

Excelsior Springs, Missouri
Historic Preservation Commission

Survey Outcomes and Recommendations

1991 - 1994



Photo by Kevin Morgan

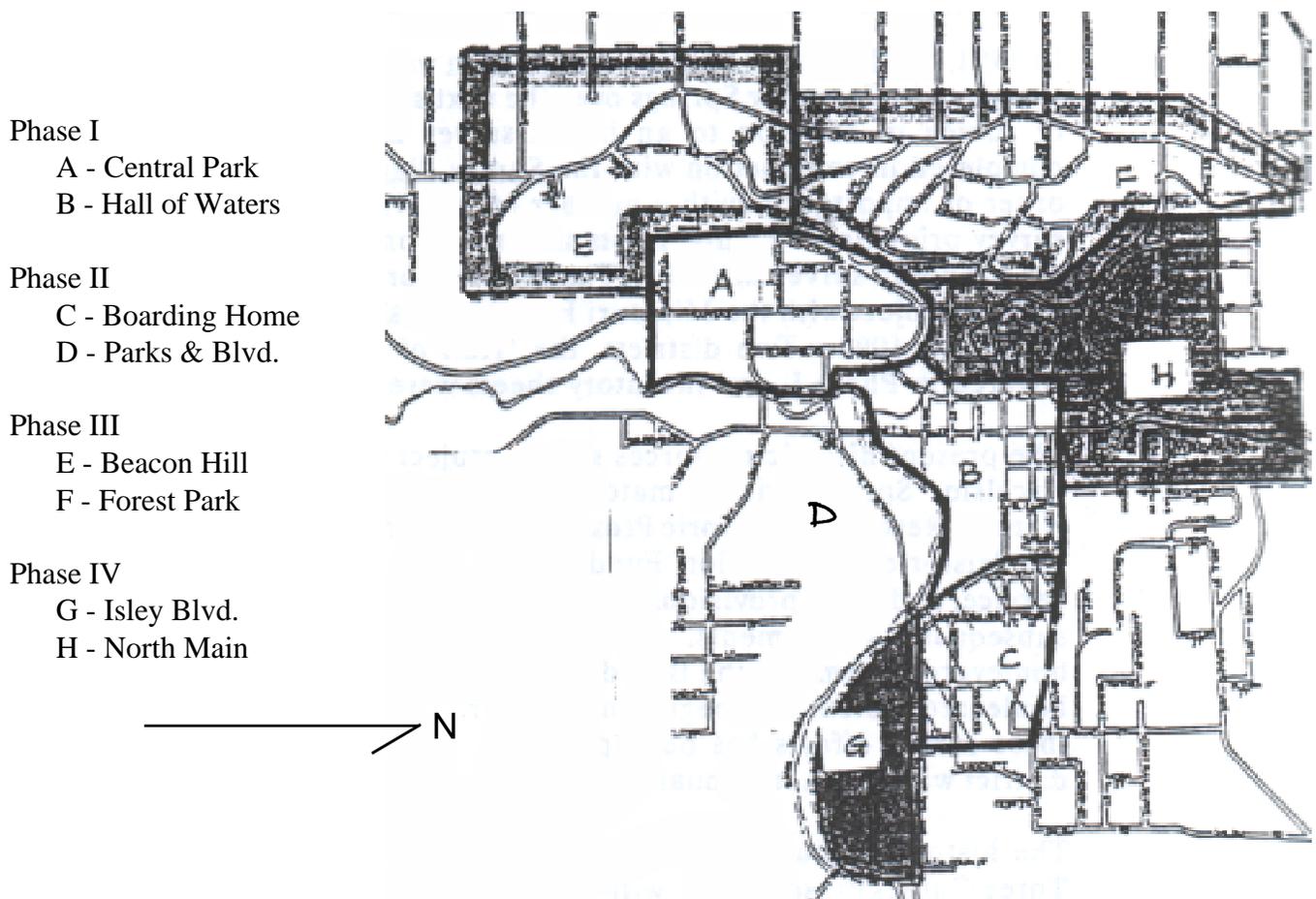
Introduction

In 1991, the Excelsior Springs Survey Plan was developed in order to guide survey activities in Excelsior Springs over the next several years. It proposed four phases of survey in addition to an initial survey of 20 historic buildings which was completed in conjunction with the Survey Plan. The four phases were ranked in order of importance, with a number of factors examined in order to develop the survey priorities. Figure 1 lists the survey phases and shows the boundaries for the proposed survey districts. The Phase I portion of the survey was developed as a grant project with the Missouri Historic Preservation Program and subsequently funded in 1992. Two districts, the "Hall of Waters" and "Central Park", were covered in Phase I, and inventory sheets were prepared for 142 structures.

The present historic resources survey project was also funded by the City of Excelsior Springs with a matching grant through the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, Historic Preservation Program, which receives allocations from the Historic Preservation Fund of the Department of Interior, National Park Service, under the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and subsequent amendments. Phase II covers the Excelsior Springs parks and boulevard system was begun in October, 1993. A separate report summarizing these survey efforts has been prepared. The inventory of the Boarding House district was begun in January, 1994, and its results are summarized in this report.

The historic resources survey of the Boarding House district was conducted by Three Gables Preservation, with Deon Wolfenbarger serving as project coordinator and Brad Finch assisting. The survey project coordinator for the City of Excelsior Springs was Molly McGovern, Director of Community Development. Project coordinator for the Missouri Historic Preservation Program was Beverly Fleming.

A grant application was made for 1995 funding for a part-time Staff Planner Position. It was denied.



Historic Resources Survey, Phase I
Hall of Waters District and Central Place District
 1993

The outcome of recommendation made by Deon Wolfenbarger at the completion of these surveys led to the development of two National Register Districts for the City of Excelsior Springs, but I cannot find the original recommendations. Following is the information made available by the National Register of Historic Places:

Natural Register of Historic Places
