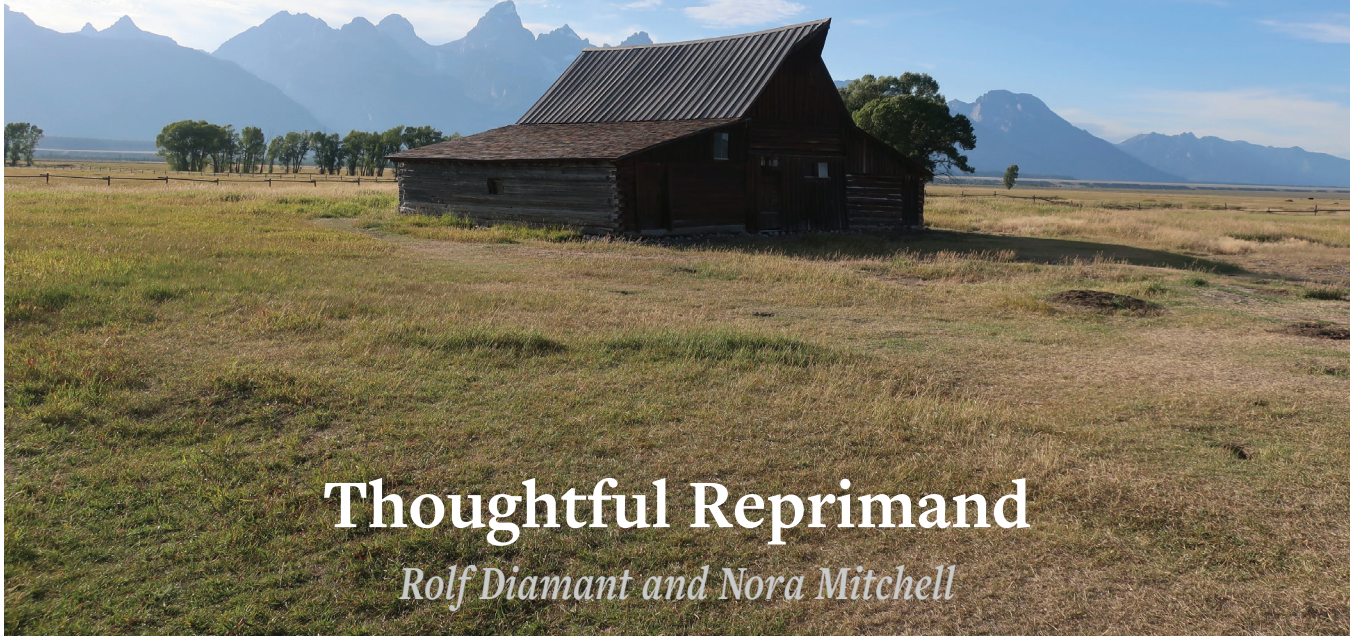




LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



# Thoughtful Reprimand

*Rolf Diamant and Nora Mitchell*

**Rolf  
Diamant**

**When I was a young landscape architect at the newly opened Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) I got into some trouble—what is known as “good” trouble, as it turned out.**

I had been asked to design and supervise the construction of a public viewing platform adjacent to a popular launch site for hang gliders on the windy headlands of Fort Funston. Funston, a former coastal defense installation overlooking the Pacific approaches to San Francisco Bay, had been turned over by the Army to the National Park Service (NPS) in the early 1970s. The military left behind concrete fortifications partially submerged in the ice plant-covered bluffs; most notably, Battery Davis, a massive World War II-era artillery emplacement that once housed a 16-inch gun, flanked by a pair of smaller observation bunkers.

The problem was how to separate the increasing numbers of spectators from flyers, and mitigate erosion along the heavily trafficked cliff edge that threatened to dislodge the observation bunkers and allow them to topple down hundreds of feet to the beach below. So, we built a network of paved trails that led to a raised wooden viewing platform overlooking the launch area. We also extended the path up to one side of the gun emplacement and continued it on the other side of its huge empty gallery. Now accessible, people, frequently pushing baby strollers, and sometimes in wheelchairs, enjoyed passing through the cavernous structure.

