

Recognizing History in Our Interstate Highway System

by Lynne
Sebastian

Not long ago I was asked to discuss interstate highways from the perspective of my experience as a former State Historic Preservation Officer. I'm not sure that the experience necessarily left me any more prepared to tackle this daunting issue than anyone else, but I will give it a try.

I distinctly remember the day another preservation officer told me that her office was evaluating whether a power line was eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. A long vista opened down which I had never considered going, and down which I definitely did not think I wanted to go. And I remember thinking to myself, "I sure hope I'm out of this job before we get to the point of evaluating freeways." And, as it turned out, I got my wish, but despite that, here I am, faced with the question.

This isn't actually the most difficult case I have had to deal with lately concerning a property from the recent past. That would be last year when I had to tell a client, an energy development company, that I thought that one of their natural gas pipelines might be eligible for the National Register and should be considered an historic property for the purposes of preservation law.

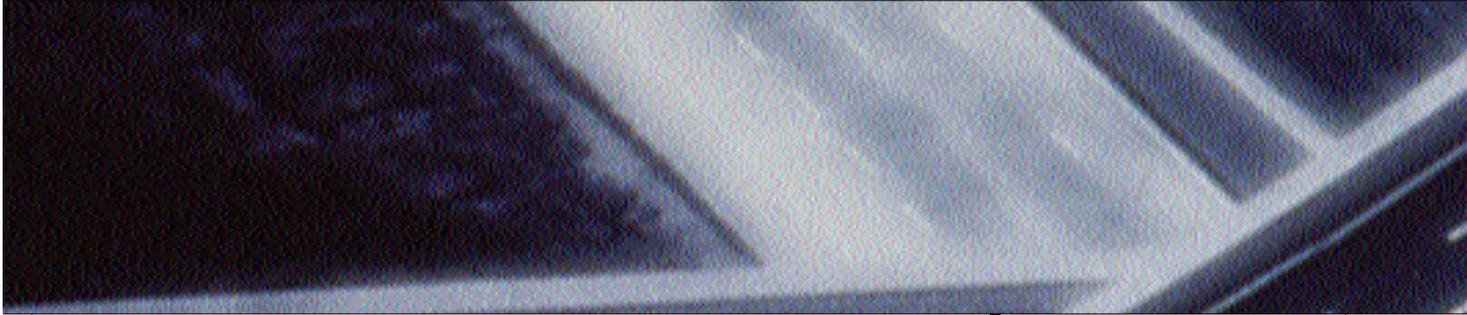
Interstates are part of a whole class of properties that I found very difficult to deal with when I was a preservation officer, and I still find them very difficult as a consultant. The category includes things like railroads and irrigation systems and power lines and pipelines. They are difficult to deal with because they are linear; they are functioning, engineered systems; they are not the kinds of properties that were envisioned when the National Register was created; and they are recent-past properties, which means that we have no body of experience to draw on when we begin to evaluate them.

First of all, they are linear. Linear properties are difficult for a couple of reasons. For one thing they can be very long and mostly what you see in State Historic Preservation Offices is some tiny, project-specific window on them. When you are asked to make decisions or recommendations at this scale, it is kind of like the visually challenged man and the elephant. It is almost impossible to evaluate these properties—or the effects of publicly funded undertakings on them—absent a larger understanding of their context.

The other difficulty is a mechanical one. It is difficult to manage information about linear properties even if you have a sophisticated data management system, as we do in New Mexico—especially when that system was set up, as virtually all of them are, to manage point or polygon data for archeological sites, buildings, and districts. In general, the system just doesn't want to hear about a polygon that is 423 miles long and 20 feet wide.

The second problem is that these kinds of properties are living systems. They were designed and engineered to perform a specific function. In order for them to have continued performing that function long enough to become historic, they have to have been maintained and upgraded, they have to have evolved. Otherwise they would have turned into archeological sites and we know how to deal with those.

THE BAD NEWS IS THAT EVERYONE IS EQUALLY UNCERTAIN ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH THIS ISSUE. THE GOOD NEWS? WELL, I GUESS THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO FEEL LONESOME ANY MORE.



