal programs designed to relieve unemployment among architects, engineers, photographers, and draftsmen) contributed directly to the professionalization of preservation and, indirectly, to the field's masculinization. The National Park Service's limited resources were primarily devoted to saving sites significant in American military and political history, and thus offered only limited opportunities for commemorating women's history given the historic exclusion of women from the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. As the architectural profession gained hegemony over historic preservation, formal and aesthetic values prevailed. By the 1930s, women had lost the organizational power that once had allowed them to define the content of preservation.
Women in the preservation movement underwent much the same experience as women in medicine, law, and other fields in the process of professionalization. Institutional barriers effectively marginalized and eventually disempowered them.\(^\text{15}\)

With the 1976 Bicentennial, public concern about the status of women at historic sites and buildings reemerged. Against the background of the Second Wave of feminism and the explosive growth in the field of American women's history, new questions arose. In a 1976 article, Marion Tinling and Linda Ruffner-Russell first called attention to the dearth of places associated with women's history on the National Register of Historic Places. They also criticized the stereotypical and distorted images at state landmarks that commemorate "women whose fame rests on slim historical evidence ... the Pioneer Mothers, the Madonna of the Trail, [and] the Indian Maiden."\(^\text{16}\) More recently, Heather Huyck has pointed to vast opportunities for interpreting women's history within the historical parks managed by the National Park Service; to date, these opportunities remain largely unexplored.\(^\text{17}\)

My own analysis of selected landmark registers lends credence to the contentions by these authors that women’s history is poorly represented at the nation's historic sites and buildings. In a review of the 1985 register of National Historic Landmarks, I found that less than 3 percent of sites and buildings incorporated women's contributions to history among the explicit reasons for landmark designation.\(^\text{18}\) A similar pattern appeared in my review of selected state and local landmark listings. As of 1982 in California, women's contributions to history were recognized at only 3.3 percent of designated sites and buildings.\(^\text{19}\) In Los Angeles, as of 1986, 5.2 percent of Historical-Cultural Monuments marked women's contributions to the development of the city.\(^\text{20}\) Yet as
historian Gerda Lerner has pointed out, women have always been at least half of human history.\textsuperscript{21}

If the preservation movement has been slow to respond to calls to enhance the visibility of women at the nation's historic sites and buildings, pressure for change is likely to mount as grassroots projects appear with increasing frequency. Walking tours of women's history landmarks have been developed in a number of U.S. cities. These tours include the New Orleans Women's History Tour; Domer, Hunt, Johnson, and Wheeler's \textit{Walking with Women through Chicago History}; Lacy and Mason's \textit{Women’s History Tour of the Twin Cities}; and the Los Angeles Women's History Project developed by Gail Lee Dubrow, Carolyn Flynn and Sherry Katz.\textsuperscript{22} Two national guides to women's history landmarks have been published (Lynn Sherr and Jurate Kazickas's bicentennial \textit{The American Woman's Gazetteer}; and Marion Tinting's encyclopedic \textit{Women Remembered}); these guides give the visitor knowledge of hundreds of sites and buildings associated with women, from the Daytona Beach home and college named for black educator Mary McLeod Bethune, to the Alaska homestead and town named for roadhouse operator Nellie Neal Lawing.

Still, there remains a pressing need to link new-found knowledge of U.S. women's history with the skills and resources of the preservation community. The recent commitment by the National Park Service to establish a Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, N.Y., and to cooperate with historical associations in a survey of nationally significant women's history landmarks are the first steps in the right direction.\textsuperscript{24} However, the National Park Service and state historic preservation offices have not made major commitments of staff and fiscal resources to support the
identification, preservation, and interpretation of women's history landmarks. Additional state and local surveys are needed to fill gaps in existing knowledge about the status of tangible resources associated with women's history.²⁵

As we begin to review the landmarks of women's history, it is essential to recognize that the conception of women's history has changed considerably since the Daughters of the American Revolution first set out to preserve it in 1890. The past emphasis on notable women has given way to a wider view. Equal emphasis is now given to the collective struggles and accomplishments of women and to their daily lives; new importance is assigned to women's history in the household, workplace, and community. The conception of women's history has expanded to include the historical experience of working class and minority women.²⁶ A wider range of tangible resources becomes visible from this perspective. Not only can we see homes and gravesites of exceptional women, but also elements of the built environment that speak to shared and ordinary historical experience. Not only must we look at the woman's place in a male-defined world, but also the places that women themselves created, defined, and used: hospitals, kindergartens, social settlements, schools, women's club buildings, women's residences, and the sites of strikes, protests, and public speeches.

