Spring 5-1-2011

Imagining Place, Fighting for Space The Story of the National Heritage Area Movement

Jesse Solomon Turiel

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Imagining Place, Fighting for Space

The Story of the

National Heritage Area Movement

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors

May 2011

Honors Capstone Project in Geography

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze recent economic and political trends by providing an in depth look at the National Heritage Area (NHA) program. By tracing their conception and origination back to the early 1980s, I attempt to place NHAs within the larger framework of deindustrialization and government cutbacks that were occurring at the time. Furthermore, I show how, with their emphasis on building social capital and creating cross-jurisdictional ties, NHAs were a natural response to emerging “new regionalist” ideals in America. By embracing the concept of regional partnerships to enhance economic competitiveness, NHAs signaled a new drive towards geographical thinking throughout much of the country.

After providing a quick survey of the existing academic literature, I take a closer look at the NHA program by making use of three case studies. In telling the stories of these three areas, I attempt to show why there has been such an increasing demand for NHA designation in recent years.

Finally, I show that, because of a lack of enforced standards, the NHA program has become susceptible to partisan forces, both locally and on Capitol Hill. Furthermore, I use testimony from National Park Service officials to show that the program is now in real danger of running out of funds. With such a flawed system of designation, I end by posing some critical questions for a program in need of a direction.

Ultimately, I conclude that, while these issues are troubling, the true significance of the NHA program comes from its reliance upon the idea of geographical place. By embracing the power of geography to drive economic competitiveness, NHAs are just one example of how spatial concerns have become increasingly important in today’s society.
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**IMAGINING PLACE, FIGHTING FOR SPACE**

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Acknowledgements

It pains me to realize that, when this paper is finally printed, future readers will only see one author listed on the title page. In reality, this project was a shared endeavor, and to limit my expression of gratitude to this one small section seems somehow inadequate. Nevertheless, I will do my best to thanks those who, with their helpful suggestions and infinite patience, helped to transform this project into something worth sharing.

All expressions of gratitude must first begin with my capstone advisor, Dr. Anne Mosher. Until I took her class two years ago, I, like many people, had never heard of the heritage area program. Her knowledge of the subject was daunting, but her passion for it was infectious, and I soon found myself eager to follow in her footsteps. In agreeing to serve as my advisor, she acted, not just as an academic consultant, but as a personal role model and a friend. Without her guidance, this project literally would not have been possible.

My heartfelt thanks also goes out to my honors reader, Dr. Robert Wilson. A few weeks before the project was due, he told me I needed to develop a stronger thesis statement. At first, I was crushed. I had been working on the introduction for months and felt I could develop it no further. However, by challenging me and pushing me beyond my comfort zone, he helped to transform my argument into something I could be proud of.
I would also like to thank Dr. Eric Holzwarth, along with the rest of the faculty at the Renee Crown Honors Program. In the spring of my sophomore year, I considered dropping out of the program for personal reasons, but they convinced me to stick it out. I’m glad that I did.

Among all of my non-academic contributors, no one deserves more praise than my mother, Mary Foran. As a middle school teacher, her schedule was hectic enough. Even so, she managed to take the time to help me through the long process of editing and revising. She, along with my father Jeff, stepfather Chris, stepmother Nadya, and stepsister Malika, helped to preserve my sanity when things got rough. Whenever I needed a few words of motivation or simply a sympathetic ear, my family was always there to provide it.

I also want to extend a special thank-you to my roommates, Andrew, Paul, and Eva, who sacrificed their own comfort to create a quiet and hospitable environment in which I could work.

