

“Of Exceptional Importance”: The Origins of the “Fifty-Year Rule” in Historic Preservation

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Abstract: The “fifty-year rule” is one of the most commonly accepted principles within American historic preservation: properties that have achieved significance within the past fifty years are generally not considered eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. An often misunderstood chronological threshold, the fifty-year standard was established by National Park Service historians in 1948. Until the advent of the “new preservation” with the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966, the standard of exceptional importance had only been applied to presidential and atomic heritage sites. Operating as a filter to ward off potentially controversial decisions about the nature of historic site significance, understanding the origins of the fifty-year rule reveals how Americans have constructed the chronological boundaries of a useable past through historic preservation during the twentieth century.

Key words: historic preservation, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, fifty-year rule

ONE OF THE CONVENTIONS learned within the practice of historic preservation in the United States is the so-called “fifty-year rule.” “Ordinarily . . . properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years shall not be considered eligible for the National Register” unless they are “of exceptional importance.” Generations of preservationists and planners, politicians

and the public, have cited the “longevity test” to segregate consideration of properties that represent recent trends, events, or individuals significant in American history at the local, state, or national level. In fact, this “rule” is only an exception to the criteria that shape listings within the National Register of Historic Places. Of the eight “exceptions” to the National Register Criteria, Consideration G, for properties that have achieved significance within the last fifty years, is probably the best-known, yet also the most misunderstood preservation principle in America.¹

The origins and early application of the fifty-year standard are important for understanding how Americans have constructed the chronological boundaries of a useable past through historic preservation during the twentieth century. Although most preservationists assume that Criteria Consideration G was established with the advent of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in 1966, the history of the fifty-year standard goes back to the Historic Sites Act of 1935 and the creation of the Historic Sites Survey, which is now known as the National Historic Landmarks program. From the mid-1930s until the first National Historic Landmark was designated in 1960, the goal of the Historic Sites Survey was to identify sites and buildings that were nationally significant, that deserved protection, and that might be considered as additions to the National Park System.² Over the thirty years from 1936 to 1966, the National Park System Advisory Board played a major role, through its review of proposed National Historic Sites, in developing most of the basic criteria for significance and integrity that shaped the foundation of the national historic preservation program after the mid-1960s. Formulated by National Park Service historians in 1948 and adopted by the Advisory Board, the fifty-year threshold was broken only in the case of a few presidential and atomic heritage sites prior to the “new preservation” that evolved out of the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act.³

1. The National Register of Historic Places has four Criteria and eight Criteria Considerations, labeled A through G. The National Historic Landmark program has six Criteria and eight Exceptions to the Criteria, labeled I through S. Except as noted, this essay will use the generally more familiar National Register terminology. *National Register Bulletin: How to Complete the National Register Form* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1991), 37.

2. For the origins and impact of the Historic Sites Act of 1935, see Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926–1949* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981), 589–601. Verne E. Chatelain, Chief Historian, Office of National Parks, Buildings, and Reservations, presented “A National Policy for Historic Sites and Monuments” at the first meeting of the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments, February 13–14, 1936. At this meeting he also proposed “Suggested Statements of Principles and Standards Involving National Historical Areas.” Records for the National Park System Advisory Board are maintained at the National Historic Landmark Survey, Washington, DC. For an international comparison of government sponsored historic site surveys, see J. Thomas Schneider, Report to the Secretary of the Interior on the Preservation of Historic Sites and Buildings (Washington, DC: United States Department of the Interior, 1935).

3. Barry Macintosh, *The Historic Sites Survey and National Historic Landmarks Program: A History* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1985), 69. For a description of the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings and Monuments (hereinafter Advisory Board),

A Thematic Approach

The 1936 Historic Sites Act raised such expectations within the American public that the National Park Service was quickly flooded with congressional and other official requests for Advisory Board consideration of potential National Historic Sites. NPS staff worked closely with the membership of the Advisory Board, whose deliberations served as a buffer protecting the Department of the Interior from “political and patriotic pressures.” Within a couple of years, the Historic Sites Survey and the Advisory Board spent the majority of their time reacting to requests for review, rather than conducting an active survey of American historic sites.⁴ To help structure this review work, NPS historians established a series of themes, conceived by them as “stages of American progress,” under which historic sites might be identified, categorized, and recognized. In program guidance from NPS headquarters, historians were advised that “the survey is to cover the entire course of American history. Accordingly, full attention must be given to the different periods, and no important period should be slighted or neglected because of the special field of interest of the surveyor.” The ultimate goal was to identify “representative sites of all periods.”⁵

Despite this call for comprehensiveness, the Historic Sites Survey adjusted the thematic framework to avoid controversy, or the perception of controversial issues.⁶ A 1937 report by the “Committee on Historical Areas” noted: “In accordance with the recommendation of the Committee, the attached list omits all sites of contemporary or near contemporary nature which might lead to controversial questions.” The entire theme “Political and Military Affairs, 1865–1937” was dropped from consideration “in view of the fact that matters

see Barry Mackintosh, *The National Park System Advisory Board: A Short History* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1999).

4. Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 600–01, 713–14.

5. Mackintosh (*The Historic Sites Survey*, 7–12) discusses the development of the National Park Service’s thematic framework. In 1994, the National Park Service, at the direction of Congress, revised its thematic framework. Fifth Advisory Board Meeting, October 28–29, 1937. Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee on Historical Areas, June 25–26, 1937. Sixth Advisory Board Meeting, Jan 13–14, 1938. Agenda, Meeting of the Advisory Board, December 1, 1938. The Advisory Board raised the questions: “Does the thematic approach to the problem of classifying historic sites provide a satisfactory basis for determining national significance?” and “Should an attempt be made to differentiate between history, archeology, and architecture in the survey and classification of sites?” Memorandum for the Director, October 12, 1936 describes the scope of the proposed survey of historic sites. National Park Service, Bureau Historian Files, Washington, DC.

6. In the late 1930s, following the initial guidance for historical inclusiveness, NPS field historians forwarded recommendations for properties associated with the recent past. Regional historians proposed properties such as Vice President John Garner’s Lamar County, Texas boyhood home as representing “Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt” and the home and birthplace of Will Rogers (1879–1935) in Oklahoma. Rogers was recently deceased, and at the time of the recommendation, Garner (1868–1967) was the sitting vice president. Understandably, the Advisory Board took no action on these proposals. List of Sites of National Historical Importance, Region III, Submitted to Washington Office, May 1937, for Consideration by Advisory Board. NPS Bureau Historian files, Washington, DC.

involved . . . are pertinent to current or near current history, and therefore controversial, it will be inadvisable to act on this theme at the present time.” In this way, NPS set a terminal date (1870) for consideration of historic sites.⁷

According to the National Park Service and its advisors, American history, or at least the noncontroversial parts of it, effectively ended at the conclusion of the Civil War. Although the Committee was not specific in its characterization of “contemporary” or “near contemporary” history, it is easy to understand how events in American history during the last third of the nineteenth century might be considered controversial. In the mid-1930s, Americans were still arguing over what to call the Civil War, and the country was ill prepared to deal with issues surrounding Reconstruction, Populism, and other themes of the Gilded Age. As the first official systematic national survey of historic properties in the United States, the National Park Service leadership focused its efforts first on the backlog of obvious, noncontroversial, candidates for designation.⁸

