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Stephanie K. Meeks

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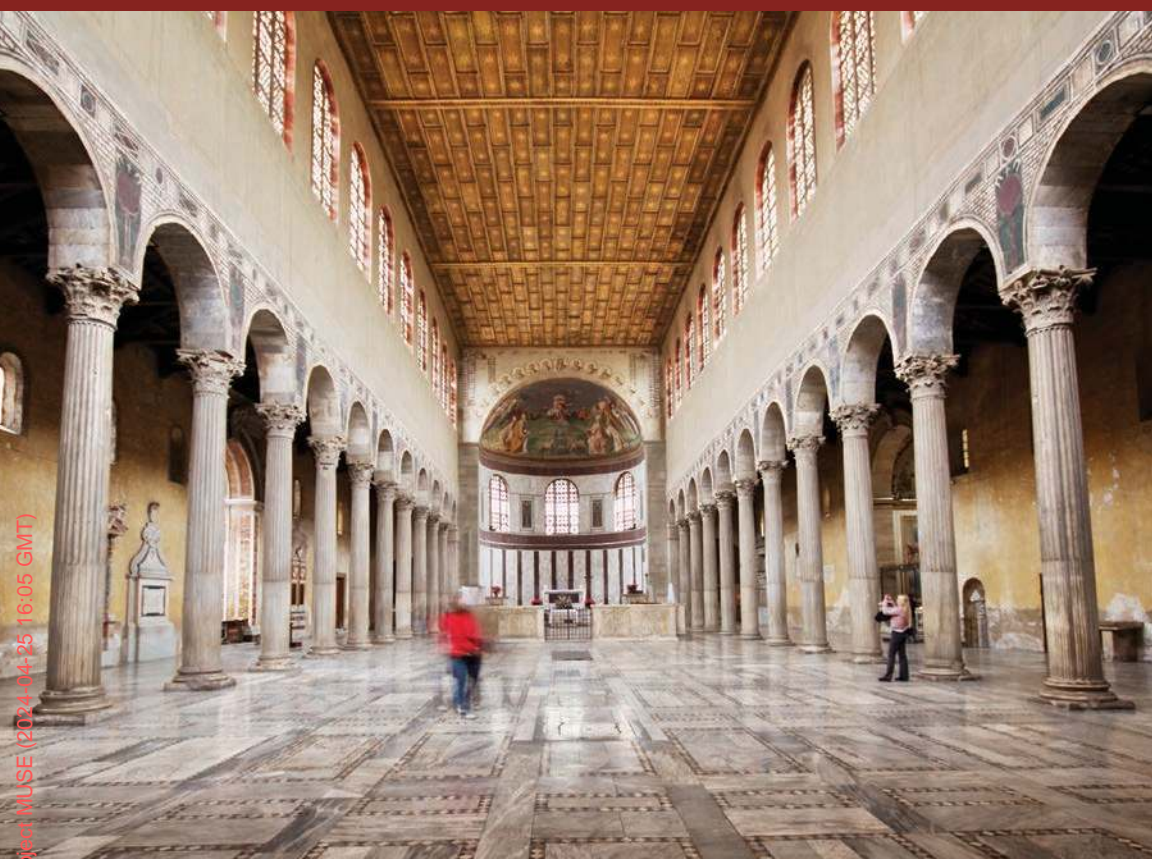
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## Why Do Old Places Matter?



National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation  
Leadership Forum**

# Foreword: The Power of Old Places

STEPHANIE K. MEEKS

Why do old places matter so much to us? What is the essence of their enduring magic? How do they continue to hold such sway over us long after they were formed or built? These are questions we have been pondering since the dawn of recorded history.

Just as the Romans marveled at the ruins of Troy, many over the years have noted the role of old places in bringing to life, across millennia, the long continuity of the past. “From the heights of these pyramids,” Napoleon Bonaparte once told his troops at Giza, “forty centuries look down on us.” While Napoleon saw his vast ambition reflected in the stones of Egypt, another Frenchman, Gustave Flaubert, drew the opposite lesson from them. “All this ancient dust,” he shrugged, “makes one indifferent to fame.”

Other writers have highlighted how places help us to establish a sense of identity—to recall who we are and where we come from. “How hard it is to escape from places,” observed the modernist writer Katherine Mansfield, early in the 20th century. “However carefully one goes they hold you—you leave little bits of yourself fluttering on the fences—like rags and shreds of your very life.”

A similar sentiment was famously crooned by four lads from Liverpool: “There are places I’ll remember all my life,” the Beatles told us, bringing back “moments with lovers and friends I still can recall.” By contrast, losing the places that tell our story can be traumatic. “How will we know it’s us without our past?” John Steinbeck’s displaced families ask in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Over the past year, we have been fortunate to have Tom Mayes, deputy general counsel at the National Trust for Historic Preservation and winner of the 2013 Rome Prize in Historic Preservation from the American Academy in Rome, delve deeply into questions about the significance of place—questions that are fundamental not just to our work as preservationists but to our basic understanding of ourselves and our communities.

