

Barbara Wyatt is chair of the Frederick County, Maryland, Roads Board and serves on the Frederick County Rural and Scenic Roads Advisory Committee. After 13 years of service, she recently retired from the Frederick County Historic Preservation Commission. Barbara was the Historic Preservation Planner for the City of Frederick from 2001 to 2007. In her “day job” for the National Park Service, she works for the National Register of Historic Places and the National Historic Landmarks Program.

Conduits for Innovation: Rural and Urban Landscapes as Historic Districts

By Barbara Wyatt, FASLA

In recent years, many local historic preservation commissions have expanded their long-standing emphasis on architectural resources and taken steps to recognize large and small, urban and rural cultural landscapes as resources that have intrinsic value as heritage resources. Several developments illustrate growing interest in the historic designation of rural cultural landscapes (historic farms, roads, forests) and better acknowledgement of the importance of urban landscapes.

The work of historic preservation commissions, sometimes inadvertently, has become linked with concern for pressing environmental issues, including climate change, loss of habitat, and wasteful use of resources. At the same time, preservation programs are realizing that diversity may be better expressed by cultural landscapes than by individual buildings and building collections. Many commissions no longer recognize historic districts primarily as intact collections of architecture, but also recognize the cultural imprint, history, and vibrancy evident in the outdoor spaces and places that constitute the urban landscape. With these realizations, issues of integrity and change are being considered as they apply to historic landscape and streetscape resources.

New Directions

There are several reasons why new directions in landscape preservation are emerging and becoming mainstream. Maturation of the modern historic preservation movement is a major factor, evidenced by the exploration of new types of historic designations, including those that concern resources with a measure of protection through farm and ranch lands protection programs, rustic road programs, or wetland and shoreline protection programs. The National Register of Historic Places criteria, which underpin the criteria used by most local preservation programs, is amenable to broad considerations of landscape significance and integrity. For example, “conservation” as an area of significance is finding new applications for varied



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Peace and Plenty Rural Historic District. The Frederick County Historic Preservation Commission designated its first rural historic district in 2020. There were no objections by property owners, thanks in part to the grant program approved by the county council. The program is funded by a percentage contribution from the recordation tax collected with property transfers. The district is composed of 11 contiguous farms totaling 1,161 acres. It is significant for its early development, mostly by German settlers. This long-awaited designation gives the HPC purview over changes to building and landscape treatments and will protect the designated area from inappropriate development.

properties, including forests, shelterbelts, prairie restorations, arboretums, and other areas that reflect the nation's conservation history.

The evolution of preservation, including increased interest in landscape resources, is impacted by the same environmental and societal issues that are inspiring most disciplines to look at "standard practices" and reconsider the wisdom and fairness of entrenched values and protocols. Preservationists in every corner of the country are examining who has been left out, what has been left out, and how old ways can be modified and new considerations can enrich existing programs. Of particular interest are the histories of excluded groups and the often-overlooked cultural landscapes associated with them.

Sometimes the "preservation" of important stories and landscapes has long been a priority, perhaps by different names (nature reserves, conservation easements, wetland protection, etc.) and by people who may not consider themselves preservationists. When preservationists and other advocates find that such properties have profound historical signifi-

cance, a new team may be formed to protect, defend, preserve, and manage a cultural landscape. Two brief examples illustrate this point.

Many Black cemeteries are in a state of disrepair due to demographic shifts that took descendants to other parts of the country, issues of access due to ownership, and chronic needs for maintenance resources. Cemeteries remain vital historic legacies for Black Americans and for communities that want to acknowledge and commemorate their diverse history. Existing preservation programs are increasingly recognizing cemeteries as icons of Black history and new funding programs for their preservation are available from private and public sources. New alliances are being made between stakeholders, descendants, and preservation programs.

Another example concerns public forests established by federal, state, and local governments. Perhaps most appreciated for their beauty, habitat value, and the environmental benefits of trees, they may also have significance related to conservation history. Forests that helped spawn a state's conser-



Photo by Sarah LeYoun Grouchy, courtesy of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation.

Hinesburg Town Forest, Hinesburg, Vermont. Listed in the National Register in 2015, this Vermont woodland has been maintained by the town for more than 80 years. Vermont's enabling legislation requires town forest committees to manage such forests, and Hinesburg's committee considers its role to encompass stewardship of the forest's history, as well as its vegetation.

vation ethic and municipal forests with a similar local impact have been subjects of National Register listings and local landmark designations. Over the years, such places may have been protected by environmental groups or recreation enthusiasts who did not consider themselves stewards of historic places but monitors of important ecosystems or protectors of access to public lands. Preservationists and such groups are finding each other and uniting for the protection of important landscapes.

Looking Backward/Looking Forward

Interest in cultural landscape history and preservation is not new, and advocates for landscape recognition and preservation have been a small but persistent voice from the earliest preservation efforts. Along with a growing constituency, they realize that rural and urban landscapes can be vital records that impart important information about history and culture,

government and conservation, agriculture and commerce, exclusion and diversity, technology and innovation, and much more. As rural and urban landscapes have garnered appreciation among preservationists, important conversations are taking place among historic preservation commissioners and between commissions and stakeholders with different agendas. Among themselves, commissioners may wonder about the legitimacy of their purview, guidelines that need revision, and how rural and urban landscape review corresponds with or could be in conflict with the work of other municipal departments. At the same time, they may be challenged to consider rural and urban landscapes through the eyes of non-municipal stakeholders. Fears of landscape loss and streetscape change may motivate commissions to broaden their vision and negotiate collaboration, sometimes with new partners.