What does this mean in terms of evaluating their integrity as a historic resource? In northern New Mexico we have historic acequia systems—irrigation systems to most of you—that are 300 years old. They have been maintained by the same community over all that time, and they continue to perform their historic function of watering the crops and, incidentally, serving as a unifying force in the community. But the ditches have been dug and redug and realigned, the headgates and flumes have been replaced dozens of times, the diversion dams and takeouts have been washed away and replaced more times than anyone can remember. In some cases the ditches are still unlined, but in others they have been lined with concrete to decrease seepage and maintenance. What constitutes integrity with a property like this?

The third problem is that properties of this sort are not what anybody envisioned when the National Register was established. Let's face it: the National Register and the National Register process were set up to deal with mansions and monuments, battlefields and historic neighborhoods. Even archeological sites aren't a great fit to the National Register process; traditional cultural properties still less so. But interstate highways?

Consider, for example, the National Register's concern about boundaries. What are the boundaries of Interstate 10? I mentioned to a friend that I was going to Florida, but I didn't know how I was going to get here yet—meaning that I didn't know where I would be changing planes. And she said to me with a perfectly straight face, "Oh, it's easy to get to Florida. You just go down to the end of Wilmot here and turn left." And of course, she was quite correct; were I to follow her advice, several days and several States later I would, indeed, arrive in Florida. Are we going to assess the eligibility of I-10 as a whole, taking the Route 1, Maine-to-Key West model? Should we examine it on a State-by-State basis? Interchange by interchange?

And as for the public's perception of questions about the National Register eligibility of these kinds of properties, I suspect that most of them, including many preservationists, would think that we had gone round the twist. When I told the folks at El Paso Natural Gas that their "1100" pipeline (which goes from El Paso to LA) might be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, well, if I'd still been the State Historic Preservation Officer, I probably would have found myself in the Governor's office in about an hour. Since El Paso was actually paying me to give them this unwelcome advice, I think they had a hard time deciding whether to fire me or not.

The fourth problem with these kinds of properties is that they are part of the history of the recent past, and we have neither the perspective that comes from the passage of time nor the experience of others in assessing similar properties. The bad news is that everyone

ON I-40 NEAR GALLUP, NEW MEXICO, A STRANGE MIRAGE GREETSS TRAVELERS GOING WEST THROUGH THE BEAUTIFUL RED MESA VALLEY: AN ENTIRE CITY, CONTAINED UNDER ONE ROOF AND OFFERING ALL THE NECESSITIES AND FRILLS OF MODERN LIFE. THIS MARVEL IN THE DESERT IS MARKED BY AN ENORMOUS, MILLION-WATT ELECTRIC SIGN PROCLAIMING "GIANT TRUCK STOP!!"



COPYRIGHT DARYL BENSON/MASTERFILE

is equally uncertain about how to deal with this issue. The good news? Well, I guess that the good news is that you don't have to feel lonely any more.

So, what to do? Well, I do have some experience dealing with a historic highway: Route 66. But I was reexamining the study we commissioned for Route 66, and it made me realize that this experience is not going to be as much help with the issue of interstates as I might wish. There are big differences between the two cases. Route 66 is not a living, functioning engineered system; it is the fossilized remnants of such a system, so the integrity issues are much easier to address.

And Route 66 is not even linear anymore. It now consists of a small number of discrete, bounded properties. And even the public perception issue is easy. Route 66 has pizzazz and nostalgia on its side, and it has Interstate 40 to do all the heavy lifting. It is easy for the public to love Route 66 in the abstract; if the same people who love it passionately today were still getting stuck behind an 18-wheeler going up Nine Mile Hill out of Albuquerque, most of them would be screaming to get rid of that old road and build a six-lane freeway, which is exactly what we have.

So, if Route 66 isn't a good model, what can I suggest? I think we have to deal with two critical issues, and we have to deal with those at the national level. Those issues are scale and integrity. The interstate highway system is unique. It is not only national in its level of significance, it is national in scale. There is nothing else I can think of that is like it. We have other property types and themes that are nationwide, but they are not part of a coherent, interconnected system, as are the interstates. The significance of the system as a whole is going to have to be addressed at a national level. And because of the living, functioning nature of the interstates, we are also going to have to resolve the issue of what constitutes historical integrity for such properties at a national scale. This isn't one of those places where we want to have 50 different standards. On the other hand, the properties that make up this national system exist at a local level and, in many cases, will derive their significance from the local impacts of the highway and from a association with local events and people.