Finally, my appreciation is owed to Heather Scotten, Katie Durcan, Gerald Adelmann, Bill Reid, Gilbert Metcalf, and the members of Freedom’s Way Inc. Without their valuable firsthand input, my project would have been little more than a stale recounting of old books and newspaper articles. With them, I feel I was able to capture the personal and human elements behind what is, after all, an intensely emotional program.
Of course, there are many other people I would like to thank, and I fear that I may have left out some important names. So in conclusion, I say to all those who helped me, encouraged me, or challenged me: this project belongs to you.
Introduction: National Heritage Areas
More than Meets the Eye

“If you would converse with me, you must first define your terms.” - Voltaire

What, exactly, is a National Heritage Area? Many Americans would be surprised to learn that there is a fairly good chance, about one in three, that they live in one.¹ In fact, in the Northeastern United States, it is difficult to find a place more than a couple hours’ drive away from one of these regions (Appendix, Figure 1). With 49 designations in 32 states, National Heritage Areas (NHAs) cover more ground and contain more people than any other land use program in the history of the United States.²

Designated by Congress and affiliated with the National Park Service (NPS), heritage areas are nominally recognized as federal entities. However, unlike their more glamorous older sibling, the National Park, heritage areas are not managed directly by the federal government. The NPS provides funding and technical assistance, but it does not own any land and is prohibited from exercising control over property rights, environmental standards, or land use

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¹ Heather Scotten, Assistant Coordinator of National Heritage Area Program, National Park Service. Telephone interview, 26 October 2010.

² Ibid.
regulations of any kind. In this relationship, it is the private sector that holds the reins of power, with the park service relegated to the role of watchful guardian.

Although there is no set formula for designation, heritage areas usually arise through the cooperative efforts of local stakeholders, from chambers of commerce to preservationist groups, public officials, and even ordinary citizens. These stakeholders then begin the long process of lobbying Congress for a recognition of “national significance” on behalf of their region. If they are successful, the stakeholders are officially recognized as a governing body for the new heritage area, and Congress grants them three years to formulate a management plan and have it approved by the Secretary of the Interior. At this point, the area becomes eligible to receive federal dollars and technical advice, which is then supplemented with state, local, and private funds in order to further the stated goals of the management plan.

When it comes to defining an overall theme or purpose for the NHA movement, the existing literature is disappointingly vague. Due to the nature of the program, no two regions have the same stated goals, and because each area is designated on a case-by-case basis, management plans tend to differ widely in their function. Indeed, with the scale of heritage areas ranging from just a few

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4 Katie Durcan, Assistant Coordinator of National Heritage Area Program, National Park Service. Telephone interview, 3 November 2010.
counties to the entire state of Tennessee,\(^5\) articulating a common purpose would seem a hopeless task. However, upon closer inspection, some broad, unifying themes begin to emerge.

According to the National Park Service, heritage areas are similar in that they offer “Nationally distinctive cultural, historic, scenic, and natural resources that, when linked together, tell a unique story about our country.”\(^6\) This idea of a “nationally significant” narrative is prominent in most descriptions of the program, with the idea being that designation will serve to promote, and ultimately protect, that region’s history. In the words of one non-profit group, the definitive goal of the heritage area movement is simply “to recognize, preserve and celebrate America’s defining landscapes.”\(^7\)

Thus, at first glance, National Heritage Areas are, to put it bluntly, exactly what they sound like: areas of exceptionally rich heritage, recognized at the national level and assisted by the federal government. It is a simple concept: easy to understand, easy to explain, and largely unobjectionable to the general public.

If the story were to end right here, it would make for a vaguely interesting but wholly unremarkable tale, best suited for the back pages of travel brochures or

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government websites. However, the next few chapters of the heritage area story prove to be much more nuanced, controversial and, ultimately, more exciting.

**A Weapon in the War for Economic Stability**

While historic preservation is certainly an important part of the equation, it is not, and never has been, the true catalyst for the heritage areas movement. Beneath their sunny, feel-good exterior, heritage areas are often viewed as useful tools in the struggle to attain economic stability. In many cases, they allow otherwise fragmented regions to coalesce around a shared identity, strengthening community ties and improving local morale. In other cases, they provide regions with the opportunity to showcase an attractive image, making themselves more amenable to prospective tourists and businesses. Essentially, for many communities across the country, NHAs represent far more than mere badges of pride and recognition. Rather, they represent a tangible opportunity for municipalities to work together towards the common goal of economic prosperity.

