

Reinterpreting the Cultural Landscape of Chalmette Battlefield: Landscape Management Strategies for Parks with Multiple Layers of History

Introduction

Sites which contain multiple layers of material history often do not conform to the established methodology for analyzing cultural landscapes. Such landscapes may contain historic resources—buildings, roads, vegetation—from multiple eras which are only loosely related developmentally. As a result, these landscapes may exhibit multiple and overlapping periods of significance. The degree of historical integrity the landscape retains from its primary period of significance may be weak, suggesting that conventional restoration is unfeasible or ill-advised. This does not preclude the possibility, however, of an ecologically informed and creative landscape rehabilitation, which draws inspiration from historic documentation while addressing contemporary interpretive and management concerns. A cultural landscape report prepared for the Chalmette Battlefield and National Cemetery Site during 1998-1999 provides interesting insights into such a rehabilitation and some innovative management strategies that could easily be adapted to other sites with multiple layers of history.

Site Context and History

Chalmette Battlefield and National Cemetery Site is administered by the National Park Service as a management unit of Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve. The park is located in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, approximately six miles southeast of downtown New Orleans in a highly industrialized corridor along the east bank of the Mississippi River (Figure 1). The property is bounded to the south by a broadly concave arc of the river and by its adjacent levee, which is maintained and administered by the Army Corps of Engineers. To the north, an approximately 200-foot-wide strip, containing highway, railroad, and

utility rights-of-way, separates the park from the St. Bernard Highway (Louisiana State Highway 46). The mammoth refinery and waste site of the former Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical Corporation bounds the park to the east; Chalmette Slip, a ship docking and storage facility, bounds the park to the west. A service road along the landward toe of the levee provides cross-park access between the neighboring industrial properties. A 1.5-acre sewage treatment facility, owned by St. Bernard Parish, stands as a conspicuous inholding at the southern end of the battlefield.

The 142.9-acre park includes the commemorative battlefield and the

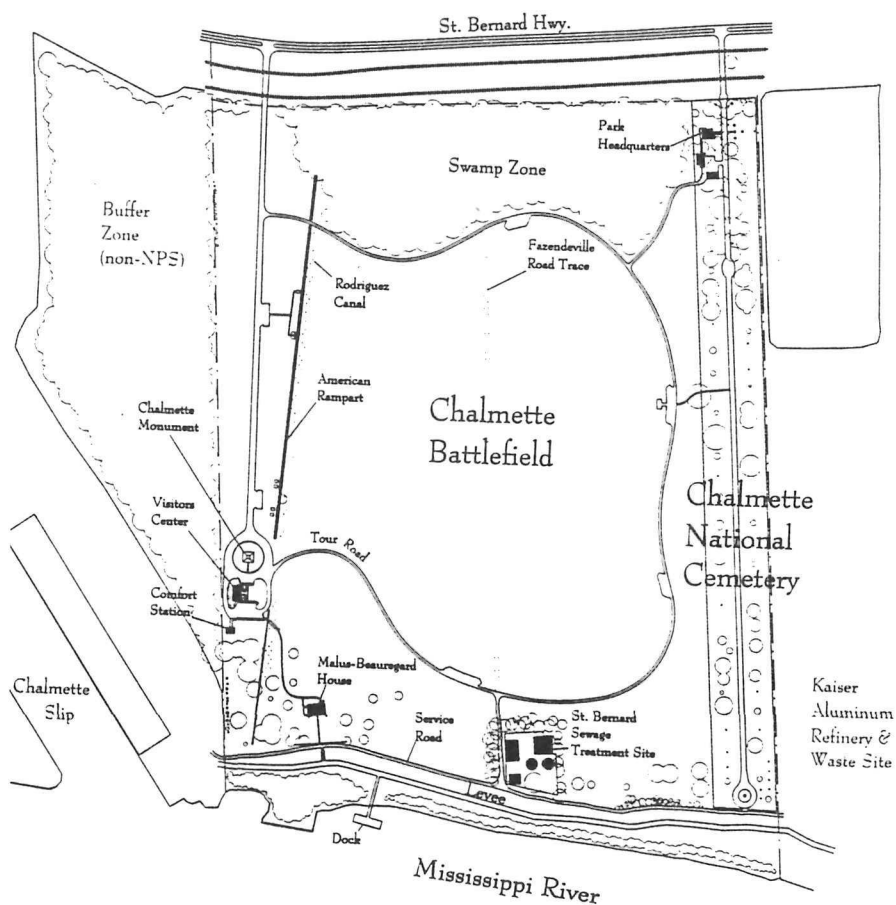


Figure 1. Chalmette Battlefield and National Cemetery: Existing conditions and site context.

