

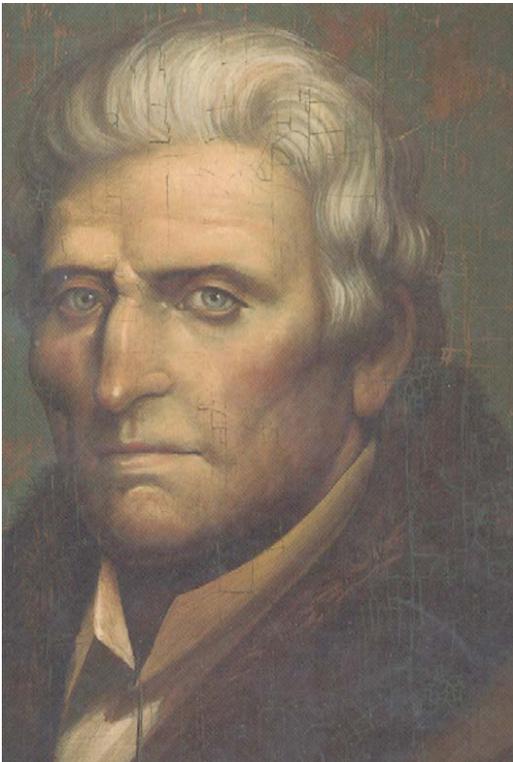
Converting the Kentucky Wilderness

By
Nancy O'Malley
W.S. Webb Museum of Anthropology
University of Kentucky
Lexington, Kentucky

Abstract

The rural central Kentucky landscape today appears as open, rolling bluegrass fields, punctuated by relicts of “woodland pasture” and partitioned by stone or board fences, the latter usually painted black. Historic residences often sit back from the road at the end of a long drive, presenting a picture of placidity, prosperity and gracious living. Country roads are organic in quality, often appearing to have simply followed the underlying topography without any purposeful engineering. But this landscape is the byproduct of a diverse set of human decisions, actions, subtractions, and additions over a long period of time. This paper examines the origins of the central Kentucky landscape, perceptions of how the landscape appeared to people in the past and the present, and the actions, both intentional and serendipitous, that produced it. Critical to the evolution of the central Kentucky landscape was the eradication of earlier landscapes, retention of certain elements, purposeful design, and changing perceptions of the past and what it means. Understanding the underlying complexity is a first step toward a more meaningful interpretation of the built environment, the designed environment, and the nature and symbolism of the physical evidence (archaeological, architectural, and environmental) that is part of its expression.

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Beginning with someone who was there
at the beginning--

“Thus we behold Kentucky, lately an howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts, become a fruitful field; this region, so favorably distinguished by nature, now become the habitation of civilization... Here where... wretched wigwams stood, the miserable abodes of savages, we behold the foundations of cities laid that, in all probability, will equal the glory of the greatest upon earth.”

Daniel Boone through the imaginative pen of
John Filson, 1783

And a corroborating opinion:

“O my dear honeys, heaven is a Kentucky of a place.”

The Christian Traveller.

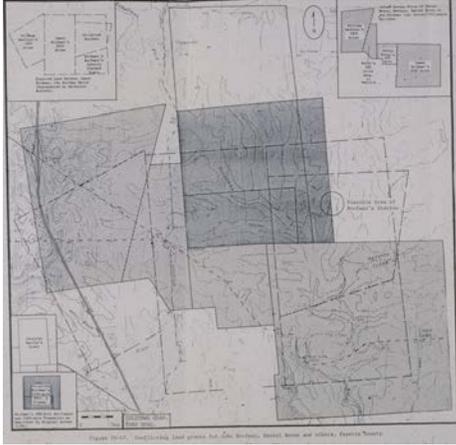
The historic settlement of Kentucky began with a preoccupation with land so it is not surprising that comments about its landscape are plentiful. It is also not surprising that many comments are underlain by a duality in landscape perception—distinguishing “howling wilderness” from “fruitful field”, and characterizing Kentucky as an earthly paradise. Reports by long hunters and explorers from the mid eighteenth century gave rise to the notion that Kentucky was a fabled land of great fertility and temperate climate, containing vast forests teeming with game, a veritable “Garden of the West”, long before settlers arrived to inhabit the land permanently.

