VERNACLAR LANDSCAPES IN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
OF THE UNITED STATES

The United States is internationally recognized for its varied array of national parks that are managed by the National Park Service (NPS). While a number of sites in the system—Yellowstone (the world’s first national park), Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and several others—are best known, the NPS management mandate goes well beyond situations where the primary purpose is to preserve and protect significant natural, scientific, and scenic resources. During much of the twentieth century the NPS directive has also included the management of cultural and historic resources. As early as 1906 the federal Antiquities Act placed such important archaeological sites as Mesa Verde, Colorado, and Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, under the U. S. Department of Interior, and in 1916 responsibility for their protection passed to the newly created National Park Service (Unrau and Willis 1987).

The conservation of archaeological properties has been an NPS function since 1916, but its history-related responsibilities increased even more noticeably in 1933 when President Franklin Roosevelt transferred authority for all parks, monuments, and cemeteries in the U. S. War Department and U. S. Forest Service, as well as all parks, monuments and public buildings in Washington, D. C., to the National Park Service. By the late 1980s, the NPS managed almost 350 sites, more than 13,000 historic structures, 25 million objects, and several thousand archaeological properties (Scheie 1987, Unrau and Willis 1987).

While cultural and historic resources have played an obviously important role in NPS procedures for several decades, some supervisors still term them as key obstacles to effective resource management in natural areas. Indeed, most planning documents prepared prior to 1980 reveal that cultural resources seldom were considered at all in the majority of large natural parks (Toothman 1987). Managers ignored references to historic objects and interpreted the mandate as referring to the restoration of natural landscapes prior to the appearance of white settlement. An influential report in 1962 stated the objective clearly: “As a preliminary goal, we would recommend that the biotic associations within each park be maintained, or where necessary recreated, as nearly as possible in the direction that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man. A national park should represent a vignette of primitive America” (Cain et al. 1962). Wilderness status, therefore, was “interpreted by some natural area managers as a mandate to destroy the shelters, cabins, and other artifacts found in such areas, without regard to their potential significance as historic or recreational resources” (Toothman 1987). Park supervisors trained in natural areas management often viewed any human presence as undesirable in a wilderness area (Webb 1987).

It was the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and its implications, however, which “stunned traditional park managers” (Webb 1987). No longer were they allowed to demolish significant historic buildings without studying the structures and giving careful consideration to alternatives. While many supervisors initially ignored the directions or still found a rationale to destroy cultural artifacts, local communities and preservation agencies eventually became more aggressive and the NPS began to conform to the law—although a scarcity of funds often hampered such efforts. Even today, cultural resource managers in the NPS continue to bemoan the loss of such resources (Rogers 1989). At the same time, however, preservationists have had difficulty in evaluating vernacular buildings and their related landscapes. For example, common buildings scattered over a large area, but having significance in terms of tradition and cultural followways, remained outside the definition. Since significance formerly had referred to one structure or a group of structures that contributed to a major American theme in history, or that was significant architecturally, the surrounding land often was considered as incidental or as a buffer.
The new concerns were especially difficult when dealing with landscapes. Traditionally, NPS managers have treated landscapes in one of two ways: one has already been mentioned, with the natural parks being envisioned as areas where the landscape would be restored to its original state; historical parks, on the other hand, were managed by preserving the historic scene at a precise time or period by maintaining the terrain features and vegetation. In other words, efforts were made to “approximate,” “freeze,” or “restore” such landscapes in time (Webb 1987).

The recognition “that landscapes can have cultural and associative values” is only a recent issue in the NPS (Schene 1987). In fact, it was not until 1979 that the chief preservation architect for the NPS commissioned a project that would seek to evaluate cultural landscapes. It is the evolution of this project that will be spelled out in the remainder of this paper, followed by a brief overview and evaluation of two important NPS sites—Buffalo River National River and Ebey’s Landing Historic Reserve—where such criteria have been applied.