Of course, no historical movement can be analyzed in a vacuum, and so it becomes necessary to contextualize the development of heritage areas within the larger scheme of economic and social history.

Indeed, looking back to the origination of NHAs in the early 1980s, evidence seems to suggest that heritage areas were a natural outgrowth of changing economic and fiscal conditions in the United States. During this period, there was a concerted effort to deemphasize the role of the central government in
many domestic affairs, especially those involving aid to inner cities. At the same
time, there was a continuing trend towards deindustrialization across much of the
country, a trend exacerbated by Reagan-era cutbacks in federal assistance. Thus,
as is often the case in periods of great crisis, many localities felt compelled to
search for new methods of economic sustainability to compete in an era of scarce
resources.

In this climate of fiscal austerity, cities often were left to fend for
themselves, a situation that frequently placed them into direct geographic
competition with each other. For these cities hoping to compete with distant
rivals, it often made sense to partner with immediate neighbors in order to
increase their economic clout. By forming rich, mutually-reinforcing webs of
social connectedness, many regions found they could attain a level of innovation
and productivity greater than the sum of their parts. In time, this capacity to form
inter-jurisdictional partnerships, known as “regional clusters,” would come to be
seen as a key advantage in an economy dominated by the free flow of money and
ideas.

As I will attempt to make clear in this paper, I believe that the heritage
area movement was, at least in part, a reaction to this new trend towards regional
development. By forging a common consensus around the theme of geographical
identity, heritage areas felt they could generate the enthusiasm and grassroots
activism needed to transform individual towns and cities into larger, more
cohesive units. In this sense, support from the federal government was modest but
essential; by legitimizing an area’s claims of “national significance,” designation effectively served as the nucleus around which a regional framework could be built. Once this legitimacy was “seeded” from above, heritage areas then could begin to create a reputation for themselves, attracting tourists and new businesses in an effort to attain economic stability.

**Too Much of A Good Thing?**

By the mid-1990s, heritage areas had gained the reputation as potential moneymakers, and as such, they became a hot commodity on the political market (Appendix, Figure 2). Even today, the popularity of the program is continuing to increase. As of April 2011, there are ten proposals waiting to be reviewed by Congress along with dozens more in the early planning stages\(^8\). Although quantitative evidence is lacking, there is at least the belief among the program’s followers that heritage areas are major difference-makers in the race to attain comparative geographical advantages. In a purely perceptual sense, then, the program must be viewed as an unqualified success. However, despite the movement’s popularity and largely unobjectionable reputation, there remain some inherent flaws in the overall structure of the program.

For one, there is a major disconnect between how heritage areas present themselves to the public and how they are perceived in more elite circles. While the program’s preservationist and historical credentials are frequently celebrated,

\(^8\) Katie Durcan, Op. cit.
the public rarely hears about its more tangible function as an agent of regional competitiveness. More troubling, however, is the lack of defined criteria for what these regions actually are. There is no agreed-upon definition for what constitutes “national significance,” nor is there any objective measure to determine which regions deserve designation and which do not. More often, designation is simply determined by which regions have the political connections needed to gain access to Capitol Hill. In fact, once a heritage area bill reaches Congress, it is virtually guaranteed to pass, regardless of its legislative merits.

Lastly, as more areas continue to be designated, it is unlikely that the Park Service will be able to find the resources needed to support them all. With such a lax designation process and no enforceable mechanisms for terminating funding, the heritage area program seems destined to outgrow the relatively limited amount of funds set aside for its continuation.

Thus, while heritage areas might seem like a good idea in theory; in practice, the program is rife with misconceptions and inconsistencies. By presenting a public image so out of step with its actual goals, it obscures what is, in effect, a geographical struggle for scarce economic resources. In this struggle, some regions are fortunate enough to receive a boost from the federal government while others are not. Furthermore, given the way the program currently is structured, regions obtain federal assistance, not because they have intrinsically better claims to historical or cultural significance, but rather because their
organizational prowess allows them to compete more effectively in the political arena.