adjacent Chalmette National Cemetery, a designed landscape which occupies a portion of the former battlefield (see Figure 1). The battlefield property serves to commemorate the Battle of New Orleans and to interpret the strategy of this decisive American victory during the War of

1812. The cemetery was established in 1864 for the interment of Union soldiers killed during the Civil War in Louisiana. The 17.3-acre cemetery is set apart from the battlefield within a brick-walled enclosure along the park's eastern edge.

Both the battlefield and cemetery

occupy land that belonged to the historic Chalmette and Rodriguez plantations. It was on these two properties that the primary action of the Battle of New Orleans—the last engagement of the War of 1812—was fought, on 8 January 1815. During the battle, British troops advanced westward across the fields of Chalmette Plantation, attacking the American troops entrenched behind a canal on the eastern boundary of the neighboring Rodriguez Plantation. The two-hour battle was an impressive victory for General Andrew Jackson and his outnumbered troops over British forces seeking to capture New Orleans from the east. The victory solidified American claims to the Louisiana Purchase and bolstered Jackson's popularity, helping to catapult him to national prominence.

The commemorative battlefield contains a number of features associated with the Battle of New Orleans: the Rodriguez Canal, which served as the line of entrenchment for Jackson's troops; the partially reconstructed American rampart and artillery batteries; the site of the British attack and advance batteries; the Rodriguez Plantation archeological site; Chalmette Monument, erected in 1855 to commemorate the American victory; and Spotts Marker, erected in the 1890s to memorialize First Lieutenant Samuel Spotts's role in the battle. However, the battlefield also contains significant features not connected with the battle, notably the Malus-Beauregard House, an

architecturally noteworthy summer residence built in 1833, and archaeological resources related to post-battle land use and subdivision. For example, a trace of Fazendeville Road, a remnant of the free black subdivision of Fazendeville that existed on site from the late nineteenth century until 1964, remains within park boundaries. The interpretation of these non-battle-related features has proven problematic to the park's primary mission of interpreting the battlefield landscape, yet these features hold historical, cultural, and ethnographical significance in their own right. The cultural landscape report was developed, in part, to address this issue.

Project Description— The Cultural Landscape Report

A cultural landscape report is a research document that (1) records the existing and historic conditions of a cultural landscape; (2) analyzes the integrity and historical significance of that landscape against established National Register criteria; and (3) provides treatment recommendations for managing the cultural landscape in light of historical documentation and contemporary management concerns. For the Chalmette site, the overall goal of historical research was to trace the history and evolution of the various land parcels that compose the contemporary park. Significant periods of change in the landscape were documented, including investigation of the site's pre-battlefield landscape

(plantation agriculture to 1815); the battlefield scene (1814-1815); Chalmette's post-battle history of subdivision and private ownership (1815-1964); and the battlefield's long history of private and public commemoration (1840-present). The historical research findings were compared with the park's existing landscape in order to assess what resources remained from both the battle-era landscape and from latter cultural overlays. Treatment recommendations were then devised to suggest how the park's landscape resources could most effectively be treated and interpreted in the future.

Problems and Management Issues

The battlefield's natural setting has been dramatically altered by surrounding industrialization, which has erased the formerly rural, agricultural context. In addition, progressive reinforcements of the levee have severed the landscape from its connection with the river. The presence of a highway and railroad to the north of the park has further altered the distinctive spatial character of the former battlefield land. Strategically open view lines, across the once sweeping Chalmette Plain and along the curve of the river, have been blocked by industrial infrastructure or wooded buffer zones to the east and west of the park. The cypress swamp, which spatially defined the northern extent of the battlefield and played a critical role in Jackson's battle strategy, was lost to timbering

in the nineteenth century. Consequently, the woodland swamp zone that exists today does not contain cypress trees and only loosely approximates, for interpretive purposes, the original swamp. The levee has blocked views of the Mississippi River to the south.

