

# REDISCOVERING THE FOREST: THE EFFECTIVE USE OF HISTORIC CONTEXTS IN PRESERVATION PLANNING



SUSAN DETHERAGE ~ HISP710/711 ~ SPRING 2010

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## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: REDISCOVERING THE FOREST:  
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Susan L. Detherage  
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Directed By: DONALD W. LINEBAUGH, Ph.D., RPA  
Director, Graduate Program in Historic  
Preservation

The National Park Service regards the use of historic contexts as a foundation for the preservation planning process, yet there appears to be a disconnect between the creation of historic contexts and their use by local planners. Preliminary inquiries suggest that the role of contexts in the planning process is not clearly understood, and that the purpose and usefulness of historic contexts themselves are not clear to those that rely on them. This confusion has led many to assume that contexts are of secondary importance, to be developed after the completion of physical resource inventories and then only as time allows. This paper will look at the current role of historic contexts in the preservation planning process and how their usefulness as a framework for a broader perspective of the planning landscape may also increase the overall effectiveness of preservation planning.

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PLANNING

By

Susan L. Detherage

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Advisory Committee:

Doctor Donald Linebaugh, Chair, Director and Associate Professor, UMCP, HISP

Doctor Paul Shackel, Chair and Professor, UMCP, Department of Anthropology

Susan H. Renaud, Historic Preservation Planning Program Manager, National Park  
Service

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## Foreword

I had a hunch that the topic of historic contexts was an interesting possibility for a research project when my professor's initial response to the idea was negative. As I continued to explore the purpose and use of historic contexts in the preservation planning process, I observed similar reactions with an increasing bemusement. What is it, exactly, about these documents that so often brings out this type of response? Why is it that a document that seems to hold so much promise in theory completely fails to deliver in practice? As I began talking with the preparers and users of historic contexts, my original conviction that GIS maps were a missing component of the historic context document focused on a specific type of GIS presentation – that of thematically-linked historic resources portrayed as cohesive districts on the planning landscape. It is my hope that this paper will demonstrate the need for this type of perspective in preservation planning and how it may provide a more proactive approach to preservation efforts.

## Dedication

For Kate, who gives my life context and meaning.

## Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the time and information provided by the people shown below. My sincerest thanks goes to each and every one.

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## Chapter 1: Rediscovering the Forest

Over the past forty years, historic preservation has come to be increasingly accepted as a standard element of the planning landscape. According to a survey published in 2009, for example, more than 75% of respondent state transportation departments consistently include state historic preservation offices in their planning process.<sup>1</sup> Even so, each community's commitment to preservation can vary widely, as each one faces different levels of economic and development pressure: a small town in the midst of a largely agricultural area will see less need to protect its resources than a small town located on the outskirts of a growing metropolitan area. Planning is proactive by definition, however, seeking to establish a set of goals and priorities to further some desirable public policy. Being proactive in preservation planning issues can give preservationists the opportunity to educate communities and begin building support for preservation values before any resources are actively threatened.

My focus on the use of historic contexts as it applies to preservation planning follows from the theory that the best protection for historic resources lies within the planning process because of its proactive nature. As defined in the *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Preservation Planning*, a historic context is “an organizational format that groups information about related historic properties

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Klein, David Cushman, Danny Kwan, and Elizabeth Stepp. “Effective Practices For Considering Historic Preservation in Transportation Planning and Early Project Development – NCHRP Project 25-25, Task 49.” (Washington, D.C.: Cambridge Systematics, Inc., August 2009), 3-2.

based on a theme, geographic limits, and chronological period.”<sup>2</sup> For example, a historic context that focuses on the National Road in Maryland would look at, in part, the construction and maintenance of the road from 1811 to 1853, and list the types of physical resources associated with those activities, such as road cuts, bridges, toll houses, drainage culverts, paving quarries, etc. The scope of a historic context can be as narrow or broad as needed. For example, the theme of the National Road context can be widened to cover the businesses spawned by the road, which would include the public houses and inns built to cater to travelers, and the smithies and cartwrights that performed repairs on wagons and stagecoaches. The scope can also be broadened or narrowed by changing the time period or geographic area. In this case, the time period was determined by two major events affecting the road – its construction, beginning in 1811, through what is describe as its initial “heyday” ending with the opening of railroad lines in 1853.<sup>3</sup> The scope of a theme can depend on a wide variety of factors, but most often depends on the amount of time and resources available to cover the topic.

A clarification of the intended use of historic contexts in the preservation planning process will also be helpful, as I believe this to be a major source of confusion. At all levels of planning (federal, state, local), a mention of historic contexts almost always brings about a discussion of their usefulness in evaluating the significance of historic sites. While this is clearly a fundamental use of contexts, it can be argued that the use of historic contexts for planning purposes lies along an

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, *The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines for Preservation Planning* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1983), <http://www.nps.gov/history/HPS/pad/PlngStds/sources.htm> (accessed October 8, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Orloff Miller, “The Maryland National Road Historic Context” (Cincinnati, OH: Gray & Pape, Inc., September 8, 2005), 16-17.

entirely different plane. As a basis for *significance*, historic contexts serve as the framework within which specific properties are to be evaluated for their contribution to particular themes. In other words, the context is used to assess the relative importance of an individual resource that has been identified and documented to some extent. As a basis for *preservation planning*, federal guidelines discuss the role of historic contexts as providing the framework for highlighting information gaps and identifying survey activities that will most effectively support preservation efforts. Using the National Road example, this would include determining where to focus preservation efforts by helping to identify communities where historic resources related to the road appear to have been less extensively documented or to identify specific property types, such as tollhouses, that are missing or poorly represented in existing inventories.

The federal perspective on this approach is that preservation planning still uses contexts to assess significance, but on a broader scale; they use it to “make decisions about what is important for us to spend money and time on.”<sup>4</sup> What I will present here, however, is the concept of looking at all historic resources, regardless of significance, to see where opportunities might present themselves to protect resource areas that can portray a broader story. For example, when comparing an impeccably-preserved blacksmith shop amidst a line of strip malls with a group of blacksmith, livery, and cartwright shops having less integrity of features but located within a more-or-less intact landscape, which portrays a richer story? Both are important, but the focus is often put on the resource with a higher level of integrity, leaving those that are individually marginal at a greater risk of loss. The new role proposed for

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<sup>4</sup> Email communication from Susan Renaud dated April 5, 2010.

historic contexts in the following chapters is to use them to expand the boundaries, both conceptual and spatial, of individual resources by grouping them with other thematically-related historic resources to form a larger footprint on the planning landscape. In this exercise, National Register significance is not the immediate concern; what we are looking for is a total inventory assessment and how it all fits together to tell the broader story. Significance assessments, while important, should be regarded as a separate undertaking.

Conversations regarding historic contexts also quite often start at the level of a specific resource and the contexts' applicability to that resource. This focus on a specific resource, as opposed to the overlying historic themes that include that resource, may be viewed as a direct and unfortunate result of preservation history in the United States. Preservation efforts in the U.S. began with individual buildings and most preservation policies and regulations for the built environment continued to develop using this narrow, site-specific focus. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find that preservation planners today concentrate on getting individual resources designated, and spend relatively little time looking for ways to protect larger areas that can contain many historic resources. This is not to say that broader landscape programs have not been developed at all; there are many programs that encourage the formation of historic districts and heritage areas, although local community members are not always very receptive to the idea of designation. As private property owners, many feel that they should be able to do whatever they want to their property without having to run it by a local committee. It is, after all, a right generally guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and property owners seem to

take that right quite seriously. During the last decade, for example, only a single community in Baltimore County succeeded in getting the seventy-five percent support of its residents necessary to form a historic district. This suggests that the preservation tools successful for protecting individual properties may be too restrictive at the broader community level. Within this environment, therefore, it is not unreasonable that the greatest efforts center on the individual site. For purposes of the following discussion, however, I encourage the reader to take the opportunity to view the entire forest, not just a few exceptional trees.

Chapter 2 looks at the role of historic contexts in preservation planning as defined by *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Preservation Planning*. It also includes a description of the components of the historic context document and how the federal guidelines suggest the document should be used in the overall planning process. Chapter 3 takes a look at how context documents are developed and used in several state and local planning offices within Maryland. In Chapter 4, the development and use of one particular context, *The Maryland National Road Historic Context*, is presented as a case study of how such documents are developed and disseminated, and some of the pitfalls that can handicap the proper use of historic contexts, regardless of their content. Chapter 5 summarizes some of the key issues identified surrounding the use of historic contexts in planning and illustrates the benefits of looking at the broader planning landscape. Chapter 6 offers some recommendations on how to strengthen preservation planning outcomes through the effective use of historic contexts.

## Chapter 2: The Federal View

The National Park Service (NPS) is charged under the National Historic Preservation Act to provide guidance to the states in carrying out historic preservation activities. With regard to preservation planning activities, the NPS administers *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Preservation Planning* (hereafter referred to as “federal guidelines”) to assist states in designing effective goals and priorities to protect historic resources through the planning process. This section will describe the role of historic contexts in the planning process as defined in these standards and guidelines.

The federal guidelines view historic contexts as the foundation upon which future planning activities are based. As stated in Standard I, “[t]he development of historic contexts is the foundation for decisions about identification, evaluation, registration, and treatment of historic properties.” These decisions “are most reliably made when the relationship of individual properties to other similar properties is understood.”<sup>5</sup> This relationship, in turn, can be most clearly understood when all facets of the resources’ history have been linked together – e.g., their cultural basis, chronological appearance, and geographical range. Historic contexts are the documents that tell the larger stories of which individual resources can be viewed as the details; they help to supply a more three-dimensional picture of the world that

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, *Standards and Guidelines for Preservation Planning*.

each resource has inhabited, giving the resource itself a sharper focus and a richer history than it can carry in isolation.

The importance of historic contexts as planning tools, however, extends beyond the individual resource level. Contexts are also intended to supply the framework within which to develop preservation goals and priorities. Standard II states that a “series of preservation goals is systematically developed for each historic context to ensure that the range of properties representing the important aspects of each historic context is identified, evaluated, and treated.”<sup>6</sup> The concept of a “range of properties” highlights one of the advantages of using historic contexts: comparing the range of property types with existing inventories may identify specific types of resources that have been overlooked in previous surveys. For example, the National Road context includes not only the physical attributes of the road itself, such as bridges and culverts, but also the quarries that produced paving materials at various locations along the road, which have not been widely identified. This identification process can highlight property types that were once important to an industry or cultural practice, but are relatively scarce or unknown today due to their impermanence or declining visibility on the landscape. Sorting resources chronologically and thematically also enables them to be presented within their proper context, allowing the most vulnerable as well as the most historically significant resources to be identified.

