Toponymic Commemoration of National Figures: The Cases of Kennedy and King

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The use of placenames to honor national figures has left a prominent impression on the toponymy of the United States. This practice developed after the American Revolution and gained popularity throughout the early nineteenth century, a product of the enthusiastic nationalism of the young American republic (Zelinsky 6). As settlement spread into the nation's interior, hundreds of places were named in honor of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, and other patriots (Stewart 198-99). The naming of places for national leaders remained common throughout the 1800s, but declined sharply in the early twentieth century. Since the 1920s, according to Wilbur Zelinsky, trends in American toponymy have favored names with "comforting, commercially potent messages" rather than those involving "description, possession, commemoration, or other forms of celebration"(7). Few national figures have achieved a significant toponymic presence during this period.

Since the early 1960s, however, two exceptions to this pattern have emerged: John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. These men occupy preeminent positions within the pantheon of modern national figures, a consequence of their contributions to American society and their tragic deaths by assassination. The esteem accorded them by the American people has been demonstrated in many ways. When asked to name the three greatest American presidents, respondents to surveys conducted in 1975 (Gallup, *1972-1977* 2: 641) and 1985 (Gallup, *1985*: 168) ranked Kennedy in the top three more often than any other president. The best evidence of King's importance as a national leader appeared in 1983 when a national holiday was established in his honor, an action favored by nearly two-thirds of the public at the time (Hastings and Hastings 460). The revered status of these men has led to many commemorations, including the naming of a multitude of landscape features, from streets and bridges to hospitals and schools. Through such memorials, Kennedy and

King have achieved a greater presence in American toponymy than any other leaders of this century.

This study explores some of the cultural and geographical issues associated with patterns in the naming of places in honor of these men. The discussion focuses primarily on what those patterns reveal about regional variations in attitudes toward Kennedy and King and their respective roles as national leaders. In his study of nationalistic placenames, Zelinsky found significant regional contrasts in the commemoration of particular figures and of national leaders in general. Such contrasts apparently evolved out of regional diffusion processes, the presence of competing toponymic styles, and variations in the character of the "American political mind" (12). A major goal of this study, then, is to determine whether similar forces continue to produce regional contrasts in the use of placenames to honor national leaders.

This issue is addressed through an analysis of school and street names. Several factors recommend schools and streets as subjects of study in this context. They are essentially ubiquitous, and are the landscape features now most often named in honor of individuals in the United States. Because the selection of school and street names is a local matter, it should reflect underlying community attitudes and values. School and street names can also be easily changed; many of the namings examined here have in fact involved renaming existing schools or streets. This form of commemoration is thus not limited by the amount of new school and street construction.

School and street names are also of interest because they represent basically different forms of commemoration. The role of schools in preserving and transmitting society's values lends them symbolic importance as social institutions. The naming of a school in honor of an individual has a special significance, creating an overt association between that person and the community. This act is essentially hortatory, calling on the community to follow the path set by the school's namesake (cf. Jackson 89-102). Naming a street after an individual is less likely to carry such a connotation, honoring that person without creating an explicit association between his values and society's. Comparison of the use of street and school names to honor Kennedy and King should thus clarify trends in their commemoration.

Three sources provided information concerning school and street names. Streets were identified through the *1987 National Five-Digit Zip*

Code and Post Office Directory, which lists streets located in 648 cities and towns across the United States. Two sources provided school names: *School Universe Data Book, 1977- 1978* (Curriculum Information Center), which lists the names of all public and private schools in the United States; and the white and yellow pages of telephone directories covering years between 1985 and 1987 for 202 major cities. Reliance upon these sources may have excluded some streets and schools named after Kennedy or King in smaller communities, but such omissions are likely to be few in number and should not affect the validity of the following analysis.

