Richa Wilson has been an architectural historian with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) since 1998, and since 2001, has served as the Regional Architectural Historian for the Intermountain Region in Ogden, Utah. She earned a Bachelor of Architecture from Kansas State University and an M.S. in Historic Preservation from the University of Oregon. She focuses primarily on evaluating USFS administrative facilities in the national forests for historic preservation, among her other assignments. She has written and presented widely on such topics as historic architecture, documentation work, early building materials, and administrative sites.

Interview by Benjamin Guterman

Richa Wilson

Your original professional interests were in architecture and historic preservation. What drew you to those disciplines?

At age 17, I entered college with a vague interest in art and drafting. After several classes in both, I chose architecture because, to me, it represented a balance of the humanities and sciences, of design and technology, of the abstract and the tangible. The architectural history courses appealed to me most, and I was drawn to places as representations of cultural memory and the past. My favorite projects involved historic buildings, especially when they required archival research and field investigations. Historic preservation seemed a natural next step but certainly not the last one. My interests and work have transitioned from historic architecture to architectural history to public history.

As a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi, Africa, 1995–97, how were you able to apply your educational training? And, looking back, how do you think those experiences have inspired or influenced your career goals and options?

My placement as a volunteer was atypical, as I was assigned to the Blantyre City Planning Department where I drew directly from training in architecture and historic preservation while working with urban planners and building inspectors. The most rewarding project was researching and writing a historic context statement for the city. After I left, my Malawian counterpart used it when applying to the World Bank for funds to develop a comprehensive plan. He also told me the document provided names of former chiefs and headmen that proved useful in a street-naming exercise. I also implemented a records management process with checks and balances to ensure that building plans and other documentation were not accidentally or intentionally lost.

My Peace Corps experience steered me away from historic preservation as a means of protecting an individual building to a broader goal of managing cultural resources, whether they are places, records, artifacts, or traditions.

You evaluate USFS administrative facilities in national forests for historic significance and preservation. Can you discuss a recent site and what kind of work was involved? What criteria do you use to help decide a structure’s enduring value?

A recent site visit to the Colton Ranger Station in the Ashley National Forest was typical. After photographing each building, I described its architectural features on a standard survey form. I looked for clues to its evolution such as ghost marks of former molding or writing on the interior studs of the fuel shed. (It’s not unusual to find calculations, dates, and names of CCC men or employees who distributed gasoline from these.) I drew a site plan to show the spatial relationships of buildings, corrals, the pasture, the flagpole, vegetation, and topographical features.

Site visits are important, but historical research is essential to identifying the facility’s association with important events and people, and assessing the significance of its design and construction, as well as its information potential. We use the National Register of Historic Places criteria to determine historic significance.

Looking at historical research for this site, for example, what kinds of sources and people were you able to work with?

Lands status records are an important starting point because they document the station’s official designation as an administrative site, usually by executive order, presidential proclamation, or public land order. I then searched our regional collection for forest and ranger district histories, oral histories, photos, site plans and architectural blueprints. I travelled to the forest headquarters and ranger district offices to research engineering, real property, and heritage files. While there, I got the names of “old timers” – long-term employees, retirees, or local people – who have knowledge of the ranger station’s development, use, and past staff. Finally, I visited the local library and historical society to review local histories, photo collections, and materials related to the early rangers, who often were local men.

Without getting too technical, what are some architectural features that you have found to be unique in Forest Service buildings in the western United States? I assume styles and construction were influenced by such factors as local building materials and even local traditions.

Most Forest Service ranger stations built before the New Deal era can be classified as “vernacular architecture.” They reflected local materials, skills, preferences, and environment. In the 1930s, Forest Service regions were encouraged to adopt standard architectural designs that reflected their identities. The Rocky Mountain Region, headquartered in Denver, developed plans for Rustic Style buildings made of stones and large-diameter logs. Many of the ranger stations in the Southwestern Region, which covers New Mexico and Arizona, were in the Pueblo Revival style.
The fire lookout is a unique building type and a good example of “function over form.” The ability to transport materials to remote peaks by mule train meant that some were built from a standard kit of parts. Other considerations affecting their design included the need for 360-degree views of the terrain, lightning protection, and the reflectivity of interior paint colors to decrease eyesight strain.

What kinds of materials does your office collect and maintain in your history collection?

The collection includes administrative histories, oral history tapes and transcripts, field programs, manuals, directories, and reference materials. We also have historic materials that our specialists and other staff use: grazing reports, lands status maps, building plans, and thousands of photographs and slides. Smokey Bear and Woodsy Owl items, uniforms, wooden snowshoes, tree-boring instruments, and other artifacts are available to Forest Service units and partners for display and interpretive purposes. When I began managing the collection, I found it necessary to use volunteers, many of whom are retirees, to help with cataloging, scanning, transcribing, and other activities. This has made it possible for me to respond more quickly to queries and to open the collection to researchers. The number of queries and visits from academic researchers increases every year.

You’ve been involved with a lawsuit about road ownership in a national forest. What was your role?

Revised Statute 2477 of the Mining Law of 1866 gave states rights-of-way on federal land.

The statute was repealed in 1976, but the repeal recognized valid existing rights. Those rights often were unrecorded, so claims can be controversial. My role in this particular lawsuit was to research the development and use of the road, with an emphasis on determining if it existed in any form (such as a trail) prior to the area’s designation as a national forest. I then presented my findings in court.