Protecting the landmarks of women's history will require the cooperative efforts of women in the architectural profession, the academy, and the preservation community. Beyond that, it will require support from an even wider constituency. But if there is a lesson to be learned from our foremothers in the historic preservation movement, it is that organized women hold the power to ensure a female presence at historic sites and buildings.
"Bunker Hill Ladies Appeal" (3 April 1830), Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

Ibid.

Harriot K. Hunt, *Glances and Glimpses or Fifty Years Social, including Twenty Years Professional Life* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Co., 1856), 163.


Hunt, 163.

Ibid.


Lockwood and Sherwood, 115, 122, 176.


The preservation strategy employed by clubwomen at the Anthony house took advantage of their wide social network. Local groups assumed responsibility for restoring individual rooms according to an overall plan: the League of Women Voters sponsored the study; the University of Rochester alumnae supported the back parlor; and the Women's Alliance of the Unitarian Church that Anthony had attended made the front parlor its project. Martha Taylor Howard to Rose Arnold Powell (2 December 1946). Rose Arnold Powell (RAP) Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

Carrie Chapman Catt to Rose Arnold Powell (2 February 1935), RAP Papers, Schlesinger Library.

Carrie Chapman Catt to Rose Arnold Powell (21 June 1938), RAP Papers, Schlesinger Library.


Hosmer, 300. Hosmer correctly observes that "women were predominant in the preservation movement as long as it stressed history and patriotic inspiration. When architectural preservation began toward the end of World War I, men became equally active." However, Hosmer wrongly attributes women's declining influence to the supposition that "women apparently were not so enthusiastic about the field of architecture." Here he overlooks the structural
barriers faced by women seeking an architectural education, and wrongly assumes
that a balance of power was struck between men and women in the preservation
movement.
16 Tinling and Ruffner-Russell, "Famous and Forgotten Women": 18.
17 Heather Huyck, "Beyond John Wayne: Using Historic Sites to Interpret Women's
History," in Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz and Janice Monk, eds., Western Women:
Their Land, Their Lives (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 303-
330.
18 Analysis based on U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, History
Division, Catalogue of National Historic Landmarks (Washington, D.C.: United States
history sites on landmark registers reveals three further problems: (1) the
inadequate protection of cultural resources associated with ethnic and minority
women; (2) the limited variety of tangible resources preserved (most are houses);
and (3) the uneven regional distribution of National Historic Landmarks
incorporating women's history themes (most are located on the eastern seaboard
between Maine and Virginia). It should be mentioned, concerning the theme surveys
carried out by the National Park Service, that the long-standing NPS themes of
Exploration and Settlement, the War for Independence, the Civil War, and Westward
Expansion have traditionally focused on male achievements; recently added
thematic categories such as Social and Humanitarian Movements, however, to the
credit of the NPS, have left wider room for women.
19 Analysis based on California Department of Parks and Recreation, California
Historical Landmarks (Sacramento: California Department of Parks and Recreation,
1979; rev. 1982).
20 Analysis based on records of the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission.
22 Gehman and Ries, Women and New Orleans: A History (New Orleans:
Margaret Media, Inc. 1985); Domer, Hunt, Johnson, and Wheeler, Walking With
Women Through Chicago History (Chicago: Salsedo Press, 1981); Lacy and Mason,
Women's History Tour of the Twin Cities (Minneapolis: Nodin Press, 1982) [out of
print]; and the Los Angeles Women's History Project, whose findings were reported
in the California Historical Courier 37: (February 1985): 11.
23 Lynn Sherr and Jurate Kazickas, The American Woman's Gazetteer (New
York: Bantam, 1976) and Marion Tinling, Women Remembered: A Guide to
Landmarks of Women's History in the United States (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood
24 "Reclaiming Our Past: Landmark Sites of Women's History" is a three-year project
begun in May 1986, cooperatively sponsored by the Organization of American
Historians, Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, and National Park
Service. [Page Putnam Miller, Director, National Coordinating Committee for the
Promotion of History, 400 A Street, S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003.] The purpose of
the project is to identify existing sites on the National Register of Historic Places for
nomination to the National Historic Landmark Program, and to fill gaps in the
coverage of women's history by identifying new sites and reinterpreting female historical experience at currently designated landmarks.

25 Rich finds await surveyors. Hidden in a Boston alley I discovered the former headquarters of the Boston Women's Trade Union League. Across the street from Copley Square are the one-time offices of the Woman's Journal and the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association. In Los Angeles, with Sherry Katz and Carolyn Flynn, I discovered a cluster of buildings known in the 1920s as the "Civic Center of Women's Activities," and residences for black women founded by the Sojourner Truth Industrial Club. State and local preservation officials know little about such sites.

26 Few landmarks currently speak to women's labor history. Preservation efforts could rescue from invisibility such significant sites of female labor militancy as the scene of the 1910 garment workers' strike in Chicago and many others.