

4. Historic & Cultural Resources

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

- WAITSFIELD LISTINGS -

GREAT EDDY COVERED BRIDGE
1974

PINE BROOK COVERED BRIDGE
1974

WAITSFIELD VILLAGE HISTORIC DISTRICT
1983

JOSLYN (ROUND BARN) FARM
1988

MAD RIVER VALLEY RURAL DISTRICT
1994

WAITSFIELD COMMON HISTORIC DISTRICT
2001

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Waitsfield residents have long had an interest in preserving the town's rich social and cultural history, including its historic sites and structures. The **Waitsfield Historical Society**, a volunteer organization with over 100 members, is committed to preserving and celebrating local history. The Society, housed at the town-owned General Wait House, sponsors a variety of special events and educational programs. Long term plans for the Wait House possibly include renovating the attached barns to house a three-season historic museum and meeting space.

In 1987, the Mad River Valley Planning District and the Vermont Land Trust initiated the Rural Resource Protection Project, with the goal of identifying and developing a strategy to protect the Valley's historic resources within their rural context. This resulted in 1988 in the founding of the district's **Rural Resource Commission**—the first multi-town “certified local government” created under the National Historic Preservation Act. Managed by a nine-member board, the Commission's mission is to advocate for the protection of historic resources that contribute to the area's rural character, to assist towns in protecting these resources, and to provide educational opportunities.

The Rural Resource Project also resulted in the 1988 publication of the **Mad River Valley Resource Protection Plan**—the first such resource protection plan in the state. The Valley's historic and archaeological resources were identified as a major element of rural character, along with scenic resources, agricultural and open land, and river and trail resources. The Commission has since worked to update initial sites and structures surveys and compile oral and video histories, and most recently completed an inventory of the Valley's historic barns.

Traditional Settlement Pattern

Waitsfield's historic development is written on the local landscape. The town's historic settlement pattern—of clustered villages surrounded by an open river valley and forested uplands—has been well-established since the 19th century. The town's agrarian heritage and rural character have been maintained largely through the preservation of its working landscape. Waitsfield's villages and smaller hamlets developed at a scale and density that is pedestrian friendly, with clearly defined streetscapes and public spaces,

prominent public buildings, and a variety of goods, services and employment opportunities—all within easy walking distance of nearby residences.

Waitsfield's traditional settlement pattern contributes significantly to the town's scenic character. The town is blessed with one of the most extraordinary scenic landscapes in Vermont. Encompassing a pleasant blend of rolling meadows, wooded hills, a meandering river, and imposing historic structures, the town's landscape is a source of pride to residents and an important attraction to visitors. Historic settlements, open farm fields, forested hillsides and ridgelines, and tree-lined roads are all important scenic resources. The preservation of the town's historic and scenic character is important for a variety of reasons: to promote tourism, to preserve the agricultural land base, to enhance recreational opportunities, and to protect important natural and cultural landscape features. Careful sight selection and design, and more detailed cultural, environmental and/or visual impact assessments where appropriate, can minimize adverse impacts to the town's cultural and scenic landscape and resources, and its rural character.

Archaeological Sites

As noted, knowledge about the town's distant past is limited. Buried archaeological sites are often uncovered only when disturbed by site development work. As a result, these important sources of information about the town's past are not readily identifiable, but can be easily destroyed through subsequent development.

An initial assessment of the Valley's archaeological potential was conducted in 1990 for the Planning District. Two previously reported prehistoric sites were investigated, and five new historic sites were documented. It was concluded that numerous sites likely exist in the Valley, including buried riverine and scattered upland prehistoric sites, historic homesteads, and industrial mill sites along the Mad River and its tributaries. Areas of “high” archaeological sensitivity or importance include:

- ◆ **Level, undisturbed, well-drained soils near water or other strategic resources, including the Mad River,**
- ◆ **High terraces (700+ feet above msl) bordering ancient Lake Vermont shorelines,**
- ◆ **Locations adjacent to major river confluences,**
- ◆ **Known mill sites, and**
- ◆ **Sites of structures that are no longer standing, as identified from historic maps.**

Also of historic significance, though not well-documented, are other cultural landscape features, including stone walls, fences and corner posts or “witness trees” that once marked field and property boundaries; foundations and cellar holes; quarry sites, old road beds, and other visible remnants of past land use and occupation. Such features, if identified on subdivision and site development plans, can be documented, incorporated in subdivision and site design, and protected where appropriate. For development within highly sensitive areas, further archaeological assessments may be necessary.

Historic Sites & Structures

Waitsfield has a wealth of historic resources that includes hundreds of documented historic sites and structures, and others that have yet to be identified or catalogued. Some of the town’s most historic structures, including its two covered bridges and the Joslin Round Barn, have been accepted for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (see Map 7). Inclusion on the National Register places no restrictions on the use of property, but is typically a source of pride for property owners.

