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Do People Have a Place in the Historic Environment? The Anderson Ferry and the National Mall

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ABSTRACT

The significance of historic places often depends on their use by people. The Anderson Ferry, an historic river crossing in the Eastern United States, is an extreme example; arguably the on-going human use of the crossing is its only significant characteristic. The National Mall in Washington DC also exemplifies the importance of on-going human use. However, such places are often managed as though on-going human use were irrelevant and even damaging to their historic significance; again the National Mall offers a case in point. At least part of this disconnect may result from the documentation instruments used in recognising and designating such places as historic; these instruments tend to focus attention on architectural details and past events, at the expense of contemporary roles and values. We suggest that the forms and guidelines used in historic place designation should be rethought with an eye toward recognising that service as a living part of community life and development is an important aspect of historic significance.

KEYWORDS

Historic significance; human use; Anderson Ferry; National Mall; National Register of Historic Places

The Anderson Ferry: What is an Historic Place?

The Anderson Ferry has been in operation since 1817, carrying passengers, vehicles, horses and cargo across the Ohio River between Hebron in the U.S. state of Kentucky and Cincinnati in the state of Ohio.¹ It was placed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1982, and later in the 1980s was the subject of consultation under Section 106 of the U.S. National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) because a proposed coal-loading facility would have impinged upon the route taken by its boats as they crossed the river.

Without in any way questioning the historic significance of the Anderson Ferry, we have to wonder precisely what it is that is listed in the NRHP. The ferry landings on either side of the river have been reworked repeatedly. The ferries themselves have been replaced (although one – Boone #7 – dates to 1937 and is driven by side-wheels). The waters of the Ohio across which the ferries travel are continually replaced as the river flows on to the Mississippi and the sea.

In a case like the Anderson Ferry, the geography that is listed in the NRHP – the ‘place’ – is constantly changing. What is consistent about the ferry, the thing about it that has been in place for 200 years and that is meaningful in local and regional history, is the act of ferrying,

the fact that the ferry has been in operation for so long. Ferrying, of course, is a human activity, so in a very real sense, what is eligible for the Register at the Anderson Ferry is the on-going human activity of crossing the Ohio – repeatedly, systematically, in a structured and institutionalised manner that involves physical things but is itself entirely evanescent. When the persistence of that activity was threatened by the coal-loading scheme in the 1980s, this threat was duly recognised as a potential adverse effect on the ferry as an historic property and became the subject of Section 106 consultation (The scheme was eventually abandoned).

The Anderson Ferry is by no means the only historic property for which on-going human activity is a key component; it is unusual only in that it has no other components. Many, if not most, 'Traditional Cultural Places' (TCPs) are significant in whole or in part for the historically grounded human activities that go on there,² but places not recognised formally as 'TCPs' may also feature contemporary human activity as a key aspect of their significance.

The National Mall

A case in point is the recently completed updated NRHP nomination for the National Mall in Washington DC. In its discussion of the Mall's significance, the nomination says:

The National Mall Historic District is nationally significant under (NRHP) Criterion A in the area of social history as the site of demonstrations of American rights of free assembly and free speech related to some of the most important issues in our nation's history. Beginning in the first half of the twentieth century, American citizens used the public space of the historic district to express their opinions on social issues and seek influence over their representatives in the government. In addition to important civil rights demonstrations, such as Marian Anderson's performance on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 and the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, three large protests against the war in Vietnam took place in April and May of 1971, during which protestors attempted to disrupt the city's daily routine, while some 10,000 police and national guard tried to restore order. Since it became a favored location for such events, the National Mall has continued to be a venue for citizens who wish to make their fellow Americans aware of important issues facing the country, including the environment, abortion, HIV-AIDS, prisoners detained in Guantanamo, Cuba, immigration, and the Falun Gong in China.

The National Mall Historic District is also both nationally and locally significant under Criterion A in the area of entertainment/recreation. It is nationally significant as the site of continuing recreation in the form of museum and memorial visitation, which began to be encouraged in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century as part of a movement aimed at advancing the physical and mental well-being of American citizens. The value of such recreation also guided the City Beautiful Movement of the early twentieth century. Millions of people visit the National Mall each year to participate in this form of recreation. The National Mall is locally significant as the site of on-going recreational opportunities for Washington residents since the beginning of the twentieth century that have included the construction of ball fields, tennis courts, polo grounds, golf courses, and other facilities. While many of the built facilities for athletic competition have been removed, the National Mall remains an important venue for city residents who wish to participate in informal athletic contests.³

As the subtitle of a recent book by geographer Lisa Benton-Short puts it, the National Mall is 'no ordinary public space'.⁴ It has been referred to as 'America's civic stage',⁵ where key events in our history and on-going cultural life are not only commemorated but enacted, played out. These enactments necessarily and fittingly involve a wide range of activities carried out by people – of, by, and for whom, after all, the business of the U.S. Government is said to be conducted.