The third standard, key to the proper application of the context data, states that “the results of preservation planning are made available for integration into broader

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

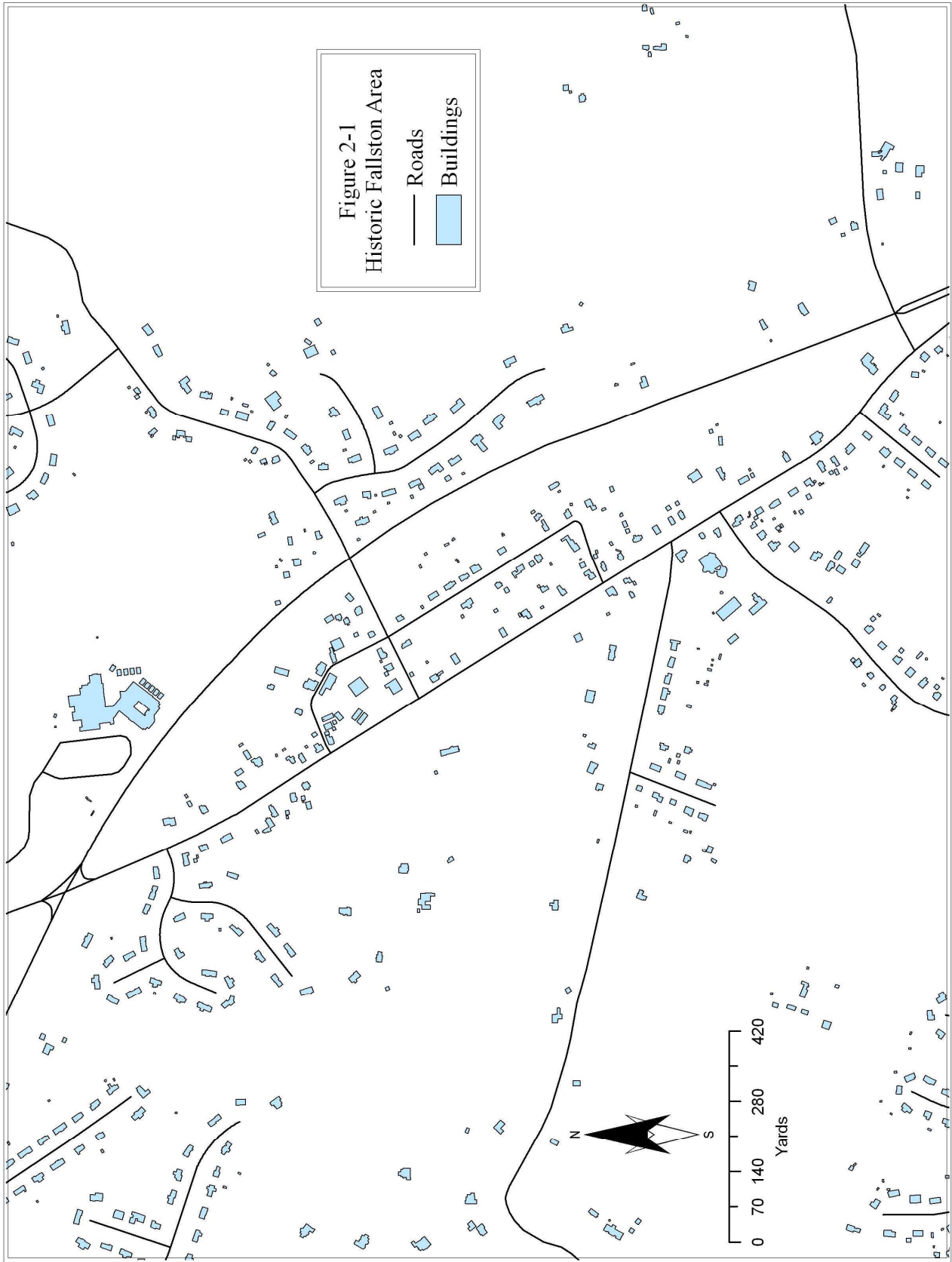


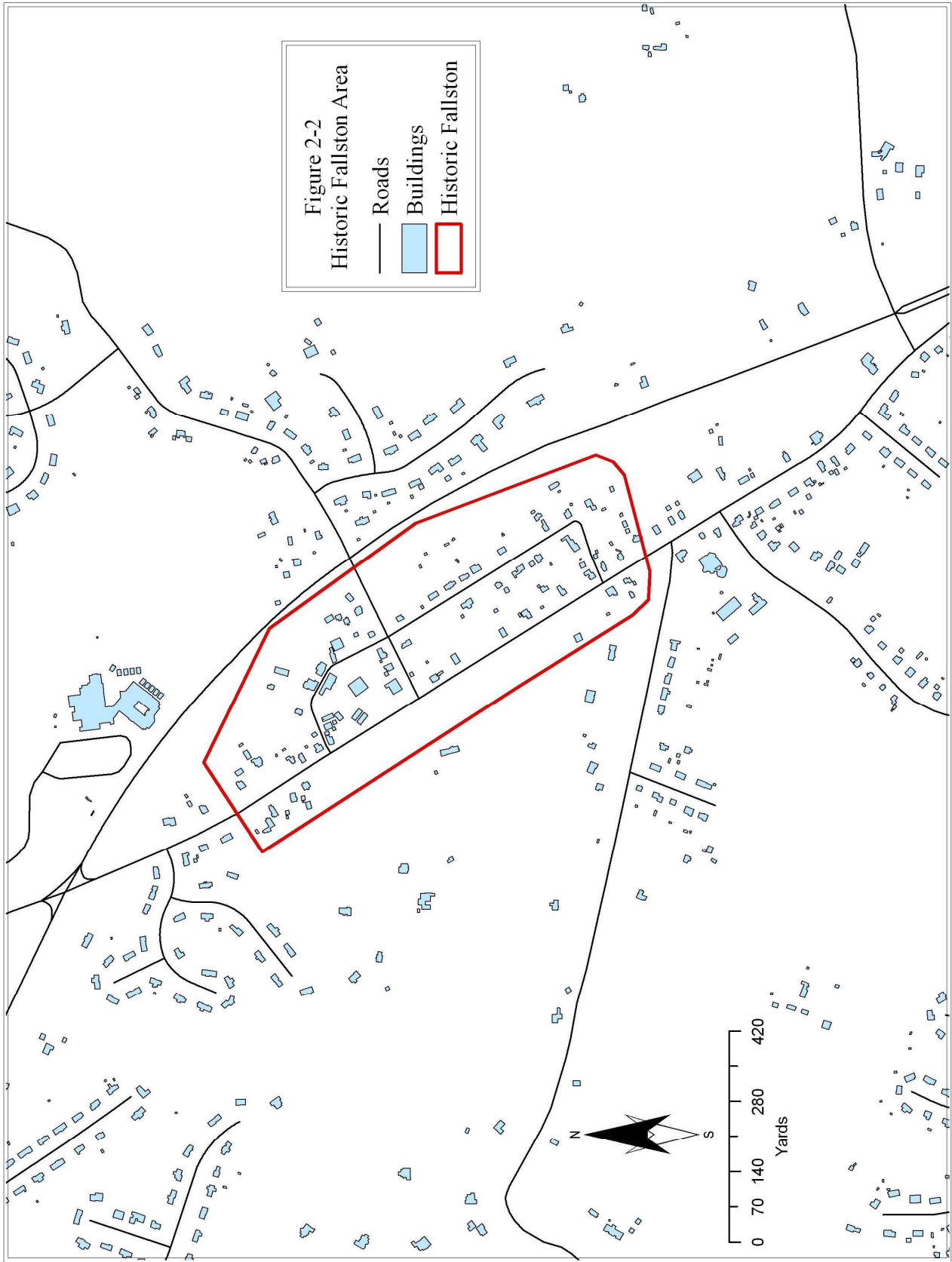
planning processes.”<sup>7</sup> Dissemination of information about the existence and location of historic resources is crucial for raising awareness and garnering support for the continued preservation of those resources. The development of geographic information systems (GIS) has been invaluable in projecting historical resources onto the planning landscape, but its potential has barely been tapped for preservation planning purposes. To illustrate, refer to Figures 2-1 and 2-2 on the following pages. Identifying historic resources as dots on a map, while contributing to the awareness of those resources, does not hint at the broader story of the historic context. Portraying those scattered, individual resources within a defined boundary immediately makes the statement that something happened in that place, that the area has a story to tell. Linking resources geographically also provides a stronger impact and higher visibility on the regional planning landscape. Regional planning for transportation, economic, and residential development looks at the landscape in terms of large areas that often cover several square miles; representing thematically-linked historic resources as cohesive districts expands their visual impact on that landscape, even when limited to a few square acres.

Accompanying the federal planning standards are specific guidelines intended to assist in gathering the information required for preservation planning. As with all planning processes, the initial steps call for planning the process itself, gathering input from the various stakeholders, and determining an appropriate review and revision process. The American Planning Association’s report, *Preparing a Historic Preservation Plan*, makes the important point that “successful implementation of a

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.





preservation plan will depend a great deal on the planning process.”<sup>8</sup> The report states that the most important aspects of the process are getting stakeholder buy-in and resolving potential conflicts before developing the current plan’s goals and priorities. This point cannot be overemphasized, as input from the public contributes directly to the ultimate success of the preservation plan. Stakeholder participation also helps ensure that the interests of the community will be addressed when choosing and developing the contexts from which future goals and priorities will be developed. This process develops a broad base of support at the point of implementation and also demonstrates to elected officials that historic preservation issues are important to the voters.

Historic contexts are the key documents in identifying and evaluating relevant goals and priorities for a geographic area’s historic resources. As described in greater detail below, historic contexts for planning purposes should be composed of three major sections: (1) a written narrative defining the time, place, and theme of the context; (2) a list of property types associated with the theme; and (3) the goals and priorities developed for those resources. In practice, there is a chicken-and-egg debate about the proper order of this particular process. One school of thought believes that contexts cannot be developed before knowing what types of resources exist, so that surveys should take precedence over other documentation efforts. A different perspective says that historic resources cannot be objectively evaluated absent relevant historic contexts, so that written narratives with associated property types

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<sup>8</sup> Bradford J. White and Richard J. Roddewig. *Preparing a Historic Preservation Plan*, Planning Advisory Service Report Number 450 (Chicago, IL: American Planning Association, 1994), 40.

should be developed first. Susan Renaud, Historic Preservation Planning Program Manager at the National Park Service, notes that this should be “an iterative process – background research for the narrative part gives you an understanding of the property types to be expected, and field survey identifies some of the individual resources that fit the property type expectations, which refines the description of property types, etc.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, one is not complete without the other; contexts and inventories should never be considered as final, but as works in process. Most jurisdictions have some type of written inventory and have a general idea about what themes played the most prominent roles in their history. It is not necessary to complete an exhaustive inventory prior to developing narrative contexts, nor is it feasible; the same holds true for developing all possible contexts that can apply to a single jurisdiction. One must also bear in mind that the presence or absence of a particular property type on the landscape does not always determine its level of significance in a region’s history; slave quarters are largely gone from most landscapes, but are clearly important to many different themes in American history. The narrative and the site inventory must be viewed *together* to determine the appropriate goals and priorities that apply.