The conversion from a perceived paradisiacal wilderness to an undeniably manicured and manipulated landscape was a relatively rapid process and was greatly influenced by economic motivations. European visitors were apt to see the conversion in somewhat negative terms. Count Francesco Arese commented in 1837-1838: “The most sincere and least bombastic Americans tell you that the country around Lexington is the garden of the United States: the others tell you it is the garden of the world! In reality it is very beautiful, but in a positive, numerical way, a money-beauty, in short an American beauty.” The romantic stereotype of the buckskinned backwoodsman living in a state of nature not unlike that attributed to the “noble savage” was belied by the merchant in his broadcloth suit and the prosperous farmer driving a four-wheeled carriage. To be sure, the settlers that flooded into Kentucky from the 1770s onward ran the gamut—from the impoverished to the well-heeled, all expecting to find or augment their fortunes in Kentucky’s rich and fertile lands. Not surprisingly, those with economic assets and social connections prevailed over those without although there was the occasional person who rose to prosperity from humble origins. Moses Austin said it best:

Ask these Pilgrims what they expect when they git to Kentuckey the Answer is Land. Have you any. No, but I expect I can git it. Have you any thing to pay for land, No. did you Ever see the Country. No but Every Body says its good land. Can any thing be more Absurd than the Conduct of man, here is hundreds Travelling hundreds of Miles, they Know not for what Nor Whither, except its to Kentuckey, passing land almost as good and easy obtain.d, the Proprietors of which would gladly give on any terms, but it will not do its not Kentuckey its not the Promis.d land..and when arriv.d at this Heaven in Idea what do they find? A goodly land I will allow but to them forbidden Land, exhausted and worn down with distress and disappointment they are at last Oblig.d to become hewers of wood and Drawers of water.

So who were the movers and shakers, the creators of the Kentucky landscape? For that matter, who were the “hewers of wood and Drawers of water”? How do we record the results of their actions and decisions as they are inscribed in the landscape? What evidence exists to determine whether landscape design decisions were embedded and largely subconscious or rational realized outcomes of planning and vision?

Before trying to answer these questions, some working assumptions are in order. An important assumption, I think, is that landscape is an artifact that can be defined, broken down into discrete elements, classified and subjected to diverse forms of analysis. Designed



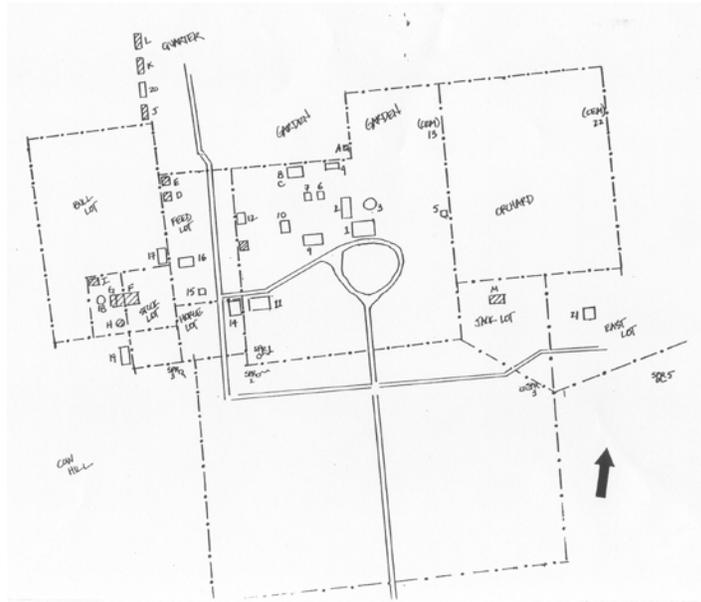
Kentucky was from its inception steeped in the agricultural way of life; even its industry owed much to agricultural production and its urban centers relied on agricultural products for its markets. The partitioning of the land initially followed Virginia land laws that authorized 400 acre settlements and preemptions in varying acreages (most commonly 1000 acres) to qualified individuals. Although the laws had certain stipulations that supposedly governed the shapes of the grants, in practice, land parcels were frequently irregularly shaped and often contained more acreage than the grant description

