“Put Your Very Special Place on the North Country Map!”: Community Participation in Cultural Landmarking

This article describes the evolution of a project undertaken in rural northern New York state to identify and document local cultural landmarks in diverse communities. It includes the development of concepts and strategies, the creation of documentary techniques, and a summary of public folklore presentations undertaken to explain and promote the project to local people. Key to the success of the project is the community participation in each stage. A major goal of the project is to inform local residents of the need to create and preserve a record of the architectural, social, and cultural history of sites and to take advantage of opportunities that collaborations between lay persons, professional folklorists, and other cultural specialists can provide.

A place is much more than a point in space. To be sure, a place is necessarily anchored to a specific location which can be identified by a particular set of cartographic coordinates, but it takes in as well the landscape found at that location and the meanings which people assign to that landscape through the process of living in it. A sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing a history within its confines.

Kent C. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*

Early one January morning in 1996, I woke up to find some shocking news in our local daily paper. As a folklorist, perhaps as an aging folklorist, I often find that one of the first things I turn to these days is the obituaries, and this morning was no exception. There I found that Herbie Haven of Canton had died of a massive heart attack the evening before in the local hospital emergency room. He was only sixty-six.

I had known Herbie for about thirty-five years, from the days I was an undergraduate at St. Lawrence University and took ice hockey skates for stitching or patching to his tiny, hole-in-the-wall shoe repair shop in a Main Street storefront basement. That shop was amazing. Antique iron tools on a small bench, several sewing machines, and a small sales counter were completely surrounded—wall to wall, floor to ceil-

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ing—by racks of shoes and boots and slippers of every make and style. There were a couple of chairs by the space heater that were always occupied by local characters. Conversation flowed regularly, and Herbie was at the center of it all.

Everyone in town knew him. Nearly everyone for miles around needed heels replaced or belts adjusted, and they would come in the shop at least once or twice each year. It was the kind of place a folklorist loves. I know I did. For years I had been telling myself, “I have to spend some real time at the shop: record Herbie and his customers, photograph that terrific interior, do a complete documentation.” But, there was always next year. Haven’s Shoe Repair Shop was a fixture; it would just be there.

A few days after Herbie’s funeral, a small notice appeared in the paper stating that people who had left items for repair could stop by and retrieve them. In a few months, without any public fuss, the equipment was sold out of the area and the shop was gone. The word was that business had gotten bad, what with the trend for cheap, disposable imported shoes and casual footwear, like sneakers. Herbie had never had a partner or an apprentice to learn the trade. Apparently no one, including his own family, was interested in continuing. So a local landmark became history. Furthermore, no one, myself included, had ever recorded anything about it.

Today, I consider that experience an eye-opener for me. I began to think more about the landmarks in my own lifetime in the North Country and how they have had so much meaning for many of us who live here. This has led to a new and very exciting project for Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY), the regional folk arts nonprofit organization in the Adirondack/St. Lawrence River Valley region that I direct. We would eventually call it the Register of Very Special Places—RVSP—and invite community members to become actively involved in identifying and documenting their own cultural landmarks.

Exploring an Idea

As collaborators on a number of publications and exhibitions in and around New York State, documentary photographer Martha Cooper and I have been professional and personal friends for a long time. In the mid-1990s, she began to tell me about some photography she was doing in New York City for Place Matters, a collaborative project then being developed by City Lore and the Municipal Art Society. The project was originally called “Endangered Spaces” because organizers were concerned about the disappearance of so many cultural landmarks important to neighborhoods around the five boroughs. At the time, folklorist and City Lore board member Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observed, “Now that you can put a card in a slot and do your banking without ever meeting a teller, now that you can eat fast food without ever meeting a waitress, now more than ever we need to protect the shoemaker, the laundromat or the barbershop, places that have been there since our childhood or at least the last fifteen years and that hold together the fabric of the community” (quoted in Zeitlin 1994:216). In a city where some of the world’s great architectural achievements are celebrated, however, “landmark” status for most people did not include the likes of ethnic social clubs, pool halls, bakeries, dance pavilions, bath houses, or bodegas.
At a conference in Washington in 1990, described by Mary Hufford as “a forum for critically rethinking the national system of heritage protection,” she noted that “there was talk of shifting the government’s preservation paradigm—away from a top-down, prescriptive approach to heritage planning toward an approach more open and responsive to grass-roots cultural concerns” (1994:1). Much attention was focused on cultural conservation as an alternative to the longtime model of preservation, which sought to protect the “best examples” of the built environment. Hufford explains that “[conservation] registers the dynamism of cultural resources, implying that, like natural phenomena, cultural phenomena inevitably change. Cultural conservation further suggests that resource identification be guided as much as possible by those whose cultures are affected” (3).

