

The Value of Historic and Cultural Resources in Public Parks

Ask a person to describe a “national park” or a “state park” and likely you will hear about some sort of a natural preserve where people can enjoy passive recreation amidst the unspoiled beauty of nature. Such a description indeed encompasses the purpose and forms of our early national and state parks. The federal government set aside Yosemite and Yellowstone as very early national parks in the 19th century in order to protect them from degradation and despoliation.

It wasn't long, however, before sites of historic significance were added to a growing universe of public parks. This process of nature conservation first, followed by historic preservation second, can be seen in the development of Maryland's state forests and parks.

The first state forest in Maryland was a bequest of 2,000 acres of largely despoiled forest lands. Brothers Robert and John Garrett, heirs to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad fortune, made this bequest in 1906. Moreover, the Garretts made their largesse contingent upon Maryland's instituting a state-managed scientific forestry program. Maryland's first state forester, Fred W. Besley, seized upon this task with gusto. As early as 1910, another state forest reserve along the Patapsco River was informally being referred to as “Patapsco Park.” By 1912, a part of the reserve had been developed specifically for public recreational use. Besley realized that one way to sell the public on the value of wise forest management was by inviting people to use and enjoy forests, not by keeping them out.

A decade later, a site of immense

significance to Maryland history, Fort Frederick—a large, but ruined, stone relic of the French and Indian War (1756-1763)—was purchased and designated a “forest reserve,” though it was informally referred to as Fort Frederick Park. The main purpose of designating the fort a “forest reserve” was for the state to acquire and preserve an important *historic* resource. Acres of trees were planted near the fort to justify its official status as a forest reserve. The influential individuals who had lobbied for the fort's acquisition really had preservation of the fort as their motive, however, and designating it a forest reserve seemed the best way to accomplish that mission. Indeed, during the Great Depression, a company of the Civilian Conservation Corps assigned to the reserve/park devoted its main energies to partially restoring the fort, and secondarily to reclaiming associated natural resources.

Today, Maryland's system of state forests and parks encompass a daunting array of historically or culturally significant resources. Some were acquired on purpose, as was Fort

Frederick, in order to save an important historic site. Many parks, however, were acquired for recreational or nature conservation purposes with no thought given to historic resources that might come along with the package.

A good example of this phenomenon is Point Lookout State Park. Located on the tip of the peninsula formed by the confluence of the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay, Point Lookout offers unparalleled opportunities for water-related recreation. Boating, fishing, swimming, camping, and nature study, with appropriate facilities for public accommodation, make Point Lookout one of the most popular parks in Maryland. However, aside from all that is an immensely important historical fact that, at the time of the park's acquisition and master planning, was given no thought. Point Lookout was the site of the largest prison camp of the Civil War. Between 1863 and 1865, Union authorities interned 52,000 Confederate prisoners at the Point. Four thousand of them died and are buried nearby in a federal cemetery. Fortunately, through the efforts of a succession of several dedicated park managers and staff, and a very dedicated corps of volunteers, the story of the prison is memorialized and interpreted for the public at Point Lookout.

Today, Maryland's state forests and parks, as with parks in other states and on the national and local levels, contain a myriad of resources reflective of not only the hand of God, but also the hands of humans. In fact there are few—if any—parks that do not show human influences. In Maryland we

have a good example of a park (we call this one a “natural environment area”) that is kept in a pristine “natural” state that is not natural at all.

Soldier's Delight Natural Environment Area is a shale barren incapable of sustaining the typical deciduous forests of most of the rest of the state. Left to nature's design, Soldier's Delight would become a forest of scrub pine and swamp oak, the soil is so poor. However, the state, with volunteer help, routinely burns off sprouting trees in order to maintain the area as prairie grassland hosting flora and fauna that are rare in the state. And in so doing, we today continue a practice started in prehistoric times by Native Americans, who burned the poor forest cover in order to drive game and provide clear fields of fire for hunting.

Is Soldier's Delight truly a “natural environment area?” One could argue that it is in fact a *cultural* environment area, because human beings have for centuries artificially maintained it as grassland. (Or, one could concede that human beings are part of the environmental equation, rather than intruders upon it, and have their impacts on other species the same way plants and other non-human animals do.)

