

Rural Businesses

Best Practices for Preservation and Design



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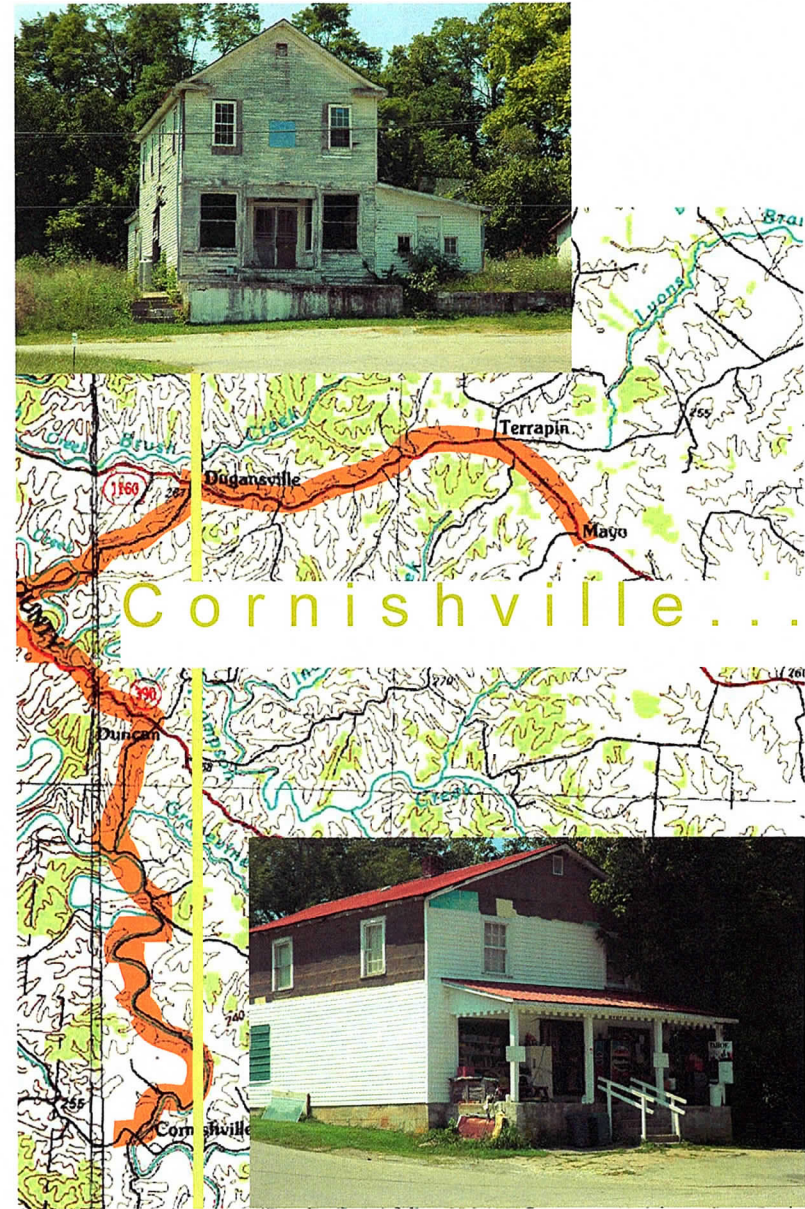