Toponymic Commemorations Of John F. Kennedy

Almost immediately following President Kennedy's assassination on 22 November 1963, individuals and communities across the United States and throughout the world sought to honor his memory (Wolfe, 405-9). The most common method adopted was the naming of public works and places. Within a week of his death, proposals appeared to affix the late President's name to a vast array of sites and institutions: the Peace Corps, New York's Verrazano Narrows Bridge, a national cultural center (later to become the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts), Cape Cod National Seashore, and a multitude of schools, streets, libraries, hospitals, and parks (Benjamin). *The Post-Herald* of Beckley, West Virginia, proposed changing its state's name to Kennedy, or perhaps Kennediana (Tolchin). Not all of the proposed changes were enacted. Indeed, so great was the proliferation of namings in Kennedy's honor that a backlash against the practice arose. Barely a month after his death, a *New York Times* editorial criticized the growing number of commemorative namings:

> The speedy change of a name—whether it be of an airport or a bridge or a park or a cape—reflects the love that millions of people all over the world had for President Kennedy; but . . . it is only debasing the subject of our grief to attach his name so hastily to a miscellaneous collection of public works, almost as if we were afraid that without these tangible reminders he would soon be forgotten. ("Light")

But such attitudes did not lessen the nation's enthusiasm for naming places in Kennedy's honor. In the months following his death, his name appeared on scores of landscape features. New York's Idlewild Airport was renamed Kennedy International ("Kennedy Airport"); Philadelphia Stadium became Kennedy Stadium ("Stadium"); and Kennedy Memorial Bridge, connecting Jeffersonville, Indiana, and Louisville, Kentucky, was dedicated ("Kennedy Memorial"). Moreover, toponymic commemorations have continued into the 1980s. As recently as 1985, a park was dedicated to Kennedy in Cambridge, Massachusetts, adjacent to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government ("Park").

In selecting landscape features to name after President Kennedy, Americans have most often chosen schools and streets; at least 150 such places had been named in Kennedy's honor in the United States by the late 1980s (Table 1). Schools have served as a means of commemoration far more often than streets, by a ratio of five to one. The greater prevalence of schools named in his honor may reflect the esteem in which Kennedy is held by the American people. During his term in office, he maintained the highest average approval rating among the American public of any President from Truman through Reagan; and a majority of Americans continue to rate him as one of the nation's greatest leaders (Gallup, *1985* 28, 168). School names may thus have been favored as a means of honoring Kennedy because of the special significance schools possess as social institutions. By naming a school in his honor, a community created a symbolic association between its values and those of the late President. The naming of a street in his honor may have seemed less symbolically charged, and thus a less fitting form of memorial.

Although the use of school and street names to honor President Kennedy has been widespread, the practice has not been adopted equally in all parts of the country (Figures 1 and 2). Such memorials are absent in much of the upper Middle West and the northern Rocky Mountain states, but this pattern is likely a product of low population density in these areas. A more striking trend in the distribution of schools and streets named for Kennedy is their relative abundance in the North and their scarcity in the South. The Northern states contained slightly less than half of the American population in 1980, but two-thirds of the toponymic commemorations identified here (Table 1). The South, on the other hand, accounted for a third of the American population in 1980 but only 18% of

Table 1. Toponymic Commemorations of John F. Kennedy.

	Region[1]			
	North	South	West	Coterminous United States
Freqencies				
Schools	89	16	20	125
Streets	11	11	3	25
Schools and Streets	100	27	23	150
Percentages by Type of Feature				
Schools	89.0%	59.3%	87.0%	83.3%
Streets	11.0%	40.7%	13.0%	16.7%
Schools and Streets	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Percentages by Region				
Schools	71.2%	12.8%	16.0%	100.0%
Streets	44.0%	44.9%	12.0%	100.0%
Schools and Streets	66.7%	18.0%	15.3%	100.0%
U.S.Population, 1980[2]	48.0%	33.4%	18.6%	100.0%

[1]**North:** Maine, N.H. Vt,. Mass., Conn., R.I., N.Y., Penn., Ohio, Ind., Ill.,Mich., Wis.,Minn., Iowa, Mo., N.D., S.D., Nebr., Kans. **South:** Del., M.D., D.C., Va., W.Va., N.C., S.C., Ga., Fla., Ky., Tenn., Ala., Miss., Ark., La., Okla., Tex. **West:** Mont., Id., Wyo., Colo., N.M., Ariz., Utah, Nev., Wash., Ore., Calif.

[2] Percentages are based on the total population of the coterminous United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

the streets and schools dedicated to Kennedy. The West contained more or less its share of toponymic commemorations.