Steve Zeitlin was a participant in the Washington conference, where he noted, “Sites that are crucial because of a human rather than a physical dimension can not be preserved in the sense that a building can be preserved; human factors render each cultural site exceedingly complex and often impossible to conserve. We cannot serve as a life support system to keep dying establishments alive; and keeping a neighborhood establishment open will not assure the perpetuation of the community that patronized it and brought it to life” (1994:226). Eventually, the City Lore project was renamed Place Matters, and its focus was expanded to include sites in the city that are not necessarily threatened but have proven value to some community and are often still vital.

I really liked their idea. People in our region—dominated by the Adirondacks but including major river valleys and plateaus—have long struggled with the concept of a collective identity. Government entities, educational institutions, businesses, and organizations—including our own—often disagree about definitions and boundaries, without resolution. Perhaps because we are so rural, our communities both small and scattered, we tend to be parochial and loyal to what we know best. As Kent Ryden explains, “We have much more direct experience of neighborhood or town than of state or country, have much more of our lives invested in the little places than in the big places” (1993:65).

As a professional folklorist working in the region, I have become increasingly aware of the potential role our organization can play in helping local people articulate the culture of their neighborhoods, the diversity of communities in the region, and where and how expressions of local cultures can be found, giving all a better sense of place. I found Ryden’s language about folklore and landscape to be quite helpful in trying to envision how to approach our task: “In fact, the sense of place . . . is in large part a creation of folklore and is expressed most eloquently through folklore. It is through traditional narratives, both personal and communal, that the human meanings with which the landscape is imbued are given form, perpetuated, and shared; the meaning of a place for the people who live there is expressed by the stories that they tell about it, about the elements that comprise it, and about the events that took place within its bounds” (45).

I began thinking of the possibilities of a project similar to Place Matters that we could undertake in our region, a place about as diametrically opposite in character to New York City as one could find. TAUNY represents the fourteen northernmost
counties in New York state, including the Adirondack Park, the St. Lawrence River Valley, the Thousand Islands, and western Lake Champlain. The whole region is rural, remote from urban centers, vast (about one-third of the state’s land mass), and economically depressed. Local livelihood has long depended chiefly on agriculture and forestry, with some small manufacturing. All of these are in decline these days. The relatively sparse population has been mostly white from the beginning, with scattered pockets of other ethnic communities that have been stable for a long time. The Anglo and French-Canadian cultures of early settlers continue to prevail today, with some Europeans—including Italian, Polish, Hungarian, and Greek, as well as some populations of Mohawks, Jews, and African Americans in specific places. Small towns have fostered a sense of neighborliness, but often of diverse and exclusive interests as well. Most residents share a sense of local pride, especially in their history which, according to some, “is all we have.”

In fact, over the years there has been considerable interest in historic preservation in the region. In the six northernmost counties of TAUNY’s service area alone, 446 historic properties, including numerous districts that involve whole parks or business blocks, are already on the National Register of Historic Places. They include the usual—courthouses, train stations, early bridges, and classic architectural styles in houses or churches—and some unusual—like the tuberculosis cure cottage inhabited for a couple of Adirondack winters by Robert Louis Stevenson, the farmhouse and grave of abolitionist John Brown, Lake Champlain lighthouses, Thousand Islands castles from the Gilded Age, and the birthplaces of artists, statesmen, and financiers who eventually made their mark in other distant places.

Adopting the general strategy of Place Matters, in the summer of 2000 we began to identify currently vital cultural landmarks in different communities around us. Having lived in the region all my life and having conducted folklore and local history research here for nearly forty years, I had ideas about places we could look for first. With financial assistance from the New York State Council on the Arts and the New York Folklore Society, TAUNY hosted our first folklore graduate student summer intern, Elisabeth Nixon, of Ohio State University. She began survey work of selected places in six counties, doing initial interviews and photography that created important groundwork for what was to come. During that summer, Nixon completed significant documentation of three distinctly different sites and surveyed at least a dozen more. We chose these sites because each one represented certain issues that we could explore, with an eye to expanding the project later.

Lazy River Playground is a family-operated seasonal roller rink and dance pavilion that first opened in the 1940s, shortly after World War II. In its first years, it was very popular as a place for young people to congregate in the summer time. It also attracted families, as it included outdoor shuffleboard, a miniature golf course, as well as swimming and picnic areas. Sixty years later, it is still opened every summer by the founder’s son, now in his early eighties. Today, however, people use it only occasionally, for family reunions, office picnics, or a rare wedding reception.