 Index by State and Name with Database Details

99000637 - Missouri

Excelsior Springs Hall of Waters Commercial West Historic District

Significant architects: Frank J. Jackson, William F. Schrage
 Architectural style: Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals, Late Victorian
 Area of significance: Architecture, Commerce
 Current function: Commerce/Trade, Domestic, Government, Recreation and Culture, Religion, City Hall,
 Multiple Dwelling, Professional, Religious Structure, Restaurant, Specialty Store, Theater
 Historic Function: Commerce/Trade, Domestic, Health Care, Recreation and Culture, Clinic, Department Store,
 Financial Institution, Hotel, Multiple Dwelling, Resort, Specialty Store
 Level of Significance: Local
 Owner: Local, Private
 Period of Significance: 1875-1899, 1900-1924, 1925-1949

99000638 - Missouri

Excelsior Springs Hall of Waters Commercial East Historic District

Significant architects: Louis S. Curtiss
 Architectural style: Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals, Late Victorian
 Area of significance: Architecture, Commerce
 Current function: Commerce/Trade, Domestic, Government, Recreation and Culture, Religion, City Hall,
 Hotel, Museum, Professional, Religious Structure, Restaurant, Specialty Store
 Historic Function: Commerce/Trade, Domestic, Health Care, Recreation and Culture, Clinic, Department Store,
 Financial Institution, Hotel, Multiple Dwelling, Resort, Specialty Store
 Level of Significance: Local
 Owner: Local, Private
 Period of Significance: 1875-1899, 1900-1924, 1925-1949

Resource Name	Address	Listed
Hall of Waters	201 E. Broadway	1983-06-09
Elms Hotel	Regent & Elms Blvd.	1985-03-29
Excelsior Springs Hall of Waters - Commercial East Historic District	Roughly along portions of East and West Broadway and Main St.	1999-05-27
Excelsior Springs Hall of Waters - Commercial West Historic District	Roughly along portions of Thompson and St. Louis Ave.; South, Main, Marietta and Spring Sts.; and Elms Blvd.	1999-05-27

Historic Resources Survey, Phase II

Boarding House District

June 10, 1994

Recommendations

The Excelsior Springs Historic Preservation Commission is in charge with certain powers and duties, outlined in the city's preservation ordinance. These duties include overseeing the inventory of historic resources, designating properties or districts which are worthy of preservation, reviewing proposed changes to those properties, and increasing public awareness of the value of these historic resources. Using the information gathered in this and the previous surveys, the Commission needs to proceed in all areas in which they have been charged.

