# FIRST WORD

BY PAUL DOLINSKY

## The Intimate and the Epic

**BRIARWOOD, A LOUISIANA PRESERVE ESTABLISHED** by the late conservationist Caroline Dormon, is a landscape with a very pronounced tie to humanity. Her love is literally written in woods where she created a safe haven for endangered species (see page 30). I was strolling the grounds in the early days of the Historic American Landscapes Survey—a then-new NPS program intended to document such places—thinking how Briarwood fit into the grand breadth of the American story. My guide—Jessie Johnson, an elderly woman who had worked with Caroline—suddenly bent down and exclaimed, "Oh my God, it's blooming." Here I was, musing on landscapes with a capital "L," and she had taken the idea down to a flower as tiny as a pinhead—a species that had not bloomed in ages. The moment was a lesson in perspective, speaking of the intimate connections we have with our lands. **AMONG PRESERVATIONISTS, THAT CONNECTION** has been growing since the late 1970s, when a sea change took place in how we look at historic places. The context in which they exist, the landscape, emerged as a dynamic new concept, as national parks examined themselves anew and the National Trust launched its Main Street program—focused on rejuvenating entire communities, not just individual structures. **IN THE MIDST OF THIS CHANGE**, the National Park Service stepped forward to take the lead. It was a time of great ferment as the traditional tools of historical survey—measured drawings, large format photography, written histories—were applied to a spectrum of sites, from heavily designed landscapes to vernacular landscapes with little or no design pretensions. Two pilot projects—at Washington DC's Meridian Hill Park, a sterling example of early 20th-century Neoclassical design, and Dumbarton Oaks Park, a naturalistic design of stream, woodland, and meadow—revealed new dimensions in places we thought we already knew. **VIRGINIA'S STRATFORD HALL**—the Lee Family ancestral home—can be used to illustrate the approach. The old way saw an artifact on a platter, a lovingly restored piece of Georgian architecture to be studied under a magnifying glass. The new way saw how, far from a discreet entity, the house was a product of the vast agricultural operation surrounding it, created by rum and slavery. Early efforts employing the perspective resonated with the preservation community, and HALS was established in 2000. **THE SURVEY'S FIRST PROJECT WAS** at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, in the rolling hills of Vermont. George Perkins Marsh, author of *Man and Nature* and one of America's first conservationists, lived here as a child; Frederick Billings, president of Northern Pacific Railway, purchased the home and followed the teachings of Marsh in farming and reforestation. An experiment itself, the place was ideally suited to the new approach. The spectacular view from the fanciful Victorian porch—of a mountain, of farm fields, of the town below—illustrates the very idea of a cultural landscape, the union of land, architectural environment, and societal forces. HALS surveys are invaluable to preserving and understanding such places. And today, technology not available to earlier generations of landscape architects—such as laser scanning—enhances both speed and accuracy. **HALS HAS BEEN IN EXISTENCE** for ten years, turning its lens on the national narrative as told through our lands, but there is still much to do. A network has been established with the American Society of Landscape Architects, with liaisons across the United States inventorying sites to be documented, realizing the vision of HALS as independent from its partners the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record. **A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE IS A PLACE IN CONTINUOUS CHANGE**, and documentation puts it in that context. Philadelphia's The Woodlands—a Victorian graveyard overlooking the Schuylkill River, with the city skyline in the distance—was once the estate of William Hamilton, one of the wealthiest people in the early days of the Republic. How did a gentleman's estate, its Classical mansion one of the first with a formal portico, become a Victorian relic? HALS documentation looks to answer that question, placing the site in the context of today. **THE INTENT IS TO SHOW HOW PEOPLE SHAPE PLACES** and are in turn shaped by them. Ranchers eking out a life on the north rim of the Grand Canyon, who saw in that stark landscape their own vision of Manifest Destiny (see page 18). Ancient Hawaiians constructing Hale O Pi'ilani Heiau, a massive ceremonial platform bridging volcanic flows on the east coast of Maui. Hopi Indians chipping and scratching clan symbols on the rock faces at Tutuveni—their Rosetta Stone. **HALS DOCUMENTATION IS AT THE CONFLUENCE OF** the historical and the natural, the cultural and the scientific. It captures our humanity while portraying the broad sweep of the American landscape, revealing its power, its importance, its ability to contain both the intimate and the epic.

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