To some, this arrangement may seem unfair. To others, it may seem a natural and justifiable reaction to economic trends that are beyond these regions’ immediate control. Either way, one fact remains unmistakably clear: the heritage area program, despite its humble reputation, offers a much more compelling story than originally meets the eye.
Chapter 1: Competition through Cooperation

The Economic Factors Behind NHA Development

“A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” - Winston Churchill

In Flint, Michigan, the housing market is so depressed that many homes sell for just a dollar apiece. In Youngstown, Ohio, public officials have taken to bulldozing entire neighborhoods in the hopes of reducing city maintenance costs. In Cleveland, population loss is occurring so rapidly that, if one week’s worth of emigrants were to leave simultaneously, they would be able to fill the seats of two full-size Greyhound buses. In Detroit, if one were to lay out all of the city’s vacant lots side by side, the resulting space would be large enough to cover the entire city of San Francisco.

As incredible as these facts may seem, they nevertheless fail to convey the full degree of hardship and pain felt by so many of America’s industrial cities since the 1960s. It was a hardship caused, not by any particular fault of the cities themselves, but rather by a series of economic and fiscal changes arising at the

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national and international levels. In a very real sense then, these urban localities were victims of economic forces entirely beyond their control. However, while these problems originated from outside sources, their solutions would have to come from within.

In an age of increasingly scarce resources, the keys to economic success often lay in a community’s ability to create geographical linkages and innovative partnerships across jurisdictional lines. Ultimately, in this new cutthroat economy, cities would have to cooperate in order to compete.

An Unstoppable Force: American Manufacturing After WWII

Many historians refer to the 1900s as “The American Century,” and after looking at the economic data, it is not difficult to see why. In 1945, as much of Europe and Asia lay in ruins, the United States emerged from the rubble of WWII as an economic superpower, ready to unleash its concentrated industrial might upon the world. In those brief, fast-paced years, half of the world’s manufactured products were made in America. Consumer confidence and union membership were high while unemployment and inflation were low. By the mid-1950s, despite the notable exclusion of women and minorities, the American Dream finally seemed attainable to the expanding middle class. In many ways, the 20


14 Ibid. 347.
years after WWII, while not without some dips and panics, remain unmatched in their creation of prosperity for the average American worker.

By the late 1960s, however, the first stirrings of long-term fiscal troubles were becoming apparent. Inflation inched above 5% in 1969, only to explode four years later as a series of supply shocks led to dramatic shortages in the world’s energy market.\textsuperscript{15} As the decade wore on, economists began to refer ominously to the new trend of “stagflation,” a seemingly counterintuitive combination of inflation and slowed growth.\textsuperscript{16}

During these difficult times, no sector of the American economy was hit harder than heavy industry. In the 40 years between 1969 and 2009, the percentage of the American workforce engaged in manufacturing fell from 26 percent to less than 10 percent.\textsuperscript{17} Throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s, this decline was reflected mostly by a shrinking ratio of manufacturing jobs to service sector jobs, rather than an actual loss in industrial employment. However, following the 2000 - 2002 recession, nearly five million manufacturing jobs were lost outright, dropping payrolls to their lowest level since the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
In the existing literature, there are many competing explanations for this apparent decline in American industrial prowess. However, while these conflicting narratives merit further study, the exact reasons for deindustrialization are not necessary for the scope of this paper. Instead, it is sufficient to acknowledge that, by the 1970s, much of America was suffering from a slowdown in economic activity, the worst of which was occurring within the sector of heavy manufacturing.

