

CRBIB#407205
Color: 170 2
333/130740

**Cultural Landscape Assessment
for the Ferris Property
Colonial National Historical Park
Yorktown, VA**

Prepared by

Cheryl A. Sams

Cultural Landscape Program, Philadelphia Support Office

2001

Executive Summary

The Ferris Property unit of Colonial National Historical Park is being assessed as part of the preparation and design of a river walk system connecting the National Park Service (NPS) Yorktown Visitor Center with the Commonwealth's Yorktown Victory Center along the York River. The purpose of the assessment is to determine if the Ferris property contains any historically significant landscapes that might be negatively affected by the river walk project.

The Ferris property is a wedge-shaped parcel located between the York River and Water Street. The property includes the Ferris House, with an entry driveway and parking area, and a largely vegetated area leading up a slope to an open meadow where the Fusiliers Redoubt is located along the riverbank. An access road, which was originally the terminus of Colonial Parkway, is immediately adjacent to the site's eastern boundary. The redoubt is significant due to its association with the 1781 Siege of Yorktown and its association with the Civilian Conservation Corps. As the redoubt's significance has already been determined, it is assumed that the River Walk project will not affect any of its landscape features. This assessment describes the redoubt's landscape features but focuses primarily on the landscape surrounding the Ferris House.

In a determination of eligibility in 1994, the National Park Service stated that the structure of the Ferris House does not meet any of the criteria for its inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. The study period was "revitalization of the tidewater A.D. 1907 – A.D. 1945", with the major theme being "influences on this regions' modern development". The landscape retains several features from this study period, such as some vegetation and traces of the circulation patterns. The Ferris house, along with a Pitts house that has been demolished, was meant to be part of a major subdivision planned for the riverfront. However, only two houses were built because the remainder of the property was acquired by the United States Government, who blocked any further subdivision construction.

It is the determination of this cultural landscape assessment that the Ferris House landscape does not contain any historically significant features. While there are remnants of other landscape features from the study period of 1907-1945, without the context of the two buildings for which they were designed, their integrity is greatly diminished. However, even though they are not historically significant, the Ferris House landscape does have some very nice landscape features that every effort should be made to retain throughout the development of the river walk. These features include the views to the river and to Yorktown, the topography of the bluff, and several mature specimen trees.

Ferris Property Landscape Characteristics:

Natural Systems and Features

The proximity of the Ferris Property to the York River is one of the best features of the site. The property is located on a bluff directly above the York River just upstream from the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. Therefore, the river is tidal at this location. The site is situated at a point on the river where continual erosion of the bluff is a consistent concern. The site consists of a deep well drained loamy soils formed over layers of fossil shells, which is very susceptible to erosion.

Spatial Organization

The Ferris Property is a linear, wedge shaped parcel located between Water Street and the York River. The house, which is located in the eastern portion of the site, was built into slope of the bluff so that the garage can be accessed directly from the driveway and parking area and the main floor of the house can take advantage of the view to the river. There are stairs and walkways on both sides of the house that lead the pedestrian to the upper terrace of the bluff outside the house. There is evidence of a previous road trace that provided access to two houses from Water Street. The road trace runs parallel to Water Street.

Land use

The Ferris Property has had several land uses throughout its history. During the Revolutionary War, the British used the site for defense purposes. The earthwork known as the Fusiliers Redoubt was used to help defend Yorktown from Allied attack. This earthwork was reconstructed, and is used for interpretation and commemoration at Colonial National Historical Park. The Fusiliers Redoubt site was also the terminus of the Colonial Parkway at one time. There was a parking lot established in the meadow south of the redoubt to accommodate visitors to the earthwork. The terminus was redesigned as a parkway access point when the parkway was extended further into Yorktown to end at the NPS visitor center.

The site was also used for residential use starting in the mid 1920s. Two houses were built on the site as the beginning of a planned subdivision. (Figure 1) The Ferris House was constructed circa 1925 and the Pitts house was constructed in 1928. These were the only two homes built before the United States Government stepped in and bought the adjacent land to keep the subdivision from further development. The National Park Service purchased the two houses and their property in the 1970s. The Pitts house was purchased in 1976 and subsequently torn down. The Ferris house was purchased in 1971 and has been used for staff housing. Currently it is used for storage.