Overlapping or “shingled” land grants in Central Kentucky

stipulated. Shingling of land claims led to numerous lawsuits whose settlements further reshaped the land parcels as a part of the adjudication process.

Land clearing began the process of landscape modification, deforesting limited areas initially for the construction of houses and farm buildings, and eventually converting large acreages to pasture for an agricultural economy heavily invested in livestock. Human impact on forested areas was eventually dramatic. Clearing for agriculture, harvesting wood for heating and cooking and constructing buildings, bridges, and other facilities resulted in huge expanses of the central Kentucky Bluegrass being stripped of its forests and a pastoral open landscape developed. The “woodland pasture” of central Kentucky became a feature of “gentleman farms”—the Upper South equivalent of plantations.

A well preserved example of purposeful design is the plantation of Brutus Junius Clay, called Auvergne, on the Winchester Road in Bourbon County. I am indebted to Dr. R. Berle Clay, Brutus’ descendant, for his insightful analysis of his ancestor’s farm as well as for the many conversations we have had over the years about the Bluegrass landscape. Brutus Clay’s father, Green Clay, began the design process in the 1820s by building a log house, corn crib and stable and installing tenants to begin clearing and fencing. Considered together as a complex, the relationship of the three buildings forms a triangle with the house standing at a greater distance from the other two buildings. The triumvirate of buildings were just north of three springs. Subsequent building by Brutus of his agricultural complex concentrated many of his agricultural buildings in the vicinity of these original three buildings.



Site plan of Auvergne, drawn by Julie Riesenweber

His house was a different matter. The approach to Brutus' house is impressive. After traversing a rolling pastoral landscape of woodland pasture along a winding farm road, one makes a dogleg turn into the main driveway, passing through a gate guarded by the Auvergne stone lions. At the gate one first feels the impact of the house set within a yardscape that harkens back to the recommendations of Andrew

Jackson Downing for country estates. The landscaping in the yard is easily as important as the impressiveness of the architecture, continuing the theme of woodland pasture but with more ornamental trees—notably ginkgo and cypress in addition to the more common deciduous trees. The trees also hid from initial view the earlier log house and other outbuildings that stood to the left of the house. The house is sited facing south at the end of a long drive that terminates today in a circle. A connected drive leads to the west where the majority of the agricultural buildings stand. Although the agricultural building complex is convenient to the house, the area it covers is set apart from the house and its domestic yard.

Zooming out in scale, the entire building complex is set far back from the nearest road and does not even face it. Nor did Clay ever change the orientation of the house to face the road at a later period when many of his neighbors were doing just that. He hardly needed to since the road is not even visible from his house. This isolation from public roads was not unusual for the Kentucky Bluegrass and was noted by a reporter for The Country Gentleman in 1856:

Some of the finest farms in Kentucky thus lie miles away from the main travelled highways, and little, if at all less valuable on that account, it being the way of the country...as the dwelling and other farm buildings are placed for the convenience of the farm, instead of regard to the road.

The building complex followed the advice of New York State agricultural journalist Lewis Falley Allen in having “a central position on the farm, by which every part of it might be easily reached in getting in the crops and superintending the labor.”

