What are historic landscapes? Historic landscapes range from several thousand-acre rural farms and ranch complexes, to several acre urban plaza sites, to addenda with a yard or two across the street. 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 historical property has a landscape component.

Imagining a historic residential district without sidewalks, lawns, trees, or an agricultural complex with buildings, but no fields, garden plots, or hedgerows; a densely populated city with no park system or plaza; 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 our landscape legacy before it is too late.

What is happening to our landscape legacy? The evolutionary nature of historic landscapes makes them fragile and highly vulnerable to loss and alteration. Several claims are made annually across millions of acres of farmland each year. Road widening projects disturb the rolling splendor of scenic parkways. Redvelopment undermines historic industrial landscapes. Modernization of urban centers impacts the park and plaza master works of landscape architects from the late-1800s to today. Incompatible development warps unique building and engineering structures and systems. Although the HALS program has officially been established, the effort to comprehensively develop the program needs your support.

Teams of students and interested professionals in landscape architecture, architecture, landscape and sites, with these records publicly available through the three programs have documented over 40,000 structures, buildings, and objects associated with the development of America’s historic landscapes nationwide through long-term efforts.

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 systems. Although the HALS program has officially been established, the effort to comprehensively develop the program needs your support.

The Historic American Landscapes Survey

In an effort to preserve, protect and interpret America’s significant and threatened historic landscapes, the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), the National Park Service (NPS) and the Library of Congress (LoC) cooperated to create the Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) program. 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 landscape research, planning, and stewardship underscores the value of a parallel program focused on historic landscape documentation. To date, the best projects have documented over 60,000 structures and sites, with these records publicly available through the Library of Congress.

What are the other documentation programs mentioned in the text? AHAIR and HALS have educated many generations about the relationship between land and history for the participant and the related community.

The success in documenting these landscapes, but little attention to the ongoing care of these landscapes, is a consistent theme. The Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) was established in 2000 to continue the work of these programs and to focus specifically on historic landscapes.

The Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) program aims to comprehensively develop the program needs your support.

The Halo Family, Mount Allison Shaker Village, New Lebanon, New York; view from left side of Shaker Village, street, walkway, and shrubs growing along the north side of the Second Dwelling House; James W. Rosenthal, photographer, 2009.


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-efforts include the landscapes of Syracuse and Rochester, New York, Missouri: Chicago's Burnham Plan; and Theodore Roosevelt Island, Washington, DC; east and west fountains; Meghan Clemmens, Anne E. Kidd, and Cal J. Mincey, delineators, 2007. Visit us on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/HeritageDocumentationPrograms/ for more information about the HALS program, or to access the HALS Guidelines for Drawings, History, or Photographs, visit our website: https://www.nps.gov/hdp/ The HABS/HAER/HALS Collection is available through the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division via the internet at http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/hh/