

CHAPTER I THE SEEDS OF SUCCESS: THE NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA IDEA

Introduction

Our human landscape, as geographer Peirce Lewis once wrote, is “our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form.”¹ In the last two decades, national heritage areas have offered conservationists, community representatives, and historians new opportunities to preserve these autobiographical landscapes, celebrating not just the figureheads of American society, but the bedrocks. Encompassing both natural and cultural landscapes, national heritage areas base preservation and interpretation efforts on the interest of local communities in nationally significant stories, told through the lens of their own experiences and traditions. Yet heritage areas face considerable challenges in encouraging local communities to participate in the complex planning and preservation processes that are the underpinning of the heritage area movement.

In light of these challenges, this thesis examines the hypothesis that certain primary factors increase the likelihood of success in national heritage areas. Such factors include: a) the existence of active local constituencies who continue cultural traditions, b) existing preservation efforts and partnerships, and c) a clearly defined network of natural and cultural areas that relate to the stated themes of the heritage area.

Specifically, research focused on two heritage areas in the central and southern Appalachian region: the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area and the Appalachian Forest

Heritage Area. As relatively new heritage areas with similar geographic features and historic contexts, and yet fairly different interpretive themes and protected sites, these two areas provide an edifying contrast to the more established Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Blackstone River Valley was recently the subject of an in-depth sustainability study, which illuminated both the successes and challenges faced by this heritage area over the last two decades. A brief history of the Blackstone River Valley and a summary of the sustainability study's findings are included in this chapter.

By examining the two Appalachian heritage areas in depth and comparing them to Blackstone River Valley, this thesis tests the hypothesis that thriving heritage areas are built on a foundation of active communities that already understand the need for and benefits of historic preservation. Several assumptions related to community involvement underlie this hypothesis: 1) heritage areas require support from local and regional organizations and local governments for formal designation, 2) the region's residents and community leaders must be engaged in the discussion of which traditions, themes, and sites are preserved, and 3) heritage areas benefit from a community's support for continuing cultural traditions in modern times. It is also assumed that certain barriers to community involvement (such as socioeconomic factors, lack of understanding about heritage areas, or distrust of government) must be overcome to support a successful heritage area.

Following this introductory chapter, the next chapter of the thesis provides an overview of the geography and historic contexts of the Appalachian region in general and the two primary heritage areas in particular, laying the groundwork for an in-depth study

of what constitutes heritage in these locations. The subsequent two chapters examine the development of these two heritage areas in depth, including the planning processes for each, how partners and interpretive themes were identified, sources of support and opposition, and barriers to community involvement and how they were overcome. These chapters conclude with evaluations of the extent to which the heritage area process leveraged or benefited from the likely factors of success listed in detail later in this chapter. Finally, the concluding chapter summarizes those factors that are likely to contribute to the success of heritage areas and those that detract from or have little impact on the process. Opportunities for further research are also explored.

Research Methods and Suppositions

To provide a foundation for testing this hypothesis, several avenues of research were undertaken, including reviewing the history of preservation in national heritage areas and the current state of heritage area planning, and looking at representative case studies of successful heritage areas. This research was based on the primary supposition that national heritage areas are a wholly different construct than national parks, which have sharply drawn boundaries and top-down federal management. By contrast, heritage areas are large, lived-in landscapes that rely on local constituencies who understand and care about preserving their heritage. Further, the research shows that heritage areas are strengthened when the traditions they preserve are augmented by their continued cultural expression in modern times.

Community involvement was a central aspect of the research. For national heritage areas, communities generally include residents, businesses, government officials

at local, state, and federal levels, and religious and cultural groups. A primary challenge in developing heritage areas is determining who the community leaders are, which historic contexts must be interpreted, and which sites are preserved. Therefore, research for the thesis evaluated the process by which a region's leading agencies, people, and partners are identified, how they are engaged, and how regionally and nationally significant themes are chosen for interpretation and preservation. This examination also determined whether any barriers to community involvement were encountered, and how they were overcome.

National heritage areas have been defined as places where “natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography.”² In addition to studying the people that are necessary for heritage area success, this thesis also investigates how the development of interpretive themes translates into the fostering of a recognizable regional identity, as well as the preservation of place. In heritage areas, preservation occurs at several levels, from preserving specific historic sites and buildings, to maintaining the historic character and industry of an entire town or geographic landscape. One heritage area management entity, the Shenandoah National Valley Battlefields Foundation, is authorized to actually buy land from willing sellers. A significant research question involved determining which community-driven preservation efforts existed in these regions before heritage area planning began, and how these efforts translated into support for these heritage areas.

