

Evolution of the Heritage Areas Movement

Introduction

Tracing the evolution of heritage areas in the United States is a daunting and inherently leaky task that calls to mind D.W. Meinig's 1979 paper, "The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene." Meinig said that "even though we gather together and look in the same direction at the same instant, we will not—we cannot—see the same landscape. We will see many of the same elements, but such facts take on meaning only through association; they must be fitted together according to some coherent body of ideas." According to Meinig, "Any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads" (Meinig 1979).

Heritage areas are like a view of the landscape in that everyone sees them, and their origins, differently because those involved have different values, goals, and backgrounds. This description of the evolution of heritage areas is one view of the movement.

The heritage areas movement began, arguably, in a dozen different places and points in time. The approach that is being used in hundreds of places evolved from a number of separate but related conservation, historic preservation, land use and economic development movements. Without question, heritage areas have evolved as a result of the creation in 1949 of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the passage in 1966 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Over more than fifty years community leaders have worked to first preserve and conserve individual buildings and structures, and then districts, and then landscapes, and now entire regions. However, the heritage

approach being used today is much more than historic preservation and cultural resource conservation.

The major influences that have created the first generation of heritage areas include evocative journalism, automobiles and the Interstate Highway System, cultural resource conservation, and innovative approaches in park protection, historic preservation, and economic development. The keystone philosophies that hold these elements together, and create the synergy that is a signature of these places, include advocacy and civic engagement, a place-based focus, interdisciplinary approaches to planning and action, interpretation, and heritage tourism.

Heritage areas, individually and as a movement, benefit from the work of writers—their research, books, and stories. They demonstrate the effectiveness of the historic preservation and parks movement in changing the way that Americans look at and man-

age their communities and landscapes. Heritage areas are an expression of the resurgence of democracy in America and the traditions of home rule. They illustrate the ability of economic leaders to broaden their focus to be able to integrate their goals with those of other interests and disciplines, thus creating a synergy with greater benefits to everyone.

Most importantly, the heritage area movement illustrates how the term “heritage” can be used as an organizing principle at all levels of the government and in the private sector. In hundreds of regions the heritage idea is the unifying force that is strengthening communities and helping them successfully plan for their environmental, cultural, and economic future. It unifies because all people have a heritage and it has meaning to them. Heritage gives people visions of the past, present, and future. Heritage areas have a heart, soul, and human spirit that many traditional master plans, land use plans, and zoning ordinances lack. Heritage areas allow people to claim these places and make our communities, landscapes, and regions relevant and special to the populations they serve.

Evocative Journalism

Author Chuck Little has said that “behind every successful conservation movement is a writer”(personal communication, 1994). Writers, and their stories about places and people, have been important parts of the heritage areas movement. The origins of the movement are obvious in the Federal Writer’s Project state and place guides of the 1930s. The project, created in

1935 as one of the New Deal’s undertakings, was a “government-sponsored national self-portraiture.” The guides, which came before superhighways, television, and computers, included an enormous amount of research on an array of heritage topics and turned the untapped wealth of local history into a lasting treasure.

Across America talented local writers wrote more than 1,200 guides and pamphlets about landscapes and communities. The writers used the documents to capture the sense of these places in a readable, evocative, enduring, and endearing way. The early guides gave people information on their own areas as well as descriptions of other places.

Interstate Highway System

As people became more aware of their own communities and others, the government was working on the federal Interstate Highway System, to give them access to these places.

In 1954 President Eisenhower formed a Committee on a National Highway Program to assess the transportation needs of the nation. The committee included representatives from the Teamsters Union, a large construction firm, the National Chamber of Commerce, and a road construction machinery manufacturer. These groups had key leaders with a strong interest not only in the road system, but in the outputs, products, and impacts of the 41,000 miles of road that were part of Eisenhower’s vision.

Although the president’s plan stressed solving safety, transportation congestion, and nuclear evacuation

issues, the impact on tourism—and access to the natural and cultural heritage—was profound. The new highways gave people access to travel and the ability to compare and contrast other communities, landscapes, and cultures with their own.

