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### **Drawing Details: Taking Measure of the HABS Collection**

Since its establishment in 1933, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) has become one of the largest architectural archives in the world, documenting approximately 40,000 buildings and sites located throughout the United States. HABS documentation captures the essence of these historic places through measured drawings, large-format photography, and research. Records generated for the survey are housed at the Library of Congress, and the properties included in the HABS collection offer a glimpse into our material history, the recent past, and the colonial era.

Efforts to evaluate the collection, to determine what was done and where work needed to be done, began with the compilation of catalogs for each state that listed the sites documented. Quantitative analysis improved with collection databases as they grew more sophisticated. Audits of the records created for several states revealed the patterns of documentation but little about the motivations to include the places highlighted or even when the work was undertaken. Today, a major impetus for HABS documentation is mitigation. This legality, stipulated in the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) as amended, adds vital records to the collection but also disassociates the HABS office from the site selection process. A closer examination of the survey's presence in Mississippi and Rhode Island, the two states for which the HABS documentation was most recently cataloged, chronicles the choices made, and through those places, offers a commentary on how the survey emerged as a preservation strategy in the 1930s and perpetuated the preservation movement until its codification in 1966 through NHPA. More than forty years later, the work of the survey continues, and the selection of historic places warranting documentation – and in what detail – remains an ongoing concern.

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# Drawing Details: Taking Measure of the HABS Collection

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The Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) is one of the largest architectural archives in the world, documenting approximately 40,000 buildings and sites located throughout the United States. HABS documentation captures the essence of these historic places through measured drawings, large-format photography, and research.<sup>1</sup> The creation of the archive in 1933 represented the convergence of several trends that sought to mitigate the loss of America's architectural fabric and vanishing cultural landscapes. These trends ranged from individual field drawings of old buildings to federal preservation policy under Executive Order 6133 that brought stewardship of historic battlefields and associated cultural sites to the National Park Service. In fact, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) floated the idea for a thorough survey or complete list of America's historic places as early as 1918. Recognition of the conceptual value of such an index came when the administrators of the New Deal work relief programs accepted the HABS proposal. The survey was one of the cultural endeavors supported through the Works Progress Administration and was the sole WPA initiative for historic architecture (Lavoie 2008-2009, 4-9, 28).

Yet the Historic American Buildings Survey was more than a make-work program for architects without commissions during the depression years. The documentation produced during the 1930s formed the nucleus of the collection, and the process of recording historic architecture not only refined the drafting skills of the architects but also reinforced their architectural education, increasing their familiarity with structural elements and aesthetic embellishments. Moreover, the photographs the field teams took, and the notes they made about the places they measured,

contextualized the drawings and their understanding of the past. The architects employed by HABS benefited from the tradition of studying classical architecture and historical precedent. The curriculum of the Ecole des Beaux Arts enshrined such an approach; it was also one that provided a repertoire for Ecole graduates' design and restoration projects. Influenced by the Ecole doctrine, historical architects drew both high style and vernacular buildings with increasing frequency.

The first to use the drawings as evidence in a scholarly work addressing American vernacular architecture was Norman Morrison Isham in the 1895 publication *Early Rhode Island Houses*. Isham and his co-author, Albert Brown, observed the structural systems of each building to suggest a larger pattern of historical change. Documents that could otherwise date the houses they studied were scant, so the authors emphasized the verifiability of their drawings and the details delineated (Brown and Isham 1895; Upton and Vlach 1986, 149-50). Isham continued his recording efforts. He produced the architectural monograph on Providence's colonial period domestic architecture for the influential *White Pine Series* in 1918 and crafted a glossary of architectural terms for the Wapole Society in 1939. He also taught at Brown University and chaired the architectural department at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), thereby encouraging the next generation of architects in their studies of past technologies and structural innovations. His classes attracted architectural historians, including Antoinette Downing, who quickly became a compatriot in the field. She accompanied Isham on his site visits and published work of her own on Rhode Island's historic architecture (Downing 1937; Downing and Scully 1952).<sup>2</sup>

The independent efforts of restoration architects, such as Isham, coalesced as HABS through the vision of Leicester B. Holland, chief of the fine arts division at the Library of Congress and member of the preservation committee for the AIA (Lavoie 2006-2007). Holland looked to the state chapters of the AIA to nominate men to lead the geographically-based HABS recording teams.<sup>3</sup> Responsible for a state or HABS district, the district officers typically had devoted years to recording examples of early American architecture. They were active in local preservation initiatives, they were members of a local AIA chapter, and they had architectural practices dependent on design and restoration business.

Because of the significance of Isham's approach to the study of historic buildings, this paper turns to HABS in Rhode Island for insight into how the national program was implemented on a state level. As a rural foil to the industrial landscape of Rhode Island's mills, documentation for Mississippi is also considered (more selection criteria are detailed later). After the New Deal funding ceased, the survey continued nationally but had no further presence in Mississippi until the 1970s. In Rhode Island, the model persisted, but materials submitted to the HABS archive were intermittent. Through the examination of collection records for these two states, this paper seeks to elucidate what measure of the past the archive presents today. Specifically, the author investigated what was done and identified the district officers who shaped the contents of the collection through their interpretation of what was historic and, unintentionally, through the geographic isolation of architectural patterns resulting from a state-by-state, case-by-case focus.

## THE COLLECTION

The HABS records that together form the architectural archive are housed at the Library of Congress. They are catalogued by location, that is, by the state, county, and city in which they are found. The advent of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) refines the data, adding coordinates that pinpoint a building's location irrespective of road and street names and numbers that can change.<sup>4</sup>

Precisely located, and recorded with a precision laid out in the standards set by the Secretary of the Interior, buildings in the collection offer a glimpse into our material history, the recent past, as well as the colonial era. Efforts to evaluate the collection began with the compilation of catalogs for each state.<sup>5</sup> Quantitative analysis improved as databases grew more sophisticated. A review of the records created for Mississippi and Rhode Island reveals patterns of documentation but, unfortunately, little about the motivations to include the places highlighted or even when the work was undertaken.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1930s, the Washington office guided the way the documentation was done in each state through various bulletins and circulars that established procedure and methodology. Key personnel, particularly architect Thomas Tileston Waterman, weighed in on the choices. Yet, experts in each state set the priorities (State files, HABS; Lavoie 2006-2007). Today, however, a major impetus for documentation is mitigation, which accounted for one-third of the records entered into the collection this year. Mitigation adds vital records to the collection, but it disassociates the Washington office from the site selection process. A closer examination of the survey's presence in Mississippi and Rhode Island chronicles the choices made. Through these choices, the collection illustrates how the survey emerged as a preservation strategy in the 1930s and perpetuated the preservation movement until its codification in 1966 through the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA).

