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Preserving Pullman: Historic District Becomes Illinois' First National Monument

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When Jane Baxter pads around her home in Pullman, she walks in the footsteps of history. Baxter, an associate professor of anthropology in DePaul’s College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, lives in the fifth house built for George M. Pullman’s company town, an experiment in social control dating back to the 1880s. This planned community served as a new kind of model town, one where employees of the Pullman Palace Car Co. factory were required to live in close proximity to where they worked.

Pullman has long had a place in history, labor and urban planning, but the spotlight on this far South Side neighborhood is about to get a whole lot brighter. On Feb. 19, President Barack Obama announced the designation of the Pullman Historic District as a national monument. With this move, Pullman entered the National Park Service portfolio, joining such iconic American sites as the Grand Canyon, the Statue of Liberty and Mount Rushmore, and becoming the first national monument in Illinois.
A UTOPIAN IDEAL
When George M. Pullman purchased 4,000 acres of land on the banks of Lake Calumet in 1879, he did so with the idea of building his town geographically and ideologically far from the city slums where most of Chicago’s industrial workers lived in the late 19th century.

“Pullman’s model town was the first of its kind,” notes Amy Tyson, associate professor of history and director of the American Studies Program. “Ideally, these types of towns benefited workers by providing them with clean and updated housing, modern amenities, and easy access to libraries and churches.”

The concept of company towns developed in part out of a then-contemporary social theory linking aesthetics to behavior. This idea was also the basis for the design of Pullman’s wildly successful railroad sleeper cars, which were manufactured at the factory.

“Pullman believed that if you put people in better circumstances and surroundings, they’ll behave accordingly,” explains Susan Bennett, associate professor of public policy studies.

Pullman chose Solon S. Beman, a rising star in the architectural world, to design his perfect town. Beman’s architectural plans, which incorporated periods as diverse as Gothic, Italian Renaissance and Queen Anne, were eclectic and magnificent. “For his grandiosity of vision, for his detail, it’s truly a feast,” says Mark Pohlad, associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences and associate professor of history of art and architecture. “What’s impressive is that it’s so varied. He truly shows a mastery of so many different styles.” Perhaps the most spectacular sight, one that remains today as it was in Pullman’s heyday, is the lavish Hotel Florence, named for Pullman’s daughter, with its striking Queen Anne veranda, dormers, gables and chimneys.

Nearly 90 percent of the Pullman company town’s original buildings remain standing. In addition to the hotel and the factory complex, Pullman highlights include the Gothic-inspired Greenstone Church, the administration building with its imposing clock tower and the iconic brick row houses for employees. Additionally, an arcade stocked with shops, a library, a theatre and offices once held court magnificently on the grounds across from the Hotel Florence until it was torn down in the late 1920s.

The row houses appealed to the immigrant workforce. “Employees would have thought, ‘Wow, I can live in a brick house with my own yard’—that’s something people still aspire to now,” Pohlad says. “This idea that architecture could lift people up was both charming and naïve, but perhaps Pullman’s heart was in the right place.” Row houses like the one Baxter owns showcase a clear attention to detail, with delicate ornaments, attractive brick patterns and carefully cut stone.

Although hundreds of company towns sprang up across the United States in the following decades, Pullman remained revolutionary. “Most factory towns were created in a single architectural style. They look soulless and a bit frightening,” Pohlad explains. “People were very moved by Pullman. I think everyone was startled by the beauty and the visual interest and the idea that workers were entitled to that.”

On the flip side, this aesthetic generosity came at a cost. Once employees took up residence in the town, Pullman’s utopian ideal gave way to corporate intrusion and control over their private lives. “They traded all that for being ‘owned’ by George Pullman,” Pohlad notes.

REALITY SETS IN
One of the first residents of Baxter’s home was a draftsman. In the hierarchy of the Pullman Palace Car Co., this was a high-status position, and the draftsman’s walk to the factory was much shorter than the daily commute of less-skilled employees who lived farther down the street.

“You can see a clear designation of people’s rank depending on the square footage of their home,” explains Barb Willard, an associate professor in the College of Communication. Tyson adds that the homes for unskilled workers didn’t have parlors: “These folks weren’t presumed to be entertaining company.”

For workers at the lower end of the pay spectrum especially, this social stratification was extreme. “The company paid its workers less than competitors, and the rents to live in Pullman were high. The indoor plumbing was grand, but the utilities were expensive and the town itself was socially controlling,” Tyson states. “True to the social purity movement of this ‘progressive’ era, brothels and saloons were banned—but so were town meetings and free speech.”

Pullman’s patriarchal oversight came starkly to light for approximately 150 DePaul students who worked on archaeological digs in Pullman between 2004 and 2009. Led by Baxter and in collaboration with several community partners, the students excavated at eight different sites, including the factory, the Hotel Florence, the site of the former arcade and private yards. The students looked for evidence of daily life to better understand what it was like to reside in the Pullman community. It turns out that
Pullman exerted a level of control that was even more stringent than anticipated. “Normally, you’d find tons of personal stuff in backyards,” Baxter notes. “The backyards of other company towns are filled with artifacts that show those areas were being used for private spaces. It’s shocking you don’t see that in Pullman.”

