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Tomorrows Parks and Open Spaces - Preservation Strategy for Waterford Village

Elizabeth Brabec



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Tomorrow's Parks and Open Spaces Preservation

Strategy for Waterford Village

Elizabeth Brabec

Historic rural landscapes are important national resources which are just beginning to be appreciated for their cultural complexity, diversity, and diminishing numbers. As was the case with many of our great urban national and city parks in the first quarter of the century, these landscapes lie on the edges of metropolitan regions and, if preserved, will become important parks and open space for the surrounding communities. New developments are threatening historic landscapes in these areas, landscapes which have long been a defining feature of regional, if not national character. As appreciation for these landscapes increases for their historic and open space benefits, so do efforts to preserve and protect them, a daunting task considering the vast acreage involved nationwide.

The goal of this discussion is not to describe preservation efforts in detail, but to illuminate the application of the draft *Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Landscapes* to the specific case of rural historic landscapes. The

Guidelines are intended to provide guidance for planning and design professionals in the field in the evaluation of the relative merits of various treatment options. For this discussion, the historic village of Waterford, VA, is used as an example.

Located only 45 miles northwest of Washington, DC, the rural historic village of Waterford (figure 1) stands in the path of encroaching suburbanization. As in many other areas of the state and the country, while the development of new housing subdivisions is on the increase, farming is losing its economic viability. Thus, although the family farm has been a defining feature of the

Waterford landscape since its settlement in the 18th century, and has been largely responsible for the preservation of the historic landscape to date, land use is changing to residential homes.

This change in land use and potential loss of historic resources is not unique to Waterford. The same problem and circumstances are occurring across the country as significant historic landscapes, covering vast acreage and held largely in private hands, are undergoing changes in land use. It is clear that we cannot follow the preservation successes of the past in which total buy outs were the answer. The cost in terms of actual dollars and the effects on the local community are often too large.

Thus, our efforts in Waterford were focused on finding a preservation strategy in which preservation interests could coexist with the change inherent in a living and growing community. In order to find ways in which new development can successfully be integrated into historic landscapes, meeting both preservation goals and the economic viability of new development, it was first necessary to define appropriate treatments for the sites.

Historic rural landscapes, as defined by the *Guidelines*, are "vernacular landscapes that historically have been used by people, or shaped or modified by human activity, occupancy, or intervention, and that possesses a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of areas of land use, vegetation, buildings and structures, roads and waterways, and natural features."¹ Within this definition lies the notion that historic rural landscapes are based on and are a product of change, the change inherent in a living system. Thus it is somewhat antithetical to define a discrete period of significance for these districts. The period of significance is defined as "the span of time in which a property attained the importance or association

for which it meets the National Register criteria."² By definition, the entire history of the rural landscape is significant, as are the changes that are being wrought today. It may be possible to argue that too great a change is detrimental; however, at least some level of change is inherent in the landscape.

The first step in planning for the preservation of rural historic landscapes is selecting a treatment. However, barring protection and stabilization which is a temporary treatment, there are only two treatments that can be used in rural historic landscapes: preservation and rehabilitation. These are the only two treatment options which



Fig. 1. The village of Waterford is nestled within a 1400-acre rural historic landscape which is designated a National Historic Landmark. Photo by the author.

acknowledge and allow change in the resource. Restoration and reconstruction treatments are static, do not allow for change and will produce a museum, an effect antithetical to a living and growing rural community and to private and diverse land ownership interests.

In defining a preservation approach in a rural historic landscape, which has a diversity of private interests, two questions must be answered: 1) how much local and landowner support is there for preservation efforts, and 2) what are the priority areas for preservation and rehabilitation? In Waterford local support was high although landowner support was variable for the preservation efforts. Considering that many of the landowners had maintained their farms for generations, it was understandable that the landowners were very concerned with maintaining equity value in their land and the ability to maximize sales price. This did not mean that they were anti-preservation, merely that they were concerned with maintaining the value of their largest asset.

In determining priority areas for preservation, and rehabilitation, the priority areas for preservation are the character-defining features of the landscape. The most important features in Waterford were the spatial relationships of the fields, roads and woodlands, and the viewsheds. These two aspects of the landscape provided the order and context within which the village and surrounding architectural resources were set. Change in these features would produce the most measurable impact on the quality and character of the landscape.

