
To Reconstruct or Not to Reconstruct: An Overview of NPS Policy and Practice

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Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site is only the latest battleground on which reconstruction adversaries have clashed. Reconstruction has probably aroused more controversy over the years than any other cultural resource management activity of the National Park Service. Surely in no other realm have outside pressures been more keenly felt nor has practice diverged more obviously from policy. Typically, local community interests, aided by their elected representatives and often abetted by park personnel, have favored reconstruction projects; CRM professionals in Washington, citing policies they have forged, have resisted; and management decision-makers have come down on whichever side has seemed more likely to serve both the public interest and their personal survival.

Avid anti-reconstructionists have sometimes gone so far as to claim that the NPS, being a preservation organization, has no business undertaking reconstruction, which is not preservation but the creation of new structures simulating old ones. Unfortunately for their case, the Historic Sites Act of 1935 explicitly authorizes the bureau to "restore, reconstruct, rehabilitate, preserve, and maintain historic or prehistoric sites, buildings, objects, and properties of national historical or archaeological significance . . ." (emphasis supplied). And the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 as amended in 1980 defines preservation to include reconstruction.

The Historic Sites Act was intended to sanction and support the greatly expanded historic preservation program on which the Service had lately embarked. That program was inevitably influenced by Colonial Williamsburg, the Nation's foremost preservation project of the time, which embraced reconstruction on a grand scale. At George Washington Birthplace National Monument,

acquired by the NPS in 1930, the Service completed a rendition of the long-vanished house in which the first president was born. At Colonial National Monument, another 1930 addition, the Service reconstructed key earthworks on the Yorktown battlefield. At Morristown National Historical Park, established in 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps reproduced typical soldiers' huts of the Revolutionary War. Even before the remains of Hopewell Furnace became a national historic site in 1938, the CCC was employed under NPS supervision to reconstruct several features of that Pennsylvania ironmaking complex.

Some of these reconstructions, initiated by outside forces or inspired by demands for Depression relief projects, were less well conceived and executed than they might have been. The Washington's birthplace project, sponsored by a well-connected private association, proceeded with little evidence of the original house and less regard for what evidence existed. The resulting "memorial mansion," as it was euphemistically called, barely resembled the birth house and was found to be on the wrong site. This and other early experiences caused NPS officials to take a more restrictive stance by the mid-1930s.

At the second meeting of the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments in 1936, NPS Chief Historian Verne E. Chatelain argued for interpretive alternatives to reconstruction at sites lacking physical remains. Reconstruction could entail an unwarranted focus on one time period at the expense of others, he felt: "Certainly if at Jamestown Island we were to attempt to restore the first Jamestown condition, we must neglect a later Jamestown condition, which is just as important historically." He also noted the impact on archeological remains: "Otherwise

intelligent people . . . seem not to see that in taking steps to effect the restoration of certain historic sites, they are making a decision which may mean the destruction of all the record of a certain period of history, irreplaceable in nature for all time to come."

Advisory board member Fiske Kimball, a noted architectural historian and restorationist, took a more positive view of reconstruction. Mentioning Jamestown, where only subsurface foundations remained of the early houses, he declared that "as far as practical, we should rebuild destroyed buildings on important historic sites. Even the ruins are more interesting, when used in a restoration." Alfred V. Kidder, an archeologist on the board, raised the alternative of preserving building foundations as ruins and reconstructing the buildings nearby for "museum purposes."

A committee including these men then formed to draft an NPS policy on the "preservation, repair, restoration, and reconstruction of historical structures." The resulting statement, formally adopted by the NPS in 1937, observed that "the motives governing these activities are several, often conflicting: aesthetic, archeological and scientific, and educational." Reconstruction prompted by educational motives could mean the destruction of archeological evidence. "It is well to bear in mind the saying: 'Better preserve than repair, better repair than restore, better restore than construct,'" the statement declared. But it was not dogmatic: because each of the motives had value, "the ultimate guide must be the tact and judgment of the men in charge." Overall, the statement was less restrictive of reconstruction than later partisans quoting only the "better preserve than repair . . ." phrase would have it.

