

Tim Davis

HAER Documents America's Park Roads and Parkways

HAER is now in its 12th year of documenting America's national park roads and parkways. Initiated in 1988,

HAER's NPS Park Roads Program aims to create a detailed visual and textual record of the historically significant roads, bridges, ancillary structures, and related landscapes that comprise an important aspect of the cultural heritage of the national park system. As with all HAER documentation projects, the park road studies combine large-format photography, historical narratives, and measured and interpretive drawings. Yellowstone, Yosemite, Glacier, Zion, Acadia, Great Smoky Mountains, Blue Ridge Parkway, and Gettysburg are among the 30 parks that have hosted intensive documentation efforts, which are underwritten by the NPS Park Roads and Parkways Program with funding provided by the Federal Lands Highway Office of the Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation. HAER has also documented individual road-related features in a number of additional park units. This comprehensive interdisciplinary survey has produced a wealth of information on bridge and highway engineering techniques, landscape design issues, park manage-

ment strategies, and related cultural concerns and social practices.

The National Park Roads Program is a natural outgrowth of HAER's emphasis on documenting engineering structures and infrastructure developments that fall outside the range of traditional architectural studies. Culverts, road alignments, guardwalls, and paving technology are not necessarily the first concerns that leap to mind when considering the corpus of American design, or even the history of construction in the national parks, but park road development is an important chapter in the annals of American civil engineering, landscape architecture, park management, and social history. Road and bridge construction in the national parks involved impressive feats of civil engineering. Many technological developments first employed in park road development were later applied to broader highway construction practices. The same is true of roadside landscape design policies, which were pioneered in park road development and eventually spread to more utilitarian usage. The HAER Park Roads Program documents the evolution of these practices through detailed exposition of construction methods, design strategies, and road- and bridge-building technology.

The HAER Park Roads Program also reflects the growing interest in cultural landscape studies along with the increasing awareness that even such seemingly natural environments as national parks are complex cultural constructions, with rich and varied human histories that shed insights into a variety of social, technological, and environmental issues. While natural resource concerns tend to dominate the NPS management agenda, and roads are often portrayed as intrusions in the park environment, park road development has played an integral role in the development of the national park system. Not only did the encouragement of motor tourism provide the public support needed to protect and expand the park system, but, for many visitors, the view from the road has long been the dominating element of the national

Belcher Curve, on the Blue Ridge Parkway, near Rocky Knob recreation area in North Carolina, showing how rustic design elements and agricultural easements blur distinction between parkway and bordering properties. Photo by David Haas, 1997.



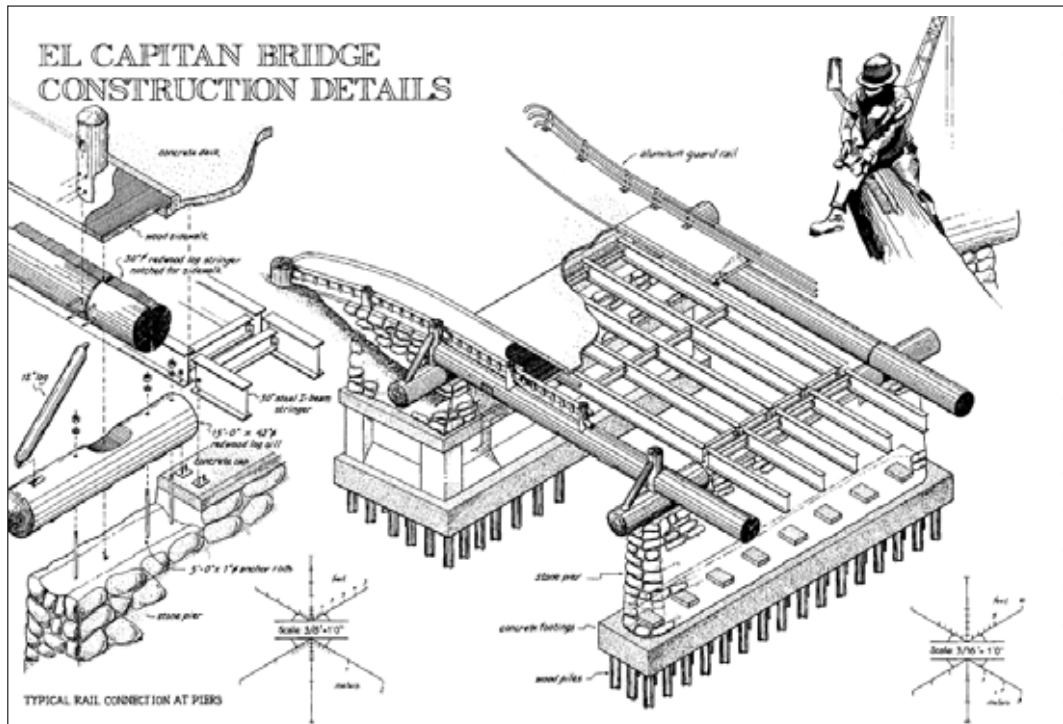
park experience. By providing access, choreographing visitors' movements, and framing vistas, park roads strongly influence visitors' perceptions of natural and cultural resources. In fact, the subtle layout and organic unity of many park roads blurs the distinction between natural and cultural resources, an artificial dichotomy that is gradually giving way to a broader understanding of the complex relations between social, cultural, technological, and biological processes. By articulating these complex relationships through innovative interpretive drawings and providing detailed archivally based research to underscore the historical significance of park road development, the HAER Park Roads Program has played an important role in expanding the ways in which park roads are viewed by cultural and natural resources managers alike.

