

# Countrysides Lost and Found

## Discovering Cultural Landscapes

**D**elaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (NRA) had a significant role in the formulation of the National Park Service's cultural landscape programs. The park was at the forefront of many issues addressed in the 1970s during the evolution of the National Park Service's cultural resource policy, management programs, and professional cultural resource management staffing decisions. The holistic approach to archeology, anthropology, collections, history, historic buildings, and cultural landscapes that we know in the parks today and the development of related professional staffs in the regions and the parks all had significant origins in that period. At the same time, strategies for management of vegetation on historic sites, leasing of historic properties, and cooperative partnerships developed.

National recreation areas in general, and Delaware Water Gap NRA in particular, were "poster parks" for what was wrong with cultural resource management in the National Park System. Farmland had been purchased, and the owners stopped cultivation and moved off the farm. The buildings and land were abandoned. Vandalism, arson, and the stripping of historic features from buildings were common place. As a result, demolition was the preferred management

action in spite of the fact that many buildings were on, or eligible for, the National Register of Historic Places. Land that had often been in cultivation since prehistoric times was released to natural succession and the management of natural resources to wilderness was the preferred National Park Service policy.<sup>1</sup> Cultural landscapes did not exist.

This problem was compounded at Delaware Water Gap NRA where over 23,000 acres of the Delaware River Valley were to be flooded by a reservoir that would extend more than 37 miles upstream from the proposed Tocks Island Dam. This was to be surrounded by about 47,000 acres of National Park Service managed recreation area. The private land in the "take boundary" included active farms, villages, summer cottages, and large private resorts. Here the Corps of Engineers land agents aggressively acquired land and buildings not only in the proposed pool area but also for the National Park Service in the surrounding recreation area. Suddenly, over 1,000 buildings and their landscapes, many historic, came into government ownership, with demolition the intended or eventual action and abandonment of cultural landscape the unintended consequences.

By the early 1970s, the National Park Service had taken up the "No Dam" argument with a position that there were better and more recreational activities with a "free flowing" river. This was at odds with the work of the Corps, and the tensions rose between the local population and National Park Service. The dam was effectively stopped in 1975 by a decision of the Delaware River Basin Commission. But well into the 1980s, some National Park Service managers spoke of the eventual building of the dam. They were adamant about not spending money on any cultural resources in the reservoir area. The dilemma of how to manage the thousands of acres of landscapes and buildings as potential cultural resources was largely ignored.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 established the National Register of

*Slateford Farm reclaimed. Main house built 1833. Cabin built c. 1790. Buildings are undergoing stabilization while adjacent lands are cultivated under an agricultural lease. NPS photo.*



Historic Places and gave a variety of program responsibilities to the National Park Service. In 1971, Executive Order 11593 made it clear that federal agencies, including the National Park Service, must register and manage their historic resources. At the same time, National Park Service Director George B. Hartzog issued a directive that all demolition of buildings over 50 years old would need to be approved by him. This review and approval was delegated to the office of the Chief Historical Architect in the Washington Office.

The first visit to the park in 1973 to review demolition requests was depressing. There was an excitement of riches in the 18th- and 19th-century architecture of farm complexes and village settlements that lined the roads. There was the immensity of the destruction of buildings in the pool area and threads of hope for the boarded-up buildings in weedy fields or once well-kept yards. There was the sad reality that these places had lost their human activity. The efforts by the park to preserve a few of the historic resources were sincere but missed the mark.

The entry to the historic interpretive area at Slateford Farm was on a multi-lane scenic drive (never completed) that ended at a large parking lot. Here there were interpretive signs overlooking abandoned farmland, ruins of the barn, and dilapidated outbuildings. The farmhouse was being restored, but there was little concern at the time about the farm. The real meaning of the historic place was being lost with molding outbuildings and a succession of trees and woody plants creeping onto the fields.

During the same visit, the artificial nature of Millbrook, a surviving 19th-century village used as a repository for additional structures displaced by the dam, became apparent. Unlike many successful outdoor museums, there was no cohesive historic theme or relationship to the land. The buildings removed from the pool area were typically marginal and many of the salvaged parts did not fit. There was no understandable plan or implementation to depict the landscape and settlement pattern of a typical historic village of the upper Delaware Valley.

There were many visits to the park with regional cultural resources management staff to categorize historically significant buildings with the hope of preservation. There were the reluctant signoffs for the demolition of historic buildings that had been trashed by vandalism or

moldered in neglect. There was the bittersweet joy to find daffodils blooming near hydrangeas in the weedy overgrown farmsteads. There was a sense of loss of what the cultural history of Delaware Water Gap NRA was all about.

