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A century or more ago, interest in preserving historic sites brought attention to buildings of national interest or to major battlefields. Structures such as Mount Vernon demanded attention. Historic preservation activities in recent years have expanded to cover a far broader scope, both in subject and in geographic range. Sites important in state and local history, and cultural resources significant for social, industrial, agricultural, engineering, architectural, and many other historical specialties are included. Prehistory and archaeology contribute a still broader assortment of possibilities for historic recognition. A major problem has resulted from this change. With efforts to protect an increasing variety of historic properties, a means to identify them has to be accepted by federal agencies and other groups concerned with cultural resource protection. Officials who never had been exposed to historical concerns now have to find out what an historic site is and how one is identified. Many of them assume that someone with a mind of an IBM computer can sort out historic sites using specific criteria which provide clear, sharp, and simple distinctions. Site identification does not work out quite that way. An explanation, however, must commence with a general definition of an historic site.

An historic site is any location at which an event of historic interest may have occurred, or a location at which physical evidence of cultural resources of prehistoric or historic significance may be found. Historic sites vary greatly in quality (integrity of cultural resources, importance of information that may be derived from their study, documentation of their significance, or evaluation of their importance in local or national history), so inventories of all sites that might be of interest are compiled. Then these inventories are evaluated by archaeologists and historians capable of rendering adequate professional judgment as to their importance. Those that meet criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (which includes sites of local, state, and national significance) are identified for eligibility determination through an elaborate review process. National Register criteria include:

The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archaeology, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

1. that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our

history; or

2. that are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
3. that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
4. that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important to prehistory or history.

Because of a variety of classes of historic sites (archaeological, architectural, engineering, social history, economic history, or intangible cultural history, including locations of events or of cultural activities as well as physical properties of evidence), a number of professional disciplines are involved in adequate evaluation. Standards of some architectural historians exclude some structures that are of substantial importance to social historians. Some of the latter, in turn, are likely to exclude some structures regarded highly by most architectural historians--depending in part upon how broad-minded each evaluator is. Scarcely anyone has professional capability for judging all classes of historic sites. Generally, a location or property (including historic districts, structures, sites, or objects) that has merit in any of these fields is identified as historically significant.

Aside from public interest, historic sites and associated cultural resources have profound documentary importance. Along with artifacts, library resources, and archival or manuscript documentation, they provide cultural evidence for historical research, without which history cannot be prepared. Sites investigation has an obvious importance in archaeological or historical research for which no substitute is available.

In any kind of archaeological or historical application, documentary integrity--including, in this case, site integrity--has major importance. Changes or modifications have to be accounted for, and sites or structures that have undergone excessive change may lose part or most of their documentary or interpretive value. (An historic farm, for example, loses most or all of its historic quality if it is covered with forty-story apartment buildings so that no visible suggestion of a farm is retained.) Yet these changes may be an appropriate subject for historic research; and particularly for emigrant-road studies, changes cannot be ignored. Almost no century-old emigrant-road trace will resemble its original appearance very closely. But surviving physical evidence, subject to modification by a variety of natural and cultural causes, needs to be evaluated and (where appropriate) preserved for public benefit to future generations as well as for present enjoyment.

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