

One in six historic resources in Colorado is in a floodplain

October 19 2020, by Rachel Sturtz



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Colorado has lost several of its important historic landmarks to disasters. The 2013 floods, for instance, destroyed a WPA-era shelter in Lyons

and severely damaged the town's historic library. In the aftermath of these events, many Colorado communities asked whether they were adequately prepared to protect their history in the face of increasingly severe floods and wildfires.

A new study from researchers at the University of Colorado Denver reaches a sobering conclusion, that one in six historic resources in Colorado is at risk from a flood disaster, yet few communities proactively plan for their protection.

The study was published in the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*.

The Threat to Colorado's Historic Resources

Historic preservation and economic revitalization often go hand in hand in Colorado. Building preservation, heritage tourism, and businesses along main streets give communities a sense of place and collective history—not to mention an economic boost. Historic preservation projects and investments produced nearly \$4 billion in direct and indirect economic benefits in Colorado from 1985 to 2015, with much of the benefit accruing to small towns and [rural communities](#).

Natural hazards like floods and wildfires—which are becoming more frequent and severe in a warming climate—pose a threat to Colorado's historic resources. And yet, there is limited information on the scope of the problem.

A new study by Andrew Rumbach, Anna Bierbrauer and Gretel Follingstad from CU Denver uses state historic preservation and floodplain data to analyze the potential for flooding at historic sites. They found that 17% of historic resources on the National and State Registers of Historic Places are located within mapped floodplains, and

yet only a handful of communities have proactively planned for that risk.

"In most cities, historic preservationists and emergency planners work independently from each other, despite their common interests," said lead author Rumbach, Ph.D., associate professor of Urban and Regional Planning at CU Denver.

Resources to Mitigate Disaster Risk Already in Place

Some Colorado communities have stand-alone historic preservation plans or comprehensive plans that engage with [historic preservation](#), but only one community in the study—Manitou Springs—explicitly and proactively planned for historic resource risk to flooding. Similarly, eight (57%) of the communities' hazard mitigation plans described historic resources as an asset, and seven (50%) make some specific mention to their unique vulnerability to [natural hazards](#), but none moved beyond generalities or included historic resources in their risk assessment or mitigation priorities.

The good news is that nearly every community in the study recognized the value of their historic resources, whether for their cultural value or contribution to heritage tourism and local economy. The researchers also found that "many of the resources necessary for planning for disaster risk are already in place." An important next step is to find financial resources for communities to update their comprehensive plans and hazard mitigation plans to better address potential risks to historic resources.

"I was surprised by the unevenness of resources outside of the Front Range," said Rumbach. "The small towns and rural communities, where heritage tourism is so important, have the least access to this information. It's a challenge that we as a state need to address. We've got the tools and regulations to do it, it's just a matter of being proactive and

bridging the gaps."

Beyond floods, Rumbach said there's an obvious next step in his research: "I suspect we'll look at this next through a wildfire lens."

More information: Andrew Rumbach et al. Are We Protecting Our History? A Municipal-Scale Analysis of Historic Preservation, Flood Hazards, and Planning, *Journal of Planning Education and Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0739456X20948592](https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X20948592)

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

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