This thesis documents, through case studies, how the partnership entities for successful national heritage areas anticipate and deal with management and

implementation issues at national heritage areas. By design, national heritage areas are managed by partnerships among federal, state, local, and private entities, although regional and local stakeholders are encouraged to take the lead in defining preservation goals and fostering partnerships to achieve them. For most heritage areas, extensive management planning has been undertaken to determine the goals, boundaries, sites, and stakeholders that define heritage areas. Yet these management partnerships often face significant challenges in maintaining the economic drivers that support heritage areas, such as heritage tourism and eco-tourism, as well as dealing with changes in political support and availability of funds.³

In addition to studying existing preservation efforts at national heritage areas, this thesis also delineates common problems facing heritage areas. Significant barriers to success at heritage areas include local economic factors, a lack of organized preservation entities, a lack of a clear circulation system, and unstable funding mechanisms. The two heritage areas in the Appalachian region serve as case studies to evaluate their chances for success, specifically looking at those factors that will have the most impact on their long-term survival. This in-depth examination is grounded in documentation of the historic contexts of the region, which includes stories related to maintaining the family farm, supporting local industry, overcoming socioeconomic and cultural divides, and dealing with the federal government.

For too long, Appalachian people have been unfairly dismissed as uneducated, provincial, and close-minded. Yet Appalachian residents have a profoundly intellectual and emotional connection to land and place. Their families have lived in these mountains for centuries, and they are perhaps more finely attuned to their culture and heritage than