Practical considerations may well have governed Brutus' decisions in building placement, but aesthetic and social concerns were paramount when he built his house. His mother advised against his building a large house, commenting in a letter written in 1836 her reasons: *A two story house is much more dangerous in taking fire. You have no idea of the expense of*

furnishing and keeping so large a house clean. In your retired situation you might not have company in seven years to fill it. It is not nearly as much trouble to keep a room in order that is not used as if it was, it gets mouldy, spider webs, moths in your carpets...

But knowing her son well, she concluded, *I am sure my advice is good, you will then do as you please.* Brutus pleased to build an elaborate house of two stories, double pile with a central hallway plan. It is flanked by one-story wings and has an extensive ell that held the kitchen and work rooms for weaving, laundry, and storage.



The message is unmistakable. Here is the home of a prosperous, prominent man who is, above all, organized and methodical in his thinking and his dealings in business and with people.

A closer view reveals another aspect of the man as a pragmatic, no nonsense businessman. The land in which the buildings were located was partitioned by stone fencing into a series of lots. While the

The main house at Auvergne, front elevation

total building complex took a number of years to build and responded to developing needs of the farm's agricultural activity and growth in its slave population, a coherence of design is still perceptible.

The central lot contained the main house, its domestic outbuildings, the family cemetery, and a garden in the east half. The west half contained the original log house, the house spring, and antebellum buildings for blacksmithing, storing grain or lumber, and an ice house.

Buildings associated with the farm operation were clustered together. Slave housing included a row of houses out of sight of the house but not too far away for supervision. Other quarters were attached to agricultural buildings and may have housed slaves with particular skills.

Separation of farm working spaces from domestic space appears to have been a purposeful decision. The family referred to lots by names that emphasized their main purpose. Thus, the bull lot was a large lot with the bull barn in one corner. The stock lot contained two smaller fenced areas where the shorthorn cattle herd barn, mash cook house, manure pit, cistern and feed mill were located. The lots flanking the lane that led to the largest concentration of slave housing were the feed lot containing the early corn crib and two shops for working leather and pressing apples for vinegar, and the horse lot that contained the stable. A barn for mules was located in the jack lot and another lot was named after the orchard it contained. Only the east lot, containing the cutting barn, was named differently.

The domestic space mostly contained outbuildings and facilities directly relating to processing activities—the blacksmith shop, the gas house for interior gas lights, the smokehouse, the ice house, and the dairy. Also included within this lot was the early log house and a small house where slaves or overseers lived. These residences were separated from the larger slave quarter to the northwest and may have housed people who had more daily contact with Brutus and his family. The distribution of residential spaces represents an interesting set of choices. Brutus Clay operated his farm with slave labor, owning in the neighborhood of 150 slaves by 1860. He owned many more slaves than he could profitably utilize or even keep busy. His papers indicate that he dealt with his labor issues by renting out a significant number of men, women and children and divided up the remainder that could work between domestic and farm tasks. For instance, his wife had a male gardener (and undoubtedly assistants), at least two women who wove cloth fulltime, domestic servants, and a cook. Some of these individuals may have slept inside the main house, while others lived in the quarters with their families. The log house and the smaller house inside the domestic yard housed laborers as well—a white overseer at times, or a skilled slave or slave(s). Having a live-in labor force presented housing challenges that were not an issue for people who hired labor that lived elsewhere.