Because of the relatively small size of the site, the battlefield setting is noticeably interrupted by the presence of non-contributing park-era infrastructure, especially the visitor tour road, which circumscribes a portion of the central battlefield, and the complex of the visitor center, comfort station, and parking area. The tour road introduces automobiles into the battlefield setting and hinders understanding of the rectilinear land patterns that prevailed at the time of the battle. The visitor center, parking area, and comfort station are clustered in unfortunate proximity to the Chalmette Monument and Rodriguez archeological site. Though not owned by the park, the St. Bernard sewage treatment plant also intrudes into the battlefield landscape. The Malus-Beauregard House, a post-battle era construction, poses yet another interpretive challenge to the park; its anachronistic presence at the southern end of the battlefield confounds a clear understanding of the historic scene.

Summary of Findings

Given the highly industrialized context of its surroundings, Chalmette's landscape is not readily legible to the uninformed visitor; and it

bears only the loosest resemblance to the landscape that existed at the time of the Battle of New Orleans. Furthermore, the site's connection to the Mississippi River and to a broader regional context—information critical for understanding the site's early development as an agricultural landscape, its evolution to post-agricultural land uses, and its present condition as a relic landscape within a highly industrialized corridor—remains largely uninterpreted. The landscape treatments proposed were thus devised with multiple purposes in mind: to preserve the park's significant cultural resources; to provide a fuller and richer interpretation of the site's landscape features, context, and multiple layers of history; and to address such contemporary planning and management concerns as boundary buffering, vegetation management, and visitor-use patterns.

A carefully selected program of rehabilitation was determined to be the most viable treatment approach for the commemorative battlefield. The urgent need for site buffering, a shift in visitor-use patterns, and the tightened economies of site management required landscape treatments that addressed such contemporary problems, yet enhanced the park's interpretive aims. In fact, primary and secondary interpretive themes were strengthened by revising visitor circulation patterns and by defining separate spatial zones, or "character areas," in which differential interpretation could occur. Treatment

recommendations also propose the removal or relocation of the park-era infrastructure that compromises the spatial integrity and understanding of the historic battlefield landscape. The riverfront was treated as a separate management zone because of its spatial isolation from the battlefield and its individual interpretive potential. Treatment recommendations suggest how the riverfront might be more fully incorporated into the park's interpretive program and the visitor experience.

Because of its developmental history, designed layout, and independent spatial integrity, Chalmette National Cemetery stands apart from the battlefield as a distinct designed landscape. Consequently, separate treatment recommendations propose a rehabilitation of the cemetery's allées and planting patterns, based on historic documentation and photographs. Such improvements will further distinguish the cemetery from the commemorative battlefield and will provide much needed buffering from the Kaiser Aluminum property to the east.

Management Strategies for Parks with Multiple Layers of History— Lessons from Chalmette

- Define separate interpretive zones or "character areas" to highlight secondary interpretive themes. Re-establishing historic circulation and vegetation patterns helps visitors to better understand the development and significance of a landscape on an

experiential level, even if such features are not explicitly interpreted. For example, rehabilitating the historic planting patterns in the national cemetery will enhance its distinct spatial character and developmental identity, while buffering the site from the surrounding industrial development. Resources which are anomalous or anachronistic to a park's primary interpretive theme are best placed within an interpretive and landscape context of their own, not ignored or glossed over for ease of interpretation. Simplifying a site's history for interpretive purposes does not do justice to the complexity of a cultural landscape. Furthermore, it denies the public a broader understanding of the site's historical development. Visitors may take away a false impression if such anomalies are not expressly interpreted. For example, the Malus-Beauregard House is often misinterpreted as a plantation house, and despite the park's efforts to the contrary, some visitors probably take away the impression that it was one of the battle-era plantations. Re-establishing a landscape setting for the house and restoring the riverfront approach will further distinguish the house from the battlefield.