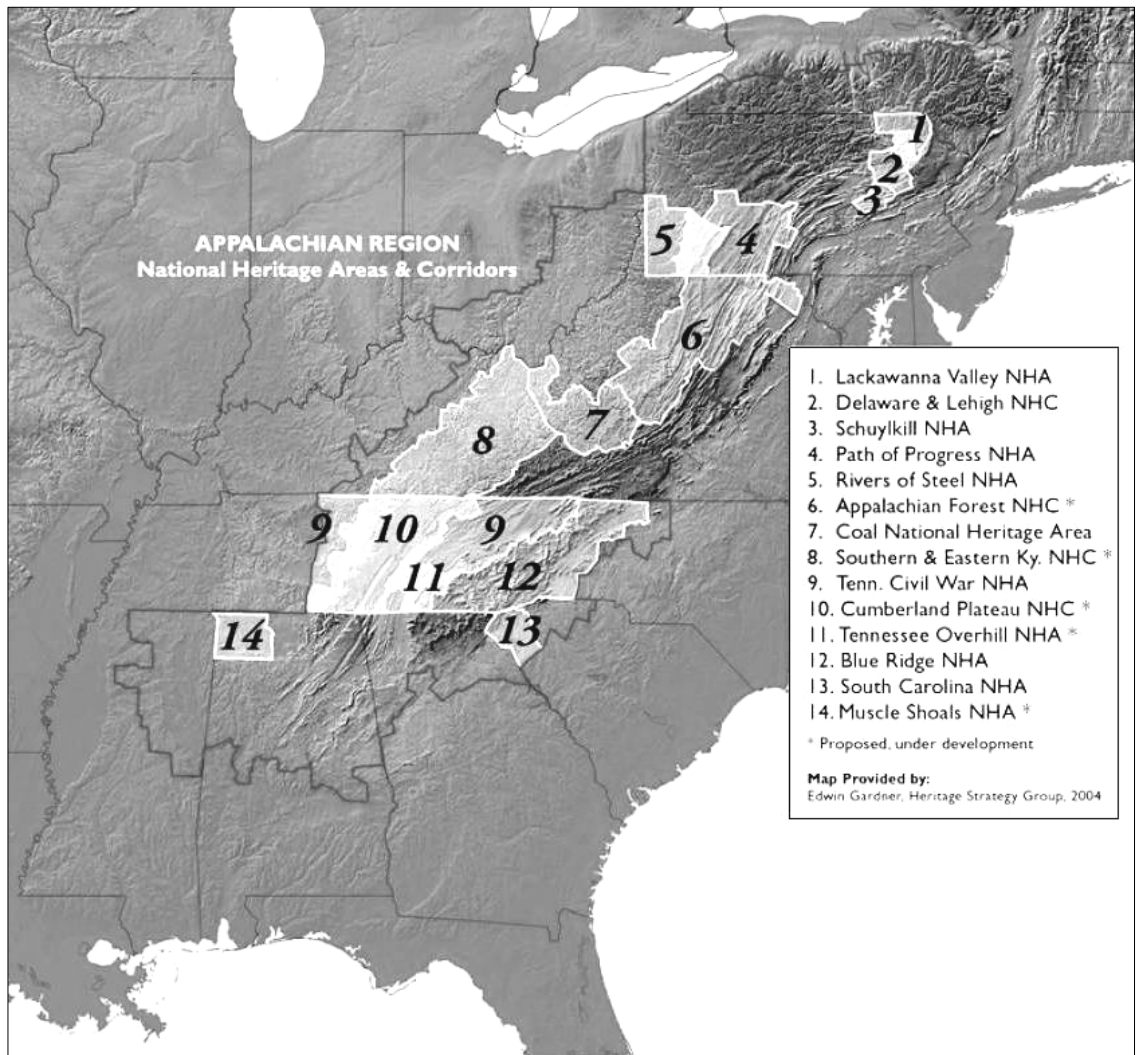


Fig. 1. Map of current and proposed heritage areas in the Appalachian region. Courtesy of Edwin Gardner, Heritage Strategy Group, 2004.

more transient people who live in other parts of the country. At the same time, Appalachian residents are willing to embrace new technology and ways of thinking, and many have wholeheartedly championed the relatively new concepts of national and state heritage areas. As of 2004, 14 heritage areas had been proposed or established along or near the spine of the Appalachians (Fig. 1).

Studying the history of these heritage areas from their initial planning efforts, as well as the longer track records of other areas, bolstered the supposition that active local

constituencies and existing preservation constructs are necessary for heritage areas to succeed. Newly designated in 2003, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area encompasses 24 counties in the “nationally distinctive” mountains of western North Carolina. The heritage area aims to preserve and interpret traditional folk music, folk life and traditional arts, cultural traditions of the local Cherokee Indians, and various historic sites and artifact collections. The area is designed to be managed by a partnership of state, local, nonprofit, and Cherokee Indian representatives.⁴

As a two-state regional heritage initiative, the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area provides an opportunity to study how private, state, and federal entities differ in their approaches to heritage area designation. Located just to the north of the Coal Heritage National Heritage Area in southern West Virginia, Appalachian Forest Heritage Area attempts to fill a tourism niche by interpreting the region’s geographic and economic ties to the timberlands of eastern West Virginia and western Maryland. The heritage area aims to preserve the history of forest management and forest ecology in the region, while telling the stories of the various ethnic and immigrant groups who have settled in the region over the last 200 years.⁵

The National Heritage Area Movement

Heritage areas represent the convergence of several cultural forces over the last few decades, which has led to a widespread movement toward the preservation of geographically large, community-led, lived-in landscapes.⁶ Among these forces, says urban design professor Dennis Frenchman, is a global shift toward an information economy, which has left many former industrial cities and regions to seek new identities

and income sources. “Depressed areas have found that they can leverage heritage to reinvent their identity in a way that attracts people and business,” he has stated. “The second force is a reaction to the standardized environment and culture that the information economy is creating, which looks pretty much the same in San Francisco or Singapore.”⁷

Others argue that heritage areas have grown out of opposition to the growing homogeneity of our society, as well as an increasing recognition of its complexities and multicultural traditions. According to cultural landscape experts Susan Buggy and Nora Mitchell, “the heritage conservation movement has actively expanded its perspective to encompass landscapes that are defined by broader human relationships to place, the material evidences of how people have adapted to, and shaped the land through, for example, settlements, agriculture, fishing, mining, forestry, and sustainable harvesting.”⁸

Heritage areas can also be viewed as a reassertion of America’s founding principles, according to J. Glenn Eugster, who has called them “an expression of the resurgence of democracy in America.”⁹ Heritage areas and people are inseparable, Eugster continues. “[I]n the late 1960s and mid-1970s historic preservationists, planners, and landscape architects began to change the way decision-makers looked at the relationship between people, the land, and the built environment,” he writes. “People were changing the way they looked at parks and special places. The public wanted these places close to where they lived for recreation and education....This change from viewing parks and special landscapes as places to live rather than just visit, dramatically expanded definitions of what was important to conserve.”¹⁰