Establishing the Fifty-Year Rule

Discontinued for the duration of World War II, the Historic Sites Survey was slowly revitalized in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1948, the *Report of the Committee on Standards and Surveys on Criteria to be used in Selecting Historic Sites and Buildings* noted that “structures or sites of recent historical importance relating to events or persons within the last fifty years will not, as a rule, be eligible for consideration under the standards.” This report established the primacy of historical significance within the process to select important sites worthy of preservation and outlined four of the current seven aspects of integrity used by the National Register. These standards, including the exclusion for properties associated with recent history, were quickly adopted by the newly established National Trust for Historic Preservation. For both the Park Service and the National Trust, the guidelines struc-

7. Fifth Advisory Board Meeting, October 28–29, 1937. Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee on Historical Areas, June 25–26, 1937. Some of the adopted themes that give clues to what was considered “recent history” include Westward Expansion and the Extension of National Boundaries, 1830–1890; Commerce, Industry, and Agriculture to 1890; Exploration of Natural Resources to 1870; and the Arts and Sciences to 1870. The list of recommended actions is found in “A Summary of the Recommendations on Historic Sites made by the Committee on Historical Areas” (June 25–26, 1937). In a draft “Report to Committee on Historical Areas” (June 25, 1937), several of the themes were revised to shorten their period of consideration to a terminal date of 1830. For example, Arts and Sciences, 1830–1937, was shortened “in order to bring it down to a non-controversial period.”

8. Although the survey work undertaken since 1933 by the Historic American Buildings Survey was national in scope, it “did not really help in the difficult process of classifying the historical resources of the nation.” Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 592. In 1936 the Advisory Board listed “timeliness in relation to historic or current events” in addition to potential demolition, collapse, or profanation as reasons for “urgency for action in any given case beyond a declaration of national significance.” Advisory Board Meeting, May 9, 1936.

tured the evaluation of properties proposed for stewardship and long-term management.⁹

The creation of the fifty-year rule was not without a chronological precedent. During World War II, as the Advisory Board held a series of “interim meetings,” the National Park Service established what could be called the “twenty-five-year rule”:

No consideration will be given to the national significance of the contribution performed by an individual for at least 25 years after the death of such a person. Such policy has been adopted to insure the proper historical prospective regarding the effect of such contribution upon our national heritage.¹⁰

In 1952, at its twenty-sixth meeting, the Advisory Board specifically addressed an “inconsistency in policy of not considering any historical places, or event, later than 1870” and the provision “that no person shall be commemorated until at least 25 years following his death.” As adopted the Board’s resolution read:

Resolved, that the Committee (Committee on Historical Problems) recommends that in lieu of the termination date of 1870, or the death of an individual for 25 years before his contributions are considered, the following criteria be adopted: Structure or sites of recent historical importance relating to events, or persons, within fifty years will not, as a rule be eligible for consideration.¹¹

The administrative record of this meeting does not indicate if there was a particular property under consideration that prompted the need for this clarification of the Board’s policy and NPS practice.

Establishing two sets of chronological limits for the consideration of historic sites was an important step for the Advisory Board. In 1945 Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes had specifically asked the Advisory Board to evaluate the eligibility of Chinsegut Hill, located near Brooksville, Florida. This fifteen-acre property was the retirement home of social reformer, politician,

9. Twentieth Meeting, Advisory Board, February 8–10, 1948. In evaluating potential new park areas, the “prime requisite is historical significance,” while “suitability” was listed as an important consideration. The integrity of a proposed building or structure and the appropriate property boundaries were included within the discussion of suitability. David E. Finley, *History of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1947–1963*. See Appendix 10: “Report of the Committee on Standards and Surveys on Criteria to be used in Selecting Historic Sites and Buildings.”

10. Fifth Interim Committee Meeting of the Advisory Board, Dec. 11–12, 1945 at Washington, DC. “Rough Draft of Dictaphone Recording,” 15–21 and 50–53. Previous adoption of the twenty-five-year rule was referenced at during the Fifth Interim Committee Meeting. The twenty-five-year rule continues to influence NPS decision-making. The 1986 Commemorative Works Act (P.L. 99-652) adopted the twenty-five-year rule to restrict the establishment of memorials on the National Mall in Washington, DC.

11. Advisory Board Minutes, Twenty-Sixth Meeting, April 21–22, 1952, Washington, DC. *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Properties Associated with Significant Persons*, pp. 12–14. Current NPS policy is that properties associated with living persons are usually not eligible for listing in the National Register.

and diplomat Raymond Robins (1873–1954) and his wife Margaret, who was also a labor reformer. The Advisory Board quickly concluded that the Robins' collective contribution to American history did not rise to the level of national significance and that the architecture of their home was "passable, but not outstanding." Given Secretary Ickes' personal interest in the site, the Advisory Board carefully worded the resolution on the property. The Advisory Board noted that it "has for several years declined to attempt to estimate the national significance of the lives and careers of citizens of the United States, unless they have been dead for at least twenty-five years. The Interim Committee feels that this is a wise practice and should be adhered to." This twenty-five-year standard effectively ensured that consideration of an individual's accomplishments would have a historical perspective that was at least one generation removed. Regardless of the Secretary of the Interior's personal interest and whatever impact Robins had on American history, in 1945 his place fell within the period of recent and thus inherently controversial history.¹²

As the Historic Sites Survey was reinvigorated by MISSION 66, a ten-year effort to revitalize the National Park Service (1956–1966), the ideal of the fifty-year rule remained intact. To provide guidance during Mission 66, the National Park Service produced the *Handbook for the National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings* in 1958. This work set forth seven historic criteria and one criterion for integrity that served as the "measuring stick by which every site considered by the Survey is evaluated." With reference to the work of surveying historic sites, Charles Hosmer notes that "the job of systematically classifying historic sites . . . did not really begin until the late 1950s."¹³

Historical vs. Architectural Significance

From the late 1930s to the late 1950s, as the National Park Service established chronological boundaries for noncontroversial history, the Advisory Board elaborated on the differences between properties significant for their association with nationally significant events or persons and properties sig-

12. Minutes of the Fifth Meeting of the Interim Committee of the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments, December 11–12, 1945. Confidential Section of the Minutes. Fifth Interim Committee Meeting of the Advisory Board, Dec. 11–12, 1945 at Washington, DC. "Rough Draft of Dictaphone Recording," 15–21, 50–53. Robins and Ickes had worked together in Chicago during the first decades of the twentieth century.