Thus nature and culture (or history) are inextricably intertwined in our nation's system of national, state, and local parks. To compartmentalize the two is to do a disservice to the diversity of park resources. Management of natural and cultural resources should be viewed as two sides of the same coin, and therefore as a common currency, a currency that is very valuable to the park-visiting public.

The philosopher George Santayana remarked that those who don't know their history are condemned to repeat it. In other words, a society without knowledge of its past is like a person without a memory. If someone can't remember what happens when he sticks his hand in a fire, history will repeat itself and he will find out again soon enough.

Historical and cultural resources, tangible or not, serve to remind a society of its past, the same way familiar faces, places, and things can put a person in mind of his life, successes and failures alike. Without these signposts, a society, like a person, can easily lose track of where it has been, probably does not understand where it is now, and has no frame of reference to anticipate the future. History gives us a sense of place, and a sense of place in time. Without knowledge of history, we are abysmally ignorant.

While most people remember history classes in school as boring, and while history receives less attention in schools today than formerly, the American public nevertheless has an insatiable desire to experience history, if not from books then from getting out and living it. Historic sites are among the most popular tourist destinations across the country. Living history reenacting and crafting grow ever more popular. History themes are once again fashionable in motion pictures. Antique collecting grows. The desire for "colonial" style houses shows no sign of abating. What, then, is going on?

What is going on is that modern life, with its temporal, situational, and societal dislocations, makes people

yearn for a sense of both place and a place in time—a sense of who they are, where they came from, and confidence about where they are headed. History, the collective memory of humankind, supplies these needs. While history can well be studied from the written page, it can also be studied from experiencing the places where it happened and by examining things that have come down to us from the past. Historic places and things are anchors both in place and time. It is one thing to read about the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. It is quite another to stand in Independence Hall where those documents were debated and adopted; it is quite another thing to stand at the National Archives and behold the actual documents themselves. Experiencing these places and things, if they are properly managed and interpreted, inspire a certain awe and wonderment that nourish the human soul.

A wise society husbands its historic and cultural resources, saves and protects them, and lets the people, whose heritage those resources constitute, experience and learn from the resources. Public parks are among the largest repositories of historical and cultural resources. It is therefore morally and profoundly incumbent upon public parks to protect, enhance, and interpret those resources for the benefit of humanity.

Cultural resources management is a relatively new discipline in park management. Though parks have cared for historic resources for many years, over the past 20 years or so cultural resources management has emerged as a discrete professional discipline with-

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in overall park administration. Cultural resources managers usually have academic backgrounds in history, archeology, anthropology, architectural history, historic preservation, and allied fields. And many institutions of higher learning now offer professional degrees in cultural resources management, which is a cross-disciplinary curriculum that includes coursework in public administration, something your traditional academic historians know little about.

Cultural resources management may be broken down into two major components. The first is inventory and curation; the second is public benefit. Inventory and curation mean knowing what cultural resources a park has and taking proper care of them. Public benefit means providing the public the opportunity to experience those resources in a way that does not endanger them but does encourage the public to enjoy and learn from them.

Many, but by no means all, cultural resources are tangible. Structures or other historic landmarks, historic landscapes, archeological sites, artifacts, and historical records make up the bulk of tangible cultural resources to be found in public parks. The extent of tangible cultural resources in most park systems can be overwhelming. Such is the case in Maryland.

A survey of historic structures on Maryland's natural resources public lands, undertaken in the late 1970s, revealed a total of 403 separate historic structures distributed over 173 sites across the state. These ranged in importance from National Register-eligible properties to 1920s bunga-

lows. A new inventory about to be undertaken is projected to find 1,000 qualified structures, with many having been acquired since the last count, and the 50-year rule of thumb having advanced from 1929 to 1952. Clearly, in strategizing for the preservation of these structures, some sort of triage protocol will have to be adopted. What must be saved in the public interest, what would be nice to save, and what must, unhappily, be written off?

We have no way of inventorying all of our archeological sites. Hundreds are known, but thousands are yet to be discovered. Because geographical areas that are now attractive for public parks were attractive to prehistoric and historic peoples for settlement, we assume the number is astronomical. Methodology for predictive modeling is contemplated, with actual excavation reserved for areas undergoing natural degradation (shore erosion for example) or slated for new construction.

