

## Significance Determinations for Interstate Highways

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I've been asked to talk about the issue of significance determinations for interstate highways from the perspective of my experience as a former State Historic Preservation Officer. I'm not sure that my SHPO 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 SHPO told me her office was working on an eligibility determination for a power line. It opened before my eyes a long vista 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 of NRHP eligibility and interstate highways.

This isn't actually the most difficult case that I have had to deal with lately concerning a recent-past property type and eligibility, however. That would be last year when I had to tell a client, an energy development company, that I thought one of their own natural gas pipelines might be eligible to the Register and should be considered a historic property for the purposes of Section 106.

Interstates are part of a whole class of properties that I found very difficult to deal with in Section 106 cases when I was at SHPO, and I still find them very difficult as a consultant. This category includes things like railroads and irrigation systems and power lines and pipelines. They are difficult to deal with because 1) they are linear; 2) they are functioning, engineered systems; 3) they are not kinds of properties that were envisioned when the National Register was created; and 4) 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 a big problem in the SHPO world for a couple of reasons. For one thing they are very LONG and mostly what you see as the SHPO is some tiny little, project-specific window on them. When you are asked to make decisions about eligibility or effect recommendations at this scale, it is kind of like the visually challenged men and the elephant. It is almost impossible to evaluate these properties or the effects of undertakings on them absent a larger understand of their context. The other problem is a more mechanical one. It is very difficult to manage information about linear properties — even if you have a fairly 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 (that is, archaeological sites, buildings, and districts). In general, the data-management 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 archaeological sites and we *know* how to deal with those. But what does this mean in terms of evaluating their integrity? We have historic acequia systems — irrigation system to most of you — in northern New Mexico 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 take-outs 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 in the public or at the National Register ever envisioned when the NRHP 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 archaeological sites aren't a great fit to the Register process; traditional cultural properties are still less so. But interstate highways? Let us consider, for example, the Register's mania about boundaries. What are the boundaries of Interstate 10? I mentioned to a friend in Tucson that I was going to Florida, but I didn't know how I was going to get there 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 eligibility of these kinds of properties, I suspect that most of them, including many preservationists, would think 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 to the National Register of Historic Places -- well, if I'd still been the SHPO, 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 just shoot me at first.

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 on significance that comes from the passage of time nor the experience of others in assessing similar properties to draw upon. The bad news is that everyone 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 lonesome any more.

So, what to do? Well, I do have some experience dealing with a historic highway — Route 66. But I was re-reading the historic context that we commissioned for Route 66 on the plane on the way here, and it made me realize that that 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 is much easier to address — those remnants which have not deteriorated irreparably since the end of the period of significance generally are eligible; none of the remnants were altered by upgrading since then. And Route 66 is not even linear any more. It now consists of a small number of discrete, boundable 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 6-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 that I can think of that is like it. We have other property types and themes of significance that are distributed nationwide, but they are not part of a coherent, interconnected system, as are the interstates. The significance and history of the system as a whole are 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 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 local impacts of the highway and from 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, where they came from, what they did and what they do. In other words, **historic 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 break-throughs in engineering and construction resulted?"

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 historic context 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 the 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 and have created their own roadside culture.

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

Near Gallup, New Mexico, on I-40 along the original alignment of Route 66, 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, fine quantity food, oceans of coffee, game room, a 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 coming of the interstate.

There can be no doubt that the interstate highway system has profoundly changed this country. Its historic significance is undeniable. The question is: can this historic 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? If should, how do we think about that preservation process? To answer these questions, we need a much deeper understanding of the historic context within which this system was created and which it itself has spawned.