Heritage areas cut across a large percentage of the American landscape; as of 2003, 45 million people were thought to live with the boundaries of national heritage areas.¹¹ The first national heritage area was designated only as recently as 1984, and since then 27 national heritage areas have been designated (as of 2005). Many more heritage areas are currently under consideration for designation by the U.S. Congress or targeted for additional study. Furthermore, several organizations have instituted heritage area programs at the local, state, and regional levels.¹²

Four park proposals have been referred to as precursors of the heritage area movement, each enacted as part of a multifaceted piece of 1978 legislation: Lowell National Historical Park in Massachusetts; Pinelands National Reserve in New Jersey; Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area in California; and Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve in Louisiana. These four parks represented new concepts in park establishment and management, featuring boundaries based more on themes dictated by natural and cultural resources, rather than simply based on the government's ability to acquire the land. Other commonalities included harnessing the power of local land use authorities to preserve resources; taking an all-encompassing view of other parks and less-than-fee-simple ownership to preserve resources without federal acquisition; including the local community and other interest groups through advisory commissions; and limiting funding by setting fixed dollar limits, matching requirements, or both.¹³

The National Park Service has established ten criteria as indicators that a region would qualify as a national heritage area. Ideally, according to the agency, national heritage areas should: 1) have an assemblage of natural, historic, or cultural resources

that represent distinctive aspects of American heritage and are best managed through partnerships among public and private entities; 2) reflect traditions, customs, beliefs, and folk life that are a valuable part of the national story; 3) provide outstanding opportunities to conserve natural, cultural, historic, and scenic features; 4) provide outstanding recreational and educational opportunities; 5) contain resources that retain a degree of integrity capable of supporting interpretation; 6) involve residents, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and governments in the planning and development of a financial plan that outlines the roles for all participants and demonstrates support for designation of the area; 7) have a proposed management entity and units of government that support the designation and will work in partnership to develop the heritage area; 8) develop a proposal that is consistent with continued economic activity in the area; 9) create a conceptual boundary map that is supported by the public; and 10) describe a management entity proposed to plan and implement the project. To increase the likelihood of congressional designation, proponents of heritage areas must produce a feasibility study, ensure public involvement in the feasibility process, demonstrate widespread public support, and identify and secure support of key constituents.¹⁴

National heritage areas are distinguished by their partnership approach to planning. Such partnerships, according to the National Park Service, create opportunities for “a diverse range of constituents to come together to voice the range of visions and perspectives that exist in any community that has strong connections and interests in the place in which it lives and works.”¹⁵ Partnering also provides residents with opportunities to leverage financial and in-kind resources.¹⁶ This too presents a shift in thinking about managing historic resources. Previously, Park Service partnership arrangements “had

more of the air of an arranged marriage and not that of a more perfect union,” Brenda Barrett, the national coordinator for national heritage areas, has said. “Shared ownership and authority over resources was seen as a problem to overcome, not as an opportunity for expanding the scope of conservation.”¹⁷ In the past, local interests played little more than an advisory role to an adjacent national park unit. In national heritage areas, local interests have moved to center stage, with citizens and stakeholders forming management entities to guide the future of heritage area preservation. Management plans reflect this shift in responsibility. Generally, the federal role in the planning process is to provide technical assistance, seed money, and final approval of the document. The local entity is also responsible for funding and implementation of the plan.¹⁸

The first heritage area, established in 1984, was the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor south of Chicago. The heritage corridor was special because it was a new type of National Park Service unit in an industrialized, urban area.¹⁹ Although not all heritage areas are in industrialized areas, in nearly all cases they represent “working” landscapes where people both live and make their livings. They fulfill most or all of the Park Service’s ten suggested criteria previously discussed. Yet the criteria do not address other factors that distinguish these landscapes from other protected areas. Often, these working landscapes are becoming or have become obsolete, because of depopulation, evolving technologies, development, and a loss of connection with history. Often, a community’s desire to manage this change is what helps bridge gaps between diverse races, interests, and socioeconomic classes.²⁰

To further illustrate how heritage areas become designated, the Cane River and Yuma Crossing national heritage areas are outlined in some detail below. Both are

considered to be successful in terms of planning, community engagement, economic drivers, and historic preservation.

