Chapter 9

Cultural Landscape Preservation

Background

Cultural landscapes give us a sense of place and reveal our relationship with the land over time. They are part of our heritage and part of our lives. Cultural landscapes reveal much about our culture, populations, and express our regional identity. Landscapes can be read on many levels—for example, landscape as nature, habitat, artifact, system, history, place, and aesthetic. When people learn how to “read” the landscapes that are part of their surroundings, they begin to understand how changes affect these special places and learn to become better stewards of our significant cultural landscape heritage.

A cultural landscape may be defined as a geographic area that includes cultural and natural resources associated with a historic event, activity, person, or group of people. Cultural landscapes exist in both rural and urban environments and can range from thousands of acres to houses with small front yards. The farms in the Rural Tier can be considered a cultural landscape as can a street in Mount Rainier. They can be manmade expressions of visual and spatial relationships that include plantations, estates, cottages, farmlands, public parks, institutional campuses, cemeteries, scenic highways, civic plazas, and industrial sites. The treatment and management of these cultural landscapes should be considered in concert with the management of historic property.\(^1\)

In defining a cultural landscape, it is important to identify the humans who shaped it, the artifacts within it, and the natural features present. Each of these three elements is influenced and shaped by the others. A cultural landscape may consist of a single property or a group of properties that together express a coherent theme, such as the Mount Vernon viewshed and the Route 1 heritage corridor. They also exist in relationship to their ecological contexts. As with historic buildings, these special places reveal aspects of the origins and development of a place. Through their form, features, and the ways they are used, cultural landscapes reveal much about our evolving relationships with the natural world. They provide scenic, economic, ecological, social, recreational, and educational opportunities which help individuals and communities understand themselves. The preservation and interpretation of these cultural landscapes can yield an improved quality of life, identity, and sense of place. Cultural landscapes in Prince George’s County have been shaped by, and reflect, significant local heritage themes including the county’s agricultural past, political developments, the expansion of the federal government in Washington, D.C., and transportation networks.

Cultural landscapes can be loosely grouped into four categories: historic sites and their environmental settings, designed landscapes, historic vernacular landscapes, and ethnographic landscapes. Examples range from Ridgely Church and Cemetery, a historic site; to Belair Mansion and Mount Calvert, designed landscapes; to the village of Croom or the Trueman Point Landing, historic vernacular landscapes; and Piscataway Park in Accokeek, an ethnographic landscape.\(^2\)

\(^1\) This definition and discussion of cultural landscapes is based on information published by the National Park Service/U.S. Department of the Interior Preservation Brief 36, “Protecting Cultural Landscapes: Planning, Treatment and Management of Historic Landscapes, 1994”.

\(^2\) The Applied Ethnography Program of the National Park Service has defined an ethnographic landscape as: “...a relatively contiguous area of interrelated places that contemporary cultural groups define as meaningful because it is inextricably and traditionally linked to their own local or regional histories, cultural identities, beliefs, and behaviors. Present-day social factors such as a people’s class, ethnicity, and gender may result in the assignment of diverse meanings to a landscape and its component places.”
An ethnographic landscape may also be thought of as an area that is defined by the cultural groups associated with it and whose histories are tied to it. Therefore, traditional survey methods, such as windshield surveys or single property evaluations, are not the only tools that should be employed to identify and delineate ethnographic landscapes. The methodology for identifying ethnographic landscapes should include consultation with community organizations, the collection of oral histories, inventories of community-identified culturally significant features dispersed throughout the community, and recordation of traditional place names. Recording the ethnographic landscape serves to place individual sites and resources in their cultural and geographic context in a more comprehensive manner.3

Issues
Many elements of Prince George’s County’s rural and urban landscapes are disappearing in the wake of new development. “Big box” retailers and chain stores are diverting business from small rural crossroad communities that once served the basic needs of local families. Railroad and streetcar commuter lines have disappeared with the advent of the automobile, transforming suburban communities near Washington, D.C. Older, smaller houses within suburban communities are being torn down and replaced with larger structures whose architectural features and scale are incompatible with the surrounding community. These “teardowns” also occur on infill lots where new houses do not conform to the character of a neighborhood.

