Protecting Cultural Landscapes: The Challenge of Old Order Amish and Mennonite Heritage in Waterloo Region

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Abstract

The Old Order Mennonite community has maintained a strong presence in southwestern Ontario's Waterloo Region for the past 200 years. This presence has manifested itself in the physical environment, creating a unique cultural landscape. The various landscape features, directly relating to the cultural traditions of these people, distinguishes the Region's townships from many other rural areas in the province. This paper explores the challenges facing planners and others working to protect this particular landscape and the opportunities for heritage planning in this regard.

Introduction

Waterloo Region in southwestern Ontario is home to a distinctive heritage. The longstanding presence of Mennonites and Amish has manifested itself in the physical environment, creating a remarkable cultural landscape. The first Mennonite settlers to Waterloo County (later Waterloo Region) came from Pennsylvania in 1800, where they had settled almost 100 years earlier. The first Amish settlement in the Waterloo area was set in motion in 1822. Since that time, the groups have maintained a strong presence in the area, joined by waves of Russian Mennonite immigrants in the 1870s, 1920s and 1940s (Hayes, 1997: 4).

In my MA thesis entitled, *Plain and Not-so-simple: Planning with the Old Order Mennonites and Amish*, I examined the physical landscape these groups have created over time and examined the challenges facing its protection. This paper will identify some of these challenges and look at the role of heritage planning as a strategy to be used in the conservation of cultural landscapes such as this one.

The Study: Purpose and Methods

The basic purpose of this study was to investigate heritage planning and other strategies used by planners and related professionals when working in a multicultural environment – in this case, the Old Order Mennonite and Amish areas in Waterloo Region. One of the principal study methods was interviewing planners and related professionals in the Region about their experiences. Among other questions, the study participants were asked the following:

1. What they would identify as the "Amish and Mennonite landscape" in Waterloo Region;
2. What they believed threatened those areas; and
3. The planning strategies they used to counteract the threats, including heritage planning in particular.

The research was a comparative study, examining the similarities and differences between results in Waterloo Region, Ontario, and Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, another area that has maintained a large Old Order Amish and Mennonite population over several centuries. This paper will concentrate on how the participants viewed heritage planning as a potential strategy for working with this rather unusual cultural landscape.

The Old Order Mennonites and Amish – A Brief History

It is important to begin with a brief history of the plain groups, in order to provide some context for how this cultural landscape in Waterloo was created in the first place. When their movement began in Zurich Switzerland in 1525, the ancestors of the Amish and Mennonites were considered religious radicals. The group's distinctive practices included pacifism, a belief in the separation of church and state, the refusal to participate in government, and adult baptism, for which they were given the name "Anabaptists" (Hostetler, 1993: 28). For holding and promoting these beliefs, its members were persecuted by the Reformed Church and local governments, and often tortured and killed. Martyrs inspired new groups of Anabaptists, and the movement spread. After 1536, a former Dutch Catholic priest named Menno Simons (1492-1561) became the leader of the groups in the Netherlands and the Anabaptists became known as "Mennonites." About 100 years later, the church was divided and a Swiss bishop named Jacob Amman managed to secure a strong following toward greater discipline and strictness (D. Wagler in Igou, 1999: 32). His followers eventually became known as "Amish."

Over time, the "Old Order" or plain groups have maintained many traditional beliefs and practices. Most obviously, the groups continue to use horses and buggies instead of automobiles. While some groups use gas-powered stoves and lights, most do not make use of electricity from the public power grid. They still dress in plain clothes and most still speak "Pennsylvania Dutch" – really Pennsylvania Deutch, an old German dialect specific to these groups. Many of these lifestyle choices can be traced back to the groups' origins in Europe in their desire to maintain self-reliance and separation from the state. Others are related to the importance of family to the Old Order communities and, as in the example of transportation, the fear that new technologies might draw them away from family life.

