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PRELIMINARY REPORT ON AKERS FERRY HAMLET
CULTURAL LANDSCAPE SURVEY

D-119

OZARK NATIONAL SCENIC RIVERWAYS
SHANNON COUNTY, MISSOURI

By

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ON MICROFILM

Introduction

In July 1992, a cultural landscape inventory of Akers Ferry by a team of cultural landscape architects and a historian from the Midwest Regional Office of the National Park Service concluded that the site is potentially eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places as a vernacular Ozarks hamlet cultural landscape. Along with being a significant prehistoric site, Akers experienced a long history as an important local rural crossroads and hamlet for Euro-American settler; however, the present appearance of the Akers Ferry Development Concept Plan site most resembles the hamlet as it appeared during a significant transition period between 1930-1950. Important character defining features of the locale, such as the open fields, cemetery, church, store, ferry, river, and road system, most reflect this historic period. Therefore, 1930-1950 constitutes the period of significance. The historical context of the site relates to community development, rural social and economic history, religion, transportation, and recreation. The Akers hamlet appears significant as a vernacular cultural landscape characteristic of the settlement pattern and dispersed rural community of the Ozarks.

The accompanying map provides tentative boundaries of the historic hamlet and of the area within the Ozark National Scenic Riverways that the National Park Service proposes to nominate in the future. Outside the park boundaries, the extant dispersed farmsteads (c. 1910-1950) of the Akers rural community, and the old system of rural roads provides a strong historic setting surrounding the potential nomination area within the park. Akers hamlet will receive a more thorough examination in a Multiple Property Documentation of "Ozarks Rural Hamlets" and a National Register nomination of the "Akers Hamlet Cultural Landscape" within the borders of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. The nomination is expected to evaluate the hamlet based on criterion A, its association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history, and C, a property that embodies distinctive characteristics of a vernacular rural historic landscape and represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

Ozark Hamlets

The Ozarks rural hamlet performed an important social and economic function and represented a significant characteristic of the enduring Ozarks frontier landscape. In the early nineteenth century, the first permanent Euro-American residents in southeast Missouri adapted familiar patterns of settlement to their new Ozarks upland homes. They were mostly native-born Scotch-Irish uplanders from homes scattered about the hills and valleys of Tennessee, Kentucky, and North Carolina. As a region, the upland South displayed a distinct version of the decentralized rural life characteristic of nineteenth century America. It had the lowest

population density of any rural area east of the Great Plains and the fewest villages, towns, and cities. The early settlers of the eastern Ozarks established similar dispersed rural communities whereby the principal unit of settlement was the individual farm or rural homestead. In place of a village or town, the mill, post office, and general store served as central social and economic locales for the outlying settlers. The clustering of several such functions formed a hamlet.¹

An Ozarks hamlet typically featured a few residences and a combination of services such as a gristmill, blacksmith shop, post office, general store, school, sawmill, and church. The housesites belonged to the workers or proprietors of the local businesses, who like other Ozarks economic generalists also raised crops, herded livestock, worked the timber, and hunted in nearby land. The hamlets differed from villages and towns. In describing the distinction, historian Robert Flanders explained that the residences of the cluster lived at the hamlet, not in it as in a village or town. He said: "The subtle difference between the two prepositions suggests association with the place rather than containment within it." In fact, the majority of the families and individuals associated with a hamlet lived in dispersed rural homesteads in close proximity to the cluster or central place. Yet they represented a definable community of rural neighbors, with strong kinship ties, who regularly used the store, school, and other services of the hamlet.²

Akers Ferry--Background and Period of Significance, 1930-1950

The hamlet at Akers in upper Shannon County began developing before the Civil War. Available evidence indicates that it was one of three hamlets existing on the Current River north of Ripley County at the time. The other two, Van Buren and Eminence, contained the government seats of Carter and Shannon counties. Akers developed strictly as a trading and social center near the juncture of a road through the settlements along Gladden Creek leading to Salem and the river road crisscrossing the Current. Little is known of its early development period before 1855. The

¹Robert Flanders, Alley, An Ozark Hamlet 1890-1925: Society, Economy, Landscape, prepared for the Ozark National Scenic Riverways, National Park Service, by The Center for Ozark Studies, Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield, 1985; Cynthia R. Price, "Archaeological Investigations At Old Eminence: An Isolated Political Center in Shannon County, Missouri," Missouri Archaeological Society Quarterly, 1 (April-June 1984): 8-11, 16-19; Donald L. Stevens, Jr. A Homeland and A Hinterland: The Current and Jacks Fork Riverways, Historic Resource Study, Ozark National Scenic Riverways, National Park Service, 1991.