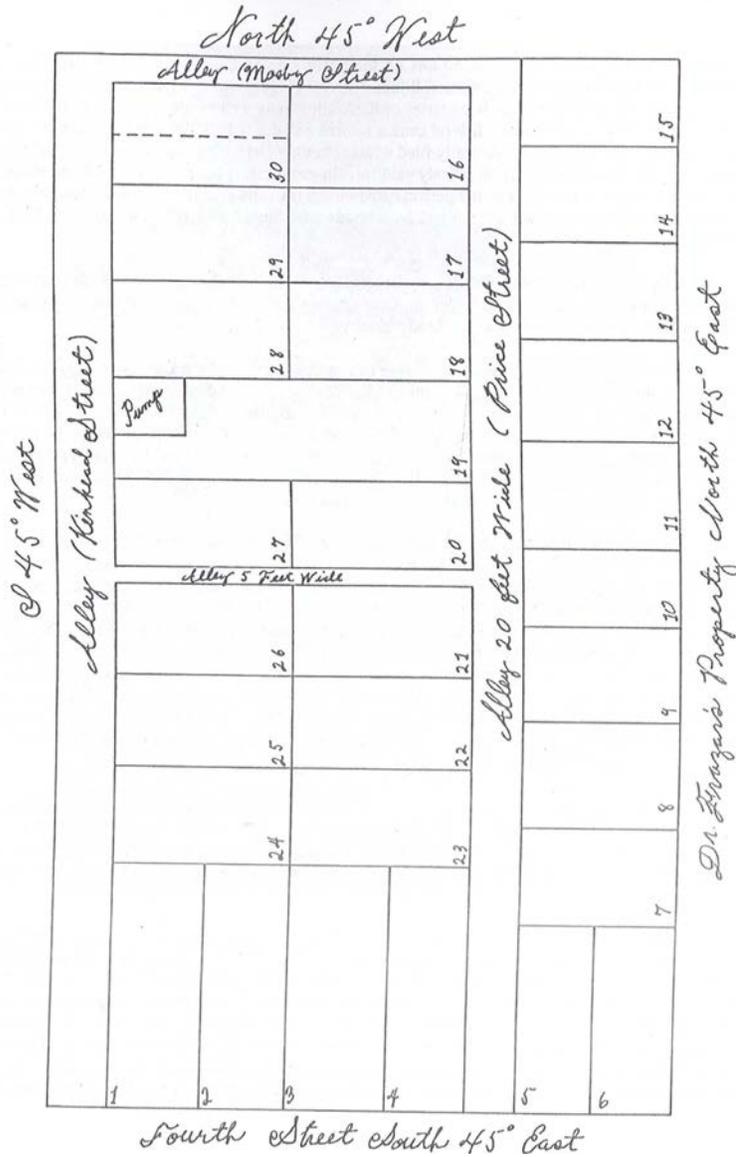
Although Auvergne exhibits some unique design aspects, it falls squarely within the classification of a Kentucky style plantation or gentleman farm. Prosperous, well educated men like Brutus Clay operated their farms on a scientific basis and at a large scale. They were the movers and shakers of the Kentucky cultural landscape in many respects since they not only controlled much material wealth, but they also exerted considerable political and social power at the local level and, in Brutus' case, at the national level as a result of his service as a U.S. congressman and his acquaintance with politically powerful men. Farms like Auvergne followed a purposeful pattern influenced by many factors, from practical templates relating to agricultural operations to fashionable landscaping plans to residential architectural styles intended to impress upon the viewer the power and prominence of the owner.

The social stratification between the landowners and their labor force (the “hewers and drawers”, if you will) presented additional design challenges. White employees were accorded higher status than slaves but were subordinate to their employers and lived in housing that reflected this distinction. The slave force was stratified by job (field vs. house), by skin color (mulatto vs. black), by age (child, able-bodied adult and elderly), and by ability (skilled vs. unskilled). Their “fit” within the farm landscape was considerably more complex since an individual could fall within several categories. But their presence and the accommodations made for them was an essential part of the landscape.

Switching to an urban example—

Following the Civil War, the abolition of slavery unloosed the residential constraints of thousands of African Americans, many of whom streamed into towns and cities from the countryside. The town of Lexington, in the heart of the slaveholding area of Kentucky, experienced a phenomenal growth in black population. Like many other southern cities, the response to increased housing needs led to the establishment of residential subdivisions designed specifically to be marketed to freed slaves. The subdivision lots were usually long, and narrow and fronted on narrow streets running off from wider thoroughfares. Since most blacks were working class, lot prices and the houses that were built upon them reflected this financial constraint. The design of the subdivisions was an eminently practical one, to create