The management of cultural resources in the National Park System became a major focus of National Park Service headquarters and the newly staffed professionals in the regional offices in the mid-1970s. The neglect of buildings, collections, and archeological sites became the subject of regional directors' meetings, committees of Congress, the friends of the parks, the preservation community, and the national press. Stories and slides of the richness of historic buildings at Delaware Water Gap NRA in their abandoned state and overgrown farm fields were included in horror shows given at these meetings.

Abandonment persisted Servicewide, but the nagging problems at Delaware Water Gap NRA prompted a "show me" tour for the National Park Service directorate. The visit of James Tobin, Associate Director for Park Operations, in the winter of 1979 was fortuitous. Jim, a third-generation park manager, had inherited the park historic resources programs and was learning a lot about eastern parks and cultural resources. On this trip, the Delaware Valley settlement patterns of historic villages and intensely cultivated farms that we saw outside the park were discussed. The wild scrub, overgrown fields, and neglected, often trashed, buildings in the park were a shock to him. From the porch of an abandoned house, we overlooked the abandoned farm landscape of the valley and discussed how a leasing program (then before Congress) could provide for rehabilitation of the farmland and the farmsteads. We also talked about the lack of policy and guidelines to evaluate and manage significant rural landscapes as historic resources.

It was not a surprise that in the summer of 1979 Jim Tobin authorized the hiring of Robert Z. Melnick, a professor of historic landscape architecture on leave from Kansas State University (KSU). He talked about the need to define a preservation policy for cultural landscapes and a method for landscape evaluation. He was familiar with the U.S. Forest Service's landscape assessment process for timber cutting and road and power alignments that could be a model. Melnick's summer work established an information database and defined landscape types. He proposed treatment standards for cul-



*Application of cultural landscape preservation principles to historic farmland through agricultural leasing maintains cultural land-use patterns and open space. NPS photo.*

tural landscapes in a CRM article.<sup>2</sup> This was followed by a contract with KSU (1980) that led to the first National Park Service management policy on cultural landscapes (NPS 28-1981) and the manual, “Cultural Landscapes: Rural Historic Districts in the National Park System” (1984). A new cultural resource had been created.

At Delaware Water Gap NRA, the real or imagined pall of the dam had hampered definitive actions for the management of cultural resources well into the 1980s. Cultural landscape preservation ideas came in 1985 following the first National Park Service workshop on “Identification and Evaluation of Cultural Landscapes” held at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Here, Beth Johnson, the natural resource manager from Delaware Water Gap NRA, met landscape professionals from the National Park Service and from the private sector and universities, including Melnick, who were active in the application of cultural landscape preservation principles to abandoned farmland. She recognized the application of the Sleeping Bear field exercises to Delaware Water Gap NRA, where there was a farmland leasing program developing. She worked with the park and regional staff to secure funding for a cultural landscape inventory and management plan for the park.

In 1989, Land and Community Associates (Robert Z. Melnick, J. Timothy and Genevieve Keller, principals) were contracted for a multi-task evaluation of the cultural landscape with management recommendations for Delaware Water Gap NRA. Their “Rural Landscape Management Plan” became the model for the Service’s natural and cultural resource professionals — and later student summer teams from Iowa

State University — to put cultural landscapes on the map.<sup>3</sup> Now the continuing work for the identification, evaluation, and management of the park’s cultural landscapes is an ongoing program that is well recognized in the landscape preservation community internationally.

In the award winning book, “Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America,” the authors acknowledge that “the National Park Service more than any other American organization or agency provided the most significant direction to the nascent cultural landscape preservation movement”; and they reference the National Park Service’s 1981 policy that first recognized cultural landscapes and the 1984 manual.<sup>4</sup> Cultural landscape preservation is now an established program in the National Park Service and a profession nationwide. However, the roles of the people who saw the problems and were able to find the solutions are often forgotten in the institutionalization of an idea. I credit Jim Tobin who was willing to take a risk on an “idea” after recognizing the problems he saw at Delaware Water Gap NRA.

Now the free flow of the river has eliminated the pool zone, and the entire park can think anew about challenges to find imaginative solutions for management of a landscape that had been manipulated by human occupation for centuries and then lost in a few decades. Delaware Water Gap NRA could be a model to give new meaning to the process of reclamation of cultural landscapes for other national recreation areas and similar public lands.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Webb, Melody, “Cultural landscapes in the National Park Service.” *The Public Historian*, 9:2 (1987): 81-82.
- <sup>2</sup> Melnick, Robert Z. “Preserving Cultural and Historic Landscape: Developing Standards.” *CRM Bulletin* 3 (March) 1980: 1+.
- <sup>3</sup> Land and Community Associates. *Rural Landscape Management Plan* (Philadelphia: National Park Service. Draft 1993): 1-1 - 1-3; telephone conversation and e-mail with Beth Johnson, February-March 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> Alanen, Arnold R. and Robert Z. Melnick, eds. *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2000): 7.

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