



PART ONE: BUILDINGS, NEIGHBORHOODS & TOWNS

LESSON ONE: WHAT MAKES A BUILDING HISTORIC?

By Charles M. Yarborough

Grade Levels

4 – 12 Teachers should adjust/select activities appropriate for the age and ability of their students.

Objectives

- Using historic buildings in your community, students will sharpen their powers of observation and develop research skills.
- Students will learn to become aware of their local environment and learn about local history and architecture.
- Students will learn that each building is unique and has a story to tell.
- Students will learn about threats that historic buildings face.

Mississippi Curriculum Connections

- Mississippi Studies (4th grade) Framework – Competencies 1, 3, & 5
- Mississippi Studies (9th grade) Framework – Competencies 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5

Materials Provided Online www.mississippiheritage.com

- What Makes This Building Historic?
- Is This Building Still Historic?
- Preservation Pair Up
- Lost Mississippi Landmarks
- Mississippi's 10 Most Endangered Historic Places for 2007

This project has been made possible with funding from the American Architectural Foundation, the Mississippi Arts Commission and the Mississippi Humanities Council.

For the Teacher

Communities across Mississippi and the nation have many homes, commercial buildings and other historic places that can help us understand the cultural, social, economic and political history of our state, region and nation. In essence, places can tell us the story of our state and its people if we work to understand what those places might “say” and the “language” in which those lessons might be conveyed.

Students can learn that the buildings and other places in our communities are vital repositories of the history or prehistory of our state – Indian mounds that suggest the Native American story; classical mansions of the Antebellum period that suggest the wealth and politics of “King Cotton”; wooden dogtrot houses or barns that convey a sense of the yeoman farmer; sharecropper cabins that help relate the continuing influence of cotton agriculture as well as the development of unique cultural contributions like the Blues; cotton gins, railroad depots, factory buildings and warehouses suggest developments in transportation and industry that have greatly impacted Mississippians... the possibilities are nearly limitless.

This lesson will help students understand that our buildings and other places can help us appreciate the rich history of our state. As students study *What Makes a Building Historic?*, they will become acquainted with architecture as well as the historic lessons that buildings relate. They will ultimately be empowered to see their home communities through new eyes – eyes with a greater ability to understand the shaping of our local built environments.

Opening the Lesson

The label “historic” is applied to many things...from Greek temples to baseball cards. When it comes to buildings, it can be safely said that most buildings are built with a fairly specific use in mind. And these buildings may be beautiful, or they may be ugly. As long as they serve the function required of the building, most people don’t give much thought to the building itself. Unfortunately, most people wouldn’t care if they were torn down to make room for newer buildings.

However, because buildings are built primarily with an end-use in mind, they can relate a great deal about the culture, economics and politics of the period when the building was built and used. The Buildings can be great teachers of history.

So what makes a building historic, and, by implication, worthy of preserving?

On the board or on an overhead, write the question: “What makes a building historic?” Working individually or in small groups, ask students to seriously reflect on this question and write as many answers as they can. Have students share their ideas with the rest of the class and generate a class list answering the question.

Developing the Lesson

Criteria for Listing on the National Register of Historic Places

The National Register of Historic Places is the nation's official list of cultural resources worthy of preservation. Authorized under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Register is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate and protect our historic and archeological resources. Properties listed in the Register include districts, sites, buildings, structures and objects that are significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering and culture. The National Register is administered by the National Park Service, which is part of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Compare the student list with the following criteria adapted from the National Park Service criteria for the National Register of Historic Places. Have students copy the following list to learn, explaining each criteria at the student's level of understanding:

- **Age** (students can discuss "How old is old"!) – To qualify for the National Register of Historic Places, properties must be at least fifty years old, although a few special exceptions can be made.
- **Association with Historic Events or People** (students can discuss what makes people and events "historic" at this point) – Properties listed as National Historic Landmarks are considered to be of particular national significance, while those listed on the National Register of Historic Places are considered to be of particular state and local significance. Generally, this means the property reflects significant patterns in national, state or local history; and/or is associated with the life of a significant person in national or state history.
- **Historic Integrity** (being relatively unchanged from the time of its construction or the time during which the historic events or people were associated with the building) – Properties may also be listed as exceptionally valuable architectural specimens for the study of a period, style or method of construction.

Using the *What Makes This Building Historic?* materials provided on www.mississippiheritage.com, show students pictures of Mississippi buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Discuss the

reason why each building was listed. Have students discuss what they know about each one or what they can deduce from the images: the purpose or use of the building, its origins, the construction materials, date of construction, events or people connected to the building, etc.

Encourage students to research additional buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Suggested sites could include: the White House; the U.S. Capitol; the Washington Monument; the Lincoln Memorial; the Mississippi State Capitol; the Mississippi Governor's Mansion; the Lyceum at the University of Mississippi; and homes/buildings in the school's community or area of the state.

Photographs of many National Historic Landmarks and National Register of Historic Places properties may be accessed and downloaded/printed through the "Built In America" collection of the Library of Congress on-line American Memory website: (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/index.html). Teachers may search the collection for state and national sites they feel appropriate for their class and utilize these images during the lesson. Twenty-six Mississippi counties have buildings represented in this collection.