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NPS preservation professionals remained unenthusiastic about reconstruction, none more so than architect Albert H. Good. His eloquence on the subject in *Park and Recreation Structures*, published by the NPS in 1938, is worth quoting at length:

The curse of most historical restorations, reconstructions, or re-creations is an almost irresistible urge to gild the lily. Why persons charged with bringing authenticity to something out of the past feel licensed to indulge their personal tastes and fancies in the direction of improving on known historical or structural fact is not understandable, but it is almost always the rule. As an instance, the chimney on a pioneer cabin was typically a strictly practical affair, utilizing no more materials than were needed to encase the flues, and, if it were on the exterior of the cabin, resulted in something probably ungainly and spindling in appearance by today's standards. The current fashionable silhouette in chimneys is something very much more stocky and ample. The result? Present day reconstructions of the pioneer's cabin generally are garnished with chimneys proportioned to the tastes of today, and the gaunt and gawky utilitarian aspect of the frontier type is completely missed. . . .

Wherever it is proposed to restore or reconstruct anything with pretensions to historical value, there should always be on hand a stubborn horse-sensible codger, skeptical enough to ask "Why?" and too smart-headed to mistake mere enthusiasm and sentiment for a right answer. He should be crowned with laurel forthwith, enthroned as chairman of the project, and charged to ask "Why?" at half-hour intervals until the proposal is tabled or the keys to the finished project are turned over to the Park Authority. . . .

Chairman Smart knows that misguided efforts in so-called restoration have forever lost to us much that was authentic, if crumbling. He is aware that the faint shadow of the genuine often makes more intelligent appeal to the imagination than the crass and visionary replica. He recognizes that for a group to materialize largely out of thin air its arbitrary conception of what is fitting and proper is to trespass the right and privilege of the individual to re-create vanished or near-vanished things within his own imagination.

The most notable reconstruction controversy at the end of the prewar decade involved the McLean House at Appomattox Court House, where Robert E. Lee had surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant in 1865. In this case there was good evidence of the building's location and appearance; many of its dismantled bricks even remained on site. In 1939 Superintendent Branch Spalding joined local interests in urging reconstruction of the house and other community buildings to better interpret rural Virginia society during the Civil War. Chief Historian Ronald F. Lee was opposed; he preferred to display the foundations and interpret the three-dimensional house through drawings, photographs, and "possibly a model of the building exhibited in a museum on the area." But in the "second surrender of Lee at Appomattox" he yielded to strong local opinion, and the NPS reconstructed the McLean House after the war. Later it rebuilt the nearby courthouse as the park's visitor center and museum, an unusual "adaptive reconstruction" obviating a modern intrusion upon the historic landscape. Even the most vigorous anti-reconstructionists have generally conceded the appropriateness and effectiveness of the work done at Appomattox.

Not so at Fort Caroline, perhaps the most egregious reconstruction attempt in the National Park System after Washington's birthplace. Fort Caroline National Memorial in Jacksonville, Florida, contains no remains of the short-lived 16th-century French settlement it commemorates. The site of the earth and timber fort was presumably lost to the St. Johns River a century or more ago. This did not dampen the local congressman's desire to reconstruct the fort, and the NPS capitulated to his persistence on the subject in 1963-64. The modern Fort Caroline, executed on fill at the riverbank, reflected major compromises with the sketchy data available on its predecessor. It was significantly smaller and contained none of the buildings known to have been present originally. The difficulty of maintaining an earthen parapet forced the substitution of cinder-block, plainly visible despite efforts to cultivate a grassy veneer from sod layered between the blocks. The

result was so obviously counterfeit that no one could mistake it for the original—perhaps its only virtue.

Several other forts became centers of major reconstruction activity in the following years. Fort Vancouver National Historic Site in Washington lay in the district of the chairman of the House subcommittee responsible for NPS appropriations. When she expressed an interest in rebuilding that 19th-century post, the NPS had good reason to comply. Archeological remains enabled much better results than at Fort Caroline, but as in virtually all reconstructions, gaps in the physical and documentary records had to be filled by conjecture.

The congressman of the district containing Fort Scott, Kansas, also exerted influence as an active member of the House subcommittee on parks. From 1965 to 1978, when he finally succeeded in bringing the fort under NPS administration, he obtained large appropriations for several reconstruction projects there. Service professionals had little enthusiasm for Fort Scott, whose significance they judged marginal, and for the reconstructions, based in some instances on inadequate historical evidence.