Each historic context will have a scope limited to a specific time, place, and theme. These aspects are be outlined in a narrative document in sufficient detail to support the theme’s role and importance in the area’s development, but it need not cover every detail. As stated in the federal guidelines, “for planning purposes, a *synopsis* of the written description of the historic context is sufficient [emphasis added].”<sup>10</sup> Scholarly texts often already exist for specific topics within a region; these

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<sup>9</sup> E-mail communication with Susan Renaud dated April 5, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

should be referred to in the notes and bibliography of the document so that further information can be easily located as needed. Although not specifically addressed in the guidelines, both historic and modern maps are also important for this section of the document in order to spatially identify what areas were most heavily involved in relation to each theme. The creation of GIS layers to project this information onto the planning landscape is also critical to integrating it into the overall planning process.

Each context should also list the property types relevant to the theme (e.g., agriculture would include barns, silos, chicken coops, etc.), along with a general description of each type of structure and its purpose or use within that theme. A general description of where property types may be situated on the landscape can also be helpful, such as mills located near streams and rivers or railroad depots along existing or former rail beds. The expected current condition or integrity of property types should also be discussed: some property types may have disappeared completely from the landscape or remain only as foundations or archaeological resources, while other, more permanent, resources may be expected to remain relatively intact. When describing each property type in the context document, examples should be cited from the existing inventory whenever possible. Maps are important to this portion of the context as well, not only to identify where existing resources are known to be but also to help identify areas where other examples of similar resources might be located. The use of GIS tools to create layers of known and suspected resource areas may help direct general survey efforts as well.

All of the data is then analyzed to identify goals and priorities. Information gaps are identified by comparing thematically-related property types to lists of

previously inventoried historic resources; this helps highlight which property types have been extensively documented versus others that appear to be under-represented in the inventory. When displayed spatially using GIS tools, survey priorities can be identified between areas that are showing pressure from development and those that face little development activity. These types of comparisons and tools help identify areas of opportunity and potential risk for historic resources, and make the planning process more focused and efficient by directing efforts where they are most needed at a given point in time.

Competing priorities must be evaluated not only among different historic contexts and property types, but also among other planned land-use activities being considered by federal, state, and local authorities, as well as private individuals and developers. This makes integration of the context information into overall planning documents critical to preservation planning success. Expanding the boundaries, both conceptual and spatial, of historic resources by linking them thematically into cohesive districts makes a stronger impact on planning efforts than the identification of individual, non-contiguous resources. These expanded boundaries are most easily visualized through GIS maps, which also make historically-sensitive resource areas more readily projected onto the general planning landscape. These maps can also identify concentrations of historic resources that span several themes; locating a paving quarry related to the National Road on the same site or contiguous to the site of a milling operation, for example, can expand the basis of support for both resources by joining them spatially into one larger resource area.

Integrating historic resource goals and priorities into the land-use management decisions of a state or local government is not specifically defined in the federal guidelines. This is due to the fact that the federal guidelines are national in scope and need to remain general enough for each jurisdiction to adapt to its own needs. One critical factor at the local level involves what regulatory tools are available to protect historic resources, and this may be where the application of historic contexts to the planning process breaks down completely. Because contexts view historic resources as groups of assets located within geographically-defined areas, it is possible that the application of contexts in planning is more suited to larger land areas. As previously discussed, however, preservation ordinances have tended to focus on individual resources or only portions of a larger parcel. In the case of farmsteads, for example, designation has often covered only the portion of the property where the house and agricultural structures stand, omitting the fields that surround them and provide the agricultural landscape within which they developed. This approach is changing with growing numbers of designated historic districts and an increasing recognition of the cultural landscape immediately surrounding historic resources, but the focus at the local level is still largely on individual structures. Even at the level of districts, the larger story as told by historic contexts is often not clearly articulated or even understood. This lack of understanding often leads to preservation of appearances (i.e. architecture), which can lessen the appreciation of, and support for, the real purpose of preservation, which is to understand the present through the past.

Today, mainstream planning efforts are centered on GIS maps, and it has been noted that the federal guidelines have not addressed this aspect of the preservation



planning process. Although it is clear that spatial representations are crucial in today's planning environment, this was not linked to the federal preservation planning process largely due to the fact that the use of GIS had not yet spread beyond military applications at the time the federal guidelines were formulated.<sup>11</sup> The integration of history and technology has been slow, and that must be strongly encouraged along with improvements in regulatory frameworks for furthering the successful preservation of historic resources.

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<sup>11</sup> E-mail communication from Susan Renaud dated 4/5/10.

## Chapter 3: The State and Local View

The use of historic contexts for planning at the state and local level can be somewhat difficult to assess in a general, all-encompassing way, as each jurisdiction has its own management and regulatory structure, development pattern, economic and environmental issues, etc. Community involvement in preservation planning and other land-management issues can also vary widely. This combination often results in preservation planning goals and priorities that must look beyond resource-specific information gaps to address the information gaps that exist within the community and local government regarding the importance and benefits of historic preservation. This educational component of preservation planning may involve not only the need to inform stakeholders about the regulatory and economic aspects of preservation, but also to inform them of what is known about the history and culture of their community. Historic contexts can easily be used to supply these background stories and help build a strong level of support for preservation efforts, especially when developed in response to interests expressed by the community. A look at the state preservation plan followed by the historic preservation plans of three Maryland counties - Harford, Baltimore, and Prince George's - will demonstrate how historic contexts can be used within different environments.

It should be noted here that interviews were conducted with each of the jurisdictions whose preservation plans are reviewed, as well as with representatives from the State Highways Administration and non-governmental users and/or

preparers of historic context documents. The results of these interviews will be discussed in more detail below, but I would like the reader to be made aware yet again about the tendency to focus on individual resources. When those who find historic contexts not very useful were asked to explain why, they invariably started their explanation with reference to an individual resource and the difficulties encountered when trying to fit that resource under the general theme of a context document. This perception highlights several issues, but the one to keep in mind at this point is that preservation planning is not intended to benefit specific resources *in isolation*. While planning tools must be flexible enough to address individual resources, the overall planning process is also meant to focus on larger areas. Within the context of preservation planning, a cluster of individual resources thematically linked under a specific historic context should be treated as a single land unit whenever feasible. This is one of the benefits of using historic contexts in the planning process; they can link individual resources into larger, cohesive units that not only have greater visibility on the planning landscape, but can expand the boundaries of protection overall.

#### Maryland Historic Trust

It would stand to reason that state historic preservation offices (SHPOs) are better situated than local planning offices to develop broad, high-level planning tools. Maryland's SHPO, Maryland Historical Trust, provides assistance statewide to individuals, businesses, non-profit organizations, and local jurisdictions undertaking a wide variety of projects in areas such as preservation planning, financial programs such as tax credits and grants, and other federal, state, and local preservation

initiatives. Included in this assistance is the MHT library, which serves as a central repository for documentation generated about national and local history and culture, including not only published documentation, but also resource survey data, historic maps, journals, oral histories, and, of course, historic contexts.

During a recent online search of the MHT library catalog, I found a selection of nearly fifty historic context documents related to the state, ranging from general archaeological topics to specific military resources. Many of these documents were obviously prepared for specific projects or resources, such as “Historic Context and Archeological Monitoring Plan for Proposed Streetscape Improvements on MD 30, et al.”<sup>12</sup> and “Historic Context and Statement of Significance: USCGC Chokeberry.”<sup>13</sup> Other contexts are relatively general, such as “Modern [Architectural] Movement in Maryland”<sup>14</sup> and “The Interstate Highway System in the United States.”<sup>15</sup> I briefly reviewed a number of these documents, and became particularly interested in the “Maryland National Road Historic Context,”<sup>16</sup> which appeared to contain everything the federal guidelines required: a high-level narrative history, descriptions of property types, a complete listing of historic resources along the Maryland National Road (both contributing and non-contributing), and maps showing resource locations along the entire stretch of the road.

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<sup>12</sup> “Historic context and archeological monitoring plan for proposed streetscape improvements on MD 30, Beaver Street to Holland Street, Manchester, Carroll County, Maryland” (Washington, D.C.: The Louis Berger Group, Inc. and EHT Tracerics, Inc., 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Jayne Aaron, “Historic context and statement of significance. USCGC Chokeberry. United States Coast Guard 65-foot inland buoy tender” (Washington, D.C.: United States Coast Guard, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Isabelle Gournay, et al., “Context Essay. Modern Movement in Maryland” (Draft; University of Maryland, School of Architecture, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> “The Interstate Highway System in the United States” (East Orange, NJ: The Louis Berger Group, Inc., 1994).

<sup>16</sup> George Orloff, “Maryland National Road Historic Context” (Cincinnati, OH: Gray & Pape, Inc., September 2005).

Armed with this document, I arranged an interview with the staff at MHT to get their perspective on the use of historic contexts for planning purposes. The initial meeting was conducted in the fall of 2009 and felt like a complete dead end. This interview was actually the first of many experiences illustrating the gap between the use of contexts for significance evaluation and their use for preservation planning. Several months later, when I sat down to a second interview, my awareness of this gap was much clearer and I realized that I was trying to discuss historic contexts for planning with staff that used context documents solely for the purposes of significance assessment. The planning perspective that I was looking for was to be found in another office, and I was promptly introduced to the proper staff. My third interview with MHT staff was prefaced quite predictably by my contact's admission that he thought the use of historic contexts made sense in theory, but was impractical in reality. When I asked him to explain why, he paused for a few seconds, then began to talk about looking at an individual property. I stopped taking notes and, to be honest, I'm not even sure I let him finish his thought because, by this time, I had had this same conversation many times.

This series of events highlights how, even at the state level where one could reasonably expect the perspective to be somewhat broader, the use of historic context documents is still largely focused on (and dismissed regarding) individual resources. I was mired in a significance assessment perspective because it did not occur to MHT staff that contexts were useful in any other capacity. This position places MHT with the vast majority of practitioners. Trying to shift the perspective of a very detail-oriented profession toward a much more general viewpoint will be incredibly

difficult, especially because that attention to detail is still so important and necessary in many respects. In preservation planning, however, there is a growing need for this broader perspective, and the proper use of historic contexts is one of the tools that can be of great value in supporting that effort.