These patterns appear to reflect regional differences in attitudes toward Kennedy. Throughout his term in office, Kennedy was less popular in the South than in the rest of the country. In a survey conducted in June 1963, Kennedy's approval rating among Southern whites reached its lowest point, with only a third approving of his handling of the Presidency (Gallup, *1935-1971* 3: 1827-8). This low approval rating largely reflected opposition to Kennedy's policies on racial integration. In the same survey, 77% of Southern whites stated that the Kennedy administration was pushing too fast on integration, compared to only 35% of non-Southern whites. Southern opposition to Kennedy's policies may thus have mitigated regional interest in naming places in his honor. The greater frequency of

such namings in the North appears to reflect several factors: wider support for Kennedy's policies, the large number of Northerners sharing his Catholic faith, the political prominence of his fellow Democrats in many Northern states. Proximity to Massachusetts, Kennedy's home state, may also account for the large number of commemorative namings in New York and New England.

Regional contrasts in attitudes toward Kennedy appear as well in variations in the relative proportions of schools and streets named in his honor. In the North and West, schools named for Kennedy outnumber streets almost nine to one, while in the South streets and schools named for him are nearly equal in number (Table 1). The infrequent naming of schools in his honor in the South may again reflect opposition to his policies there. Southerners differing with the President on the issue of racial integration appear to have resisted honoring him through the naming of schools, the institutions that figured most prominently in the conflict

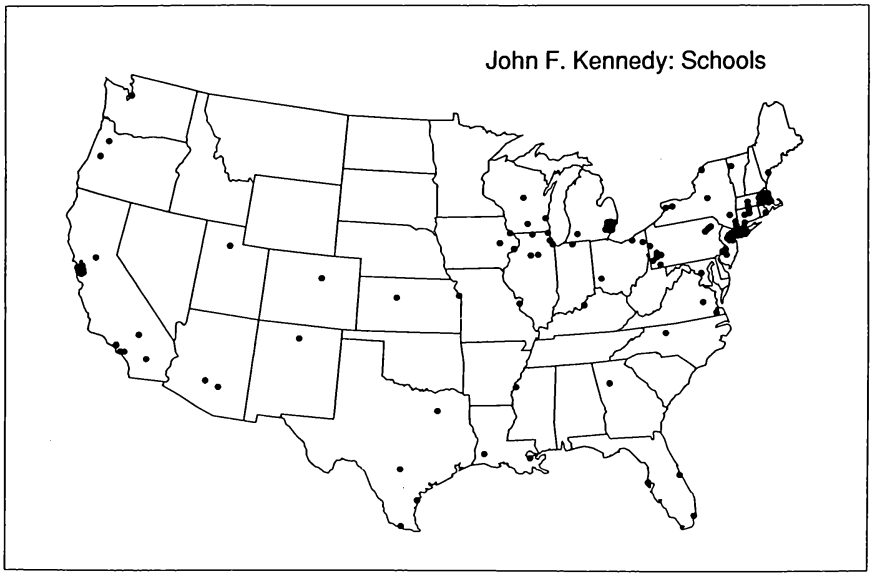

Figure 1. Schools named in honor of John F. Kennedy, circa 1987.