**Urban Areas in Decline: America’s Rust Belt**

For the country as a whole, America’s loss of industrial jobs can best be described as a chronic malady; although serious, it did not present an immediate danger to the survival of the national economy. For a few major cities in the Mid-Atlantic and Inland North, however, the decline in manufacturing was a more acute problem, and its effects on the ground were nothing short of disastrous. After centuries of rapid growth, the population of most major Northeastern cities began to decline after 1960, and in some cases, such as Detroit and Cleveland, they fell by more than 50%. As workers from these cities dispersed throughout the country, many chose to head south and west to the so-called Sun Belt, where the weather was nicer and the jobs more plentiful. Others, however, relocated to just a few miles beyond city limits, creating a massive, sprawling exurbia around

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a hollow urban core. Left behind in this exodus from inner cities were the old, the poor, and the racially marginalized, forming a permanent underclass amongst the abandoned factories and vacant lots.\textsuperscript{21}

By the 1970s, deindustrialization was largely seen as an urban problem. More specifically, it was seen as a problem highly concentrated among the manufacturing cities of the Upper Midwest.\textsuperscript{22} As bad as things were, however, they would only continue to get worse. During the late 70s and early 80s, a revolution in political thinking would begin to challenge the legitimacy of the nation’s vast network of urban assistance programs; programs which had been growing, largely uninterrupted, for nearly half a century.

\textbf{1933-1978: The Golden Age of Keynesian Economics}

In the midst of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt assumed the presidency promising a “New Deal” for the American worker. In order to achieve this goal, Roosevelt would authorize a dramatic expansion in the role of the central government, approving massive federal outlays to states and localities in hopes of stimulating employment on the ground and demand in the markets. This plan, influenced by the work of British economist John Maynard Keynes, aimed


\textsuperscript{22} Marlene Lee and Mark Mather, Op. Cit., 8.
to spread the benefits of full employment and high wages as evenly as possible, targeting struggling areas with offers of federal assistance.\textsuperscript{23}

In the 1960s under President Johnson, the United States redoubled its efforts to “level the playing field.”\textsuperscript{24} Social assistance programs and generous government grants to struggling municipalities became commonplace, and in 1965, after the passage of Medicare, even the conservative economist Milton Friedman was forced to sourly admit that “We are all Keynesians now.”\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, by the mid 1970s, more than a quarter of all of the money spent by states and cities came directly from the federal treasury.\textsuperscript{26}

Thus, even as deindustrialization took hold during the early 1970s, many urban areas managed to avoid its worst effects by relying upon the federal government for monetary assistance. By the end of the decade, however, a new shift in the political climate would force these cities to begin fending for themselves in an increasingly competitive fiscal environment.

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\textsuperscript{26}John E. Peck and Thomas R. Swartz, Op. Cit. 8
\end{flushright}
A Shock to the System: The Tax Revolt of 1978

The first true blow to the New Deal/Keynesian consensus took place on June 6, 1978, when California voters overwhelmingly approved the Jarvis-Gunn Amendment, better known as Proposition 13. In less than 400 words, the new law completely gutted California’s most important source of revenue, lowering property tax returns by almost 60%. Over the next two-and-a-half years, no less than 22 states followed California’s example, leading to what many observers called “a full-scale tax revolt.”

In November of 1978, a poor Democratic showing in the midterm elections suggested that this newfound voter hostility was more than just a passing phase. Indeed, after 45 years of liberal dominance, a deep conservative backlash was beginning to take hold across the country. According to economist David Stoesz, there was a growing concern that New Deal economics had “violated citizens’ privacy and harmed growth by ‘confiscating’ private resources in the form of taxation for welfare expenditure.” In the opinion of fiscal conservatives, government, in the quest to ensure equality, had spent itself into oblivion, wasting

27 Ibid., 9.


hard-earned tax dollars on programs that did little more than “reward failure” and foster “a culture of dependence.”

As frustration grew, President Carter stunned many of his closest supporters by announcing a new “lean and austere” budget, which reduced or eliminated many public works projects and local development initiatives. While certainly a bold move, Carter’s actions turned out to be too little, too late. The following year, Ronald Reagan captured the presidency in an electoral landslide, due in large part to his promises to take on what many saw as a bloated and inefficient government structure.

