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Tentative Title of Dissertation:

Restoring America: Historic Preservation and the New Deal

Abstract:

My dissertation investigates the federally-funded restoration of historic landmarks during the Depression years, an overlooked facet of the New Deal's cultural agenda. I argue that between 1935 and 1939 the Works Progress Administration (WPA) financed the restoration of what it categorized as "historic shrines" as a method of refashioning America. A restored nation - as evinced through its preserved historic architecture - celebrated past American achievements, ingenuity, and diverse local histories that gave the country its multicultural character. To make the case for preservation as a form of national healing, I examine three major WPA restorations: the Henry Whitfield State Museum in Guilford, CT; the Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, SC; and the Charles A. Lindbergh Boyhood Home and State Park in Little Falls, MN. As a collection, these three case studies represent regional diversity and different types of architectural spaces. Additionally, each project arose from local claims to distinct histories that the federal government ideologically supported: the three projects honored "the oldest stone house" of a New England Puritan settlement, reconstructed a theatre that was the cultural heart of colonial Charleston, and cultivated the pioneers' landscape of the Minnesota frontier. These New Deal restoration projects reveal that during the Depression years, the preservation of the historic built environment became a materialized method of cultural production and national recovery.