A young student architect at the University of California, Berkeley, Steve Perkins, designed a bench with arms and a back (see photo below) to better serve older visitors. The design was inspired by the “social factors” research of Berkeley professor Claire Cooper Marcus, which focused on the needs of children and seniors. Versions of the popular “Perkins Bench” were later replicated in other GGNRA locations, including along the main loop trail in Muir Woods National Monument.

Erosion checked, the gliders and their spectators, now safely separated, were also pleased with the project.

↑ Mormon Row Historic District, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming. ROLF DIAMANT & NORA MITCHELL



↑ Funston Loop Trail and Battery Davis (with a Perkins Bench in foreground). ROLF DIAMANT

↓ Before and after viewing platform construction. LEFT: ROLF DIAMANT • RIGHT: CREATIVE COMMONS



But no good deed goes unpunished, and my punishment came swiftly enough. For the record, I unreservedly confess to not paying enough attention to how close we came to the Funston fortifications with our new path and decking materials. No doubt better compliance on my part would have caught and corrected this oversight. As it happened, the regional historian for NPS’s Western Region was an authority on these former military installations, and was not happy at all to see this project built so close to the coastal defense structures. He took a rather dim view of my argument that we had in fact protected these historic structures from unrestricted use, erosion, and further damage, and, in addition, were interpreting their story to more people. He took his complaint directly to the Western Regional Director. I was warned by my supervisors at Golden Gate to expect some sort of official reprimand from on high. But the nature of the reprimand, when it came, took me totally by surprise. I was instructed to fly to Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, site of the Mather Training Center, and enroll in a new course, “Historic Preservation for Managers,” being organized by NPS Chief Historical Architect Hugh Miller.

Before I knew it, I found myself on a roof high above the C&O Canal, learning to repoint a failing chimney. Later, I helped paint the interior of an 18th-century farmhouse at Manassas National Battlefield Park under the watchful eye of master painter Pat Laffey. (I remember Pat because he would work with me years later when I became superintendent at Olmsted and Longfellow National Historic Sites.) So, I plastered, painted, and repointed my way through the week, as Miller took my classmates and I from one needy historic treasure to the next. These skills were all new to me, and I enjoyed myself immensely. Furthermore, as a future manager of other national historic sites and, privately, co-owner and occupant of a 19th-century house in need of much repair, this instruction turned out to be personally as well as professionally very useful. But most importantly, I got to know Hugh Miller, who became a life-long friend and mentor.

Hugh was a thoughtful and soft-spoken person who generously advised and guided younger colleagues. An architect, he was an internationally recognized leader in the historic preservation movement. He epitomized a generation of highly skilled specialists in cultural and natural resources stewardship that gave NPS (up until today, that is) a worldwide reputation for cutting-edge professional practice and innovation. As chief historical architect, Hugh was known in NPS as a problem solver who strongly advocated preservation over reconstruction. He was an active member of the Association of Preservation Technology, and valued hands-on training. When Hugh started his “Historic Preservation for Managers” training course, he intrinsically understood that park managers needed to become more familiar with the actual trades and skills required to care for historic resources, and build relationships with the craftspeople and technical experts who performed rehabilitation work. Hugh often reminded his students and other colleagues that “maintenance *is* preservation.”

Rolf Diamant and Hugh Miller at Hampton National Historic Site, 2006. NORA MITCHELL



Of course, nothing of this sort would be possible in the current environment imposed upon NPS. Work-related travel is now tightly restricted, with in-person training programs nearly eliminated; participation in professional conferences banned; and peer-to-peer exchange—so essential to networking and knowledge transfer—fast becoming a distant memory. It is not an environment where a person of Hugh’s energy, initiative, and integrity would be valued.

As it turned out our paths would cross again when I became superintendent of Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, which would host the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation (see below). Hugh pioneered the first professional training for the preservation and management of NPS cultural landscapes. He advocated for professional staff to be hired throughout the Park Service to care for this newly recognized category of cultural resources. Working closely with Lee Nelson of the Preservation Assistance Division, Hugh sought to bridge the growing divide between NPS Washington offices responsible for “external” programs that assisted states and communities outside NPS jurisdictions, and “internal” programs, such as his, that directly served the national parks. Hugh and Lee recruited two outstanding landscape architects, Lauren Meier and Robert Page, to respectively coordinate the external and internal cultural landscape programs and effectively crosswalk between the two. They were the right people at the right time. This was a real breakthrough.