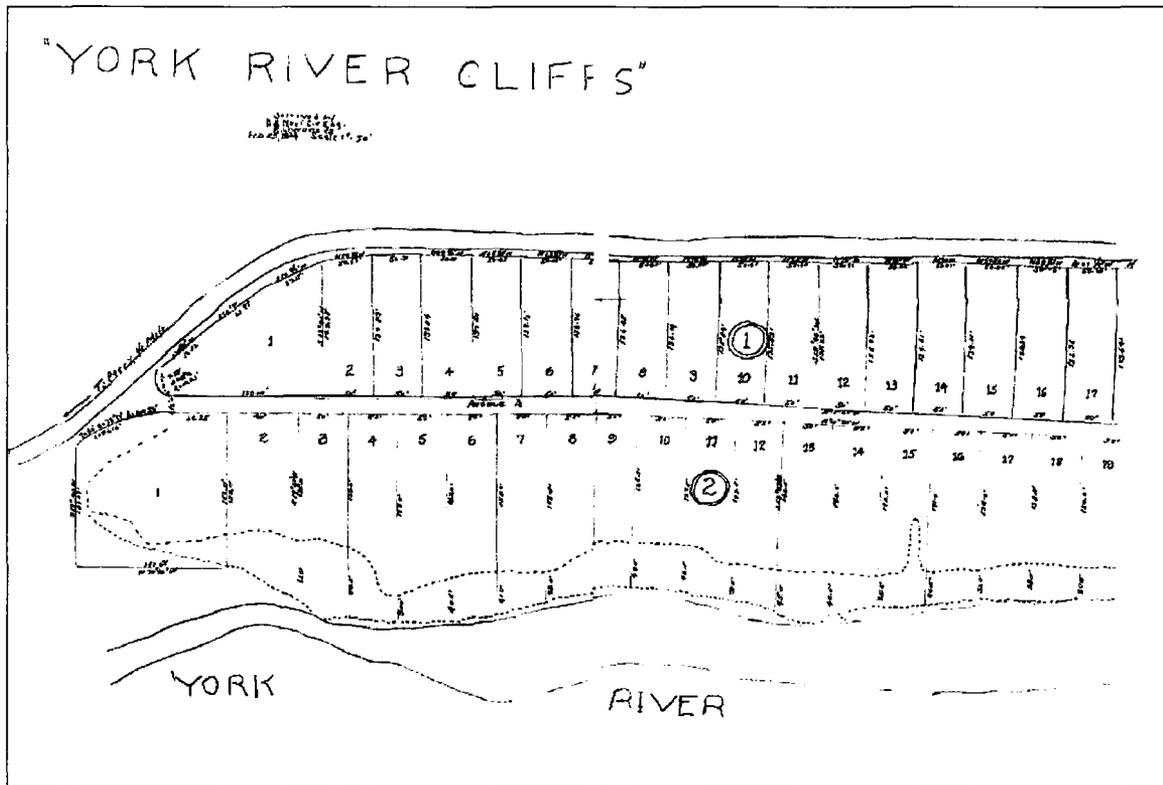


Figure 1: 1924 Survey of planned subdivision (COLO Archives).

Topography

The Ferris Property is located on a bluff overlooking the York River. The bluff face to the river is very steep and has been cutback by severe erosion. Some riverbank stabilization methods have been attempted in the past, such as a seawall and concrete riprap, but the bank has eroded to the point that the slate and concrete patio located behind the Ferris House has begun to fail.

The house is located directly west of the topographic feature known as Hangman's Point, which is where the bluff comes to a point overlooking Water Street and the York River. The topography of the bluff east of the house continues to climb to a ridge where a grove of younger trees is located. This is the location of the Pitts house, which has been removed. A second ridge lies further south from this grove, which rises above Water Street. The swale between these two ridges accommodated the historic road trace that provided access to both of these houses from Water Street.

The Fusiliers Redoubt is located on a broad, relatively level terrace overlooking the York River. The redoubt is crescent-shaped, and a 6-8' deep trench protects the 8-10' tall earthworks. (Figure 2).

As the bluff location and the topography of the site is the most historic feature of the Ferris House site, care should be taken in the river walk development to stabilize the bluff. However, the grading changes made to the site should be minimized to retain as much of the historic character of the bluff as possible.



Figure 2: View of Fusiliers Redoubt earthworks from the east (COLO 2001).