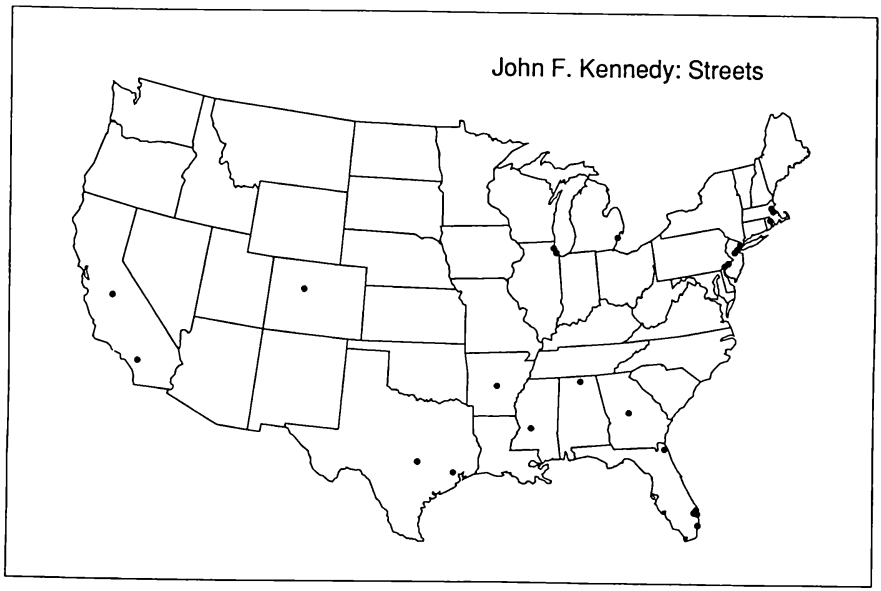

Figure 2. Streets named in honor of John F. Kennedy, circa 1987.

over racial integration. It should be noted that most Southern schools named after Kennedy are located in areas with large Catholic populations, such as the southern portions of Florida, Louisiana, and Texas. This pattern presumably reflects the tendency of Catholics to support Kennedy more strongly than Protestants.

Patterns in the toponymic commemoration of President Kennedy thus reveal several significant trends. The preference for school names to street names as a means of commemoration derives from the symbolic significance of the former, and illustrates the great esteem that Americans have had for Kennedy. The relative scarcity of toponymic commemorations in the South, and the large proportion of street names among Southern commemorations, suggest that this esteem was not found in equal measure in all parts of the country. The latter pattern reflects the

importance of social and political attitudes in decisions regarding whether and how to honor a national figure toponymically.

Toponymic Commemorations Of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Proposals to commemorate Martin Luther King through placenames also began almost immediately following his assassination, on 4 April 1968. The mayor of Newark suggested renaming Newark Airport ("King Airport"); students suggested renaming the Bronx's William Howard Taft High School (Lissner); Mayor Daley of Chicago proposed renaming South Parkway, running through a major black district on Chicago's South Side ("Daley"); and Los Angeles State College renamed a building on its campus ("Building").

In general, however, the naming of places in King's honor did not proceed as rapidly as namings in honor of Kennedy. At the time of his death, many whites did not support King's efforts in the civil rights movement. According to a survey conducted in the summer of 1969, for example, 42% of Northern whites and 58% of Southern whites believed that racial integration of schools was proceeding too quickly (Gallup, *1935-1971* 3: 2210). White resistance to King and his aspirations, along with a lack of political influence among blacks, often delayed or prevented attempts to create memorials in his honor. For example, in 1972 the City Commission of Montgomery, Alabama, voted to name seven blocks of a city street after King, in response to a petition by 10,000 blacks. Within two weeks the Commission rescinded this action under pressure from white opponents to the change. According to the leader of the White Citizens Council, one of the groups opposing the name change, "It ill-behooves a government to honor a man whose philosophy is to break any law he doesn't believe in" ("Montgomery"). This objection derived in part from the fact that, although the street in question ran through a black residential area, it also contained white-owned businesses and a white Masonic lodge. The WCC spokesman quoted above indicated that he would not object if a street located entirely within the black community were named after King. Attitudes toward civil rights have changed during the past twenty years, however, and blacks have achieved greater political influence. As a result, toponymic commemorations of King have become increasingly common. In 1971, Newark's first black majority Board of

Education, appointed by the city's first black mayor, renamed a public school for King (Butterfield). New Orleans' Melpomene Street was renamed Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in 1977 (Washington), as was Los Angeles' Santa Barbara Avenue in 1983 (Townsend). In 1986, the County Council of King County, Washington, designated Martin Luther King its official namesake, replacing slave owner and Vice-President elect William King, who died in 1853 before taking office ("Namesake"). The establishment of a national holiday in King's honor seems to have added to interest in commemorative namings. Since Martin Luther King Day was first observed in January 1984, at least eighteen streets have been given King's name.

By the late 1980s, no less than 146 schools and streets had been named in King's honor, almost as many as were dedicated to Kennedy. King has been commemorated far less often than Kennedy through the naming of schools, however. Nationwide, streets named in his honor outnumber schools three to two (Table 2). This trend is even more pronounced in the South, where streets named after King are roughly six times more numerous than schools (Figures 3 and 4). Nonetheless, toponymic memorials to King of both types combined are slightly more common in the South than elsewhere. The Southern states account for over 40% of all streets and schools dedicated to King, but only a third of the nation's population in 1980.