A comprehensive historic sites and structures survey for Waitsfield, initially conducted by the state in 1979-80, identified one historic district—the Waitsfield Village Historic District, with 59 contributing structures—as well as 78 other historic structures located throughout town. A structure must be at least fifty years old and retain its historic integrity to be eligible for listing on state and national registers. Most structures identified were historic homes, but also included several farm complexes, school houses, and public buildings. Not included on the initial survey were potential archaeological sites, including mill sites along the Mad River; town cemeteries; and a more extensive listing of historic structures such as barns and outbuildings that also contribute to the town’s cultural heritage.

The Rural Resource Commission recently completed a barn inventory, identifying 74 barns of historic significance in Waitsfield. These buildings help culturally and visually define the town’s agrarian heritage. Many barns included on the state survey, however, are no longer actively used for agricultural purposes, and as such there is little economic incentive for their maintenance. There are several examples in town of barns which have been successfully convert-





ed to nonagricultural use, while retaining their historic integrity—most notably the Joslin Round Barn, which houses the Green Mountain Cultural Center and the Skinner Barn which is used for performing arts. Such “adaptive reuses,” as allowed under local zoning regulations, may help preserve these historic structures.

Historic Districts

The state sites and structures survey also has been updated to include the designation of two additional historic districts—the Mad River Valley Rural Resource District and the Waitsfield Commons Historic District. All three of the town’s historic districts are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and are shown on Map 7.

The **Waitsfield Village Historic District**, initially surveyed in 1980, encompasses approximately 75 acres and 71 structures within its boundaries—including historic homes, stores, public buildings, barns and outbuildings. The village is a typical New England village, having a concentration of historic structures in a classic village setting. Contributing structures date from 1790 to 1930; all but seven are wood-framed. The district’s predominant architectural style is Greek Revival, but other styles are also represented. Prominent buildings include the Waitsfield Federated Church, the Joslin Memorial

Library, the Benjamin Wait House (the recently restored home of the town’s founder), and the Bridge Street Market Place, which was restored with the assistance of historic preservation tax credits. The district also includes, near its center, the Great Eddy Covered Bridge—the oldest continually used covered bridge in Vermont.

While the historic character of the village is largely intact, contemporary buildings dominate the northern part of the district—including the Waitsfield Elementary School, the Waitsfield-Champlain Valley Telecom building, and other single story residential and commercial structures. Efforts are ongoing to ensure that new development within this district is more compatible with its historic architecture and character.

The **Mad River Valley Rural Historic District**, listed on the National Register in 1994, stretches four miles and incorporates roughly 2,000 acres along Route 100 in Waitsfield and Moretown. The district was the first of three designated rural historic districts in the state, and is noted for its fine collection of well-preserved historic farmsteads representing the agricultural history of Vermont. Farm complexes date from the early to mid-1800s, and include a number of late 19th century barns. Land along the river has been in farming since the valley was first settled in the 1790s. Farming has kept the valley bottom open, in sharp contrast to the forested slopes of the Green and Northfield mountains, bordering it to the east and west.

The **Waitsfield Common Historic District**, listed in 2001, was the first settlement in the Valley by those of European descent, and is considered an important example of an 18th century hilltop settlement. The district contains five vernacular Federal-period houses dating from 1793 to 1810, an 1810 farmstead, a cemetery dating from 1793, and a 1798 public common (divided into two parcels by town roads). Though the area has changed somewhat over the years—from the loss of structures to fire and as a result of new development—it remains largely intact and could serve as a model for new compact residential developments .

Scenic Resources

As mentioned above, Waitsfield’s traditional settlement patterns and associated rural landscape is the

community’s greatest aesthetic resource. This landscape consists of several key features, however, that have been identified as distinct scenic resources in a variety of studies and public opinion surveys over the past 20 years, including the 1988 Rural Resource Protection Plan and the 1992 and 2003 community surveys. It is the protection of each of these distinct features that will ensure the preservation of Waitsfield’s scenic landscape and—by extension—much of its rural character. These features include:

- ◆ **Open farmland and meadows, which often serve as the foreground for expansive views;**
- ◆ **Forested knolls, steep mountain-sides and ridgelines which provide the unbroken background for most distant views, most significantly land above an elevation of 1,500’ and lower hillsides and forested knobs that rise steeply to the east of the Mad River (between the River and the Waitsfield Common/East Warren plateau) and are highly visible from Route 100;**
- ◆ **The historic context of development, including compact villages surrounded by open land and the relationship of clustered farm buildings (of mixed scale and massing) surrounded by farmland;**
- ◆ **Scenic roads, especially those of a scale and character that discourage high speed travel while offering a pleasant walking and recreational environment (see Chapter 8);**
- ◆ **The Mad River and adjacent riparian land and floodplain;**
- ◆ **Individual buildings which, because of their scale, character or historic significance, such as a large barn, serve as a visual and cultural focal point in the landscape; and**
- ◆ **The night sky which, despite increasing light pollution associated with commercial development in Irasville and scattered residential development, still provides a magnificent view of the stars.**

CULTURAL RESOURCE PROTECTION

The 2002 Community Survey reconfirmed findings from earlier surveys—that there is a great deal of local support for preserving the town’s rural character, including its traditional settlement patterns, and historic, scenic and recreational resources. There are a variety of regulatory and non-regulatory options available to encourage, or in some cases require, the protection of local cultural resources (see sidebar).

In recent years the town has pursued a number of these options, including the establishment of a local conservation fund for the purchase of

land and interests in land (e.g., the Scrag Mountain municipal forest, Maple Avenue Farm multiple-property conservation project, and the Lareau Swim Hole), a local tax stabilization program for land kept in agriculture, and, under recent (2002) zoning amendments, additional regulatory protections. Adaptive reuse provisions for historic barns were also adopted prior to the 2002 zoning revisions.

Current zoning regulations also include the “Historic Waitsfield Village Overlay District,” the purpose of which is to maintain the historic character of the Waitsfield Village Historic District as listed on the National Register. Structures within this district that are classified as conditional uses are subject to exterior alteration standards. Also, the proposed demolition of any contributing structure must meet associated review standards intended to require the documentation and/or preservation of historic structures within the district.

The town, in association with the Rural Resource Commission and local property owners, should also continue to pursue nominations of historic

CULTURAL RESOURCE PROTECTION TECHNIQUES

Regulatory Options:

- ◆ Conservation, neotraditional and/or neighborhood subdivision design (subdivision)
- ◆ Historic and/or design review districts (zoning)
- ◆ Scenic overlay districts (zoning)
- ◆ Conditional Use siting and design standards (zoning)
- ◆ Transfers of development rights (TDRs) (zoning)
- ◆ Planned unit and planned residential development standards (zoning, subdivision)
- ◆ Local participation in Act 250 and Public Service Board (Section 248) regulatory proceedings

Nonregulatory Options:

- ◆ State and national register historic sites and structures listings
- ◆ Village designation under the Vermont Downtown Program (financial assistance)
- ◆ Purchase of land or interests in land (development rights, conservation easements)
- ◆ Local and state tax abatement programs (e.g., current use)
- ◆ Property owner education, technical and financial assistance

properties to state and national registers. Listing on the National Register may afford some protection in the review of federally and/or state funded development projects, and also ensure that property owners are eligible for available state and federal assistance, including preservation grants and tax credits. Additional state assistance is available for historic properties within designated villages under Vermont's Downtown Program (see Chapter 7), Village designation should be pursued for historic Waitsfield Village and Irasville.

In 2000, the Mad River Valley Planning District, Vermont Land Trust and Friends of the Mad River formalized nearly two decades of cooperation and coordination regarding local land conservation with the establishment of the *Mad River Watershed Conservation Partnership*. The Partnership is intended

to focus the resources of the three organizations to more actively promote land conservation as a means of preserving the Valley's rural character. Since the partnership was formed it has worked closely with the town to conserve several important properties



HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCE GOAL:

To identify, protect and preserve Waitsfield's cultural landscape and resources, including its traditional settlement pattern, historic built environment, and scenic features.

HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCE POLICIES:

- 1) Development shall be sited and designed to be consistent with Waitsfield's traditional settlement pattern, including historic densities and scales of development, local road networks, and streetscapes, particularly within designated historic districts.
- 2) Development shall be sited and designed to avoid adverse impacts to Waitsfield's historic sites and structures, and historic architectural styles should be considered when developing within designated historic districts.
- 3) Changes to historic structures should maintain their historic integrity to the extent feasible. Adaptive reuse shall be allowed where appropriate, including the re-use of historic barns, to preserve structures that no longer serve their original function.
- 4) Any building listed on the state historic sites and structures survey should be documented prior to demolition (to identify and record significant historic and architectural details, preferably in consultation with the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation or a qualified historic preservationist) Copies of the

documentation should be provided to the Waitsfield Historical Society for safekeeping.