13. In April 1959 the National Survey of Sites and Buildings presented "Criteria and Guidelines for the Classification and Selection of Historic Sites and Buildings to the Advisory Board." At this time the National Park Service had a three-step process in the classification of historic sites and buildings: (a) initial evaluation and comparison of the historic site or building by theme of study; (b) classification of sites and buildings by period or theme into those possessing exceptional value as commemorating or illustrating the history of the United States and those not possessing such value; and (c) presentation to the Advisory Board. After classification, the issue of suitability for inclusion in the National Park system was considered. The seventh historic criterion was a restatement of the Advisory Board's resolution on the fifty-year rule. Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 581.

nificant in the history of architecture. The framers of the Historic Sites Survey thought that it was desirable “nevertheless to preserve outstanding examples of historical architecture even in some cases where important historical events have not occurred . . . if such examples are the best to be found.” In January 1937, NPS field historians, who were compiling initial lists of candidate sites, were instructed: “For the present, no structure built after 1860 should be included for architectural reasons, although historical consideration may in some cases justify their inclusion.” NPS regional staff quickly identified several late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century properties for consideration, such as H. F. duPont’s Winterthur estate in Delaware and the midwestern work of Frank Lloyd Wright.¹⁴

As the NPS historians produced lists of nationally significant sites, Fiske Kimball, a distinguished architect and member of the Advisory Board, was “happy to learn . . . that buildings in which no outstanding historical events took place but which are typical examples of architecture are to receive consideration. Social, economic and architectural history is so often represented by buildings.” Before World War II, appreciation by the general public of recent architecture was limited. As Charles Hosmer has noted, path-breaking works focusing on modern architecture, such as Henry Russell Hitchcock’s 1928 study of Frank Lloyd Wright, were “valiant efforts to broaden the horizons of the literate public, who had tended to believe that buildings later than 1830 did not possess enough historical or architectural interest to be preserved.” In 1941, after a briefing on National Park Service programs, the arbitrary cut-off date of 1870 was widely criticized by members of the newly formed American Society of Architectural Historians. Henry Russell Hitchcock’s observation that “often primary monuments of modern architectural history are wantonly destroyed” was reinforced with a anecdotal list of demolished or threatened important buildings.¹⁵

The National Park Service had already experienced difficulty with the 1870 threshold and with the impact of presidential interest in National Historic Site

14. A Summary of the Recommendations on Historic Sites made by the Committee on Historical Areas, June 25–26, 1937. Fifth Advisory Board Meeting, October 28–29, 1937 at Washington, DC. Architectural properties were listed chronologically by state and by building type, with the last group gathered under the category “After ca. 1840.” Memorandum for Field Historians: Inventory Procedure on Historic Sites Survey, January 26, 1937. NPS Bureau Historian Files, Washington, DC. Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 591. Papers of Charles B. Hosmer, Jr. Series II, Box 5, Folder 3, “U.S.-NPS-General 10.” University of Maryland, College Park.

15. Minutes of the First Meeting of the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments, Department of the Interior, February 13–14, 1936, p. 33. At this meeting, Kimball also expressed the European approach to historic preservation: “better to preserve than to repair; better to repair than to construct; and better to construct than to destroy the evidences of history.” “Summary of the Round Table Discussion on the Preservation of Historic Architectural Monuments,” *The Journal of the American Society of Architectural Historians* 1, no. 2, (1941): 22. At the end of discussion, Esther Saver “hoped this meeting would end the prevailing idea that 1870 was the terminal date of architectural significance.” “Special Issue on Preservation of Historic Monuments,” *The Journal of the American Society of Architectural Historians* 1, no. 3–4, (1941): 22.

designation. Located near President Franklin Roosevelt's home at Hyde Park, New York, the Vanderbilt Mansion (1896–1898), a “pretentious example of Renaissance architecture” designed by McKim, Mead, and White was completed nearly two decades after the Advisory Board's cut-off date. In 1939, upon hearing that the property might be sold to the controversial New York City evangelist, Father Divine, President Roosevelt strongly encouraged the National Park Service to consider the estate as “‘an excellent example of a phase of American life that is now past.’” Although “some members of congress questioned whether a house built in the 1890s was ‘historical,’” the site was quickly designated in late 1940. Hosmer concluded, “it is unlikely that the Vanderbilt home would have come into the Park System without constant pressure from the president.”¹⁶

In 1941, Fiske Kimball, the author of a 1928 survey of American architecture, presented the Advisory Board with a list of nationally significant examples that included buildings constructed after 1840.¹⁷ Properties significant for their distinguishing characteristics rather than their association with important persons or events were considered under separate criteria by the Advisory Board. Kimball's list of significant post-1840 architecture included many icons of late nineteenth-century architecture, and while the Advisory Board approved his recommendations, the properties were not designated because of a presidentially imposed wartime restrictions on such honors and because none of the buildings were under consideration for incorporation into the National Park System. Illustrating the influence of individual Advisory Board members in sponsoring individual properties, Kimball campaigned for the first historic site individually recognized by the Advisory Board for its architectural merits alone: the extraordinary Georgian home of the Ridgely family, Hampton, located outside Baltimore, Maryland.¹⁸

About ten years after establishing the fifty-year rule, the plight of the Robie House (1907–1909), a Frank Lloyd Wright building in Chicago, provided an opportunity to recognize a significant example of modern architecture that

16. Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 675–80.

17. Kimball's list included ten buildings constructed after the Advisory Board's terminal date of 1870. Two buildings built in the first decade of the twentieth century, both from Frank Lloyd Wright, were listed; the Larkin Administration Building, Buffalo, New York (1906, now demolished) and Unity Temple, Oak Park, Illinois (1907, NHL designation 1970). Fifteenth Advisory Board Meeting, October 28–30, 1941. Kimball's 1928 *American Architecture* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company) contains five chapters on modern architecture, including a discussion of Wright entitled “Counter Currents.”

18. “Dr. Fiske Kimball's Annotated List of Structures of Outstanding Architectural Interest.” Eighth Advisory Board Meeting, August 15–18, 1938. Fifteenth Advisory Board Meeting, October 28–30, 1941. Sixteenth Advisory Board Meeting, May 22–23, 1942. For a discussion of the designation of Hampton, see Fifth Interim Committee Meeting of the Advisory Board, Dec. 11–12, 45 at Washington, DC. “Rough Draft of Dictaphone Recording,” 29–37. Worrying about the sustainability of an architecturally significant park unit, NPS Director Drury was concerned that “whether from a national standpoint historically we are justified in taking even a supreme example of architecture that creates an additional burden to the government.” Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 1058–60.

was threatened with demolition. When the Chicago Theological Seminary announced plans to raze the building for new construction, a representative from the “The Committee to Preserve the Robie House” wrote in April 1957 urging that the Secretary of the Interior nominate the building as a historic monument. Noting that recognition of the importance of the Robie House began only in the 1930s, the *Architectural Forum* opined that “a house like that cannot fully mature in less than a century. A hundred years may have to pass before the educated public will know that the Robie House is worth more than Mount Vernon as an expression of the genius of the American people. . . . It must have its century at least, to stand in and to be tested in.”¹⁹