Trends in the naming of places in King's honor appear to reflect his particular status as a national leader, and varying support for his ideals in different parts of the country. His importance as a leader is perhaps mitigated by the fact that he never held national office. His social agenda thus lacked the official approval of the electorate. He has also been seen by many whites as a spokesman for the nation's black minority rather than for all Americans. Many whites have considered him a source of social divisiveness, an antagonist of majority values. For these reasons, schools have been named for King less often than for Kennedy, and streets more often. By commemorating King through street names, local authorities could satisfy those advocating some form of memorial without creating the controversy that could follow the more symbolic act of dedicating a school to him.

The use of street names rather than school names to commemorate King has been most common in the South, where white support for King and his goals has traditionally been weakest. At the same time, the total

Table 2. Toponymic Commemorations of Martin Luther King, Jr.

	Region[1]			
	North	South	West	Coterminous United States
Frequencies				
Schools	37	9	13	59
Streets	27	52	8	87
Schools and Streets	64	61	21	146
Percentages by Type of Feature				
Schools	57.8%	14.8%	61.9%	40.4%
Streets	42.2%	85.2%	38.9%	59.6%
Schools and Streets	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Percentages by Region				
Schools	62.7%	15.3%	22.0%	100.0%
Streets	31.0%	59.8%	9.2%	100.0%
Schools and Streets	43.8%	41.8%	14.4%	100.0%
U.S. Population, 1980[2]	48.0%	33.4%	18.6%	100%

[1] **North:** Maine, N.H., Vt., Mass., R.I., Conn., N.Y., N.J., Penn., Ohio, Ind., Ill., Mich., Wis., Minn., Iowa, Mo., N.D., S.D., Nebr., Kans. **South:** Del., MD., D.C., Va., W. Va., N.C., S.C., Ga., Fla., Ky., Tenn., Ala., Miss., Ark., La., Okla., Tex., **West:** Mont., Id., Wyom., Colo., N.M., Ariz., Utah, Nev., Wash., Ore., Calif.

[2] Percentages are based on the total population of the coterminous United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

number of toponymic dedications to King is greater in the South, relative to its population, than in the North and West (Table 2). This trend appears to reflect several factors: growing political influence among the South's black population, their interest in commemorating King and the gains that he helped to make in the area of civil rights, and increasing acceptance of King's ideals among Southern whites.

A variety of factors have thus shaped patterns in the naming of streets and schools in honor of Martin Luther King. Disagreement within the American population over the validity of King's goals, as well as his lack of official status as an elected national leader, have made schools named in his honor less common than those named in Kennedy's honor, especially in the South. At the same time, the overall frequency of streets

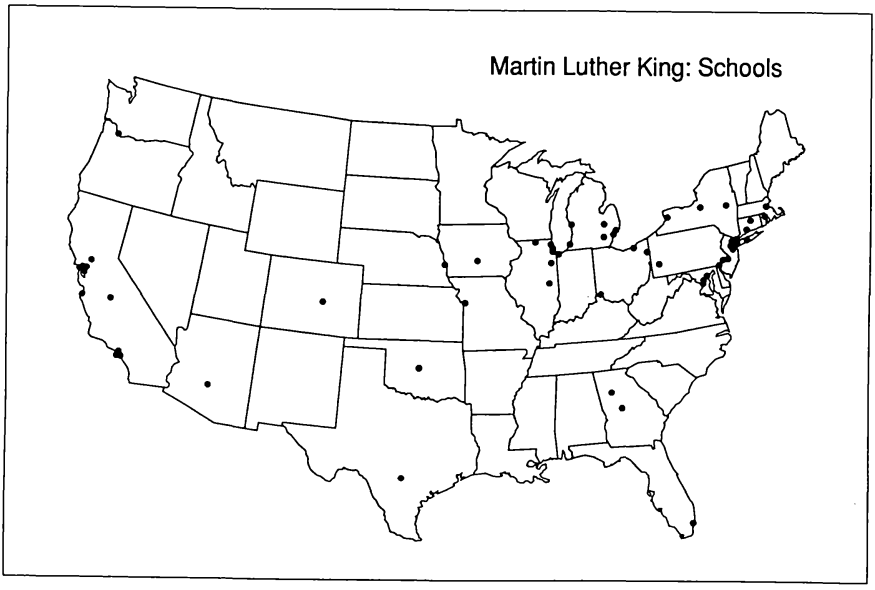

Figure 3. Schools named in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., circa 1987.

and schools named after King confirms his importance as a national figure. The esteem in which he is held by blacks in the South, who have benefited most directly from his life and work, is particularly evident in the large number of streets named in his honor there.

