

Cultural Landscapes and the National Register

Since the early 1980s, the National Register and the field of historic preservation as a whole have matured in their ability to provide assistance in understanding and documenting cultural landscapes. Cultural landscapes, as defined in the National Park Service (NPS) *Cultural Resource Management Guideline*, are “a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values.”*

When one looks to early National Register nominations there is thorough documentation of the building, but rarely a comprehensive description of the relationship of that building to its site, its landscape context, or any unique details of a designed or vernacular landscape. In most cases, if a landscape is mentioned it refers to a formally-designed garden or landscape directly adjacent to the building. This comment is not to fault the nomination preparers of those times, but to reinforce that it is crucial in understanding the “whole story,” that nomination preparers incorporate into each nomination form information that is as comprehensive as possible (i.e., archaeological, architectural, landscape information, etc.). It is an injustice to the resource to tell only part of the story. The Register has attempted to address this problem by producing a number of bulletins that directly relate to cultural landscapes, including:

How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes
Guidelines for Identifying, Evaluating, and Registering America's Historic Battlefields
Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Cemeteries and Burial Places
Guidelines for Identifying, Evaluating, and Registering Historic Mining Properties
Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years

Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes
Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties

Each of the aforementioned documents has directly impacted the quality of the nominations that have been approved over the last decade. The nomination preparers are more consistently attempting to incorporate landscape content into their documentation, and in some cases landscapes are the primary resource being nominated. To further the effort in understanding, two new bulletins are currently in production: one on historic roads and one on the development of suburbs (see McClelland's article, p. 33). These publications will further our collective understanding of these important resources, as well as propose how to nominate them to the National Register.

Two other NPS programs provide information on and assistance for cultural landscapes inside and outside the national park system. The first program developed was the Historic Landscape Initiative, which provides guidance, disseminates guidelines, and raises awareness about cultural landscapes through partnerships with federal and state agencies, professional organizations, colleges, and universities. The second program, the Park Cultural Landscapes Program, provides similar leadership and guidance concerning the cultural landscape issues within the 386 units of the national park system.

As an example of how the National Register is used in a NPS cultural landscape program, the Cultural Landscapes Inventory (CLI) of the Park Cultural Landscapes Program is briefly discussed. The CLI is an evaluated inventory of all cultural landscapes having historical significance in each unit of the national park system. The CLI provides the NPS with baseline information about cultural landscapes in a national park. The National Register guidelines provide the framework and criteria for determining significance, integrity, boundaries, and contributing and non-



*Ebey's Landing
National
Historical
Reserve,
Coupeville,
Washington.
NPS photo.*

contributing resources. Landscapes addressed in the CLI include those listed in or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

To clearly indicate the National Register status of a given landscape, the CLI records both National Register documentation and National Register eligibility. National Register documentation ranges from landscapes listed in the National Register with adequate documentation; to landscapes listed as a part of a historical unit of the system (as required by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966) with no documentation; to landscapes physically located within the boundaries of a National Register property, but not specifically identified or described in the nomination; to landscapes with no documentation.

The NPS historical landscape architects who prepare the inventories are trained professionals who have developed the park's cultural landscape information based on historical research, analysis, and evaluation of the resources. Throughout the inventory process, the identified park cultural landscapes are discussed with the appropriate state historic preservation office (SHPO) to facilitate the Determination of Eligibility process. NPS regional historical landscape architects work with SHPOs to confirm which landscape characteristics contribute to the significance of the property, along with an associated list of contributing and non-contributing resources.

Once all of the cultural landscape information has been input into the CLI database and there is concurrence from the SHPO that the identified landscapes are eligible for the National Register, the CLI database has the ability to print individual National Register nomination forms for each landscape. To date, more than 3,000 cultural landscapes have been identified within the national park system as potentially eligible for the National Register.

Although the NPS, including the National Register, has matured in its thoughts about and approaches to cultural landscapes, there is an ongoing challenge to describe the tangible and intangible aspects of cultural landscapes. Throughout the maturation of the field of landscape preservation, a variety of terms have been developed to describe these aspects which collectively give a landscape character and aid in the understanding of its cultural value. Typically, these terms address the physical aspects of a landscape (circulation, vegetation, structures) and the more intangible cultural and natural processes (cultural traditions, land use, and natural systems).

The need for clear and consistent terminology cannot be overstated. There are distinctions between the National Register program, the park programs, and the non-park programs in the use and application of terminology. In essence, the distinction relates to resource types defined by NPS policy, and categories for listed properties in the National Register defined by the National Historic Preservation Act. The NPS *Cultural Resource Management Guideline* defines four general types of cultural landscapes, not mutually exclusive: historic sites (e.g., presidential homes, battlefields), historic designed landscapes (e.g., urban plazas, formal estate gardens), historic vernacular landscapes (e.g., farmsteads, ranches), and ethnographic landscapes (e.g., Native American, African American, Scandinavian American landscapes). Categories for properties listed in the National Register are defined in the National Historic Preservation Act as, "districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects." The Register recognizes the cultural landscape categories defined in NPS policy as descriptive terms; however, it officially lists the landscapes as either "districts" or "sites."

Ultimately, as the field of landscape preservation continues to develop, there will undoubtedly be further discussions about evaluating, documenting, and registering cultural landscapes.

Note

* National Park Service, *Cultural Resource Management Guideline*, Release No. 5, 1997 (NPS-28), p. 179.

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