

Seeing, Sensing, Sustaining the Past
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Some months ago, reading *The Madonnas of Leningrad* by Debra Dean, one delicious passage halted my reading. “Her distant past is preserved,” wrote Dean. “Moments that occurred...years ago reappear, vivid, plump, and perfumed.” This was such a three-dimensional, multi-sensory way of thinking about memories, the past, and even history. I got to thinking about that passage as summing up why the tangible manifestations of history are so essential.

Preserving artifacts and architecture; old buildings and boats; musical instruments and machinery; weaponry and technological wizardry is important because these objects of the past make history vivid and plump. Through preservation of these things, we experience different moments in time, sense their meaning, feel the wonderment of human achievement and the angst wrought by human tragedies, and better understand the human spirit.

That human spirit materialized as I poked around the basement of Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia and climbed to its rafters with the present-day pastor. Over 200 years ago, African Americans bought property and built a church. The current church, erected in 1889, is the fourth at this site continuously owned by African Americans since the time of the American Revolution. Its roots trace to Richard Allen, born an enslaved person who bought his freedom at the age of 20.

The site of the church and its sequence of buildings encapsulate a history of the quest for freedom. Here operated an Underground Railroad. The church hosted the first national convention of African Americans. Ideas of self-reliance and the economic power of boycotting took shape at the church. The church tells these stories.

Several years ago, Mother Bethel Church received a Save America’s Treasures grant to repair the church’s roof and secure the bell tower. This year, the Save America’s Treasures (SAT) grant program reaches the end of its first decade, having provided \$278 million dollars for over 1,000 projects to restore and protect buildings and archives of historic significance.

San Miguel Mission in California used grants to repair earthquake damage. A couple years ago, I visited the mission, marveled at the original murals painted by Native Americans, and explored the grounds. The mission still evokes the imagery, smells, and aura of mission life—giving us a swathe of history “vivid, plump, and perfumed.”

Fallingwater, the architectural triumph of Frank Lloyd Wright, is at once a work of art and an engineering masterpiece with its cantilevered layers. It reminds us of the human genius that resides in both craftsmanship and creativity. The stewards of Fallingwater used an SAT grant to structurally strengthen the home and undertake repairs.

Ellis Island, historic drawings at Yellowstone, the Murie Ranch home of 20th century conservation pioneers, historic Midway Island naval facilities, and pueblo artifacts in Colorado—these and other historic icons received SAT grants to assure that what they tell of America will carry into the future. They give us a legacy vivid and plump with the knowledge and emotion that come from seeing and sensing places and things.

I remember clambering across a slope of talus teeming with pottery shards at an ancestral pueblo village in Canyon de Chelly. Among the shards lay a bone bracelet decorated with designs etched in black. Someone wore this ornament a millennium ago. Who was she? How did she live?

I felt similar intrigue at Aztec Ruins, where we navigated the labyrinthine structure till we reached an inner room. There on the window sill were reed window blinds intact for nearly 1,000 years. On the sill was an imprint of a child's hand—a testament to the timelessness of human action.

Children then, as with children today, were lured by the temptation of wet adobe or plaster. Standing within the pueblo, admiring the kiva, and looking at the window blinds, grinding stones, and other artifacts elevate my understanding of these people, their lives, their accomplishments, their trials and tribulations.

History is unveiled through these places. Save America's Treasures grants help sustain them. Yet history is not purely linear. Perhaps the Native American philosophy of life as a cycle rather than a timeline is instructive. Historic places, through adaptive use, through incorporation into modern economies and communities, through sustained links to the present can maintain a sense of place and create new opportunities for communities to flourish.

The Preserve American program initiated by President Bush and the First Lady complements Save America's Treasures by celebrating and facilitating heritage tourism, adaptive reuse of historic places, and incorporation of these places into educational experiences. With Save America's Treasures we preserve historic places, sustaining stories of the past. With Preserve America, we assure that the cycle of life swirls and gathers the strands of the past, incorporating them into the present and sustaining them into the future. Together, these programs sustain our many stories of people and places, linking past to present. Together, they give us history "vivid, plump, and perfumed."