The Park Service response to this emergency request was measured: “Although we know very little about the Robie House, we share your concern that it is slated to be razed this summer.” Hillory A. Tolson, the Acting Director of the National Park Service, was unable to “offer greater encouragement” and observed that the nationwide survey of historic sites, which was “interrupted at the outset of World War II,” would “not be initiated in time to be of any help in saving the Robie House.” Tolson’s response was influenced by bureaucratic restraint and advice from the Chair of the Advisory Board, Walter Huber, who closed his letter to the NPS Director with “I hope the Secretary will take no precipitate action” on the request to designate the Robie House as a national monument. Although the request by the concerned Chicago citizens is included in the Advisory Board files from its October 1957 meeting, there is no mention of the property in the agenda or the minutes from the meeting.²⁰

Why was the National Park Service unwilling to recognize the significance of the Robie House in 1957? Given its contemporary selection by architectural critics as one of the two most important examples of residential architecture in the United States, arguments that the property’s significance had not yet been established were spurious. Was it the fact that the property was threatened? At its March 1957 meeting, the Advisory Board had “given further consideration to the historic and architectural importance” of Alexander Hamilton’s home, “The Grange,” and noting that the property was “in immi-

19. NPS Acting Director Hillory A. Tolson to William B. Macdonald, Organizing Chairman, The Committee to Preserve the Robie House, May 13, 1957. “The Value of Used Architecture,” *Architectural Forum*, 1957. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941). Henry Russell Hitchcock, *In the Nature of Materials: The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright, 1887–1941* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearch, 1942). Rumors of threats to the Robie House were current in 1941. See Hitchcock’s comments in “Summary of the Round Table Discussion on the Preservation of Historic Architectural Monuments,” *Journal of the American Society of Architectural Historians* 1, no. 2 (1942): 22.

20. NPS Acting Director Hillory A. Tolson to William B. Macdonald, Organizing Chairman, The Committee to Preserve the Robie House, May 13, 1957. Walter L. Huber to Conrad L. Wirth, Director, National Park Service, April 26, 1957. Thirty-seventh Advisory Board Meeting, October 7–10, 1957. Carl Feiss, “Historic Town Keepers,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 15, no. 4 (1956): 2–6. In 1956, Feiss remarked “Frank Lloyd Wright is still very much alive, but a house of his which helped to make architectural history and is of itself a beautiful thing faces extinction.”

ment danger,” the Board reaffirmed its position that the home was worthy of preservation.²¹ Was it the fact that the well-known and flamboyant architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, participated in the efforts to save the property? Did the fact that the property’s significance was wholly due to its artistic and architectural merits influence the Advisory Board? Or, was it simply that the building was only forty-eight years old in 1957? One limiting factor—perhaps the primary one—was the nature of the Advisory Board’s legal mandate—to evaluate the significance of properties considered suitable for inclusion in the National Park System. For the Park Service to support the property as a National Historic Site would have been precedent-setting, given that there was little likelihood that the home would ever be established as a National Park. What was needed at the end of the 1950s was a mechanism for the National Park Service to recognize nationally significant properties that would never be federal parks.

The Registry of National Historic Landmarks

On October 9, 1960, Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton announced the establishment of the National Registry of Historic Landmarks. “Because of the number of important historic landmarks in our great nation, it is manifestly impossible for the government to acquire or manage these sites or support them financially, although they are an integral part of the American heritage.” The purpose of the program was to “give moral support and recognition to organizations now concerned with the preservation of archeological and historic properties.” Given this new form of historic recognition, the Advisory Board and its NPS staff refined and elaborated on the established criteria for evaluating historic sites. For example, the Board amended the *Criteria and Guidelines for the Classification of Sites and Buildings* in 1962 to limit the recognition of sites that are primarily significant in the history of religion. This policy evolved into National Register Criterion Consideration A.²²

The fifty-year rule was codified in 1961 with a technical amendment to the Surplus Property Act. When enacted in 1948, the law included provisions that allowed the federal government to transfer federally controlled lands to states and other parties for the purpose of establishing historic monuments. The act also restricted any property from being transferred if it had been acquired by

21. Thirty-sixth Advisory Board Meeting, March 1957.

22. *Secretary Seaton Announces Plan to Register National Historic Sites*, NPS Press Release, October 9, 1960. This announcement established the principle that units of the National Park System were not eligible for consideration as National Historic Landmarks. NPS viewed the Registry as a additional component of the overall history program, acting as a companion to theme studies and the evaluation of potential new park system units. In 1963, the criteria were amended to generally exclude birthplaces, graves, burials, and cemeteries, except for persons of transcendent importance. Forty-sixth Advisory Board Meeting, April 30–May 3, 1962. Forty-eighth Advisory Board Meeting, March 25–27, 1963.

the United States after 1900. The role of the National Park System Advisory Board was to determine if the proposed surplus property site was “suitable and desirable” for recognition and preservation. In “several instances,” such as at Fort Moultrie in South Carolina, this rigid date prevented the transfer of historically significant properties because the land had been acquired after 1900. The legislative reporting on the bill, which was sponsored by the Department of the Interior, noted that “it seems probable that the basis for this limitation was the general criterion of the Advisory Board which provided that property relating to events of persons within 50 years would not ordinarily be considered as having historical significance.” The analysis referenced the National Park System Advisory Board’s 1948 adoption criteria for consideration of historic sites, including the fifty-year restriction. In a letter supporting the bill, Assistant Secretary of the Interior George W. Abbott stated, “we believe this to be a well considered requirement because it is calculated to assure that by an appropriate lapse of time historic matters will be considered in their proper perspective.” “Historic significance is a rather intangible matter on which opinions may vary but we believe the best solution is to rely on a carefully selected advisory board composed of people who are specially trained for evaluating claims of historic significance.” The National Park System Advisory Board “is firmly established and its specialized competence and careful evaluations are generally recognized and respected.”²³

Persons of Transcendent Historical Importance

Not surprisingly, the first individuals considered exceptionally significant in American history were the former presidents. In 1939, President Roosevelt made plans to establish the first presidential library, a gift that was confirmed by congressional resolution. At the same time he also agreed to donate his family’s home at Hyde Park to the National Park Service. Given the wartime context, the Advisory Board’s recommendation that Hyde Park was nationally significant was not surprising, and the site was designated as a National Historic Site late in mid-January 1944. In 1945, NPS Director Drury argued that there was “a long list of Presidents of the United States who have not yet been memorialized” by properties in federal ownership.²⁴

In 1963, the Advisory Board reviewed a study of the post–Civil War po-

23. Public Law 87–90. *Amending the Surplus Property Act of 1944 to Revise a Restriction on the Conveyance of Surplus Land for Historic-Monument Purposes*, U.S. House of Representatives, Report No. 558, June 21, 1961. Phillip S. Hughes, Assistant Director for Legislative Reference to Representative William L. Dawson, May 23, 1961. George W. Abbot, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, to Representative Sam Rayburn, January 11, 1961.

24. Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 758–767. Fifth Interim Committee Meeting of the Advisory Board, Dec. 11–12, 1945 at Washington, DC. “Rough Draft of Dictaphone Recording,” 19, 35. In 1945 one member of the Advisory Board noted that Woodrow Wilson’s birthplace had been previously “turned down because it was too contemporary with our own times.”

litical and military history—"Political and Military Affairs, 1865–1915." The terminal date for the study was revised to meet the fifty-year standard. Described as "a very interesting period of our history close to the present," the theme study focused on sites associated with the early careers of persons who eventually became president of the United States. Places associated with James Garfield, Rutherford B. Hayes, William Howard Taft, U.S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Johnson, and Franklin Roosevelt were enumerated. The Advisory Board deferred consideration of sites associated with Presidents Cleveland, Wilson, and Arthur.²⁵

This effort to recognize the contributions of American presidents continued in 1964 with the designation of John F. Kennedy's Massachusetts birthplace and two homes associated with President Woodrow Wilson: his birthplace in Staunton, Virginia and the home in Washington, DC, where he died in 1924. These designations were "approved in a special category" by the Advisory Board, suggesting that the properties were considered to represent the contributions of persons of exceptional importance in American history. For Kennedy's 1917 birthplace both the provisions against considering birthplaces or boyhood homes and the fifty- and twenty-five-year guidelines were ignored, which is understandable given the nation's mourning over his assassination in 1963 and the rush to commemorate places associated with his career.²⁶

The transcendent importance of the American presidency was reaffirmed in 1965, when the Advisory Board, after restating its general policy regarding places that have achieved national significance within the past fifty years, made an exception for presidents, finding that "an election by the citizens of this Nation of a President is in itself an event of transcendent historical importance." The Board went further in recommending that "upon the election of any man as President of the United States, an appropriate site be identified and considered for classification as a National Landmark." For a short time, the Advisory Board held firm with its conviction that living persons—even presidents—should not be memorialized. However, in 1966 both presidents Eisenhower and Johnson helped the National Park Service choose the property that was best associated with their careers.²⁷

The transcendent historical importance of the presidency was not immediately expanded to include members of Congress and other political lead-

25. Forty-ninth Advisory Board Meeting, November 4–6, 1963. Minutes of the History Committee, November 5, 1963. Curiously, sites associated with President Hoover were not discussed because they fell within the fifty-year period.

26. United States Department of the Interior News Release, "President Kennedy's Birthplace Heads Latest National Historic Landmark List," Fiftieth Advisory Board Meeting, April 13–16, 1964. Wilson's birthplace designation also went against general policy to recognize birthplaces, and his Washington, DC residence was also associated with his presidential retirement, a period that was within fifty years of the designation date.

27. Fifty-second Advisory Board Meeting, April 12–13, 1965. The History Committee revised its report on presidential sites to exclude properties associated with Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson. Fifty-third Advisory Board Meeting, October 4–17, 1965. Fifty-fourth Meeting of the Advisory Board, April 18–21, 1966.

ers. In the early 1960s, the Advisory Board appears to have applied twin chronological standards—that a person must have been dead for at least twenty-five years and that the important events a person is associated with must be at least fifty years in the past. In 1961, the Advisory Board was asked to evaluate the George W. Norris home at McCook, Nebraska. Noting that Norris' contributions to "American political life" dated from the 1930s, the report stated: "To have the benefit of historical perspective, the Board, as a rule, does not evaluate sites and buildings associated with events and persons less than 50 years of age. The comparative analysis of the contributions of other notable figures of this period has not been made." Norris (1861–1944) served in the House and Senate for forty years, from 1903 to 1943, and was an important supporter of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs. Although Norris had died during World War II, his political accomplishments were less than twenty years old in the early 1960s. Built in 1903, Fairview, the Nebraska home of William Jennings Bryan until 1921, was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1963, only thirty-eight years after the influential politician's death in 1925, but more than fifty years after his first presidential bid. After operating as part of a hospital for many years, the house was restored as a museum beginning in 1961. Senator Francis Newlands' home in Reno, Nevada was honored in 1962. This recognition came forty-three years after the politician's death and sixty years after the passage of the Reclamation Act for which the senator was widely praised. Closer to home, the National Park Service bent the fifty-year rule for two luminaries in the history of conservation, John Muir and Stephen Mather. Muir's California home was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1962, two years before being added to the National Park System. In 1963, NPS expanded the chronological coverage of an ongoing "Conservation of Natural Resources" theme study in order to recommend designation for the Connecticut home of its founder, Stephen T. Mather.²⁸

Landmark Designation of the Robie House

Coincidentally, it was at the same meeting where the American presidency was defined as being inherently nationally significant, that the Advisory Board revisited the architectural significance of the Robie House. After the successful efforts in 1957 to save the building, local preservationists banded together with professional architects from across the country to raise funds for the restora-

28. Forty-fifth Advisory Board Meeting, September 15–19, 1961. In 1965, the Advisory Board, in reviewing a survey of properties commemorating the presidents of the United States, reinforced its opinion that "living persons, however important their functions may be or have been, should not be memorialized." *National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings: Studies of Sites Commemorating the Presidents of the United States*. Now operated as a museum by the Nebraska State Historical Society, George Norris' home was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1967. Twenty-second Advisory Board Meeting, April 12–15, 1965. Memorandum: Mather House at Darien, Connecticut, Chief Historian to Regional Director, Northeast Region, April 15, 1963.

tion of the home—the “first sustained, organized effort to preserve a building for architectural, rather than historic, reasons.” In July 1963, as fundraising efforts lagged, Robie House enthusiasts renewed their efforts to secure the new National Historic Landmark designation. The National Park Service quickly acted on the request. By late August NPS Director Conrad Wirth reported to the Secretary of the Interior Udall that a special study of the property was underway, noting that the Robie House “is a focal point in all accounts of American architectural history, and its overwhelming importance, as well as the vicissitudes that beset old buildings, justifies its separate consideration now as a National Landmark.” Although the study was not completed, in November the Advisory Board recommended designation of the site. On April 1, 1964 Secretary Udall traveled to Chicago to announce the designation. At the ceremony, Udall quoted President Kennedy, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Mies Van der Rohe on the significance and impact of the building’s design: “It is not an overstatement to assert that no house built in America during the past century matches the importance of the Robie House.”²⁹

With its designation as a National Historic Landmark—the first such designation in Chicago—any National Park Service objections to the significance of the building had been removed. An illustration of the Robie House, superimposed with a Corinthian column, was used to illustrate a 1964 NPS brochure detailing the operation of “The National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings.” A 1969 NPS review of the Johnson administration’s accomplishments highlighted the NHL designation of Robie House and Louis Sullivan’s Wainwright Building in St. Louis (designated an NHL in 1968) as two examples representing the “evolution of American architecture” as part of the new preservation’s “increasingly balanced view of American history.”³⁰

Atomic Heritage

Internationally significant developments occurring in the United States during World War II forced the National Park Service to address established policies for considering historic sites of recent vintage. In 1954 the Advisory Board considered the Atomic Bomb National Monument at the Trinity Site near Alamogordo, New Mexico. NPS Director Conrad Wirth included the site as

29. For a review of early efforts to save the Robie House, see Theodore Hild, “Imperishable Value: Saving Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie House.” Illinois State Historic Preservation Office. J. Roy Carroll, Jr., FAIA, Robie House: An Open Letter to the AIA. *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* (August 1963). *Remarks by Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall in Presenting Plaque for Robie House as National Historic Landmark at Ceremony in Chicago, Illinois, April 1, 1964*. Department of the Interior Press Release.

