

## Women's History in the National Register and the National Historic Landmarks Survey

**H**ow have the contributions of women been recognized through listings in the National Register of Historic Places? How can the National Register be used for further research in women's history? With nearly 67,000 listings, the National Register is the only source of information on historic places of national, state, and local significance nationwide. It is the single inventory which recognizes the historic and cultural units of the national park system, the National Historic Landmarks (NHLs) designated by the Secretary of the Interior, and the places nominated by States, federal agencies, and American Indian tribes. A computerized index to listings, the National Register Information System (NRIS), contains about 45 data elements which can be queried individually or in a variety of combinations to find listings associated with women. The NRIS is available on the World Wide Web, and information from both the NRIS and the National Register files can be obtained on request. National Register and National Historic Landmark documentation are rich sources of information about the contributions of women in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture. The descriptions, statements of significance, and bibliographies can

be invaluable to researchers of the same or related subjects.

Having been around a long time, I remember how, after seeking advice from nominating authorities, scholars in a variety of disciplines, and others, the National Park Service determined which data elements to computerize on each National Register listing. Our goal was to create an automated index with a manageable number of useful pieces of data on each Register listing to make the places and the information about them accessible to the public for a wide variety of uses, from research to preservation planning, public education, and interpretation. After considerable discussion, the National Park Service decided **not** to include a data field for significance in women's history. The fundamental reason for that decision was that the places associated with women were being nominated not because of the gender of the women associated with them, but because these individuals made contributions in areas of significance, such as architecture, art, education, literature, law, medicine, or science—regardless of their sex. Gender was not a factor in their selection. We reasoned that if a property is nominated for its significance in the field of women's history, the nomination preparer could list women's history in the "other" category provided for places possessing significance in areas different from those with given categories from which to choose. (No one has done this.) There was concern that to list a property in any area of significance just because it was associated with a woman was patronizing. We did not want to imply that standards of achievement should be lowered for women. Furthermore, it was argued that, for most listings, gender information would be unreliable because most listings are associated with both sexes in one way or another.

In hindsight, I wish we had a data field to flag listings that are relevant for women's history. It surely would have been easier to prepare this paper on how women's lives are reflected in listings and made the Register a more valuable tool for research on women's history. After reassessing the earlier decision, we have now decided to enter a flag in the database to identify those we have identified as important in women's history in order to make the collection more accessible to the researching public. While the NPS does not have

*St. Mary's Church, Fairfax Station, Virginia. After the second battle of Manassas, Clara Barton, with three women volunteers and donated supplies, traveled out from Washington by train to care for the wounded. A field hospital was set up in this church. Photo by Ed Lattau, 1976.*



the funding to add new cross references to the NRIS very often, so much information is now available and the subject is of such great interest that it seems not only appropriate but necessary to flag those we have discovered. Now that I am reading about the growing interest in studying men's history, that is being greeted with both hope and alarm, we may eventually need a data element for sites for men's studies as well.

While the online database can serve as a guide to many subjects, this particular topic demonstrates there will always be historical dimensions that go beyond current National Register categories. To aid the researcher who wants to explore such subjects, the National Register has an Internet site (FTP.NR.NPS.GOV) which will permit downloading of the entire database for in-depth analysis. Researchers can then add their own cross references. This site is now available to the public.

Right now, obtaining a complete list of places associated with women from the NRIS is not possible, but the database can be searched using a variety of fields alone and in combination with others to find listings associated with women.

To begin, a search of the significant persons field is among the most useful. At the time of our query, the NRIS showed listings associated with 9,820 significant persons. About 360 (over 3%) of these are women. A researcher can pick out the names of women of interest and then pull the NRIS record on each listing and the National Register or NHL file to obtain more detailed information.

The significant person field can also be searched by the name of any individual of interest. Researchers on Clara Barton will find four listings:

Clara Barton National Historic Site, one of the five units of the national park system primarily about women; Clara Barton Parkway, a commemorative property; Clara Barton Homestead; and St. Mary's Church, where Barton treated the wounded after the Second Battle of Manassas. A researcher might do a more detailed query of just those records finding where the properties are (Maryland, Massachusetts, and Virginia); the different periods or dates of and areas of significance that they reflect in Clara Barton's life; whether they are administered by the NPS, are NHLs or are nominated by a state; and so on. The National Register registration documentation provides the detailed information about what these places tell us about Clara Barton.

In our research, we were not as interested in the famous women whose names we knew, like Jane Addams, Susan B. Anthony, Mary McLeod Bethune, Helen Keller, Annie Oakley, or Eleanor Roosevelt—the "female icons." Many of them are represented in the National Register, and their impact is well known. Instead, we were curious about the women whose names we did not recognize.

A sampling of what we found gives some indication of the breadth of the National Register.

- The Hulda Klager Lilac Garden in Washington state was the private laboratory and show-place of the nationally-recognized horticulturist, a leading authority on the hybridizing of lilacs, who developed over 250 varieties.
- The Joslyn Mansion in Omaha was the home of a well-known philanthropist, Sarah Joslyn and her husband.
- By 1816, when she was granted her medical license, Sarah Clark Case of the Daniel Case/Sarah Case Farmstead was the first licensed woman physician in Hunterdon County and one of the first in New Jersey.
- Susan Blow helped create the Des Peres School in St. Louis, the first successful public kindergarten in the United States.
- Anna Beir, who bequeathed her home to the City of Greenville, Ohio, for an art museum, was the founding spirit behind the Greenville Art Guild, art supervisor in the Greenville schools, an artist, teacher, and patron of culture.
- The most famous resident of Casa de los Ponce de Leon in Puerto Rico was the 19th-century poet and educator, Lola Rodriguez Ponce de Leon.
- The well known Polish Shakespearean actress, Helena Modjeska lived at Arden, California.
- The Montanez Adobe chapel became the village sanctuary and its owner, Polina

*Des Peres School, St. Louis, Missouri. Historical photograph taken for the U.S. Centennial Celebration, 1876. Inspired by the teaching of Friedrich Froebel, a German educator, Susan Blow founded the first kindergarten in this building in 1873. Photo courtesy Missouri Historical Society.*



The Polonina Montanez Adobe, San Juan Capistrano, California, has a great deal of spiritual significance to the city. From 1886 to 1910, Mission San Juan Capistrano stood open and empty, a victim of politics, looters, and rain. The tiny chapel in the Montanez Adobe became the village sanctuary and Polonina Montanez, its owner, became the spiritual leader of the community. Photographer unknown, c. 1930.

