Stewards of the Human Landscape, Spring 2001

by Rebecca Joseph

Speaking one afternoon of "the tyranny of existing structures," Boston Harbor Islands' Superintendent George Price points out that that the physical remains of the urban past represent only a small part of American history. "It's easy to jump into existing buildings, infrastructure, recreational opportunities, the whole tourism thrust," he says. "To look only at the Boston harbor islands as recreation possibilities for the 21st century cuts them short of their history, what makes them important. Our responsibility is to do the research and make sure [the public] gets the whole package." Price should know. He spent many years as a manager of Lowell National Historical Park, one of the national park system's premier urban parks.

Urban national parks are vital public spaces as well as markers of national heritage. The diversity of people connected with these sites produce needs that may appear at odds with the purposes of a national park. To better address the challenges to preserving all the site's important resources while providing for public enjoyment and use, urban park managers often turn to ethnographers for help.

Location does make a difference. Urban national parks are integral parts of the built environment. They provide a laboratory in which to study the meaning of urban spaces through the knowledge of people who know them intimately. Parks in the Northeast commission ethnographic studies to better understand the significance of these places and their constituents.

Edison National Historic Site lies five miles from Newark (pop. 275,000) and about 20 miles west of New York City in one of New Jersey's mostly intensively developed regions. The park memorializes the achievements of inventor Thomas Alva Edison by preserving his home and research laboratory in West Orange. About 60,000 people tour Edison's laboratory and Glenmont estate each year. It is a primary destination for international visitors, school groups, and a small but increasing number of home educators.

With its emphasis on the great inventor and the loss of many related buildings outside its boundaries to urban renewal, few park visitors realize the full import of the site. Established in 1886, the Edison corporate presence prevailed over West Orange for more than eight decades. At the height of production, manufacturing operations covered 21 acres off Main Street. Edison enterprises provided thousands of jobs for generations. A former worker, now 77, recalls, "I joined the Thomas A. Edison company because as I grew up my father had been with the company . . . forty-nine years and seven months when he retired. Our family and all the other families that grew up in the Oranges were all part of the Edison family . . . They went through the plants and said, if you have any brothers or sisters ask them to come in for an interview . . . A lot of men, their daughters came to work there . . . [Edison] wanted to keep the families in. Like I had a brother, a sister, and myself."

Ethknoworks' Michael Agar, who conducted interviews with former Edison employees, neighbors, business people, and city officials in West Orange, was struck by the differences in how the National Park Service and long-time residents interpret the park's significance. While some local leaders see an opportunity to capitalize on their community's Edison heritage, for others the park is a painful reminder of what they view as the abandonment of their community by McGraw-Edison, the corporate descendant of the original Thomas A. Edison company, which ceased operations in West Orange in 1973. Moreover, ethnographic interviews revealed that the company's carefully crafted family image was not necessarily consistent with its practices. "It was fascinating to discover that the development of organized labor [in the Edison plants] was critical to all of the people interviewed," Agar says.

Sometimes urban ethnography yields other surprises for researchers and parks. In 1996, the National Park Service sponsored an ethnographic study to support the re-organization of Gateway National Recreation Area's 20-year-old community gardening program, which serves more than 600 people at three sites in New York City. Because giving, exchanging, and processing produce are important among the gardeners, several thousand people in their households and social networks are also connected to the park's resources.

The community gardens serve many needs of city dwellers with limited access to open space. For some, they are a therapeutic refuge from the rigors of urban life, providing opportunities to observe and participate in natural processes as well as grow and provide fresh food to share. According to University of California, San Diego, anthropologist Steven Parish, "When people garden at Gateway, they often do much more than cultivate garden

crops. They cultivate identities and harvest memories. It is not just that the gardeners are diverse in terms of their social and cultural backgrounds, their race or ethnicity; for many, the gardens are important as an affirmation of the histories and identities that constitute their diverse identities and cultural backgrounds."

Parish believes that in addition to serving as a resource for the community, Gateway's gardens demonstrate how well the Park Service mission fits in this urban setting: "Gardens and parks alike may offer an experience of nature, of open space. If some gardeners use their garden plots to remind themselves of their heritage and history, so do national parks: they express and preserve the memories of the nation . . . [these] gardeners are doing in miniature something the National Park System does on a much vaster scale-affirm a connection to nature and to the past."