Circulation

The circulation pattern at the Ferris Property revolves around vehicular and pedestrian access to the Ferris House. There is an asphalt driveway and parking area on the south side of the house. A road trace continues west from the parking area following the natural swale between two ridges on the bluff. This road would have provided access to the Pitts house and to the proposed subdivision that was planned in the 1930s. (Figure 3)

The pedestrian circulation at the site consists of brick staircases located on both the southeast and southwest corners of the house. The brick staircase on the southwest corner is constructed with mortared brick risers and the extended runs are dry-laid brick in a herringbone pattern. The steps are bounded by 3-foot high brick walls. The mortared brick steps on the southeast side of the house curve up the hill from the parking area, then changes to a stepped slate walk to continue to the back of the house.

The Fusiliers Redoubt does not have any apparent pedestrian or vehicular access. Historically, there was a parking lot located in the open meadow, but it was removed when the Parkway was re-aligned to its current position and a new Visitor Center was built at its terminus. The 1963 aerial photograph indicates a pedestrian trail connected the new parking lot at the French Trench with the Fusiliers Redoubt. (Figure 4) Currently, pedestrians can cross the meadow, which was the site of the original Parkway terminus parking lot. There are no circulation features on the site that need to be preserved.

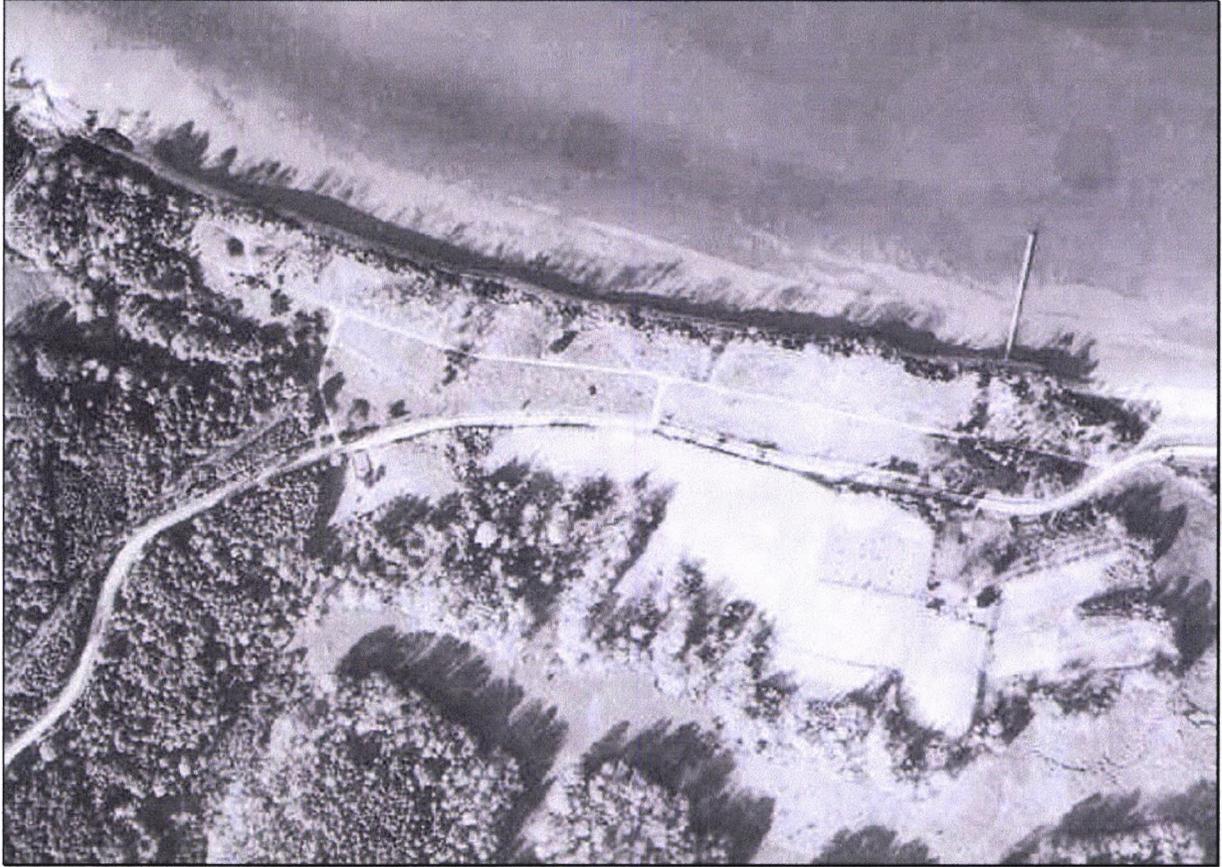


Figure 3: 1930s aerial photograph demonstrating historic road layout (COLO archives).