Cane River

In northwestern Louisiana, the 40,000-acre Cane River National Heritage Area encompasses historic plantations, three state historic sites, and the Natchitoches National Historic Landmark (NHL) District. In planning for the long-term protection of these and other sites, Congress commissioned a feasibility study to determine the best approach for preservation of the region. The study ultimately proposed a combined program of national park and national heritage area to preserve the region's French Creole history, which encompassed a variety of ethnic groups and traditions, and the development of the town of Natchitoches. The heritage area was authorized in 1994.²¹

Community involvement and previous historic preservation efforts formed the backbone of the success of the Cane River area. According to one report, "Natchitoches and Cane River had decades of experience with historic preservation projects, and the people connected with those efforts were the primary forces behind the legislation."²² After the creation of the heritage area, the Park Service began sponsoring or conducting ethnographic, archeological, and historical studies, which included extensive community involvement and representatives of various Cane River ethnic groups.²³

In recent years, the heritage area commission sought to "build an identity in a region where many long-standing public and nonprofit organizations had prospered for decades, and expanding partnership relationships with those existing organizations." This was accomplished by continued outreach, the development of a map brochure, the

awarding of a Save America's Treasures grant for restoration of two national historic landmarks, and the development of a competitive grants program in which individuals, organizations, and businesses could receive grants for historic preservation.²⁴

Laura Gates, superintendent of Cane River Creole National Historical Park, and Nancy Morgan, executive director of Cane River National Heritage Area, have attributed the heritage area's success to the existing partnership framework. "The park and the heritage area commission work hard to ensure the fair treatment of all partners and the inclusion of all voices," Gates and Morgan have reported. "As organizations that are new to the region, the park and the commission are in a unique position to build bridges between diverse local organizations where none have existed before. Over 200 years of wisdom and existing understanding of the sense of place in the region can guide park and heritage area efforts and contribute to a solid foundation for the future. In conjunction with local knowledge, it is important to involve subject-matter experts early and often."²⁵

Yuma Crossing

Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area in Arizona is viewed as a model heritage area in terms of defining interpretive themes and bringing together diverse constituents. Established in 2000, and one of only three heritage areas west of the Mississippi River, this heritage area commemorates Yuma's role in the history of American transportation and trade, serving as a key crossing point over the Colorado River. The heritage area is managed by a partnership comprising members of the Quechan and Cocopah Indian Nations, the U.S. Army (which once operated a still-visible quartermaster depot in Yuma and has an active proving ground there), private citizens, and local governments.²⁶

This entity's commitment to diversity is evident in the heritage area's articles of incorporation and by-laws, which promote representation from a broad cross-section of individuals, agencies, organizations, and governments. The board structure indicates that five out of the 11 positions are to be citizens of the Yuma community. Furthermore, the heritage area's interpretive themes include Yuma's importance as a cultural crossroads, emphasizing the region's intersection of three major cultures: Anglo, Hispanic, and Native American. The heritage area recognizes that this "volatile yet rich blend of spiritual traditions" can best be sustained by their continued expression through music, food, and other folkways within the heritage area.²⁷

Recent projects are leveraging partnerships for both environmental restoration and preservation. In 2001, the heritage area managers partnered with the Quechan tribe to begin a wetland restoration project on tribal land, and in 2004, the city approved a downtown redevelopment effort that will restore and reopen the historic Ocean to Ocean bridge, which connects downtown Yuma with the Quechan community. Such efforts, Yuma Crossing manager Charles Flynn has said, have helped to bury previous cultural differences with the tribe. Restoring the wetland was found to have cultural significance to the tribe, which readily supported the project.²⁸

Measuring Success

For many years, the national heritage area system operated in the absence of systemwide data that would adequately define and measure success, whether in terms of financial viability, natural and cultural sites saved, or other variables. However, the Park Service and other partners are continuing to produce in-depth studies such as the

Blackstone River Valley report that was completed in 2005, which shed light on factors that contribute to a viable region. One key factor in successful heritage areas, according to urban design professor Dennis Frenchman, is the clear delineation of and balance between federal and local roles. These roles can be organized into four steps: designation, planning, development, and monitoring. Designation of national heritage areas is a federal responsibility. Planning is a partnership activity; indeed, Frenchman adds, “the tasks of discovering resources and devising conservation, education, and development strategies helps to build local capacity and is one of the most important and exciting parts of the process.” Development is primarily a local responsibility, building on initial federal funding, and finally, monitoring requires long-term involvement by the National Park Service.²⁹

