



Historic Preservation

The Road to Remembering

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HIGH ABOVE THE PATCHWORK QUILT FARMLANDS OF the Hudson Valley near Albany, New York, sits John Boyd Thacher State Park, cresting miles of limestone cliff face and traveling deep into forests, down rocky slopes to grassy fields. It was here, as a child, where I first walked the Indian Ladder Trail with my dad. It was here where my love for the past was nurtured by the stories of the Mohawk Iroquois Indians who, several hundred years earlier, had walked a trail back and forth to Henry Hudson's trading post. To scale the cliffs they felled tall trees against the cliff wall and cut

back the branches, creating what the early settlers called Indian ladders.

In the late 1800s, philanthropist John Boyd Thacher established a summer residence in the area and purchased hundreds of acres of land, including more than a three-mile expanse of the cliff ledge. The Indian Ladder Trail and a number of other sites of natural and historic beauty were part of his estate; land which he made available to the public for their enjoyment.

When Thacher died, his wife, Emma Treadwell Thacher, donated 350 acres of this land to the people of the state to be dedicated as a public park. In a speech to the legislature in March of 1914, New York Governor Martin Henry Glynn announced the gift, expressing sentiments that are still relevant for preservation communities today:

This generous gift is inspired by a benevolence which cannot fail to receive the grateful appreciation of the people and will permit this area where peculiarly attractive natural scenery abounds, to be conserved and preserved for public enjoyment, subject only to such restrictions as make for the public pleasure.

It is another evidence that the principle of conservation attempted to be made effective through enlightened legislation meets with a quick response by men and women, in generous gifts of their private resources to meet these desirable ends. This substantial response to public-spirited legislation is gratifying, and this notable gift will conspicuously contribute to the promotion of the health, happiness, education, and patriotism of the people of the present and future generations.

Preservation has long been recognized as an expansive boon to communities, and dependent on an integration of legislation, public awareness and generosity. I would also realize many years later, after moving to the Garden State, the pivotal importance of early education in promoting the value of historic preservation.

Fast forward to Colonia, New Jersey, where years ago I put down roots with my husband to raise our family of six sons. Gathered around the dinner table one evening, a middle child complained about the poor grade he earned on his social studies test. "Who needs history?" he grumbled. "It's over and done with. Who cares?"

Certainly my son's protestations were simply a justification for his failure, but his muttered sentiments could also be said to reflect an element of our society that needs shoring up—a broader education of the value of historic preservation for a community and a culture. There is no doubt that historic preservation efforts in 2011 and forward would be well served by a broader and more passionate education across the board, for public officials, the general public, and on a more foundational level, our youth. After all, adult values are formed in the hearts and minds of children.

A society teaches what it values

With the development of the first state historic preservation plan in 1997, the New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office shared the vision that:

New Jersey's historic and archeological properties are among the state's most valuable resources. They reflect and illuminate the values of New Jerseyans. They are the physical evidence of the ways people have chosen to live, of our need for beautiful objects as well as functional structures. The presence of historic properties, which display various styles, different historic periods, and the contributions of many groups of people, adds diversity and richness to our urban, suburban, and rural landscapes.

Since then, two more plans have built upon and expanded that vision for these changing times and challenges. Both *New Jersey Partners for Preservation: A*



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Blueprint for Building Historic Preservation into New Jersey's Future 2002—2007 and the draft of *2011—2016 Preserving New Jersey's Heritage: New Jersey Historic Preservation Plan*, include a goal that historic preservation be included in the academic curriculum of New Jersey's youth.

The draft of the 2011—2016 historic preservation plan states as “Goal 2: Expand understanding and appreciation of history and historic preservation among New Jersey citizens, elected officials, students, and organizations across the State.” One of the action steps for this goal is to “Cultivate stewardship by teaching history, archaeology, and historic preservation in grades K-12 and by working with the Department of Education, coordinating with advocacy groups, and encouraging locals to keep preservation and history in schools.”

