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Voices from the Archive

Oral Histories and the Preservation of Intangible Heritage

by Deirdre Washington, M.A.

When Mrs. Lucille Harper sat down in her parlor in Selma, Alabama, in the summer of 2024, she was ninety-three years old and possessed of a memory as sharp and clear as the crystal water glasses she set out for our interview. Over the course of three afternoons, she told me things about the old houses on Water Avenue that no document could record — the sound of the screen doors in summer, the particular shade of green that Mrs. Davenport painted her shutters, the smell of the crepe myrtle that once grew at the corner of Broad and Selma Streets.

Mrs. Harper's stories are the kind of knowledge that disappears with a generation. They cannot be found in any archive or recovered by any archaeological excavation. They live only in human memory, and when memory fails, they are gone forever.

This is the challenge of intangible heritage — the preservation of knowledge, tradition, and lived experience that does not exist in material form. For organizations like the Southern Historic Preservation Society, whose founding mission emphasizes the built environment, the question of intangible heritage raises fundamental questions about what we mean by 'preservation' and whom we serve.

Since 2023, the Society's Oral History Initiative has conducted over sixty interviews with residents of historic communities across the South. Our subjects range in age from 67 to 101 and represent a remarkable cross-section of Southern life — sharecroppers' daughters and senators' wives, church deacons and jazz musicians, mill workers and college presidents.

What has emerged from these conversations is a portrait of Southern life that complicates and enriches our understanding of the built environment. Buildings, we are reminded, are not merely objects of architectural interest. They are the settings for human life, and their significance cannot be fully understood apart from the lives that were lived within them.

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Consider the testimony of Mr. Robert Calhoun, 84, of Georgetown, South Carolina. When we showed Mr. Calhoun photographs of the historic rice mills along the Sampit River, his first response was not architectural but sensory: 'You could hear those mills from a mile away. The whole town ran on that rhythm.' His account of daily life in the mill district provides context that no measured drawing can capture.

The methodological challenges of oral history are well known — selective memory, the passage of time, the inevitable distortions of nostalgia. But these challenges do not diminish the value of the enterprise. Rather, they remind us that all historical knowledge is partial and provisional, and that the human voice, with all its imperfections, remains our most powerful instrument of witness.

All of our recorded interviews are being professionally transcribed and will be deposited in the Society's digital archive, where they will be freely available to researchers. We are also developing an educational curriculum that will pair these oral histories with architectural surveys, allowing students to encounter the built environment through both material evidence and lived experience.

If you know of individuals whose memories of historic places should be recorded, we urge you to contact our Community Engagement office. Time, as Mrs. Harper reminded us with a gentle smile, is not on our side.



President's Column

On the Importance of Listening

by Dr. William Hargrave

Dear Members,

Ms. Washington's remarkable essay in this issue reminds us of a truth that preservationists sometimes forget: the most important thing we can do is listen.

It is tempting, in our field, to privilege the tangible — the measured drawing, the materials analysis, the structural assessment. These tools are essential, and we must continue to refine them. But they tell only part of the story. The rest — the part that gives buildings their meaning and their claim on our care — lives in human memory and human experience.

This summer, I had the privilege of accompanying Ms. Washington on several of her oral history interviews in the Alabama Black Belt. I came away humbled and changed. The people we spoke with were not, for the most part, preservationists in any formal sense. Yet they possessed a depth of knowledge about their communities' built heritage that put most professionals to shame.

As we enter our sixth year, I am more convinced than ever that the future of preservation lies in community engagement — in the patient, respectful work of listening to the people who live in and around historic places, and in making their voices central to our understanding of what deserves to be saved and why.



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