## Counting Records: Documentation in Mississippi and Rhode Island

Attempts to mine the archive for details on American architecture place new emphasis on data collection about the records themselves, as illustrated in two case studies. The state-based case studies for Mississippi and Rhode Island correspond to the geographical basis for organizing the archive initially. Mississippi is defined by the river that shares its name, while Rhode Island embraces Narragansett Bay. The waterways helped establish the states as important cultural centers in the colonial and early national periods of United States

history and helped maintain them as nexuses of great wealth in the nineteenth century. Underpinning those riches was an economy dependent on labor, enslaved families toiling on the plantations (Mississippi) and factory workers – families – caught up in the cotton and textile industries (Rhode Island). Slave and tenant housing on Mississippi's plantations, therefore, could be contrasted with housing in the company towns along the Blackstone River. Both states have high-style houses, such as the Natchez (MS) mansions and Newport (RI) summer palaces, and each has vernacular farmhouse types reflective of their place, such as the wood dog-trot in Mississippi and the stone-ender in Rhode Island (Figs. 1, 2). These generalizations



Fig. 1. Mississippi dog-trot house, 1937 (HABS/HAER/HALS, Library of Congress) (HABS No. MS-183-2).

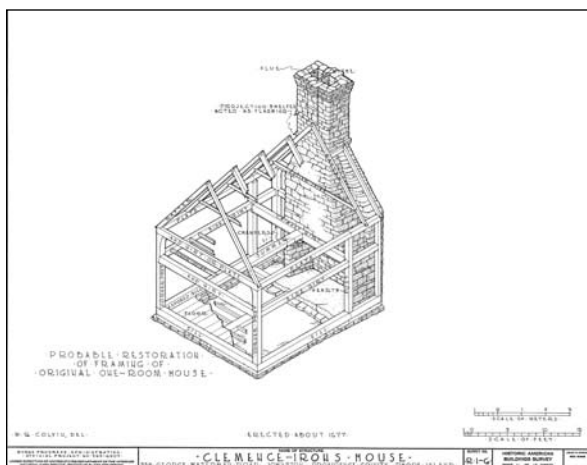


Fig. 2. Framing plan of the Thomas Clemence House (Clemence-Irons House) in Johnston, Providence County, Rhode Island, showing the stone end chimney (HABS/HAER/HALS, Library of Congress) (HABS No. RI-6).

hardly reshape our perceptions about Mississippi and Rhode Island, but they do reflect the era in which the documentation was done, accounting for sites selected and levels of recording completed.

#### *Delta Dwelling: Collection Statistics for Mississippi*

Cataloging HABS entries for Mississippi allows for the identification of locations and sites recorded for the state since the 1930s (Table 1). The Mississippi records correspond, predominantly, to forms of domestic architecture, houses made of wood and brick, as well as various outbuildings, characterizing sixty-five percent of all the building types noted. Of the 347 records, some received recognition from other programs. Eighty-nine properties are also listed in the National Register for Historic Places, and there are records for twenty-one (of the thirty-eight) National Historic Landmarks. Five (of nine) sites administered by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), and two (of three) engineering landmarks recognized by the American Society of Civil Engineers and the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, are included in the survey.<sup>7</sup> The state falls below the median for numbers of survey records in the collection, ranking forty-first among the states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories.

With indexing, the collection could yield precise information about building materials and use, as well as about architectural plans, scale, and forms. To date, the index for Mississippi's records consists of broad categorizations, making regional patterns and building information difficult to discern. Despite these deficiencies in data collection, recording efforts took surveyors to each of Mississippi's five regions: the Hills, the Pines, the Delta, the River, and along the Coast, as well as in the Black Prairie (Fig. 3). Of these, the Mississippi Delta is perhaps the best known culturally, although the coastal region became synonymous with the state in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Yet the River and Hills regions are best represented in the records of the collection.

Counted as part of the River region, Mississippi's capital city of Jackson has nineteen sites in the collection. However, the most documented city is

Natchez, giving Adams County the greatest presence in the collection of any county in the state, with Warren County running a distant second.

After the 1930s, documentation efforts in Mississippi continued only locally. HABS did not return until the 1970s. At that time, staff photographer Jack E. Boucher surveyed a broad swath of the state, adding seventy

plus records to the collection.<sup>8</sup> Boucher's travel to Mississippi was likely sponsored by the state with funding appropriated after the passage of NHPA. In the 1990s and early 2000s, at the behest of Natchez National Historical Park, comprehensive recording of the park's properties was undertaken. Similarly, thorough work was done as part of the national study that examined

Table 1. Collection statistics for Mississippi<sup>1</sup>  
The Findings:<sup>2</sup>

	<i>Mississippi</i>	<i>HABS / HAER / HALS Collection</i>		
Total reports (HABS, HAER, HALS)	350	39,586 <sup>3</sup>		
Reports with measured drawings	50	15%	8812	22%
Reports with photographs	329	98%	35,919	91%
Reports with historical data	232	69%	24,585	62%
Average number of sheets per drawing set	6	7		
Average number of photographs	6	8		
Average number of pages per historical report	5	10		
Building types identified				
Houses	220	63%		
Outbuildings	21	6%		
Commercial facilities	27	7.75%		
Religious facilities	23	6.6%		
Roads	7	2%		
Barns	4	1%		
Regional distribution of reports <sup>4</sup>				
Hills	74	21.4%		
Prairie	37	10.9%		
Pines	1	0.3%		
Delta	12	3.4%		
River	192	55%		
Coast	35	10%		
County with the most records	Adams			
National Parks	31	9%	2960	7.5%
Natchez National Historical Park (NATC)	7			
Natchez Trace (NATR)	2			
Vicksburg National Military Park (VICK)	22			