That said, there is also a problem in becoming *too* broad, and that appears to be the case with the 2005 Maryland Preservation Plan.<sup>17</sup> Although the plan contains a great deal of useful information and has many good ideas, it tries to cover too much ground and loses any sense of focus on overarching themes or goals. With regard to historic themes, there is very little indication of what major contexts might be specific to Maryland. For example, there is no mention at all of the large military presence within the state, and I could not find the word “crab” in the entire document. Given the importance of the blue crab to human habitation in the Chesapeake Bay area over hundreds of years, the omission is problematic. While an appendix to the plan provides a framework of general themes for the state, they are at a level so broad as to be applicable to any number of different states. Because the planning cycle (life span) of the preservation plan is five years, a relatively short period of time to effect sweeping change, it may be more effective to focus the proposed goals on specific themes that may have been long overlooked or are approaching landmark anniversaries, such as the upcoming bicentennial of the War of 1812.

My final interview for this project was with the staff that oversee the Maryland Heritage Areas Program (MHAP) at MHT. Their perspective and goals clearly reflect the use of historic contexts as heritage areas specifically identify

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<sup>17</sup> Maryland Historical Trust, “The Maryland Preservation Plan, 2005” (Crownsville, MD: Maryland Historical Trust Press, 2005).

districts that demonstrate one or more historical and/or cultural themes. Although the focus of heritage areas is more closely connected to the development of heritage tourism than the more traditional historic district focus of architectural control, the fundamental concept for both is the protection and preservation of an area's historic resources and character. In addition, the focus is exactly in line with what I propose throughout this document – viewing the landscape as historic resource *areas* as opposed to disconnected sites. One of the strategies shown in MHAP's current strategic planning document is to “assist [heritage area] management entities to work with local planning offices on comprehensive plans.”<sup>18</sup> The heritage areas program is a fairly new arrival to Maryland, so a track record of planning activities based on those areas has not yet been built. Portraying historic contexts on the landscape for these areas will be even more important, as the boundaries of heritage areas do not necessarily encompass the entire geographic range of a theme, particularly when related to urban areas. Directing planning efforts with those expanded boundaries in view will help protect heritage area boundaries and possibly much of the adjoining areas that contain historic resources but were not included within the actual boundaries.

While MHAP staff strongly agreed with the use of contexts for developing heritage areas, I did notice one troubling aspect of the method used to document those themes. Organizations interested in creating a heritage area are required to submit management and strategic plans, and typically receive grants to hire consultants who help with that process. The development of related historic contexts is typically

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<sup>18</sup> *Maryland Heritage Areas Program - Charting a Sustainable Course for the Next Decade: 2010-2020* (Baltimore, MD: MD Department of Planning, January 2010), 9.

assigned to the consultant as part of the scope of work, and MHAP staff seemed to think that was quite normal and acceptable. From the perspective of a profession that is always limited on what it can accomplish because of funding constraints, however, it would appear that this may be a preventable cost. Many context documents already exist that can easily be adapted for use on multiple projects, yet thousands of dollars are spent to recreate them on every new project. MHT itself funds the creation of many of these contexts, yet does not attempt to reuse them on new projects. They appear to become reference documents for researchers only, when they could and should be used for so much more. While there are certainly many topics that will not already be available, once a historic context is developed, it should be kept available as a tool that can be adapted and reused many times.

In summary, I found that historic contexts are not considered useful beyond their use in developing themes for heritage areas, and that there are no real plans or initiatives to develop them for proactive planning purposes. The heritage areas initiative appears to signal recognition of the need for a broader focus on the preservation landscape, but the use of this focus for a more proactive approach in preservation planning does not yet appear to be a goal at the state level. The effective use of the documents themselves also seems to be problematic: for a document that appears to garner little regard, a large amount of funding is spent upon creating them over and over. Regarding the National Road historic context document that I chose as a case study earlier, I have to admit that it did not play the central role I had envisioned for it; that is, as a document that all would appreciate and covet for their own planning purposes. This was largely due to the fact that the focus of preservation



planning simply wasn't easily turned toward that objective. In spite of this disappointment, the story of the creation of the document and the controversy that swirls around it makes it a useful case study about why some historic contexts can fail in spite of themselves.

### Harford County

Harford County is located in the northeastern part of Maryland and, while still largely agricultural, has experienced unprecedented growth within the last fifty years. According to census data, the population of Harford County increased from 76,722 in 1960 to 218,590 in 2000.<sup>19</sup> Although much of the growth has been focused in the southeastern portion of the county within the development envelope<sup>20</sup> along Routes 40 and 152, the conversion of family farms into residential communities of varying densities regularly occurs outside of this area as well. Long-time residents who have witnessed this dramatic growth are far outnumbered by those new to the county and unfamiliar with its heritage. While preservation planning is critical to preserving the county's rural history, it will only be successful when recognized by government officials as an area of concern to a majority of the community. In this case, contexts play an important role in supporting the goals and priorities of the preservation plan by supplying the background documentation needed to educate and inform a community that is largely unaware of the history of its surroundings.

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<sup>19</sup> CensusScope. (University of Michigan: Social Science Data Analysis Network), [www.CensusScope.org](http://www.CensusScope.org) (accessed March 23, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> *Harford County 2004 Master Plan and Land Use Element Plan (As Amended)*, (Bel Air, MD: Harford County Department of Planning and Zoning, May 2004). Page one of the plan defines the development envelope as "a geographic area for planned development" that allows the county to "begin staging and directing more intense growth into a specific area."

Harford County's 2010 Draft Historic Element Plan explicitly recognizes the usefulness of historic contexts when it states:

*“Some of the historic structures that constitute Harford's heritage... might be viewed as ‘standing on their own merit.’ On the other hand, other resources are best understood as parts of a larger picture.”*<sup>21</sup>

While federal guidelines consider *all* resources as best understood within the “larger picture,” this statement at least acknowledges that an individual resource represents only one part of a broader story. Harford County's preservation plan provides synopses of six themes that are reflected prominently on the county's landscape. These themes were developed for prior element plans and have not been expanded upon in recent years, as frequent changes in planning personnel and county management have affected preservation activity over the past decade. The themes, which include farmsteads, villages, transportation-related structures, industrial sites, religious structures, and municipalities, are relatively broad and provide extant examples of related resources under each theme. While the county itself has not focused on creating historic context documents, it relies heavily on publications produced by the Harford County Historical Society. The *Harford Historical Bulletin* is produced quarterly and focuses on specific types of resources within the county, such as colored schools or bridges that span the Susquehanna River. While these do not provide lists of property types, they do include extensive lists of known resources and could easily be converted to the type of historic context document recommended by federal guidelines. There are also several projects that have produced quite

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<sup>21</sup> Harford County Department of Planning and Zoning, “Draft Historic Element Plan – Harford County, Maryland” (Bel Air, MD, January 2010), 7.

excellent maps of where particular types of historic resources were located in the county throughout the years, such as post offices and canning operations.

Harford County is an example of a jurisdiction that is working to strengthen the integration of preservation of its historic resources into overall planning priorities. The preservation element plan lists seventy-nine county-designated historic resources, which include fourteen historic districts and the skipjack Martha Lewis, proving that the county has had some success in its past preservation efforts, even though only two resources have sought designation within the last three years. The county has had success in developing a strong agricultural preservation program; as of August 2009, nearly 16% of the county's total land area has been protected through agricultural and conservation easements.<sup>22</sup> These designations also help protect the historic resources found within those areas by reducing development pressure, but are separate from the historic preservation planning function.

As designation of the county's historic resources is relatively slow, the preservation plan's top priorities are focused less on resource information gaps than on the need to strengthen support within the community and county government for the increased protection of historic resources already identified. To this end, plans are being made to apply for Certified Local Government (CLG) status, which will allow the county to apply for much-needed grants to improve community outreach and education efforts. Using historic contexts to tell the story of Harford's historic resources will make these outreach efforts more effective by highlighting different

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<sup>22</sup> "Accomplishments as of August, 2009 [table]" (Bel Air, MD: Harford County Department of Planning and Zoning website), <http://www.harfordcountymd.gov/PlanningZoning> (accessed March 2010).

areas of interest within the community that can be built upon to improve support for overall preservation efforts.

### Baltimore County

Baltimore County shares its eastern boundary with Harford County, its northern boundary with Pennsylvania, and extends south to almost entirely surround Baltimore City, the largest urban area within the state. This extensive geographic range includes both rural and densely-populated urban areas, all with a rich and divergent history. The county currently has over 370 designated historic resources, 9 historic districts, and approximately 2,900 total inventoried resources. The goals and priorities for historic resources in the master plan are split between rural and urban areas, but both areas focus on comprehensive inventory efforts, clarification of significance assessment criteria, and development/adaptation of zoning tools to address development issues as they affect historic resources.

The county master plan also provides a framework for local communities to develop their own detailed community plans that allow a focus on immediate needs. Twenty-four of these plans are in effect and are summarized in an appendix to the master plan. Only five of those summaries reference historic resources, which indicates that the focus of most of these plans is not on the preservation of local historic resources.

Baltimore County appears to have a strictly resource-based approach toward its historic assets, with attention to assessing each resource on its own merits. Historic contexts as general resource documents are not recognized by staff as useful for planning or significance assessment. This may not be apparent when reading the

county's master plan, as it specifically defines "context" as "the term used to identify... geographic and/or functional relationships; it establishes the setting by which the degree of importance can be evaluated," and one of the actions is to "complete a geographically and thematically comprehensive inventory."<sup>23</sup> Between these two statements, however, is a paragraph that states, in part:

*"A full understanding of a property's importance for the community's present and future can only be achieved by knowing its place in the context of a complete inventory of all the remaining historic features in Baltimore County."*<sup>24</sup>

This statement is troublesome as it not only indicates some confusion regarding how historic resources are typically assessed under federal guidelines, it also seems to negate a resource's past when considering its importance for the "present and future." For preservation planning purposes, it does not allow for the broader understanding of a resource outside of what is still visually evident on the landscape and the values it embodies beyond its mere existence.

The master plan does not speak to any of the historic themes that once played important roles in the development of the county. While focusing specific attention on several historically African-American communities, it provides no discussion of how these communities arose, what their role in the broader scope of history might have been, or even if they should be preserved as historic districts. Instead, goals for these resources focus on improving infrastructure and community services, with no reference toward discovering or maintaining the historic integrity of the communities

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<sup>23</sup> *Master Plan 2010 – Baltimore County* (Towson, MD: Baltimore County Office of Planning, February 2000), 210-211.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

as a whole. This is indicative of how the master plan appears to address all historic resources; that is, as resources to be used productively in the future while retaining their distinctive architectural features. While it is understood that the present and future viability of historic resources is an important issue and has a legitimate place in preservation planning, it should not be the sole consideration when setting goals and priorities. Some effort must be made to explain the importance of historic resources beyond their physical appearance, which is purely aesthetic absent a deeper cultural or historical meaning.