Figure 4: 1963 aerial photograph demonstrating the parkway terminus, parking and pathway to redoubt (COLO archives).

Vegetation

The Ferris Property maintains much of the vegetation that was apparently planted as part of the site design for both houses located at this site. However, much of the vegetation has been negatively impacted by invasive vine growth. If the invasive plants can be brought under control, the vegetation already established on the site has the potential to enhance the planned riverwalk.

Hangman's Point Vegetation

Hangman's Point has several mature trees located on its crest. Specifically, there is one large, healthy southern red oak centered on the point. (Figure 5) There are also several mature holly trees on the point. However, there is much new scrub growth on both slopes of the point. Some of this growth should be removed to open views to the river and to Yorktown. This would also reduce the competition with the larger, mature trees. Caution should be taken removing vegetation from the south slope of the point, however. The vegetation located on this slope is important in stabilizing the slope.



Figure 5: Large oak tree on Hangman's Point (COLO 2001).

House, Yard and Driveway Vegetation

There is a series of decorative plants planted in the immediate vicinity of the house. The types of vegetation located here include several azaleas and a large camellia shrub. The west yard of the house has several mature cherry trees, an oak and a mature holly. (Figure 6) The vegetation near the driveway includes a large southern magnolia and some crepe myrtle. The severely invasive kudzu vine has established itself along the northwest corner of the house.



Figure 6: Vegetation located in the west yard of the house (COLO 2001).

Historic Property Border Vegetation

There is a large mass of vegetation located west of the lawn and north of the historic road trace. Analyzing the historic aerials and by studying the type of plants located in this area, these plants were most likely planted for the purpose of providing a border between the two houses located here in the 1930s. (Figure 7) Invasive vines like kudzu have seriously affected the plants in this area, but there are several mature specimens buried in the vines. They include holly and invasive privet shrubs and several mature cedar trees. Several small boxwoods and some privet hedges also indicate the edge of the historic road trace.



Figure 7: Former property border vegetation covered with invasive vines (COLO 2001).

Northern Ridge Vegetation

The northern ridge of the Ferris Property is an open grassy area with a grove of younger trees in the clearing. This is most likely the site of the Pitts house located on this property in the 1920s. There are some mature trees planted along the edge of the bluff and younger grove of trees on the ridge. (Figure 8) Care should be taken to retain as many of these trees as possible when laying out the river walk.



Figure 8: Grove of trees located on northern ridge (COLO 2001).

Southern Ridge and Water Street Vegetation

The vegetation on the southern ridge of the site that runs along Water Street is comprised mostly of a tangle of invasive plants and vines. The vines are so thick in this area that it is difficult to identify if there are planted trees beneath them. While this is not the most attractive vegetative feature of the site, it does a good job buffering the site from the traffic on Water Street and will help direct the focus of the visitor to the river.

Meadow and Redoubt Vegetation

The open meadow area located south of the redoubt is characterized by mixed grass species. The grass in the meadow appears to be regularly maintained, but the grass on the earthworks is on a two-year maintenance cycle to protect the earthworks from further erosion. There is some indication of invasive plants sprouting in the redoubt's ditch. There is a large hackberry tree located at the east corner of the redoubt, and several trees have been planted along the bluff's edge, accommodating views to the river between them.

Views/Vistas

The Ferris Property offers many upstream and downstream views of the York River, Windmill Point and the Yorktown Creek. Its location on the bluff above the river offers the elevated view of the river. There is some vegetation planted along the bluff's edge, but for the most part, this vegetation acts as a frame for the view, it does not block it. (Figure 9) One of the locations where the vegetation does hinder the view to the river is at Hangman's Point. The view downstream to Yorktown is blocked by the thick brush growth on the river. This scrub growth also hinders the view from Water Street up to the large oak on Hangman's Point. The second place the vegetation is a problem for the view is at Fusilier's Redoubt. The heavy vegetation north of the redoubt blocks the view to the river when the visitor is inside. This lack of connection with the river hinders the interpretation of the role of the earthworks during the Revolutionary War.



Figure 9: View down river framed by vegetation (COLO 2001).

Buildings and Structures

The Ferris house and its related features are all buildings and structures that remain at this site. The Ferris house is a story and a half structure built into the slope of the ridge.

