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"Links to the Past"

"Links to the Past," the area of the National Park Service (NPS) "ParkNet" Web site focusing on cultural resources, was launched only three years ago. In that short time, we have assembled the most comprehensive collection of information on NPS cultural resources service-wide. And we are constantly expanding. We have over 7,500 HTML documents, many other documents in PDF format (e.g., *CRM* magazine), and countless graphics. We created many features unique to the Web utilizing its graphic and navigating tools. More than 2,000 users visit our site every day; many come back frequently. We have received a number of Web awards and have been mentioned in many articles about the Web, particularly for our excellent content and useful features.

All of this is due to the ingenuity, creativity, enthusiasm, and perseverance of numerous NPS staff, especially the Cultural Resources Web team. It has not always been easy; we have hit many bumps along the way. To date, we have gone through two major phases of activity and are entering our third. These phases are described below to illustrate opportunities taken, challenges faced, and benefits received.

Phase I: Floundering in a New Medium

In January 1995, the NPS Director decided to enter the information superhighway. One team was formed to consider an overall NPS Web site (Handly 1995), and another for cultural resources. National Parks Week, beginning March 31, 1995, was the launch date.

The Cultural Resources team, made up of disciplinary specialists from eight divisions, had numerous questions at the start: What kinds of information should go up on a Web site? How will our site be organized? Who will visit and use it? Who will do the work? Who knows Web-related programming? What does it mean that a Web site doesn't have a beginning and an end like a publication? Is the Web merely a fad?

Three years ago there was little guidance available to answer these questions (Andrews et al. 1995). Relatively few staff had hands-on Web experience. The current plethora of books about the Web did not exist. The group floundered at times, but began making decisions—some with forethought, some reactionary. We organized the site by topic (e.g., Historic Places, Archeology,

Grants-in-Aid) recognizable to the general public. "Public" was defined as the range of people with access to the Web. We agreed on a site name, "Links to the Past," to evoke the relationship between historic preservation and the Web's linking capabilities. The homepage and identifying headers were designed with an eye to editorial coherency. As the deadline neared, many offices contributed documents and reports written for other media, using the notion that a Web site was a container for existing materials. Other offices reworked their materials into manageable segments and developed new materials, allowing visitors to follow their interests via links. Technical experts converted myriad documents (HTML coding applications did not exist), uploaded them into the organizational schema, and tested the site. We met the deadline. Members of the first team were satisfied and most went back to their "real" work.

But the Web was about change and Web users demanded updated and new materials. Site maintenance became an issue. By late summer, 1995, a new team, consisting of representatives from each program office, was formalized to maintain the site and look to its future. It is still only inter-programmatic team in the NPS National Center for Cultural Resource Stewardship and Partnerships.

Phase II: Finding a New Vision

We created a vision and long-term goals for the site, set a policy for contributors, and provided Web training. In the fall of 1995, an unexpected opportunity arose: one-time funding to redesign the overall NPS Web site. Award-winning Web sites were reviewed to determine current trends in Web design and publishing. The attention-grabbing magazine model, a one-screen homepage with departments and changing features, was chosen, and the design firm, Interactive Bureau, was hired to realize our vision. Another deadline was set to inaugurate the redesigned site: National Parks Week in March 1996.

The Web team began reorganizing "Links to the Past" from this exciting design perspective by asking more informed questions. Who exactly is our audience? How do we effectively inform the public about their heritage—the millions of cultural resources that the NPS protects and manages? What organizational categories and names are relevant to our audience(s)?

We recognized four key audiences: the public, including educators and children; professional colleagues; NPS staff; and Congress and other government offices. We acknowledged that our programs cater to different combinations of these audiences, but that the Web could also help us reach new audiences. After carefully considering the range of materials we might post to our site, we

confirmed a decision made in Phase I: provide direct access to our products. We set such a course with the following table of contents:

- "Collected Heritage" (later changed to "Discover") including major databases (i.e., the National Archeological Database <www.cr.nps.gov/aad/nadb.htm>, the National Register Information System <www.cr.nps.gov/nrishome.htm>), and other collections (i.e., significant NPS museum objects in "Treasures of the Nation" <www.cr.nps.gov/csd/treasures.html>; HABS/HAER collections <www.cr.nps.gov/habshaer/collectn.htm>);
- "Help Yourself" to grant programs (i.e., the National Maritime Heritage Grants Program <www.cr.nps.gov/history/maritime/grants.htm>, Tribal Preservation Grants <www2.cr.nps.gov/tribal/grants.html>), tax credit information, and key contact groups (i.e., the State Historic Preservation Offices <www2.cr.nps.gov/shpo/>);
- "Tools for Teachers" including educational programs and activities for teachers (i.e., "Teaching with Historic Places" <www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/home.html>) and for students (i.e., "The Great American Landmarks Adventure" <www2.cr.nps.gov/pad/adventure/landmark.htm>); and,
- "Get Involved" with opportunities to tour historic areas, restore old buildings, participate in archeological excavations, save Civil War battlefields, and seasonal employment.