In order to effect a preservation treatment in a rural historic landscape, preservation areas must be slated for acquisition or easement programs. It would be difficult to maintain these lands in private hands, unless it was the hands of a very committed preservationist. Preservation treatments for landscapes require continuous affirmative actions on the part of the landowner: continuous mowing to maintain an open field, proper planting, thinning and maintenance of hedgerows, and planting of the proper crops. It must be realized that a preservation treatment may not be useable for any but the smallest areas of the landscape, and again change may be necessary and even desirable even in preservation. If the goal is preservation of a farming community, it is inappropriate to proscribe particular crops, or even a cropping schedule—viable farming methods and practices change.

Historical farming and land management practices were often also not environmentally friendly. In Waterford, a conscious decision was made to encourage the revegetation of swales in fields, and the Catoctin Creek banks in order to minimize erosion problems. This action was not historically accurate, however necessary to improve the stream water quality.

Within the non-critical areas of the landscape, a rehabilitation treatment was used in Waterford to integrate the new land use—housing—with the historic landscape. Again, application of the *Guidelines* brings forth some difficult issues. As with preservation treatments, it is recommended that “the appropriate form, arrangement, species and character of vegetation” be retained “through regular and cyclical maintenance. For



Fig. 2. Many rural historic landscapes are part of growing communities. The preservation of agriculture as a land use requires that agricultural practices be allowed to change to meet the demands of a changing economy. Photo by the author.



Fig. 3. Historic farmland is being converted to other uses, a trend which has inflated land costs and increased equity value for farm owners. Photo by the author.



Fig. 4. The relationships of road, field, hedgerow and viewshed are important to the character of the historic landscape in Waterford. Photo by the author.

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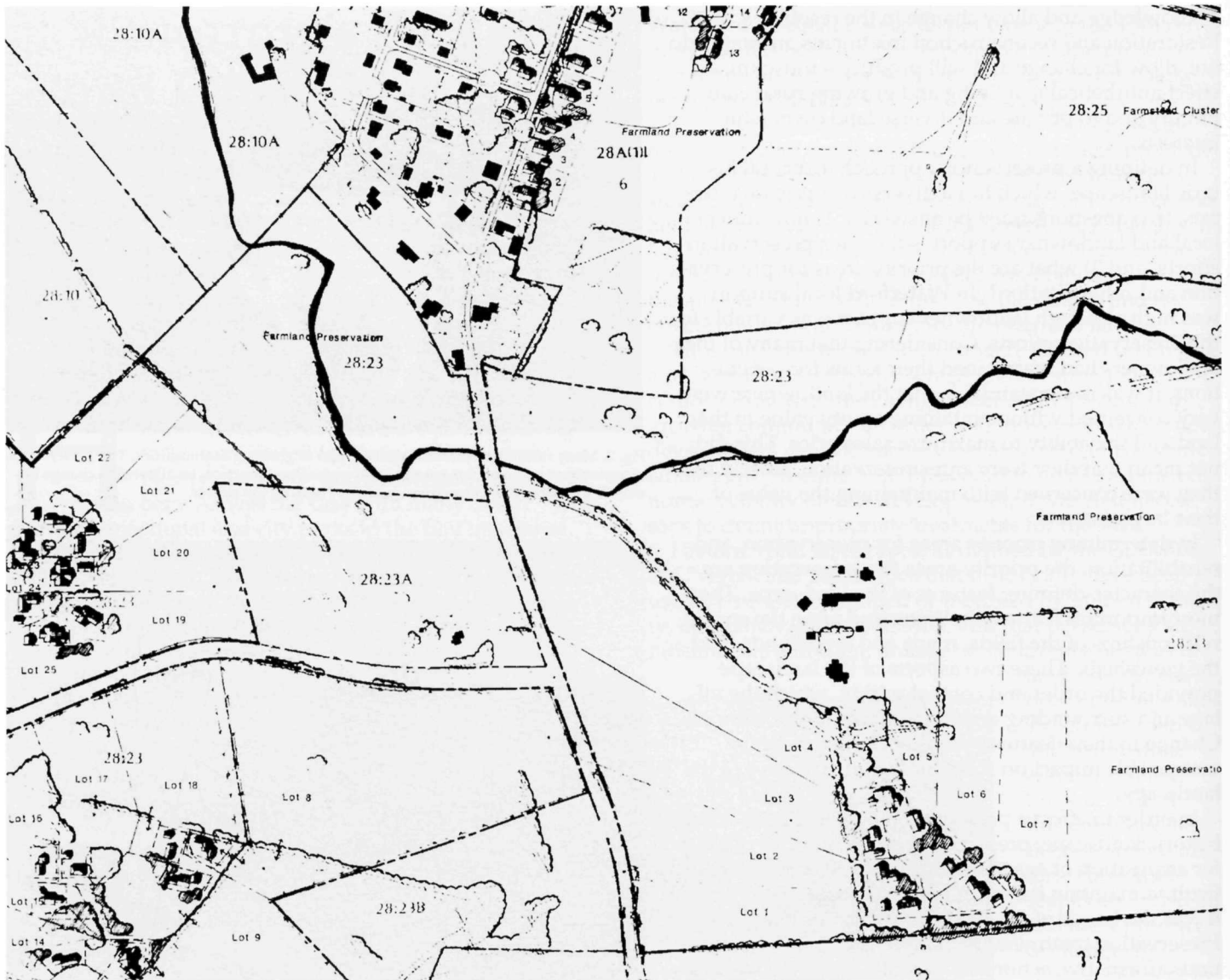


