IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

EARLY IDAHO HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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Early interest in historic preservation projects in Idaho emerged from concern for frontier structures--mostly log cabins--representative of pioneer missions or settlement. Cabins in or near places like Boise and Caldwell had to be moved to locations where they could be preserved, although some, in communities like Paris, survived on their original sites. Two early examples gained more than local interest. Their preservation procedures did not anticipate modern standards but that detail has not concerned anyone outside of state historic preservation office staff, who are inclined toward tolerance for antecedent projects that provide evidence of compelling preservation interest for structures less than fifty years old at a time when very few buildings had attained any such age anywhere in Idaho. If early Idaho preservationists had been so foolish as to wait fifty years to try to identify and preserve structural evidence of their initial frontier heritage, and if they had declined to show interest in buildings that could not be retained on their original sites, almost no representation of a significant early era of their history would have survived.

An 1862 log cabin that John Welch erected as an intermediate base for his Lewiston pack trains to Boise area mines became Idaho's most prominent early preservation project. Known for well over a century as Packer John's cabin, this landmark had served as a center in which Idaho's two geographically isolated sections could arrange to negotiate political nominations for territorial office. Only a 200-mile pack trail over formidable mountain barriers offered any direct connections between entirely

disconnected communities that did not even manage to construct a paved highway to unite them until 1938. North Idaho Republican and Democratic party leaders used to meet at Packer John's cabin for their territorial conventions (composed of only several delegates--no more could fit in or would make so arduous a trip) with their southern counterparts, because no other convention facilities could be found in a hundred miles or more of mountain wilderness. By 1899, Packer John's cabin had fallen into ruin through neglect and vandalism, but a decade later, Idaho's legislature invested $500 in an historic preservation and rehabilitation program, assigned to Idaho's State Historical society two years after that 28-year-old organization had become a state agency. John Hailey managed so economically that he had to spend only $25 for protective fencing, $250 for site acquisition of ten acres, and $60 to have Packer John's cabin logs reassembled and supplemented for reconstruction with a new design and new roof. After funding his travel expense, he had $126.85 left over from his appropriation--an economy not always typical of later projects. This interesting example of adaptive use as "a nice summer resort, cool and shady, surrounded by trees, with a fine stream of water . . . which furnishes good fishing" lasted until after 1920 when a fire destroyed that preservation effort. But that did not deter Idaho preservationists who responded with another Packer John's cabin complete with still another design that still survives as a monument of their preservation interest. By that time, a major private campaign for historic preservation enabled rehabilitation of North Idaho's monumental Coeur d'Alene mission near Cataldo in 1928. Newer standards for historic preservation have come into fashion since these early projects--in Idaho history, at least--were undertaken. Early experience has been important in providing a foundation for later programs.

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