the largest numbers of lots that could be fit into the available space. The long, narrow lots did not rigidly dictate the footprint of the house but encouraged the construction of shotgun plan houses. If the layout and size of the lots was a design decision made by the developer, the internal spatial partitioning of the lots was left to the buyer. Were these designed landscapes? The casual observer would probably not have thought so. However, detailed research in one such neighborhood, Kinkeadtown in eastern Lexington, suggests that the occupants did incorporate purposeful design in their houselots. Although the shotgun plan was the most common floor plan used in the neighborhood, the house was usually placed on one-half of the original lot, that is, taking up only 25 feet of a 50 ft. frontage, and invariably stood close to the front boundary of the lot. This allowed room for expansion of the house or construction of an additional shotgun house later, and provided yard space on the side as well as in the rear of the lot once the initial house was completed. Domestic outbuildings



Plat of Kinkeadtown

such as coal sheds, privies, chicken coops, animal pens and, later, garages, were always placed in or toward the rear of the property. Other floor plans such as a T-plan were occasionally

from Paris in Bourbon County to Lexington in Fayette County departed from the general plan in that it was designed and built as a completely new road. Once finished, the turnpike improved the business of transportation-related sites like taverns that were already accessible and attracted others to open in underserved sections. Small communities sprang up along the road and subsidiary roads were laid out to join it and other sites such as mills, iron works or other important commercial centers. Historic maps indicate a diversity of sites along the road – in 1877, the Paris Pike section alone had several stagecoach stops often linked to taverns and post offices, churches, an Oddfellows' Lodge, and several small communities as well as farms. The turnpike was one of Kentucky's premier roads and such luminaries as Henry Clay traveled it on his way to congressional service in Washington, D.C. Several stagecoach lines plied their trade along the road as well. Later in the nineteenth century, an interurban rail line was established between Paris and Lexington along the road. Had the road not been turnpiked, its character may have developed very differently.

Its status as a state-of-the-art highway continued until the first quarter of the twentieth century as thoroughbred horse farms began to develop. Over time, the horse farms bought up land once owned by individual families, taverns closed, the interurban stopped running, stage lines gave way to automobiles, and the road became a public thoroughfare maintained by road taxes rather than by tolls. The cultural diversity of commercial and residential sites along the roadside began to disappear as the large horse farms transformed the land into rolling pastures skirted by plank fences. By mid 20th century, much of the nineteenth century cultural landscape was barely discernible. The road remained a two-lane thoroughfare even in the face of increasing automobile traffic and a relatively high incidence of accidents, largely because of the public perception of the road as a rustic, historic landscape that should remain untouched by such improvements as four-laning. Attempts to four-lane the road were blocked by an injunction for decades. Only in the last few years was the injunction lifted and an innovative and very expensive road redesign was approved. The road is presently being widened to four lanes and landscaped to appear as a historic landscape even though the process has involved introducing curves where there were none, moving and reconstructing stone fences, and planting trees in groves.

The road design is quite beautiful, very functional and seems to have satisfied the concerns of most of the people who objected to improvements. But it is a redesign that harkens back to a perception of the past that was never expressed along the nineteenth century Paris Pike. In the process, the cultural diversity that occurred along the road remains largely unknown and invisible to the traveling public. In effect, the actual history of the road in terms of its associated sites and landscape features has been essentially sublimated in favor of a functional model that incorporates the ideal of a historic, pastoral thoroughfare while still serving modern needs for high speed vehicular traffic. To the knowledgeable, some remnants of the earlier road still exist—among them, the Jacoby curve skirts a rock quarry that was mined for surfacing materials, the Oddfellows Lodge now serving as a residence and several other historic structures still stand in their original locations. Gone are the toll houses, the flat embankment that traced the route of the interurban, the small communities, the taverns, schools and brick yards. Retained for their rustic, quintessentially Bluegrass character are the stone fences—but rebuilt along the new sides of the road in equal proportion to the fences that were still preserved at the time of the road design. Is it a sensitive highway design? Unquestionably. Is it historic Paris Pike? Depends on who is doing the asking and who is providing an answer.