Recommendations for Future Survey

The survey or inventory of historic resources has been occurring within the city on a regular basis after the preparation of the Survey Plan in 1991, thanks to federal grant funds passed through the Missouri Department of Natural Resources. The Excelsior Springs Survey Plan recommended two additional survey phases. At the completion of the last phase, it will be necessary to prepare a summary report which not only evaluates the potential for historic designation in the City of Excelsior Springs, but which also serves as the starting point for future preservation planning efforts. The last survey phases and summary report would also be eligible for the Historic Preservation Fund money. A thorough understanding of the property types in Excelsior Springs, particularly the numerous boarding and rooming houses, cannot be completed until these final phases of the survey are completed.

In addition to the inventory phases outlined in the Survey Plan, the Commission should be prepared to conduct survey or research into additional areas. After conducting the inventory for the Boarding House district, at least two additional areas of study are proposed. First, the distinction between boarding houses, apartments, small hotels, and buildings with "rooms for let" could be further defined. The development of the boarding house as a property type would be enhanced by a study of the interior floor plans of these buildings. Interiors are not typically reviewed in an intensive level survey, but this research might reveal some very interesting characteristics about the buildings. The survey might be accomplished on a volunteer level by commission members or interested citizens, as residents may be more likely to open their homes to neighbors rather than a stranger.

Another topic further of additional research is locating the wells which were within the Boarding House district, as well as the rest of the community. Many have been identified in the booklet published in 1968 by the Excelsior Springs Historical Museum on the history of the wells. Sanborn maps also reveal locations of wells and pavilion structures. Very few well structures are extant in the city, and the inventory of historic resources thus far has only covered above-ground structures. If any foundations remain, these need to be identified. Buildings which have, or which formerly contained wells, need to be identified as well. These resources were the key to the development of Excelsior Springs, and are worthy of further development. The Commission has discussed producing a map showing the locations of the wells, and this project should continue to be pursued.

Recommendations for Historic Designation

Another duty of the Commission is to recommend property and/or properties for proposed designation as a historic landmark and/or historic district, in addition to reviewing and commenting on proposed designations brought before the commission. To date, only a handful of individual structures have been designated as a Historic Landmark. With the recommendations from this report, the Commission should consider establishing a Nominating Committee. By reviewing the goals of the citizens, city staff, and the Commission, assessing the potential threats to the historic resources, and by analyzing the political realities in Excelsior Springs, the Nomi-

nating Committee should develop a list of proposed historic districts and landmarks and assign priorities to this list. This Nominating Committee could also make recommendations for the city to pursue federal grant money available for National Register nominations.

There are two types of historic designation available for resources in Excelsior Springs -- local landmark designation, or listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Presently only a handful of buildings are on either register. At the time of this report, the city is considering changes to its preservation ordinance. These changes may affect its ability to recommend local designation; therefore this report will focus on the potential for National Register designation. In general, however, anything which is recommended for federal recognition is certainly worthy of local recognition. A local commission usually also has the power to designate additional buildings or to expand the boundaries of National Register districts. This usually occurs when the buildings have a strong local historical significance, but may lack the architectural integrity necessary for federal designation. Since local designation usually carries with it the added protection of local review over proposed changes, it sometimes happens that many buildings will undergo a sympathetic rehabilitation (such as the removal of false siding or the replacement of missing features) after designated as a local historic district. The end result may be a district now eligible for the National Register.

The map shown in Figure 12 illustrates the proposed boundaries of a potential National Register district. There are just a few buildings which may be individually eligible for the National Register. These are noted on the map, as are the probable non-contributing buildings within the district. Most of the buildings within the district are individually lacking in architectural integrity, primarily due to loss of original siding materials (generally by covering with false siding). Any proposed district would understandably not be nominated in the area of ARCHITECTURE. However, the historic sense of time and place in the district as a whole is unmistakable as one walks through the Boarding House survey area. Integrity does remain in the district's location, setting, association, and feeling. The design of many of the buildings is intact in many instances as well.