Notes:

1. Compiled by the author, 2009-2010.
2. Mississippi tallies confirmed per entries in the database January 11, 2010.
3. Overall collection statistics generated by Anne Mason, Collections Manager, January 11, 2010.
4. Numbers are drawn from a county-by-county search of the database; these numbers do not include five sites in Mississippi without county-level locational data, as in the record HABS No. MS-287 for the waterway, or with locational data describing the counties as "other places," as in HABS No. MS-34 (Jefferson County), HABS Nos. MS-170 to MS-171 (Lowndes County), and HAER No. MS-11 (Lowndes County). These sites are included in the total number for the state (350) and do not change the proportional distribution of survey records in the regions in which they are located (Prairie, River). The county-by-county figures do include sites that appear in more than one county if the locational data is entered as "multiple addresses" as in the Natchez Trace Parkway (HAER No. MS-15). The parkway was counted twice, once for Adams County and once for Lee County. Similarly, Sacred Heart (HABS No. MS-208) appears – and is counted – in both Jefferson and Claiborne counties.

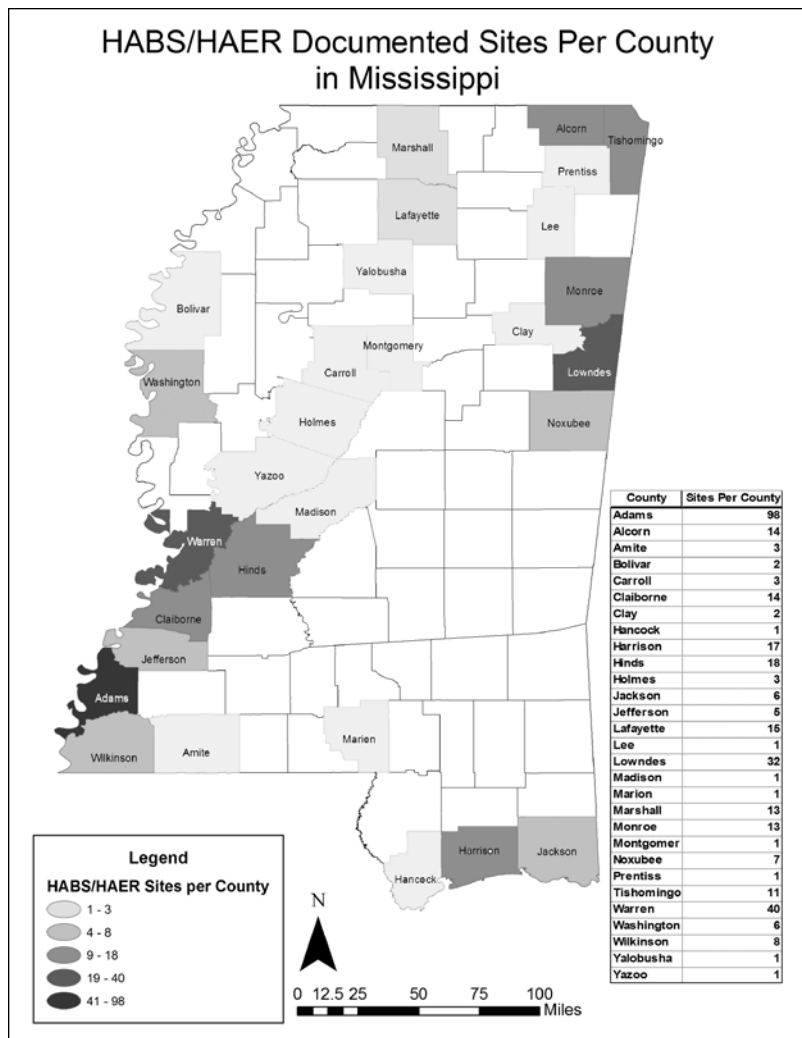


Fig. 3. Map of Mississippi, 2009, highlighting where (and how much) HABS documentation had been done (Deidre McCarthy, CRGIS).

historically significant bridges, parkways, and roadways. The scale of the Park Roads and Bridges Recording Program most closely resembles that of the 1930s-era survey, wherein the Washington office coordinated with state and local authorities to systematically record historic places across the country. Documentation of Mississippi's Natchez Trace Parkway and the roads running through Vicksburg National Military Park is representative of this undertaking (Davis et al. 2004).

*Housing Industry: Collection Statistics for Rhode Island*

Survey teams recorded thirty-two buildings in Rhode Island through measured drawings in the 1930s. In 1941, they field-noted nine other buildings but had not yet transferred

those onto Mylar sheets (State files, HABS).<sup>9</sup> Of the nine, four drawing sets were never completed.<sup>10</sup> The purchase of photographs from Arthur LeBouef in 1940 captured sites not yet visited or recorded by the HABS team (State files, HABS). Subsequent efforts led by Antoinette Downing and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission largely followed the documentation priorities established for the state in the first years of the national program. They concentrated heavily on the state's colonial era. In 1967, all of the buildings recorded for the state were revisited by HABS staff. Fifteen percent of those places had been demolished (Overby 1972, 14). The Historical Preservation Commission sponsored more documentation in the early 1970s, including that on Fort Adams (Downing 1976, 26). Since that time, however, HABS presence in Rhode Island has been sporadic and primarily done to meet

mitigative stipulations, excepting the pictorial study of the Cranston Armory by Jack E. Boucher in the late 1990s. Today, the collection includes records for thirty-four of the state's forty-four National Historic Landmarks and 130 of the properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places for Rhode Island (Table 2).<sup>11</sup>

