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Heritage in the Landscape
Cultural Landscapes and the National Register

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Efforts to recognize and preserve cultural landscapes date to the earliest days of America’s preservation movement. Consider Ann Pamela Cunningham’s work to save Mount Vernon, which began in 1853. Familiar to every preservationist, the story of Miss Cunningham’s crusade may have focused on George Washington’s house, but she and the organization she founded—the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union—also anticipated restoring the gardens and wider landscape that Washington was known to have loved. Similarly, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation sought to restore the landscape of Monticello after acquiring the property in 1923.

An aerial view of the landscape surrounding Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello.

PHOTO BY THOMAS JEFFERSON FOUNDATION AT MONTICELLO
When the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) was passed in 1966, the historic parks of the National Park System were listed in the National Register of Historic Places, as were the National Historic Landmarks that had previously been designated. Approximately 800 such properties, ranging in area from 2 million acres to less than one acre, were listed in the National Register in 1966—and a number of these first listings had landscape significance.

Like all properties nominated to the National Register, landscapes must correspond with one of the five property types specified in the NHPA: a building, site, district, structure, or object significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, or culture. Landscapes are generally nominated to the National Register as sites or districts, although many are listed because they contribute to the significance of a building or structure. In such cases, the landscape is included within the nominated boundary and the nomination addresses its significance.

Properties must have boundaries drawn according to the guidance established for all nominations—acreage not directly related to the significance of the property and buffer zones intended to “protect” the property should not be included. The area that retains integrity should be included and boundaries should be natural or human-made features, depending on the property.¹

It may not be widely understood, but the National Register has always accepted nominations for significant landscapes, and listing them is neither onerous nor unusual. Nonetheless, listings of cultural landscapes lag well behind those of other resources.

SPECIFIC GUIDANCE FOR CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

The term “cultural landscape” is difficult to find in National Register regulations and guidance materials. This may be surprising, given that one of the most frequently quoted definitions of “cultural landscape” is found in National Park Service (NPS) materials. Per the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes, a cultural landscape is:

“A geographic area (including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein),
associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values. There are four general types of cultural landscapes, not mutually exclusive: historic sites, historic designed landscapes, historic vernacular landscapes, and ethnographic landscapes.”

Several years before the Secretary of the Interior’s guidelines for cultural landscapes were published, the National Register had opted to use the term “historic landscapes,” with a focus on designed and rural historic landscapes, because of evident public interest. National Register bulletins were prepared for both categories of landscapes in 1987 and 1989, respectively, and included explanations of typical designed and rural landscapes as well as specific guidance for documenting, evaluating, and registering them. The two broad categories are intended to encompass nearly any type of historic landscape, although the rural landscapes bulletin focuses on agricultural properties. A designed historic landscape might be a park, a zoo, an estate, or a campus. A rural historic landscape might be a single farm or broader agricultural area, an industrial site, a natural reserve, or a conservation area.  

Historic orchards at Filoli, a site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, in Woodside, CA. The extended landscape of the property is a key component of the estate’s National Register nomination.

PHOTO BY LUCAS SAUGEN
But the National Register’s guidance also acknowledges that the significance of landscapes is varied; thus, the terminology for identifying landscapes is not rigid. A nomination can use descriptors that are not included in the bulletins, so long as they are accompanied by explanations and context. Nominations for vernacular landscapes, evocative landscapes, cultural landscapes, and so on have been accompanied by statements of significance explaining the terminology.

**UNINTENDED NEGLECT**

Although not deliberately intended to exclude landscapes from consideration for the National Register, common early practices by state historic preservation officers, the NPS, and academic preservation programs have had that effect. Landscapes have often been excluded from consideration in windshield and intensive surveys, boundaries have been drawn too tightly around building clusters in National Register nominations, and attention has not been invested in developing a standard vocabulary or instructions for describing and evaluating landscapes. No doubt, many communities were focused on ameliorating the building losses suffered with Urban Renewal and the effects of post-war development. By the 1980s landscapes were not on all preservationists’ front burners. Today, however, most federal, state, and tribal historic preservation offices, as well as many local historic preservation programs, consider landscapes important cultural resources.