To help organize the process of collecting data on the impacts (and therefore success) of national heritage areas, the Park Service has developed five categories to be quantified and examined at heritage areas: 1) baseline information, including social, economic, and resource characteristics; 2) additional designations, programs, and resources, such as pre-existing national or state parks; 3) indicators such as visitation, volunteerism, partnerships, and grants; 4) leveraging impacts, such as the economic value of federal investments in local initiatives; and 5) heritage tourism impacts, measuring the amount of visitor spending in the heritage area region.³⁰ Already, studies have produced hard data on heritage areas: In 2003, heritage areas were awarded 367 grants, leveraging \$29.3 million in funding. Furthermore, more than 500 educational programs reached 740,775 students; more than 3,000 partnerships were created; and 167,000 hours of volunteer service were generated.³¹

But quantifiable impacts are just one part of the story. The Park Service has called for development of a model that considers both quantitative and qualitative data and “draws stronger correlations between heritage area designation and management and its long-term impacts on the values that residents hold dear.”³² Although developing and applying such a model are beyond the scope of this thesis, an examination of several heritage areas has produced a list of likely factors that would enhance the ability of heritage areas to thrive over the long term. These factors for success are: a) the existence of active local constituencies with a history of preservation and conservation efforts; b) a clearly defined regional network of existing national, state, or local parks, forests, and public lands that relate to the identified themes of the heritage area; c) working partnerships and processes for civic engagement; d) mechanisms for engaging diverse community members and overcoming barriers to participation; e) continued expression of cultural traditions; f) a sustainable income stream from heritage tourism or traditional industries, and g) methods of dealing with threats to cultural and natural resources.

A Model Heritage Area: The Blackstone River Valley

The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, which stretches across 24 cities and towns in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, was established in 1986. The corridor grew out of a state-driven effort to protect, manage, and actively use the historic Blackstone River corridor, whose textile mills once formed a key pillar of the Industrial Revolution. As part of this effort, the National Park Service was directed by Congress to assess whether the valley should be included in the National Park System. Ultimately, the Blackstone feasibility study did not recommend national park designation,

but it did indicate that “there may be a role for federal assistance in the area of resource interpretation,” as well as the need for “shared responsibility” and “increased commitment from state and local governments.” In 1986, federal legislation created the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor.³³

Before the heritage area was designated, the Blackstone River corridor had been a loose amalgam of historic resources that had been neglected over the years. “The Blackstone River Valley, like many regions that are candidates for recognition as heritage areas, had been largely forgotten,” James Pepper, former executive director of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, has said. “There are many places in America that have become anonymous, that we don’t see, and that have lost a lot of their own self-consciousness as an identifiable place with a history and heritage that are worth preserving.”³⁴

As is the case with many other heritage areas, the rebirth of the Blackstone River Valley was led by committed and passionate volunteers. In 1972, a grassroots effort built a 10,000-member group to clean up the abandoned and polluted waterway. A decade later, the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council began pushing for a linear park along the river, as a way to boost tourism to the region. Once the heritage corridor was established, a broad community education program was developed, including curriculum for classes and tours of the corridor’s natural and cultural resources, from the kindergarten through graduate levels. These efforts have paid off financially as well. Since designation, more than \$21 million in federal funds have been appropriated to the Blackstone River Valley. Private investments have far eclipsed this figure, with more than \$73 million in private investment for Rhode Island’s portion alone. The key to its success, according to one

account, is education, leadership, and involvement “on all strata” of the community.³⁵

In 2005, the 19-member Blackstone River Valley Corridor Commission, which includes National Park Service staff, state and local government officials, and representatives from the local business and preservation communities, completed and published a study of the past 18 years of work in the heritage corridor. The study was conducted by the National Park Service’s Conservation Study Institute with extensive input from numerous partners and the general public. In developing the study, the project team investigated accomplishments within the heritage corridor related to conservation and preservation, the partnership process, and the management framework.

Although the study revealed areas in need of improvement, generally the project concluded that the heritage corridor is a successful, model area worthy of examination and emulation. “Today, 18 years after designation, change is visible throughout the valley,” the report states. “Many of the mills and historic buildings have been renovated for reuses such as housing, business space, museums, and arts facilities. Along the Blackstone River, cleanup efforts have removed trash and debris...and the river itself is beginning to recover. State and federal governments, local jurisdictions, historical societies, environmental organizations, businesses, sports groups, and private landowners are collaborating to promote and care for the qualities that make the area so special.”³⁶

Some of the study’s findings will be outlined below according to the likely factors for heritage area success that were listed earlier.