²Flanders, Alley, An Ozark Hamlet, 26.

site might have contained only a store and mill and a river ford near the crossroads. Stores, in particular, developed as social places where residents and travelers exchanged news of neighbors and of the outside world. The services at Akers expanded after the Civil War and, by the time large-scale lumbering reached the area around 1890, it contained a steam-powered grist and saw mill, post office, blacksmith shop, school, store, cemetery, and several residences. During the lumber era, 1890-1930, the area developed a reputation for making moonshine and became a major landing site for the product on the upper Current.³

The development of Akers entered a major transition between 1930 and 1950, as transportation innovations, religious missionary activities, and recreation developments changed the landscape and the outlook of the hamlet. The economic depression beginning in the mid 1920s and lasting through the 1930s and the accompanying cycle of droughts created severe hardship in the area. In 1926, the evangelical minister Rev. Paul A. Wobus made his first trip into Shannon County. At the time, Akers and most of the upper Current region lacked any permanent religious organization. Rev. Wobus' missionary work started in earnest in 1928 with the help of another inspired missionary Rev. Zenith F. Yount and resulted in the formation of a community church and religious retreat called Shannondale. Rev. Wobus and much of the Akers community developed a lasting friendship. The people of Akers collaborated in building the Mount Zion Community Church, beginning in 1938, and the Reverend had a cabin built near the river north of the store. The timing of the church's construction coincided with the building of County Highway K, the first paved road in the area. Rev. Wobus called the road "Gloryland Trail" and referred to the Mount Zion Community Church as "Journey's End."⁴

The construction of paved roads for automobile traffic began to change the circulation patterns of the hamlet. The full significance of the new roads requires further study; however, they appear to have influenced the construction of a new store at a new location. Around the end of the 1930s, the state stopped the construction of Highway K and, for the duration of World War Two, the road simply ended at the Current River at Akers. The store operators, Gaylord (Buck) and Loreen Maggard, built a new store along K near the east bank of the river sometime in the forties, possibly 1944. They assumed responsibility for the Akers store

³Stevens, A Homeland and A Hinterland, 33-35, 193-196; History of Shannon County Missouri, Friends of the Shannon County Libraries, Eminence, Missouri, 1986, 66; and Thomas D. Clark, Pills, Petticoats, and Plows, The Southern Country Store (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 5.

⁴Stevens, A Homeland and A Hinterland, 193, 196; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 16 May 1949.

after former owners, Mrs. Maggard's parents George and Jane Purcell, died. This provided continuity at the hamlet since the Purcell family operated the business for most years since the 1880s. Loreen Maggard also functioned as the Akers postmistress out of the store. The Maggard's son, George (Gene), operates the store in 1992 and runs a canoe concession business.⁵

Catering to recreationists from outside the riverway evolved into a major function of Akers. In the 1940s, Buck Maggard organized guided johnboat float fishing trips and later in the 1950s became one of the earliest canoe rental operators on the upper Current. The increasing importance of the recreation trade to the hamlet followed continued transportation improvements such as the establishment of a ferry crossing in 1949. The ferry initially provided local stone masons with access to a quarry on the eastern side of the river, but it also came to serve traffic along the newly completed Highway K to Summersville on the west side of the Current.⁶