So my suggestion is that I think we have been too focused on what the interstates are, on their physical nature, their engineering, their construction methods. We need to step back from that and spend some time thinking about what they mean, about where they came from, what they did, and what they do. In other words, historical context.

I think we need a national context that examines questions like, "How did this change in how we move people and material around the nation come about and why? How did the development of this system change the nature of life in this country? How were the locations of the interstate routes chosen and why, and what influenced those choices? Were these existing historic corridors of travel?"

"Who built this system? What construction challenges had to be dealt with? What breakthroughs in engineering and on-construction resulted?"

Just as fundamental are questions that speak to the heart of the historic preservation movement: "How do we capture the significance of interstate construction as a galvanizing force for preservationists? How do we acknowledge that the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 arose in part from the Federal highway legislation 10 years earlier? How do we illustrate the ties between the interstates and the urban renewal of the 1950s and 1960s—a other bellwether for preservation?"

And we need State or regional contexts examining questions like, “How did existing communities influence the choice of route? What were the impacts on the existing communities? What new communities were created? How did the growth of limited access highways influence the local economies? How did the way services are provided change? How were the interstates built? Who built them?”

Rereading the Route 66 study raised one important issue that I haven’t really heard addressed anywhere yet: What are the property types? The Route 66 context includes extant sections of the road itself, tourist courts and motels, gas stations, restaurants, curio shops and trading posts, and municipal roadside attractions. Most discussions of interstates treat these arteries as if they exist in a vacuum, but they don’t. Like Route 66 before them, they have fundamentally altered the nature of roadside businesses, creating their own roadside culture.

So in considering the significance of interstates, maybe we need to look not only at the roadbeds, the bridges, the changing fashions in interchanges, the signage, the safety features, the sound and visual impact mitigation features, but also at the landscaping and the rest areas, at the roadside culture that the interstates have created.

On I-40 near Gallup, New Mexico, a strange mirage greets travelers going west through the beautiful Red Mesa Valley: an entire city, contained under one roof and offering all the necessities and frills of modern life. This marvel in the desert is marked by an enormous, million-watt electric sign proclaiming “Giant Truck Stop!!” to the accompaniment of animated, electric, dancing figures. Though descriptive, the name of this outpost of consumerism derives from the oil company with which it is affiliated. Acres of parking, quality food, oceans of coffee, game room, pharmacy, laundry and shower facilities, Internet access, gifts, souvenirs, snacks, cinnamon rolls the size of soccer balls, actual soccer balls, a wide variety of clothing items, all this and much, much more can be found at the Giant Truck Stop. It is a world marked by social stratification—“Truckers Only” signs set some dining areas and other facilities apart—and one that did not exist, could not have existed prior to the interstate.

There can be no doubt that the interstate highway system has profoundly changed this country. Its historical significance is undeniable. Can this significance be captured, interpreted, and represented for future generations through the federally mandated processes for protecting and preserving historic places? Are the interstates a place? Or are they a process, like the Industrial Revolution or urbanization? Should we try to preserve parts of them? If so, what characteristics should those parts have? Should we think about preserving interstates at all? If we should, how do we think about that preservation process? To answer these questions, we need a much deeper understanding of the historical context within which this system was created and which the system has spawned.

THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM HAS PROFOUNDLY CHANGED THIS COUNTRY . . . THE QUESTION IS: CAN THIS HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE BE CAPTURED, INTERPRETED, AND REPRESENTED FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS?



Lynne Sebastian, a former State Historic Preservation Officer for New Mexico, is Director of Historic Preservation Programs for the SRI Foundation in Albuquerque. She can be reached at lsebastian@sri-foundation.org. This article was adapted from a paper presented at the summer 2001 meeting of the Transportation Research Board Committee on Archaeology and Historic Preservation in Transportation.