Special Places

The highways fueled land development, and leaders became concerned about the adverse impact of land use change on special places. Between 1965 and 1977, as part of what has been called the “Quiet Revolution in Land Use Control” (Bosselman and Callies 1972), state governments recognized that portions of the landscape were “sensitive areas.” This view emphasized the importance and uniqueness of place and resulted in state legislatures adopting nearly 100 statutes creating minimum development control standards for sensitive areas that included floodplains, wetlands, historic sites, and scenic areas.

Congress acted to help governments and the private sector conserve important values and improve special place land use decision-making. Not surprisingly, the management of the land–water interface was a major focus of these initiatives as Congress enacted the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968 and the Coastal Zone Management Act in 1972.

Both the coastal zone and scenic rivers legislation defined federal policies to help all governments and the private sector plan for the future uses and enjoyment of these special landscapes. While federal legislation created frameworks for coastal and river corridor place-based work, individual

efforts were acting as the incubators of new ideas.

In 1968 the federal Bureau of Outdoor Recreation concluded a heritage study to assess the feasibility of establishing the Connecticut River Valley as a national recreation area. The study report recognized “an outstanding array of historical, educational and cultural heritage, high quality scenic and recreational resources, and the need for a coordinated and interrelated program of public and private action” (Bureau of Outdoor Recreation 1968). New England’s views about “home rule” disagreed with the recommendations and Congress never acted on the study. However, the proposal outlined a multi-objective approach centered on heritage values and an integrated partnership for implementation.

Cultural Resources and Interpretation

Heritage areas and people are inseparable and the combination is part of the intrinsic value of these places. This view wasn’t always the case, and in 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.

Heritage areas benefited from work in cultural conservation, human ecology, and cultural anthropology. As the historic preservation community broadened its context for cooperation, technical and financial assistance, as well as outreach, were used to help people outside of the movement

understand the importance of the relationship between people and the built environment. Greater value was placed on traditional land uses, vernacular architecture, “working” and everyday landscapes, and the populations they serve.

In 1969 Congress created the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) as a way to document America’s engineering, industrial, and technological heritage with measured and interpreted drawings, large-format photographs, and written histories. The work was used to promote awareness and recognition of industrial heritage and assist state and local historic preservation and heritage area efforts.

The HAER program was used to help create one of the earliest heritage area efforts in the USA, on the Lehigh Canal in Pennsylvania. Led by a team that included Alan Comp and Karen Wade, the Lehigh effort refined the heritage area idea and built support for collaborative action.

In 1974 the University of Pennsylvania’s (UPenn’s) Department of Landscape Architecture, under Professor Ian McHarg, brought in a team of human ecologists and cultural anthropologists to teach graduate-level ecological planning and design. The team was challenged to integrate the “other ecology” into the planning philosophy. Practical approaches for using human ecology to help make land use decisions, reflecting natural and cultural values and functions, were taught and demonstrated. Jon Berger and Dan Rose, two of the professors, published *Human Ecology and the Regional Plan* (Berger and Rose 1974) and trained a legion of

landscape architects who would become prominent leaders of the heritage areas movement within the National Park Service (NPS).

Congress reinforced this view of culture through the creation of the American Folk Life Center in 1976 to “preserve and present the heritage of American folk life” through programs of research, documentation, archival presentation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, publication, and training. The center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 in the Library of Congress, and is one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the nation and the world.

In 1990 UPenn and the American Folk Life Center collaborated on a project in the New Jersey Pine Barrens. Mary Huffard of the Center, Berger, and Jonathan Sinton of Rutgers University used their human ecology methods to prepare a report for the New Jersey Pinelands Commission entitled “Planning the Use and Management of the Pinelands: An Historical, Cultural, and Ecological Perspective” (Berger 1980). More so than any other heritage planning document, the report identified, explained, and illustrated the link between people, nature, and heritage in a form suitable for land use management decisions.

Innovation in Parks, Preservation, and Development

In the 1970s leaders were searching for new ways to conserve landscapes. Land development outpaced conservation and preservation, land use controls were increasingly unpop-

ular, the cost of conservation far exceeded available budgets, and conflicts between protection and development were commonplace.