**Background**

The first manual for landscape preservation appeared in 1984, and had the ultimate goal of providing for “the protection, wise stewardship, and appropriate management of significant rural landscapes within the National Park System” (Melnick et al. 1984). A major dilemma that had to be resolved over the course of the project was the one of terms and definitions. Whereas “historic landscapes” had been previously used by the NPS in its management efforts, the term proved inadequate since the agency focused upon landscapes associated with important persons, designers, or historical periods. “Historic scene” was rejected because of its association with a view; “socio-cultural landscape” since it could refer to the intangible; “cultural landscape” lacked specificity and was thought to be too broad; and “vernacular landscape” was initially rejected because NPS bureaucrats deemed it too vague and esoteric. Therefore, the term, “rural historic districts,” was adopted (Webb 1987).

The key difference in philosophy that the rural historic districts represented was associated with landscape change. Whereas the major goal of historic structure preservation is to minimize change, with landscapes the ultimate objective often is the issue of how to manage change itself. Eventually the definitions were tightened up even further. Today, the NPS uses the following terms to designate the broad array of cultural landscapes it manages:

- **Historic Scene:** a micro-environment where a significant historic event has occurred (historic scenes have subsequently been merged with historic sites).
- **Historic Designed Landscape:** a place where form, layout, and/or the designer provide the reason(s) for preservation.
- **Ethnographic Landscape:** those sites used by contemporary peoples for subsistence hunting and gathering, religious or sacred ceremonies, and traditional meetings.
- **Historic Vernacular Landscapes:** landscapes possessing a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of natural and human-made components united by use and past events or aesthetically by plan or physical development.

**The Buffalo National River in Arkansas: The Process Begins**

The first NPS site to receive attention from the standpoint of cultural landscape preservation was the Boxley Valley, an area of the Buffalo National River in Arkansas. The Buffalo National River was established in 1970, and by 1980 only 60 people were still residing in the Boxley Valley portion. The site, however, had 200 scattered farm buildings situated within its forested bluffs, and also included 3,250 hectares of cultivated land. While the original master plan for the Buffalo National River had stated that the farmlands could
continue as private operations—but with scenic easements to maintain their character—conflicts arose when the NPS, sometimes aggressively, encouraged residents to sell their lands outright. Farmers who stayed for ten to twenty years under leaseback arrangements often chose not to invest in soil or building improvements, thereby leading to additional NPS purchases, more conflicts, and further abandonment of houses and buildings. When a structure didn’t meet the significance criteria established by the National Register of Historic Places, it was destroyed (U.S. Department of the Interior 1985, Feierabend 1989).

Some of these practices began to change in the 1980s, however, when the importance of vernacular architecture emerged as a consideration within the NPS, and emphasis was given to the evaluation of entire farmsteads as part of a historic district. Eventually a historic district embracing 170 structures within the Boxley Valley was identified and nominated to the National Register. Perhaps the greatest change in traditional NPS philosophy occurred in 1985, however, when the cultural landscape report for Boxley Valley appeared. The report noted that the cultural landscape of the Boxley Valley reflects a continuum of land use, architectural design, and habitation. “It is the continuity of use,” stated the report’s authors, “along with its significant historical, architectural, cultural, and scenic resources that make the valley important and unique in the Buffalo River basin.” Likewise, the NPS now seeks to direct change in the Valley, not to stop it or ignore it. “The concept is to protect the natural and historic character of Boxley Valley, while allowing and encouraging a relatively ‘natural’ evolution of the rural landscape” (U.S. Department of the Interior 1985). The approach seeks to balance private use and resource preservation by applying a number of management techniques to different districts in the Valley. These include the river corridor, forests, agricultural zones, community development districts, park development areas, and the transportation corridor. The NPS, for example, now encourages private ownership in the community and the agricultural districts. Supposedly the spirit of cooperation that existed among residents for some 150 years is now being expanded to include the NPS and visitors. Though conflicts still exist between the federal agency, dispossessed residents, and current inholders, it appears that some of the acrimony has been curtailed with the new plan and its greater sensitivity to local needs and traditions (U.S. Department of the Interior 1985; Feierabend 1989).