Montanez, the spiritual leader of the community in San Juan Capistrano, California.

When we queried the database for architects and builders, we found 25,000 names. From the printout, some 90 of these are women. Several are well known, Julia Morgan, the architect of William Randolph Hearst's St. Simeon, with 16 listings, and Mary Jane Colter with 6, including buildings she designed at the Grand Canyon. Who were these women, and what were their contributions?

In her introduction to *Reclaiming the Past, Landmarks of Women's History*, editor Page Putnam Miller gives the best survey to date of what has been done to identify, recognize, and interpret nationally-significant historic resources associated with women. These are either units of the national park system or National Historic Landmarks. While some were designated as part of earlier National Historic Landmark theme studies on social and humanitarian movements, American writers, and the African-American study, most resulted from the congressionally-mandated theme study on women's history landmarks. Recent NHL theme studies now underway, such as the labor history study coordinated by the Newberry Library, use the more encompassing approaches to American history reflected in the new NPS theme structure and build on current scholarship about women's history.

A search of any one of the 30 areas of significance in National Register Bulletin 16A, *How to Complete the National Register Registration Form*, will result in a list of all the properties of national, state, and local significance recognized in the National Register for that area of significance. Those in each category that have the woman's name in the name of the property will be obvious. To identify others, a query can be run coupling area of significance with another field, such as significant person or architect/builder, to allow

Wendover, Hyden, Kentucky. Wendover was the home of the Frontier Nursing Service founded by Mary Breckenridge (foreground) in 1925. While working as a volunteer for the American Committee for Devastated France following the end of World War I, she was inspired by the work of the nurse-midwives in France and England and thought that they might be able to meet the problem of medical care for mothers and children in rural America. Photo by Warren Klosterman, 1961.



women's names to be picked out. More listings associated with women can be identified by pulling National Register files that are likely to be associated with women, but researchers may miss places which do not have an individual in the name, unless they read each nomination.

Research by areas of significance will identify the most prominent fields in which properties associated with the contributions of women have been recognized. For literature, the best represented area, 105 places are registered for literary women, such as a recent listing for the home of Angie Debo, scholar and writer on Oklahoma and Native-American history. Art includes listings reflecting 38 women artists. Among the most interesting is Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village in Simi Valley, California, an exceptionally significant and rare folk art environment created by a self-taught American folk artist who has received high acclaim. Performing arts has 21 listings.

We also did sample searches of the historic functions data field. In "College" we found that of the approximately 700 National Register listings, 28 are associated primarily with women.

The NRIS can also be searched by key word. We searched for "women." The result was 58 listings with women in the name. Most were women's clubs, along with some homes, schools, a monument to Confederate women, a hotel, a fountain, a gymnasium, and even a ladies restroom.

Having organized the National Register files she was using chronologically, Gail Dubrow found that listings until the mid-1970s tended to recognize notable women of major cultural significance, such as Juliette Gordon Lowe, the founder of the Girl Scouts, and Harriet Tubman, or literary figures, like Louisa May Alcott. Beginning in the mid-1970s, organized initiatives consciously sought to broaden the range of NHLs associated with women like those done by the American Association for State and Local History and the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation. The women's theme study has the most systematic approach to cover a wider range of subjects, areas

of significance, and resources types. States have been nominating a few miscellaneous resources, usually associated with individuals or a relatively large number of women's clubs. That pattern has continued with a few exceptions. One unusual thematic group of nominations, submitted by the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Officer, includes listings for 30 places in Webster County which Willa Cather used in her writings. Another multiple property submission was for 10 buildings designed by California architect, Lillian Rice. Several states (Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Vermont, and Wisconsin) are making a conscious effort to identify women in the names of listings.

More needs to be done to recognize historic places associated with American women. Thematic surveys sponsored by state historic preservation offices, certified local governments, and other communities should result in additional multiple property nominations in women's state and local history. The new Tribal Preservation Programs should be encouraged to prepare nominations for places on Indian lands associated with women. Existing listings can be reinterpreted to provide better documentation on the role of women. The National Park Service's recently published *Exploring A Common Past: Interpreting Women's History in the National Park Service*, is a joint effort between the NPS and the Organization of American Historians. Based on current scholarship, it provides information on women's history useful in identifying new sites and in reinterpreting others in areas such as work, family, life cycle, ideologies about women, dynamics of difference, public life, and education. Many of these themes can be documented and interpreted at specific historic places. They can also be used in other public

*Pavelka Farmstead, vicinity of Bladen, Nebraska. This house was the site of Willa Cather's novel, My Antonia. The fruit cave that she described in the novel is in the foreground of the picture. Photo by R. Bruhn, 1978.*



education initiatives, such as the National Register's lesson plans relating to women in the *Teaching with Historic Places* series. Where significant, associations with women at historic places should be reflected in National Register listings.

#### **Bibliography**

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- Information on National Register listings is from the National Register registration files and the National Register Information System database.

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