The Redford Carousel is owned by the Church of the Assumption in a hamlet that was once a thriving mining town. Local legend has it that this Armitage-Herschell track machine—with its twenty-four original carved horses and four sleigh-chariots—
was abandoned in Redford by a bankrupt traveling carnival in the early 1900s. Years later, it was given to the church for its church picnic, which has occurred annually for more than 150 years. The carousel, carefully cared for and operated by church volunteers, still runs only one day each year, during the Redford Picnic. Hundreds of people—many in their seventies and eighties, often accompanied by grandchildren—continue to wait in line to ride the carousel each summer. Experts assert that this carousel is very rare, one of a handful of its kind still operating anywhere.

Santa’s Workshop, located near Lake Placid at the base of Whiteface Mountain in the Adirondacks, is most likely the best known site to both North Country residents and others (Figure 1). Long reputed to be the first theme park in America, it is a village of cleverly designed structures, including Santa’s house, the elves’ workshops, a reindeer barn with a team of live reindeer, an outdoor theater for live performances by clowns, and an iced pole dubbed “the North Pole.” Founded in the late 1940s by three local men, it was immediately a huge success for postwar tourist families. The park’s records report several thousand visitors daily in those early years. Generations of local people and summer visitors have gone there; some still take their children and grandchildren every year. Designed for the “believers,” it still has charm and innocence that some say they could not find in today’s corporate theme parks. Young families are its greatest supporters. Until recently, Bob Reiss, son of one of the founders,

Figure 1. Parents and grandparents still bring their children to a place they remember with great delight from their own childhoods, Santa’s Workshop, in Wilmington, reputed locally to be the original theme park in America. Photograph by Martha Cooper, courtesy of TAUNY archives.
owned the park. Its future was in doubt a few years ago when the sale of the park went bad, but, with new owners now, the plans to keep its original mission and to promote it for economic success seem more promising.

From what we could tell, each of these sites is truly a local cultural landmark and each has had, and still has, real vitality for its community. Lazy River, however, seems to me an anachronism and vulnerable, quite unlikely to continue once the current owner decides to close it. People go there for nostalgic reasons. Maintenance of its buildings and grounds is a huge annual task, and I doubt that it offers a viable economic future. On the other hand, the Redford carousel will most likely be a community attraction for a long time to come. Thousands attend the annual picnic—now more of a church fundraiser with a carnival atmosphere—and the local pride in keeping the carousel is, if anything, increasing. Whereas modern audiences may travel in droves to visit Disneyland or Six Flags, the quiet appeal of Santa’s Workshop for some parents of small children, along with its cherished history, make this a “special place” in our region.

Because Nixon’s fieldwork was limited to two months in the summer of 2000, it was then up to us to decide whether and how to proceed. We began to consider undertaking a significant project to identify and recognize cultural landmarks throughout our large region.

**Developing Concepts and Strategies**

First, we needed a defined mission. I spent considerable time reading from works on both historic preservation and cultural conservation by folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists, and architectural historians. I pursued several questions: Did we want to focus on a conventional study of vernacular architecture? Was our goal to identify outstanding architectural examples with nomination to the state and national registers as the outcome? Did we envision ourselves as political activists, advocating for historic preservation when places were threatened for one reason or another? Was preservation our purpose or, as folklorists, was cultural conservation our main focus? What practical means could we use to accomplish our goals?

Vernacular architecture, which is in large part what we have in this rural region, certainly would be one part of our study. We knew various good examples of traditional architecture—maple sugar houses, log cabins, potato barns, Adirondack lean-tos, and the common use of native stone in all kinds of buildings—but, by strict standards, many landmarks we were documenting were not folk forms. Most structures are relatively simple adaptations of formal urban styles, built by country builders from available materials, or twentieth-century phenomena, such as diners, gas stations, or drive-in theaters. In his definitive book *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, what architectural historian and preservationist Chester Liebs said about his study of roadside architecture resonated for me: “[It] derived from my interest in helping to expand architecture, landscape and historic preservation studies, and general public interest, from what was an all too common fixation on a few select aspects of the physical heritage—‘Colonial’ mansions, works by famous architects—to a fuller range of places illustrating the American cultural narrative” (1995:vii). Although Liebs may
not speak for a majority of preservationists, his view is becoming more common and was certainly affirming for us.