30. Essays prepared for the Assistant Secretary for Fish Wildlife and Parks include “The New Preservation, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, National Park Service,” “The New Preservation: The Evolution of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966,” and “The New Preservation,” which was apparently drafted by Robert Utley. Fifty-eighth Advisory Board Meeting, April 16–18, 1968.

one associated with American industry and invention. With the nuclear explosion less than ten years old, its international significance within world history had been widely recognized, and efforts were underway to consider preservation of the site.³¹

After the establishment of the National Historic Landmark program in 1960 other atomic heritage sites were soon the object of recognition efforts. In 1964, NHL designation of the site of the first self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction on the University of Chicago campus clearly broke the fifty-year rule. In 1942, the reactor was located on a squash racquet court seated beneath the west stands of Stagg Field. Chicago Pile Number One, as it was called, was dismantled during World War II, and the stands and squash court were demolished in 1958. The site no longer retained any aspect of its physical integrity. The Advisory Board recommended this property as being nationally significant in October 1964, based upon “general information” about the site. NPS prepared a nomination after the Board’s recommendation. “Even though the integrity of the site at the University of Chicago was in question, the experiment which took place there was of such magnitude that the site should be recommended for landmark status.” At the request of the University of Chicago, the Secretary of the Interior quickly designated the property on December 2, 1964, the twenty-second anniversary of the event. In effect this recognition also established what would become National Historic Landmark Criteria Exception 3, for properties no longer standing that are directly and importantly associated with persons or events that are transcendent importance in the nation’s history.

In 1965, the Secretary, based on the recommendations of an NPS and Atomic Energy Commission study, designated six other atomic heritage sites, each of which represented events that were within the 50-year period. This pattern continued the next year, with the designation of a property associated with the beginning of American rocketry. In March 1926, on Pakachoag Hill, near Auburn, Massachusetts, Robert H. Goddard successfully launched the world’s first liquid-fueled rocket. However, not all atomic heritage sites were considered exceptional. In 1967, the Advisory Board considered the historical significance of the “F” reactor at Hanford, Washington. Although this reactor was one of three installations that produced fissionable materials during World War II, the Advisory Board felt that the atomic energy theme was adequately represented by existing Landmarks.³²

31. Located within the White Sands National Monument, the Trinity Site was the centerpiece of the proposed Atomic Bomb National Park, which was to include two B-29 Superfortress bombers that had been used in the nuclear attacks on Japan at the close of World War II. Memorandum, Director, National Park Service to Assistant Secretary Lewis, October 1, 1954, “The problem of preserving the nationally significant historic sites and buildings associated with American inventions and industrial achievements.” Michael Welsh, *Dunes and Dreams: A History of White Sands National Monument* (Santa Fe: National Park Service, 1995).

32. Fifty-third Advisory Board Meeting, October 4–7, 1965. The honored sites were Trinity Site, Alamogordo, New Mexico; Room 307, Gilman Hall, University of California, Berkeley,

What was the influence of the Cold War on the rapid recognition of atomic heritage sites by the National Park Service? Were the members of the Advisory Board influenced by then-current events—the missile gap and the space race—by highlighting American accomplishments in nuclear engineering? The language of the 1964 National Historic Landmark documentation for the Site of the First Self-Sustaining Nuclear Reaction was more heroic than historical: “on that fateful day in the West Stands at the University of Chicago,” the scientists “placed in man’s hands the ultimate means of determining his own destiny.” “When America undertook the effort to obtain a self-sustaining reaction, her overall purpose was to produce an atomic bomb to help her secure her own future.”³³

To Expand and Maintain a National Register of Historic Places

With the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the practice of historic preservation in the United States was transformed over the course of a decade. No longer did the federal government emphasize the preservation of individual sites and buildings of national significance. Instead, the program stressed a broad public and private partnership that “provided the means for harmoniously blending the old and the new of all levels of significance in modern, functional use.” As Americans maintained “in their changing environment a sense of stability and continuity derived from a past that is always present,” the policy and practice of the expanded National Register of Historic Places was built upon the foundations laid down by the National Park System Advisory Board.³⁴

From 1960 to 1966, the Secretary of the Interior designated 673 National Historic Landmarks.³⁵ In 1965 the Advisory Board approved a revision to the criteria used in identifying National Historic Landmarks (Table 1). “In view of the changing complexion and increasing complexity of preservation needs, especially in urban areas, the Board believes that the administrative criteria

California; X-10 reactor, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Experimental Breeder Reactor, No. 1, National Reactor Testing Station, Arco, Idaho; Pupin Physics Laboratory, Columbia University, New York, New York; and Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, Los Alamos, New Mexico. In 1966, President Johnson spoke at the Landmark dedication ceremonies for the Experimental Breeder Reactor No. 1 in Idaho. Fifty-fifth Advisory Board Meeting, October 3–6, 1966. The Goddard site recommendation was made without any recorded reference to the fifty-year criteria. Fifty-seventh Advisory Board Meeting, November 6–9, 1967.

33. Designated an NHL in 1965, in 1967, the Advisory Board reaffirmed the national significance of the Trinity Site in New Mexico. The Board’s support came as the Departments of Defense and Interior were negotiating the transfer of stewardship responsibilities for the property. S. Sydney Bradford, *Site of the First Self-Sustaining Nuclear Reaction*. National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings, 1964.

34. National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, Public Law 89-665, U.S.C. 470 et seq. Fifty-eighth Advisory Board Meeting, April 16–18, 1968.

35. John D. McDermott, *Breath of Life: An Outline of the Development of a National Policy for Historical Preservation* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1966).

TABLE 1. CRITERIA FOR CLASSIFICATION OF HISTORIC SITES, BUILDINGS, AND OBJECTS

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1. Structures or sites at which events occurred that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified prominently with, or which outstandingly represent the broad cultural, political economic, military or special history of the Nation, and from which an understanding and appreciation of the larger patterns of our American heritage may be gained.
 2. Structures or sites associated importantly with the lives of persons nationally significant in the history of the United States.
 3. Structures or sites associated significantly with an important event that outstandingly represents some great idea or ideal of the American people.
 4. Structures that embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, exceptionally valuable for a study of a period style or method of construction; or a notable structure representing the work of a master builder, designer or architect.
 5. Objects that figured prominently in nationally significant event; or that were prominently associated with nationally significant persons; or that outstandingly represent some great idea or ideal of the American people; or that embody distinguishing characteristics of a type specimen, exceptionally valuable for study of a period style or method of construction; or that are notable as representations of the work of master workers or designers.
 6. Archeological sites that have produced information of major scientific importance by revealing new cultures, or by shedding light upon periods of occupation over large areas of the United States. Such sites are those which have produced, or which may reasonably be expected to produce, data affecting theories, concepts, and ideas to a major degree.
 7. When preserved or restored as integral parts of the environment, historic buildings not sufficiently significant individually by reason of historical association or architectural merit to warrant recognition may collectively compose a "historic district" that is of historical significance to the nation in commemorating or illustrating a way of life in its developing culture.
 8. To possess national significance, a historic or prehistoric structure, district, site or object must possess integrity.
 For a historic or prehistoric site, integrity requires original location and intangible elements of feeling and association. (The site of a structure no longer standing may possess national significance if the person or event associated with the structure was of transcendent historical importance in the Nation's history and the association consequential.)