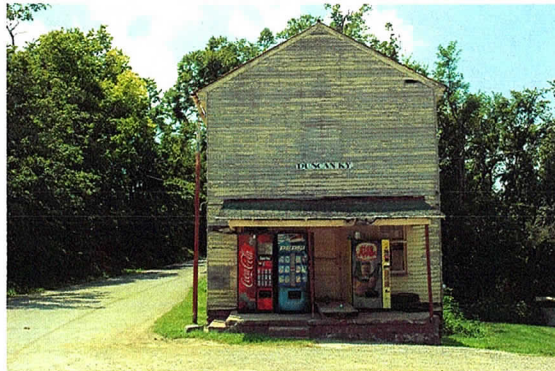
RURAL BUSINESSES

Three kinds of rural businesses are common in the agricultural landscape of central Kentucky. Very small towns, both incorporated and unincorporated, contain small clusters of business buildings that are similar to the commercial buildings found in larger county seat towns. Groceries and general stores are located at widely-spaced intervals along highways and smaller rural roads – often as the center of a small settlement. Newer gas station-convenience market combinations are found on the higher traffic highways in the region and have largely replaced the function of the older rural groceries. The two traditional business building types – the clustered buildings in settlements and the rural groceries – each have a distinctive design pattern that contributes to the character and image of rural landscapes. The newer convenience stores create a design challenge because most are largely unrelated in architectural character to older buildings in their localities. In addition, the scale of their sites is much larger, more open, and visible across longer distances than older business types. Larger clusters of commercial buildings are discussed in the *Rural Commercial Centers Best Practices*. This document is focused on more widely scattered rural stores.



The Kentucky Crossroads region includes a remarkable number of rural stores. On a twelve-mile drive between the communities of Cornishville and Mayo in Mercer County, one encounters twelve country store buildings. Throughout the region, country stores are landmarks of local community that at one time were social centers for their rural neighborhoods. Most are no longer in business and serve as physical reminders but with no remaining community purpose. Some have been converted into residences, others into farm offices, and many are empty. A select few continue on as groceries, cafes, or a combination of the two. Heritage tourism in rural areas like the Crossroads region brings promise for a revival for some of these rural stores. The design practices in this document address design and preservation of those stores and their sites. The document also addresses ways in which to design the newer gas station/convenience markets and other commercial buildings found on more major roads in the region so that they are more compatible with its rural image.





...to Mayo



Landscape and Architectural Characteristics of Traditional Rural Businesses

Context: relationship to roads and other buildings.

Rural groceries, general stores, and other businesses are usually located within a small cluster of houses. Sometimes this grouping includes more than one business. The clusters don't add up to a town, but might be described as a crossroads or a settlement. Many of them are named on maps because they have been the location for a post office or a railroad freight depot.

Business buildings are located close to the road, often on the edge of the right-of-way. Parking is limited to perhaps one row of head-in spaces in front, or parallel spaces may be informally strung out along the road. Businesses that have continued to thrive often have developed a more substantial parking area alongside their building. Site development other than parking is usually limited; in fact, the simplicity of the buildings and their position by the road is the distinctive characteristic of most country stores.

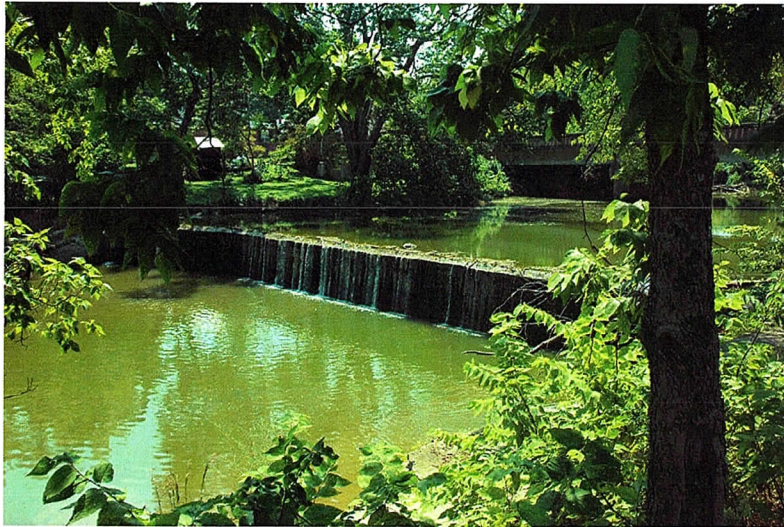
The collection of buildings that compose a community cluster around a country store are usually arranged linearly along county roads. When the cluster is at a crossroads then the linear pattern becomes more focused and the intersection may develop significance as a center for the cluster. Because there are so few buildings in one of these clusters, their preservation has great importance to the character of the



This country store is in a typical position: next to an intersection and with a small cluster of houses and work buildings around it.