Waterloo Region Study Results

Most of the eleven planners and related professionals interviewed in the Waterloo portion of the study were quite capable of identifying features of the Old Order Mennonite and Amish landscapes, as outlined in table 1 (based on Fraser, 2000: 53). On the other hand, the participants found it more difficult to draw boundaries around Old Order areas.

> ...it's not something that you draw a line around. The important part is not just preserving the core where it's untouched and uncontaminated... what's really interesting about the culture is how it interacts with the other cultures around it. *(Study Participant in Fraser, 2000: 57).*

They cited several examples of how the Old Order landscape mixes with the dominant culture, such the interaction of Mennonite and non-Mennonite at the farmers' market or the presence of horse parking spaces at the local shopping mall.

Table 1. Landmarks and Identifying Characteristics of the Old Order Communities

Landscape Features	*Built Features*
Distinctive layout of farms, mixed farming	Schools
Lack of power lines	Meeting houses
Gardens	Outhouses
Cemeteries	Barns, particularly bank barns[1]
Wood lots	Large houses with many additions
Wide road shoulders	Outbuildings
Orchards	Dotty houses

When participants were asked about potential threats to the features of the Old Order landscapes, the responses tended to be threats both to the landscape, but also to the lifestyle of the groups themselves. They spoke about the difficulty the Old Order groups have in simply maintaining their way of life in the midst of modern society, and of the prejudice felt by others toward them. Some of what the study participants considered to be the most important threats, however, were related to land use and municipal planning. Tourism and development pressures on the rural areas were identified as particularly threatening, and concern was also expressed about the fact that in certain ways the planning system itself put these groups at a disadvantage because it failed to accommodate their lifestyle.

Participants were then asked about what strategies they used when working with the groups, and in particular, how they felt heritage planning could be used. In the course of the interviews, at least five of the participants had specifically mentioned that the presence of the Old Order groups was a significant local heritage asset. When it came to heritage planning, however, nine of the eleven professionals consulted either dismissed heritage planning as irrelevant to planning with the plain groups, had no opinion on heritage planning, or said that it could play a limited role – preserving historic buildings and structures that were a part of Mennonite or Amish history. Only one participant suggested the possibility of identifying particular Old Order areas as cultural landscapes and protecting them under a formal heritage designation.

Lancaster County Comparison

While the landscape features identified in the comparative study in Lancaster County were similar to those in Waterloo, the Lancaster respondents had a radically different way of describing the role of heritage planning in their work with the groups. Four of the respondents actually used the term "cultural landscape" in their responses. Seven out of the eleven informants mentioned the word "heritage" in their earlier responses before the heritage planning question was even asked. Three of the informants discussed a study that had been done by the County Planning

Commission called the "Sacred Resources Study." The goal of that study was to determine what the residents of the County valued most in their environment. The results of the study demonstrated a clear desire to help to maintain the viability of the Old Order lifestyle. The Lancaster informants also mentioned the Lancaster Heritage Tourism Program as another heritage planning strategy that relates to the Old Order groups. The program was designed to help manage tourism in the plain areas.

The Lancaster informants also described the various kinds of designations that have been sought for particular Old Order areas in the County. Unlike in Waterloo Region, where the designated Heritage Conservation Districts are nearly all in urban areas, many historic districts in Lancaster are rural. A nomination has been accepted by the National Parks Service for an area to be listed on the National Register. Another area was officially designated a Pennsylvania Heritage Park Planning Area. This designation provides recognition and state funding in order to "preserve, enhance, package and promote" a heritage area (Lancaster County Planning Commission Newsletter, 2000). Other rural, Old Order areas were formally identified in Northeastern Lancaster County as Potential Historic Districts. Sections of the Old Order areas were also determined to be "Historic Vernacular Landscapes," landscapes defined by the National Parks Service as follows:

> a landscape that evolved through use by the people whose activities or occupancy shaped that landcape. Through social or cultural attitudes of an individual, family or a community, the landscape reflects the physical, biological, and cultural character of those everyday lives... (Birnbaum, 1994: 2).