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, and to improve the quality of life. This change from viewing parks and special landscapes, as places to live in rather than just visit, dramatically expanded definitions of what was important to conserve.

These changes had two impacts. One placed greater emphasis on quality of life and land use, and firmly established “sense of place” as a national and community goal. It also placed greater value on “living,” “working,” and everyday landscapes and vernacular architecture. The new perspective shifted interest from distant natural parks and landscapes to those close to large populations and with a diversity of natural, cultural, and economic uses.

The heritage movement evolved in special places and in Congress. In the early 1970s, in response to a depressed economy and an exodus of young people, the leaders of Lowell, Massachusetts, proposed a plan for revitalization. Educator Patrick J. Mogan insisted that any revitalization of the city should be based on its industrial and ethnic heritage. After study and debate on Mogan’s proposal, leaders decided to make Lowell a new kind of national park based on labor and industrial history, and partnerships with local and state governments and the private sector. In 1978 Congress established Lowell National

Historical Park and the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, a decision that proved to be a keystone of the heritage areas movement.

Nationally, the movement was making a shift. In 1976 Congress directed NPS to conduct the *National Urban Recreation Study* to conduct a review and report on the needs, problems, and opportunities associated with urban recreation in highly populated regions, including the resources available for meeting such needs (National Park Service 1978). The reports recommended establishment of a system of national reserve landscapes based on a partnership between local, state, and federal governments; creation of a new urban recreation funding program; and a series of specific place-based heritage areas.

Author Chuck Little, then of the Congressional Research Service, prepared a report for Congress that summarized the need for a new approach to urban park acquisition and management titled *Greenline Parks: An Approach to Preserving Recreational Landscapes in Urban Areas* (Little 1975). The concept of greenline parks (see also Corbett et al. 1983) was based on U.S. and international precedents, and suggested that special landscapes could be protected using a combination of federal, state, and local means under a coordinated regional plan.

Although Congress never enacted legislation for this approach, many government agencies and private groups, with the assistance of the National Parks Conservation Association and the American Land Forum, began to apply it in specific communi-

ties and landscapes.

In 1979 the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act program, in response to public support, was modified to create a technical and financial assistance program to help states and local governments conserve and protect important river corridors. Using a philosophy of helping people help themselves, NPS created the Rivers & Trails Program. In testimony before Congress, William K. Reilly, then president of the Conservation Foundation, described the assistance as being “in the best tradition of federalism and local initiative and a prototype for the next generation of land and water conservation techniques in America, one that adroitly melds federal, state, local and private efforts into a cost-effective partnership” (Reilly 1985).

Working in response to public and private requests, and with other public and private assistance programs, NPS expanded the scenic rivers program to help communities design and implement plans and strategies for their special places.

The Rivers & Trails Program’s community-based view (Steiner 1986) was responsive to requests that didn’t fit neatly into existing federal programs. Requests came for places where community, and often congressional, leaders wanted to coordinate historic preservation, parks, and economic development into an integrated approach. As a result of this approach, NPS became a sought-after federal partner for many of the earliest heritage area efforts, including eight current federal areas.

Massachusetts and New York played a leadership role in heritage

areas. Massachusetts developed a strategy, based on the success of Lowell, for conserving and promoting the cultural resources of aging and declining cities to build community pride, enhance the quality of life, and stimulate economic revitalization. In 1979 the state created the Urban Cultural Park Program and designated 14 locally administered heritage parks located in 21 cities and villages.

Private-sector historic preservation interests also changed their heritage approaches. In 1980 the National Main Street Program worked with communities to revitalize their historic and traditional commercial areas. The Main Street approach was developed to save historic commercial architecture and the fabric of American communities’ built environment by partnering with development interests and using economic tools. With inspired leadership from such people as Mary Means and Scott Gerloff, Main Street brought historic preservation and cultural conservation into communities with an emphasis on empowerment, innovation, sustainability, and flexibility.