Establishing strong relations with African American communities is a priority for Manhattan Sites Superintendent Joseph Avery, who uses ethnographic research to address local conflicts, apathy, and antipathy among constituents. Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site, a unit of Manhattan Sites located in Mount Vernon, New York, undertook an ethnographic study to improve documentation of African American associations with the site and its resources including church buildings, a cemetery, and adjacent non-federal lands. Though once the picturesque center of predominantly white "Old Eastchester," today the site is surrounded by small industrial plants and enormous oil tanks. In a city of 61,000 that is 55 percent black, Mount Vernon residents include 96 nationalities.

Saint Paul's Church archives include documentation of its early beginnings as a "dissenting" church, its evolution into one of the oldest Protestant Episcopal churches in the country, and its role in the Revolutionary War. When the ethnography project began, site staff already knew a few things about the longevity of African American associations with the site. The cemetery, dating to 1704, contains over 8,000 burial sites including free and enslaved Africans. Between 1710 and 1800, the percentage of the Eastchester population owned by others increased from 8 to 15 percent. By 1910, only 1,345 Mount Vernon residents (4 percent) were African Americans. The Turner Homestead, adjacent to the cemetery, was occupied by descendants of Benjamin Turner, a prominent free African American of the mid-19th century, prior to a controversial land taking by the City of Mount Vernon in the 1930s.

Anthropologist Laura Pires-Hester says of her work at Saint Paul's Church, "Ethnographic research was especially crucial in locating and documenting details of the 20th century African-American presence and associations with the site . . . [the] interviews confirmed that indeed in the "functioning Church" of the 1960-1980 period African-Americans were numerically predominant. It was a period of struggle as the small congregation attempted to survive, and it was also the period when efforts to transfer the site [to the Park Service] accelerated." Photographs collected by Pires-Hester show African Americans worshipping, getting married, and attending events alongside stalwart white parishioners in the Parish Hall.

Pires-Hester believes that "the African American presence is integral to the site and area's social history-not a separate story at all-and the challenge is to capture and interpret that continuum." Her ethnographic fieldwork confirmed "a reservoir of interest that can be tapped with aggressive outreach, display representation, follow up and creative programming."

Urban park managers recognize that ethnographic research speaks to their needs. Just ask John Piltzecker, superintendent of the two-year-old New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park in Massachusetts. Recognizing that a small group of surviving whalers, like 102-year-old Antonio Lopes, and their immediate descendants are key to the park's mission of preserving and interpreting 19th century American whaling, he secured funding for a documentation project to begin this year. As whaling drew from diverse populations so does this ethnographic project. Working with the New Bedford Whaling Museum, the New Bedford Historical Society (an African American organization), the Azorean American Heritage Committee, the Descendants of Whaling Masters, and the folklorist Laura Orleans, the park has identified 10 families intimately associated with whaling on which to focus the study-Wampanoags and African Americans along with people of Cape Verdean, Azorean, West Indian, and Yankee descent.

Boston Harbor Islands' Superintendent George Price has funding for an ethnographic study, too.

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Louis Berger & Associates, Ethnographic Overview and Assessment: Edison National Historic Site, West Orange, New Jersey, Technical Report, Boston: NPS Northeast Region Ethnography Program, 1997.

Parish, Steven M., The Gateway Gardens: A Resource for a Diverse Urban Population at Gateway National Recreation Area in New York City, Technical Report, Boston: NPS Northeast Region Ethnography Program, 1998.

Pires-Hester, Laura J., Ethnographic Overview and Assessment: Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site, Technical Report, Boston: NPS Northeast Region Ethnography Program, 1996.

NPS Ethnography Site:
Overview (lots of links here)

- **Conduct Research**

  Research helps NPS decision-makers understand what's important to park stakeholders. As important as learning about their heritage, however, is communicating with the group. Making people partners in the process—and sharing information—can create productive long term relationships between these peoples and the park.

- **Consult with Stakeholders**

  Ethnographers facilitate consultation with stakeholders in park planning, operation, and interpretation. For example, recent meetings with the Gulla/Geechi peoples—direct descendants of enslaved Africans on the southeast coast—will yield maps of culturally important African American sites in traditional rice-growing regions. Other anticipated results include programs to protect and highlight their culture and its contributions to the regional way of life.