**DIVERSE CULTURAL LANDSCAPES ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER**

A huge variety of landscapes are listed in or determined eligible for the National Register. They vary in age and size, and they reflect national, state, and local significance.

- The Eugene De Sabla, Jr., Teahouse and Tea Garden in San Mateo, California, was listed in the National Register in 1992.4 About an acre in size, the garden is an early expression of the influence of Japanese culture on the development of California design at the beginning of the 20th century.
The Heritage Park Plaza, listed in the National Register in 2010, is a small site in Fort Worth, Texas, designed by Lawrence Halprin and completed in 1980. According to the National Register nomination, “The plaza design incorporates a set of interconnecting rooms constructed of concrete and activated throughout by flowing water walls, channels, and pools. ... This park represents one of Halprin’s most significant projects and embodies his mature theories and philosophy of landscape design.”

Other designed landscapes include components of state and national parks, such as the Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania; parkways and boulevards, such as the George Washington Memorial Parkway in Washington, D.C.; estates, such as the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina; urban plans, such as the L’Enfant Plan of the City of Washington, D.C.; and national monuments, such as the Chiricahua National Monument Historic Designed Landscape in Arizona. Only historically significant national monuments are eligible for National Register listing—those with natural resource value for which historical significance has not been determined are not listed.

Landscapes that are not considered designed but are significant for their association with tribal history, archaeology, or conservation are also listed in the National Register. Many of these are listed under National Register evaluation Criterion D for their “information potential”—that is, for having yielded or being likely to yield
information important to history or prehistory. Burke’s Garden Rural Historic District in Tazewell County, Virginia, is an example of a rural historic district. The Cape Krusenstern National Monument, an archaeological district in Northwest Arctic County, Alaska, and the Adirondack Forest Preserve in New York State are among the largest properties listed in the National Register. The Tarryall Rural Historic District in Park County, Colorado, is nearly 40 miles long and encompasses ranches, conservation and recreation sites, and schools and cemeteries—all bordering the historic Tarryall Road.

- **Traditional cultural places (TCPs)** are listed in the National Register for their meaning to an American culture group—frequently, though not exclusively, one or more American Indian tribes. Lands associated with American Indian history can be significant for various aspects of tribal history. The Menominee Tribe, for example, is considering nominating land that is significant for the tribe’s innovative forestry management and conservation efforts. On the other hand, TCPs are not always associated with tribes. The Green River Drift Traditional Cultural Property in Wyoming is associated with generations of ranchers who have used it to herd livestock to higher ground in the summer and bring them back in the fall. The ranchers’ ongoing use of the drift is a cultural practice that has persisted for more than 100 years.

**MORE LISTINGS TO COME**

Interesting properties with cultural landscape significance have recently been listed in the National Register or come to the attention of National Register staff. The University of Wisconsin Arboretum was listed in the National Register in January 2019. Nominated primarily for its national significance in conservation, the 1200-acre property was home to pioneering prairie restoration work. The city of Tucson is conducting a streetscape survey in order to amend the Barrio Historic District National Register nomination. Landscape and streetscape information that was not originally included will be added to the National Register documentation. An interesting designed landscape, the Winged Foot Golf Club in Westchester
County, New York, was listed in the National Register in June 2019 for landscape architectural and architectural significance. The club has two 18-hole courses designed by Albert Warren Tillinghast, a seminal figure in American golf course design. Dating to the 1920s, the courses were recently restored, maintaining the strategic course design that Tillinghast pioneered.

Federal agencies are also preparing or updating nominations to add landscape information. Section 110 of the NHPA requires them to nominate eligible properties under their jurisdiction, and if a property’s landscape was inadequately addressed in the original nomination, that requirement was not met. Minong, more commonly known as Isle Royale National Park, was listed in the National Register in January 2019. The Michigan archipelago is significant as a TCP connected with the beliefs and practices of the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa (Ojibwe). The Ojibwe know the archipelago as “Minong”, meaning “the good place”. The TCP encompasses some 210 square miles in Lake Superior.