Following extensive archeological and historical research yielding relatively good data, the Service also reconstructed Fort Stanwix in Rome, New York, and Bent's Old Fort, Colorado, between 1974 and 1976. These large-scale projects were embraced more willingly by the Service but again owed much to public and political intervention.

Fort Stanwix, which had figured in the Revolutionary War, was one of several noteworthy reconstructions undertaken for the American Revolution Bicentennial. At the centerpiece of the Bicentennial, Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia, two long-gone houses were slated for reconstruction. One was the Graff House, where Thomas Jefferson had drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Reasonably good evidence permitted a reasonably accurate replica. But the \$1.4 million project was not completed without controversy within and beyond the NPS. NPS preservationists who felt that the house was not sufficiently important to warrant such attention found themselves

overwhelmed by an influential outside lobby. And the architecture critic of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Thomas Hine, charged the government with misplaced priorities in a piece provocatively titled "We're Building Lies About the City's Past."

The other house slated for reconstruction was that of Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia's most famous citizen. Here the outcome was different, however. Despite significant archeological and documentary evidence and advocacy by several NPS professionals, senior Service professionals and managers concluded that there were insufficient data to rebuild Franklin's house with the accuracy befitting its importance. Instead, its plan was outlined on the ground and an open steel framework was erected above to delineate the standing structure. This "ghost reconstruction" was widely applauded as a brilliant solution to the problem of recreating a structure on which detailed information is lacking.

In 1968 the NPS published *Administrative Policies for Historical Areas of the National Park System*, containing its first general policy on historic structure treatment since the Advisory Board statement adopted in 1937. This was the policy in effect during the Bicentennial planning period. Reconstruction, it stated, should be authorized only under the following conditions:

- (a) All or almost all traces of a structure have disappeared and its recreation is essential for public understanding and appreciation of the historical associations for which the park was established.
- (b) Sufficient historical, archeological, and architectural data exist to permit an accurate reproduction.
- (c) The structure can be erected on the original site or in a setting appropriate to the significance of the area, as in a pioneer community or living farm, where exact sites of structures may not be identifiable through research.

In the ensuing years, more pressures for questionable reconstructions and growing preservation demands posed by the original historic resources in its custody moved the NPS to an increasingly restrictive reconstruction policy. A 1974 memorandum from Director Ronald H. Walker prepared by

Robert M. Utley, associate director for park historic preservation, discouraged reconstructions less on their merits than because they took resources better devoted to preservation: "Too frequently . . . the treatment of fragile and deteriorating original fabric commands lower priority than less pressing needs, such as reconstruction of vanished historic structures [and] creation of 'typical' buildings reflective of past ways of life . . ."

The Service's next general policy compilation, its *Management Policies* of 1975, disallowed the "typical" constructions that had been countenanced at living farms and elsewhere and for the first time reflected concern about the impact of reconstruction on archeological remains. Reconstruction would now be authorized only when

1. There are no significant preservable remains that would be obliterated by reconstruction.
2. Historical, archeological, and architectural data are sufficient to permit an accurate reproduction with a minimum of conjecture.
3. The structure can be erected on the original site.
4. All prudent and feasible alternatives to reconstruction have been considered, and it is demonstrated that reconstruction is the only alternative that permits and is *essential* to public understanding and appreciation of the historical and cultural association for which the park was established.

The framers of this policy knew that very few reconstruction proposals could meet all these criteria—which was precisely their intent. This intent became most explicit a few years later in the *Service's Cultural Resource Management Guideline*, NPS-28. The latest (1985) edition of NPS-28 flatly declares that "the Service does not endorse, support, or encourage the reconstruction of historic structures." And its requirement that reconstruction occur on the original site without destroying any surface or subsurface remains (regardless of their significance or preservability) was designed to be virtually impossible to meet.

William Penn Mott, Jr., who became NPS director in 1985 just as anti-reconstructionism reached this apogee, was particularly interested in interpretation. From his perspective,

cultural resource management was worthwhile primarily as it served the greater goal of public enlightenment and enjoyment. He did not share the aversion of the "professional elite" to reconstructions, which he viewed as valid educational media in many instances where significant original structures had vanished. Visiting Pecos National Monument, he favored reconstructing a portion of the historic pueblo. Visiting Andersonville National Historic Site, he favored reconstructing part of the prison stockade. (Service professionals discouraged the former but assisted in accomplishing the latter.)

