Cultural Landscape Reports: An Overview of Their Purpose, Content, and Format in the National Park Service

During the past fifteen years cultural landscapes have become an integral component of historic preservation in the U.S. and abroad. In turn, the National Park Service (NPS) has come to recognize the significance of cultural landscapes to our national heritage and the stewardship of these resources has become an important part of the NPS mission. The national park system contains an impressive array of cultural landscapes which reflect history, cultural richness, development patterns, and a changing relationship with the environment. They range from large rural tracts covering several thousand acres, to estates with formal gardens, to urban parks in the nation's capitol.

In the NPS, since at least the 1930s, management of historical areas in the system, such as battlefields like Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, has included the recognition of the landscape as it related to the historic scene of a park. However, during the past several years, what has changed is an increased understanding of what constitutes a cultural landscape, the diversity of

Robert R. Page

Cultural Landscape

Program Manager,

National Park

Service,

Park Historic

Architecture Division,

Washington, DC

these resources in the country, their significance to American heritage, and the need to preserve cultural landscapes, along with archeological resources, historic structures, and museum objects. Moreover, there has been a growing awareness that cultural landscape preservation encourages a more holistic approach to resource preservation, engendering an increased understanding of the inter-relationships among cultural and natural resources in a park. Although, until very recently there were no policies, guidelines, or standards for their preservation and management.

Today, the NPS uses the term cultural landscape as an umbrella term which includes four general types: historic designed landscapes, historic vernacular landscapes, historic sites, and ethnographic landscapes. The identification of distinct types assists in distinguishing the values that make a landscape a cultural resource and determining how it should be treated, managed, and interpreted.

At a broad programmatic level, two developments clearly identified the preservation of cultural landscapes as a significant component of the NPS mission:

In 1988 "cultural landscapes" were formally identified in NPS *Management Policies* as a type of cultural resource in the system. At that time, policy was established which mandated the recognition and protection of significant historic, design, archeological, and ethnographic values. The policy recognized the importance of considering both built and natural

features and the dynamics inherent in natural processes and continued use.

In 1994, Release No. 4 of *NPS-28, Cultural Resource Management Guideline*, the guideline which is used to expand, clarify, and apply NPS cultural resource policy, was finalized and includes the most comprehensive procedural guidance to date regarding the management of landscape resources in the system.

In addition, since the early 1980s, much effort has involved the interpretation and application of documents which have codified the preservation program in the U.S. since the passing of the 1966 Historic Preservation Act:

☐ the National Register of Historic Places Criteria, which provides the basis for evaluating the significance of a property, has been applied to a variety of landscape types, such as cemeteries, rural historic districts, and battlefields, in the form of technical bulletins.

☐ the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* which guide the physical treatment of a significant property, have been revised to broaden the language to include landscapes.

These activities have provided the framework for a park cultural landscape program which focuses on preserving a landscape's physical attributes, biotic systems, and use when that use contributes to its historical significance. The understanding of

cultural landscapes and the processes of research, inventory, documentation, analysis, and treatment of these resources has vastly expanded over the past several years. However, this knowledge continues to evolve and many issues still need to be confronted, such as the lack of contextual research, the need for a systemwide inventory, and the need for management strategies which address the dynamic qualities of a landscape.

II. Cultural Landscape Research in the National Park Service

The recognition of cultural landscapes as significant cultural resources in their own right, and not simply for their associative qualities as the setting for a structure or scene of an event, has resulted in a greater degree of rigor by which landscape resources are managed. The evolution of the purpose, content, and format of NPS reports dealing with cultural landscapes reflects this change in management. A review of the research undertaken during the past fifty years on cultural landscapes reveals this evolution, as well as changing perceptions and different approaches to the research, inventory, documentation, analysis, and treatment of these resources.

The purpose of the research has varied considerably and has changed over the years. Until the 1960s, the research conducted dealt primarily with historic sites and the emphasis was on the grounds associated with historic structures. The structures were of primary interest and the landscape information contained in the reports is particularly concerned with other structures in the grounds and associative values, such as troop movements. The reports rarely dealt with landscape features, such as land use, spatial organization, and vegetation. Specific early reports also are limited to a narrative documentation of the historical base map for a park, describing the primary source material from which the base map was produced.

One of the predominant distinctions between early research projects and those conducted today is represented in the information contained in the reports. Early reports addressing landscape resources were single discipline, research projects which tended to concentrate almost exclusively on historical documentation. They were prepared primarily by historians and based solely on research of primary sources, such as ledgers, journals, diaries, order books, historic photographs, and sketches. In most cases, the reports include some evaluation of the research, conclusions are drawn on the appearance of the landscape at a specific date or historical period, and a historical base map is developed. However, in some instances, a report only contains relevant landscape references noted in chronological order with no discussion or analysis. The early reports were frequently intended to serve a dual purpose, providing a record of a historic landscape and a source of interpretive material. As a result, much of the research focused on social history.

Based on an increased understanding of the complexity of cultural landscapes, the scope of the research has expanded from primarily historical documentation to include a review of the archeological record for the site and a detailed physical investigation of the existing landscape. Based on this expanded scope, recent reports generally have involved a multi-disciplinary effort. The preparation of these reports has entailed a historical landscape architect, who serves as the project manager, along with a historian, archeologist, historical architect, and ethnographer, as appropriate. While the historical documentary research remained important, few of the reports compiled since the late 1980s are limited solely to primary source references. Equal consideration is given to recording and "reading" the existing and historic landscape "on the ground." This involves a detailed field survey to document the character-defining features of the landscape, such as site boundaries, cluster arrangements, circulation systems, and viewsheds and vistas. In recent reports the field survey is an essential tool for understanding the historic landscape.

