



Conversation on Design, Meaning, and Commemoration in Landscapes Valley Forge National Historical Park

Valley Forge National Historical Park, located 20 miles west of Philadelphia, tells the story of the Continental Army's enduring struggle and perseverance during the winter encampment of 1777-78. The challenge facing the National Park Service today is how to utilize the 3,600 acres that make up the park to help tell the story of what happened there and why it is so significant to our nation's development, while accommodating the recreational user who jog, walk and generally enjoy the park's trails and meadows everyday.

Following the 1777-78 winter encampment of the Continental Army, which devastated the region, the Valley Forge area was quickly restored to agricultural use. It continued as such until 1893 when the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania began to purchase lands to establish the first state park. The State Park Commission partially developed the park along the lines of national military parks, such as Gettysburg, constructing driving routes along lines of defense; inviting other states to erect monuments; and planting commemorative allees and groves. The plans were never fully executed, and little integrity of the original commemorative gestures remains. In addition, all the small-scale features of the original 18th and 19th century farm complexes were lost through demolition and disuse. The commission also demolished most post-encampment structures, including two 18th and 19th century industrial villages.

As a state park, Valley Forge was managed in a traditional park-like manner with manicured lawns, ornamental plantings, and recreational facilities. Over the years, especially as suburban development has enveloped the park, recreation became the dominant use: joggers, cyclists, sunbathers, and horseback riders can be found alongside visitors who come to learn about the historic events.

The National Park Service acquired the park in 1976, and has essentially maintained the status quo. The park landscape that remains, while lovely, is confusing - incomprehensible and fails to tell its own story. Through the general management planning process, the NPS will rethink the design and utilization of the landscape in an effort to tell the story of Valley Forge and its significance in this nation's struggle for independence.

Additionally, the park is working in partnership with the National Center for the American Revolution to develop a new museum on the site dedicated to telling the entire story of the American Revolution. This adds a level of complexity to rethinking the landscape because of the potential impact of a new structure to the site.

In an effort to guide the planning process, a one-day seminar was held exploring the future of commemorative landscapes and how to think about the commemorative landscape of this park in particular. As stewards of historic landscapes, the National Park Service knows and understands a great deal about 19th century forms and models. As the NPS enters into a major planning process for this park however, it is essential to understand what a 21st century commemorative landscape could be.

The seminar took place at Valley Forge and included a wide variety of participants such as architects, landscape architects, NPS employees, university scholars, as well as an audience made up of local constituents and park employees.

The following questions were posed:

1. What makes a meaningful place a powerful landscape?
2. The character-defining features of the 1778 historic landscape are lost. Yet the terrain, watercourses and long views remain, and there is a complete archeological record. What relevance does the historic scene have to contemporary interpretation and commemoration of the encampment?
3. The Valley Forge State Park Commission sought and largely succeeded in making a beautiful park, albeit at the expense of the historic landscape. What significance does the 19th century notion of beauty have for commemorative landscape design in the 21st century? What is the role of the park's abundant natural resources in commemoration?
4. Recreation is a traditional use at Valley Forge – dating back to the early 19th century. Only in the late 20th century has the desire for recreation resulted in the addition of facilities to the historic landscape. There are widely differing views on the compatibility of recreation in a place that commemorates a momentous event. What is the role for recreation at a historic site?
5. Each generation makes its mark on the park, adding to or diminishing the historic record. Conceptual design alternatives for a new museum in the park as well as other support facilities soon will be developed. What function should architectural expression have in a historic landscape?
6. The Valley Forge story is seminal to American history. Yet the predominant visitor to the park is white and middle class. Can the commemorative landscape demonstrate the meaning of the event to all Americans?

Conversation was animated and dialogue the primary objective. The day resulted in a number of observations which will shape planning decisions, but no dictums that are rigid or set in stone.

These thoughts are captured below:

- The landscape conversation can be summed up as relating to what is visible or invisible on the landscape and which elements should stay invisible or be made visible again.
- Visible elements:
 - Visitor center complex – some visible elements can be related to default or neglect
 - Topography is an historic feature, although somewhat manipulated
 - Tour roads
 - Jogging trails – People using the park recreationally are “part of the exhibit.”
 - Vernacular architecture
 - The iconic log house
 - The name “Valley Forge” – name recognition without a “product”
 - Deer are running amuck like rats!
- Invisible elements:
 - Log city is very important but invisible
 - Archeology
 - Historic transportation connections

- Natural resources are an important part of the story – How are they related to the history?
 - Entrenchments are invisible because of the tour roads over them.
 - View to river is obliterated
 - Allee of trees is gone
 - North side of park contains currently invisible elements – amphitheater, quarries, grand parade site
- Over time, it seems that apologies have been offered because VAFO is not a battlefield; however, panelists recognized the power of the “creation myth” at work here that is resonant for every culture. That is, the myth of the hero finding himself when threatened and conquering the odds.
 - The VAFO GMP is an important opportunity within the NE region to challenge our collective professionalism in reinventing the park.
 - Education and entertainment must be connected in order to reach a younger audience that does not relate to pre-WWII history.
 - Don’t isolate historic events – consider connections to Cooch’s Bridge, Brandywine Park, Battle of Paoli and coordinated interpretation
 - NPS should communicate the history of the landscape to visitors.
 - The interplay between building and landscape is important – the building is a nexus, an intermediary that helps the visitor go out into the landscape and understand it.
 - NPS has an exciting opportunity to create future historic value – “zones of sacredness” are a way to do this.
 - Be rigorous and honest in clarifying the intent – Question which landscape elements to leave in and leave out. The story is too complex to use all the artifacts.
 - What can the site tell us today? Continue the story up to the present. The evolution of the U.S. from colony to colonizer of the rest of the world?