Another concern for me was finding a more expansive definition of cultural landmark than I had seen in the past. How would a hiker’s favorite vista from the summit of an Adirondack high peak, or a physically nondescript tavern that straddles the Quebec/New York border with a rich Prohibition history, qualify? “Despite the attention to context,” the authors of *The Grouse Creek Cultural Survey* wrote, “the focus of historic preservation has remained on properties, neglecting other elements of culture, both tangible and intangible. Culture itself, of course, consists of knowledge and values, and is therefore fundamentally intangible. A fisherman’s house or workboat are tangible expressions, and his stories and occupational skills are intangible expressions, of the culture of his community” (Carter and Fleischauer 1992:3). Narratives from local people about their experiences and the value they placed on sites seemed a crucial part of the mix to us. According to Hufford, “Vernacular histories, whether stored in myths, artifacts, festivals, or landscapes, are vital resources for the ongoing construction and maintenance of places and the social identities dependent on them” (1994:7).

I found in a publication of the National Park Service—*Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties*—a succinct definition that was encouraging: “A traditional cultural property . . . is defined generally as one that is eligible for inclusion in the National Register because of its association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that (a) are rooted in that community’s history, and (b) are important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community” (Parker and King 1990:1). That was the general direction I wanted to go with any project TAUNY might undertake.

Satisfied that we were on the right track, I then drafted an informal mission statement for our project: “to record important details about the architecture, social and cultural history, and current vitality of North Country cultural landmarks while first-hand information is still available.” Ultimately, our staff and board decided that our specific goal was to create an inventory or register with documentation about regional cultural landmarks in our TAUNY archives as a central repository for researchers; copies of all materials produced about specific sites would be left in public libraries and municipal historians’ files in each community. We also foresaw the possibilities of our future role of assisting local communities in nominating some of the sites that are appropriate for state registers or the National Register of Historic Places. In addition, we recognized that we might also help local people advocate for preservation of sites that might become threatened by economic or social forces beyond their control.

Another important step was to establish a list of criteria we would consider for sites to be included on our register. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg has written about “cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons and other hangouts at the heart of a community.” He called such public settings “the third place,” equal in importance to home and workplace for many. His list of functions included a place for unifying the neighborhood, bringing adults and youth together, providing mutual aid, a location for “public characters” who looked out for everyone, and, most importantly, a place for entertainment and “fun” (1999:xvii–xxvii).
After considerable discussion by our staff and board and testing with community members, we created our own list of ten criteria for sites that might be included on our register, listed here in no particular order. It is not necessary for sites to meet all of them to qualify for inclusion:

- A place for community gatherings
- A place that meets a community’s social, spiritual, economic, or entertainment needs
- A place where vital community events still take place
- A place that has served multiple generations over time
- A place where an important local historical event or movement occurred and is remembered
- A place that is a source or repository of local beliefs, customs, or stories
- A place that is a physical marker on the local landscape
- A place that is a good example of a vernacular architectural form
- A place that is a factor in community or regional identity
- A place that is an example of the vanishing regional or American landscape.

We are—and for the foreseeable future will continue to be—a small organization with a small staff and plenty of other ongoing and new projects to meet our audiences’ expectations. Creating a process for documenting landmarks in widely-scattered places, which would require in-depth research for each example studied, seemed impossible. If TAUNY were to sponsor such an effort, we would have to devise ways for enough good work to be done by others that we could make intelligent judgments for credible outcomes.

Philosophically, too, I knew the importance of people in communities becoming quite involved in our efforts. Who would know more or care more about saving their local landmarks than the residents themselves? One conclusion of the Grouse Creek project was that “the process of documentation, description, and assessment may itself encourage cultural conservation by heightening self-awareness and self-esteem within the community, and offering greater recognition of the community by outsiders who learn about it from publications, exhibits, and the like” (Carter and Fleischauer 1992:64). We decided to design the project so local people with little or no knowledge of architectural history, cultural studies, or documentation techniques could go well beyond their initial enthusiasm for saving a local landmark and create an important, somewhat detailed record of its physical characteristics and social value, for now and for posterity.

For several years, I had watched with interest how some public folklore colleagues were working with lay persons to do research and programming. These community scholars have often proven to be invaluable resources about themselves and others in their communities. Certainly, we all have done exploratory research in communities where nearly everyone we approached would send us to one or two people “who can tell you all you want to know . . . and more!” And, we knew that in order to sustain this project, it would be important to recruit people in local communities with their own knowledge of cultural landmarks to become active partners in this project.

Another early decision we made before we went public was to identify a number of landmarks in our large region that we ourselves felt met the criteria of “very special places.” Despite our commitment to future additions to the register coming from
community members, we felt it important to illustrate models of cultural landmarks—places that were pretty unmistakable in their importance. One pragmatic factor was political: because we had decided to confine the project at first to the six northernmost counties in our region—some of which had not had much TAUNY presence before—we would choose two or three sites from each county to research.