When it came time to revise the *Management Policies* in 1988, it was clear that the anti-reconstruction bias in the previous edition and especially in NPS-28 would have to give. With personal input from Director Mott, reconstruction regained its place as a legitimate CRM alternative. But the criteria were substantially unchanged from the 1975 policies and were still more restrictive than for any other structure treatment:

A vanished structure may be reconstructed if (1) reconstruction is essential to permit understanding of the cultural associations of a park established for that purpose, (2) sufficient data exist to permit reconstruction on the original site with minimal conjecture, and (3) significant archeological resources will be preserved in situ or their research values will be realized through data recovery. A vanished structure will not be reconstructed to appear damaged or ruined. Generalized representations of typical structures will not be attempted.

Those who viewed the archeological resource preservation requirement as a major weapon against reconstruction were unhappy about the allowance for archeological data recovery. If and when the first criterion can truly be met, however, it is neither logical nor practical to insist that affected archeological resources remain undisturbed. The revised policy merely recognized that fact.

A statement prefacing the resource treatment policies stresses the importance of accuracy and honesty in all resource treatments, including reconstruction:

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NPS Surveys Yield Data on the Effects of Hurricane Hugo

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percent of the total estimated storm damage to roofs. The class "C" estimate for this damage totals \$5.2 million.

Slate failed in a variety of ways. The most common damage was caused by the force of high winds. Slates were simply lifted off the roof sheathing by winds that reached 140 miles per hour. Large sections of many roofs were stripped to the sheathing; often not even the slate nails remained in place. This type of building material failure indicates other weaknesses in the extant pre-Hugo roofing systems. It speaks to the potential inadequacy of the sheathing's "holding power"—which is the mechanical connection between the fastener and the sheathing board. It also indicates the inability of smooth-shanked fasteners, used in Charleston during the last re-roofing cycle, to resist withdrawal and lateral forces of high winds. Both fasteners and sheathing contributed to the loss of historic slate roofing.

Many slate roofs were also destroyed when slate shingle fractured at the course lines. Vibration from the wind caused slate to fracture where it overlapped with the next course. Wind action caused slate that was already loose to oscillate against the head of the nail which secured it to the roof. Once this movement began, the nail hole became enlarged and eventually the slate was freed and lifted off the roof by winds. Residents who stayed in town the night



The immediate reaction to roof damage was to throw up plastic or canvas tarps to cover destroyed areas and to help prevent further interior damage.

of the hurricane reported slates ripping off in rows starting at the eaves and peeling up the roof until the entire roof deck was exposed up to the ridge.

Throughout the central historic city, damage results to other traditional and modern roofing systems were similar to that recorded for slate. Dollar figures vary according to the type of roof material and the associated labor costs for installation.

Many roofs of all types appear to have survived the hurricane intact. Regardless of the visual condition of the roof, it was recommended that every roof which held together should undergo a careful and thorough inspection conducted by a knowledgeable roofing professional.

The concept of "getting to know your building and its roof" was advocated by the National Park Service preservation professionals who participated in this assistance effort. It is an idea which hopefully was left with every building owner in Charleston.

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Photos by
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(See photo story, "NPS Helps Charleston After Hugo," CRM Bulletin, Vol. 12, No.6.)

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As a basic principle, anything of historical appearance that the National Park Service presents to the public in a park will be either an authentic survival from the past or an accurate representation of that which formerly existed there. Reconstructions and reproductions will be clearly identified as such.

Feelings against reconstruction remain strong among NPS professionals. At a historians' discussion of

the 1988 policy revision, one of the participants who had prepared the final language was accused of "selling out." Others, appreciating the direction under which he and his colleagues had labored, have expressed satisfaction with how much of the old policy survived.

One thing is certain: those expecting that the latest reconstruction policy will significantly affect the quantity or quality of NPS reconstructions have an exaggerated notion of policy. Unlike law, policy is subject to the discretion of agency management, whose commitment to

it will inevitably vary with the public and political influences attendant on a public agency. The Fort Union Trading Post reconstruction proceeded essentially without regard to the restrictive policy then in effect. This is not to say that it violated every policy criterion; a good case can be made that it met most of them. But it would have proceeded regardless. So will the next reconstruction project enjoying similar support.

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