

Landscape Architecture Provides Historical Frame

By Cathy Gilbert

Management strategies regarding the treatment of natural vegetation in historic landscapes often focus on techniques for enhancing the historical scene and interpretative environment. Treatments can range from selective thinning of vegetation and vista clearing in overgrown stands to comprehensive reestablishment of native and historic plant communities in disturbed areas. The success of any treatment relies most often on a clear set of management goals for the landscape as a whole, taking into account not only the appearance of the landscape, but the historical context and cultural values of the site, the integrity of the natural landscape, site capacities, park mandates and interpretative opportunities.

In the Pacific Northwest Region an interdisciplinary approach for determining management goals and options for historic landscapes has proven successful. Landscape architects, resource management specialists, scientists, park managers, interpreters and maintenance staff, all provide valuable insight to these complex landscape resources. This interdisciplinary approach, along with a consistent design process for evaluating the cultural landscape, has led to inte-

grated landscape management plans for several historic landscapes in the region. The landscape study conducted at Whitman Mission National Historic Site (WHMI) is a case in point.

Authorized in 1936, WHMI memorializes the work and efforts of Dr. Marcus Whitman and Narcissa Prentiss Whitman between the years 1836 and 1847 when they established an Indian mission along the Walla Walla River in the Oregon Territory. The structural complex of the mission originally covered approximately 10 acres with surrounding lands used for crops, irrigation systems and as pasture lands for grazing domestic livestock.

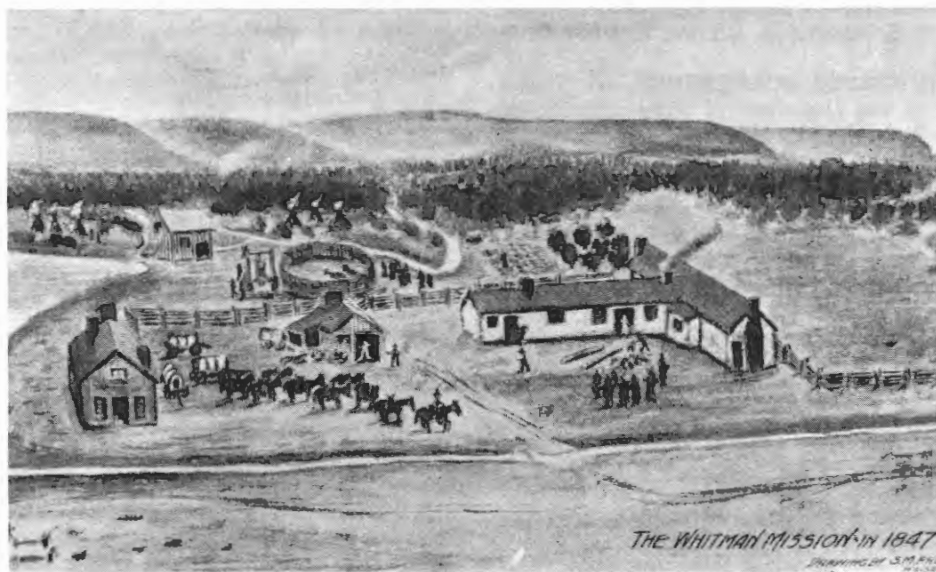
Although no structures remain above ground, the 98.15 acres that comprise the park today include the mission site, monuments, a pioneer and an Indian cemetery and the Whitman gravesite. The historical park also accommodates contemporary NPS facilities including a visitor center, maintenance areas and parking. Altogether WHMI is a landscape that has been highly modified. The result is a mosaic of diverse landscape values, different vegetation types and various levels of contribution to the historic scene. The

goal of the interdisciplinary landscape study at WHMI was to identify historic land use patterns and remaining historic plant communities in the park and to develop management strategies for enhancing the cultural landscape. The study team included the park staff and individuals from the PNRO Division of Cultural Resources, Science and Technology and Resource Management. The study had three phases: research; analysis and evaluation; and development of management alternatives.

Site research and investigations into the historical record revealed a considerable amount of information related specifically to the cultural landscape. Historic photographs, maps, drawings, journals and correspondences, all were used to help determine historic plant materials and land use patterns and activities. Understanding how the landscape was used historically and documenting the structures and patterns associated with those uses helped determine the cultural context for the landscape as a whole. Management goals for the landscape were developed based on that context.



Whitman Mission Historic Site is it looks today.



THE WHITMAN MISSION in 1847

DRAWING BY S.M. FRENCH

Whitman Mission in 1847, from a drawing by S.M. French and titled "Wailatpu on the morning of the first day of the massacre, showing the departure of Spaulding's pack train."

In addition, because there were areas of unique character and historic value at WHMI, the team determined early in the project it was appropriate to divide the landscape into six units. The boundaries were based on natural resources – such as topography, soils and water features – and on cultural components – such as roads, paths, fences and contemporary land uses. Organizing the landscape in this manner helped the team understand the historical relationship among several areas and develop specific management treatments for several diverse ecological areas.

At the site itself, inventories and site surveys of existing features and resources were essential for analyzing landscape change and the integrity of remnant plant communities. By comparing the historic record with existing site resources, the team was able to evaluate the historic significance and integrity of each unit, and propose appropriate management alternatives. In addition, the operational and programmatic needs of the park, including maintenance, interpretation, and visitor facilities, also were considered as components fundamental to preservation and visitor experience.

After exploring the history, vegetation patterns and physical character of the landscape and evaluating the historic significance and possible management problems for each area, the land units were placed back into the context of the entire 98.15 acre historic site. Thus, development of management alternatives always occurred in the framework of the park as a whole system, assuring the thematic and material flow from one area to another.

This interdisciplinary approach to vegetation management at WHMI helped everyone involved clarify management goals and strategies for enhancing the historic landscape at the park, integrating the natural and the cultural resource values.

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