What special duties did you have in your collaborative work at Fort Ross State Historic Park in California?

I worked with historic preservation and interpretive specialists from Russia, the National Park Service, and the State of California to develop a furnishing plan for the Rotchev House, a log building erected by the Russian American Company in 1836. We used the historic structure report that I had previously completed, archival sources, and additional on-site examinations to identify period-appropriate furniture and interior finishes. The plan enabled the Fort Ross Interpretive Association to furnish the Rotchev House as accurately as possible.

You’ve been assigned to firefighter fatality investigations. What were your duties?

As part of an interdisciplinary team, I served primarily as documentation specialist and writer/editor. The work was emotionally difficult but meaningful, and I employed skills of the history profession: interviewing, gathering and synthesizing a variety of source materials, developing a chronology, and using these to chronicle the incident. We followed a process known as “Facilitated Learning Analysis,” which relies on interviews, photographs, videos, and other records to develop a narrative. This storytelling, which incorporates different perspectives, helps others to understand the events leading up to the accident. It seeks to deter counterfactuals and hindsight bias by showing why actions made sense, at that time, to those involved. In the past, traditional accident investigations resulted in a lot of blaming, shaming, and an increasing wariness of those involved to share information. The Forest Service realized that learning is far more important than punishment if the goal is to change perceptions of risk and safety and to decrease accidents.

It seems that your work occasionally takes you outside the United States. What was your most interesting foreign assignment?

In 1991, I was honored to be chosen as an intern for the International Council on Monuments and Sites. They sent me to the Soviet Union where I worked and lived with counterparts in Russia and then Lithuania. It was a priceless opportunity to meet and learn from restoration experts at premier sites such as the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Of greater significance was the chance to witness firsthand the coup d’etat that preceded the dissolution of the USSR. I’ll never forget watching people use sledgehammers on the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police, in front of the KGB headquarters in Moscow. One stroke caused a small piece of granite to land at my feet. It was amazing, as I picked up the unexpected souvenir, to realize I was watching history in the making.

Are you involved in any outreach work, and is your research ultimately available to the research public?

My outreach work tends to be informal, rather than part of an established program. It has ranged from discussing Forest Service history and architecture at a salon of professors from our local university to creating a display about an early ranger for a small visitor center. I’m regularly involved with Forest Service retirees through social activities and their “Old Timers Club.” Our website has been the best forum for reaching people. I saw a significant increase in public queries after posting my papers, as well as diary transcriptions, oral histories, and forest histories. With the help of volunteers, I’ll continue expanding the website with content that is in high demand or that will have broad appeal.
A Focus on Indian Treaties

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC, has opened an exhibit that explores the legacy of U.S.–American Indian diplomacy from the colonial period through the present through the history of treaties. Treaties have been loaned from the National Archives, but the exhibit will also feature stunning artifacts and images associated with the treaty experience. The Museum’s website features a sampling of these artifacts at http://nmai.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item/744/

A recent article by Larisa K. Miller titled “The Secret Treaties With California Indians” in Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration (Fall/Winter 2013) recounts the special history of 18 unratified treaties with Native American clans and groups in that state and their suffering. The Senate did not ratify the treaties, claiming confusion from early Spanish claims, resulting in loss of lands by Native Americans without compensation. The Gold Rush with its influx of miners and settlers also created a struggle for land. The treaties remained unratified and “secret.” Lawyers and activists from the Northern California Indian Association (NCIA) and other groups campaigned for compensation, including sending petitions to Congress. Charles Kelsey, a lawyer and Indian agent, helped map the location of every Indian group in the state and worked with both Senator Thomas Bard and an agent to locate the treaties at the Department of State. They were able to secure some compensation and homesteads. But the story provides a revealing look into the fate of Indian groups and treaties in the second half of the 19th century. See http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/

What changes have you seen in recent years in the preference for or adaptation of original building materials in preservation work, and what is your involvement in that area?

Honestly, I haven’t seen any changes. The challenges of historic preservation within an agency with limited infrastructure funds have remained consistent. Our building managers want to stretch dollars by using the cheapest and easiest products. For example, we often see requests to replace historic wood shingle roofs with standing seam metal roofs, which would adversely alter the color, texture, reflectivity and other characteristics. It’s my job to help them understand that replacement of a building’s historic fabric with incompatible materials would diminish its integrity and historic significance. If they are unable to use in-kind materials, I’ll work with them to find acceptable substitute materials. Another challenge is to convince them to repair, rather than to replace, historic materials. Not only is it more costly, but it is difficult to find people with the skills to do so, especially since many of our historic buildings are in remote areas.

In your longtime service as chair of SHFG’s committee for the Thomas Jefferson Prize (Documentary Editions and Research Tools), generally what publication standards do you emphasize?

After confirming that an entry meets the basic criteria, I try to evaluate its value as an “outstanding” work that contributes to our understanding of federal history. We want to recognize works of excellence, not just the best entry in the bunch. Over the past few years, we’ve seen an increasing number of electronic entries. We’ve developed criteria for those, but it can be challenging to evaluate electronic and printed entries against each other.

What advice would you give to students aspiring to work in federal history?

Be open to growth opportunities, even when they are not directly related to the history profession. Non-traditional experiences can broaden your knowledge, skills, and abilities that will supplement and round out your education. They can foster desirable skills and traits such as collaboration, listening, resilience, and flexibility, which will contribute to your success.