The significance of the Boarding House district and its association with the historic context are clear. Further investigation is needed -- the first survey phases and a summary report should be completed in order to place this district solidly in relationship to the historic context of Excelsior Springs. An evaluation of the city as a whole may reveal that the best chance for National Register designation for the Boarding House district lies with a Multiple Property nomination. A "thematic" approach to nominating boarding houses may solve the dual issues of partial loss of integrity on some buildings and the intrusion of the non-contributing buildings within the district.

As noted in the description of the district, the issue of synthetic siding presents a major integrity problem. However, the majority of siding is asbestos-cement shingle. This material may be over fifty years old in many cases. In fact, as early as 1906, asbestos manufacturers marketed shingles and sheathing not only for roofing, but for general construction as well. Some houses were even built with asbestos-cement shingles as the intended siding material.* The material was popular up through the 1970s, though, and in some instances may not be historic. Given the history of the district, however, the likelihood is that the asbestos-cement siding appeared after 1900 and offered several advantages over traditional siding materials, such as clapboards, wood shingles, and stucco. Man-made materials had the advantage of factory uniformity coupled with promises of longevity and low maintenance. If applied prior to the fifty-year cut-off for consideration of historic buildings, then this material could be considered "historic" itself.

Another "solution" to the issue of architectural integrity may be an examination of the period of significance for a proposed nomination. It is the belief of this consultant that a strong argument can be made for extending the period of significance beyond the typical fifty year limit for historic structures. The City of Excelsior Springs is

* "Substitute Siding," Old House Journal, Sept-Oct. 1993, p. 56.

nationally significant for its unique position as a health and resort town. The historic context defined in the survey plan -- "Excelsior Springs - Missouri's National Health Resort: 1880-1963" -- provides the basis for discussion of its national significance, but further work is needed to define its temporal period. Excelsior Springs became well-known virtually overnight. It maintained its prominence in the mineral water industry over the decades, surviving World Wars, the Depression, and changes in technology and transportation. It wasn't until the 1960s that the "bottom fell out" on the industry which made Excelsior Springs famous. Legislation was passed in 1963 which prohibited the clinics from advertising that their treatment could cure conditions such as arthritis and rheumatism. As a final blow, unfavorable articles exposing the treatments in the mineral waters clinics began appearing in national magazines. The decline of the town's economy based on the waters can be clearly traced to this decade from these two prime causes. If this argument is accepted, then some of the buildings which are viewed as marginally eligible (due to alterations dating from the 1960's or earlier) increase their chances for eligibility. The siding alterations typically occurred across the nation not just in response to switch to a low maintenance material, but also for the purposes of cosmetically upgrading the appearance of a building. It was only natural that the owners of the boarding houses wanted to keep the appearances of their buildings up-to-date as well. The mineral waters of the city were advertised for their medicinal purposes. Even though the city had a resort atmosphere, the health aspect of the community was never forgotten. Businesses associated with the mineral waters had to appear as modern as possible. Old fashioned buildings might be associated with old fashioned remedies. Excelsior Springs and the mineral water system maintained to the end that its treatment was a thoroughly modern health strategy.