Generalising

A place does not have to be so widely celebrated and heavily used as the National Mall in order for its on-going human use to be part of its significance. It is widely understood that one of the very purposes of the NRHP is to encourage people and communities to keep using their historic places – to retain them, in the words of the NHPA,⁶ as ‘living part(s) of our community life and development’. Innumerable NRHP nominations stress with approval that their subjects – be they courthouses, town squares, residential districts or rural landscapes – continue in use, either for their original purposes or in some kind of adaptation.

Recognising a place as historically important because of the human activity that goes on there, however, is no guarantee that such activity will be respected by those responsible for managing the place – even when historic preservation is among their guiding principles. The National Mall provides a prominent and rather shocking example.

Managing the National Mall’s Historic Environment

The primary manager of the National Mall is the National Park Service (NPS), which has explicitly chosen to manage it in such a way as to preserve its historic qualities; the management option selected in its 2010 National Mall Plan is distinguished from other alternatives largely by its emphasis on ‘protect(ing) the historic landscape.’⁷ But although the Mall’s role as the scene of public gatherings is highlighted in both the NRHP documentation and the 2010 Mall Plan, this role is poorly reflected in actual management. Instead, NPS treats the Mall as though it were Yellowstone or Yosemite, understanding its natural and built environments – grass, trees, buildings, monuments – to be ‘park resources’ that must be protected, while consigning people to the role of visitors – tolerated, ostensibly welcomed, but not really integral to the Mall’s character.

Writing in the weblog of the George Washington University Department of Geography, Lisa Benton-Short summarises the issue:

Over the last few years, as I researched my new book, *The National Mall: No Ordinary Public Space*, I came to appreciate how crucial public use of this open space is to the health of our democracy. And yet, there are troubling signs that public use and access are eroding, slowly and quietly.

Recent developments appear to restrict access and use of the Mall. For one, the Park Service encouraged (or maybe forced, it’s unclear) the annual book festival off the Mall in 2013. The Library of Congress spent months trying to work with the Park Service to keep the festival on the Mall, but was not successful. Although the festival is held now at the DC Convention Center, one enthusiast lamented the fair seemed to lose its ‘soul’ in this new location.

A similar push off the Mall may be in store for the popular summer Smithsonian Folk Life Festival. In the last several years, the Festival has been scaled back from its previous size. The reason: new regulations by the Park Service now restrict large events because they trample the grass. Ironically, The Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, said these restrictions would help ensure the Mall would be able to accommodate the millions of visitors in years to come.

A guiding mission of the Park Service is preservation of the resources for future generations. Keeping the turf in good shape is an important maintenance issue, but it shouldn’t come at the expense of public access and use. The Mall, unlike other park units, is a constantly evolving space. And because it is our stage for democracy, access to and use of the Mall for all of the various purposes must remain equally as important as preservation.⁸

But are access and use not aspects of preservation? What do we seek to preserve when we formally recognise a place as historic? At the National Mall, NPS seems to have elevated preservation of infrastructure – specifically the health of the turf – over preserving the Mall’s function as a stage on which the on-going drama of the people’s government is played out. This strikes us as misguided and narrow-minded policy and we puzzle about its source. Is there something about looking at historic significance through the lens of the NRHP that – despite rhetoric to the contrary – pushes us toward treating historic places as ancient life-forms in amber, to be admired and studied but never, never directly handled?

Form 10-900

Form 10-900, the NPS form used to nominate places to the NRHP, essentially solicits two kinds of data: descriptive data about the place being nominated, and data supporting the nominator’s judgments about the place’s significance in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering and/or culture. Both classes of data, as outlined in the form, are relentlessly thing-oriented.

In eliciting a description of a place, Form 10-900 asks about its location, its boundaries, and what it looks like, emphasising architectural styles and building materials. Information is to be provided on both its historic and contemporary ‘function or use’, but only as a matter of general classification, with reference to pre-established standard categories set forth in NPS guidelines.⁹ The clear emphasis is on where the place is and what it looks like as a piece of real estate. If the place is a ‘district’ like the National Mall, one is required to list the specific buildings, structures, sites and objects within its boundaries, distinguishing between those that ‘contribute’ to its character and those that do not. Only such physical things are understood to contribute; the form makes no provision for contributing or non-contributing human (or non-human) activities.