Despite these changes between 1930 and 1950, the institutional core of Akers continued to serve a definable dispersed rural community as it had for nearly one hundred years. The institutional features of the hamlet included the school, store, sawmill, church, cemetery, and ferry. Only a few families, such as the Maggards, Smiths, and Purcells, dwelled at the Akers crossroads or central place. The majority of this rural community lived in scattered farms and housesites on both sides of the Current River. Local children still attended the one-room Cedar Hill School through the 1940s although its enrollment declined from the high population years of the 1910s and 1920s. The number of pupils during the 1940s averaged thirteen except between 1942 and 1944. During the latter years the student body swelled to over forty, as families moved in to work nearby at a temporary stave mill of the National Distillery Company. Aside from these brief boom years, children of the Dooley, Hodges, Purcell, and Smith families dominated the rolls. Their ancestors settled at Akers between 1830 and 1880 and, as the headstones of the Akers cemetery show, they and several other families persisted as the foundation of this

⁵Elizabeth Amberg, "Preliminary Report on Akers Ferry Store For Section 106 Compliance," Ozark National Scenic Riverways, February 14, 1992; History of Shannon County, 12; and Memorandum Historian, Central Team, Denver Service Center to Historian Don Stevens;, Midwest Regional Office, Trip Report of Historian David L. Fritz, July 4, 1992.

⁶Ibid.

rural community.⁷

In 1992, the cultural landscape inventory performed by the Midwest Region of the National Park Service defined a tentative boundary of the community of Akers and surveyed the existing features of the landscape. The survey team identified the Cedar Hill School District as a working boundary of the Akers community (see enclosed map). This was determined by comparing the names of persons buried in the Akers cemetery with the names of students enrolled at the school during the period of significance and with the names of families that traded at the Akers store on a regular basis. Local informants provided the latter information and this closely corresponded to the families buried at the Akers cemetery. Next, the researchers obtained the assistance of James Purcell, a local resident born in the 1930s, who helped locate homesites of the families identified. A subsequent field survey inventoried six extant farmsteads and remnants of a number of other farm and house sites.

In the forthcoming National Register nomination of Akers Ferry Hamlet, the National Park Service will nominate that portion of the landscape within the boundary of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. As described in the enclosed map, this involves the institutional core and adjacent landscape. The nomination will not include the existing farmsteads outside of the park. The farms, however, constitute important features of the dispersed Akers community, and the nomination will note their importance to the historic setting of the Akers Hamlet Cultural Landscape.

Character-defining features of Akers Ferry Hamlet

The following discussion of character-defining features of the Akers Ferry cultural landscape is based on the classification system described in "National Register Bulletin 30: Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Districts." Through this system, the character of a rural landscape is described in terms of four broad-scale processes which have historically shaped the land and seven categories of physical components which reflect the historic patterns of human use and occupation.

Processes

1. Land Uses and Activities: Land uses are the major human forces that shape and organize rural communities. At Akers Ferry, the landscape we see today is largely the result of three major activities: logging which cleared the land of its natural tree cover, agriculture which kept the fields open,

⁷Interview with James Purcell, July 22, 1992. Papers of Mrs. James Purcell, Teachers Register 1930-1949, Cedar Hill #7, District Clerk Records, Shannon County, Missouri.

and recreational use of the river which has increased since the initial float fishing trips organized by local residents in the 1940s and 50s, resulting in the proliferation of campgrounds, parking lots and canoe storage areas.

2. Patterns of spatial organization: The large scale patterns of settlement and land use have been consistent along the Riverway from prehistoric times through the present, as seen in the layering of historic features over parallel prehistoric burial and camp sites. The wooded uplands enclose open terraces of fields and homesteads throughout the "hollows" along the river and tributary creeks. Due to the poor soil and rough terrain, the farms are relatively remote from one another. Akers Ferry, the small cluster of services for these scattered farms, developed at the junction of Gladden Creek with the Current River. Since the early roads followed the drainageways, the hamlet was also a crossroads for overland travelers who crossed the river at a ford near the location of the current ferry. Today the crossroads community is located at the junction of paved state highways K and KK.