While most Waterloo informants saw heritage as little more than a side point, Lancaster informants recognized it as a valuable tool they felt was effective in working with the Old Order communities and offering some degree of landscape protection.

Challenges and Opportunities

Why was there such a discrepancy between the way that the Waterloo and Lancaster informants understood the role of heritage planning in their respective communities? The Waterloo informants seemed to view heritage planning primarily in terms of the preservation of significant old buildings, and did not see a role for it in terms of landscape protection. Interestingly, the Grand River was designated at Canadian Heritage River in 1994, and one of the reasons for that designation was the cultural diversity in the Watershed – of which Waterloo Region and the Old Order Mennonite landscape is a part.

It should be noted that in terms of heritage planning generally, Waterloo Region is well respected for its progressive initiatives. The Regional Policies Plan includes an entire chapter on "Heritage Conservation" and "distinctive cultures" are even included as part of the definition of "heritage" (Regional Municipality of Waterloo,

1998: 65). At a recent workshop on Heritage Planning in December, 1999, the Region and its various municipalities stood out as having far more detailed policies than many of the other municipalities in the Grand River Watershed. One outcome of the Workshop and associated research, however, was that very few rural municipalities were engaged in heritage planning of any kind (Nelson and Fraser, 2000). Wilmot Township was designated the first rural Heritage Conservation District in Ontario in 1996, but besides that there has been little activity in the rural areas.

There are two reasons that quickly come to mind to explain the discrepancy in views of heritage planning with regard to the Old Order areas. First of all, although the Ontario Planning Act and Provincial Policy Statements recognize the need to protect cultural landscapes, there is an absence of clear directives at the provincial level in terms of how to go about it. Although the Ontario Heritage Act's Heritage Conservation District Designation can be used to formally designate landscapes, this approach has rarely been taken. It is no wonder that planners in Waterloo Region think mainly in terms of protecting buildings, when the Act focuses mainly on buildings and streetscape-type districts. Because the legislation is not explicit in suggesting ways or formally protecting landscapes, such protection relies in large part on the imagination and creativity of municipal planners and heritage advocates. This is a difficult challenge in any case, but particularly in a complicated, cross-cultural landscape such as the Old Order areas.

The other major difficulty is that heritage still does not appear to be part of many planners' way of thinking. They continue to see it as a specialized field, rather than something to be incorporated into a more holistic planning approach. Heritage planning courses are few and far between at universities, and many students are never exposed to it. Practicing planners, too, especially in rural areas, have few examples to learn from in terms of cultural landscape protection.

The ambiguity of the provincial legislative framework, however, should not restrict planners from thinking about these ideas and looking for opportunities to explore new ways of protecting landscapes. New ways of defining heritage districts, for instance, could lead to better landscape recognition and conservation. The Heritage River designation offers the potential for building partnerships and sharing ideas. Looking at what other municipalities outside the province (such as Lancaster County) are doing to manage their cultural landscapes is also a useful exercise. It is important that planners and other heritage advocates begin thinking critically about ways of protecting cross-cultural, "living" landscapes such as Waterloo Region's Old Order areas, especially since it is only one example of many other physical manifestations of Canada's cultural diversity.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that there is an Old Order Amish and Mennonite cultural landscape in Waterloo Region with identifiable features that is threatened in a variety of ways. These areas present an interesting challenge to planners and

heritage advocates in terms of their conservation. While local planners and other professionals have largely dismissed heritage planning strategies, such strategies have been used successfully elsewhere. In cases such as this, heritage planning should not be discounted, but rather the myths of its restricted use should be dispelled.

Notes

[1] Bank barns, large barns built into the hillside are a key component of a uniquely Mennonite/Amish cultural landscape. They have become symbolic of the Old Order belief in hard work and community cooperation because building these barns requires a large number of workers (Martin, 1979: 37).

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