With reference to a place’s significance, Form 10-900 begins by asking the nominator to say which of the four ‘National Register Criteria’ apply. Is the place ‘associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history?’ Is it associated with the lives of ‘persons significant in our past?’ Does it ‘embody significant characteristics, or constitute the work of a master, or failing that is it a ‘distinguishable entity?’ Does it, perhaps, contain significant data about the past?’

With a property like the National Mall, which began as a ‘distinguishable entity’ in the late 18th century when George Washington’s vision for it was translated to design by Peter (‘Pierre’) l’Enfant, it is easy enough to show that all the Criteria apply, but it is notable that none of them quite captures the Mall’s on-going, vibrant character as a social space. And all of them look back – toward events and people, architectural styles and archaeological data – important in the past. This is certainly understandable in a National Register of Historic Places, but it makes the process of nomination inevitably a process of historical research, not one of recognising contemporary uses even when they are historically rooted.

The nominator is then asked to consider whether any of seven ‘criteria considerations’ apply. Any one of these, if it applies, may disqualify a place for listing. The last ‘consideration’ asks whether the place has ‘achieved significance within the last fifty years’. Understandable as this consideration is – a register of historic places should not include places with no history – it too tends to focus attention on the past, away from how the place being nominated functions in contemporary society.

The nominator is then asked to identify 'areas of significance' to which the property relates. Acceptable 'areas' are listed in the guidelines for completing Form 10-900.¹⁰ Neither contemporary uses nor continuity of use is among the listed 'areas'.

The nominator is also asked to assign the place to one or more 'periods of significance'. It is acceptable for such a period to extend to the present, but there is no encouragement to make it do so; no value is added to a place by continuing in use, continuing to be treasured.

Eventually the nominator is done with lists of areas and dates, and provides a narrative discussion of the property's significance. This discussion must be organised with reference to the 'areas of significance' listed earlier in the process. Since the 'areas of significance' do not value contemporary or continuing use, the nominator's narrative is unlikely to assign much value to, or even say much about, such use.

Unintended Consequences

The presumably unintended result of the way Form 10-900 and its guidelines structure the NRHP nomination process is the creation of documentation that portrays an historic place and its significance in static, thing-oriented terms. A district like the National Mall becomes a collection of 'contributing elements', perhaps linked by some integrative design, or perhaps not, and with on-going human use given little or any attention. When this documentation is then used as a basis for management,¹¹ managers are tempted to the view that preservation and use are at best unrelated, if not mutually inimical.

When the Anderson Ferry case came up for review under Section 106, it was hard to persuade the Corps of Engineers – the federal agency responsible for compliance with the law – that there was 'really' an historic preservation issue. The barge loading facility would not be built directly on or adjacent to either landward end of the ferry route; it would 'only' have the potential to interfere with ferry traffic. Similarly at the National Mall, NPS seems to have trouble understanding that public access to and use of the mall is a preservation issue in anything but a negative sense, as a conflict with preservation that has to be resolved.

Conclusions

We suggest that we need to rethink how historic significance is judged in the United States, and represented in the paperwork we consult when trying to understand such significance. We do not propose that documented history, architecture, or archaeology be ignored or devalued, but we do think that a place's on-going human use should be given much greater, more sympathetic attention, regardless of whether we explicitly recognise the place as a 'TCP'.

As for the Anderson Ferry and the National Mall: the former does not seem currently to be under threat, but in the case of the latter, we think there is an urgent need to recognise that the on-going human uses alluded to in the NRHP nomination are themselves important contributing elements to the Mall's historic significance. Maintaining the mall as a vibrant, living stage for the on-going enactment of American history and culture – including, book fairs and folklife festivals, kite flying and softball games – is at least as important to preserving its historic character as is keeping the turf lush and the monuments unscathed.

Geolocation Information

Eastern United States of America, North America.

Notes

1. See www.andersonferry.com, accessed December 12, 2016.
2. See NPS, *Guidelines for the Identification*.
3. National Mall Historic District nomination.
4. Benton-Short, *The National Mall*.
5. cf. NPS, National Mall Plan.
6. NHPA Section 1(b)(2).
7. NPS, National Mall Plan, Table 7.
8. Benton-Short, "Turf War."
9. NPS, "How to Complete."
10. NPS, "How to Complete."
11. NPS, "Final National Mall Plan."

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Thomas F. King is a private consultant, writer, mediator and trainer whose work focuses on historic preservation and cultural resource management in the United States and Pacific Islands.

Judy Scott Feldman, an art historian and civic activist, is founder and Chair of the nonprofit National Mall Coalition, which advocates comprehensive, long-range planning to ensure the future vitality of the National Mall in Washington DC.

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