We also introduced other significant site areas: a temporary feature space for a cultural resource topic, such as "Ancient Architects of the Mississippi" <www.cr.nps.gov/aad/feature.htm>; "Publications"; "Laws" relevant to historic preservation; "Programs" to introduce each program; and, "America's Album" to provide a graphic exhibit about what the programs do. With this reorganization set, Interactive Bureau created

design templates reflecting the image of the NPS, and we met the new deadline through the efforts of many.

Again, change was and is inevitable. However, we had grasped the strengths and weaknesses of the Web in relation to our diverse audience and the different values they place on our materials. These understandings have proved to be critical for long-term planning and management as we continue to modify and add to our Web site.

Phase III: Looking to the Future

"Links to the Past," our one-stop shopping locale for cultural resources activities, projects, and products, is providing significant benefits to the NPS. We inform and educate Americans and the world in a cost-efficient way. In fact, we impact more people than ever before and more than in any other medium. We also now better understand ourselves as we set up and maintain Web links between our many programs, parks, and products.

With a positive outlook to the future, however, comes new management and maintenance challenges. During the 1996 site redesign, the goal was to create a unified NPS presence on the Web. In response we have used a carefully planned homepage, common templates, logos, palettes, and fonts to define "Links to the Past," bind our dispersed parts into a unified whole, and be a significant part of "ParkNet." Yet, the Web also encourages individuality and creativity.

Another challenge is the growing enormity of our site and maintaining efficient access to its varied materials. What began as a dynamic "electronic brochure" must now be transformed into a powerful application for the public and NPS alike. The best strategy to manage our creativity and productivity requires a combination of technology and human ingenuity. On the human creativity side, we must encourage the evolving talents of our Web team and program staff and advocate for staffing a dedicated Web editorial group. We must also continue to utilize the unique advantages of the Web. The Museum Management Program, for example, manages millions of interesting museum objects

Left, a recent "Links to the Past" Web site feature designed by Mark Oviatt for HABS/HAER.
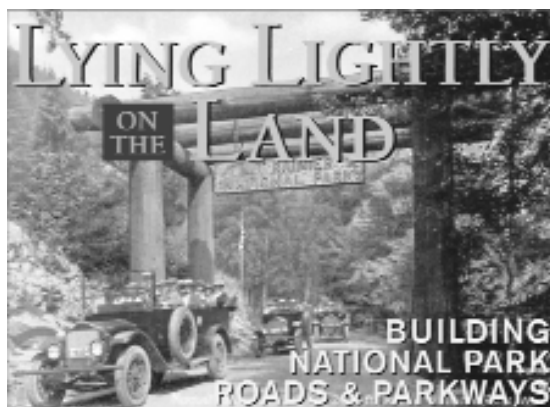
Right, original Web site design as delivered from Interactive Bureau in 1996. Screen capture by Mark Oviatt.

and archival documents in parks and centers, but has not been able to widely showcase them. The Web allows us to produce exhibits, such as "Camp Life: Civil War Collections from Gettysburg NHB" that are viewed by thousands of people worldwide. Our most widely used publications, such as the *Preservation Briefs* and *CRM,* are now available to a much wider audience than ever possible in paper. Also, we are now able to assemble all the NPS Web projects and products on a topic into one coherent and dynamic presentation, such as "Shared History: Celebrating African American History & Culture."

On the technology side, we must continue to mold our site into an institution of information exchange and education by dismissing its former technical novelty and focusing on its useful tools. This involves quantifying user visits and gaining an understanding of user interests by better application of user statistics, user surveys, and demographic data. We also must test and take advantage of new cataloging and indexing software applications. Thousands of links need to be continually tested, addresses changed, and facts checked.

In the end, a rich Web site depends on great content and a unique perspective on information flow, not on software. The sheer volume and diversity of our materials dictates that we move to a three-dimensional approach. This means using core pages, not homepages, as focal points for accessing various parts of our site, including new sections on heritage tourism and museum exhibits, a central clearinghouse for publications, diverse programmatic services, and park resources. Where once we had hierarchical lists, we are beginning to construct dynamic spheres of intersecting information—an electronic Venn diagram of sorts.

We expect to continue to learn and work hard as we move through phase III, perhaps even go through another site redesign. It has all been worth it, however, mostly because we are able to inform and educate much larger and more diverse audiences about cultural resources in the national parks than ever before. An added benefit has been the increasing use of our site by NPS staff across the country to help with daily work, learn more about what each other does, and begin work on new Web projects.

References

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