Finding the examples was easy; limiting them was not. I had my own candidates, but all of us wanted to explore more possibilities. We contacted local historians, journalists, and past informants for ideas and information. We eventually settled upon fifteen sites that were well known in their communities, and often beyond, and served as easily understood models for what we wanted people to look for in their own areas. Our choices were Lazy River Playground, the Redford Carousel, Santa’s Workshop, the Italian-American Civic Association (one of only a handful of ethnic social clubs remaining in the region), Cooks Corners Schoolhouse (a former one-room schoolhouse and current community center; Figure 2), the Crystal Restaurant (a popular downtown lunch counter in Watertown; Figure 3), Vivekanada Cottage (a Hindu religious retreat in Thousand Island Park; Figure 4), E. M. Marilley & Co. (a fourth-generation general store; Figure 5), Veronica Terrillion’s house and garden (an example of a folk sculpture garden and personal environment), Clare & Carl’s (the oldest remaining “michigan” hot dog stand; Figure 6), Dick’s Country Store & Music Oasis (a convenience store and favorite musical instrument store for bluegrass musicians), Beth Joseph Synagogue (one of two synagogues in the Adirondacks), Six Nations...
Figure 3. Citizens of Watertown gather for coffee or lunch and good conversation at the Crystal Restaurant on Public Square, operated by the Dephtereos family since the 1930s. Photograph by Martha Cooper, courtesy of TAUNY Archives.

Figure 4. Ramakrishna pilgrims annually seek spiritual renewal at Vivekananda rock and tree near the nineteenth-century swami’s cottage in Thousand Island Park. Photograph courtesy of Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center of New York.
Figure 5. Jim Marilley continues to operate his family’s general store in Croghan, with “something for everyone” and a longtime commitment to good service. Photograph by Martha Cooper, courtesy of TAUNY Archives.

Figure 6. Since the 1940s, Clare & Carl’s roadside stand in Plattsburgh has served locally celebrated “michigan” hot dogs and maintained traditional car hop service. Photograph by Martha Cooper, courtesy of TAUNY Archives.
Indian Museum (a family-founded and operated museum of Iroquois life), Adirondack Sport Shop (fly fishing guru Fran Betters’s supplies and lessons), and YMCA Camp Dudley (the oldest continuously operating boys’ camp in the United States).

Although our region is frequently perceived as homogeneous, there is surprising diversity within communities. We wanted the site selections to represent various types of places, including commercial and nonprofit, secular and spiritual, public and private, multigenerational, historical, and relatively recent. Our architectural examples ranged from the elegant Adirondack rustic style of the boys’ camp to the funky hot dog stand on Lake Champlain. We wanted to reflect different ethnic backgrounds, religious faiths, recreational interests, occupations, and social classes. With certain choices, we believed we could dispel the idea that “community” is only a geopolitical concept, like a village or a town, as places like the synagogue, the Italian men’s club, and even the schoolhouse/community center are known chiefly to members and not much beyond. And, although there has never been a resident Hindu community in the region, followers of the nineteenth-century Swami Vivekananda have come from all over the world for decades to find spiritual renewal at the Thousand Islands cottage where the cleric spent a few weeks in the summer of 1895. Finally, we determined to choose one of our sites to undertake a thorough ethnographic study as an example of a North Country cultural landmark. We would then provide a detailed illustration of the steps to follow in documenting sites.

We chose to document the Cooks Corners Schoolhouse, which sits in a very rural section of the northern Adirondack foothills, because it met all ten of our criteria, and we knew that the community would enthusiastically participate in our research. Like thousands of other one-room schoolhouses in rural America, the small, white frame building at Cooks Corners was where elementary children went to school for generations. Like hundreds of such schools in New York state, it was closed in the early 1940s when centralization of educational services to one or two locations within one large geographic area became common. At Cooks Corners, which had no church, fire hall, or other public buildings, the twenty or so families who had attended school there for years chose to take over the building as a community center, and it has served in that capacity ever since. Local people who otherwise have to drive at least ten miles for groceries, health care, or other services continue to use the building year-round for socializing. Ice cream socials, family birthdays, and bridal showers are summer events; an annual Christmas memory tree dedication and pedro card parties are regular winter gatherings. It is a place for genuine community interaction and is well maintained as a source of pride. To this day, it is actively used by four generations of local residents.