Rural businesses are often set adjacent to roads with perhaps a narrow band of parking in front.



Shade trees, streams, or other natural features can create a counterpoint to the sparseness of country stores' typical sites.



This store is a typical form for a rural store: a simple front-gabled main building with a false front and small additions.

place. Most houses historically had a variety of outbuildings associated with them, and the maintenance of all of these buildings contributes to the substance of the community.

Shade trees are the other consistently prominent landscape element. From a distance, the trees – which are much taller than the buildings in a country store settlement – are an important sign of the community's presence. Within the settlement, their canopies connect buildings to the wider landscape. These communities are often on busy roads and shade trees provide some tranquility to the homes and yards.

Architectural character. Country stores in the Crossroads Region are as consistent in character as a group of buildings can be. This is remarkable when one considers that they predate chain stores and that individual small entrepreneurs constructed them. They are a perfect example of the term pattern, which is used often in describing rural landscapes. These buildings are individual in their details, but a few patterns for store design can describe nearly all of them.

Country stores are similar to barns and other work buildings in the agricultural landscapes that surround them. They are generally a simple mass with a narrower gable end facing the road and with a long straight side perpendicular to the road. Two story stores usually have their gable exposed. Their builders often attached false fronts to one story buildings to make them more prominent. Frame construction with clapboard siding is the most typical building technique. Rock-

faced concrete block is not as common. Steel stamped in a rock face pattern and other materials clad some stores.

One story or two, nearly all country stores include a front porch covered by a simple shed roof. The porches are often elevated up to four feet above the grade in front of the building, usually because the road is lower than the rest of the store's site. Porches may have earlier been frame, but they are consistently concrete now. Columns that support the porch roof are simply square wood or round steel posts. Entries are single or double doors with windows in the doors that extend half to two-thirds of the way to the floor.

Windows are usually residential in scale: simple double hung windows that are set individually. Windows are often either ganged together or are oversized on front facades .

Signs are nearly always flat and affixed directly to the front of the building and to other prominently visible walls.

Site features. As mentioned earlier, the main site feature at a country store is pavement. This doesn't create a quaint setting, but on the other hand, there is a stark simplicity to a country store that makes it easily identified. The pavement typically occupies the area in front of the porch, clearing the view to the entry. Gas pumps occasionally are placed in front of stores and when they do, they become a focus of outdoor activity. Shed additions or outbuildings exist on some sites, but are usually not prominent.



Porches are simple shed-roofed structures that provide social space, shade front windows, and house displays. Photograph: Dorothea Lange.



Design Practices for Traditional Store Buildings

Adaptation of historic rural stores for modern uses is likely to involve adapting and outfitting the interior space, repairing or maintaining the exterior, providing accessible entry, adapting the site for suitable parking, providing for delivery and trash removal, and perhaps creating outdoor space for dining or other uses.

Preserving architectural character in existing buildings. Store buildings contain highly adaptable and open interior spaces. This makes them available for a variety of uses while preserving the character and materials of the building. The essential exterior elements of the building that should be considered when maintaining or rehabilitating a store building include the following:

- ***Massing of the overall building and potential additions***
Roof slopes on main building masses and additions should be maintained with their original geometry. Additions to buildings that are placed to the rear of the building and that are proportionally smaller than the main building mass allow the main building to retain its original prominence. Roof slopes for additions that relate to either the slope of the main mass or to the slope of porches or other existing additions will be most likely to maintain the integrity of overall building form.



Additions set back from the front of the original building allow the original building to maintain its prominence.