Recommendations for Public Education

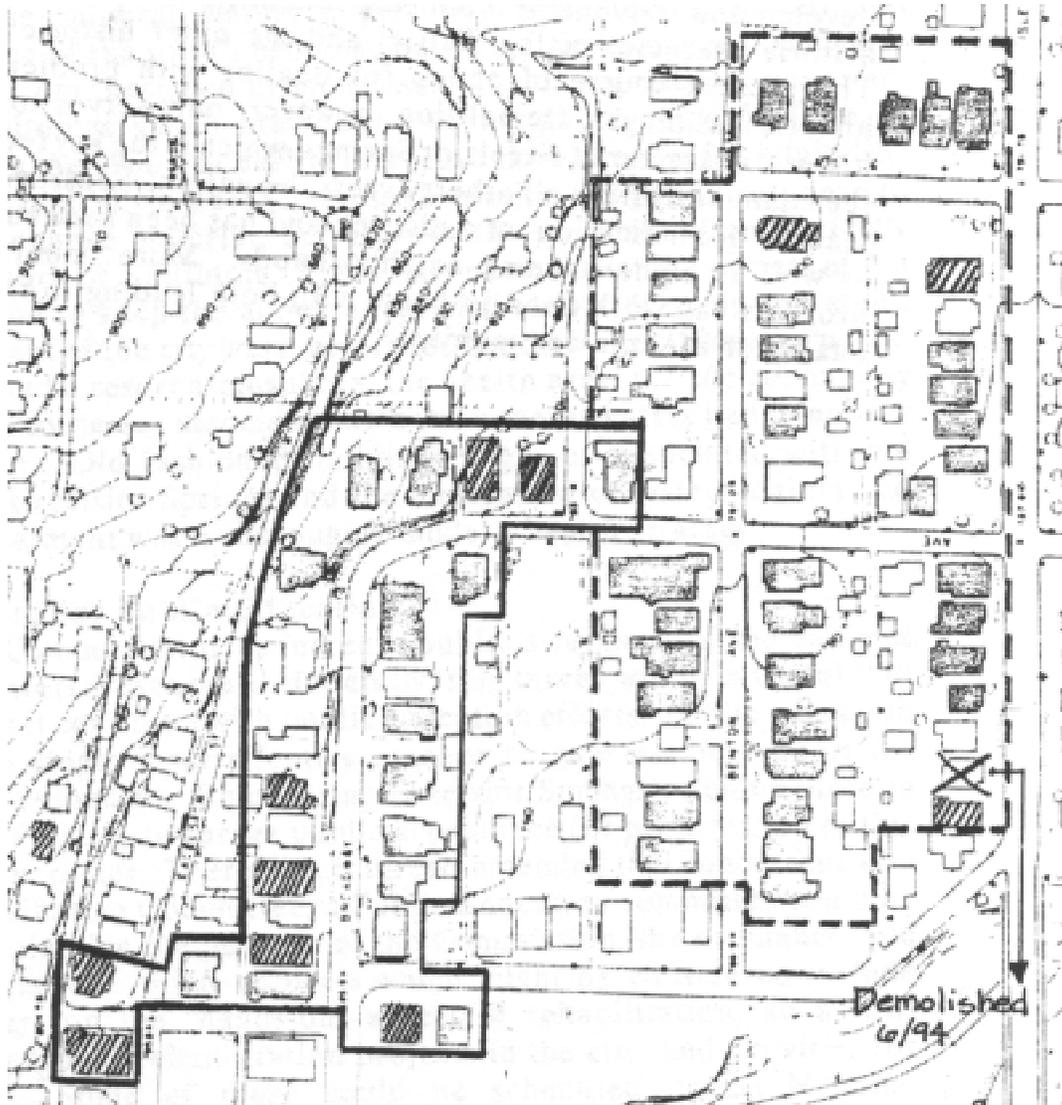
Another duty of the Commission is to increase public awareness of the values of Excelsior Springs's historic resources. Hopefully, this survey will be a useful tool for the Commission as it continues with public education efforts. Public education has proven to be the single most effective manner to gain public support for protection of historic resources. Considering Excelsior Springs's unique place in this nation's history, it is time to garner public acceptance for preservation of this community's special character. Therefore, it is recommended that concurrent with the efforts of the Nominating Committee, a Public Education committee could be formed to work on explaining the purpose of the Commission, the ordinance, and the benefits of designation. Some projects which might be considered include workshops or seminars on the "hands-on" aspect of rehabilitation, an awards program recognizing "good" rehabilitation projects in the city, and activities for school-age children. Some of these could be scheduled during National Preservation Week, held each year in May.

In light of the integrity problems within the Boarding House district, workshops should focus on sensitive rehabilitation efforts. In spite of the argument that many of the alterations to the buildings have become historic themselves, it is nonetheless usually recommended that the original materials and design of a building be retained. In the case of asbestos-cement siding, for example, the inclination is generally towards removal. However, asbestos is a hazardous material, and care must be taken not only in its removal, but with its disposal as well. This topic alone might be worthy of a workshop; at the minimum, the commission should be prepared to share information gathered by DNR staff, Beverly Fleming.