3. Response to Natural Features: Life in the Akers community has always depended heavily on the natural resources of the area. The wooded uplands have traditionally been used for logging, hunting and livestock. These activities still go on today, as agriculture continues on the arable land of the river terraces. The waterways were used for fishing and water-based recreation, which has increased in economic importance since the 1940s. Building traditions continue to emphasize use of native materials, such as wood and stone, in local construction.

4. Cultural traditions: Cultural traditions affect the way land is used, occupied and shaped. Although never formally incorporated as a political unit, the Akers hamlet has served as the social center for a dispersed community of fiercely independent farmers, bound by strong bonds of kinship and family loyalties. Despite the many changes in technology, economy and transportation over the years, this sense of community has endured intact from the early nineteenth century through the present, as members of the traditional Akers families continue to shop at the Akers store and bury their dead in the community cemetery. The modest, unornamented buildings reflect a tradition that does not value displays of material wealth. Generally built on piers rather than excavated foundations, buildings were not intended to serve as permanent memorials to their creators, to be passed from father to son, but rather as a means to meet immediate needs of subsistence and shelter.

Components

Note: Numbers in parentheses () refer to the sites indicated on the accompanying maps.

1. Circulation networks: Generally, early roads followed the drainageways, while more permanent modern roads ran along ridges and across the upland slopes. In the 19th century, Akers was located at the crossroads of two unpaved roads, one running along the Current River and one along Gladden Creek to Salem, the most accessible larger town in the area. State Highway K was constructed in the late 1930s, serving as the first paved connection between Akers, its terminus, and Salem. State Highway KK was built in 1953-54, along a different alignment from the old Gladden Creek Road. The old River Road is still open in the Akers Ferry area and used currently for canoe access to the river. The ferry was built in 1948-49 while the extension of Highway K was under construction on the south side of the river. Prior to the ferry operation, the river crossing was located at a ford 200-300' below the one-vehicle, motorized cable ferry, which is one of two ferries currently operating in the state. Since bridges were costly and uncertain on the flood-prone waterways, fords and ferries were the traditional means of river crossing in the Ozarks.

2. Boundary Demarcations: The most common means of enclosing fields is a woven wire fence, sometimes surmounted by strands of barbed wire and attached to cedar posts. This is a tradition which continues in the present. Occasionally stone walls form the base of these enclosures. The hamlet boundary itself is indistinct since the service cluster at the crossroads blends seamlessly into the surrounding rural landscape.

3. Buildings, Structures and Objects: During the period of significance (1930-50) the hamlet service center consisted of a church, a school, a general store with post office, cemetery and several residences. Of these, the church, store and cemetery remain, and the latter are still in active use.

a. Mount Zion Church (13)- Influenced by the religious fervor inspired by Reverend Wobus, the Akers community undertook construction of present structure between 1939 and 1948. Built of many varieties of native stone laid in a random pattern with distinctive ridged mortar joints, the church is representative of vernacular local building traditions. The 28' x 46' structure has a metal roof and bell tower containing a large cast bell. The interior has oak flooring, pine pews and roof battens keyed to the stonework.

b. Akers Ferry Store (19)- The current Akers Ferry store was constructed in 1944 on the site of a former sawmill by long-time Akers residents Buck Maggard and Jason Boyet. The current store succeeded the old Akers general store located on a site fronting on the old Gladden Creek Road, which had been run by the Purcell family since the nineteenth century. Continuity between the old and new operations was provided by Loreen Maggard, daughter of George Purcell and wife of Buck Maggard; Mrs. Maggard served as postmistress from 1942 until her death in 1964. The store is currently operated by Buck and Loreen's son, Eugene; it serves both as a grocery store for local residents and canoe rental facility for area tourists. The exterior of single-story, wood-frame structure has not been significantly altered since its construction, although the interior has been remodeled to convert the former living quarters into office space.

c. Akers cemetery (12)- The cemetery is located along Highway KK, adjacent to the site of Cedar Hill School (11), which is no longer standing. The simple, rectangular gravestones, which display little ornamentation, are arranged according to family units: Purcell, Ferguson, Dooley, Hodges, Smith, Maggard and others, representing generations of families that traditionally made up the Akers community. Approximately 54 graves are found in the cemetery, the most recent interment having been made in 1987. Following folk traditions, the older graves are oriented so the head would face east. Cedar trees are planted along the grave rows.