Modified from a drawing by Winter and Company.



An addition of an upper porch and exterior stairs is set behind a store building so that it is not visible from the road.

- *Roof materials*

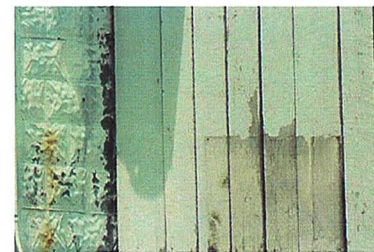
If a new roof is necessary, matching the color, material, and pattern of the original or historic roof as closely as possible will maintain building authenticity. This can be a judgment call. For example, a building may have deteriorated asphalt shingles over wooden shingles. Replacing the asphalt shingles is appropriate. Replacing the wooden shingles is most historically accurate, but may be too expensive. For another example, a deteriorated standing seam metal roof may be too expensive to replace. Replacing it with another type of metal roof could be appropriate if the metal resembles the simple lines of standing seam and if a color similar to the original is chosen. Traditional standing seam roofs will, however, likely last between 50-100 years with maintenance, making them sound investments.

- *Cladding materials*

Original cladding materials vary by period of construction. Clapboard siding is common for older buildings and plain or faux stone concrete blocks were used on many twentieth-century stores. Many stores have had additional cladding materials added over time: galvanized steel roofing and stone pattern pressed-steel panels are fairly common and are still available through companies such as W.F. Norman. Repair and maintenance of historic



Metal roofing is typical on country stores. This dealer displays the various colors available on an awning.



Frequently used cladding materials include stone pattern pressed-steel panels, clapboard, concrete block, and vertical wood siding.



Large doors with windows extend an invitation to enter a rural store.



The composition of windows and doors on the fronts of rural businesses can create simple harmonious compositions.

materials is important for the preservation of country store architecture. Replacing traditional cladding with vinyl siding or other obviously incompatible materials drastically changes a country store's character. Part of the appeal of many of the buildings is the make-do appearance that results from repairs and mixed materials. Continuing to repair, even when the repair is obvious, continues this tradition.

- *Windows and doors*

Beyond the mass and shape of the whole building, the pattern and size of window and door openings are the most important character-defining feature of a building. This is especially true of store buildings because they usually have a front whose windows and door express a much more open character than do the openings on the sides. Reducing the sizes of openings or their proportions disrupts the original composition.

The sidewalls of many store buildings have few windows because interior wall space was maximized for display. New windows to provide daylight in the interiors may be necessary, but should be very carefully considered with regard to building composition and integrity.

- *Porches*

Porches are the signature feature of a country store. The simple roofs shelter a social gathering space

and provide weather protection for the entry. Existing porches and their roofs, when preserved as simple and straightforward structures, will continue this tradition and provide a framework for small signs and other compatible ornamentation. Stores whose porch roofs are missing are clearly lacking an important visual element. The reconstruction of a porch roof, when done faithfully to the building's tradition, restores the essential character of a country store building. Enclosure of a porch, either with glass or solid walls, is generally not in keeping with its character because it will alter the mass of the building and obscure the entry, which is the most common feature of country store architecture.

- *Accessible entry*

High porches on many store buildings create a challenge for accessible entry. Integrating accessibility is highly specific to individual buildings and sites and there is no blanket approach. Accessible entry may be gained by constructing ramps along the side of a building that lead to a porch and front entry. Ramps need careful design to avoid damaging a building's character. Helping them to blend in with good choices of paint color, avoidance of overly heavy or thick structural materials and relating them to their site with grading and plant material can all make a difference. Another approach is to identify a separate accessible entry point where the change between floor and site



The design of a porch is sometimes as simple as two posts, a beam, rafters, and roofing.



Accessible ramps can be integrated into the surrounding grade so that they are less overt. This ramp has a temporary railing.



Parking alongside a country store can be relatively unobtrusive within the open rural landscape.