Documentation entered into the collection for Rhode Island is below the median for numbers of survey records in the collection database, ranking thirty-sixth among the individual states, U.S. territories, and the District of

Columbia. Most records in the collection are for houses. Rhode Island's dwellings were constructed of wood and brick, like those erected in many places, but the documentation captures the distinctive stone-enders and shingled buildings that are regionally important. Recording efforts took place in each of Rhode Island's five counties (Fig. 4).<sup>12</sup> However, Rhode Island's most defining feature is Narragansett Bay, and the collection records are overwhelmingly concentrated at the founding settlements of Newport, located at the mouth of the bay,

Table 2. Collection statistics for Rhode Island<sup>1</sup>  
The Findings:<sup>2</sup>

	<i>Rhode Island</i>	<i>HABS / HAER / HALS Collection</i>		
Total reports (HABS, HAER, HALS):	464	39,586 <sup>3</sup>		
Reports with measured drawings	89	19%	8812	22%
Reports with photographs	445	96%	35,919	91%
Reports with historical data	316	68%	24,585	62%
Average number of sheets per drawing set	12	7		
Average number of photographs	8	8		
Average number of pages per historical report	8	10		
Building types identified				
Houses	250	54%		
Mills	20	4%		
Commercial facilities	42	9%		
Religious facilities	23	5%		
Railroad facilities	26	6%		
Bridges	27	6%		
Waterways/canals	7	1.5%		
Distribution of reports by County <sup>4</sup>				
Bristol	26	5.4%		
Kent	31	6.5%		
Newport	103	21.5%		
Providence	277	57.8%		
Washington	42	8.8%		
National Parks	2	.04%	2960	7.5%
Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor	1			
Roger Williams National Monument	0			
Touro Synagogue	1			

Notes:

1. Compiled by the author, 2010.
2. Rhode Island tallies confirmed per entries in the database January 2010. Three HABS records lack documentation, so 464 is used as the state total, instead of the 467 site names entered in the database for the state in this table.
3. Overall collection statistics generated by Anne Mason, Collections Manager, January 11, 2010.
4. These numbers are dependent on locational data. The county-by-county figures tally 479, rather than the overall site location total of 481, because county information for HABS No. RI-6 and HABS No. RI-80 is entered as "other places." Nonetheless, both location figures (479, 481) are larger than 464 (by site name) because some buildings and structures have multiple addresses, such as a bridge or waterway.



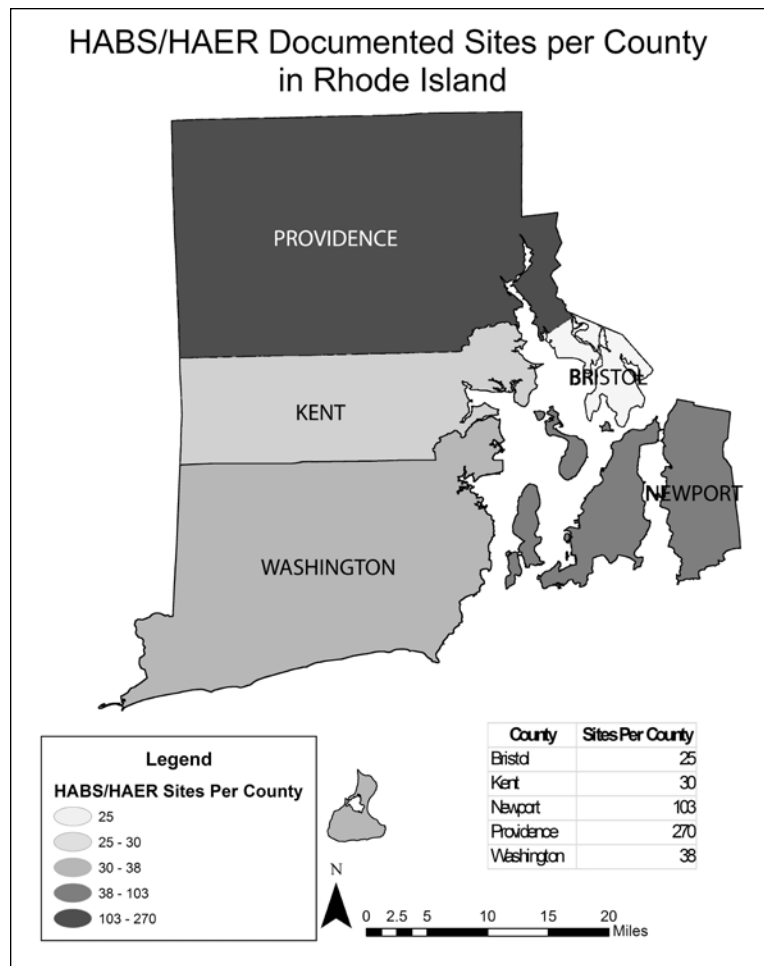


Fig. 4. Map of Rhode Island, 2010, highlighting by county the number of sites recorded for HABS (Deidre McCarthy, CRGIS).

and Providence, the capital city located at the head of the bay. Newport and Providence also served, concurrently, as colonial-era capitals. Of the 479 site locations registered in the database for properties in Rhode Island, 277 are in Providence County and 103 in Newport County. Of those, 216 are in Providence itself, and ninety-three in Newport. Regardless, there are omissions to the record, including the iconic Marble House in Newport and Salve Regina University's Ochre Court, Vinland (McAuley Hall), and Wakehurst buildings (Zipf 2010).

#### Accounting for Records in the Collection

The quantitative approach reveals what was done and where. Yet it leaves many questions unanswered, such as who was responsible for what, as well as contextual inquiries, such as the survey's relationship to and within

the preservation movement, particularly after the 1930s. As illustrated through the entries for Mississippi and Rhode Island in the collection, most activity occurred in the inaugural decade (1930s), when the program itself was both a make-work endeavor and a preservation strategy. After NHPA, HABS returned to both states but the impetus for documentation came from the state historic preservation offices (SHPOs) and not from the WPA district officers. Across the country, SHPO county surveys drew upon the HABS model, while HABS trained a new generation of architects and preservationists through its summer recording program. The relationship between HABS and the preservation movement continued throughout the twentieth century, with one informing the other. This relationship is personified by the men and women who led the survey in Mississippi and Rhode Island in the 1930s and, as educators and preservation activists, by their activities in the years afterward.