In the summer of 2002, Cristina Muia, a graduate student in the folk studies program at Western Kentucky University, became our second intern to focus on our RVSP project. As a special project of her internship, she undertook in-depth documentation of the schoolhouse and of the community center it had become. She located and interviewed key people who know the history and its contemporary uses, searched through local archives and newspapers, measured and sketched both the building and the site, and, with the help of Martha Cooper, began photographing a series of community events that would eventually represent an entire year of local
activities. Muia met and worked with Judy Aldous, a lifelong local resident and amateur historian who had independently researched the history of the Cooks Corners community long before we knew her. Over a period of eight years, Aldous has interviewed nearly a hundred residents—many now deceased—and videotaped at least 600 hours of interviews, which she transcribed herself. She has filled scores of scrapbook pages with donated vintage photographs, newspaper clippings, and copies of pages from local diaries and personal memoirs, and she has obtained copies of all kinds of legal documents from the local courthouse. Truly a community scholar who is still making videos, Aldous illustrates that local people with knowledge and interest can be key players in the work of the Register of Very Special Places.

Creating the Necessary Tools

Our next step was to develop simple but effective ways for people in our communities to actually nominate and document sites. For nomination, we wanted to make the process as simple as possible so people would actually respond. At this stage in our project, our first goal was to learn about the existence of sites in the region and know that community members are aware and care enough to bring them to our attention. Eventually, we created a three-page form with the following questions, requesting only a maximum of three or four lines in response to each. The form begins with basic questions about location, ownership, and contact information for the nominator, followed by these questions:

- What makes this place important to your community? Briefly, what historical event, people, traditions, or memories are particularly connected to it?
- When you visit this place, what physical features help you or your community to remember its history or to want to preserve its traditions?
- Do you know of any threats to, or plans for, this place, such as real estate development plans or community revitalization plans? Are there other local issues—economic, social, political—that might make your place’s future precarious?
- Are you willing to provide or find documentation about this place, like photographs or memorabilia? Do you know others in the community who are knowledgeable about your site’s history and use?
- Would you be willing to assist TAUNY in recognizing this place?
- Are you willing to undertake—with TAUNY’s guidance and, perhaps, with others in your community—the next steps, including basic photography and measurements of the site, local history research, interviews of some local residents, etc.? This is a crucial step in the process that will lead toward recognition by RVSP.
- If you are unable, please suggest someone else in your community who could lead the documentation process.
- If you think they are willing and able, list others in your community and elsewhere who can be of help in the documentation process.

We decided that nominations can be submitted at any time. They are addressed to the RVSP coordinator at TAUNY and reviewed quarterly by a small committee of volunteers who have some expertise in architecture or cultural studies. The coordina-
tor corresponds with the contact person and, perhaps, visits the site to make recommendations for more information or clarification, if necessary, before the committee meets. If the committee agrees that the site satisfies criteria for RVSP, community members are invited to undertake the more complete documentation process.

As the questionnaire suggests, we encourage the community to find one or two people to lead the process and identify others to work on it as well. For example, amateur photographers can work with someone who can measure and draw the floor or site plans and with someone else who has some experience with audio or video recording. The goal is to get more community members invested in the project.

For the more detailed documentation, we created a list of questions and requests rather than a form, including:

- **Background information:** Provide basic facts in one or two word answers, like name(s) of builders, owners, dates of building and changes, etc.
- **Overview:** Compile a list of what could be photographed; shoot at least one roll of color film (or its equivalent in digital images). At least six specific shots and angles are requested; measure the structure and its features and create a rough drawing of a floor plan, showing the exterior shape of the building and the interior layout of spaces; create a rough drawing of an overview or site plan, which shows this place as part of its larger physical landscape.
- **Physical features:** Write a description of the site. Include major details of the structure’s exterior, interior, any significant architectural changes—additions, deletions, etc.—in the history of this place.
- **Uses:** Write a description of the major use(s) of this site over its history.
- **Values:** Write a description of the special value(s) that the site has in the community. (This is followed by the ten criteria listed earlier with boxes to check.) In the description for this section, we ask preparers of the materials to indicate which of the ten values they think apply to the site and, in brief, tell why.
- **Sources of information:** List specific sources of information used to prepare the documentation and their locations.

Though optional, TAUNY strongly encourages interviews of several community members to verify facts and to solicit opinions. Copies of recordings, transcriptions, and field notes should be submitted as part of the documentation.