For a historic or prehistoric structure, integrity is a composite quality derived from original workmanship, original location and intangible elements of feeling and association. (The structure no longer standing may possess national significance if the person or event associated with the structure was of transcendent historical importance in the Nation's history and the association consequential.)

For a historic district, integrity is a composite quality derived from original workmanship, original location and intangible elements of feeling and association.

For a historic object, integrity requires basic original workmanship.

9. Structures or sites which are primarily of significance in the field of religion or to religious bodies but are not of national importance in other fields of the history of the United States, such as political, military or architectural history, will not be eligible for consideration.
10. Birthplaces, graves, burials, and cemeteries, as a general rule, are not eligible for consideration and recognition except in cases of historical figures of transcendent importance. Historic sites associated with the actual careers and contributions of outstanding historical personage usually are more important than their birthplaces and burial places.
11. Structures, sites and objects achieving historical importance within the past 50 years will not as a general rule be considered unless associated with persons or events of transcendent significance.
12. Structures, sites and objects proposed for addition to the National Park System must also meet standards for suitability and feasibility.

SOURCE: Minutes of the 52nd Advisory Board Meeting, April 12–15, 1965.

of national significance should be broadened and strengthened in such a manner as to enable the Department of the Interior more fully to meet its obligations under the Historic Sites Act.” Twelve “Criteria for Classification of Historic Sites, Buildings, and Objects” were set forth, with Criterion 11 reading:

Structures, sites, and objects achieving historical importance within the past 50 years will not as a general rule be considered unless associated with persons or events of transcendent significance.³⁶

36. Revision of the Administrative Criteria of Historical Significance adopted pursuant to the Historic Sites Act of August 12, 1935. Criteria for Classification of Historic Sites, Buildings, and Objects. Fifty-second Advisory Board Meeting, April 12–15, 1965. Criteria for selection of areas for inclusion in the National Park System, Fifty-third Advisory Board Meeting, October 4–7, 1965.

Reviewing the early history of the new preservation, James A. Glass noted that with the passage of NHPA in October 1966, the National Park Service “was suddenly faced with the challenge of creating a mechanism for administering a new preservation program.” Given the thirty-year record of historical evaluations and the development of criteria and guidelines by the Historic Sites Survey and the Advisory Board, the National Park Service was able to “expand and maintain a National Register of Historic Places” with well-developed criteria (and exceptions to the criteria). Within five months of passage of the NHPA, the National Park Service had adopted the National Historic Landmark criteria as the basis for the National Register of Historic Places.³⁷

What was the impact of the “new preservation” on the recognition of relatively recent American history? One general characteristic of the new preservation was the broadening of the program’s mandate and scope and its flexibility to accommodate new property types. The boundary of historical importance was expanded to include state and local level of significance. Areas of consideration were enlarged to include properties more representative of the total American experience and sites that had intrinsic aesthetic values. So it is not surprising that the chronological boundaries of the program were also stretched. Inclusiveness was geographic, topical, ethnic, and chronological.

At the end of the 1960s, the National Park Service measured the impact of the “new preservation.” Fifteen National Historic Landmark designations were highlighted as illustrations of the preservation paradigm shift. Of these properties, more than half represent places where the period of significance ended within the last fifty years and many of those sites had periods of significance that were totally within the previous fifty years. One of the accomplishments of the Johnson administration was that “traditional sites [such] as battlefields and homes of statesmen were balanced by emphasis on places significant in science and technology . . . industrial and labor history . . . literature, drama, and music . . . and the evolution of American architecture.” As Representative John Seiberling noted on the twentieth anniversary of the NHPA, historic preservation has become “part of a broader environmental ethic that spans an immense range of activities. It includes designed landscapes as well as buildings and shipwrecks, bridges and moon-rocket gantries as well as magnificent mansions and turn-of-the-century skyscrapers.”³⁸

37. James A. Glass, *The Beginnings of a New National Historic Preservation Program, 1957–1969* (Washington, DC: American Association for State and Local History and National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers, 1990), 23–27. William Murtagh, *Recollections and Comments—First 12 Years of the National Register*. Memorandum to Director, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Services, June 1979. Interestingly, the fifty-year rule was not included in the “Criteria for Evaluating Historic Sites and Buildings” presented in the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s 1964 study: *A Report on Principles and Guidelines for Historic Preservation in the United States* (Washington, DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1964).

38. Since the 1930s, the Advisory Board recognized three levels of significance (local, state, and national), and was clear in its understanding that it was the role of the national government to identify, recognize, and where appropriate, help to protect sites of national significance. Minutes of the First Meeting of the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and

Impact of the Fifty-Year Rule

From the beginning of the Historic Sites Survey in 1935, National Park Service historians and planners were concerned with the potential that political influence would unfairly shape the process of identifying and evaluating the historical significance of individual properties. At the first meeting of the Advisory Board 1936, the consensus was that “there is a great possibility of setting aside historic sites sponsored in different states, because of political considerations. There must be a sound basis in policy for withstanding this pressure.” The continuing concern among the Park Service leadership was that without maintaining a strict rule regarding national significance, the park system would be burdened by the addition of substandard units and the quality of the parks would diminish.³⁹ Since the Historic Sites Act of 1935, Park Service historians have relied on the premise that an independent and objective historical survey would moderate the influence of what some today call “Criterion P” (for politics). In the early years evaluations of national significance were kept confidential in order not to generate expectations of impending federal stewardship. Establishing criteria like the fifty- and twenty-five-year rules was another way that NPS planners and historians could limit the number of potential sites under consideration and maintain the objectivity of the national survey of historic sites. The issues were pragmatic as well: at the beginning of the survey, it was relatively easy to start with the oldest and most obviously important properties for recognition.

The Mission 66 transformation of the Historic Sites Survey into the Registry of National Historic Landmarks provided another buffer for the park system. After 1960, the Park Service could offer official recognition of national significance, through the designation of National Historic Landmarks, without the implication of impending federal stewardship. In theory, the designation process through which National Historic Landmark nominations were prepared, processed, and reviewed prior to consideration by the Secretary of the Interior reduced the impact of civic boosterism and political influence on the recognition program. Yet as reported by Barry Mackintosh, the designation process has been the subject of continual political pressures both within NPS and the federal government and by the general public.⁴⁰

The National Park Service has long presented guidance on how to implement Criterion Exception G through the National Register Bulletin series.