This new vision may not be about maintaining the status quo but concerned with allowing change and reinterpreting “historical” and “significance”. Thus, in Tucson, Arizona, a Latinx community, working with preservationists, is inventorying streetscape features that express their past and present culture. They expect that streetscape features will be acknowledged as cultural resources worth saving or at least documenting. In Frederick, Maryland, the streetscape in the city’s downtown historic district is witnessing the introduction of public art that would have been unthinkable in the decades

when efforts focused on removing overhead power lines and maintaining brick paving, while frowning on using a building facade as an artist’s canvas. Today, Frederick’s historic district is considered a vibrant art destination, with city streets and downtown parks embellished with murals, sculpture, and decorations that convey an ongoing celebration.

In neither Tucson nor Frederick have all preservationists embraced the new directions, although each city is discovering how preservation can be innovative and find new advocates who represent a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Thus, in Tucson, documentation of streetscape elements may not ultimately have a direct correlation with preservation, and the city may or may not adjust its district guidelines to embrace cultural expressions. In Frederick, the guidelines and approval process have been honed to involve both the Historic Preservation Commission and the Public Art Commission, with each playing a role in the approval of new works of art. In both cities, time will tell if integrity is considered lost, embellished, or neither. We have new ways of



Bear Trap Falls, West Branch of the Wolf River, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin Reservation. The Tribe designated a quarter-mile buffer on either side of the Wolf River and designated it the “Wolf River Corridor” where no development can take place. This corridor was created to protect historic sites, mounds, ceremonial areas, and sacred sites of the Menominee people. In addition to this rich history, the Tribe’s conservation practices throughout the reservation, in place for nearly 200 years, are cited as an exemplary model of forest conservation.

Photo by Ryan Overstreet, courtesy of the Menominee Historic Preservation Department.

thinking about urban cultural landscapes, but, most importantly, they are no longer primarily backdrops to historic buildings.

Innovations are also evident in rural counties, where historic preservation commissions are moving beyond individual building or farm designations to the designation of rural historic districts, rural roads, and areas with conservation significance. Such designations may require forging new alliances and advocates and, perhaps, developing new and collaborative review parameters. Often, the historic preservation commission alone cannot assess treatments for rural properties that may require expertise in engineering, agriculture, vegetation management, and road safety. Consideration of the physical, cultural, and legal considerations that cemeteries involve may require assistance from other specialists. Challenges may arise when farmers need to make changes to remain economically viable. Traditional integrity requirements, with a focus on the status quo or the removal of noncontributing components, may need reconsideration. In addition, the review of

proposed changes or maintenance practices may become a shared responsibility with other commissions, boards, advisors, and municipal departments.

Commissions may also find that incentives for some historic designations are necessary for buy-in. Traditional farmers may be skeptical about the designation of a rural historic district until there is a financial incentive that is less burdensome than applying for historic preservation tax credits. Conservationists may perceive that the priorities of a historic preservation commission will preclude appropriate vegetation management practices, which could involve vegetation removal. They may perceive that their mission is watered down when “historic” considerations are on the table with habitat and forest conservation. Commissions may also experience conflicts with the long-standing practices of other municipal departments. For example, the department of public works may resent sharing the management or maintenance of resources whose oversight has been theirs alone, such as maintenance on rural roads now designated as historic. These new collaborations will present issues that must be worked out as stakeholders weigh the benefits of collaboration over myopic vigilance.

Many rural communities are already thriving with broader goals for historic preservation and a wider breadth of partnerships. Interesting models exist where forests and open space are protected as historic resources in their own right. The Hinesburg Town Forest in Hinesburg, Vermont, was listed in the National Register in 2016 (there is no local historic preservation commission). The forest, much of it former farmland, was reforested in the 1930s and is now managed as several distinct cover types, with each a contributing component to the cultural landscape historic district. The town recognizes the forest not only as a historical resource that continues the tradition of a community-owned forest, but also as a place valued for its recreation, conservation, and aesthetic qualities.

New frontiers for preservation also exist at the intersection of historic preservation and farmland preservation programs. The Frederick County, Maryland, Historic Preservation Commission recently approved its first rural historic district. Most of the farms already are enrolled in a farmland preservation program, which regulates land use but not modifications to buildings, structures, field patterns, and roads, as the HPC does. Many in the county, including planning staff, elected officials, and nearby residents, see the dual designation as an ideal vehicle for preserving rural character. Preservationists hope this initial rural historic district designation will be followed by others. Once more, we see a partnership that can work to address a shared goal to protect a cultural landscape, albeit each with different motivations.

From time-to-time historic preservation is threatened by proposed regulatory changes that have the potential to wreak havoc on preservation programs from the top down, starting with federal programs, with fallout in state and local programs. Lavishing more attention on landscape and streetscape resources is not that kind of change. For the most part, local commissions can use the authority they have to consider streetscape components when designating historic districts. At a minimum, such components can be included in the inventory and evaluated as either contributing or noncontributing. Likewise, historic landscapes are not generally a novel type of designation, with “sites” and “settings” entrenched in the historic preservation lexicon. Landscapes in historic districts, whether rural or urban, streets or parks, should be standard components of district surveys, even if architecture is, ostensibly, the dominant resource. The real frontier for some commissions may be finding those landscapes that embody a rich and compelling history that is eminently worthy of local landmark designation. Consider this a challenge! ■