# Teaching History and Heritage Conservation with a Forgotten Cultural Landscape

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Geographer Peirce F. Lewis once suggested that the human landscape is "our unwitting autobiography," and before him, naturalist Mae Thielgaard Watts urged people to "read the landscape" around them.[53] These literary analogies remind us that any cultural landscape (that is, one shaped in some way by people) represents a living document or artifact that can be studied, interpreted, and (possibly) preserved for the lessons it embodies.

Students from my Theory & Practice of Historic Preservation class have visited the abandoned village site of Marshalltown, New Jersey—not only to "read" the landscape, but to also consider the historical lessons and preservation problems this unique place represents. The 166-acre Marshalltown site was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2013, but this historic district is probably not like any other you have visited. The National Register nomination describes Marshalltown as a "fragmentary" landscape—and at this point, even that description might be overly generous. It is mostly gone. Marshalltown was an African American village, first settled in 1833 during the tenuous years of gradual emancipation. During its peak years in the late-1800s, the community, which is tucked away on the edge of a large tidal marsh in southwestern New Jersey, featured around 30 houses, two churches, a school, and a pair of cemeteries. Yet by the middle of the twentieth century, it had been largely abandoned.[54] Today, on this sprawling, wooded, sometimes-soggy landscape, all that survives from the nineteenth-century village is a church building (its last two parishioners stopped attending several years ago), a dilapidated schoolhouse, a couple of collapsing dwellings, and two overgrown, mostly-forgotten cemeteries.

Visiting Marshalltown on a mid-November afternoon, as the sun began to set, the encroaching darkness felt analogous to the waning physical presence of the village. We parked our vans near the old schoolhouse, at the foot of Roosevelt Avenue (formerly Church Street), which is a half-mile stretch of paved road that runs north from Marshalltown Road and dead-ends into the marsh. This was once the primary axis, and pretty much the only dedicated street, of the village. Yet it is difficult nowadays to envision (both literally and figuratively) this overgrown landscape as the former stage set for a living community. Trees, underbrush, and marsh grasses have reclaimed much of the area where dozens of houses, gardens, and outbuildings once stood—and where school children once played. As we walked this street, the students could immediately sense how this place might attract a marginalized people. It feels secluded, off the beaten path, and (probably not coincidentally) on soils that were poor for agriculture. This single, dead-end street undoubtedly lent a sense of security to those who settled here—the ability to form an insular support network with few outsiders passing through.

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[53] Peirce F. Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene," in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D.W. Meinig, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 12, and Mae Thielgaard Watts, *Reading the Landscape: An Adventure in Ecology* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).
[54] All historical information in this essay was obtained from Janet L. Sheridan, "Marshalltown Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, National Park Service, July 17, 2013. Sheridan's research has almost single-handedly called attention to this otherwise forgotten landscape and its history.

Figure 1. The now-silent schoolhouse at Marshalltown, which was moved during the 1930s due to flooding, and then converted into a dwelling in the 1950s. It has been vacant for many years.

Yet the fate of this once-lively village allowed the students to witness how the contours of twentieth-century history transformed a community, leading to its gradual abandonment. During the economic disruptions of the Great Depression, many rural workers here, as elsewhere, headed for larger towns to find work. As farms and financial institutions failed, banks of a different sort—the earthen, water-management banks keeping tidal waters from farmland near Marshalltown—also failed during severe storms, resulting in flooding in the northern and western reaches of the village. Marshalltown slowly withered on the vine. As the number of residents declined, and the financial strength of the community waned, buildings decayed and collapsed, while others burned down without intervention (oral histories suggest the local fire department would not respond to fires here). The forces of apathy, racism, and poverty took their toll.

Today, Marshalltown poses many challenging questions for historic preservationists. The preservation movement was born of efforts to save famous landmarks and the finest architecture, but for decades now, the field has evolved to be more inclusive and preserve places representing the full spectrum of American history. This often involves preserving "vernacular" architecture—even simple buildings with little adornment, if they represent the stories of the working class, racial minorities, women, or other underrepresented social groups. Marshalltown is a prime example of the type of resource prized by modern preservationists (not to mention vernacular architecture scholars and archaeologists) who know these landscapes are rare, vulnerable, and full of historical significance.

Yet, I asked the students: what can be done at Marshalltown, where so few resources survive and there is so much (apparent) apathy in the local community? We talked about the economics of preservation—that the best way to preserve something is to find a financially viable use for it, and that this possibility seems to have mostly passed for Marshalltown. Still, I asked, as historians and preservationists try to rectify past injustices, should places like this—that represent key histories of underrepresented groups—be prioritized for funding and recognition? If the remnants of this site were preserved, or if an interpretive center was created at the schoolhouse, would people come to see it and learn from the stories Marshalltown has to tell? The students all agreed that, whatever its future, the status quo here seemed unjust and unfortunate.

Figure 2. Entrance to Roosevelt Avenue (formerly Church Street) at its intersection with Marshalltown Road. Now almost entirely abandoned, this street was the primary spine of Marshalltown village.

When considering Marshalltown as a fieldtrip destination, my nine-year-old son and I wandered the site—and in the thicketed woods behind the surviving church building, we were both startled by the sight of many abandoned and toppled tombstones. "No one should ever be forgotten like this," he said poignantly. And, of course, he's right. What does the material state of these gravestones—and Marshalltown, itself—say about this chapter of our American past? While the early story of Marshalltown's settlement is one we should not forget, its current chapter—one of absence, deletion, and decay—is just as powerful.[55] This landscape is, indeed, our unwitting autobiography—and as historians, we can learn as much from its abandonment and decay as we have from its creation.

Figure 3. Some of the overturned and sunken gravestones among the thorns and underbrush in the woods behind Mt. Zion African Union Methodist Protestant Church. One epitaph reads, "Gone but not forgotten."

[55] For a fascinating discussion of meaning-making at heritage sites in the face of "natural processes" of physical "decay," see Caitlyn DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2017): 1-21.