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BENEATH THE FAÇADE: HIDDEN HISTORIES OF SAINT PAUL'S ARCHITECTURE

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Introduction

After half a century, the National Register of Historic Places (National Register) boasts an abundance of significant properties. However, underrepresented in the National Register are reflections of the experiences of those historically denied access to wealth and education—and even basic rights of citizenship and freedom. A widening crack in the façade of historic preservation is revealed by the dearth of properties listed for their significance to non-Euroamerican history, including the history of those who built, worked, resided, or were imprisoned—whose fates were determined— at the very locations deemed significant for their architecture, engineering, and/or association with Euroamerican history.

This paper examines culturally diverse historical layers of two National Register-listed buildings in Saint Paul and explores methodologies for unearthing, revealing, and honoring these layers. This research follows the recent development of a Saint Paul African American Historical and Cultural Context, conceived of and led by African American community members, and developed collaboratively through a community engagement process.

The African American Context is one embodiment of the charge to architectural historians to embark on the historiography of properties by delving deeper into their historical layers, looking beyond each property's built reality and published history—its façade, so to speak—when evaluating its significance. By doing so, a fuller history of a property's heritage can be revealed, bringing to light its “hidden histories.” This can in turn more equitably guide planning and preservation efforts, thereby benefitting both the communities whose heritages have been neglected and actively suppressed, and contributing to a richer understanding of our historical environment and diverse local and national heritage.

The Saint Paul African American Historical and Cultural Context

In 2016, the Aurora-Saint Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation received a Minnesota Historical and Cultural Heritage Grant to develop an African American context, the first context focused on a non-European cultural group in Saint Paul. The Neighborhood Development Corporation is located in Rondo, Saint Paul's traditionally African American neighborhood. This community was well-developed and cohesive before the construction of I-94 in the mid-1950s broke it apart, destroying its main thoroughfare—Rondo Avenue—and hundreds of homes, institutions, and businesses, displacing thousands. Today, strong community cohesion persists, with annual celebrations and commemorative events, and new efforts in the works to carry on the community's cherished values and contributions.

Historical contexts are integral to preservation planning. The African American context lays the groundwork for regulatory bodies to conduct preservation responsibilities more equitably, ensuring significant African American resources are protected with the same due diligence as historic assets of groups with European origin. In addition, the context is intended as a tool for the African American community to capitalize on the social and economic benefits of heritage preservation, advancing preservation of resources and the community's stories in the process.

A devastating event catalyzed the effort to develop the Context Study. In 2011, one of the City's few National Register properties associated with African American history, the home of Black civil rights activist and community leader S. Edward Hall, was razed as a nuisance property after reviews by the city's Heritage Preservation Commission and the State Historic Preservation Office failed to identify its designation status.¹ This destruction of one Saint Paul's very few National Register-listed properties associated with local African American history underscores the importance of effective and equitable identification, review, and preservation for all historic properties.

The loss of the Hall House also highlights the disproportionate effect that errors and inadequacies in preservation practices can have on resources significant for their connection with minority communities. For illustration, there are 107 National Register-listed properties in Saint Paul, but of these, only five were nominated for their association with African American history. That is less than five percent of all listed properties, in a city with an African American population of approximately 15 percent.² This trend plays out nationally as well. Of the over 90,000 properties currently listed on the National Register, only about two percent were nominated for their association with African American history, whereas approximately 14 percent of the U.S. population is Black.³

Structure of the Project

This project's leadership consisted of an advisory group of over a dozen elders and other community leaders familiar with African American history and culture in Saint Paul. The project team of the Neighborhood Development Corporation (fiscal sponsor), the nonprofit Historic Saint Paul, and consultants 106 Group and the African American-owned CultureBrokers, provided technical expertise. In addition, community workshop participants steered recommendations to include: preserve and protect community resources; collaborate and build community; educate, interpret, and create; influence policy; remedy losses; build local economies; and cultivate leadership and accountability.

Hidden Layers Revealed

This project first sought to identify local National Register-listed resources associated with African American history, of which were few. However, research and community input revealed that some National Register-listed properties have important associations with African American history that are not reflected in National Register and other commonly-cited documentation for these properties. In most cases, this information about the African American components of the properties' histories is contained

only within specific ethnic or race-focused resources, such as books and articles specifically on African American history, and has not been incorporated into broader documentation on these properties.

Next I'll discuss two cases studies. First, the *Germania Bank Building*, built in 1889 at the corner of Fifth and Wabasha Streets in downtown St. Paul, was listed in the National Register in 1977 for its architectural significance as the “sole surviving multi-storey brownstone ‘skyscraper’ in the city.”⁴ In 1906, African American brothers S. Edward and Orrie C. Hall established the Hall Brothers Barbershop in what by then was known as the Pittsburgh Building. The barbershop, though serving a predominantly white clientele, was the vital locus of a job service system for the Black community. While serving clients, S. Edward Hall learned of job openings and inquired about employment opportunities on behalf of African Americans, then distributed this information to the Black community from the barbershop. Hall operated out of this location for forty years.⁵

Hall's job service system benefitted both current African American residents and new arrivals. When Blacks arrived at St. Paul's Union Station in search of work, usually from southern states, the African American railway station porters would refer them to Hall's barbershop. Hall was a leader in and activist on behalf of the African American community, helping to found the Saint Paul Urban League, Union Hall, and the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center. His home, listed in the National Register in 1991, was removed only 20 years later after it was inadvertently demolished, as mentioned above. The 1991 nomination described Hall's shop as located within the Germania Bank Building, but there is no cross-reference to Hall's shop in the Germania Bank Building National Register documentation.⁶ The only way to learn that the Germania Bank Building housed this vital resource for the African American community for nearly half a century is through historical sources specific to African American history. Hall's association with the extant Germania Bank building becomes even more important when we learn that the other resource strongly associated with Hall, his house, has been demolished.