*District Officers in Mississippi*

Mississippi's first district officer was the architect A. Hays Town (State files, HABS; Sachs 2003, 47-48). Town trained in architecture at Tulane University, where the architectural program was led by such men as William Woodward, who was instrumental in preserving the Vieux Carré and promoting New Orleans cultural heritage. The architectural curriculum at Tulane was steeped in Beaux Arts planning and construction, and this approach generated designs defined by classical formality and historical detail. Under the tutelage of John Herndon Thompson, Town learned the importance of visual composition and of regional architectural traditions. Thompson's students documented the buildings of New Orleans, and this field experience prepared Town for his internship with architect Richard Koch.<sup>13</sup> With Koch, Town worked on the restoration of historic Oak Alley (Fig. 5). It was both his design practice with



*Fig. 5. Oak Alley colonnade, Vacherie, Louisiana, c. 1940 (Photograph by Richard Koch, HABS/HAER/HALS, Library of Congress) (HABS No. LA-71).*

N.W. Overstreet and his knowledge of the region's vernacular architecture that made Town well placed to lead the survey effort.

In Washington, at the inauguration of the survey, Holland and John P. O'Neill outlined the standards for recording buildings for HABS, but the district officers' interpretation of their parameters likely explains the variation, from district to district, in how the drawings appeared. In Mississippi, Town applied his lessons in drawing composition from Tulane and instructed his field teams. He later recollected "little guidance into the mechanics or format," suggesting that the implementation of the standards prepared in Washington was entirely at the district officers' discretion. This latitude would also explain, as Town said, the program administrators using Mississippi as a procedural example for other districts (Sachs 1986, 200; 2003, 48).

Town served from 1934 until about 1940, when he moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana; at that time, Emmett J. Hull was nominated to replace him. (State files, HABS; DO, HABS). Hull's design aesthetic was decidedly modern, following Town's work in Mississippi. It is likely he was selected to steer the survey because of his established reputation and because of his family's integral place in Mississippi's cultural community (Baughn 2010).

Hull also succeeded Town on the State Advisory Committee, an entity established by the AIA to guide the investigation and recommendation of subjects for HABS documentation. Generally, the committees consisted of three architectural professionals, as well as one or two local historians. In Mississippi, the committee was composed of Hull, C.H. Lindsley, F.P. Gates, Dunbar Rowland, and Judge Andrew H. Longino (State files, HABS).<sup>14</sup> As a committee, these men reviewed the existing literature and determined what documentation had already been completed on their state's historic buildings. Only then did they compile a list of sites for consideration, ranked in order of priority, which was forwarded to the Washington, D.C., office.

The priority list submitted by Hull for fifty-six more sites in Mississippi appears to be targeted at the next phase of funding. Of the places identified as potential subjects in 1939, only the Hope Villa (HABS No. MS-46)

was ultimately drawn for HABS (State files, HABS; DO, HABS).<sup>15</sup> Many places on the list were subsequently photographed for the collection, although twenty-eight of them were never recorded. This seeming oversight occurred because the publically funded survey effort ended with the Second World War. Without successors to Town or Hull as district officers or the advisory committee to press for further documentation, and without WPA funding, the recording of Mississippi's historic sites fell to individual practitioners and academic programs. While work was undoubtedly done, no formal records were submitted to the national program for the archive until the 1970s. The hiatus highlights the impact of the 1930s program and the men and women who participated in it.

#### *District Officers in Rhode Island*

In Rhode Island, Isham led the initial survey efforts, but the program soon fell under the guidance of Philip D. Creer. He succeeded Isham in 1936 and worked under the New England division chief, Frank Chouteau Brown, in administering the survey. HABS in Rhode Island was waylaid by controversy over personnel in spring 1936, and this threatened its funding (State files, HABS). In this interval, Norman W. Marble was the acting district officer. Marble had evidently run afoul of someone politically, possibly while serving as the superintendent at the State House in the years 1931 to 1935. His service as a district officer was not approved, although it was a position he undertook at Isham's request.<sup>16</sup> Once the problem was resolved, Creer operated out of the Rhode Island School of Design, where he also chaired the architecture program. Shepherded by Creer, the HABS teams measured and drew more than twenty buildings (State files, HABS).

Work for HABS on the field teams offered the kind of immersion into architectural practice and exposure to drafting techniques that Creer's later students requested.<sup>17</sup> At key intervals in his teaching career, particularly at RISD but also later at the University of Texas, Creer encouraged the practical component of an architect's education through short courses in architecture and experience in the field. Less clear is his impact on the survey in Rhode Island, which was dominated by Isham's and Downing's

preferences, as well as those of Waterman. It is likely Creer affected the mechanics of the survey, working alongside Brown to see the priority buildings recorded and encouraging the professional practice of the architects.

Isham remained integral to the HABS documentation program throughout the 1930s, serving on the advisory committee alongside Antoinette Downing, John Nichols Brown, J. Peter Geddes, and the secretary and custodian of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Howard M. Chapin (State files, HABS).<sup>18</sup> In addition to the advisory committee, Creer worked closely with the architect John Hutchins Cady, thereby ensuring that the priority list for HABS documentation was in alignment with those properties recognized by local experts as important to preserve (Membership files, AIA).<sup>19</sup> By 1941, this list ballooned to more than three hundred buildings (State files, HABS; Creer, RISD).

With the United States's entry into the Second World War and the re-allocation of public funds toward the war effort, the WPA-sponsored state surveys wound down, and with them the need for oversight by the district officers. HABS continued to operate under the auspices of the National Park Service's Branch of Design and Construction during the 1940s and 1950s and was reinvigorated under the Mission 66 program. Today, the HABS Coordinating Committee of the AIA fulfills an advisory role, but the survey remains dependent on local initiatives, like that undertaken by Antoinette Downing for the preservation of College Hill.