Existence of Active Local Constituencies

With 24 towns and cities in the heritage area, the sustainability study states that

local participation is an essential part of the partnership framework and critical to the heritage area's success. The Corridor Commission's 19 members include eight representatives of local government. In addition, organizations and individuals outside of government, including nonprofit organizations, businesses, coalitions, and local residents, are central to the corridor partnership. Representatives from these groups have also regularly been tapped to fill the "local government" positions on the commission.³⁷

In the Blackstone River Valley, much of the "on-the-ground" preservation and partnership work occurs at the local level, such as the adoption and implementation of land-use policies and regulations and local riverfront revitalization initiatives. In the 1970s, for example, an effort called Project ZAP attracted 10,000 volunteers who built parks, planted trees, and retrieved tires, debris, cars, and appliances from the river. More recently, the Blackstone River Coalition and its Campaign for a Fishable/Swimmable Blackstone River have provided funding, staffing, and technical assistance to a volunteer water monitoring program, in which more than 75 volunteers sample more than 80 sites.³⁸

Although local constituencies are active and engaged, the Blackstone study notes that there are inherent challenges in working with 24 different municipalities in two New England states. Local leadership, staff, resources, and issues change frequently, making it difficult to sustain consistent involvement from any given community.³⁹

Clearly Defined Regional Network

As defined by its authorizing legislation, the Blackstone River Valley corridor encompasses 400,000 acres of the Blackstone River watershed, located between two

cities: Providence, Rhode Island, and Worcester, Massachusetts. This vast geographic area presents both challenges and opportunities. Although logistical challenges can be great, according to the study, the corridor benefits from greater fundraising capacity, political clout, and other characteristics that are inherent in a bi-state initiative relative to smaller, single-state heritage efforts.⁴⁰

The Blackstone River, the study also notes, is an obvious unifying feature that ties related sites together. When interviewed for the sustainability study, Blackstone Valley partners generally believed that the current boundary was appropriate, even though they acknowledged that certain areas were only tenuously connected to the primary story of the corridor's significance. The valley is known for its historic mill villages, which were clustered along the river and are distinctive in architecture and settlement patterns. These villages provide a recognizable visual motif that is carried through the entire geographic area. Other protected sites in the corridor include farms, state parks and forests, and old meeting houses.⁴¹

Finally, in the Blackstone Valley, great value is placed on the National Park Service's professional expertise and presence. "NPS staff has clearly been among the most important factors in the corridor's success to date," the sustainability report states. "The NPS staff presence is widely seen as providing a variety of benefits, including credibility, expertise, leveraging ability, visibility, and energy. As a result, the staff is often characterized as the corridor's 'glue.'" NPS rangers have developed and presented tours, coordinated and presented special events, organized volunteers, provided training to volunteers and professionals in partner organizations, and integrated interpretation into preservation and development projects.⁴²

Working Partnerships and Processes for Civic Engagement

Partnerships have been at the center of the Blackstone Valley's heritage preservation approach from the beginning, with the general goal that local partners would assume greater responsibility over the heritage area as time went on. Heritage programs have helped to build a complex network of partners in the Blackstone Valley region, the study asserts. This partnership network is "the primary instrument for achieving resource stewardship goals that are integrated into economic and community development initiatives," the report states. "Different partners are connected in different ways at different times in a highly dynamic system." The commission is viewed as an organizing entity that brings partners together and facilitates partner representation and involvement.⁴³

However, the Blackstone study also notes that the corridor would benefit from an expansion of the partner network through ongoing public engagement and the encouragement of new leaders.⁴⁴

Mechanisms for Overcoming Barriers to Participation

Several town officials interviewed as part of the sustainability study (which did not name its sources) described "local politics" as a potential impediment to undertaking long-term projects in the heritage corridor. These partners went on to say that the notion of heritage is a beneficial discussion tool, providing "political leverage with which to pursue objectives that are of town-level as well as regional interest."⁴⁵

Much of the Corridor Commission's value, according to the sustainability study, lies in its ability to engage unlikely or unwilling partners in the pursuit of common goals

such as heritage preservation and economic development. The commission has helped find points of consensus between town officials, the business community, nonprofit organizations, state and federal government agencies, and other partners. One partner interviewed for the study said, “I think the commission does a lot of work to identify who the stakeholders are, and then does a lot of work to identify what the consensus points are. That’s been valuable. And I think those two points are very important to any organization that’s trying to affect progress in an area. From my perspective, those are two principal areas where I’d say the Corridor’s been a big success.”⁴⁶