The second property I'll discuss is *Saint Paul's Union Depot*. *The Depot* opened in 1923, replacing an earlier one built in 1881, and launching Saint Paul as a regional transportation hub.⁷ The Union Depot was listed on the National Register in 1974 for its significance in the areas of architecture, commerce, and industry.⁸ However, beyond serving as a point of arrival and departure for travelers, Union Depot was also the place where a large percentage of Saint Paul's African American community began and ended their work weeks. The railroad lines employed large numbers of African American men as cooks, porters, and waiters at the station and on the cars, while women were employed as matrons and maids.

One of the most common jobs for men through Union Depot was as Pullman Porters, staffing the Pullman cars. At one time, Pullman was the single largest employer of African Americans in the country.⁹ Another common position held by African American men in Saint Paul was that of railway station porters. Because of the outfits they wore, they came to be known as Red Caps. A number of Black men who went on to become community leaders within St. Paul first worked as porters. This rich history has long been underrepresented in the documentation on Union Station. Thanks to efforts of those who wished to honor the careers of their fathers and grandfathers, in 2013, an exhibit at the Saint Paul Union Depot was installed and dedicated to the Red Caps in recognition of their significant role in the building's history.¹⁰

A 2013 article on the Red Caps exhibit included interviews with these descendants, who expressed pride in their fathers for supporting their families on low wages, and emphasized the dignity that they had cultivated despite challenging working conditions and racism.¹¹

Methodology – Completing the Narrative

The procedural and documentation shortcomings highlighted above, and their disproportionate effect on properties associated with the local African American community, underscore the need for evolving preservation approaches. This paper concludes with more detail on the approaches implemented during the development of the African American Context, and a call for their adaptation for other efforts to identify and document historic resources associated with underrepresented communities.

Community Engagement

Engaging community leadership can be a powerful and effective path to meaningful identification, documentation, and evaluation of historic resources, including those that have already been recognized and designated for other associations. The Saint Paul African American context brought together community leaders and members, along with technical expertise, to support an end product that is accurate, meaningful, and meets professional standards and guidelines. This approach helps to avoid the pitfall of professionals unfamiliar with a community's history and culture, charged with identifying and evaluating its resources, which may result in the absence of key information, especially when no contexts exist to inform the process. As historians, our expertise can be effectively utilized within historic preservation frameworks to “expand ... individual perspectives to become collective ones,” however, we must acknowledge the unique expertise that communities themselves hold.¹²

Culturally Sensitive Narrative Approach

Na Li, a historic preservationist and urban planner at China's Chongqing University, developed the Culturally Sensitive Narrative Approach (CSNA) to facilitate her study of the history of an urban neighborhood in Toronto. Her approach highlights the importance of a “shared authority” in the determination of cultural and historical resources.¹³ Li's process as outlined in her 2011 dissertation consists of seven steps; of these, I'd discuss the four which were most applicable to the Saint Paul African American Context:

- Collect background information, including social history;
- Examine the history of the community's role in previous planning efforts and the outcome of those efforts and policies on the community;
- Build narratives by identifying key community contacts and conducting informational interviews/oral histories; and
- Validate the analysis with the stakeholders through public meetings.¹⁴

Our consultant team conducted background research through traditional sources of documentation, while also gathering social history and narratives from community members at a series of meetings. As the narrative was being constructed, we checked back in with stakeholders in person and through written communication and calls, to ensure that the collective narrative being constructed was valid from their perspectives. This shared accountability ensured a productive, meaningful collaboration.

Dialogical Approach

In addition, the development of this study was characterized by a dialogical approach, which brings together the expertise of those both within the community, and those outside of it who work within the historic preservation field. Throughout the development of the Saint Paul African American context, the knowledge that the different groups offered was incorporated into the process, and meetings were held throughout the life of the project to ensure that the process remained open, responsive, and flexible.

Conclusion

By bringing these additional layers of significance to light through the incorporation of community expertise into the historic preservation process we can expand recognition to encompass the many ways that these resources are significant to the community. While the officially recognized significance of the Germania Bank and St Paul Union Depot is still limited to their 1970s era documentation, other National Register-listed resources in St Paul with previously “hidden histories” are undergoing National Register nomination updates to more fully reflect their historical layers, such as the National Register update for Fort Snelling, located between Minneapolis and St. Paul, currently being compiled by the State Historic Preservation Office. The new nomination will recognize the fort’s significant associations with the American Indian and African American communities in addition to its current National Register area of significance, military history.

As architectural historians, we are entering the next 50 years of the National Historic Preservation Act and National Register in a field that is more expansive and more complex than ever. As we attempt to identify, evaluate, and document key historic resources within our local communities, it is vital that we do so equitably and in a way that is responsible, and responsive, to all communities and their members. We have the opportunity to right past wrongs, fill in previously invisible gaps, and peel back the layers of history – arguably the most exciting and meaningful aspect of the work we do. I will end with a quote by Richard Taupier:

“Historic narratives are by nature selective... Understanding what and why we choose to forget is as revealing as what we choose to remember.”¹⁵

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