4. Clusters: The Ozark tradition of clustering community services at the crossroads hamlet has been described above. Within the hamlet, there are internal cluster arrangements. Outbuildings associated with the store include two sheds, an enclosure for firewood, as well as the ruins of a concrete foundation built into a dry-laid stone retaining wall. Behind the church stands a privy which is in good condition.

5. Vegetation related to land use: Perhaps the most important feature which distinguishes a rural hamlet from town or village is the pattern of agricultural fields interspersed among the retail, residential and commercial structures, resulting in a very low density, dispersed collection of community services, which is barely distinguishable from the surrounding rural landscape. In Akers Ferry today, the majority of historic agricultural fields remain open. Two of the three fields historically associated with the Smith farm are still in active agriculture; the third is kept open by mowing. The former Purcell cornfield (18) at the intersection of K and KK is now used as a campground by the National Park

Service. Largely covered by lawn with scattered trees and small restroom buildings, the area retains the general character of open space. The pasture area west of the store is covered by Eastern red cedar, indicating the field is in the early stages of natural succession from pasture to climax forest. Outside the core area of the hamlet, there are several additional historic fields currently cultivated under lease agreement or protected by scenic easement, thereby preserving the rural character of the hamlet area.

6. Archeological sites: Akers Ferry has several important prehistoric archeological sites. Under the current NPS campground lies an important prehistoric camp site (18). Five Woodland Indian burial cairns (10) are found on the ridgetop overlooking the cemetery and school site. Both these sites are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. There are several potential historic archeological sites as well, notably the sites where other buildings formerly stood, such as the following:

- Cedar Hill School (11)- the ruins of the privy still stand near the clearing where the school formerly stood until removed by the NPS

- Smith house site (9)- a rock wall and bottle dump are found in the clearing where the first home built by Arnold Smith was located

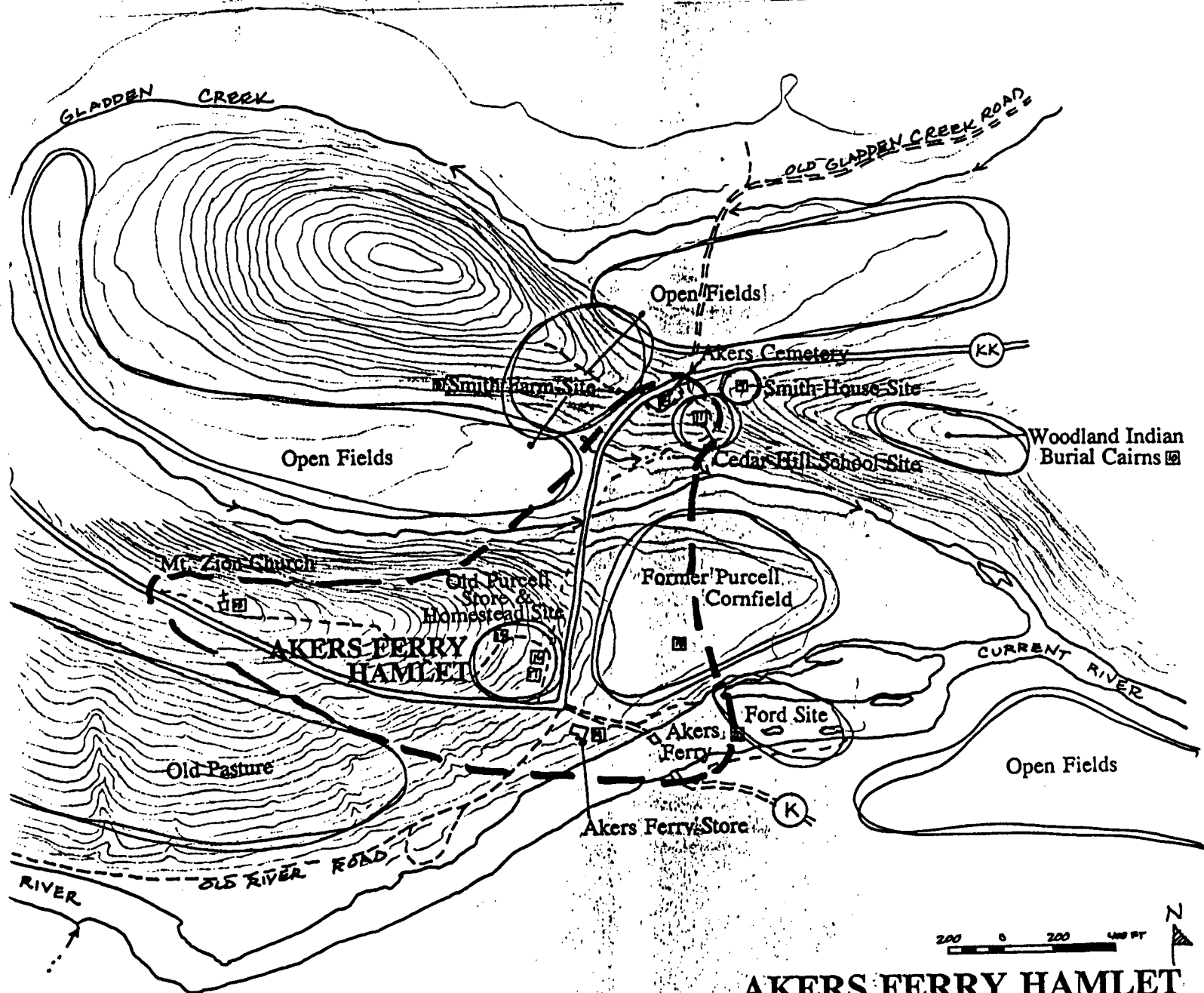
- Smith farm site (8)- the ruins of the hog pen remains to mark the barnyard of the farmstead established by Arnold Smith on this site. The farm lane and associated fields remain as well.

