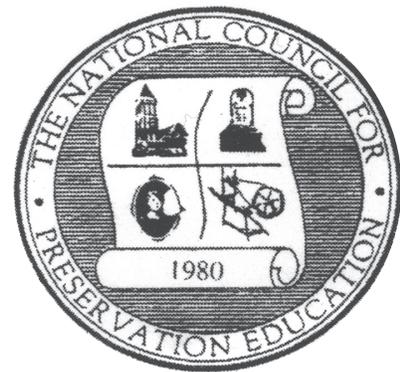


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John H. Sprinkle Jr. *Crafting Preservation Criteria: The National Register of Historic Places and American Historic Preservation*. New York: Routledge, 2014, 244 pp., 10 black-and-white photographs, paperback, \$34.95, ISBN: 9780415642552 0415642558.

Defined by the National Park Service (NPS) as “the official list of the Nation’s historic places worthy of preservation,” the National Register is in many ways the centerpiece of our preservation infrastructure. It is a program with several uses that touch people in different ways, including property owners who apply for rehabilitation tax credits and grants, professionals who administer Section 106 Reviews, and individuals in communities where historic designation is a source of pride and a means of commemoration. To those who work with the National Register as students, professors, professionals, or administrators, its criteria can often seem arbitrary, enigmatic, and antiquated. But like it or not, John Sprinkle is right to assert that the Register is part of “our normative body of assumptions—our preservation paradigm” (5).

Understanding the history of the Register and the people and circumstances that shaped its categories and considerations into the program we know today is the purpose of Sprinkle’s fascinating book *Crafting Preservation Criteria: The National Register of Historic Places and American Historic Preservation*. Sprinkle examines the Register thematically through ten engagingly written chapters, each of which has a clear objective and tight thesis. The opening chapters explain how the Park Service implemented its mandate under the Historic Sites Act of 1935, surveying American history to identify sites historically significant to the entire nation. The agency and its advisors sought to make principled decisions in the selection and interpretation of sites that would “provide a comprehensive illustration of the American experience” (27). Subsequent chapters discuss how the Park Service and the framers of the Register wrestled with issues of physical integrity and authenticity, significance

of architectural aesthetics, evolving philosophies for the treatment of archaeological sites, untangling of religious beliefs from historical significance, and the planning function of historic districts.

Sprinkle’s frank assessment of how politics—what he calls “Criterion P”—repeatedly swayed specific instances of preservation decision making is among the most insightful aspects of his analysis. For example, the “fifty year rule” was, in part, intended to avoid consideration of events and sites associated with the recent past that the NPS deemed too “controversial” or “contentious” (112). Exceptions were made. When the agency sought to highlight examples of the nation’s scientific and military superiority exemplified by its atomic heritage, it designated the location of the first self-sustaining nuclear reaction. The nomination was rushed to completion in time for the event’s twenty-second anniversary in 1964, even though the building that housed the experiment on the University of Chicago campus had no physical integrity; it had been demolished six years earlier. Decisions about archaeological undertakings were similarly driven by Cold War priorities. Archaeologists skillfully convinced U.S. politicians that their profession merited government support because it was a form of scientific exploration—a knowledge frontier—that the Soviets were aggressively funding. Anyone who works with the Register or has even a general interest in preservation will learn from and enjoy *Crafting Preservation Criteria*.

I read Sprinkle’s book as both an intellectual history and a gentle critique of the National Register. The program, which is nearing its own fifty-year anniversary, has been a durable framework for vetting historic properties. Is it fraught with internal contradictions and

unstated assumptions that seem increasingly tenuous in the twenty-first century? Yes, and Sprinkle offers ample evidence of this, though it is not accompanied by a strong critique. The NPS and its board of advisors believed they could create a principled, objective, and even quasi-scientific approach to evaluating historical significance. And yet the Register's framers felt political pressures, and acknowledged that decisions about integrity, significance, and what constituted the "American experience" were inherently subjective and contingent. Recent preservation literature increasingly refers to these as values-based decisions.¹

Some readers might wish that the author had done more to tease out the National Register's shortcomings and blind spots, perhaps offering suggestions for its improvement. But such criticisms are not within Sprinkle's clearly stated scope. Moreover, because he is a historian employed by the National Park Service, one can understand Sprinkle's desire to maintain a respectful tone. His book opens new perspectives on the history of our preservation processes and assumptions. I predict it will be a springboard for future students and scholars who, in developing more pointed critiques, may produce new approaches to thinking about history and significance. If we desire a National Register that truly represents the diversity of the American experience, we may need to rethink the program's criteria and considerations.² Understanding their origins is an important starting point.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Randall Mason, "Theoretical and Practical Arguments for Values-Centered Preservation," *CRM Journal* (Summer 2006).
2. "Imagining a More Inclusive Preservation Program," themed issue of *Forum Journal* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2014).