This is not to say that the county entirely disregards the concept of thematically-grouped resources. Several actions are proposed to increase the number of historic districts within the county, so recognition of the value of contexts to link resources is clearly appreciated. It appears that better understanding of *all* of the values and appropriate uses of historic contexts would help strengthen the county's efforts in protecting its resources. For example, the use of contexts would help to focus survey efforts more effectively by highlighting property types that are most affected by development or those that are not well-represented in the existing inventory. It would also assist communities in their planning efforts by giving them historic frameworks within which to view their own resources and determine how best to assess and protect those resources. It may also help to identify thematically-linked historic resource areas that have not been identified as districts worthy of preservation efforts in the past.

Prince George's County

Prince George's County is located in the south-central portion of Maryland and borders on the District of Columbia and Virginia along much of its western boundary. It is similar to Baltimore County in its division between rural and urban areas and total population numbers, but its smaller size gives it a population density more than thirty percent greater than that of Baltimore County (see Figure 3-1).<sup>25</sup> Preservation planning for the county falls under the Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission, which brings together both Prince George's and Montgomery counties to coordinate parks and land-use planning activities at a broader level. While the two counties often coordinate efforts in various land-use projects, preservation planning is typically handled independently by each county. Prince George's County has a substantial preservation planning commitment in terms of resources and personnel, and is considered by MHT to be at the forefront of preservation planning issues and concepts. Its "Preliminary Historic Sites and

Figure 3-1				
U.S. Census Bureau Data	Harford County	Baltimore County	Prince George's County	Maryland
Population, 2008 estimate	240,351	785,618	820,852	5,633,597
Population, percent change, April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2008	10.00%	4.20%	2.40%	6.40%
Population estimates base (April 1) 2000	218,590	754,292	801,515	5,296,516
Land area, 2000 (square miles)	440.35	598.59	485.43	9,773.82
Persons per square mile, 2000	496.8	1,259.3	1,652.6	541.9

U.S. Census Bureau, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/> (accessed February 23, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Refer to Appendix A for a more extensive comparison of statistics.

Districts Plan” lists over 420 designated historic resources, proposes 120 new resources, and identifies fifty-nine historic communities, two of which are listed on the National Register.

Out of all of the offices I visited for this project, Prince George’s County preservation planning staff appeared to be the most aware of the value of historic contexts and the most open to their use. Even among this group, however, I found that contexts are viewed as perfect-world documents that could not realistically be produced without additional funding and personnel hours that are rarely available. This perception appears to conflict with many of the statements made in their own preliminary preservation plan, which talks about the need to encourage cultural associations and thematic connections. Some of the specific issues identified by stakeholders were “the value of presenting historic resources thematically in addition to geographically, and the need to enhance connections between historic resources that may be isolated and unrelated to their current surroundings.”<sup>26</sup> One of the strategies listed in the Preservation Planning chapter states:

*“Ensure that potential development impacts to historic and cultural resources are reviewed comprehensively by all relevant agencies and departments.*

***Such a comprehensive review may help to avoid the isolation of historic sites from their historic context*** [emphasis added].”<sup>27</sup>

This is precisely the information that is made available with the proper use of historic contexts. Preparation of historic contexts that include a list of associated property

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<sup>26</sup> Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, “Preliminary Historic Sites and Districts Plan – Prince George’s County, Maryland” (Upper Marlboro, MD: Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, December 2009), 31.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 38.



types is followed by GIS mapping of the historic areas that are known to currently contain, or once contained, the relevant property types. The end product provides a much more useful representation of the historic landscape than a map of scattered resources with no apparent connection, particularly when compared with comprehensive planning maps.

Even while Prince George's County preservation planners clearly see the usefulness of linking historic resources thematically and geographically, there still appears to be a fundamental misread on the makeup and use of the historic context document. To have developed context documents for the major themes in their county, one staff member commented, would have meant that they've had "nothing but time."<sup>28</sup> In other words, the preparation of a historic context document is a time-consuming luxury on which they can ill-afford to spend precious resources. When I asked about a listing of property types into which resources are placed for survey purposes, I found that the staff simply used the information that they knew as professionals. It isn't difficult to follow the thought process: there is little need to compile a list of housing types when everyone knows a post-war rancher or turn-of-the-century Queen Anne when they see one. As professionals, however, we must be able to communicate this information to the communities we serve. By making the information that is relevant to our communities readily available in written format, we pass our knowledge on to the people who will ultimately make the preservation of historic resources possible.

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with PG County staff on March 24, 2010.

## Chapter 4: The View from the Road

My initial discovery of the “Maryland National Road Historic Context” document is one of a series of events that has led me to an increasing interest in scenic byways and how to manage their development and, most importantly, protect their resources. My childhood memories are full of long road trips along scenic routes dotted with interesting historic sites, and the two are inextricably linked in my mind as experiences to be treasured and preserved for future generations.

In late summer of 2009, I had just completed an internship at the American Battlefield Protection Program that broadened my bricks-and-mortar understanding of preservation to include landscapes. The concept of levels of significance had also been visually demonstrated on battlefield maps that show the boundaries of core areas (where fighting actually took place), study areas (which include key terrain such as avenues of approach, obstacles, et al.), and potential National Register areas, as shown in Figure 4-1. When the National Road document fell into my hands, I had also begun looking at how to develop a corridor management plan for Maryland’s Horses and Hounds Scenic Byway. It all seemed to fit perfectly into my theory of how to widen the scope of preservation planning to the thematic context level in order to gain breathing room and a broader foothold for historic resources on the planning landscape. I subsequently learned that most preservationists saw historic contexts as only appropriate “in a perfect world.” Here enters the real world.

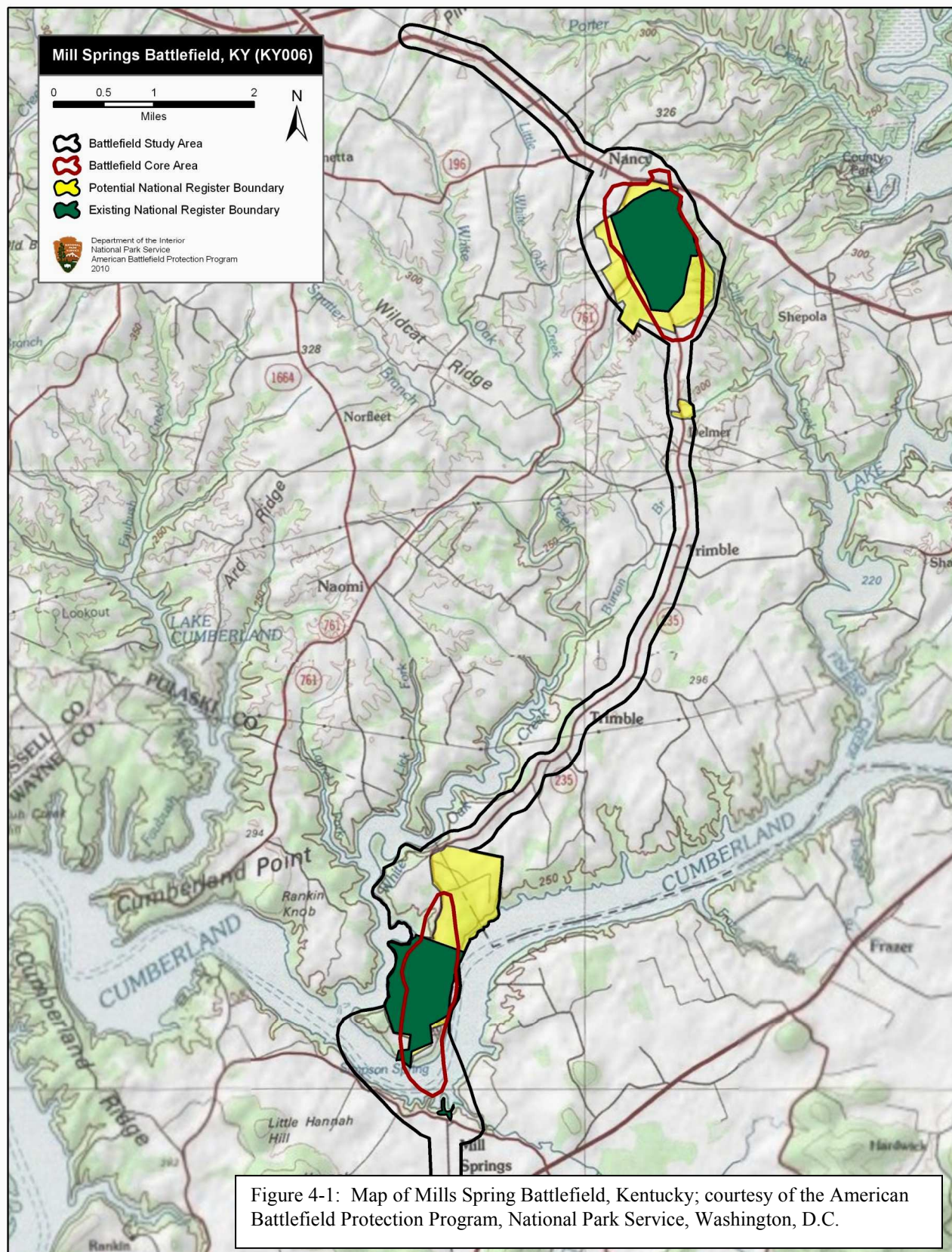


Figure 4-1: Map of Mills Spring Battlefield, Kentucky; courtesy of the American Battlefield Protection Program, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

The statement of intent for the National Road context notes that the consultant was “engaged by the Maryland Historical Trust to define the Historic Contexts and Property Types associated with the historic National Road across that state. These investigations are part of a larger effort to create a Multiple Property Documentation Form.”<sup>29</sup> On the surface, without fact-checking any of the history (administrative or thematic), this appears to be what was produced. The main section of the document is given over to historical narratives covering seven themes, each including a list of associated property types.<sup>30</sup> Appendix A, bound separately, contains spreadsheet data covering 1,071 historic resources, including resource names, various identifying numbers, map locations, street addresses, and whether they can be considered an associated property type within the National Road context based on criteria established by the National Park Service’s Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF).<sup>31</sup> Appendix B, also bound separately, contains color maps that show the National Road Byway in segments of approximately 7.5 miles. These maps include a large amount of information regarding the locations of historic sites and districts; unfortunately, the presentation is somewhat muddled by the fact that the data is projected onto a topographic map (see Figure 4-2). Putting it all together, the National Road context document appears to be a valuable collection of information regarding historic resources along the National Road in Maryland.

In actual practice, however, I was not able to find a single professional who

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<sup>29</sup> Miller, Orloff, i.

<sup>30</sup> The Abstract states that there are eight themes, but I could only identify seven; my apologies if I overlooked one.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior. *Guidelines for Completing National Register of Historic Places Forms, Part B: How to Complete the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1999).