All elements of a cultural landscape should be inventoried and their integrity assessed. Cultural landscape reports should be developed that identify the significant elements and features within a landscape, the historical development of the landscape, its change over time, its boundaries, and a treatment program. Spatial relationships between cultural landscape elements are also important and should be preserved and maintained. A cultural landscape should also be placed in its historic context to link it with historical trends in the county. Community input is crucial to identifying significant natural and cultural features within a landscape. Certain landmarks or natural features within a community often work together to create a sense of place for residents. Criteria for inventorying cultural landscapes should be developed and used to identify important cultural and natural features.

Some efforts to identify and inventory significant cultural landscapes have already been initiated in Prince George’s County. These include two historic designed parkways that are designated as National Register Historic Districts, Baltimore-Washington Parkway and Suitland Parkway. Piscataway National Park, located in the southwestern part of the county, was established in 1952 to protect the viewshed of Mount Vernon. An additional 73 acres was recently added to the protected viewshed in 2008. Mount Vernon and its viewshed is being considered for designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Planning Department’s Environmental Planning Section reviews all development applications involving scenic and historic roads in the county and provides

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the Planning Board with recommendations on their treatment during the course of development. The county’s Master Plan of Transportation lists all designated historic roads. (Scenic roads are designated through master/sector plans or by County Council resolution.)

A Scenic Roads Study was undertaken by the Prince George’s County Planning Department in 1984. The study identified 170 miles of scenic roads throughout the county, but the policy recommendations were never adopted. A Rural Historic Landscapes and Scenic Roads Study was conducted in 1988 in two project areas—the Bleak Hill Historic Survey Area and the Croom Road Corridor. Again, the policy recommendations were never adopted.

More recently, the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) has established a Scenic Byways program to identify significant historical features along driving routes. A corridor management plan (CMP) has to be completed in order to obtain funding from SHA for implementation of the plan’s recommendations. The Lower Patuxent Scenic Byway was designated as a Maryland scenic byway by the Maryland State Highway Administration, and identified by Prince George’s County for its rural character, location on the Patuxent River, and history of tobacco farming. A CMP for the Lower Patuxent River Scenic Byway is underway and several elements of the CMP have been completed by the Planning Department—the Croom Road Tobacco Barn Survey Report (2006) and a Lower Patuxent River Scenic Byway Intrinsic Quality Inventory Report (2007).

Recommendations

Goal: Foster awareness of cultural landscape preservation as a way to preserve the character of rural and urban communities.

Policy 1: Expand the integration of rural and urban cultural landscape preservation into historic preservation planning.

Strategies

1. Develop criteria to inventory the county’s rural and urban cultural landscapes that reflect established and emerging heritage themes.

2. Develop criteria to inventory ethnographic landscapes that are significant to Native-American groups.

3. Include analysis of a cultural landscape as part of the environmental setting evaluation process.

Policy 2: Preserve significant cultural landscape features during all phases of the development process.

Strategies

1. Develop a mechanism to require a cultural landscape treatment plan for a developing property in order to ensure that the defining features of a landscape are protected.

2. Maintain the natural and historic features of scenic and historic roads, such as cross sections, hills, curves, and aesthetic features.

3. Consider using protective mechanisms, such as overlay zones, for the protection of significant cultural landscapes, such as the Mount Vernon viewshed. A sector plan and a development district overlay zone could be used to regulate height, architecture, lighting, landscaping, and other elements that impact cultural landscape viewsheds.

Policy 3: Strengthen partnerships with environmental organizations working for the inclusion of cultural landscapes as part of open space preservation.

Strategies

1. Identify and create a list of partners in cultural landscape preservation, and identify ways in which collaborations might take place, such as through the establishment of scenic and agricultural easements.

2. Work with partners to inventory thematic tour routes, scenic byways, and other cultural landscapes.
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Photos:
The Orchard at Bostwick (Historic Site 69-005-09)
Trueman Point Landing (Historic Site 87B-028)