Decks, patios, and even lawns behind stores can create suitable places to eat while enjoying the countryside.

grade is not as great. This may be less disruptive of building character, but may place a greater burden on people who use the entry.

- *Parking and service*

The old country stores were built on highways and county roads whose traffic was light enough and slow enough that their informal parking arrangements posed little danger. They often provided a few pull in spaces in front of the porch; overflow parking was along the side of the road. Informal parking along the sides of the roads is now often dangerous and so parking areas now need the capacity to supply all of the parking needs of a business. Parking located alongside a store building is generally innocuous in the open space of a rural setting. A few shade trees and a landscaped buffer between parking and road are sufficient to help the pavement fit into the rural scene. Paved walkways should lead from parking areas to buildings while avoiding roads.

- *Outdoor areas*

Rural restaurants and groceries with food service often provide outdoor seating areas. This makes sense because the landscape is the charm of rural places and its ambience is the reason that people visit them. Porches are occasionally large enough to provide space for tables and chairs, but usually a new space has to be created. Decks or patios can provide a space

more removed from the road which may be preferable. When outdoor spaces are hidden from the road, their compatibility with historic features is less important. When visible, however, pressure-treated lumber decks and other incompatible materials and features should be avoided. If a new wooden feature is required it is best if it is painted or stained in keeping with the store property.





Large parking areas cause newer business buildings to be further from roads and causing them to rely more on freestanding signs.



The hallmark of rural businesses has always been simplicity, but simplicity should not be equated with complete lack of character.

Landscape and Architectural Characteristics of New Rural Businesses

New businesses continue to be built in rural areas on sites disconnected from incorporated towns. Most are built along more heavily traveled highways, and especially near highway intersections. Based on observation in the Kentucky Crossroads region, gas station – convenience market combinations and bank branches are the most frequently built rural business. Typical designs for these new businesses are different from traditional rural business designs in several ways.

Most new businesses have larger parking lots. Parking is located between the road and the building, just as it is in traditional businesses, but the distances that result between road and building are much greater because of the scale of the parking and the width of separation between the edges of road pavement and parking pavement. This pushes the building back significantly from the edge of the road, reducing its visibility and placing more emphasis on free-standing signs.

Building forms for newer rural businesses are usually single story with flat or nearly flat roofs. Gas stations and banks include canopies over gas pumps and drive-through windows. These canopies are most often flat-roofed with a narrow fascia. Most buildings are two-dimensional – they have a primary façade that displays the corporate logo and colors

and provides entry, while all other facades are unarticulated.

Varieties of signs populate new business properties. A single property might include ground-mounted signs, signs elevated on poles, and a variety of signs mounted on building walls and, occasionally, roofs.

The site plan for new businesses is arranged in a way that provides great convenience but little in the way of aesthetic character. Buildings are essentially set atop a slab of pavement. The pavement, which provides for parking and service, extends to, or near to, the property edge with varying amounts of landscape material to screen it from its surroundings. One or more signs are usually placed along this perimeter so that advertising is positioned closer to adjacent roads.

The net effect is simplicity. But unlike traditional rural businesses, this simplicity of site arrangement is absent the character of the country store building with its design similarity to barns and traditional residences. The antidote to this problem is to downplay the visual effect of large paved areas and of signs, and to build buildings with scale and character worthy of the rural quality of their region.



Buildings often are relatively invisible when compared to signs.



The essence of most contemporary rural roadside businesses is a building with a canopy in front, set upon a slab of pavement.