In Providence, for example, the confluence of urban renewal and university building programs in the 1950s brought attention to the venerable College Hill area, particularly to Benefit Street (Fig. 6). While the new buildings, such as the auditorium for RISD designed by Creer (Fig. 7) and the courthouse by the firm Jackson, Robertson and Adams, were sheathed in red brick, many historic buildings were demolished. The loss of these buildings impacted the neighborhood, prompted the establishment of the preservation society, and launched Downing on her survey effort. She recorded 1,350 buildings on College Hill, and by determining which were historically valuable, she effectively defined Benefit Street's history in the process. As Isham had done with his list of priorities for HABS in the 1950s and 1960s, Downing gave preference to the eighteenth century (Weyeneth 2004).<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 6. Benefit Street on College Hill, Providence, Rhode Island, 1958 (Photograph by Laurence F. Tilley, HABS/HAER/HALS, Library of Congress) (HABS No. RI-148-2).



Fig. 7. Elevation of the auditorium as constructed at the Rhode Island School of Design, July 2010 (Photograph by author).

### *Outlining the Past*

To connect the various buildings selected by the district officers and documented by the HABS teams in the 1930s to American architecture as a whole, John P. O'Neill of the National Park Service requested that the district officers provide an outline of their region's architectural forms. The outlines sought to elucidate the defining character of a region's architecture and show how it developed in each area (Bulletins, HABS).<sup>21</sup>

In the summary draft prepared for Mississippi, for example, specific architectural elements and building materials are noted, as well as the arrival of the central-passage floor plan. The "transitional" phases included many structures made of wood, plus houses with double porches rather than the two-story classical porticoes of the Greek Revival, with square box columns, narrow corner boards, and irregular floor plans. It was the Greek Revival buildings, here called the "formal types," of the antebellum era that the outline's authors admitted had come to "symbolize the Old South" (State files, HABS).<sup>22</sup> No architectural description or definition accompanied the categorization.

In Rhode Island, Creer also noted specific architectural elements and building materials. His text heralded the arrival of the central chimney, followed by the multi-room, central-passage floor plan in Rhode Island's domestic architecture. While only sections of the overview for Rhode Island were drafted, the fullest discussion is of the evolution or expansion of housing from the one-room, stone-ender dwelling, represented by the Thomas Clemence House and Roger Mowdy Tavern, to a house with multiple heated rooms of equal size (State files, HABS). Less fascinated by the "grand mansions" of the late nineteenth century and the professional architects who created them, Creer devoted time to the varied framing found in the buildings and how best to draw what he encountered. On at least one occasion, when questioned by Washington, Creer explained what he discovered in the field and enclosed a quick sketch to reinforce his point (State files, HABS) (Fig. 8).<sup>23</sup>

Yet, despite these early attempts to contextualize the specific sites recorded, the quantitative analysis of entries for Mississippi and Rhode Island, provided above, more clearly illustrates that the collection as it is now catalogued can answer few of O'Neill's questions; the categories are too broad. The number of houses in the collection is quantifiable, for example, but what form, scale, plan, and materials do they have? Why were they recorded? What do they tell us? Only with complete indexing of the records will individual researchers be able to fully search the collection for evidence, for details, for answers.

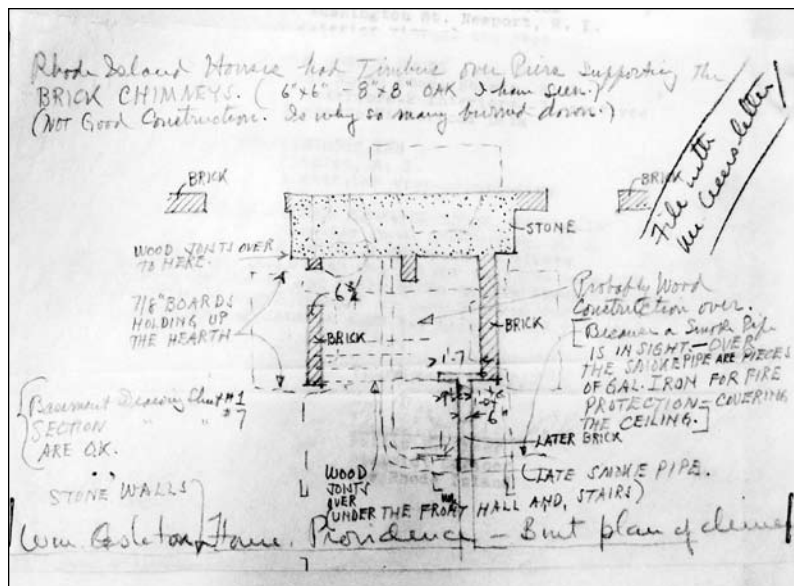


Fig. 8. Sketch showing the chimney foundation of the William Ashton House, 1941 (Rhode Island, State Organizational Files, 1933-50, HABS, RG 515, NACP).

### After the 1930s: HABS and the Preservation Movement

Viewed within the context of NHPA, HABS recording received a boost from the seminal legislation even if the framers of the preservation act initially retained O'Neill's, Holland's, and Waterman's vision of a finite priority list of buildings (*With Heritage So Rich* [1966] 1983, 189-95). Today, however, subjects for the survey are constantly growing as understanding of the past shifts. The kaleidoscope of perspectives represented in the collection is colored by those who first participated in the survey, such as Philip Creer and Antoinette Downing in Rhode Island. The shape of the collection today is the legacy of these early participants just as much as the cultural landscape they designed and protected in innovative ways, including through HABS documentation, which was emulated and codified on state and local levels.

After the establishment of HABS and the standardization of the field-based survey methods in bulletins and circulars, systematic documentation efforts continued at the local and regional levels, even as funding for the national program was suspended in the 1940s. The best known of these is, of course, *This Was Charleston* (1944), published by the Carolina Art Association (Yuhl 2005; Weyeneth 2004).<sup>24</sup> Moreover, discussions about historic buildings and sites that

warranted protection and consideration for inclusion in the National Park System led to the development of preservation standards and survey criteria by National Park Service historians in 1948. These criteria guided the evaluation of historic properties and were the precursors to those outlined for determining the significance and integrity of properties nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, established in 1966 (Sprinkle 2007).