Keeping in mind that we want to encourage participation from community members, we also sought to create helpful guidelines for documenting architecture and folk traditions and for recording oral histories, which we could make accessible to potential participants in RVSP. We researched publications and websites from several organizations, including Place Matters, the American Folklife Center, and the New York Folklore Society. Peter Bartis’s *Folklife and Fieldwork: A Layman’s Introduction to Field Techniques* (1980) and the Vernacular Architecture Forum’s bibliography were especially helpful. After careful consideration of our needs, we created our own basic guidelines for conducting and recording interviews, taking photographs (especially of architecture), measuring floor and site plans, and finding documents in local sources.
The set of questions on “values” has become particularly interesting for our project. At the Washington conference, Hufford noted one of the shortcomings of conventional practices for preservation and cultural professionals; namely, “determining the ‘significance’ and ‘integrity’ of resources is a highly subjective undertaking . . . [this] could come to represent cultural values belonging to professional planners more than to others with a stake in the same environment” (1994:2–3). Asking community members who prepare the documentation to seek local consensus about their site and relate the importance of RVSP’s ten criteria could provide significant results that we, as outsiders, might not have imagined.

Going Public

I wish I could say that there was a grand plan, even a logical sequence of activities, that TAUNY created to take our register project to the public, but that is not exactly the way this project has evolved. Like so many other small arts organizations, we have to seize opportunities as they present themselves. In the interest of clarity, I will rearrange some of the activities as they actually happened. In short, since the initial research began and the concepts, strategies, and documentation instruments were completed, we have developed a small book, a website, public workshops, and a promotional brochure to make community members aware of the project and invite them to participate in further development.

In the early phases of the register project, we began planning and researching for a small book—Very Special Places in the North Country—primarily for distribution to public officials, libraries, and interested community members in the region. We were committed to a publication as a lasting record of these sites and our project. One significant piece of the book is a series of profiles—interesting and entertaining essays with good photographs and graphics—of the sites we chose. In addition, we have included an extensive, step-by-step documentation of the Cooks Corners Schoolhouse that includes numerous photographs, drawings, and sample interview transcripts to demonstrate what others can do to research their sites. With funding from the Folk Arts Program of the New York State Council on the Arts and the Sweetgrass Foundation, we researched all of the sites that eventually became the core of the book.

Grants from the Access Program at the National Endowment for the Arts and from the Architecture, Planning and Design Program at the New York State Council on the Arts, allowed us to market RVSP to many in the region TAUNY might not otherwise easily reach. Since 2003, TAUNY has maintained a folklore education website called North Country Folklore Online, which includes modules based on our research in local storytelling traditions, foodways, traditional music, and crafts. A natural addition to that site, RVSP—at www.northcountryfolklore.org—now includes the following:

• Gallery of Very Special Places in the North Country: One page for each of the fifteen initial selections. The text for each entry includes background of the place, its physical features, uses, and community values, three or four images, a locator with a North Country map and/or driving directions, and selected criteria from the RVSP list.
• How to nominate and document your site: Brief description of the process, nomination form and documentation questions.
• Documentation sample: Video flash slide show on the documentation process for Cooks Corners Schoolhouse, with audio narration.
• Tips on documentation: Separate Portable Document Format (or PDF) files on conducting interviews, recording interviews, taking architectural photographs, measuring architectural sites, and finding local documents.
• Frequently asked questions.
• Links to other sites.
• Information on how to contact us.

The website is as user friendly as we can make it. We also can enter new profiles to it as sites are added to the register.

With that same grant support, TAUNY conducted one-day workshops in five communities to introduce interested local people to the concept of RVSP and the documentation process. Jill Breit, former TAUNY assistant director and a recent graduate of the folk studies program at Western Kentucky University, developed and conducted the workshops, which included a PowerPoint presentation on RVSP and a review of documentation procedures for people with no previous experience. Aldous spoke at each workshop about her personal experiences researching her own community. Invitations were sent to more than 400 public libraries, town and village historians (New York State has officially appointed historians in each municipality), and local history museums. About forty people attended the five workshops.

Although each workshop was cosponsored by a cultural organization in the locality, we also planned the workshop to include “a study site,” a still-active place in the community that appeared to be a logical candidate for nomination to the register in the future. These included a century-old Grange hall, a 1940s diner, an African Methodist Episcopal Zion church that has an Underground Railroad history, a county fairgrounds, and a food co-op in a college town. Members of each of those communities were present for the workshop participants to query about the site, as an exercise in basic documentation techniques.

As it turned out, the highlight of each workshop for me was a free-for-all discussion over lunch, in which we asked the local participants to suggest places in their communities that are potentially good candidates for future documentation and recognition on the Register of Very Special Places. Dozens of ideas emerged in these lively conversations, with participants giving brief descriptions of the places and their landmark significance for local people. Our staff only had to take notes, because it was clear to us that participants understood the concept and had plenty of their own ideas.