We know the Maryland Archeological Conservation Laboratory has in storage an inventory of over 300,000 artifacts that have come from archeological projects in our parks and on other public lands. Additionally we know of about 8,000 artifacts and pieces of archival material that are in the possession of 22 field units, either on public display or, in many instances, in storage. These range in importance from 18th- and 19th-century furnishings, original Audubon prints, and a rifle used by a Confederate soldier at the Battle of South Mountain, to amusement park bus tokens from the 1950s. When budgets

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permit, we hope to digitize this inventory as a first step toward a comprehensive plan of conservation and display of these artifacts for public benefit.

For years we have been depositing with the Maryland State Archives all sorts of archival materials relating to the history of our agency. Many linear feet of shelf space are occupied with traditional manuscript and printed materials, some artifacts that were donated with the archival materials, and thousands of photographs taken in our state forests and parks as early as the 1910s. Among the later is an inventory of 1,100 glass lantern slides dating up through the 1940s. These, we feel sure, were used by early state foresters for public presentations on wise forest management. While academic historians routinely mine this archival material for papers meant to be read by other academic historians, we are systematically inventorying and scanning the more interesting photographs and hope, for our agency's centennial in 2006, to have a Web site and perhaps a table-top picture book on the development of natural and cultural conservation in Maryland. This, we think, will have broad appeal to the general public.

Complementing these archival materials, we have a collection of 50 taped oral history interviews conducted in 1980 by a summer intern with veterans of the Civilian Conservation Corps. The tapes are on deposit with the Maryland Historical Society's Oral History Project. They too represent a treasure-trove of first-hand information about the history of natural and cultural resources conservation

in Maryland.

Other park cultural resources are intangible. Folklore is one example, and the systematic collection of folk traditions associated with certain parks should be part of a comprehensive inventory of cultural resources. Once collected, this material can easily be incorporated into park educational programs for public benefit. And in many cases, tangible park resources can be used to illustrate larger, intangible resources.

For example, Fort Frederick, previously mentioned, is the centerpiece of a Maryland state park of the same name. The fort itself is an impressive 17-foot-high stone wall, with four diamond-shaped bastions, encompassing two acres of land, with two major reconstructed buildings inside. As a tangible resource, the fort can be viewed, touched, and marveled at. We can interpret to the public its physical attributes, such as the bastions, and explain what function those attributes served. But to fully educate the public about the importance of Fort Frederick, we have to be conversant in the more esoteric story of the French and Indian War, during which the fort was built. Most visitors to Fort Frederick have, at best, heard of the French and Indian War (also called Seven Years War), but remember virtually nothing about it. Therefore we must be able to set the fort in its historic context, which is imperial rivalry between the English and the French in the 18th century, and, more importantly, the effect that particular conflict had upon the shaping of modern North America.

Similarly, the inextricably entwined

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story of natural and cultural history needs to be brought down from the arcane level to the concrete for the public's educational benefit. For example, at Herrington Manor State Park, the stately hemlocks found around the lake grow in straight rows. That's not how God plants trees, but it is how humans plant them. The fact is, while Herrington Manor presents to the public a beautiful natural setting with, besides the lake and forest, rustic log cabins for public accommodation, all three of these resources are the product of human artifice, having been developed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The park is a humanly landscaped "natural" resource. The interplay of humans and nature is the intangible story here, though tangible evidence remains to help tell that story. Moreover, this is a story that should be told in the context of our agency's tradition of reclaiming and managing natural resources that otherwise would be irretrievably lost and doing so in the public interest.

Public parks are stewards of cultural, as well as natural, resources that are important to the heritage of the public

those parks serve. Conserving and interpreting those resources not only serve the altruistic purpose of preserving them and informing the public about resources important to them, but have practical results as well. First, an informed public is an interested public, and an interested public provides a powerful constituency in helping park professionals manage and enhance their park resources. Secondly, parks with enhanced cultural (and natural) resources are a boon to local economies because they attract visitors with disposable incomes. Nature and heritage tourism are now both recognized as important initiatives in the economic development of areas supporting natural and cultural attractions. The management trick for park professionals, of course, is how to maximize public benefit from the resources, without the public's "loving them to death" through overuse. This issue is of growing importance with the growth of population and affluence and the growth in appreciation of the nation's parks and their natural and cultural resources.

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