Alumni of the HABS program, following the paths of Creer and Downing, continue to shape preservation practice through various academic programs, field school initiatives, CRM firms, and state and local preservation offices. These individuals often determine what is recorded as funding becomes ever more precious and, since the late 1990s, as mitigation stipulations have been reduced in scope. As a result of an emphasis on nationally significant properties, many representative building types or vernacular expressions of a region fail to receive the attention the Secretary of the Interior's standards suggest they deserve (Price 2005; Steinitz 1998). Submissions to the archive, therefore, are consistently inconsistent. The forty-year hiatus in Mississippi from the 1930s to Boucher's photographic trek through the state speaks to unevenness in the collection records, varying as they do in quantity (and detail) from place to place, time to time.

Downing's use of Isham's field-based approach in a survey format became a model for the later state-sponsored surveys of historic properties. Her exposure to the broad scope of HABS and its methodology, as well as her role on the advisory committee, provided experience for Downing to draw upon as she took up work on College Hill. It was College Hill that transformed Downing into a preservation activist, yet it was her knowledge of the historical importance of the buildings in question that made her so effective an advocate.

The lull in documentation in Rhode Island after Downing reiterates this ebb and flow of activity for HABS. As more of America's historic places "pass into unrecorded oblivion" the urgent need for a record of them is all the more evident, as is the valuable role of those alumni who carry Holland's vision onward (HABS Circular No. 1, 1933, 2).

#### SUMMARY FINDINGS: OUTLINE OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE

Better known today for its carefully measured drawings and drawing details, as well as large-format, black-and-white photography, the early HABS program aimed to use those documentary tools as standards for recordation, as well as a guide to evaluating architectural development in each state. The outlines submitted by the district officers remained in draft form at the suspension of the program. Generally, the overviews touched on each state's geographic, climatic, and cultural characteristics and summarized the political history of each. In looking at the outlines today, it is assumed that these factors were understood to have shaped the architecture of the place. However, the presentation of local architecture reads much the same as Israel Sack's evaluation of antiques in the period, exchanging the connoisseur's "good, better, best" continuum for "primitive, transitional, and formal," as if each building was on a trajectory toward the pinnacle of aesthetic expression (Greek Revival) irrespective of its builders' wherewithal and

intent. This understanding also characterizes the discussion of house types and floor plans in Rhode Island. Creer summarized Rhode Island's purported progression in an illustration for his draft text (Fig. 9).

Mississippi's and Rhode Island's outlines were just pieces of a larger programmatic goal wherein each district was to submit a synopsis based on the standardized overview format. The individual reports were to be folded into a six-volume set entitled *Outline of the Development of Early American Architecture*. Ultimately, O'Neill hoped that the *Outline* would place architectural forms within specific geographic, cultural, historical, and architectural contexts. And while the contextual *Outline* remained incomplete, HABS succeeded in identifying and recording 152 buildings across Mississippi between 1934 and 1939 and at least seventy-three in Rhode Island by April 1941 (State files, HABS).

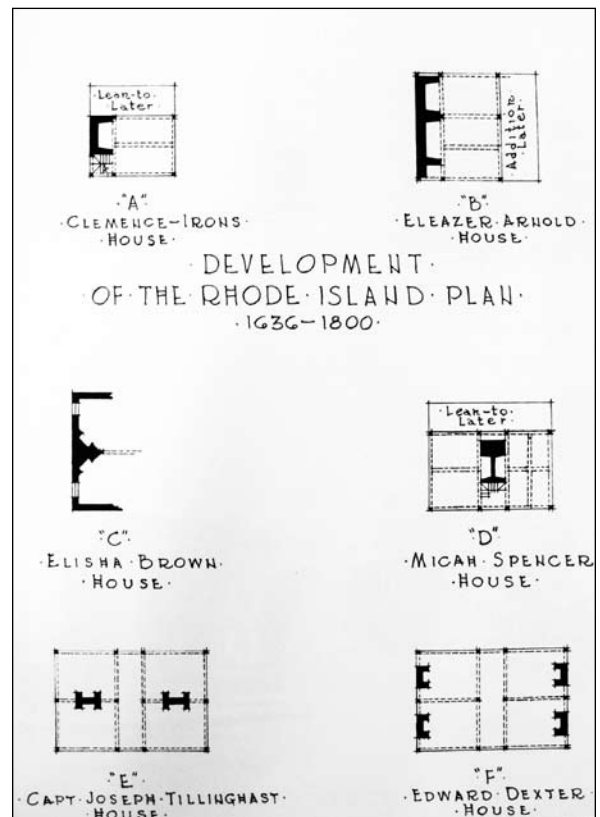


Fig. 9. Rhode Island house plan prepared for the *Outline* (Rhode Island, State Organizational Files, 1933-50, HABS, RG 515, NACP).