Conclusions

Although the naming of places for national figures is less common now than in the last century, it remains a significant element of American toponymy. In the cases of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the naming of landscape features has been widely adopted as a means of publicly commemorating their lives and ideals, continuing a national practice over two hundred years old.

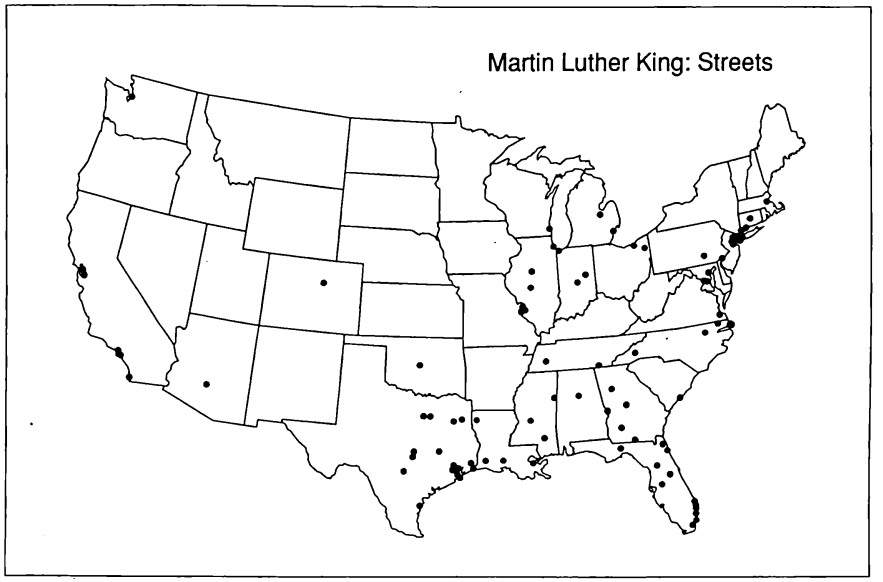

Figure 4. Streets named in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., circa 1987.

As in the commemoration of early American leaders, however, significant regional differences characterize the distribution of places named after Kennedy or King. Patterns in their toponymic commemoration appear specifically to reflect regional contrasts in sociopolitical attitudes, especially between the South and the rest of the country. Toponymic commemorations of Kennedy are relatively rare in the South, especially those involving the names of schools. The latter trend likely reflects Kennedy's contribution to the process of school desegregation in the South, a process opposed by many white Southerners at the time. This opposition may also have limited the *total* number of toponymic commemorations to Kennedy in the South, although Zelinsky has observed that the South has generally eschewed the use of placenames to honor national figures. The scarcity

of toponymic dedications to Kennedy in the South may thus reflect this more general trend.

Such a trend has not characterized the naming of places in honor of King, who has been widely commemorated across the South, especially through the naming of streets. This pattern reflects the special importance of King's work and ideals to the South's large black population, and to a growing number of white Southerners as well. The South differs from other regions, however, in the scarcity of Southern schools named in King's honor. Streets have been used to commemorate King more often than schools in all parts of the country, but this trend appears most prominently in the South, presumably a legacy of past opposition to King's goals among the region's white population and of the symbolic role of schools in the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

The places named for Kennedy and King thus represent more than simple memorials. They are public symbols of community values, attitudes and beliefs, revealing the character of both the figure commemorated and the community that has honored him. Examination of patterns in the use of such placenames therefore offers insights into significant variations within the American social landscape. Further exploration of the commemorative use of street names, school names, and similar elements of the placename cover should extend our understanding of that landscape and the people who have created it.

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