The following is a very brief sample of their suggestions: a century-old hunting club; a one-flavor-a-day homemade ice cream stand in the Adirondacks; the last of 1950s drive-in movie theaters in our region; one man’s miniature Russian Orthodox chapel; a bar rich with prohibition history that straddles the U.S.-Canadian border; the boathouse of Thousand Islands fishing guides; a cider mill in one county’s oldest extant building; and a large Adirondack roadside boulder, long painted and repaint-
ed with fraternity and sorority graffiti by passing college students. Some of these places I had heard of in my many years in the region, but most I had not. This first step, testing whether there was interest in our communities for the RVSP project, was a great success.

In the weeks and months following these workshops, there was considerable publicity in local papers about RVSP and how local people could get involved. Although some of the workshop participants began the nomination process for special places in their communities, other people began to contact us as well. Later in the year, nominations were submitted for several sites, including “flat rocks” where generations of kids have learned to swim in a local river; a 100-foot-long Adirondack rustic style log suspension bridge; a village green surrounded by a church, town hall, two early taverns (later residences) and a general store, on a “site plan” that reflects the small hamlet’s New England origins; a collection of war memorials in one village park; and an Irish bar where the local St. Patrick’s Day celebrations have always culminated.

With the exception of the local workshops, all of the first public programs of TAUNY’s register project occurred in 2005, including publication of the book and completion of the website. Together, they became the official launching of one of our organization’s most significant undertakings to date. In addition, attractive RVSP markers, locally designed and created plaques of black Adirondack slate, were presented to each of the first fifteen sites. The plaques include the project logo from a traditional Schoolhouse quilt block, the message, “This North Country Cultural Landmark has been placed on the Register of Very Special Places by Traditional Arts in Upstate New York,” and TAUNY’s logo and name. Although the presentation may be as simple as a photo op for local journalists, we encourage community members to organize their own celebrations of achieving “register status,” which we will attend to unveil the plaque and explain its meaning. We also designed and printed colorful, informative rack brochures that explain RVSP, summarize the process of nomination and documentation, and urge local people to think of their own places to add to the register. We are putting literature racks for these brochures at appropriate current and future sites, in libraries, and in other public venues in the region.

What’s Next?

Although TAUNY’s cultural landmarking project is off to a good start, it will likely take several years for us to know whether relying on local people to come forth and then do considerable work has been a good strategy. We are certainly aware that this approach has shortcomings and realize that there will be a continuing need for our staff to work with local citizens as they nominate or document their sites. No matter how much information we create in handouts or on our website, having one of us available to encourage and assist volunteer field workers with these processes will continue to be necessary. At this point, the key is to get some documentation of landmarks on record in local repositories, anticipating that some of the nominated sites could well become the basis for more in-depth research in the future.

Philosophically, for me and for us at TAUNY, choosing this method has been an important experiment. For years, as the “expert professionals,” we have chosen what
subjects or people to research, exhibit, record, or broadcast in a typical “top-down” approach. It may suggest that we know best what folklore is and what to feature as important, simply by putting our resources to work on it. Our best example of that has been our North Country Heritage Awards, an annual program for recognizing masters of local folk arts and cultural traditions whom we choose after significant research. The awards have been very successful and apparently much appreciated by recipients; however, the selection of artists and groups honored has depended almost entirely on our experience and expertise as folklorists to determine who “the masters” are or which is “the most representative” in our region.

In contrast, the brochure we created to encourage people to participate in our project opens with an invitation: “Put Your Very Special Place on the North Country Map!” We also have a section we call “What’s in RVSP for You?” The list of benefits includes

- A profile—with pictures and important information about the site—will be added to TAUNY’s Gallery of Very Special Places on our website.
- Copies of the complete information gathered when a respondent documents the site will be added to library and historian’s collections in that community, as well as to TAUNY’s archives, for student and general use, now and in the future.
- The site will be presented with an attractive, locally crafted slate marker, identifying it as a very special place in the North Country.
- This documentation could be helpful in efforts to nominate the site to the National Register of Historic Places and in finding resources to help save the site for future generations.
- The community will have the satisfaction of actively participating in preserving a local landmark and conserving a local way of life.

I like to think of the last of these benefits as the most important in the long run. Getting people in any community to become more articulate about their traditional arts and culture and appreciate their value, for themselves and their children, has been the mantra for our work. It is exciting to have the community come forth to tell us what matters most to them and offer to work with us to help keep it a vital part of local life.

As we all know, “the cobbler’s son goes barefoot.” As a member of Herbie Haven’s community, I was remiss in not recognizing while I still could the great value he and his shoe repair shop played in our lives. Although I failed to record him and save that record for posterity, I have high hopes that, with our Register of Very Special Places, landmarks like his in northern New York—or at least their stories—will be around for a long time to come.

References Cited