In looking back at the early work in Mississippi and Rhode Island, as well as evaluating the collection records today, indexing the entries bridges the gap between the initial questions of the collection posed by O'Neill in the *Outline* and contemporary inquiries. Cataloging the collection in detail affords the researcher the ability to map the diffusion of an architectural type or building form. Mapping in this way can identify patterns and folkways on the landscape that failed to notice state lines and thereby alleviate any interpretative limitations imposed on the collection by its organizational construct. Building types, aesthetic choices, and spatial arrangements tend to be regional in character, cutting through portions of several states; for a collection organized by state and county, this multiplicity poses a challenge if the search terms are too broad or the locations cannot be identified. Utilizing GIS data also transcends any artificial boundaries by enabling collection records to be linked to one another spatially and across databases. Furthermore, it highlights where work has been done, quickly illustrating concentrations of activity and places overlooked. The GIS data can be additive, restoring the locational information for buildings even after demolition, thereby allowing for an analysis of density, of the success or failure of zoning and ordinances, and of important architectural details and plans in the absence of the resource. Improving locational data, as well as indexing for architectural detail, could guide future documentation efforts and ensure the collection was representative of all America's historic places.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. For more on the establishment of HABS, see Lavoie 2006-07; Davidson and Perschler 2003; Price 2005.
2. Longstreth 2001. The author thanks Wm. McKenzie Woodward, Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, for sharing his insights into Downing, her stories and her accomplishments over the years.
3. In the state of Rhode Island, there were field teams based in Providence, Bristol, and Wickford in 1934; one in Newport in 1936; and squads in Providence, West Warwick, Cranston, East Greenwich, and Woonsocket in 1938. See HABS records, Mss. 502, Series 1, Box 1, Folders 1 and 12, Rhode Island Historical Society.
4. Standards for GIS were adopted in 2010. See National Park Service Cultural Resource Spatial Data Transfer Standards at [www.cr.nps.gov/hdp/standards/crgisstandards2.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/hdp/standards/crgisstandards2.htm).
5. These were done in 1941 and updated in 1959 through the Library of Congress.
6. The author's study follows the initial investigation of records for North Carolina by Martin J. Perschler (2005).
7. Mississippi averages are based on database tallies generated by the author on January 11, 2010; overall collection statistics calculated for the author by Anne Mason, Collections Manager, January 11, 2010.
8. After evaluating each record in the database to see when the recording work was done, I can say that HABS No. MS-163 contains photographs from 1940 by Lester Jones, and the next record, HABS No. MS-165, belongs to Boucher's 1972 effort. There is no entry for HABS No. MS-164.
9. These were assigned HABS Nos. RI-1 through RI-32, excepting HABS No. RI-3-7, RI-3-8, RI-3-13, and RI-3-12.
10. These are HABS No. RI-36 Jahleel Brenton House; HABS No. RI-39 Richard Smith House; HABS No. RI-54 John Greene House; and HABS No. RI-73 Golden Ball Inn.

11. The number of properties on the National Register of Historic Places is based on the database figures as updated December 8, 2009.
12. Rhode Island's five counties are: Bristol, Kent, Newport, Providence, and Washington (formerly, South County).
13. Koch served as the district officer for Louisiana.
14. In Mississippi the committee was composed of Claude Lindsley, a noted Mississippi architect; Rowland, the first director of MDAH and author of the two volumes *History of Mississippi*, and Longino, who while governor, commissioned the design of the New State Capitol in the early 1900s.
15. Eleven buildings were drawn in the 1930s, up to 1939, when Hull submitted the new list. These buildings were assigned HABS Nos. MS-17-1 (Rosalie) to MS-17-11 (House at 311-13 Market Street, Natchez). In 1940, Charles Peterson recommended that ten sites in Vicksburg be photographed: Shirley House, Willis House, Lockett House, Balfour House, Klein House, Allein House, Plain Gables, Warren County Courthouse, and the Blakely House and gin. Of these, all but the Willis House and the Allein House have been recorded.
16. Norman Morrison Isham to John P. O'Neill, January 8, 1936, and O'Neill to Isham, January 9, 1936, in the HABS records, Mss. 502, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 2, Rhode Island Historical Society. See also, HABS records, Mss. 502, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 3, Rhode Island Historical Society. Regarding the blocking of Marble's appointment, Richard B. Watrous to Arno B. Cammerer, March 14, 1936, RG 515 Historic American Buildings Survey, State Organizational Files, National Archives at College Park (NACP).
17. Jay Cross, typescript, n.d., and Howard R. Barr to Don Legge, July 31, 1972, Philip Creer Papers, the Alexander Architectural Archive, University of Texas Libraries, University of Texas at Austin. Regarding short courses in architecture, see correspondence between Creer and Royal B. Farnum, 1932-33, box 4, folder 6, Philip Creer Papers, the Alexander Architectural Archive, University of Texas Libraries, University of Texas at Austin.
18. F. Ellis Jackson to Frank Chouteau Brown, March 23, 1936, RG 515, HABS, State files, NACP.
19. Archival materials for the early HABS program record Isham's role, as well as Creer's appointment (State files, HABS). They suggest how Isham's restoration work in 1938 impacted the documentation of the Thomas Clemence House and the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House, because what was discovered in the field differed from the previous understanding of those structures. [Creer] to T.C. Vint, October 31, 1941, and [Creer] to T.C. Vint, November 14, 1941, RG 515, HABS, State files, NACP.
20. Downing's assessment of College Hill sparked gentrification. The community's response became a prototype for the use of revolving funds to preserve and convey historic properties, adding a private sector element to municipal preservation strategies, such as zoning and tax incentives. On the other hand, gentrification led to the displacement of the poorer African American residents along Benefit Street. Unfortunately, this was not the first instance of residual but whole-scale discrimination by neighborhood. Downing later recognized the cost of such single-minded preservation. She saw that historic districts needed their residents and so worked to make preservation, and so the history of a particular place, more inclusive.
21. HABS Circular No. 1, December 12, 1933; HABS Bulletin No. 3, December 29, 1933.
22. Section II: Development of Local Architecture, in the "Outline of the Development of Early American Architecture: Mississippi," 25-28, RG 515, HABS, State files, NACP.
23. Philip D. Creer to Thomas C. Vint, Chief of Planning, Washington, DC, April 29, 1941, regarding the William Ashton House in Providence, RG 515, HABS, State files, NACP. Also, Vint to Creer, May 1, 1941, in the HABS records, Mss. 502, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 8: 1940-41 Correspondence, Rhode Island Historical Society.
24. After four months, South Carolina opted not to continue its HABS program as part of the New Deal effort. However, there was another round of HABS activity in 1940, and the Washington office, particularly Waterman, remained interested in the region. District officer Samuel Lapham and his "collaborator-at-large," Albert Simons, measured and drew a number of buildings in the intervening years (1934 to 1940), but these they published themselves (Wilson and Schara 2010).

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