

# Connecting History with Historic Places

## The Multiple Property Approach

Linda Flint McClelland

**W**here can you find information about hundreds of light stations operated by the U.S. Coast Guard during its 200-year history? Where can you research the history of the iron and steel industry in the United States? Where can you learn about the settlement and development of hundreds of rural and urban communities across the United States?

Multiple property listings in the National Register of Historic Places provide this and other information about historic properties in the United States and the themes of American prehistory and history they represent.

Multiple property listings have greatly increased the usefulness of the National Register as a unique source of information about historic properties in the United States. Nowhere else is information about historic trends and associated historic properties from places as geographically distant as Tarpon Springs, FL, and Alaska's Matanuska-Susitna Valley collected in one place. As the number of multiple property listings increases year by year, so too does our knowledge of American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture expand.

Since 1977, the National Register program has accepted nominations for groups of properties in the form of multiple property listings. The first of these were based on multiple resource areas and thematic studies, which covered the historic properties located in a specific geographical area such as a county or city, or were associated with a common theme such as the work of an architectural firm or a method of bridge construction. These approaches were designed to encourage the use of the National Register as a planning tool and to take advantage of grants provided by the Housing and Community Development Act of 1976 for conducting local surveys and preparing National Register nominations.

In 1984, the National Register program introduced the multiple property documentation form, replacing the multiple resource and thematic formats.<sup>1</sup> The new approach was in keeping with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation*, which had been published in 1983

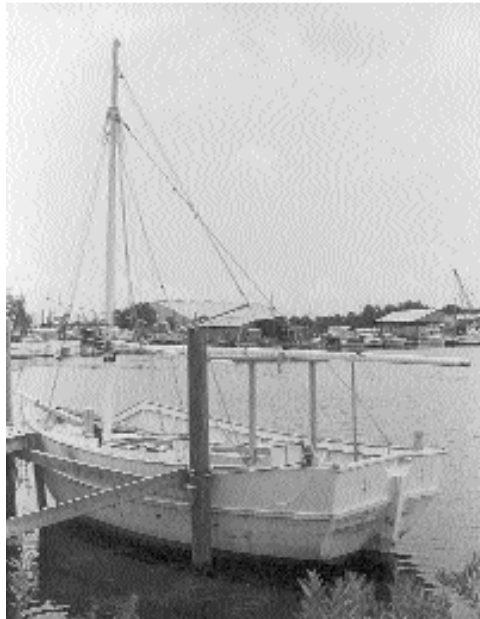
and institutionalized the concept of historic context as the basis for preservation activities. Integrating and expanding upon the earlier approaches, the multiple property approach featured the development of historic contexts and the grouping of properties by common physical and associative characteristics.

Multiple property submissions (MPS) became increasingly popular. In 1980, they accounted for 1,329 of the year's 4,125 National Register listings. From 1983 to 1990, more than half of each year's listings came under the umbrella of a multiple property listing. By January 1994, over 1,200 multiple property submissions had been accepted, accounting for approximately 20,000 individual properties and one-third of the total listings in the National Register. This impressive achievement has been the work of State Historic Preservation Offices, federal agencies, Certified Local Governments, and private organizations nationwide, often in collaboration with each other.

The new multiple property approach gave historic context a formal structure that could be used throughout the preservation process in diverse activities from survey to rehabilitation or interpretation. New was the emphasis on connecting historic properties and historic themes and defining the characteristics of historic places. New also was the premise that, given sufficient contextual information, decisions about the importance of a particular property could be made without a knowledge of the entire group of similarly associated properties. Multiple property listings could be developed before a survey was complete, and they could be expanded or modified as new information was gathered and as new properties were identified. The tool was designed to be a flexible one that could be applied at various geographical levels to meet the practical needs of sponsors and the existing framework through which preservation decisions were routinely being made.

Noticeable differences have occurred in multiple property listings as a result of the new guide-

lines. Local history—the focus of community based nominations—is now organized by theme and time, so that a historic resource can be associated with a particular period and trend in a community's history. In places as culturally diverse and geographically distant as La Tierra Amarilla region of New Mexico, and Missoula, MT, listed properties—city halls, schools and colleges, commercial blocks, industrial plants, ranches, irrigation systems, and residential neighborhoods—testify to the historic patterns of agriculture, politics, commerce, industry, transportation and social history which shaped these communities. Furthermore, the well-researched National Register forms contribute to a rich and vivid documentary of community life and history throughout the United States.

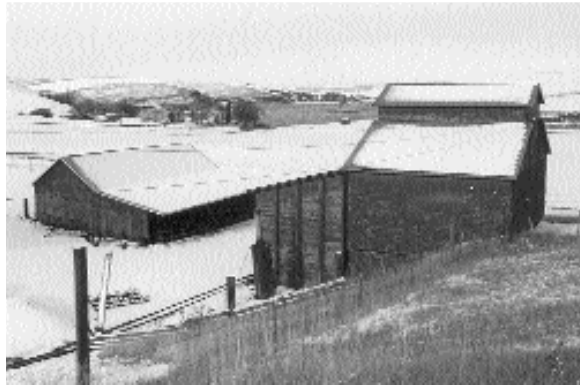


Sloop-rigged and 27 feet in length, *Dutchess* is the only surviving example of a distinctive type of small-craft designed for harvesting sponges in the shallow waters off Florida's Gulf Coast. The boat represents one of several boat types historically associated with Tarpon Springs's commercial sponge industry. Photo courtesy Florida Bureau of Historic Preservation.

