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Alison Rose Jefferson

California

Please tell us about yourself and your current involvement in historic preservation.

My name is Alison Rose Jefferson. I am a native of Los Angeles, California. Recently, I began my second quarter of doctoral studies in History/Public History/Historic Preservation at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). My current preservation project involves a research project that will satisfy my dissertation requirements. I've already submitted scholarly dissertation-related articles for journal publication. I'm also developing a collection of materials for a history exhibition focusing on several historically significant African American historic sites in California. Ultimately, this research will be used for the development of academic presentations and scholarly debate designed to draw public attention to historic preservation issues and sites which should be preserved.



Alison R. Jefferson, Historic Preservationist

Credit: Alison R. Jefferson, Historic Preservationist

My current research relating to historic sites examines how public memory, cultural and ethnic history, and community identity all impact one another. I am also interested in how heritage preservation can be a tool for strengthening a community in contemporary times. My goal is to understand how to apply various theories and strategies used globally to deal with new historic preservation challenges resulting from a wider variety of cultural narratives and sites being considered for heritage commemoration, using urban planning, ethnography, community cultural development, and economic development strategies.

What is your background in historic preservation?

I got started in historic preservation working for a central city business association that was beginning to implement community development projects. From 2001-2003, I worked as a marketing and public relations consultant for a business improvement district in downtown Los Angeles, the Figueroa Corridor Partnership (FCP). While working with FCP, one aspect of my work was to promote heritage tourism. This work made me more aware of historic preservation issues. I had maintained a strong interest in history for some time. I executed strategies and developed new working partnership relationships between public, private and community organizations to promote cultural tourism programs, economic development and community pride. This included producing a quarterly newsletter and promotional events. In 2003, I was invited to be a member of the City of Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency Tourism Related Innovation Project Advisory Committee. This committee made recommendations and researched content for a [cultural tourism website](#).

My experience with FCP inspired me to pursue a more formal education in historic preservation. After obtaining my Master of Historic Preservation from the University of Southern California in 2007, I became a preservation consultant at Historic Resources Group in Hollywood, California. I worked on historic

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preservation planning and interpretative projects. I drew on my regional history expertise to execute literature and on-site research to document and evaluate historic resource sites, and to write various types of technical and cultural resource reports, landmark nominations and interpretative material content.

Eventually, my Master's level-graduate work and independent research focusing on people and places which have been overlooked in the 'collective memory' of the heritage of the Southern California region resulted in a couple of very meaningful projects. In 2005, my research facilitated the process for the designation of Phillips Chapel, a 100-year-old African American church as a Landmark in the Ocean Park neighborhood in the City of Santa Monica, California. An article of mine entitled "African American Leisure Space in Santa Monica: The Beach Sometimes Known as the 'Inkwell,' 1900s-1960s" appeared in the *Southern California Quarterly Journal*, Summer/July 2009 issue. I have also had the opportunity to share the history and promote the preservation of Phillips Chapel Church, the Black Santa Monica Beach leisure space, and the contributions of the African American community to the heritage of the City of Santa Monica. I have also served as a guest speaker in academic and public lecture venues, such as the Third Annual Whitsett Graduate Seminar in California History, 2008 at California State University, Northridge, the Santa Monica Conservancy Program Lecture Series in 2006 and 2008, and the Beach Culture Event Series, Annenberg Community Beach House at Santa Monica State Beach, California in 2009.

What has been your most rewarding and fulfilling moment in preservation?

To date, my preservation accomplishments confirm that I made the right career choice. I am sincerely passionate about my work as a historian, historic preservationist, and educator. I am committed to documenting the voices of those whose narrative have been overlooked and the sites associated with those voices. I truly enjoy developing history presentations for the public as well as creating more student-centered pedagogical presentations for the classroom. In 2009 having my article published, "African American Leisure Space in Santa Monica: The Beach Sometimes Known as the 'Inkwell,' 1900s-1960s," in *Southern California Quarterly*. For me, my role in the creation of the actual language engraved on the plaque: "The Ink Well": A Place of Celebration located along the Ocean Front Walk (at the end of Bay Street) remains one of my most meaningful contributions. The monument commemorates the Jim Crow era beach site used by African Americans as a gathering place. Nick Gabaldon, the first identified surfer of African American and Mexican descent, spent considerable time here. The marker will potentially touch the lives of those who frequent the beach. The stories the plaque text tells is infused with the collective memory of local and national public culture. Hopefully, people will get a sense of the layers of national, regional and local heritage, and a renewed sense of community pride and identity from the plaque. The article is documentation of the African American site where there is no built environment remaining. It complements the newly installed commemorative plaque placed at the site. Both the article and the plaque demonstrate how historic preservation is useful for recognizing the diverse cultural heritage of a community traditionally marginalized and overlooked when its historic sites no longer exist or have been transformed in other ways.

How has the National Trust made a difference in your immediate community?

Most recently the NTHP established the Los Angeles Preservation Fund to fund projects in Los Angeles County. This project will go a long way towards training and educating people concerning historic preservation issues within the region.

Have you successfully engaged young people in your preservation projects? If so, how or what would you recommend?

"The Ink Well": A Place of Celebration and Pain, marker installed in 2007 in the City of Santa Monica located along the bicycle and pedestrian path, Ocean Front Walk (at the end of Bay Street) touches the lives of many young people. Maybe this marker will also encourage a few young people to pursue the preservation of sites they think matter in their home communities. I was assistant curator on the 2006-2007 exhibit, 'Intersections of South Central: People and Places in Historic and Contemporary Photographs' featured at the California African American Museum at Exposition Park in Los Angeles, CA. Many young people who viewed the exhibition and looked at the catalog developed a sense of pride from seeing their community heritage and historically significant sites recognized in these public and institutional forums. I will continue to work to develop opportunities to engage young people using internships to cultivate leadership skills within organizations that value history and historic preservation.

What do you perceive as a unique historic preservation challenge common to most African American Historic sites?

As more diverse groups including African Americans are acknowledged as actors in the ongoing

reevaluation of American heritage, more places are being recognized for cultural and social history significance — and not just architectural aesthetics. New generations of preservationists, scholars, civic leaders and ordinary citizens are connecting cultural history in preserving and interpreting American places.

What is the remedy?

Slowly, the memory of previously-unacknowledged groups' unique experiences like that of African Americans — alongside larger themes associated with the citizenry in general, like migration experience, recreational interests, employment, family organization, or the search for a new sense of identity — are being infused into the collective memory of local and national public culture. The increasing complexity of the layers of heritage we are identifying in the cultural landscape of communities will require this evolution in thought by preservationists.

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