After intensive research and many discussions with his colleagues in Rome and elsewhere, Tom composed a wonderful series of posts on “Why Do Old Places Matter?” for the Preservation Leadership Forum Blog. In these powerful, thought-provoking essays—which I encourage everyone to read—Tom reflects on continuity, memory, identity, beauty, sustainability, and other compelling reasons why old places continue to move us.

In this issue of *Forum Journal*, the same vital questions raised at the beginning of the series are now posed to others—scholars of other disciplines who have thought deeply about this nexus of issues, artists who have found continuing inspiration in the power of place, and social-change advocates deeply committed to the preservation ethos.

I hope these essays, like Tom’s, will spur conversation, and encourage you to ponder: Why do old places matter to you?

For my part, I think of the houses in Colorado I grew up in, the schools that helped make me who I am. And I think of an underground dugout on the Kansas prairie where my father’s ancestors lived more than a century ago. This is not a landmark or a monument—it is quite literally a hole in the ground! It is a place where, to escape from poverty, my great-great-grandparents and their eight children lived a hardscrabble existence so that they, and later generations, could live a better life.

My family’s American story begins in that Kansas dugout. That unremarkable hole—unlikely to be added to the National Register anytime soon!—nonetheless connects me across the generations to my great-grandmother, who left Norway with four children in search of a new start amid America’s Great Plains.

One of the most evocative chroniclers of that particular pioneer experience is the author Willa Cather, best remembered for her prairie trilogy—*O Pioneers*, *Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia*. In the second of these novels, Cather’s heroine, Thea Kronborg—a young aspiring artist from Colorado—visits ancient Native American dwellings above Flagstaff, Arizona, and imagines herself living among them, centuries earlier:

*Standing up in her lodge, Thea could with her thumb nail dislodge flakes of carbon from the rock roof—the cooking-smoke of the*



**Homesteaders in Norway, Kansas, pose for this photo taken sometime during the 1930s. Stephanie Meeks's grandmother is the young girl standing next to the cart with the cake.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF STEPHANIE K. MEEKS

*Ancient people. They were that near!...How often Thea remembered Ray Kennedy's moralizing about the cliff cities. He used to say he never felt the hardness of the human struggle or the sadness of history as he felt it among those ruins. He used to say, too, that it made one feel an obligation to do one's best.*

*On the first day that Thea climbed the water trail she began to have intuitions about the women who had worn the path, and who had spent so great a part of their lives going up and down it. She found herself trying to walk as they must have walked, with a feeling in her feet and knees and loins which she had never known before...She could feel the weight of an Indian baby hanging to her back as she climbed.*

*The empty houses, among which she wandered in the afternoon...were haunted by certain fears and desires; feelings about warmth and cold and water and physical strength. It seemed to Thea that a certain understanding of those old people came up to her out of the rock shelf on which she lay; that certain feelings were transmitted to her...They were not expressible in words, but seemed rather to translate into altitudes of body, into degrees of muscular tension or relaxation.*

This potent sense of connection that Cather describes is the power of old places. It is what I feel when I think of that Kansas dugout where my ancestors made their home—just as visiting Drayton Hall or Montpelier connects us across the centuries to the Americans of the colonial era, or Stonehenge or Arizona’s Great Bend of the Gila to life thousands of years before, or an old haunt connects us to the people and memories of our own past—including even our younger selves. (As another daughter of the Kansas prairies well put it, “There’s no place like home!”)

In 1943 the psychologist Abraham Maslow came up with a theory of human motivation called the Hierarchy of Needs, which is now usually portrayed in the shape of a pyramid—the most fundamental needs of men and women form the base, and more prosaic concerns sit at the top. After physiological needs like air, food and water, and personal safety, Maslow argued, the most powerful need felt by us is belonging.

Old places, I would argue, speak to that need for belonging in a way that little else can. They give us the chance to feel a connection to the broad community of human experience, a community that exists across time. And they help us understand that the lives we lead are not insignificant—that what we do will have an impact on the future.

That is why our work saving America’s historic places is so important, not just for understanding our own history but for formulating our sense of ourselves. Historic places connect us to the striving and struggles of earlier generations, and generations to come. They tell us who we are. And they help us understand that, though we ourselves may be mortal, our actions will echo on after we’re gone, just as those of previous generations inform our world today.

All the more reason why we must continue working to save the places that matter to us, and to make sure they are playing a visible and valued role in the daily lives of our communities: so future generations can experience them, be enthralled by them, and feel that same powerful sense of connection to the great American past, and to those who inhabited it. FJ

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STEPHANIE K. MEEKS is the president and CEO of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.