By emphasizing themes and their respective property types, the new approach has encouraged the listing of a broader range of properties. The focus of thematic submissions on documenting a single phenomenon such as round barns, rock art sites, or cobblestone architecture shifted to examining the evolution of a theme in its fullest historical context. As a result, the range of historic properties associated with a theme broadened and the link between properties and themes in history strengthened. For example, the multiple property listing for Grain Production Properties in Eastern Washington went beyond recognizing the distinctive round barns associated with the peak of activity in the early-20th century to cover entire wheat farms, conveyance systems, and storage facilities, all of which had contributed to the region's agricultural productivity over a 100-year period.

Researchers using National Register records can trace the contributions of various regions of the nation to particular historic themes. Take, for example, the evolution of the iron and steel industry in the United States. A listing for the Iron Industry on the Western Highland Rim in Tennessee documents mining sites, the ruins of forges and furnaces, and intact villages called "iron plantations" that today reflect the period in the first half of the 19th century when Tennessee led the southern states in iron production. Developed as part of America's Industrial Heritage Project, a multiple property listing for Iron and Steel Resources in Pennsylvania spans more than two centuries and has grouped together Colonial-era forges and furnaces, 19th-century iron plantations and rolling mills, and even the massive steel plants of the 20th century. A listing for the Industrial Resources of Huntingdon County provides a close look at how industrial activities affected the growth and development of one Pennsylvania county in the period 1780 to 1939.

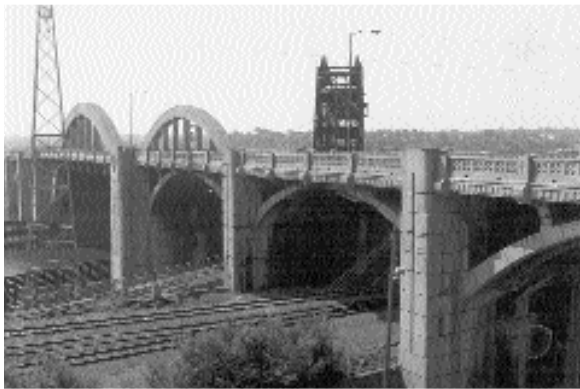
The National Register of Historic Places encourages agencies to use multiple property documentation. Information about the evolution of trends, such as the construction of iron and steel bridges or the management of the federal lighthouse service, is relevant to evaluating the significance of properties in many locations. Furthermore, information about historic properties is useful for making comparative analyses and for understanding the material culture associated with a historical theme. In 1993, the National Register published a comprehensive list with selected annotations of all the multiple property listings in the National Register of Historic Places. This has enabled those preparing documentation



Built between 1904 and 1930, the Gustave Heilsberg Farm in Whitman County, WA, is today one of the most complete examples of the historic farms in the Grain Production Properties in Eastern Washington MPS. Photo courtesy State of Washington Department of Community Development.

entire parks or small areas within them, many of which were developed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the 1930s. The documentation is based on *Presenting Nature: The Historic Landscape Design of the National Park Service, 1916 to 1942*, a contextual study on the topic drawn from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including such multiple property listings as the Facilities Constructed by the CCC in Arkansas MPS, CCC Properties in Iowa State Parks MPS, Minnesota State Park CCC/WPA Rustic Style MPS, Mt. Rainier National Park MPS, and Zion National Park MPS.

Multiple property listings in the National Register are a tangible link between historic events of the past and places that today can be recognized, preserved, and interpreted. By connecting history and historic places, these listings are forming a rich and ever-growing compendium of local, state, and national history that can be used as we preserve historic properties in meaningful and lasting ways.



According to the documentation for the listing, Reinforced-Concrete Highway Bridges in Minnesota, 1900-1945, the first reinforced-concrete bridge in the United States was built in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park in 1889. This method of construction reached its zenith in bridges such as the 1534', multiple-arch Robert Street Bridge (1934) built over the Mississippi River at St. Paul. Photo courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.

to refer to and benefit from documentation about similar or parallel developments.

The National Register is also seeking ways to better disseminate contextual information so that it can be used by various agencies and individuals for identification, evaluation, and registration without being duplicated. This has led to the development of a nation-wide context for Historic Park Landscapes in state and national parks, which will be issued as multiple property documentation later this year. It can be used by state offices, park agencies at various governmental levels, and others to nomi-

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In developing the multiple property approach, the National Park Service conducted a pilot project in 1984 and 1985 whereby several state programs and federal agencies applied the process to a survey and registration project already underway. Several multiple property listings resulted: Indian Use of the Salt Pond Region between ca. 4000 B.P. and ca. 1750 A.D. MPS; McKinney, Texas, MPS; State Parks in Tennessee Built by the CCC and the WPA, 1934-1942; Depression-Era Buildings of the

National Forest Service in Oregon and Washington; and Rural Public Schools in Washington from Early Settlement to 1945 MPS.

Linda Flint McClelland is a historian with the National Register of Historic Places, Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service, and is author of *Presenting Nature: The Historic Landscape Design of the National Park Service, 1916 to 1942* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1994).