- **Coordinate with NPS Offices**

  To make sure stakeholder concerns are heard, ethnographers coordinate with a broad range of NPS programs and staff—notably park planners, interpreters, landscape specialists, and natural resource professionals.

- **Formulate Policy**

  Policy is the key to highlighting the heritage of living peoples to NPS decision-makers. Chapter 5 of the 2001 Management Policies, on cultural resources management, commits NPS to a policy of inclusiveness towards park stakeholders through research, planning, stewardship, and consultation, especially with regard to respectful treatment of sacred places. Chapter 2 directs planners to consult with peoples whose cultures are tied to park resources. Chapter 8 draws attention to American Indian and other Native American interests in park lands.

- **Manage Cultural Registries**

- NPS ethnographers maintain databases containing the results of ethnographic research and consultation.

Research:

Park ethnography is open and collaborative, inviting the active involvement of stakeholders in the research, planning, and presentation of findings. Ethnographers have found that a group's participation enhances the study's accuracy and value to the Park Service. Ethnographers make their findings available through a variety of National Park Service publications and reports.

Ethnographic research has been conducted in parks since before the Ethnography Program's inception in 1981, has covered a diversity of subjects, and has been published in a variety of media. Some of the more recent venues of publication are Common Ground and Cultural Resource Management, two of the Park Service's flagship journals.

Other articles have appeared in special features of Common Ground and Cultural Resource Management devoted entirely to ethnography.

Still others are in various NPS newsletters where ethnographic research has been summarized or its progress reported.

Finally, the results of perhaps most research have been distributed through limited-circulation reports. Sometimes referred to as "gray literature" these reports have often had the most direct influence on park planning and resource management policy.

Research approaches:

The ethnography program conducts several kinds of research to comply with National Park Service policies and federal mandates. The goal is to inform park planning, management, and interpretation. The ethnographic overview and assessment is essential for all parks; the traditional use study is the basis for many other studies, as explained in Chapter 10 of the NPS-28: Cultural Resource Management Guideline, per NPS Director's Order 28.

- **Cultural Affiliation and Lineal Descent Studies**

  Affiliation studies identify American Indian groups or individuals who may have prehistoric, historic and contemporary affiliations or relationships with natural or cultural resources in NPS units. These studies provide evidence of these relationships or affiliations. A lineal descent study traces an the ties of an individual to ancestors, and thus to objects important to both, or to the human remains of the ancestors themselves.

- **Ethnographic Landscape Study**

  This field study typically involves working with stakeholders in visits to park landscapes. These studies differ from the more generic cultural landscape studies conducted by NPS because primary ability and authority to identify and describe it are given to the traditionally associated stakeholders themselves.

- **Ethnographic Overview and Assessment**

  The most comprehensive background study, this document reviews existing information on park resources traditionally valued by stakeholders. The information comes mostly from archives and

publications; interviews with community members and other constituents—often on trips to specific sites—supply missing data. This study also identifies the need for further research.

- **Ethnohistory**

  This study plots continuity and change in a group's pattern of resource use, demography, and ceremonial life, placing these elements in relation to variables such as neighbors, resource boundaries, and economic, environmental, and political climates as they shift over time.

- **Oral and Life History**

  These studies chronicle important events and associated places in parks, and relate them to the context of individual and community ways of life. These studies involve prolonged collaboration between interviewer and interviewee, essential when rapid change threatens a traditional culture, when elders and their stories are unrecorded, and when subsistence areas, practices, and knowledge require documentation. Methods include a wide range of open-ended and focused interviews which can be compared against documentation, when it is readily available.

- **Traditional Use Study**

  These studies fill gaps identified by the ethnographic overview and assessment. They also meet the requirements of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, which addresses the traditions of Alaskan Natives. A researcher may work over a year to gather information on the annual round of a culture's activities, involving close interaction, extensive interviews, and knowledge of the language. Often the group collaborates in the research.

- **Rapid Ethnographic Assessment**

  Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (REAP) is a package of interview, observation, focus group, site walks, mapping, and documentary analysis techniques used when there is a need for information in advance of specific actions—like establishing a new park—that may affect a group's resources and thus its traditions. More focused than the Overview and Assessment, REAP helps satisfy the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, and considers the views of various stakeholders as its primary focus. This package can yield new ways to manage places deemed important by group members, as well what they want to share with the public.