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History website (<http://mdah.state.ms.us/>) contains photographs in its "Museums and Historic Sites" section that can be useful.

Changes to Historic Buildings

Using the *Is This Building Still Historic?* materials provided on www.mississippiheritage.com, students will discuss changes to the buildings. For each building, students answer the question: "Is the building still historic?"

Students will discuss the before and after photographs of historic buildings. For each building, each student should be asked to make a chart with two columns. In the first column, students list reasons to answer "Yes, the building is still historic." In the second column, students list reasons to answer "No, the building is no longer historic."

For homework, students must select one building, decide "yes" or "no" as to whether the building is still historic and write a paragraph supporting their choice. Read/discuss student answers in class the following day.



Similarities in Historic Buildings

Using the *Preservation Pair Up* materials provided on www.mississippiheritage.com, teachers will conduct a matching exercise to illustrate commonalities among buildings. Students will be given one photograph and asked to find a classmate who has a building that “matches” the building in their photograph. Students will then be asked to explain to the class which of the following details of the buildings are similar:

- Construction materials
- Windows
- Entryways
- Porches/porticos
- Roofs
- Symmetry/asymmetry
- Style
- Use/suspected use

After students have explained their choices to the class, have students consider and discuss differences between the many pairs of photos. Why aren't each of the buildings the same? Does location of the building determine differences? Uses of the building? Personal preferences of the owners? Styles of the building period? All of the above? For homework, have students find a building in their town/community that matches one of their photographs and sketch the building, identifying the similarities.

Threats to Historic Buildings

On the board/overhead or in discussion, ask students “What threatens historic buildings?” Have students consider the question and write as many answers as they can. Discuss their answers and make a class list (the list should include fire, various weather events [hurricanes, tornadoes, flooding, etc.], neglect, new development and demolition).

Using the *Lost Mississippi Landmarks* materials provided on www.mississippiheritage.com, discuss how each building was destroyed.

Using the *10 Most Endangered Places in Mississippi for 2007* materials provided on www.mississippiheritage.com, have students assess the threats to each historic building on the list. Then have students compare the threats to a historic property maintained by the state or some other civic entity. A good example could be the Mississippi State Capitol. Photographs and a historic description of the Mississippi State Capitol are available at the Mississippi Department

of Archives and History website (<http://mdah.state.ms.us/>). Compare the relative threats to each building. Lists of 10 Most Endangered Places for previous years can be found at www.mississippiheritage.com.

Discuss why historic properties might be demolished.

Have students brainstorm how to “save” historic properties, understanding that sometimes the salvation of an endangered historic property comes in the form of a new use for the property.

For homework, have students 1) identify a historic building in their community that may be in danger of being demolished and 2) write a paragraph detailing why they believe the building is in danger. Discuss their findings and their suspected reasons for possible demolition the next day.

Working in groups, have students select one of the buildings identified within their group and develop a new plan-of-use that could aid in the building's preservation. Developing visual aids and oral parts, have students present their plan to the rest of the class.

Other possible exercises:

Some students could serve as a “city council” or “planning commission” that would assess competing plans presented by their fellow students.

Invite a member of the city council, board of supervisors, local planning commission or historic preservation commission to class. Students can make their presentation(s) and have the official respond with comments/suggestions. Students should have the opportunity to question the official about their role in historic preservation.

Assessing Student Learning

Teachers may develop assessment opportunities in addition to the following:

- Students should learn the following glossary terms: architecture; historic; National Park Service; National Historic Landmark; National Register of Historic Places; symmetry/asymmetry; neglect; demolition (and additional terms as determined by the teacher).
- Students should understand and be able to relate the National Park Service criteria for the National Register of Historic Places.
- Students should write a paragraph assessing “Is



this building still historic?"

- Students should write a paragraph assessing threats to a local historic property.
- Students should make a group presentation of a proposal to preserve a local historic building.
- Students should participate in various classroom discussions.

Extending the Lesson

The possibilities for extending the lesson are limited only by the desire, time and creativity of the teacher and students. Some possible extensions include:

- Students could take a field trip to area historic buildings. If more than one building is visited, have students compare "What makes each building historic?"
- Students could create photographic collages of historic buildings in their area or across the state.
- Students could collect oral histories from people associated with area historic buildings/places.
- Students could prepare a public program/presentation for the local city council/board of supervisors/preservation commission.
- Students could write letters to the editor calling for the preservation of a local historic building.
- Student could create a timeline showing connections between when local historic buildings were constructed and significant national, state and local historical events.

Curriculum Developed by

Mississippi Heritage Trust

PHYSICAL: 600 East Amite Street, Suite 201
Jackson, MS 39201

MAILING: P.O. Box 577, Jackson, MS 39205

PHONE: 601-354-0200

FAX: 601-354-0220

EMAIL: info@mississippiheritage.com

ONLINE: www.mississippiheritage.com

Author: **Charles M. Yarborough**

As a native Mississippian, Charles M. Yarborough has long been an advocate for educating young people about the history and architecture of our state. A teacher at the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science since 1995, Charles regularly involves his students in preservation activities, including the performance project *Tales from the Crypt*, which was awarded the 2005 Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, and an architecture scavenger hunt of historic Columbus. Charles was named History Teacher of the Year for Mississippi in 2007.