In many instances, participation in planning exercises organized by the commission encourages organizations to redefine or readjust their ways of working with each other, the study states. While individual organizations, businesses, and government agencies may still pursue their own objectives, these stakeholders are beginning to recognize the advantages in working across multiple interests, the study reports.⁴⁷

Continued Expression of Cultural Traditions

Since establishment of the heritage area, the Blackstone River Valley has upheld the cultural traditions of the region through a series of regular festivals and reenactments. In one example, the sustainability study highlighted the efforts of the musical ensemble Pendragon, which plays Celtic-inspired music that tells the stories of immigrant settlement in the Blackstone Valley. In 1996, Pendragon signed a lease with the town of Cumberland to renovate the former Unity Masonic Lodge into a cultural arts center, known as the Blackstone River Theatre, which interprets and celebrates the valley’s immigrant heritage. The theater presents concerts, folk dances, children’s activities, and

special events, as well as a Heritage Arts Studio initiative, which encourages the local community to discover traditional art forms and preserve the region's arts heritage. Since opening, more than 25,000 people have attended about 350 events hosted by the theater.⁴⁸

Sustainable Income Stream from Heritage Tourism

Heritage tourism has been considered an important economic development tool in many community and river revitalization efforts in the valley. Over the years, the commission has built partnerships with chambers of commerce and tourism organizations throughout the heritage area. Tourism marketing, promotion, and development are now coordinated within the valley through the Tourism Triangle, a coalition of the two state regional tourism organizations and the commission.⁴⁹

A major challenge for the Blackstone Valley is the uncertainty of annual funding allocations, and so far, heritage tourism does not provide enough income to keep the heritage area going without federal funding. Although the commission has been successful in advocating for and receiving federal funds for operations and implementing its management plan, these funds are not reliable from year to year, and are difficult to coordinate with money received from partners or other private sources. According to the sustainability study, this hampers the commission's ability to plan for and commit to longer-term programs and projects.⁵⁰

So far, the lack of consistent funding and a dependable income stream from tourism is a liability for the Blackstone Valley. The study notes that considerable work remains to achieve the heritage area's stated goals of a vibrant economy that reinforces the heritage values and protects the valley's historic, cultural, and natural resources. That

being said, the study contends that the commission is well-positioned, with its partnerships, message, and vision, “to marshal a significant effort to [engage] economic development interests more fully.”⁵¹

Methods of Dealing with Threatened Resources

Finally, the Blackstone River Valley partners have developed the capacity to respond to threatened natural and cultural sites, although the study admits that preservation remains one of the corridor’s greatest challenges in the face of rapid growth. Because the commission has no land-use authority, the primary strategy for dealing with threats is to work with universities, state preservation offices, the National Park Service, and the private sector to develop responses to preservation needs. These activities include developing preservation plans for historic sites and landscapes; providing funding for restoration of key sites; working with communities on “visioning exercises”; and marketing the economic benefits associated with preservation. The corridor regularly hosts statewide and regional forums such as the “Red Brick Elephants Conference,” which brought together preservationists, bankers, developers, and businesses to address the adaptive use of historic and threatened mills.⁵²

Conclusion

Although only two decades old, the national heritage area movement has proven to be a compelling model for natural resource conservation, historic preservation, public-private partnerships, and community engagement. As a whole, national heritage areas have proven to leverage millions of dollars in funding for preservation and interpretation, and they have drawn thousands of visitors and volunteers. Certain heritage areas have

gained prominence for creating successful partnerships, clearly defining interpretive themes, and establishing a recognizable identity in regions that might otherwise stay depressed or forgotten. As illustrated by the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, certain factors are thought to be important for a heritage area to take hold in the hearts and minds of local communities, while being effective as a catalyst for preservation. Yet the inconsistency of funding from both public and private sources is also a liability for Blackstone River Valley and other heritage areas, which could have long-term impacts on a heritage area's ability to preserve and interpret its resources.

Ultimately, the success of national heritage areas is likely to depend on profound connections to place, a driven and preservation-minded constituency, and the ability of communities to participate in the telling of their stories and traditions. This supposition underlies the following examination of heritage areas in the central Appalachians, a region that is passionate about its history, yet has suffered through tremendous social, natural, technological, and industrial changes. This thesis concludes with an analysis of those factors that have been successfully leveraged to engage local communities in preserving their own heritage.