Heritage area elements also surfaced in the White House. In 1981 the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) issued a report called *Landscape Conservation and Development: An Evolving Alternative to Public Land Acquisition* to articulate the need to find a way to protect nationally significant landscapes faced with urbanization (CEQ 1981). The report built on greenline park philosophy and examined alternative ways to link protection and development, using appropriate federal roles. The effort

sent a signal from the office of the president that it was important to find ways to make land use decisions that would allow communities and regions to protect important values and prosper economically.

Over time these efforts laid the foundation for the heritage movement, shaping the principles that make it effective. These laws and projects proved to be important policy and place-specific testing grounds for new approaches to integrate different public objectives. The legislative and community initiatives also began to move government away from top-down, single-purpose approaches to conservation, historic preservation, park, and economic development assistance and decision-making.

First Generation of Heritage Areas

The 1980s saw the arrival of the first generation of national heritage areas. The movement surfaced in 1984 with the designation of the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor (I&M). The I&M initially was an educational and identification program undertaken by the Open Lands Project, a private not-for-profit organization that focused on a 25-mile segment of the corridor along the Des Plaines River (Figure 1). It began in 1980 and was unlike traditional state or national parks because it was located in one of the nation's most industrialized regions.

The I&M effort combined a diversity of land uses, management pro-



Figure 1. Roger Gasa Lock, Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor. Photo provided by National Park Service.

grams, and historical themes (Figure 2), blended with economic development and grassroots involvement. With leadership from Jerry Adlemann and others, it was intended to encourage economic growth by preserving natural lands alongside industries and

historic structures within commercial centers. The concept envisioned that the federal government would provide recognition, technical assistance, and coordination through a corridor commission.

The I&M's goal for linking and



Figure 2a and 2b. Boats on the canal, then and now: Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor. Photos provided by National Park Service.

maintaining the balance between nature and industry, and encouraging economic regeneration, caught the attention of many states and communities within the eastern United States. In 1983 Congress directed NPS to assist Massachusetts and Rhode Island with a strategy for the future conservation, management, and use of the Blackstone River corridor. In addition, NPS was directed by Congress to assess whether the valley should be included in the National Park System.

The Blackstone study (NPS 1985) did not recommend traditional national park designation. However, the report indicated that “there may be a role for federal assistance in the area of resource interpretation,” and that “federal recognition of the valley may be appropriate given its historical significance....” The report spoke to the need for shared responsibility by indicating that “such recognition should follow an increased commitment from state and local governments to environmental improvements, protection of the valley’s cultural resources, and protection of its rural setting.” Massachusetts had already designated its part of the Blackstone as a state heritage park, the Blackstone was Rhode Island’s highest priority, and NPS had good relations with both states, so the study recommendations were supported. Federal legislation modeled after the I&M was enacted in 1986, creating the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (now called John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor).

The heritage areas movement also surfaced in Pennsylvania. The com-

monwealth was well versed in integrating state-run environmental, cultural, and economic programs in cities and communities and had been exploring the state heritage park approach. In 1984 the commonwealth developed a framework for a Pennsylvania Heritage Parks Program “to preserve cultural resources in a manner which provides educational, recreational and economic benefits” (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania 1984). A partnership between the commonwealth and NPS formed and the two worked in tandem to collaboratively support a series of state and federal heritage designations.

Heritage area interest in Pennsylvania, as well as other eastern states, peaked when the population turned its interest—and disposable income—toward heritage tourism. In the late 1980s Americans were more educated, older, and willing to spend more money on travel and recreation than previously. The Baby Boomer “back-to-the-city movement” was beginning and public demand for shorter, less strenuous, and more authentic vacations was increasing. Heritage tourism expert Richard Roddewig described the situation by saying: “The U.S. was mature enough as a country to have a varied and rich architectural, cultural and social history that makes every corner of the country fascinating” (Roddewig 1989).

Heritage tourism increased the forces of fundamental demand and supply for heritage areas. As these forces were converging, the human spirit, public and political support, technical know-how, and legislative precedents were available to meet the demand. Heritage areas began to mul-

tively exponentially each year as this community-based movement became a publicly supported approach to

meeting environmental, cultural, and economic goals.

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