

The HABS/HAER and the National Register

A Symbiotic Relationship

Historians with the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) routinely refer to the National Register as a source of information on sites being documented through the HABS/HAER summer recording program. Often before considering a visit to a historic building or site, the first stop is the National Register files. Likewise, a nomination may be the first piece of information that a HABS/HAER summer historian receives, and the National Register and National Historic Landmark (NHL) files are a source to which project historians likely return during the course of their research. In addition, when determining whether a property merits recording, HABS/HAER looks favorably on properties already recognized by these programs as an indication of the historical and/or architectural significance and integrity of the properties. HABS/HAER documentation generally goes beyond the information supplied by the National Register because its mission is to create a comprehensive record of individually distinguished or exceptional representative examples of particular building types. In so doing, HABS/HAER undertakes measured drawings, large-format pho-

tographs, and in-depth historical reports that strive to place the resource within a national context, none of which are required of National Register listing.

While both the National Register and the HABS/HAER programs have their own missions, they complement one another. Among the advantages of the former is that the nominations are less costly to prepare than the HABS/HAER materials and are, therefore, the more likely means of recording the vast number of vernacular structures that are so crucial to understanding our architectural development, as well as to our cultural heritage. While the HABS program was predicated on recording all types of structures from the monumental and high style to the more vernacular and utilitarian, many of these do not individually warrant the expense of recording. Furthermore, because of the increased availability of the HABS/HAER collection through the Internet via the Library of Congress' web site, individuals preparing National Register and NHL nominations may now query the HABS/HAER collection for information. In an environment of limited funding, mining each other's resources is a worthy idea. [These HABS/HAER online records are also cross-referenced in the National Register's online database, the National Register Information System.]

During the initial stages of HABS/HAER project development and research, National Register and NHL nominations provide a reliable and easily-digestible resource for architectural, historical, and bibliographic information. Once the projects are underway and more in-depth research has begun, the historians often find themselves back at the National Register looking for nominations for similar building types that will help in developing the historical context. Working in concert with primary materials and a careful analysis of the building itself, nominations for similar resource types can help reveal clues to

The HABS recording of Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia was used to create a National Historic Landmark nomination, the first ever for a cemetery. Photo by Jack E. Boucher, HABS.





John Bartram's House, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photo by J.E.B. Elliott, HABS/HAER.

the design influences and/or evolution of the particular building under study. National Register resources provide the HABS/HAER summer historians, tasked with writing a historical report in 12 weeks, with an essential time-saver and allow them an opportunity to directly benefit from the research of local scholars. For example, the National Register files proved useful in documenting the colonial-era John Bartram House at Philadelphia's Bartram's Garden this past summer. The team raised numerous questions: Is there an earlier house within these walls, as has been suggested? If so, was it built by the previous, Swedish settler, or by Bartram himself? To what period does the earliest phase of construction date, and how did the house evolve? In answering these and other questions, HABS used the information provided by National Register nominations for other structures of this period built by both Swedish and English settlers in helping to make those determinations. The nominations assisted in identifying specific plan types and architectural features indicative of the dwellings of the various immigrant ethnic populations settling in the Delaware Valley during the late 17th and 18th centuries.

More recently, the National Register and the National Historic Landmarks programs have encouraged the preparation of nominations through use of HABS/HAER documentation. Housed at the Library of Congress and resident on its American Memory Page, the written histories, large-format photographs, and measured drawings, are all copyright free and readily available. Within the past couple of years HABS recording has become the basis for National Historic Landmark nominations for a variety of sites in Pennsylvania. The first, Merion Friends Meeting House, was part of a larger HABS study

of meetinghouses in the Delaware Valley that identified and recorded examples that were pivotal to the development of the American Friends Meeting House as a building type. Merion is the earliest extant meetinghouse in that region and the product of the aspirations of first-generation immigrants to Penn's colony. Currently under consideration is the potential for NHL designation of the Buckingham Friends Meeting House, for its role in creating a national prototype for meetinghouse design. Laurel Hill Cemetery, among the oldest rural cemeteries in America, was first recorded by HABS and then the documentation was incorporated into a path-breaking NHL nomination. Its designation represented the first ever for a cemetery. HABS/HAER historical reports provide historical context, an analysis of architectural character along with detailed descriptions, and—when appropriate—describe industrial processes. This information can be easily adapted to the National Register or NHL nomination format. The value in undertaking such a task is that, unlike HABS/HAER recording, National Register and NHL listing can provide some level of protection and possible financial benefits to a property which more and more property owners and stewards see as essential. Strengthening the inter-relationship between HABS/HAER recording and National Register and NHL designation is yet one more vehicle for promoting the fuller understanding and responsible stewardship of historic properties.

In summary, every effort should be made among the cultural resource programs of the National Park Service to make the most of our project dollars and to integrate the results of our research as often as possible. The work of both programs provides information that is of value to the preservation community. While HABS/HAER takes a more academic approach to create a comprehensive record of sites and structures as representative building types, the National Register can be counted on to provide the official national database of America's historically and architecturally significant places. And although we often work in separate spheres, our universal goals are basically the same—to encourage the preservation, appreciation, and interpretation of America's vast architectural, industrial, and historical heritage.

Catherine LaVoie is the senior historian with the Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service, Washington, DC.