The Commission should also work with elected public officials and city staff to develop and implement a housing rehabilitation program that is sensitive to the historic character of the district and the other historic neighborhoods in town. The present course of action for dealing with problems is the demolition of historic buildings. Demolition, however, only serves to further deteriorate the historic character of Excelsior Springs, which is the key feature which distinguishes the community from all others across the nation. Sensitive rehabilitation need not lead to "gentrification" of a district, and has been used successfully in low-income as well as higher-income neighborhoods. More importantly, preservation and progress can work hand-in-hand, with both leading to the goal of increasing the quality of life in a community.

Figure 12. Recommendations for National Register of Historic Places

-  Potentially individually eligible.
-  Contributing buildings inwith a potential district
-  Recommended boundaries for Boarding House Historic District
-  Recommended boundaries for Benton Place/Isley Historic District



Excelsior Springs Parks and Driveway System

February 15, 1994

Recommendations

Future Research

The documentation of historic landscapes is, at best, difficult. As just one example, the types of permits which often document historic buildings were not required for landscapes. This, combined with the lack of record-keeping which is typical of small cities, has compounded the problem of documenting the historic park system of Excelsior Springs. However, it is critical that thorough documentation be completed before an accurate evaluation of the significance of historic landscapes can be undertaken.

In the course of inventorying Excelsior Springs' historic park system, several sources were reviewed (noted earlier in the "Research Design".) Some of these sources have been thoroughly exhausted. A few, however, may still have the potential to yield additional information. With the recent cataloging of city documents, it is doubtful that any more information will be discovered at the city hall. However, the Parks Department is located in a separate building. The acting director, Steve Zimmerman, believes that there may be some documents in the attic, but these were not available at the time of the survey. No drawings were found in the Kessler Files at the Missouri Historic Society in St. Louis. The offices of Oschner, Hare & Hare still retain some historic documents, but projects dating before 1950 are uncatalogued. However, further investigation along this line may be warranted, especially as the existing conditions around the Hall of Waters appear to have associations with Hare & Hare, not Kessler. The material at the Excelsior Springs Historical Museum is also uncatalogued. It is possible that some information regarding the parks system may be found in the material currently stored in the basement. Finally, private citizens may retain some historic documents which could come to light in future years. For example, no minutes of the Park Board have been discovered. Perhaps relatives of former members may have copies of these. It will be important to continue to pursue any information regarding the park system.

Historic Designation

Local designation: The development of the Excelsior Springs park and drive system is clearly tied to historic context presented in Excelsior Springs' Historic Resources: Survey Plan report -- "Excelsior Springs - Missouri's National Health Resort: 1880-1963." The parks were either developed around the mineral water springs, to provide camping for the numerous visitors/tourist to the community, or to provide recreational amenities for the visitors. It was virtually unheard of at this period for a community of Excelsior Springs' size to construct not just one park, but an entire system. The historic landscapes inventoried for this project would be eligible for designation under the local historic preservation ordinance of Excelsior Springs.

National Register of Historic Places: In the individual survey sheets for each landscape, preliminary evaluation is presented on its historic landscape integrity. However, historic site plans were not found for the majority of the parks. In addition, no park board minutes or annual reports were available. The main sources of documentation for the parks were the George E. Kessler Files, newspapers, and the numerous promotional publications about Excelsior Springs. This presented a problem in attempting to evaluate the integrity of many of the parks and drives. However, on-site observations (age of tree stands, for example) and comparison with the data that was found did permit a preliminary evaluation of the park resources for their eligibility to the National Register. The following parks would probably be individually eligible for listing: Siloam Mountain Park, East Valley Park/Isley Woods, Fishing River Linear Park, and the Excelsior Springs Golf Course. Sunnyside Park may be eligible as a contributing resource to a historic district, as may some of the drives. However, further research will be necessary in order to determine individual eligibility.