

# Careers for Historians: Architectural Historians

By Beth Crist

When you see an old house, do you wonder when it was built, how it looked originally, and who lived there? If so, a career in architectural history may interest you.

Architectural historian Dr. M. Ruth Little (see interview below) compares professionals in her field to biologists who study and classify endangered species. Architectural historians survey areas that are often threatened by extinction. They identify historic structures using high-quality photographs and standard forms to document architectural features, style, history, and significance to the community. They also study habitats—the neighborhoods and districts surrounding buildings. They research the history of an area and each building in it. After completing their research, they decide which buildings are important enough to be designated state or national historic properties. This process resembles that of biologists deciding which animals and plants should be placed on the endangered species list to receive special protection. The historians then complete detailed reports about these buildings.

Many architectural historians work independently or for local, state, or federal governments. They have other opportunities, too. Some work as administrators, researchers, and building caretakers for historic sites, historical societies, and museums. Others are educators and fund-raisers for historic preservation groups and museums. Individuals and companies who own historic buildings hire architectural historians to research what their buildings looked like originally or at a particular time. The historians then work with architects or carpenters to restore the original appearances of these buildings.

There are many volunteer opportunities for architectural historians. They can help communities and nonprofit agencies plan historic preservation projects. They can lobby government agencies on behalf of communities that want to save historic buildings from being torn down. They can give advice to historic sites and historical societies that are restoring historic buildings. These projects can be fulfilling and can give architectural historians excellent experience and exposure.

Most architectural historians have a bachelor's degree in history, architectural history, or art history. Others have backgrounds in city planning and architecture. Many jobs require a master's degree in architectural history. Architectural historians need to have excellent communication, computer, and research skills and must know a lot about history and architectural styles and features. With this expertise they provide a valuable service by recording and

preserving historic structures—an important part of our heritage—for future generations.

### To learn more:

- Check out the following Web sites:

**Architectural History and Historic Preservation Division**

<http://www.si.edu/oahp/>

**Built in America: Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record**

[http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs\\_haer/](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/)

**National Building Museum**

<http://www.nbm.org/>

**North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office: Careers in Historic Preservation**

<http://www.hpo.dcr.state.nc.us/careers.htm>

**Savannah College of Art and Design Department of Architectural History: Survey of Non-Academic Careers**

<http://www.scad.edu/dept/arlh/careers.html>

**Virtual Library: Architecture: History**

<http://www.clr.toronto.edu/VIRTUALLIB/ARCH/hist.html>

- Arrange a behind-the-scenes tour with an architectural historian. Come prepared with a list of questions: What do you do on a typical day? What is your favorite part of the job? Why did you want to be an architectural historian? What is your educational background? What projects are you working on?
- Read *Under Every Roof: A Kids' Style and Field Guide to the Architecture of American Houses* by Patricia Brown Glenn (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1993).

### Try it out:

- Research and record a historic public building, such as a county courthouse or train station, near your home. Begin by researching the building's history. Find the answers to these questions: When was the building constructed? What architect designed it? Was the building used originally for its current purpose? Has it had any major renovations or additions? Next, record the building's architectural features. What is the building's architectural style? What is it made of? How many windows and

doors are on each side? What kind of roof does it have? For a more thorough report, interview someone who has worked in the building for a long time or is familiar with its history. See what information you can find out from the interview that you didn't get from written records. Make your notes into a report and give a copy to the building for its records.

### Interview with Dr. M. Ruth Little

*Dr. Little worked for eight years as a survey specialist for the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office in Raleigh. She has taught art history and architectural history on the college level. Throughout her career she has written numerous books on architecture and art history. She has campaigned successfully to preserve historic buildings and neighborhoods. Since 1990, Dr. Little has had her own consulting firm, Longleaf Historic Resources.*

#### **Beth Crist: What is your educational background?**

**Dr. M. Ruth Little:** I received bachelor of arts degrees in French and art history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I went to Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, for a master's degree in art history. I returned to UNC to get a Ph.D. in art history.

#### **BC: When did you become interested in architectural history as a career?**

**MRL:** In graduate school at Brown University, I had an assignment to take a brown paper bag and pencil into downtown Providence to draw and take notes on a block of downtown buildings. That was the first time I had done any fieldwork. I had intended to study medieval art history, but after that assignment I was hooked on architectural history. I realized I'd rather learn about living environments than about things long gone.

#### **BC: Have you had any other history-related jobs?**

**MRL:** I created tour brochures and walking tours for historic neighborhoods including Oakwood in Raleigh and Dilworth in Charlotte. In 1976 I founded a nonprofit group called Capital Landmarks Incorporated to preserve two historic buildings in Raleigh. The group was successful; the buildings are still there today.

#### **BC: What do you do at work on a typical day?**

**MRL:** I begin projects by conducting fieldwork. On the days I'm in the field, I put on blue jeans and work boots. I take a camera, clipboard, and bag lunch and go to the area I'm researching. I go up each street in the neighborhood or historic district and take notes on and photographs of every building. After I'm done with the fieldwork, I spend a day studying and organizing my notes and photographs. My next step is to research the neighborhood or district at the state archives. My

research involves looking at maps, deeds, newspapers, and other records. Then I begin writing my report.

**BC: What do you like best about your job?**

**MRL:** I feel like I'm making the world a better place by helping to preserve history. Rather than dealing with dead things, I'm preserving living environments.

**BC: What advice do you have for students who are interested in becoming architectural historians?**

**MRL:** Pay attention in history class. Take an art class. Make friends with an architect. Visit the oldest buildings in your town and take a good look at them, inside and out.

**BC: What has been your favorite project?**

**MRL:** I had the opportunity to preserve a block of old stores in Fayetteville. The neighborhood was rundown but contained historic buildings. I called the block "Liberty Row," which gave it a personality. People began to pay attention to the block and fixed it up. It's now a great part of downtown. I was pleased I could help the area, especially since I grew up in Fayetteville.