Ebeys Landing Historic Reserve: New Directions for the NPS?

Ebeys Landing National Historical Reserve in the state of Washington is perhaps the clearest representation of the new philosophy that now permeates the NPS. The Reserve, situated on Whidby Island outside of Seattle, was established in 1978 “to preserve and protect a rural community which provides an unbroken historical record from the nineteenth century exploration and settlement in Puget Sound to the present time” (Jarvis 1985). The area includes farms, rugged headlands and coastal beaches, woodlands, open spaces, historic buildings, and the small village of Coupeville. While the NPS was an unwilling participant at first, it moved quickly once public pressures in the area became so great that the agency was in danger of losing its credibility as an organization interested in protecting valuable land resources (Jarvis 1985, undated).

The origins of the Reserve may be traced to the mid-1970s when a coalition of local residents became concerned that the heart of the agricultural enclave at Ebeys Landing would be threatened by significant subdivision activity. Most of the agricultural holdings had remained in the hands of the same families for a time span that exceeded one hundred years, and the visual appearance of the area had changed relatively little over this time span. Despite the pressures of urbanization from Seattle and the presence of nearby military installations, the land continued to be used for agriculture, the majority of service and community activities were in the town of Coupeville, and natural areas of woodlands and forests were still to be found on the ridges and uplands (Pacific Northwest Region 1980, 1984; Gilbert 1985).

When a key 120 hectare parcel of farm land was to be sold for subdivision purposes, local preservation groups coalesced around various units of government in an effort to
forestall the process, and asked that the NPS use its resources to coordinate the efforts. Once the NPS became involved, the limited amount of money available for acquisition was used to purchase the agricultural holding; this area was then sold to a nearby farmer in exchange for the development rights to the original farm, which meant that he guaranteed the continuation of agricultural practices at the site (Jarvis 1985).

In 1985, a cultural landscape report was prepared for the Reserve that sought to record the relationship between the natural and built environments on the 7,000 hectare holding (Gilbert 1985). The idea was to demonstrate that ordinary buildings, farms, and associated landscapes were as important as elaborate structures. In sections of the report entitled “Reading the Landscape” and “Looking at Landscapes,” the evolution of the Reserve from past to present was spelled out. The comprehensive plan commented on the integrity of the agricultural enclave; the broad views of ocean, beach, and mountains; and the small town character of Coupville. In addition, the report raised several pragmatic questions that faced the area and its residents: which units of government take on the obligations of open space preservation; how can local governments offer services to a growing number of residents, but maintain the present tax base; how is the area going to cope with a growing number of tourists, recreation homes, and retirement populations; and how can growing needs for water and sewer be satisfied? (Gilbert 1985; Pacific Northwest Region 1980, 1984).

To deal with these issues, a combination of development controls was implemented. Almost ninety percent of the Reserve remains in private ownership—to be managed by local zoning controls—while the remaining land area has been or will be acquired directly by outright purchase. By 1988, sufficient mechanisms were in place so that major responsibility for the Reserve was transferred to the local Advisory Board, with the NPS providing overview and auditing procedures, as well as some interpretation.

**Summary**

Within the span of a decade, the idea of historic and vernacular landscapes has had a clear impact upon the National Park Service of the United States. Not only do such concerns represent a coalescence of issues associated with the broader cultural landscape, but they also illustrate the new directions in land preservation policy that virtually every federal agency in the United States will be pursuing in the future. “Cooperation at all levels of government, and between the public and private sectors, is (now) a necessity,” states one astute superintendent for the NPS. As the amount of land and financial resources available for the acquisition and management of new natural park reserves becomes increasingly scarce throughout the world, there is no doubt that cultural landscapes will receive increasing attention from governments, agencies, and managers. Perhaps recent policies adopted for America’s national parks will provide new directions for similar activities in other nations—just as Yellowstone, Yosemite, and other sites established the foundation for a world-wide national park movement more than one hundred years ago.

**References**