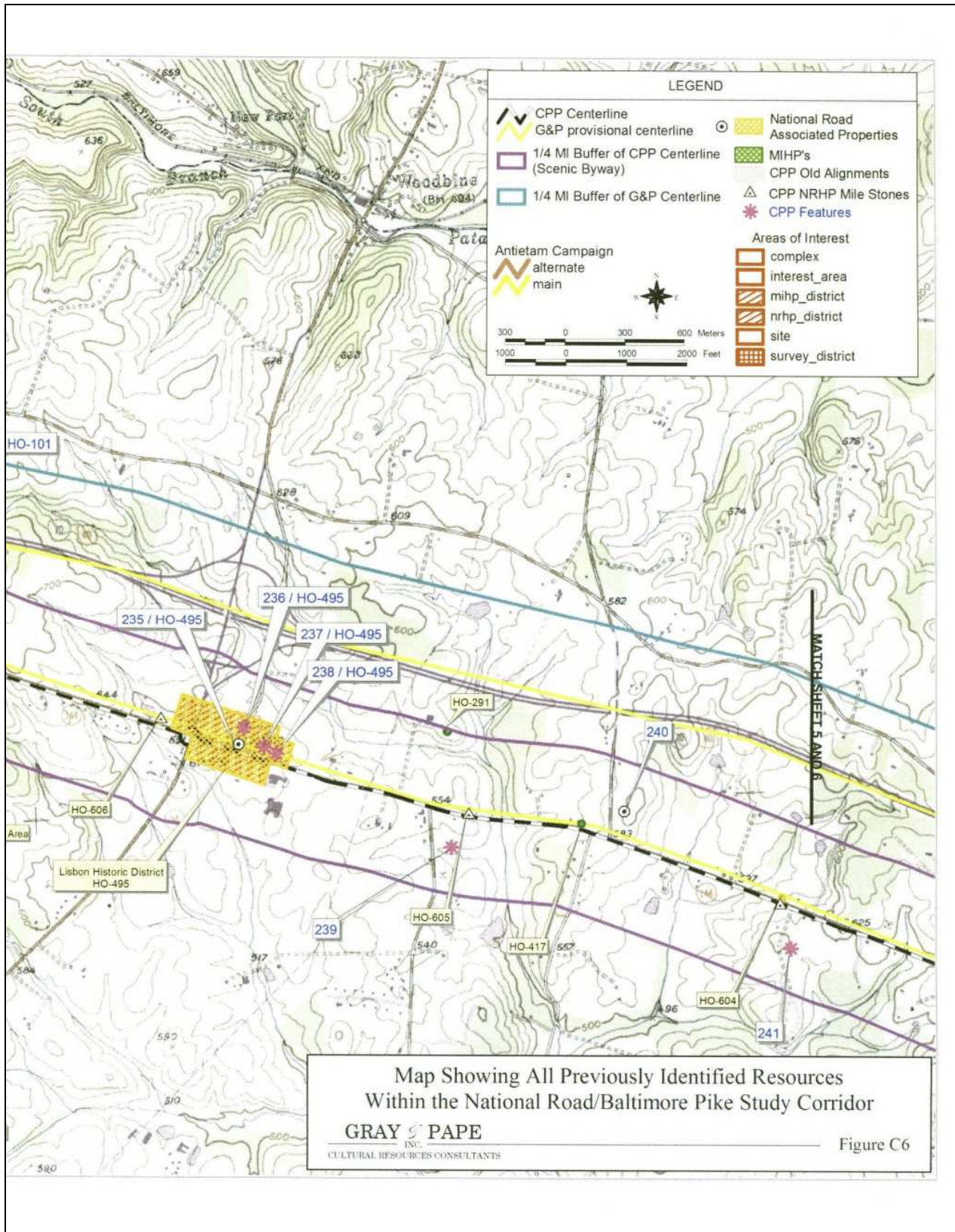


Figure 4-2: Map from Appendix B of the Maryland National Road Historic Context.

used the document, nor did I find anyone that had anything nice to say about it. This assessment of the context document is so closely entwined with the fact that the project itself was apparently something of a disaster that it was difficult to separate one from the other. When the staff at MHT were asked what it was about the *document* that they didn't like, they didn't express dissatisfaction over any particular details of the document. In fact, the staff I spoke with could not remember exactly why the document is considered "bad," they just remembered the difficulties experienced during the project itself. This may also explain why I was unsuccessful in getting a call back from anyone within the consultant's office regarding the document.<sup>32</sup>

The project difficulties were at least partially explained to me by Adele Air, current Executive Director of the Maryland National Road Association (MNRA). MNRA is a non-profit group whose purpose is to support the development of, and protect the resources along, the Maryland portion of the Historic National Road Scenic Byway, one of the federally-recognized America's Byways. According to Ms. Air, some of the basic assumptions made by the consultants when assessing the relevance and significance of historic resources in relation to the National Road caused a deep rift between the communities and the consultants. Some choices appeared arbitrary, such as considering resources as irrelevant because they had existed prior to the construction of the road, regardless of the fact that their existence helped determine the actual route of the road. According to the MPDF, this type of

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<sup>32</sup> My original intent had been to get a copy of the complete document, for which I was willing to pay a reasonable amount, but I never succeeded in talking to anyone that could help me do so.

resource would easily fall within the definition of associative characteristics as an example of “the presence of...resources that helped determine location.”<sup>33</sup> There was also some dissatisfaction over the amount of actual fieldwork done by the consultants, who appeared to have based the document entirely on prior research and inventory data supplied to them by MHT. The apparent refusal of the consultants to amend their assessment criteria or to widen the scope of the context document to include the resources they considered irrelevant to the initial theme added to the overall discontent with the results, and the entire project was written off as a bad job by everyone involved.

The question of whether the National Road context document can be a useful tool for preservation planners along the National Road Scenic Byway had still not been answered to my satisfaction, however. Ms. Air was willing to revisit the document, as she had not been involved with the MNRA in her current capacity during that time period. Because her background is more closely related to history and interpretation, she did not attempt to offer a perspective on the document’s usefulness for planning purposes, but she did feel that, with a few corrections and adjustments, the document could be quite useful for MNRA purposes, which are currently directed toward interpretation and tourism development.

With this somewhat positive assessment on the contents, I reviewed the document critically and decided that there is one major flaw with the National Road context document: none of the data is available digitally. Without the GIS data, the maps in Appendix B are essentially worthless; the topographic background makes

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<sup>33</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, *How to Complete the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form*, 14.

them too busy to even be successfully photocopied. The resource data in Appendix A is helpful, but it would have to be entered manually into a database in order to be useful in any way. The narrative historical contexts and associated property types could be scanned and distributed, at least, but they cannot be easily updated, which is crucial to keeping data relevant and accurate. The information itself is useful and has sufficient references to allow further research as needed; it may be considered a good example of a relatively broad-scope historic narrative. When evaluating the usefulness of the entire document for broad-scale preservation planning purposes, however, I have to admit that the lack of the information in electronic format, particularly the GIS data layers, is a critical blow. Nevertheless, the narrative, database information, and maps make the document a rich resource for future preservation planning efforts along the Maryland National Road.

The lack of context data in electronic format contributes to the largest stumbling block that I found with regard to any historic context – the general lack of availability. Ms. Air told me that she had not been able to get a copy of the historic narrative section of the document, having been informed by MHT that they did not have one. I have to admit that, from my own experience, this is entirely possible. I have had problems getting information from MHT due to the library search capability on the MHT website. When I began research for this project in the fall of 2009, I searched online for any historic contexts located at MHT and located only twelve. I subsequently visited the MHT library in person, explained what I was looking for, and the librarian and another staff member pulled contexts from the shelves well beyond the dozen I had located online. It is possible that anyone looking for the



National Road context online at the time of Ms. Air's request could very well have thought that there *was* no copy. A search of the MHT library website in April 2010 located over fifty context titles in the library database. This is one of those very real problems with using historic contexts – they are often hidden in a library's cataloging system, buried within a transportation study, or lost in a backlog of archive materials that have yet to be inventoried, much less digitized. The documents are finding the light of day only slowly and, without a central repository, it is only the truly dedicated and skilled researcher that will find what they need a reasonable percentage of the time.

## Chapter 5: The Rear View

To summarize the general feeling of the preservation planning world, historic contexts are a great idea in theory, but have little value in practice. They are viewed as documents that are either inadequate to the task of evaluating significance or detailed research papers that require high levels of resource investment to develop. In this chapter, I will take a critical look at the general preservation planning environment and demonstrate a different perspective on the use of historic contexts, one that uses contexts to strengthen preservation efforts.

I continue to be stymied by the apparent inability or unwillingness of many preservationists to look beyond the level of the individual historic resource. The profession seems to be locked into the idea that gaining a large amount of control over individual properties or districts is the best or even, perhaps, the only way to accomplish preservation goals. This idea is also shared by a large percentage of the public in a quite negative way. In western Maryland, for example, preservation has such a bad name in the face of individual property rights that the MNRA won't even invoke the *ghost* of preservation, but sticks to the language of economic development and heritage tourism. I certainly don't dismiss the need for adequate controls over certain outstanding historic resources, but I believe that we (as preservationists) lose more resources than we protect because of this perception. We need to remember that not everyone is as passionate about preservation as we are; in fact, many people are so passionate about things that appear to clash with preservation, such as individual

property rights, that they become equally passionate *against* preservation when it appears to threaten those rights.

Prying the preservationists' view off of the individual property isn't needed just at the state and local level, but at the federal level as well. While federal guidelines encourage looking at resources en masse, the goal is directed solely toward the individual resource, discounting the value of looking at the broader picture as a complementary goal in itself. Preservation planning should not be focused solely on preserving individual historic properties; it should also be used to put in place graduated levels of protection over areas where not enough is known to adequately evaluate each resource or where local sentiment is against stricter preservation regulation. The single most misunderstood concept in preservation planning is that getting a complete inventory of properties is the ultimate goal. In fact, a complete inventory is largely meaningless if you are not able to somehow protect those properties. A zoning overlay with minimal restrictions over, for example, demolitions, building heights, and setbacks can be used to slow the loss or alteration of historic resources in areas that appear in danger of such actions. It is unrealistic to expect to inventory and designate every resource, as there is simply not enough oversight capability to make that number of designations feasible in any given jurisdiction.

