SAA ACTION ALERT!

Potential Threat to Archaeology and Historic Preservation

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Reprinted below is a letter recently sent by three members of Congress to the executive director of the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation. We think it is an indication -- perhaps an early warning -- that Congress is very likely to undertake an intensive review of the system of federal historic preservation laws and regulations under which archaeological resources in the United States are protected and managed. The signers of the letter are all well placed to have significant influence on legislation that affects the historic preservation system, and we think they are representative of a significant segment of the new Congress that would be receptive to attempts to weaken protection for archaeological and historic properties. James Hansen (R-Utah) is chair of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Lands of the House Resources Committee; Wayne Allard (R-Colorado) is chair of the Subcommittee on Resource Conservation, Research, and Forestry of the House Agriculture Committee, and Barbara Vucanovich (R-Nevada) is a member of the Interior Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee.

By "historic preservation system" we mean the system of federal laws, regulations, and institutions (e.g., the state historic preservation offices, the Advisory Council, and federal agency programs) which provide for protection and management of archaeological sites, traditional Native American cultural properties, and historic buildings throughout the U.S. What is known as "cultural resource management" in the U.S. includes the archaeological aspects of the larger historic preservation system.

SAA supports continuing efforts to streamline this system and make it more efficient, responsive, and cost-effective, but will vigorously oppose congressional efforts to weaken protections for archaeological sites, traditional cultural properties, and historic structures. As we see it, these efforts to weaken the system could take the form of: 1) amendments to the National Historic Preservation Act; 2) requirements that key regulations designed to carry out this law be diluted (especially the regulations governing "Section 106 review" of federal undertakings); 3) abolition or dramatic weakening of key institutional elements such as the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation or the state historic preservation offices; and/or 4) drastic budgetary cuts for the cultural resource programs of federal agencies. Several such approaches are in fact referred to or implied in the letter from Representatives Hansen, Allard, and Vucanovich.

Although to our knowledge no specific actions to diminish archaeological resource protection or to weaken the larger historic preservation system have yet been initiated in Congress, the SAA Government Affairs Committee takes the "early warnings" quite seriously. Members of the Society for American Archaeology who are concerned about these issues may wish to contact members of their congressional delegation to express their support for continued protection of America's archaeological heritage. We hope they will also urge that Congress should proceed with caution if in fact it chooses to reconsider the existing federal laws, regulations, and institutional arrangements under which archaeological sites, traditional cultural properties, and historic buildings are protected and managed in the U.S.
Below we list some of the points that we think would be helpful for SAA members to make in their contacts with Congress. These are couched to emphasize archaeology, but could be modified to include historic buildings and traditional cultural properties. In general, short, to-the-point communications emphasizing local concerns are more effective than long rambling ones, so we present these points as examples of what could be said, rather than as a laundry list of items that all contacts should cover:

- A federal concern for protecting archaeological sites extends back nearly a century, to the Antiquities Act of 1906, which was designed to protect archaeological sites on the public lands. A broad policy of federal interest in preserving America's historic and archaeological heritage was stated in the Historic Sites Act of 1935, and extended in the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act of 1974, and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979. Historic preservation and archaeological protection have consistently enjoyed strong bipartisan support in Congress.
- Existing federal laws, regulations, and programs are not designed to stop development projects, but to ensure that plans for such projects include protection for important archaeological sites, if feasible; this system works and has resulted in very little litigation.
- The system is decentralized, and the states play key roles through their state historic preservation offices, which oversee the activities of federal agencies.
- Archaeological sites are our principal sources of information for the first 12,000 years or so of American history; for more recent times, information from archaeology is an important addition to what we can learn from written records and oral traditions.

The information and cultural legacy present in archaeological sites is a non-renewable resource — once destroyed, it is gone forever.

- Archaeological research, although highly technical, provides basic information and an understanding of how the human past affects our own lives today. Archaeological information is increasingly being made available to the public through archaeological and historical parks, museum displays, research participation programs, books, articles, videos, and classroom teaching at the grade school through college levels. For example, the majority of the 7,500 subscribers to the Society for American Archaeology's public education newsletter are K-12 teachers.
- Americans place a high value on archaeology and history; this is demonstrated by the increasing popularity of the various types of public education and public access to archaeology listed above.
- Archaeologists support continuing efforts to streamline and make more cost-effective the federal system for protecting and managing archaeological sites. But we will vigorously oppose congressional efforts to weaken these protections and to cripple effective management.

Perhaps more important than these general points will be any information you can give your Congressional delegation regarding:
• Important archaeological sites and archaeological projects in your area, especially if these sites or projects have benefited from the federal historic preservation program.
• Your special concerns about specific archaeological sites or districts in your area if laws or regulations protecting these sites are weakened.
• Specific examples of public interest in and support for archaeology in your area.
• Local or state organizations you are involved with which share your concerns for maintaining a strong federal presence in archaeological protection and management.

You may also wish to ask your Representative or Senators to keep you informed about any proposals to change existing federal laws or regulations that affect archaeology and to give you an opportunity to discuss these changes with him or her.

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