



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

March 1, 2016

The Honorable Milford Wayne Donaldson
Chairman
Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
401 F Street NW, Suite 308
Washington, DC 20001-2637
NHPA50@achp.gov

Dear Chairman Donaldson,

The Society for American Archaeology (SAA) greatly appreciates this opportunity to provide the following input for the upcoming *National Historic Preservation Program at 50: Challenges and Opportunities* report. We congratulate the ACHP on embarking upon this important effort.

SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to the research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With nearly 8,000 members, SAA represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. SAA has members in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world.

Archaeological sites are gateways to the past. They are storehouses of knowledge about the lives of those who came before us, and the world in which they lived. They embody cultural, historical, and traditional values that tie people to the land and speak to their place in the universe. They are also storehouses of knowledge on past environmental change – some quite extreme – and human responses to it. Archaeological sites are also extremely fragile: once damaged or destroyed, the information that they contain is lost forever.

The next 50 years for historic preservation will be very different from the previous half-century. We believe that the greatest challenge to cultural resources in the U.S. will come not from development projects, although these remain as potential threats, but from climate change and its impacts. Climate change poses a very serious threat to the hundreds of thousands of archaeological sites, both known and as-yet undiscovered, across the nation. Threats are most acute and obvious in coastal and other low-lying areas, where already sites in Hawaii and Alaska are endangered. Soon, those on the U.S. continental coastline will bear the wrath of tidal surges, wave action, and wind erosion, ultimately submerging under the ocean's waters, taking with them chapters of our common heritage, both historic and prehistoric. In other regions, fires, floods, and severe storms will become more intense and more frequent as the Earth's temperature increases, threatening inland archaeological resources. The loss of these irreplaceable resources will be a disaster for future generations of Americans who wish to learn more about the history of the continent, and for those whose historical, cultural, and spiritual identities are tied to these special places.

Only a strong federal historic preservation infrastructure will be able to mitigate the damage to archaeological and other cultural resources, but that can only happen if the federal program itself is geared toward meeting the threat. Thus, SAA urges the ACHP to make dealing with climate change one of the focuses of the report. One example that could be elaborated upon in the document as a positive step

to take is the administration's request in its FY2017 budget of funding for the digitization of the National Register of Historic Places documents. The long overdue securing of these records, which are at risk of damage from humidity, fire, and water, would ensure that at the very least, the documentation of our historically important places will be protected, even if some of the sites themselves are not.

SAA urges as well that ACHP lead the way toward development of a national or at least major regional database of archaeological and historic resources from existing SHPO databases, as well as enhancing digitization at the state level. This investment will pay off in allowing researchers to pinpoint sites most at risk, not only along coastlines but also, via sensitivity mapping, in regions liable to damage from destructive fires. Such national-scale knowledge will enhance our ability to wisely rank, mitigate, or protect those sites and buildings that offer us deep knowledge of our past.

We look forward to working with the ACHP as it moves forward with the development of the *National Historic Preservation Program at 50: Challenges and Opportunities* report.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diane Gifford-Gonzalez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Diane" written in a larger, more distinct script than the last name.

Diane Gifford-Gonzalez, Ph.D
President