- Purcell store and homestead site (15, 16, 17)- a foundation wall along the old Gladden Creek Road trace marks the location of the earlier (c.1880) store at Akers Ferry which was built adjacent to the family farm (house and barn were other structures on the site) which constituted the original Purcell homestead claim at Akers

7. Small-scale elements: Scattered, individual elements which recall the past history of the community are relatively rare in the core area of the hamlet. Isolated cedar fenceposts attached to some remainder of wire mesh fencing are found frequently amid overgrown vegetation, suggesting the location of former boundaries or enclosures. Another common feature found at habitation sites in the area is the widespreading walnut tree which serves now as a marker to indicate where clearings once occurred. Other cultural vegetation, such as yucca, iris and daylilies, are frequently found at these abandoned homesites as well.

Integrity

In the case of most rural historic landscapes, broad patterns of human land use and settlement tend to remain relatively constant although individual elements or features may change over time. This is certainly the case at Akers Ferry, which grew into and continues to function as a rural hamlet at the crossroads of the local transportation network, although the mode of transportation has changed from water to horse to automobile over time and the roads have correspondingly changed in surface, width and alignment. The river crossing changed from ford to ferry in the course of time as well. Similarly, the 19th century store was replaced by the current structure built by a second generation of storekeepers in response to a new road alignment. Unfortunately, several buildings in the hamlet have been lost but key institutions such as the church, store and cemetery remain, the latter still functioning for their traditional purposes. Moreover, the rural character of the hamlet has survived with the open field pattern intact. The current condition of fields which have been compromised by non-agricultural development, such as the NPS campground, are easily reversible, as demonstrated in the Development Concept Plan which proposes to move the campground out of this highly visible field and restore its historical character. Finally, although not within NPS boundaries and therefore not included in the future Akers Ferry hamlet nomination, the hamlet is surrounded by at least six extant historic farmsteads on unimproved roads through Gladden Creek, Wolf and Lewis Hollows.



AKERS FERRY HAMLET

Cultural Landscape Survey
December 1992

POSSIBLE NATL. REG. NOMINATION: AKERS FERRY