Fig. 5. Careful design and siting of new construction is important when integrating a new use into an historic landscape. However, even when the historic viewshed is not affected, there may be detrimental effects on the historic infrastructure. Dodson Associates and Land Ethics.

(Tomorrow—continued from page 21)

example, mowing a field at historically appropriate intervals...." This requires an affirmative act on the part of the landowner, to engage in maintenance which may or may not be enforceable upon new homeowners, or be a viable farming practice. Again, we must allow for change in the landscape, for the movement from beef farming to truck farming, from hay crops to strawberry crops, if we wish to sustain a viable farming community. If we are changing land uses entirely, from farming to housing, a detailed landscape management plan must be developed, one that is manageable as well as sustainable.

The most difficult problem in accommodating new land uses within the historic rural landscape is the problem of accommodating the new traffic generated by the new land use. Invariably, the roads are an important character-defining feature of the landscape, as they are in Waterford. However, roads must be upgraded to allow for increased traffic, and must conform to DOT standards. It is difficult if not impossible in most circumstance to adequately maintain historic curbs, edge materials, historic finish elevation, or surface materials on

state roads as required by the *Guidelines*. In Waterford, the siting and surfacing of access drives was strictly defined in order to minimize their impact on the landscape; however, widening and resurfacing of state roads was not satisfactorily addressed.

The preservation of rural historic landscapes is a difficult task requiring a variety of approaches for which the existing *Guidelines* can be overly restrictive. As the draft evolves, the *Guidelines* may wish to recognize and support the fact that change is endemic in rural historic landscapes, and should approach landscapes in a fundamentally different aspect than built resources—landscapes are living, growing and changing entities.

¹ *Guidelines*, p. 4.

² *National Register Bulletin 16A: How to Complete the National Registration Form*. Washington, DC, NPS, Interagency Resources Division, 1991

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CRM

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Thematic Issue

Cultural Resources Management
Information for
Parks, Federal Agencies,
Indian Tribes, States, Local
Governments and the
Private Sector



U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Cultural Resources

A Reality Check for Our Nation's Parks

Charles A. Birnbaum

Welcome to the second thematic issue of *CRM* dedicated to cultural/historic landscapes¹. This edition has been prepared in conjunction with the first International Symposium on the Conservation of Urban Squares and Parks to be held in North America (May 12-15, 1993) and includes 14 contributors from across the United States and Canada.

The past decade has yielded significant advancements in the park conservation and landscape preservation movements. The first "modern" park conservancy, The Central Park Conservancy, was founded in 1980, and many have followed. There has also been a succession of technical publications on the registration, identification, evaluation and treatment of landscapes such as historic parks.² Yet a reality check is still in order. As architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable stated just months ago, *"In recent years a shift has taken place in the way we perceive reality, a shift so pervasive that it has radically altered basic assumptions about art and life.... It has instantly recognizable characteristics—an emphasis on surface gloss, on pastiche, on the use of familiar but bowdlerized elements from the history of design, on tenuous symbolism and synthetically created environments... I do not know just when we lost our sense of reality or interest in it, but at some point it was decided that the evidence of the built world around us was not compelling; that it was possibly permissible, and even desirable to substitute a more agreeable product. Once it was decided that reality was disposable, its substance could be revised, manipulated and expanded."*³

(Reality—continued on page 3)



Fig. 1. New seating along Central Park's Concert Ground at the Mall. Could this "more agreeable product" be characterized as a "synthetically created environment?" Is this a trend? Is this good preservation? Photo by the author.

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