These three examples highlight the many paradoxes and contradictions that exist in the making of the classic Kentucky Bluegrass landscape. The wooded character of the early historic landscape has largely given way to a more open, manicured pastureland partitioned by plank fence and the occasional stone fence. Well preserved historic farm complexes like Auvergne survive in significant numbers that the area is famous for its beautiful historic architecture. Yet the horse farms, also beautiful in their own fashion, are a part of a later landscape that developed at the expense of an earlier one and essentially erased parts of it. Urban working class neighborhoods can still be found but many have been gentrified or bulldozed out of existence to make way for other development. Once viable, vibrant, designed landscapes have given way to the needs of a later era and their passing has become the purview of people like me who want to know what things used to look like.

The reconstruction of such landscapes is an intriguing journey that involves far more skills than are usually taught during an undergraduate or even a graduate term of study in archaeology. It requires a heightened perception of the subtle clues that still exist on the ground, as well as exhaustive analysis of documentary clues, that goes beyond the simple recordation of artifacts concentrated in space. Landscapes must be considered at more than one scale to discern the designed from the serendipitous.

Capturing the data that express the dynamic qualities of any landscape, including a designed one that may have been initially intended to adhere to a more static, fixed ideal, requires the traditional tools of archaeologists—site recordation and excavation, artifact and feature analysis, but borrowing techniques and methods from other disciplines such as geography is necessary as well. The employment of Geographic Information Systems is a particularly useful way to organize data as well as approach an analysis since landscapes are inherently spatial in character. The ability of GIS to abstract the real world into layers speaks to the multi-dimensional, multi-scale quality of data related to landscapes.

Consider the Kentucky Bluegrass as an example of a designed landscape. The design was not the product of a single individual or even necessarily a small group but rather is a series of phases that may overlap in time and space. The challenge is to tease out meaningful phases of design, characterize them by their salient features and traits, temporalize them, assess the extent to which they represent purposeful design and, finally, evaluate their preservation as perceptible, observable, real, organizationally coherent phenomena. At the scale of an individual farm such as Auvergne, its excellent preservation of physical features and design elements as well as the wealth of documentary information available that enables us to track the design process makes the exercise more assured of success than other examples. Auvergne still operates as a working farm and so continues to evolve and change but adherence to earlier design allows temporally distinct elements to be recognized and incorporated into the dynamics of the landscape. Interpretation may be made somewhat easier simply because the available data are so diverse, well preserved, and contemporaneous.

In contrast, Kinkeadtown no longer exists as a physical reality. The dynamic quality of its landscape persists only in the historical records that were generated by its study. Interpretation of the Kinkeadtown landscape is more difficult because the interpreter must rely on data gathered that cannot be replicated by a revisit or fresh observation. Even a revisit of the data by the same researcher that originally gathered it has the potential to result

in a different interpretation. And the reader of any interpretation of a landscape adds to the hermeneutic process of representation. If the foregoing sounds like it is dangerously veering over into cultural geography, that is probably true. But it is also true that many archaeologists are closet geographers, at least in part, and we should not be apologetic about helping ourselves to the some of the technology, methods and even some of the theory that geographers use. In 30+ years of archaeological practice, I find that my kinship with history and geography has become closer yet I can say unequivocally that my colleagues in those fields still consider me a dyed-in-the-wool archaeologist in approach and outlook. Nevertheless, we share an interest in many of the same problems, use the same data, and overlap in many other ways. If archaeologists bring anything different to the table, it is perhaps our preoccupation with material things at all scales, from artifacts like ceramic sherds or bottle parts to the features or deposits in which they were found, and so on. The relationships between the various layers of data, from the minute to the grand, provide ripe ground for interpretation.