Hugh was also a member of the George Wright Society, and we would see each other occasionally at conferences. However, I had less frequent contact with him when he retired and became Virginia’s State Historic Preservation Officer; but as a reader of this column, Hugh stayed in touch with me, and would frequently send a supportive note.



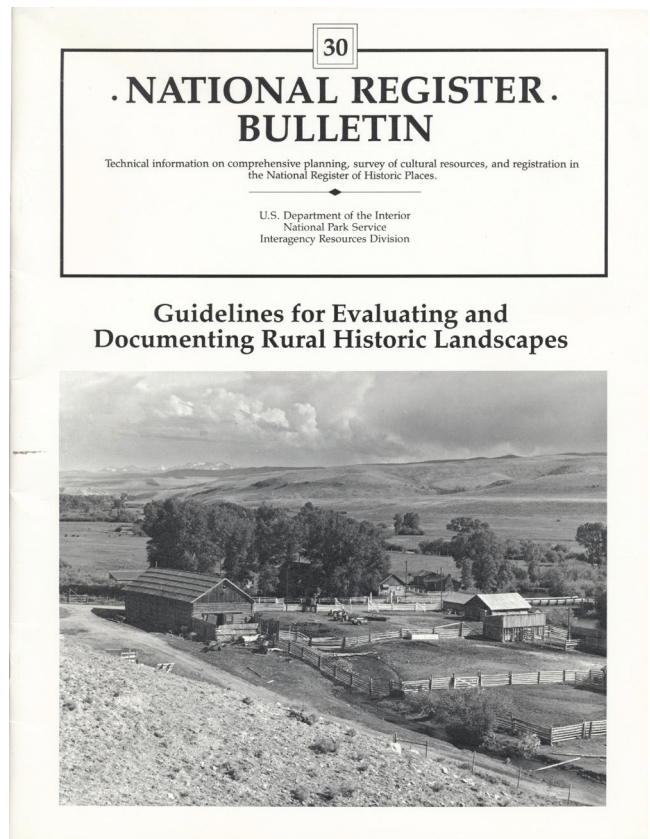
**Nora Mitchell**

**When I was asked in 1991 to launch the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, the first NPS technical organization focused on the documentation, planning, and treatment of cultural landscapes, I turned to Hugh Miller for encouragement and advice.** Hugh and I were influenced by time we both had spent

in England, where we studied the stewardship of historic gardens and landscapes. Not a landscape architect by training, I had an interdisciplinary background with a PhD in landscape history and an MA in ecology. Before I undertook the leadership of this new NPS center, I asked Hugh if he thought I should go back to school for an additional degree. After all, I reasoned, I would be working with historical landscape architects, as well as horticulturalists, historians, and master gardeners.

I’ll never forget Hugh’s response: “You already have plenty of education and a great deal of practical experience. You are the perfect person for this assignment. This is an incredible opportunity in front of you, don’t pass on this moment.” Furthermore, Hugh quipped with his wry sense of humor, “You have all the credentials you need; if you think you need one more, I’ll print you a card.”

Hugh appreciated the value of the Olmsted Center’s work, but he also knew the importance of codifying standards that would guide its future projects. He was a pivotal leader in the ultimately successful campaign for the recognition of cultural landscapes, specifically rural historic districts, as a distinctive category of cultural resources in the national park system and beyond. Hugh hired Robert Melnick from the University of Oregon to develop National Register of Historic Places standards



for the preservation of these rural historic district landscapes. Hugh's initiative and Robert's groundbreaking work made a major contribution to the stewardship of complex landscapes with intertwined cultural and natural heritage.

Agency leadership, however, was initially reluctant to incorporate landscapes along with structures on the National Register. They specifically were hesitant to advance Hugh's proposal for rural historic districts, concerned with establishing another cultural resource classification. However, Hugh, in his plain-spoken, matter-of-fact way, convinced skeptics that a *rural* historic district would be like other National Register districts, only "with more space between the buildings."

Our friend and colleague Hugh Miller died in May at the age of 96. His was a life well spent.

Handwritten signature of Roy Dannant in black ink.Handwritten signature of Nora J. Mitchell in black ink.

*The views expressed in Parks Stewardship Forum editorial columns are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity, or the George Wright Society.*