For schools and students in New

Jersey, history falls within the Core Content Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. According to Amy Rumbo, Social Studies teacher and Subject-Area Leader for Linwood Middle School, North Brunswick, “One of the many challenges that Social Studies educators face in New Jersey is that this subject area is not a part of state mandated testing, which includes the New Jersey Assessment of Skills & Knowledge (NJASK) and the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA). Therefore, the subject tends to take a back seat to the subject areas that are required by state guidelines to be assessed: Language Arts, Mathematics and Science (on the 8th Grade level). It often becomes difficult for Social Studies teachers to impress upon students and parents the importance of historical content because the academic emphasis is on Language Arts & Mathematics. In



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many cases, Social Studies classes at all grade levels may see a cut-back in the instructional time allotted during the school day due to more time being given to the ‘tested areas of study.’”

Rumbo also explained, “In response to state mandates and the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, updating and enhancing curriculums falls heavily on Language Arts, Mathematics and Science. In trying to improve the New Jersey Core Content Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, an update was drafted and accepted in 2009, which included the addition of an Active Citizenship in the 21st Century standard. It is the hope that the emphasis of this standard will provide all students with the opportunity to “acquire the skills needed to be active, informed citizens who value diversity and promote cultural understand-

ing by working collaboratively to address challenges that are inherent in living in an interconnected world” (State of New Jersey Department of Education).

It seems this most recent standard and its emphasis on cultural understanding and interconnectedness provides a sound argument and opportunity to include historic preservation as part of revised curriculums.

Education reveals interconnectedness

While undertaking my own education on historic preservation in New Jersey, I read with interest the 2010 list of the *10 Most Endangered Historic Sites in New Jersey*, published annually by Preservation New Jersey, the only statewide private membership-supported historic preservation organization in New Jersey. At the top of the list was The 1759 Vought House, an

irreplaceable historical treasure languishing into extinction, paradoxically, on the grounds of the Clinton Township Board of Education.

The house was built in 1759 by Christoffel Vought, a second-generation German immigrant and well-known loyalist during the Revolutionary War. “In 1776, he took a strong stand against the rebellion. Volunteering to fight with the British, in 1778 he unsuccessfully led a team of 50—60 loyalists to join up with the British Army. Vought was subsequently captured. A Jury of Inquisition found him guilty, and the Voughts, [including their son John and daughter-in-law, Mary], went into exile in Nova Scotia while their house, land and possessions were sold at auction” (<http://www.preservationnj.org>).

Eventually, the Voughts left the hard life of Nova Scotia and traveled by schooner to upstate New York, the Albany area to be exact. John and Mary’s eldest daughter, Christiana, fell in love and married the schooner’s captain, John Bogart, and the family set down roots in Duanesburg, NY, just miles from Altamont where John Boyd Thacher would build his summer estate not many years later. Christiana and John had eight children and a number of grandchildren, any of whom might have shared a table with Thacher descendants or walked the Indian Ladder Trail, sharing the story with family and friends of a loyalist family in New Jersey.

The challenges to historic preservation in New Jersey are significant—finances, the

need for collaboration by all the important players, developing and passing appropriate legislation, but no challenge is as systemic as the failure to educate. Adequate funds and the best collaborative efforts will serve no purpose if an awareness of the need for and value of historic preservation is absent. To overlook the opportunity for a broad study of historic preservation in our schools is to lose the opportunity to build in our young an ethic of stewardship and sustainability, enhancing the quality of life now and ensuring the viability of life in the future.

Both our built and natural environments, as well as our communities and our American culture, will suffer irreparable losses if, when students ask, “Why study history?” we fail to impress on them that “the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage” and “the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people...” (*National Historic Preservation Act*).

A state curriculum enriched by historic preservation ideals and methods will go far to ensure that our children and their children will walk the Indian Ladder Trails of our state and our country well into the future and remember who they are in the journey.

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