**CULTURAL LANDSCAPES GAIN WIDER ATTENTION**

The growing interest in cultural landscapes is also evident among professional groups. Major preservation organizations in the United States that embrace landscape topics and address cultural landscape issues include the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Main Street America, and the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions. Other scholarly and professional organizations have long considered cultural landscapes. For example, the Association for Preservation Technology International states that it is “a multi-disciplinary, membership organization dedicated to promoting the best technology for conserving/preserving historic structures and their settings.” The homepage of the Vernacular Architecture Forum explains that it “is the premier organization in North America dedicated to the appreciation and study of ordinary buildings and landscapes.” And the Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation, the oldest organization dedicated to landscape research, has recently added the subheading “Conserving Cultural Landscapes” on its website. The organization formerly known as the Pioneer America Society is now known as the International Society for
Landscape, Place, & Material Culture. Meeting agendas and journals of national archaeological associations also include landscape topics. Both the Society for Historical Archaeology and the Society for American Archaeology have sponsored conference sessions devoted to landscape history and analysis. For a number of years, The Cultural Landscape Foundation has advocated for cultural landscape preservation and conducted important cultural landscape research.

FOSTERING LANDSCAPE NOMINATIONS

Despite the considerable progress of recent years, many significant cultural landscapes remain unidentified and are not listed in the National Register. Landscape resources and their nominations are frequently misunderstood, with problems revolving around determining significance, developing contexts, delineating boundaries, and structuring nominations. The designed and rural historic landscapes bulletins are excellent sources of general and specific information, but they need to be updated and expanded to encompass the very broad range of eligible landscapes that can be and are being nominated to the National Register.

In recent years, National Register staff launched the National Register Landscape Initiative (NRLI) to study cultural landscapes and the National Register. Through this webinar series, they met with staff from the NPS and federal, state, and tribal historic preservation offices to discuss landscape interests and recurring issues with the development of National Register nominations. The NRLI provided an excellent format for sharing information and
identifying common problems. The results are being used to develop a forthcoming white paper that will clarify several aspects of nomination preparation. The NRLI has already yielded other resources.

Acknowledging Landscapes compiles the NRLI webinar materials. It addresses several categories of landscapes and approaches to landscape evaluation by federal, state, and tribal agencies. Proceedings of the Maritime Cultural Landscape Symposium, also inspired by the NRLI webinars, is a compilation of papers presented at a 2015 conference in Madison, Wisconsin—a collaboration between the NPS, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, and the Wisconsin Historical Society.

These efforts by the NPS and partners will ideally continue to raise awareness of America’s historically significant cultural landscapes and promote their further inclusion in the National Register, as well as in other preservation programs and projects. FJ

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1. For more detailed instructions on National Register criteria and the nomination process, see the National Register website: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/how-to-list-a-property.htm

2. The reference to “the wildlife or domestic animals therein” has caused confusion about the definition. Animals are not eligible for the National Register, nor are they considered contributing features; however, natural features—such as topography, vegetation, and hydrology—contribute importantly to the environmental description in a nomination. The Organic Act, which created the NPS, charges that agency “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein [emphasis added] and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” NPS responsibilities under the NHPA should not be confused with those in the Organic Act.

3. The Rural Historic Landscapes bulletin deliberately focused on agricultural landscapes, which results in a perception of the guidance as more restrained than intended. The National Register landscape guidance sidesteps the need to provide more explicit definitions or categories of historic landscapes, and the existing system has worked reasonably well for more than 30 years.

4. The National Archives is the permanent home of National Register records, and nominations can now be found on the National Archives (NARA) website. NARA’s holdings can be searched by reference number or property name. Finding aids are available for each state and territory: https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=%22national%20register%20of%20historic%20places%22

5. “The head of each Federal agency shall assume responsibility for the preservation of historic property that is owned or controlled by the agency” (54 U.S.C. 306101) and “Each Federal agency shall establish (except for programs or undertakings exempted pursuant to section 304108(c) of this title), in consultation with the Secretary, a preservation program for the identification, evaluation, and nomination to the National Register, and protection, of historic property” (§30601(a)) and “The program shall ensure that historic property under the jurisdiction or control of the agency is identified, evaluated, and nominated to the National Register” (§30602(b)(1)).