What are historic landscapes?

Historic landscapes range from several thousand-acre rural farms and ranch complexes, to several acre urban park reserves. They benefit us with a yard or an acre. Like historic buildings, historic landscapes reveal aspects of our country’s origins and development through their form, function, and the ways they were and are used. In fact, almost every historic property has a landscape component. Imagining a historic residential district without sidewalks, lawns, and trees; an agricultural complex with buildings but no fields, garden plots, or hedges; a densely populated city with no park system or place; or a Native American settlement with no gathering place, irrigation systems, or animal corrals.

Why should we care about historic landscapes?

Historic landscapes are typically “invisible” to both the public and policy makers. Hence, like many historic properties, America’s historic landscapes are subject to loss and change through inappropriate use, development, vandalism, and natural forces such as flooding. When historic landscapes are publicly identified as significant, unique resources they become “visible” and can be incorporated into local, state, and federal planning and recording processes. Documentation of historic landscapes through research, photography and drawings is crucial to their preservation. We must act now to record landscapes through three programs have documented over 40,000 structures and sites, with these records publicly available through the Library of Congress.

What is happening to our landscape legacy?

The evolutionary nature of historic landscapes makes them fragile and highly vulnerable to loss and alteration. Annual claims over one million acres of farmland each year. Road widening projects disturb the rolling splendor of scenic parkways. Redevelopment undermines historic industrial claims over one million acres of farmland each year. Road widening projects disturb the rolling splendor of scenic parkways. Redevelopment undermines historic industrial landscapes, and sites, with these records publicly available through the Library of Congress.

HALS is modeled on two existing historic resource documentation programs: the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER). Established in 1933, HABS comprehensively documents historic American architecture. Established in 1969, HAER documents historic sites, structures, and objects associated with the development of engineering, industry, and maritime resources. Growing interest in historic landscapes research, planning, and stewardship, underscores the value of a parallel program in October 2000. HALS builds on HABS and HAER documentation traditions while expanding the range of stories that can be told about human relationships with the land. HALS documents the dynamics of landscapes, as HABS and HAER have documented unique building and engineering structures and sites. Although the HALS program has officially been established, the effort to comprehensively develop the program needs your support.

The Intent and Focus of HALS

Recognizing the value of landscape documentation, the National Park Service established HALS as a permanent federal program in October 2000. HALS builds on HABS and HAER documentation traditions while expanding the range of stories that can be told about human relationships with the land. HALS documents the dynamics of landscapes, as HABS and HAER have documented unique building and engineering structures and sites. Although the HALS program has officially been established, the effort to comprehensively develop the program needs your support.

The results not only document significant landscapes, but instill a greater understanding of the relationship between land and history for the participant and the related community. The intent of HALS is to document the evolution of the American landscape heritage through large-format photography, measured and interpretive drawings, text narratives and other documentation techniques. The intent of HALS is to document the evolution of the American landscape heritage through large-format photography, measured and interpretive drawings, text narratives and other documentation techniques. The intent of HALS is to document the evolution of the American landscape heritage through large-format photography, measured and interpretive drawings, text narratives and other documentation techniques.

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Partnerships between HALS, private practice firms, academic institutions, and like-minded preservation and landscape organizations benefit all parties. Standard documentation methods have been developed, landscape preservation professionals have been educated, and long-term relationships have been established. Consider the role that your firm, university or organization could play in the development of HALS. Could they sponsor a project or offer support services?

Past Landscape Documentation Efforts

While HALS is the first permanent federal program to focus on historic landscape documentation, it is worth noting that examples of landscape documentation already exist. Since the 1900s landscapes have been recorded at local, state, and federal levels, but never systematically. Beginning in the 1930s, the Garden Club of America undertook an inventory and documentation of “gardens and gardeners of the American colonies and the Republic before 1840.” This effort led to the publication of the seminal two-volume Gardens of Colony and State. Interest in Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and his park legacy, inspired the 1983 Massachusetts Association of Olmsted Parks’ effort to document the history, design, and existing conditions of parks planned by Olmsted, Sr., his son and stepson, and their successor firm in the thirty-seven states. By 1984, the ASLA Historic Preservation Open Committee developed a model survey form to assist with historic landscape survey and documentation. Landscape recording efforts have occurred on local and statewide levels, typically emphasizing specific landscape types and are completed with the assistance of community volunteers, university faculty, students, and specialized consultants. Some examples of the local and trans-projects include the landscapes of Syracuse and Rochester, New York; Hale O Pi’ilani Heiau, Maui, Hawaii; and Mount Vernon Square, Baltimore. Project histories are available in the Townscapes of the National Capital Region series, prepared by the National Park Service, and the National Geographic Society.

For more information about the HALS program, or to access the HALS Guidelines for Drawings, History, or Photographs, visit our website: http://www.nps.gov/history/hdp/. Visit us on Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/HeritageDocumentationPrograms.


Pierre L’Enfant’s plan for Washington, DC.

At the federal level, both HABS and HAER have produced some historic landscape records, while undertaking primary documentation of historic structures and engineering resources. Simultaneous to the Garden Club of America efforts, ASLA members worked with HABS in the 1930s on the Historic American Landscape and Garden Project, recording over 40 historic gardens in Massachusetts and influencing the early landscape documentation efforts in HAER in other states. Other HABS historic landscape documentation projects include Meridian Hill Park and DuPont Circle Park in Washington, DC and the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis. Since the 1980s, HAER Roads and Bridges Documentation Project increasingly have incorporated aspects of landscapes into their recording projects. HAER projects notable for historic landscape content include road and bridge documentation in Acadia National Park, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkways.

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