This increased understanding and involvement of a variety of disciplines resulted in the first primary addition to the content of recent reports: the inclusion of substantive analysis and discussion of the information presented. Recent reports involve research, inventory, documentation, and analysis of both historical data and the existing conditions of the landscape. The historical data often is classified into significant historical periods, with

historical base maps produced for each. The production of base maps of the historic and the contemporary landscape often is used to identify and evaluate the significance and integrity of the landscape based on the National Register criteria.

In light of the fact that early reports were single discipline, research projects involving very little field investigation, they rarely include treatment recommendations. The second primary addition to the content of recent reports is recommendations for treatment. Although earlier reports propose "restoring," "reviving," "recreating," or "reconstructing" a historic landscape, very little discussion of the treatments or alternatives is provided. These reports often include a specific date for restoration work. Since most of the landscapes addressed in these reports were associated with structures which had been, or were in the process of being, restored to particular period, the decisions regarding the landscape were driven by the desire to represent the historic scene at a predetermined date. In a number of instances this resulted in a reconstruction of an appropriate period landscape.

In the later reports, particularly those completed since the mid-1980s, the collection and analysis of documentary and field data are intended to provide an understanding of the character-defining features of the landscape in relation to each other and to the significant events, trends, and people. Based on this information, a period(s) of significance is defined for the landscape in its entirety. Recommendations for treatment are

presented in a treatment plan or narrative guidelines. In proposing treatment, the reports have applied the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* as the framework for evaluating the appropriateness of proposed interventions in a significant landscape.

The early reports followed a variety of formats which vary greatly based on their intended purpose and scope. These included historic grounds reports, landscape sections within historic structures reports, documentation of historical base maps, historic groundcover reports, special site/garden histories, and a whole plethora of other types. In 1981, cultural landscapes were initially recognized as a distinct resource type in the first release of the National Park Service's *NPS-28, Cultural Resources Management Guideline*. At that time, the guideline identified the historic grounds report as a special resource study but no definition or content outline was provided. In 1984, Robert Z. Melnick's study, *Cultural Landscapes: Rural Historic Districts in the National Park System*, identified and defined for the first time the content and purpose of a cultural landscape report, which was incorporated into the second release of *NPS-28* the following year. Since then, numerous reports have been prepared for the cultural landscapes in the system, however, they continued to vary in purpose, format, and content. They have included, among others, cultural landscape reports, historic landscape reports, cultural landscape recommendations, and landscape management plans. The reason for the variation relates primarily to the lack of

basic base line information on cultural landscapes and the need to address a particular research, planning, or treatment issue.

The proliferation of study types was the cause of a great deal of confusion regarding what was needed and when to guide decisions pertaining to a cultural landscape. As a result, the necessity for standardization of these reports was realized to adequately incorporate cultural landscape research in a comprehensive park cultural resource program and to outline requirements for professional adequacy. Today, the cultural landscape report is considered the primary treatment document for landscape resources and is comprised of three parts: Part 1—*Site History, Analysis and Evaluation*; Part 2—*Treatment*; and Part 3—*Record of Treatment*.

III. The Purpose, Content, and Use of the Cultural Landscape Report

A cultural landscape report (CLR) is the primary guide to treatment and use of a cultural landscape. Based on the historic context provided in a historic resource study, a CLR documents and evaluates the character-defining features, materials, and qualities that make a landscape eligible for the National Register. It analyzes the landscape's development and evolution, modifications, materials, construction techniques, geographical context, and use in all periods, including those deemed not significant. Typically interdisciplinary in character,

it includes documentation, analysis, and evaluation of historical, architectural, archeological, ethnographic, horticultural, landscape architectural, engineering, and ecological data. It makes recommendations for treatment consistent with the landscape's significance, condition, and planned use.

A CLR's scope and level of investigation will vary depending on management objectives. It may focus on an entire landscape or on individual features within it. However, the overriding goal of these reports is to establish a preservation philosophy for these resources based on an understanding of the significance, condition, and use of the landscape which provides the foundation for making sound management decisions. Before any decision regarding treatment, **Part 1: Site History, Existing Conditions, and Analysis** must be completed.

A comprehensive CLR includes the following:

☐ Part 1: Site History, Existing Conditions, and Analysis

Introduction

The **introduction** is the first section of a CLR and provides the administrative context for the project. This section usually contains five topics/sub-headings: management summary; historical overview and context; study boundaries; methodology and scope; and a summary of findings.

Site History

The purpose of a **site history** in a CLR is to provide a description of the landscape through every relevant historic period, up to the present. To the degree possible, the history should discuss the physical development of the landscape and all subsequent changes. Other types of historical information such as stylistic trends, social history, the history of technology or cultural history is not usually detailed in the CLR (this information should be in the historic resource study) unless it has a direct bearing on the physical development of the property, as is often the case with vernacular landscapes. In a designed landscape, it is important that the history also discuss design intent, primary design principles, physical relationships, patterns, features, and important individuals or events influencing the property.

Existing Conditions

The purpose of documenting **existing conditions** is to provide an accurate description of the contemporary character-defining features that comprise the site (such as vegetation, circulation systems, and structures), land use functions, primary services, and general site character. In this section it is also appropriate to include, as needed, any technical information such as data on soils, floodplain, slope, archeological resources, or natural resources that influence or impact the investigation or treatment of the landscape. Information useful in

specific technical issues associated the preparation of CLR (e.g., documentation guidelines, contract specifications, computer applications, publication and distribution requirements), or related to prescribing treatment recommendations (e.g., soil stabilization, treatment of biotic resources) also will be identified and addressed during the project.