This is why it is necessary for preservation planners to also broaden their perspective on available planning tools. Many zoning options are available in addition to the more restrictive tools commonly used to protect individual historic resources. Zoning tools that allow for less intrusive ways of preserving the character of historic

areas may be more acceptable alternatives to traditional historic district designations, particularly where a community clearly has no interest in the more restrictive measures. Prince George’s County has one such tool specifically geared toward preservation known as the Architectural Conservation Overlay Zone.<sup>34</sup> Although one planner describes it as “preservation lite,” it moves in the right direction because it can be structured to be much less restrictive regarding what can be done with a particular resource and, perhaps more importantly, only 21% of affected property owners have to agree to it. Harford County has a zoning designation known as the Village Residential District, which is “intended to preserve and enhance the character and function of established rural settlements”<sup>35</sup> and only applies general limits, such as setbacks and building heights. Baltimore County also has a conservation zone designation that can cover historic resources.<sup>36</sup> The concept of overlay zones is a well-established tool that preservation planners should be encouraged to promote for preservation purposes. Recognizing that a little protection is better than none can go far toward protecting resources and may actually end up being quite effective as a wedge to get further protections in place in the future.

The type of context needed for broader preservation planning purposes does not require a highly detailed analysis of the relevant theme, although it must be strong enough to support the premise that historic resources related to that particular theme have existed and/or still exist within a particular geographic area. Current inventories, most of which are located within an electronic database of some type, can be labeled with their likely thematic associations, then portrayed as a GIS layer to study their

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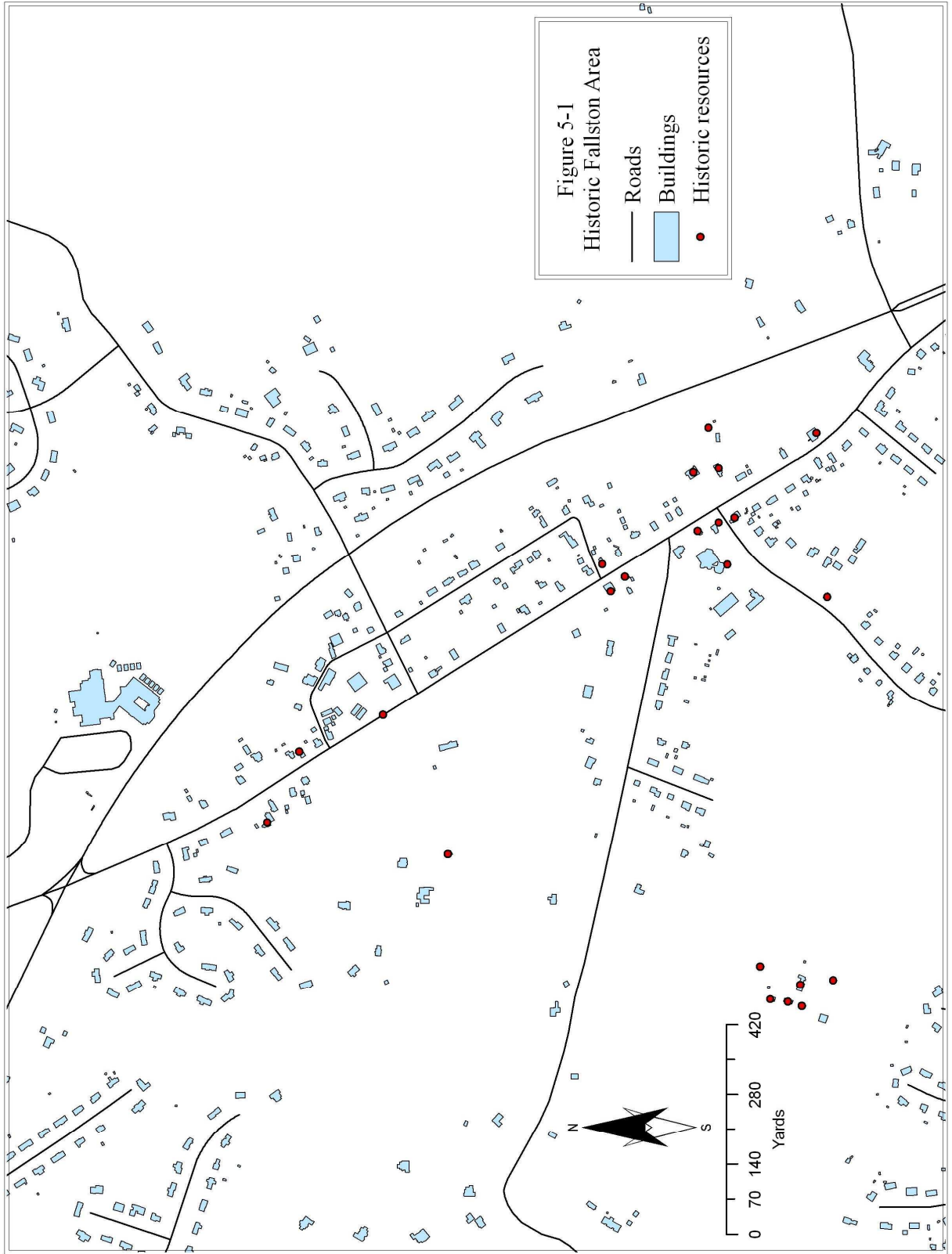
<sup>34</sup> *Prince George’s County Code* Sections 27-213.18 through 27-213.22.

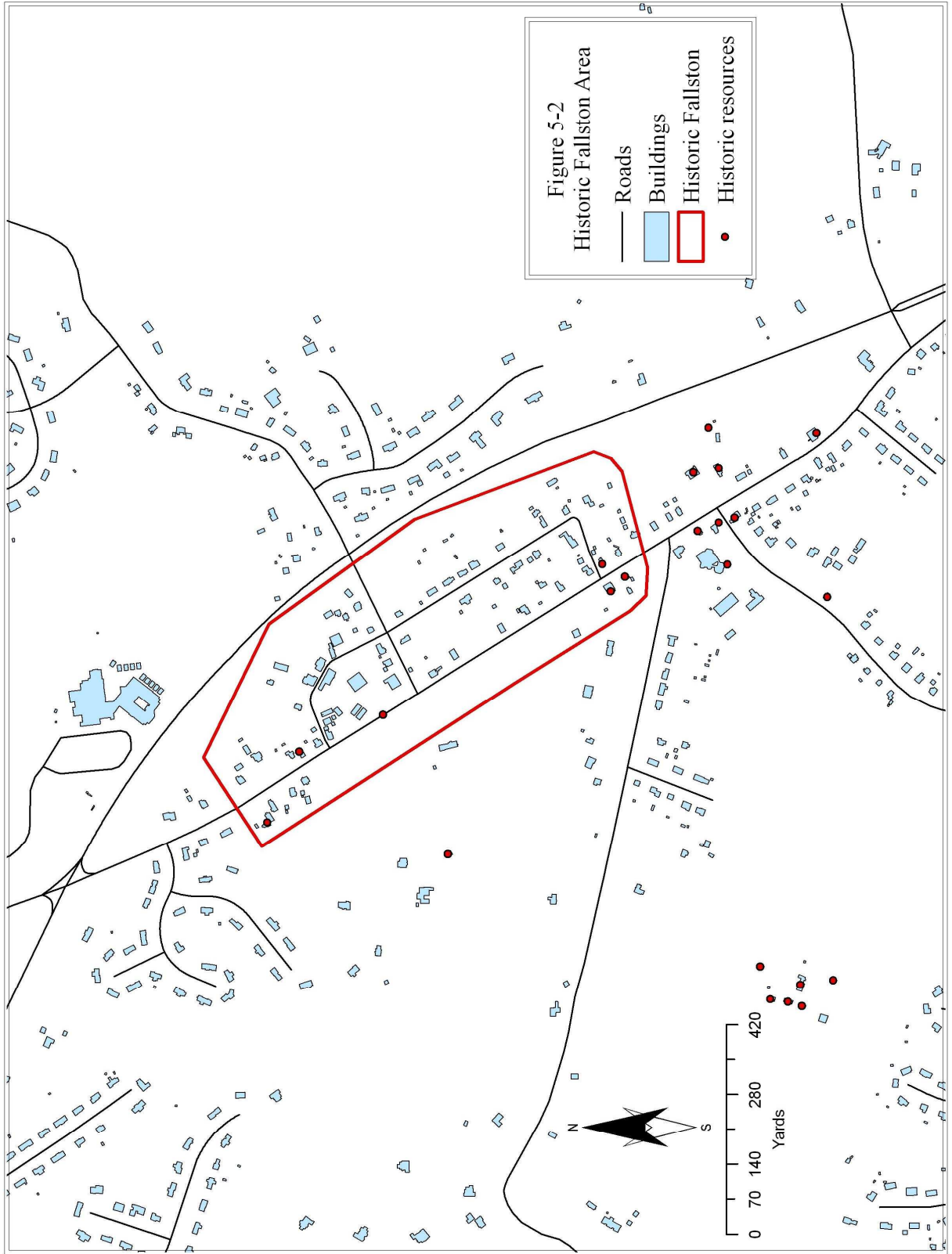
<sup>35</sup> *Harford County Code* Section 267-57.

<sup>36</sup> *Baltimore County Zoning Code* Section 1A07, “R.C.6 (Rural Conservation and Residential) Zone.”

geographic and/or temporal relationship to other themes. Historic contexts can be developed on a general level by a review of published texts on a theme, an understanding of the associated property types, an identification of those resources on existing inventories, and their projection as a GIS layer. A project of this scope could take as much or as little time as is available, as the context can be refined incrementally at any time.

