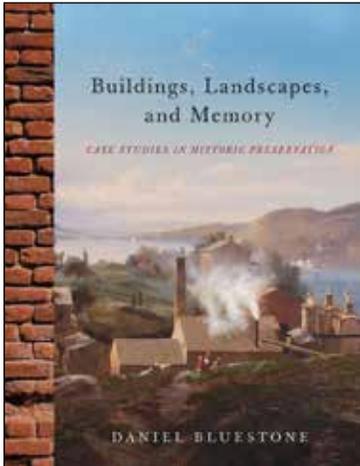


# Buildings, Landscapes, and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation by Daniel Bluestone

By Dana Bogart Cress,  
Ohio History Service Corps Member,  
Piqua Public Library, Piqua



Historic preservation is becoming a more and more prevalent field that local history sites engage with on a regular basis. Interacting with historic structures is usually part of day to day operations for local historical societies and organizations, whether that involves maintaining a historic house museum, researching for a city historic district, or aiding the city with one of the many small town renewal projects that

have surged across the state in recent years.

This field is multi-faceted. On one side, historic preservation is a technical science involving hands-on knowledge of historic construction techniques and time-period appropriate building materials. However, another side of historic preservation is largely philosophical and theoretical. This side interacts more with the humanities than the sciences and tackles questions such as: Why are some historic buildings chosen to be saved while others are demolished? How is memory of a places altered with renovation or demolition? Should newer buildings reflect historic styles? What are the impacts of historic markers and memorials?

These are the types of questions, among others, that Dr. Daniel Bluestone examines in his book, *Buildings, Landscapes, and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation*. Dr. Bluestone, Director of the Preservation Studies Program at Boston University, demonstrates the changing perceptions and politics of historic preservation in the United States with ten in-depth examples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each case study contextualizes the time periods and structures in which the issues in question are examined.

Bluestone presents a broad range of topics including architectural contextualization at University of Virginia, early efforts to protect the Palisades' natural landscape, the destruction of neighborhoods to build the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, and tourism renovations of a courthouse square to a period and style it never previously featured. These studies, as well as the others, all contain the arching theme of memory. Memory is important in determining the perceived historical significance of a place. The author mentions that since the Early Republic

Era, Americans acknowledged that a physical space could shape national memory, history, and even politics due to their associated events and figures.

As any historian, professional or amateur, can imagine, the dominating culture and politics during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries left little room for the preservation of places associated with the memory of minority or impoverished groups. Many of the presented cases examine the destruction of these places. One such example studies the former Mecca Flats in Chicago. The Mecca Flats were constructed in 1891 to accommodate the influx of individuals who would be coming for the Colombian Exposition. By the 1910s and 1920s, the Flats became a significant building associated with the Great Migration of African Americans moving from the South for opportunities in Chicago's industries and the culture they brought with them. The building was used as the subject of blues songs and literature that developed out of Chicago's Harlem Renaissance during this era. However, by the 1940s, racial and class discrimination put the Flats on the short list for demolition despite resistance that moved all the way up to the Illinois House and Senate. The building was demolished in 1952 after several long legal battles, forever erasing a physical piece of African American cultural history. Throughout the book, the author explores the idea that by saving, demolishing, or changing a structure or landscape, the individuals involved hand selected which pasts get preserved and remembered by future generations.

Bluestone points out in his introduction that this book is not a comprehensive history of the historic preservation movement or its methods, but serves as a demonstration of the movement's breadth and complexity. As a reader, I believe brief comparisons to similar situations to each case would have expanded his limited geographical analysis, since most of his cases center in Virginia, New York, and Chicago. However, his research certainly meets his goal to illuminate the complex abstract associations with physical spaces that the nation uses to define itself and negotiate the past with the future. While not meant to be a full history of the field's development, Bluestone presents the cultural and political influences that determined the preservation, or demolition, choices in each of his case studies. This book may not be helpful to those looking to learn how to renovate or repurpose an historic building. Nevertheless, it will certainly make an individual critically analyze the importance of their local built and natural environments as well as the histories they represent.

*Bluestone, Daniel. Buildings, Landscapes, and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011.* ■