- Use mowing patterns, natural successional processes, or selective planting to establish distinct interpretive zones. Employing

natural succession to simulate a landscape's historic spatial arrangement can reduce maintenance costs and time. For example, releasing an additional area of the "swamp zone" from active mowing in order to sweep across the tour road would provide buffering along Chalmette's entrance sequence, would create spatial and experiential variety for park visitors, and would complete the line of the swamp as seen from the southern end of the battlefield. Differential mowing patterns can be used to highlight hidden archeological features or historic circulation routes, a technique that is inexpensive to implement and easily reversible, e.g., mowing swathes through the battlefield to represent battle-era ditch lines, or perhaps Fazendeville Road.

- Plant ecologically sustainable native vegetation to simulate the texture, color, pattern, or appearance of historic vegetation or field patterns, such as by using a rowed planting of a coarse-textured, native clump-forming grass to simulate the appearance and pattern of sugarcane fields at Chalmette.
- Re-establish historic arrival sequences, circulation patterns, and spatial arrangements. Mid-twentieth century park development often altered or eliminated earlier circulation patterns and spatial arrangements in order to accommodate increasing auto-

motive tourism. In many cases, these changes were implemented with little regard to the integrity of prevailing land patterns and, as a result, continue to hinder the visitor's understanding of the park's cultural landscape. For instance, the tour road at Chalmette runs counter to the rectilinear field patterns that existed at the time of the battle. Parks should encourage visitors to approach landscape features in the manner in which they would have been accessed historically.

- Especially in a small park, develop interpretive programs that place the site in a larger regional context. Encroaching industrialization and suburbanization are jarring realities for many parks, yet many choose to ignore these contextual changes in their interpretive program, even though such changes are part of the regional and developmental context. Provide waysides or open-air interpretive pavilions that allow visitors to experience the historic site from a new perspective or spatial framework. Such interpretive sites need not be complex, expensive, or visually obtrusive, and can include historic photographs or documentation that reveals the landscape as it would have appeared in the historic period. As an example, Hyacinthe Laclotte's painting of the Battle of New Orleans could be effectively used to interpret

the battlefield scene from atop the levee.

- Remove or relocate non-contributing park-era infrastructure, such as visitor centers, comfort stations, picnic areas, tour roads, etc., so as to minimally interfere with the spatial and experiential understanding of key historic landscape patterns. Infrastructure which must intrude into the spatial core of a historic landscape should be minimized so as to not interfere with historic circulation patterns, spatial arrangements, or archaeological resources.
- Preserve—and, ideally, enhance—existing buffer zones along park boundaries. Many parks are engulfed by suburban, commercial, and industrial development. The use of vegetative plantings to create visual buffering at both the micro- and macro-scale from within a park can be a relatively inexpensive and effective alternative when additional land acquisition is not feasible. Think about internal sight lines and how vegetation can be used to screen distant undesirable views, or to create distinct interpretive zones within the park. For example, planting trees to the rear of the Malus-Beauregard House will help to screen it from the battlefield, setting this post-battle-era feature apart in its own character area. Also, replanting the historic cemetery allées will provide mi-

cro-scale buffering from the Kaiser Aluminum plant to the east of the park.

- Use landscape materials to interpret hidden archeological or ethnographic resources. Using a simple footprint marking of contemporary brick or stone pavers to interpret a vanished historic building or structure renders an invisible feature visible, and makes a cultural landscape more legible to the visitor, especially when combined with period historic documents, such as photographs, paintings, or maps, that depict the vanished resource. The Rodriguez archeological site is presently unmarked, but could easily be interpreted using this technique.
- Lastly, concentrate on the quality of the visitor's experience while

moving through the park. Is the visitor brought into contact with all the historically important features or aspects of the landscape? If a certain landscape feature or zone played into the historic events that occurred on site, is the visitor encouraged to explore these features? Provide access to the park's various ecological zones. A site's cultural history is never divorced from its ecology. A riverfront interpretive site at Chalmette would provide better site orientation to visitors arriving by riverboat, would encourage visitors who arrive by car to visit the riverfront, and would emphasize the river's importance to the battlefield scene and the site's later development.

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