The history of the HAER Park Roads Program exemplifies the rapid evolution of ideas about the nature and significance of park roads. Not only has the focus broadened significantly from its early emphasis on purely engineering matters, but the strategies of graphic representation have grown increasingly expansive and creative as well, as have the uses to which the documentation has been put. While early projects focused on park bridges and other individual engineered structures such as culverts and viaducts, the program gradually expanded to

address broader issues of landscape design, highway engineering, and cultural history. As the program progressed, field teams began to develop interpretive drawings of construction processes, landscape design techniques, topographical experiences, and evolving historical processes. Historians complemented historic structure reports with more comprehensive narratives situating specific examples of park road development within broader social and cultural contexts. HAER has revisited several parks that were documented early in the program's development in order to augment technical bridge-oriented drawings with illustrations of broader landscape design and transportation history issues. HAER has also moved beyond the boundaries of the national park system, employing state department of transportation funds to document parkways in Connecticut, New York, Oregon, and California. During the summer of 1999, a pilot project was undertaken to investigate approaches to documenting the Lincoln Highway in Pennsylvania. This ambitious project would push historic road documentation to yet another dimension by encompassing vernacular cultural landscapes and commercial architecture as well as conventional design and engineering issues.

HAER park road research is intended to play an active role in cultural resource management. While the original sets of HAER drawings

El Capitan Bridge Construction Details, Yosemite National Park, California. Early drawings produced by the HAER Park Roads Program focused on individual examples of bridge construction and other technical details; note use of rustic overlay to disguise modern steel girder span. Drawing by Marie-Claude Le Sauteur, 1991.



and negatives are permanently stored in the HABS/HAER collection at the Library of Congress, copies are provided to the cooperating parks. The drawings, photographs, and histories can be used by engineers, landscape architects, maintenance personnel, and cultural resource specialists to inform debates on management, preservation, and rehabilitation issues. By calling attention to the historic importance of park roads and providing detailed baseline information, HAER documentation projects have shaped management decisions in several parks. HAER documentation helped guide rehabilitation efforts in Yosemite after the destructive flooding of January 1997, for example, and HAER's 1997 fieldwork in Vicksburg National Military Park convinced park managers to reconsider plans to replace a notable collection of historic Melan-arch bridges with nondescript modern concrete box culverts. The HAER National Park Roads project has also contributed to the growing commitment on the part of the National Park Service and the Federal Highway Administration to adopt planning and development policies that attempt to maintain and extend the character of classic park roads by adapting traditional park road design techniques to new construction and reconstruction.

HAER documentation can play a particularly important role in the area of interpretation, where the attractive graphics and detailed histori-

cal narratives can serve as the basis of engaging and informative exhibits and wayside panels. HAER has developed interpretive brochures for many parks, which present the history of park road development in concise and accessible terms. In 1998, HAER joined forces with the National Building Museum in Washington, DC, to produce a major exhibition showcasing the program's first decade of work. The exhibition was viewed by over 25,000 visitors and received major awards from the George Wright Society and the Vernacular Architecture Forum. Plans are currently underway to produce a substantial book based on HAER's park road research.

The HAER Park Roads Program has played an important role in chronicling the history of park road development, articulating its characteristic design details, and underscoring its cultural significance. Through its continually expanding scope, innovative graphic techniques, meticulous historical research, and widespread practical applications, the HAER Park Roads Program extends the HABS/HAER legacy while making important contributions to the growth of cultural resources management as both a practical endeavor and an increasingly rigorous academic field.

Tim Davis is a historian with the Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service, Washington, DC, through a cooperative agreement with the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers.

Craggy Gardens, Blue Ridge Parkway, near Asheville, North Carolina. Later drawings illustrate the program's expanded focus; this example combines design details and road alignment with vignettes portraying the motorist's perspective and broader aspects of the surrounding cultural landscape. Drawing by Jennifer K. Cuthbertson and Lia M. Dikigoropoulou, 1997.