By contrast, Baxter explains that archaeologists who excavated the Lowell, Mass., textile mills that are part of the Lowell National Historical Park uncovered a great deal of paraphernalia in their diggings. “The Lowell girls had tobacco pipes and all these cute, knockoff hair pins, so they could wear something fashionable and go out on the town as independent young women,” Baxter says. “None of that was technically allowed by the Lowell mills, but the archaeological evidence shows that they were living their own lives. In Pullman, that just wasn’t the case.”

Not until 1900 or so does the archaeological record start to show otherwise. The timing is significant—a few years after Pullman’s death in 1897, the company began selling the homes. Suddenly, people were personalizing their residences. “We found toys, for example. We found a root cellar,” shares Baxter. “But just imagine not being able to use your own yard. There were controlling forces in this town.”

**LABOR HISTORY IS MADE**

The economic depression of 1893 catapulted many Pullman workers into unemployment and poverty. “Pullman laid off a majority of its workforce, and the third who remained found their wages cut significantly, while their rents stayed the same,” Tyson says. Many disgruntled workers organized with the American Railway Union, co-founded by labor leader Eugene V. Debs, and the infamous Pullman strike officially began on May 11, 1894.

“The strike had national repercussions when it led to a larger boycott by railway workers who refused to move, couple or uncouple any trains with Pullman cars attached to them,” Tyson explains. “This resulted in a nationwide traffic jam.” As food spoiled and goods failed to reach their destinations, the federal government sent troops, arguing that the strike was illegally blocking the delivery of the U.S. mail.

That July, a violent crackdown resulted in multiple deaths, injuries and indictments, and the strike was ultimately crushed by the end of the month. “In the short term, it was a big loss for labor,” notes Bennett. “But in the long term, it was the beginning of the acknowledgment that workers should have the right to unionize and negotiate.” After the strike ended, President Grover Cleveland’s administration investigated the labor condition further, and a national commission formally recommended that employers “recognize labor organizations” and “come in closer touch with labor.” Additionally, a new federal holiday—Labor Day—was declared as a top-down measure to appease workers.

The Pullman Co.’s second major social justice moment occurred a few decades later, when the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters achieved recognition as a bargaining agent. Composed of middle-class, educated African-American men who worked on the sleeping cars, the Pullman porters were a household name by 1925. “They were a highly educated and honorable group, but there was this tension since they held a servant role,” explains Willard.

Legendary orator A. Philip Randolph worked with local African-American leaders such as Ida B. Wells to organize the brotherhood. “He urged the porters to rid themselves of the childlike position they were in,” Willard says. “Randolph stressed manhood and first-class citizenship.” The Pullman Co. finally recognized the union in 1937, and the energy from that success helped launch Randolph, Wells and others onto the national stage as the civil rights movement gained momentum.

**SECURING A LEGACY**

This complex, rich history and the persistent campaigning of interested individuals contributed to the designation of the Pullman Historic District as a national monument. For more than two years, DePaul alumnus LeAaron Foley (LAS ’12), senior outreach coordinator at the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), logged countless hours on the sidewalks of Pullman organizing the community, answering questions and being a friendly face of the campaign.

Foley notes that discussions about preserving Pullman go back decades, but there wasn’t always effective coordination or collaboration. His goal was to bring local leaders together to present a unified front. “This meant lobbying members of Congress, getting our talking points right, showing our support, thanking representatives and so on,” he explains. Challenges in the form of neighborhood factions and uncertainty about what a national park would mean for residents sometimes led to difficult conversations.
According to data from DePaul’s Institute for Housing Studies (IHS), Pullman is weathering an economic slump. “Between 2005 and 2011, the number of jobs located within the community fell by 37.2 percent,” reports IHS Associate Director Sarah Duda. “The unemployment rate in Pullman reached 22.8 percent in 2012, compared to the city rate of 12.9 percent.” This stark reality informed Foley’s message of Pullman’s economic potential. An NPCA economic impact study found that a national park designation would result in an influx of nearly $32 million within a 10-year period from visitors; additionally, 350 jobs with wages totaling $15 million annually are likely to be created. “For a community on the far South Side of Chicago to have that level of investment—it’s major,” Foley says.

To help inspire local leaders to rally around the campaign, NPCA led community trips to the Lowell National Historical Park, as well as to Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress. Consequently, in January 2014, Sens. Richard Durbin and Mark Kirk, with Rep. Robin Kelly, introduced a bipartisan bill in support of Pullman becoming a national park. “This was all grassroots action,” Foley asserts. “It was the people of Pullman showing their representatives that we had broad, 110 percent community support.”

Since the bill hadn’t yet been heard in committee by December of last year, the Pullman proposal wasn’t included in the National Defense Authorization Act that created seven new national parks. However, on Feb. 19, using his executive authority under the Antiquities Act, President Obama added Pullman to the National Park Service portfolio. In a sense, Foley’s work is just beginning. “NPCA is here for the long haul,” he asserts. “Now it’s about improving Pullman and the surrounding communities to accommodate the growth of visitors over the coming years—making it a place where history thrives, where people can explore and learn.”

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–NPCA Outreach Coordinator LeAaron Foley