Historic contexts can be as broad or narrow as necessary, but the important factor is to see the process through to generate the necessary GIS data. This GIS data is important less for the comparison of historic resources to each other, however, than because it is **the** tool used by general planning and zoning departments. In order for historic preservation to be included in land-use management decisions on a comprehensive scale, it must be in the position to be seen and evaluated along with competing interests. Preservation planning must talk the same language, use the same tools, and project the same images as comprehensive planning, so that decision makers that are used to seeing planning concepts portrayed in a particular way can better understand what preservationists are trying to show them. It is also vital that the information be displayed as polygons as opposed to points whenever possible; that is, show boundaries around large areas of land, not just dots on a map. Figure 5-1 illustrates the Fallston area in Harford County as typically viewed from the preservation planning perspective; structures plotted on the landscape with inventoried historic resources indicated by red dots. The only information really provided by this presentation is the geographic location of inventoried sites. Figure 5-2 portrays the approximate boundaries for the historic village of Fallston; these

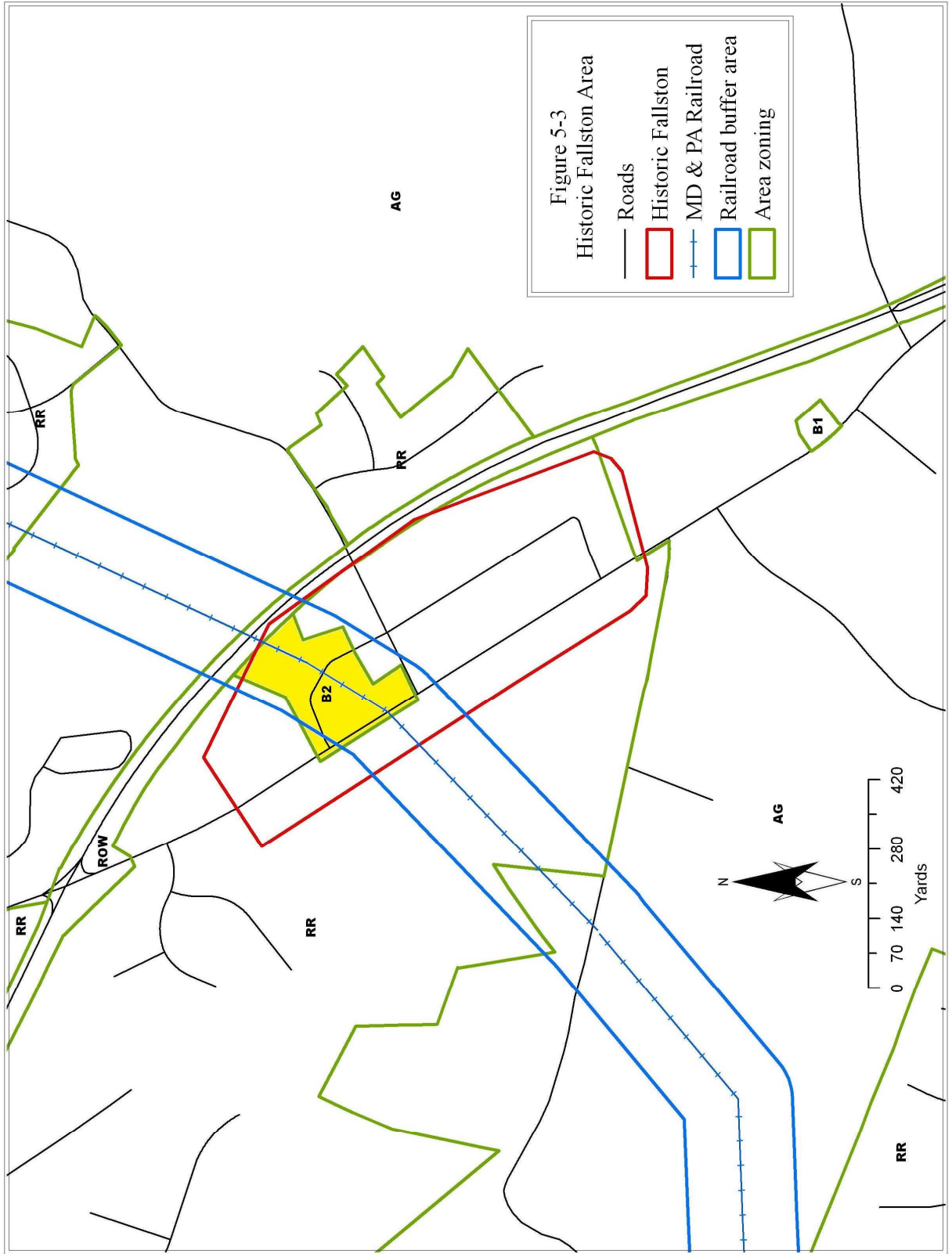




boundaries inform the viewer that the resources in this particular area are related at some level and have a common story to tell. In order to create these groups of historic resources for meaningful presentations, there must be an underlying and demonstrable basis for the overall boundary. The thematic grouping of resources supplies this basis to great effect, particularly as the theme supplies a cohesive story that helps explain the boundaries and goals sought for the area.

The map shown in Figure 5-3 illustrates this concept as it relates to the larger planning landscape. The map shows two historic themes – the boundaries of historic Fallston and the track of the Maryland & Pennsylvania Railroad (known as the Ma & Pa), which ceased operation in the 1950s and has largely been removed from the modern landscape. When combined with the zoning map used by the general planning office, one issue instantly comes into view: the area where the two contexts overlap is zoned for commercial (B2) development. This area is also known to contain the old railroad depot and several of the oldest structures in the village, but none have ever been officially inventoried. I followed this up with the county preservation planner as I knew that the county Historic Preservation Commission has lately focused on this area to begin survey efforts. When I asked if that decision had been spurred by this zoning designation, no one seemed to have been aware of it. Had such an analysis been done prior to the zoning change, it is possible that the designation could have been challenged or reduced to a designation more suitable to the character of the surrounding landscape, which is mostly Rural Residential (RR) and Agricultural (AG). This exercise provided a real-world example of not just the usefulness but the need to portray themes on the comprehensive planning landscape.





## Chapter 6: A New Focus

There will probably be little inclination on the part of the preservation planning profession to expand on the use of a document that they find largely ill-suited to current planning functions. I have no illusions about my own powers of persuasion in this matter but, as a preservationist, I am naturally drawn to impossible causes that are nevertheless worthy of pursuit. I believe that preservation planning needs to broaden its perspective in several fundamental ways: it must learn to focus on a broader landscape, accept the necessity for gradations of protection, and see that perfection is in the eye of the beholder. There is irony in a profession that continues to seek “complete” inventories of historic resources, yet rejects historic contexts on the grounds that they are “perfect-world” documents. There will continue to be losses of historic resources, regardless of what path is taken in preservation. My goal is to try to slow that loss by finding ways to protect larger swathes of resources and perhaps providing the time to better evaluate what those resources mean and how they can provide the context for a larger story. The proper use of historic contexts is a solid foundation on which to build that vision.

What follows are some suggestions that may make the collection and use of historic contexts more convenient and effective for preservation planning purposes. It is understood that all preservation planning offices have limited resources, particularly during this period of severe economic constraints. If I have made the advantages of broadening the scope of preservation planning opportunities sufficiently clear, however, it should be apparent that refocusing current resources,

even if only in limited ways, can significantly broaden the opportunity for achieving preservation goals. I have tailored the suggestions to focus on the federal, state, and local levels separately, as each level has a very different role in preservation planning practice.

### National Park Service

The federal level is perhaps best-suited for assisting state and local planning offices in developing a broader perspective – i.e., changing their focus from the tree to the forest. As the planning landscape has changed significantly since *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Preservation Planning* were first published, an updated version might include some of the following:

- 1) Guidance on how to use historic contexts for preservation planning efforts at a thematic level, such as how to identify and define boundaries for thematically-linked resources;
- 2) Guidance for the development of GIS databases to facilitate the transfer of existing inventory data and the collection of new data; this guidance would relate to how to identify the appropriate property type(s) and theme(s) for a specific resource;
- 3) Suggested standards for the electronic storage and annotation of historic contexts and related GIS data, such as the format of data (text files, shape files, etc.) and uniform indexing formats, so that data can be more accessible; and
- 4) Provide sources of funding and technical expertise for any related training identified as necessary to accomplish these objectives at the state and local level.

### State Historic Preservation Offices

As demonstrated in the comparison of county preservation planning practices, every state is also at a different phase of preservation planning development and has different types of needs based on a seemingly infinite variety of factors that apply to any major governmental entity. Although most SHPOs already have elements of the following recommendations, they have been identified as key factors in increasing the availability and use of historic contexts.

- 1) Identify specific regional and state prehistoric and historic themes, and develop a central index of available context documents related to those themes;
- 2) Create an accessible central database of all historic context documents, including contexts incorporated as elements of larger project documents, and links to other databases;
- 3) Require new historic context documents, resource inventory databases, and GIS data to be submitted in electronic format; and
- 4) Encourage the development and refinement of specific regional, state, and local contexts based on gaps identified in current documentation.

### Local Preservation Offices

Although the ones most likely to be challenged by resource constraints, local preservation planning offices are the ones that are most familiar with the activities taking place in their districts. The use of thematic representations on the planning landscape will be most helpful at this level as it can provide ways to proactively halt or limit the loss of resources at a larger scale than that allowed by focusing only on individual resources.

- 1) Investigate the range of local zoning tools available that may be useful for preservation purposes at a broader, less restrictive level;
- 2) Using local historic themes that have already been identified, add a thematic dimension to local inventory databases;
- 3) Integrate broader historic resource representations onto the comprehensive planning landscape in order to identify opportunities and allow for proactive protection of historically-sensitive areas; and
- 4) Continually develop new historic context documents at whatever scope possible and expand or refine existing historic context documents as needed.

In conclusion, I want to acknowledge the fact that most preservation planning offices are not looking around for yet another project to pick up. All things considered, however, I believe that taking a broader view in preservation planning will eventually ease the overall burden on planning resources. After all, with each year that passes, another sizable group of resources reaches that fifty-year historic threshold: the more adept we become at managing and using the information and resources that we already have, the better prepared we will be for the ever-increasing challenges of the future.

## Appendix A

The following demographic data is to provide an overview of the general characteristics of the planning areas described in Chapter 3, particularly as they relate to the changes taking place in relative population growth and housing needs.

U.S. Census	Harford County	Baltimore County	Prince George's County	Maryland
Population, 2008 estimate	240,351	785,618	820,852	5,633,597
Population, percent change, April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2008	10.00%	4.20%	2.40%	6.40%
Population estimates base (April 1) 2000	218,590	754,292	801,515	5,296,516
Persons 65 years old and over, 2008	11.70%	14.50%	9.40%	12.10%
White persons, percent, 2008 (a)	83.70%	68.80%	28.10%	63.40%
Black persons, percent, 2008 (a)	12.40%	25.10%	65.60%	29.40%
Persons of Hispanic/Latino origin, 2008 (b)	2.70%	3.10%	12.80%	6.70%
White persons not Hispanic, 2008	81.30%	66.20%	17.60%	57.70%
Foreign born persons, percent, 2000	3.40%	7.10%	13.80%	9.80%
Language other than English spoken at home, pct age 5+, 2000	5.70%	9.60%	15.90%	12.60%
Housing units, 2008	96,672	328,125	321,577	2,333,064
Homeownership rate, 2000	78.00%	67.60%	61.80%	67.70%
Housing units in multi-unit structures, 2000	16.40%	27.70%	34.20%	25.80%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units, 2000	\$149,800	\$127,300	\$145,600	\$146,000
Households, 2000	79,667	299,877	286,610	1,980,859
Persons per household, 2000	2.72	2.46	2.74	2.61
Median household income, 2008	\$76,620	\$63,078	\$71,696	\$70,482
Persons below poverty level, 2008	5.70%	7.90%	6.70%	8.20%
Building permits, 2008	636	1,528	1,306	13,018
Federal spending, 2008	2,810,759	7,358,287	12,053,899	779,053,681
Land area, 2000 (square miles)	440.35	598.59	485.43	9,773.82
Persons per square mile, 2000	496.8	1,259.3	1,652.6	541.9

(a) Includes persons reporting only one race.

(b) Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.

The above data was downloaded from the US Census Bureau website.

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