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RURAL AND URBAN LANDSCAPES

4 Conduits for
Innovation: Urban
and Rural Landscapes
as Historic Districts

10 Celebrating Historic
African American
Cemeteries in Arlington
County, Virginia

16 Kane County Rustic
Roads Program:
Preserving its Rural
History

22 Public Art in the
Frederick Town
Historic District

28 Charleston Confronts
Rising Waters and Her
History

34 Cultural Resource
Mapping: Community
Involvement in Tucson
Neighborhood Surveys

40 Spotlight on a
Preservation
Organization: Living
Landscape Observer

43 Staff Profile:
David Grignon,
Menominee Indian
Tribe of Wisconsin

46 What if We Applied the
UNESCO Historic Urban
Landscape Approach to
U. S. Historic Districts?

48 State News

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SPOTLIGHT ON A PRESERVATION ORGANIZATION: Living Landscape Observer

By Brenda Barrett and Eleanor Mahoney

The fields of historic preservation and conservation have a linked history. In the decades after World War II, advocates for both movements organized to pass a series of groundbreaking bills in Congress, including the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The unprecedented growth of the period threatened the built and the natural environments, and laws like the NHPA and NEPA provided new and powerful tools to protect cherished landscapes.

Yet, despite these important connections, the gap between preservationists and conservationists remains significant. This divide is evident in academia, government programs, grant funding opportunities, and more. However, as the realities of the global climate crisis become more evident, the two movements must come together to plan a sustainable future, where people and their connections to place are prioritized.

The need for closer partnership between these two fields is what motivated the creation of the Living Landscape Observer (LLO). Launched in 2012, the LLO is a website and e-newsletter that offers commentary and reporting on the emerging field of large landscape conservation. This approach emphasizes the preservation of a “sense of place” and blends ingredients of land conservation, historic preservation, and sustainable community

development. The term “living landscape” is used because it does not reflect any existing designation or program. Instead, it incorporates the broad shared interests of groups such as land conservancies, local and state preservation organizations, heritage areas, watershed organizations, long distance trails, and community-based tourism initiatives that come together to support regional and place-based initiatives.

As part of its mission, the LLO highlights case studies from around the globe. These places vary in scope and scale, but they share an integrated approach to resource management and a deep appreciation for grassroots participation in decision-making. Many landscape scale initiatives emphasize the perspectives and priorities of those living in the landscape—residents, underrepresented communities, and Indigenous peoples. Examples



Photo by Eleanor Mahoney.

Maritime landscape, San Juan Island, Washington State.

of the living landscape approach in the United States range from the Crown of the Continent Collaboration, which spans the northern Rockies with both trans-border and tribal partners, to the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, a National Heritage Area, in the coastal Southeast stretching from North Carolina to Florida.

Another key aspect of the LLO mission is its focus on government programs. Over the past five years especially, the LLO has closely tracked changes and proposed changes to public policy initiatives with implications for landscape conservation. This includes reporting on issues such as the termination of the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives program; the relocation of the Bureau of Land Management's headquarters from Washington, D.C. to Colorado; and the proposed rule changes



Photo by Brenda Barrett.

Point Reyes National Seashore ranching landscape, Marin County, California

to National Register Historic Districts. The LLO also regularly features interviews with practitioners and scholars, on topics such as climate change, public lands management, and best practices in partnerships and collaboration.

Today, the large landscape model in all its complexity is more relevant than ever. A global scientific consensus has emerged around the need to conserve 30 percent of the planet's lands and waters by 2030. The Convention on Biological Diversity now champions what is known as the "30 by 30 Initiative" to protect biodiversity and mitigate climate change impacts. On January 27, 2021, this idea received an important endorsement, when newly sworn in President Biden signed a sweeping Executive Order (E.O. 14008). It harnesses the full power of the executive branch to frame an ambitious plan to tackle the climate emergency for the United States and the globe. Embedded within E.O. 14008 are three paragraphs calling for the nation to conserve 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030.

While the large landscape movement was originally focused on natural resource conservation concerns, notably habitat protection and wildlife migration corridors, there is now a deeper understanding of the interconnected relationship between culture and nature. A region's lived-in landscapes can be a valuable part of large landscape conservation efforts and, if the ambitious goals of the 30 by 30 initiative are to be met, they must be part of the equation. To manage at such a scale demands a collaborative approach to resource conservation.

This is a pivotal opportunity for the field of historic preservation to make a valuable contribution to landscape scale initiatives. Adding the preservation of cultural heritage to these efforts boosts their value and provides new perspectives and partners. Storytelling is another dimension that preservationists can offer to engage communities and build regional identity.

City and county preservation programs play a key role in enhancing this work. Landscape scale designations are composed of many parts and partners, ranging from a single site or neighborhood to entire states and watersheds. Municipalities connect partners across these varied scales, bridging the gap between local and regional needs and concerns. They are also well positioned to include cultural heritage in survey and designation initiatives. Moreover, preservation strategies such as community heritage forums add a much-needed human dimension to landscape conservation work.

Interested in learning more and staying current? Subscribing to the LLO Newsletter is free and offers a convenient way to hear about policy changes and programmatic shifts at all levels of government. We report on the individuals, organizations, and communities working to preserve a sense of place in lived-in landscapes. The LLO editors have worked for nonprofit organizations, in state and local government, in academia, and for the Department of the Interior. Our e-newsletter is published 10 times per year and features opinion pieces and interviews as well as longer essays on the history and future trajectory of the historic preservation and environmental movements in the United States and abroad. The e-newsletter and blog also highlight upcoming events and recent news of interest. For more information or to subscribe, visit us at <http://www.livinglandscapeobserver.net>. ■



Photo by Brenda Barreft.

Flooded rice fields in the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, South Carolina.

NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS

National Heritage Areas (NHAs) are places designated by Congress in recognition of their natural, cultural, and scenic resources. Each NHA has unique authorizing legislation, which outlines its purpose, goals, and organizational structure. The National Park Service provides limited technical and financial assistance to the 55 currently authorized NHAs but does not play a managerial role. Instead, NHA activities are directed by a local coordinating entity, such as non-profit, municipal agency, or local university. NHA designation has no effect on zoning, land use, or private property rights.

The NHA model represents a unique approach to landscape scale conservation. It emphasizes local capacity building and partnerships, in addition to resource protection. NHAs vary widely in size, interpretive foci, and staffing levels, but share a commitment to partnerships, collaboration, and public outreach. They often serve as a hub or platform for community engagement and dialogue, offering time, space, and technical assistance to diverse stakeholders. The NHA model ties together place and process, creating a vision for community and economic development that is directly tied to the rich histories and landscapes of a region.

For more information see:

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/heritageareas/index.htm>

<https://www.nationalheritageareas.us>