- 5) Development shall be sited and/or clustered to avoid undue adverse visual impacts to scenic resources, including open fields, steep hillsides and ridgelines, as viewed from public vantage points. Screening, buffer areas and/or landscaping may be required where appropriate to minimize visual impacts.
- 6) Site design should maintain and/or enhance the appearance of properties as viewed from off-site. To this end, the town shall require all development, other than single family homes on existing lots, to comply with site design and landscaping standards under the town's zoning regulations.
- 7) Wind generation and telecommunication facilities, and utility line extensions shall be sited and designed in a manner that avoids impacts to cultural and scenic features, and shall not be located within the Forest Reserve District at elevations of 1,700' and above. In no case shall telecommunications towers be lighted or exceed an elevation of 10 feet higher than the nearest forest canopy.
- 8) Utilities serving developments shall be located underground, unless the Board of Adjustment or Plan-

ning Commission (whichever is applicable) finds that requiring utilities to be placed underground is not necessary due to presence of above-ground utilities serving nearby contiguous properties and that the requirement would place an unfair financial burden on the applicant.

- 9) Those scenic features within the rights-of-way of designated scenic roads, including but not necessarily limited to road width, surfacing materials, bordering trees, walls and fences shall be protected and maintained in accordance with an adopted municipal scenic road maintenance program.
- 10) Tree canopies shall be maintained and/or re-established along public roads in accordance with an adopted tree planting program; and shall be established along new roads as required under local land use regulations.
- 11) Visual access to the night sky shall be protected through the careful design and control of lighting to prevent glare and minimize sky glow. Lighting shall

be carefully designed to avoid new light pollution (e.g., glare, sky glow) , and reduce existing light pollution, through the use of appropriate techniques, including cut-off fixtures, down-casting, and limiting levels of illumination.

- 12) Signs shall be designed to be harmonious with the historic character and pedestrian scale of the town's village centers, consistent with traffic safety, and to avoid roadside clutter or interference with the enjoyment of the rural landscape outside of the village centers.
- 13) The town shall continue to support the efforts of the Waitsfield Historical Society, and the Rural Resource Commission (CLG), to work with local property owners to identify, protect and promote Waitsfield's resources, including its historic sites and structures.
- 14) Incentive and assistance programs and other non-regulatory means of cultural and scenic resource protection shall be encouraged where feasible, in accordance with adopted resource protection plans.

HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES TASKS

- 1) Continue to inventory, catalogue and map Waitsfield's historic and scenic features *[Rural Resource Commission*, Waitsfield Historical Society*]*
- 2) Update land use regulations as needed to further protect Waitsfield's historic and scenic resources, including the adoption of conservation and "residential hamlet" subdivision design standards, and consideration of adopting additional historic and/or design review overlay districts to protect the town's traditional settlement pattern, cultural resources, and scenic landscape (see Chapter 12). *[Planning Commission, Selectboard]*
- 3) Review the town's existing sign regulations and revise as needed to ensure consistency with this plan and to ensure an appropriate number, size and location of signs on various sites and within different land use districts. Consider options for the mandatory phasing out of signs that do not meet adopted standards. *[Planning Commission]*
- 4) Adopt specific lighting standards under the town's zoning regulations and, at the same time, conduct public informational meetings to educate the public regarding strategies to avoid light pollution. *[Planning Commission, Selectboard]*
- 5) Develop a scenic road inventory and associated maintenance plan and program. *[Planning Commission, Road Commissioner, Selectboard].*
- 6) Update the town's tree planting and maintenance program, particularly as needed to re-establish tree

canopies along public roads and rights-of-way. Implement the Waitsfield Street Tree Master Plan. *[Tree Board, Selectboard]*

- 7) Apply for village designation from the Vermont Downtown Program for Waitsfield Village and Irasville Districts to access additional resources and financial assistance for historic preservation (see Chapter 7). *[Planning Commission, Selectboard].*
- 8) Seek funding as needed for the redevelopment of the town's historic properties, including Waitsfield's historic public buildings. *[Rural Resource Commission*, Selectboard, Library Commission, Historical Society*].*
- 9) Seek funding as needed to conserve significant rural resources, through the purchase of land or interests in land (e.g., conservation easements, development rights). *[Conservation Commission, Selectboard, Mad River Watershed Conservation Partnership*].*
- 10) Support restoration of the Wait House barn for use as a historic museum, or if the use or expansion of the Wait House barn is not feasible, explore the establishment of a historic museum elsewhere in Waitsfield Village or Irasville *[Rural Resource Commission*, Waitsfield Historical Society*, Selectboard].*
- 11) Promote private use of available historic preservation assistance programs (e.g., Historic Preservation Tax Credits, Barn Again grant program). *[Rural Resource Commission*, Historical Society*]*
- 12) Explore the establishment of a "town Green" in Irasville to serve as a center for community events and outdoor gatherings (see Map 9). *[Planning Commission]*

**Participation strongly encouraged*