Monuments, February 13–14, 1936, Washington DC. John F. Seiberling, “Historic Preservation: Looking Ahead to the Next 20 Years,” *CRM Bulletin* 9, no. 5. (October–December 1986): <http://crm.cr.nps.gov/archive/09-5/9-5-all.pdf>. Robert Utley, “The New Preservation.” Fifty-eighth Advisory Board Meeting, April 16–18, 1968.

39. First meeting of the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments, February 13–14, 1936.

40. Mackintosh, *The Historic Sites Survey*, 79–80. For a view of the impact of creative federalism on historic preservation in the mid-1960s, see Antoinette J. Lee, “An Interview with Russell V. Kuene.” *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 33–48.

First published in 1979, this bulletin has been revised three times, in order to address changing views of significance and to provide updated examples of extraordinarily important properties. The National Register criteria were “not designed to prohibit the consideration of properties whose unusual contribution to the development of American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture can clearly be demonstrated.”⁴¹

Reflecting on his career within the National Park Service, former Chief Historian Robert Utley noted:

Well, there is no 50-year criterion. Unfortunately, what was considered as a kind of a general guideline has been translated by ignorant and well-meaning people, or by evil people with bad designs in mind, into a criterion. It's become almost a cliché. The thinking was that in general you need a 50 year perspective to have a good professional judgment of whether a property qualifies or not. But it was never intended to be rigidly applied as when the National Register criteria were written, the wording in the original Landmark criteria was retained in which, upon showing “transcendent” value, the general guideline of 50 years was to be ignored.⁴²

In fact, Utley argued that documenting extraordinary local importance was relatively simple. “When you are dealing with properties on the level of community significance . . . it doesn't take much verbalization to make the case for transcendent significance in the local context.” For properties that obviously met the standard of extraordinary importance, the rigid application of the fifty-year rule has been the object of concern. For example, objections in 1977 to the designation of the Chrysler Building in New York City when it was only forty-eight years old were considered nonsense by Park Service officials.⁴³

There is little documentation in the National Park Service files as to why fifty years was set as the threshold for the evaluation of historic properties. According to Robin Winks:

Minus overwhelming evidence, the Park System should hold to the historian's customary waiting period for judging the historicity of an event or development (this varied from 50 to 25 years). Clearly some few events are of such historical importance—World War II as an example—as not to require the passage of

41. Marcella Sherfy and W. Ray Luce, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years*. National Park Service, 1979, Revised 1990, 1996, and 1998. Illustrations of extraordinarily important properties used in the most recent version of the bulletin include Graceland (Home of Elvis Presley), Tennessee; Taliesin West, Arizona; WFIL Studio (Home of American Bandstand), Pennsylvania; Radburn, New Jersey; the *African Queen*; and Flannery O'Connor's home, Andalusia, in Georgia.

42. Richard W. Sellars and Melody Webb, *An Interview with Robert M. Utley on the History of Historic Preservation in the National Park Service-1947-1980. September 24, 1985-December 27, 1985*. (Santa Fe: National Park Service, 1988), 39.

43. Sellars and Webb, *Interview with Robert M. Utley*, 39. Jerry Rogers memorandum to Ernest Connally, July 6, 1977. Rogers described the argument by one of the Advisory Board members that the Chrysler Building was not exceptionally important as “nonsense.”

such time. But the Park Service should err on the side of caution, and most particularly in the volatile arenas of popular culture and of political history.⁴⁴

Established over fifty years ago by National Park Service historians and the National Park System Advisory Board, what has been the impact of the fifty-year rule on historic preservation practice in the United States?⁴⁵ Statistically, since the mid-1970s, sites with historical associations within the last two generations have represented about three percent of the listings in the National Register of Historic Places. Administratively, the fifty-year rule has functioned as an initial sieve through which potential historic properties must pass as part of the historic preservation compliance process. With so many older resources to inventory and evaluate in our communities, the potential historical importance of properties less than fifty years old (or events less than fifty years old that occurred at older sites) is often neglected by preservationists and planners. For example, the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation has provided programmatic direction to federal agencies for a variety of classes of historic properties, such as scientific facilities, federally owned public housing developments, Capehart and Wherry era military housing, and most recently, the Interstate Highway System, "which have reached, or are fast approaching, the 50-year eligibility threshold for the National Register of Historic Places."⁴⁶ In this way, at the national, state, and local levels of government, the standard continues to act as a significant chronological filter for planners and decision makers. It has become part of conventional wisdom within the field. Exceptions to the fifty-year threshold are important because

44. "Governing Assumptions," Robin W. Winks to Dennis Galvin (July 12, 1996) enclosing letter to Boyd Evison, (n.d.). Attached to an e-mail message from NPS Bureau Historian Barry Macintosh to NPS Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley dated August 9, 1996. NPS Bureau Historians file, Washington, DC.

45. Although the fifty-year-old standard is commonly used in local and state planning processes, communities have adopted other chronological standards. For example, within Alexandria, Virginia, a number of architecturally and historically significant buildings have been designated by the city council as one-hundred-year-old buildings. Projects at these properties are subject to architectural design review. The California Register of Historical Resources has a special criteria consideration for properties achieving significance within the last fifty years: noting only that "sufficient time must have passed to obtain a scholarly perspective" on a property's historic significance. See *California Office of Historic Preservation Technical Assistance Series #6 California Register and National Register: A Comparison (for purposes of determining eligibility for the California Register)*. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission guidelines require that a potential historic property must be at least thirty years old prior to its recognition. There does not appear to be an exception for this chronological threshold.

46. Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, *Balancing Historic Preservation Needs with the Operation of Highly Technical or Scientific Facilities* (Washington: Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, 1991); Report to the President and Congress, 1996–1997 (Washington: Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, 1997), 19; "Programmatic Comment for Capehart and Wherry Era Army Family Housing and Associated Landscape Features (1949–1962)," *Federal Register* 67, no. 110 (June 7, 2002); "Exemption Regarding Historic Preservation Review Process for Effects to the Interstate Highway System," *Federal Register* 70, no. 46 (March 10, 2005). The Council has resisted regulatory attempts by federal agencies to comprehensively exempt properties less than fifty years old from historic preservation compliance: preferring that "the less than 50 year old exemption should be handled during negotiation of a Programmatic Agreement." Revised Section 106 Regulations, Final Rule: Preamble, January 11, 2001.

these historic places become a precedent for the types of properties that will be considered important—once the age of a building or an event is no longer an issue.

Representing a consensus view of the persons, places and events that are considered significant within the recent past, historic properties recognized for their exceptional importance reveal a great deal about the context of contemporary historic preservation practice. As a chronological control, the fifty year rule operates in opposition to the current “craze for the relic” where objects—like the baseball hit for a record-breaking home-run are immediately termed “historic” and given monetary value.⁴⁷ What is exceptional and important about the history of the fifty-year rule is that it, along with many of the canons of historic preservation in use today, were established and well-tested long before passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966.

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47. Levy, Bernard-Henri, *American Vertigo: Traveling in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* (New York: Random House, 2006), 46.