Design Practices for New Rural Businesses

Site plan

- *Parking and drive through organization*
Parking, drive-throughs, and gas pumping areas should all be designed to accommodate good vehicular flow and parking dimensions, but should not be oversized. Rather than stretching pavement out to near the edges of the site, pavement should be limited to what is needed. Adequate areas should then be developed for landscape planting or other buffering of parking lots.
- *Landscaping*
Plant material can be used to not only screen large parking areas, but to create a setting for a commercial building that makes it more attractive to visitors. In most cases, the best effect will be had from massing plant material into a few significant areas rather than spreading it out thinly around the perimeter of the site.
- *Freestanding signs*
The key idea for an effective sign system is simplicity. Signs should contain concise information, should be thoughtfully placed relative to other building and site features, and should be few in number. Lower ground-mounted signs work effectively when the commercial building they are associated with has a prominent



Well designed landscape plantings screen without hiding a business.



Freestanding signs can be incorporated into a property in a way that is compatible with buildings on a site and with the surroundings.

mass that is easily seen from the road. Pole-mounted signs compete for attention with buildings and create significant intrusion in the landscape.

Buildings

- *Building masses*

Contemporary drive-up businesses are often low and horizontal in mass. Larger building masses get more visual attention from people traveling on adjacent roads and can be a way of attracting attention to a business without relying completely on signs. Joining canopies over gas pumps and other accessory structures to a main building can have the effect of creating one single larger structure that will have more prominence in the landscape.

- *Roof slopes*

Sloped roofs are preferred for compatibility with other rural structures. False gables and high parapets are not an adequate substitute for real three-dimensional building roofs. Canopies over gas pumps, car washes or other accessory structures should also have sloped roofs that are similar to the major building on a site.

- *Materials*

One of the key differences that can prevent new businesses from fitting with their surroundings are the materials with which they are constructed and clad.



Traditional store building forms positioned near roads are able to attract sufficient attention without large freestanding signs.



Canopy roofs sloped similarly to a business's building will create a more unified composition resembling connected buildings.



Just like historic buildings, modern buildings benefit from signs that are placed within the proportions of their building forms.



The tradition of large signs painted on the sidewalls of rural businesses is interpreted exuberantly in an advertising mural.

Country stores, barns, and other work buildings in the Kentucky Crossroads region are built of a wide variety of materials including wood siding of several types, brick, stone, concrete block, and metal siding. Plastic is one material that is not found in traditional buildings.

- *Building signs*

The Crossroads region has a tradition of signs applied to buildings. On country stores they are often placed across the front, above the entry door and windows. They are often also painted on the sides of store buildings. New commercial enterprises will almost certainly have a sign that is not attached to the building somewhere on the site. In that case, the only sign needed on the building may be one above the entry. Multiple signs on buildings are a poor substitute for a decent building that attracts its own attention. Internally lit plastic signs are incompatible with rural surroundings, and externally lit signs should be used instead.

Additional Considerations for Rural Commercial Centers in the Kentucky Crossroads Region

Preservation Techniques. For more guidance on preservation techniques or advice on implementation please see the National Park Service Technical Preservation Service's *Preservation Briefs Series* <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/presbhom.htm> and *Interpreting the Standards Bulletins* <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/ITS/itshome.htm>.

Tax Credits. Properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places, either individually or as part of a district, qualify for state and federal rehabilitation tax credits. State credits may be used for owner occupied residential properties or income-producing properties. Credits may apply for up to 30 percent of qualifying expenses for residential properties and 20 percent for other properties.

Federal tax credits may be used only for income-producing properties. Credits may apply for up to 20 percent of qualifying expenses. When state and federal credits are used together, up to 40 percent of expenses may be credited. For more information on state and federal tax credits, see the Kentucky Heritage Council website at <http://heritage.ky.gov/incentives/>.

Historic Districts and Scenic Highways. Tax credits are only applicable to properties on the National Register or deemed eligible for the National Register. It is advantageous for historic properties to be listed so that they are in essence pre-qualified for tax credits and for other preservation assistance.

There is one National Scenic Byway - the Lincoln Trail, and one state-designated scenic byway - US 68 in the crossroads region. These highway designations qualify the counties and communities through which they pass for federal financial assistance with heritage tourism development.