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Tools for Cooperative Extension's Efforts in Historic Preservation

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Tools for Cooperative Extension's Efforts in Historic Preservation

Abstract

Historic preservation is important to community development as well as architectural history. Cooperative Extension's efforts in the historic mining town of St. Elmo are described, focusing on the tools used in the project. A book was produced that was donated to and sold by the local property owners association to raise matching money for a preservation grant proposal. A coordinated effort between Cooperative Extension and community members to write a grant was rewarded with funding to restore the historic town hall. These efforts should result in the preservation of historically significant buildings and an increase in tourism.

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Introduction

This article describes the tools used by Colorado State University Cooperative Extension in its historic preservation efforts. During the past 8 years, the housing specialist examined and recorded the architecture of St. Elmo, a historic mining town, using National Park Service guidelines. Community members assisted in this process and in grant proposal writing. Two grants were funded to first document the architecture of the town and then to restore a historical building. These efforts contributed to community development, as St. Elmo is actively pursuing tourism.

St. Elmo is located on the continental divide of Colorado. It has a rich mining history, beginning with the discovery of gold and silver in 1875. Mining fueled a boom economy and a peak population of 2,000 in the 1880s (Bailey, 1985). Mining continued through the 1920s, when the railroad left and the town was almost completely vacated. There are currently 30 members of the St. Elmo Property Owners Association.

Methodology

A case study research approach using field observation was used from 1994 to 2002 (McTavish & Loether, 2002). Buildings in St. Elmo were photographed and analyzed based on architectural criteria. Because case studies use data from all possible sources, historical documents and photographs were obtained from the St. Elmo Property Owners Association, the Colorado Historical Society, the Western History Collection of the Denver Public Library, the Buena Vista Museum, and the National Mining Hall of Fame and Museum. Newspapers were examined to establish historical trends.

Informants with long-term ties to the community were identified and interviewed. These informants provided several personal, unpublished documents and photographs. Important buildings were then identified, and decisions made regarding the focus of preservation efforts.

Research revealed that St. Elmo was built using different methods of construction and experienced several types of architectural development that paralleled the phases of mining success and failure (Bamford & Tremblay, 2000). At first there were canvas tents, pine-covered dugouts, and earth-roofed huts. These were followed by unsophisticated cabins built of spruce logs.

As time passed, some of the early log structures were boarded over with siding. Other structures remained log, but false fronts were added to make them look more impressive. A further type of construction came about with the arrival of steam sawmills, which could convert logs into flat boards (Southworth, 1997). The most sophisticated buildings were balloon-framed stores and homes constructed in the mid-1880s. For the most part, the architecture of St. Elmo and camps like it was simple, straightforward, and functional.

Key tools in historic preservation work are the publications by the National Park Service:

- *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation,*
- *Preservation Planning and Guidelines for Preservation Planning,*
- *Identification and Guidelines for Identification,*
- *Evaluation and Guidelines for Evaluation,*
- *Treatment of Historic Properties,* and
- *Rehabilitation.*

They are available from each state's historical society and also from the on-line bookshop at <<http://www.nps.gov/>>.

Building Identification

An important tool in historic preservation efforts consists of community members, in this case property owners. The building determined by a committee of the St. Elmo Property Owners Association to be in greatest need of restoration was the town hall (Figure 1). The town hall was built in 1881 and 1885 as a multipurpose structure. In the rear of the building is a small jail. A bell tower is the dominant feature of the building, used to signal important events or emergencies.

A twin door with a double-paned window above the transom marks the entrance. The symmetrical front facade features a tall window on either side of the door. The pediment and face of the building are covered with horizontal siding painted white, while the sides of the building are covered with roughcut lumber assembled vertically and untreated. A small porch with a railing of aspen poles juts out toward the street.

Figure 1.

Exterior of the Town Hall, with the Fire Tool Storage Building and Barn on the Left, and the Stark Duplex on the Right



Outcomes

The first outcome of this project was the publication of a book, *St. Elmo: Building a Mining Camp on Colorado's Continental Divide* (Tremblay & Bamford, 2001). A grant was obtained that allowed for copies of the book to be donated to the community. They are sold to tourists inside the town hall (Figure 2). Besides providing visitors with important information about the town, proceeds from the book were used as the required matching funds for a preservation grant proposal.

Figure 2.

Inside the Town Hall, Which Now Serves as a Museum. The Jail Is in the Background.



As in many small communities, there are no residents with grant writing experience; thus, the housing specialist assisted members of the St. Elmo Property Owners Association in writing the proposal. Funding was obtained in spring 2002, providing the final tool to restore the town hall.

Restoration work is now underway.

Conclusion

St. Elmo is emerging as a resort community, with tourists coming to view the historical buildings. The town was designated as a National Historic District in 1979 (Colorado Historic Preservation Office, 1979). However, there exists competition to attract tourists from nearby established Victorian towns and ski resorts. Restoring historical buildings and providing a book for visitors can help in this competition.

Future plans include restoration of additional buildings with help from Cooperative Extension to provide the public an opportunity to observe a historically significant mining town. The tools of National Park Service publications, involvement by community members, a book to produce matching funds, and a grant were crucial in this project.

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