(Figure 10) *The building has a gable roof with dormers. The base and upper story is of brick construction with the main floor and underpinning of reinforced concrete. The roof is of asbestos shingle construction, with copper gutters* (Ferris House Determination of Significance 1994). The house has a patio in the back facing the river. It is constructed of dry-laid slate bound by mortared brick. The patio is failing due to bluff erosion. (Figure 11) Brick retaining walls provide support for the steps and room for the driveway. The wall located at the southeast side of the house has mortared brick fronted on a poured

concrete wall. (Figure 12) The brick retaining walls on the southwest side of the house are mortared brick only.



Figure 10: Undated picture of the Ferris House (COLO Archives).



Figure 11: Bluff erosion causing the collapse of the slate terrace (COLO 2001).

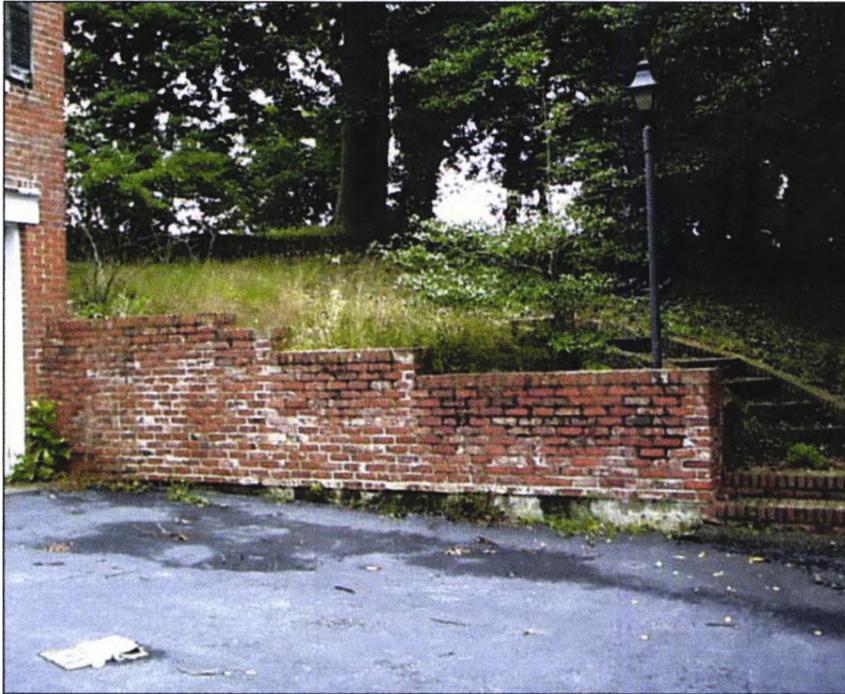


Figure 12: Brick retaining wall at edge of driveway (COLO 2001).

Small Scale Features

Several of the small-scale features located at the Ferris Property appear to date to the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) era of the park. The Fusiliers Redoubt has concrete fraises and palisades to help interpret the wooden features that would have been used during the Revolutionary war. (Figure 13) There is also worm fencing at the edge of Water Street that is supported by concrete base, which is typical of the fencing installed by the CCC.

A bronze plaque was erected in the interior of the redoubt in 1957 to commemorate the men of the Royal Welch Fusiliers who held the redoubt during a siege in 1751. (Figure 14)

A brick-faced well is located in the woods north of the historic road trace. The well is approximately 2-3 feet tall and has an opening that measures approximately 4 feet in diameter. It is unknown if this well served any purpose other than decoration, but the style of the brick seems to match the brick style of the house. (Figure 15)

Another small-scale feature is the wood fence located on the edge of the bluff behind the house. The single board fence appears to have been designed to protect the pedestrian from stepping off the bluff's edge. However, due to the erosion of the bluff, some of the fencing has started to slide down the hillside. There is also a series of utility poles that lie south of the road trace.

The final small-scale features on the site are a concrete culvert that runs under the driveway entrance from Water Street and a Park Service barrier gate across the driveway. The culvert measures about 15 inches in diameter and has partially collapsed on the east side of the drive. The Park Service barrier is a metal swing gate that stretches across the driveway.



Figure 13: Concrete fraises (left) and palisades (right) to interpret the wooden features that would have been present during the Revolutionary War (COLO 2001).



Figure 14: Bronze plaque placed on redoubt (COLO 2001).



Figure 15: Brick well located north of the historic road trace (COLO 2001).