**Ronald Reagan and the New Federalism**

While Carter aimed to streamline the existing federal system through incremental changes, Reagan sought nothing less than a complete redefinition of government’s role in society. The central government, he argued, had little business sticking its nose in issues like welfare assistance and subsidized housing, issues that could be dealt with most efficiently at the local level. If a locality wanted to spend its money on such programs, then so be it, but it should not

30 Ibid., 32.


expect any help from above. “The national government,” Reagan said, “should be worrying about arms control, not potholes.”

In his first State of the Union Address in 1982, Reagan expounded upon this idea by introducing what soon would be known as “The New Federalism.” Essentially, the federal government would assume responsibility for Medicaid, but only if states promised to assume the full burden of welfare and food stamp provisions. Additionally, other federal assistance programs would be phased out over a period of five years, after which states and localities would be expected to pay for them on their own.

Although results on the ground were not as sweeping as Reagan had originally hoped for, many of his proposed domestic cutbacks did succeed in become law. Between 1980 and 1987, for instance, aid to urban areas fell by 47%. This decline was especially notable given the fact that, during this time, the budgets of most other federal programs actually increased. Additionally, low-income entitlement spending was cut by half during the 1980s, leading to the strange phenomenon of increasing poverty in the midst of economic recovery. Indeed, by 1986, the metropolitan poverty rate had expanded to more than 20%.


34 Ibid.

higher even than during the recession years of mid 1970s. By 1984, liberal activists had begun to warn of a permanent underclass being created among America’s urban industrial centers. Alluding to the famous agricultural blight of the 1930s, they called this disturbing new trend “The Rust Bowl.”

Survival of the Fittest: New Federalism and Geographical Competition

Today, views of Reagan’s domestic policies differ widely across the political spectrum. However, amongst most observers, there is broad agreement that new federalism represented a major change in the way the central government interacted with localities. While previously, government grants were distributed largely on a basis of need, they now tended to favor competition and efficiency. With an overall reduction in domestic aid, there was a corresponding rise in the distribution of block grants; packets of money intended for the sole benefit of a single geographic area. As a rule, these grants were typically awarded to whichever region promised to leverage federal funds in the cheapest, most cost-effective manner.

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38 For a positive take on these changing relations, see Gordon Tullock, et. al., *Government Failure: A Primer in Public Choice* (Washington DC: Cato Institute, 2002). For a more critical view, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

39 Gilbert Metcalf, Professor of Economics at Tufts University, Personal Interview, 1 January 2011.
Although this method of distribution was seen by some as the result of poor planning, it was actually an essential component of New Federalist ideology. If localities were forced to fight for their money in an open market, the theory went, then each would have no choice but to operate in a frugal and efficient manner. As one current governor recently suggested, "Competition works. Let them come up with their best plans, compete against the other regions and we will fund the most creative plans." Essentially, by introducing the powerful incentive of financial ruin, the government could make sure that only the best and most cost-effective strategies rose to the top. Once these strategies became known, other localities would be forced to imitate them in order to receive money. In this way, the most optimal distribution of resources could be achieved through the powers of supply and demand, leaving the central government free to pursue other, more appropriate matters.

Thus, it is generally acknowledged that, by the 1980s, there was an increasing emphasis on interregional competition across much of the United States. As localities faced the twin pressures of globalization and deindustrialization, they could no longer count on help from above, and would


instead have to compete against each other for resources in the open market. In this sense, the concept of *geographical place* became an increasingly important notion within many economic circles. According to these thinkers, the distribution of resources was becoming increasingly defined along spatial lines; one region’s gain was another region’s loss. In this zero-sum game, the regions that could out-produce and out-innovate their competition would end up becoming successful on the global stage.

**Regional Clusters: A New Model for a New Economy**

As communities struggled to adapt themselves to these changing conditions, many drew inspiration from a developing school of economic thought, known in academic circles as “New Regionalism.” Essentially, the theory claimed that, with rising competition at the local level and decreasing assistance from above, the region would soon replace the locality as the most effective and innovative geographical unit. In the words of Michael Porter, an early proponent of this theory, “The enduring competitive advantages in a global economy lie increasingly in regional things—knowledge, relationships, motivation—that

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distant rivals cannot match.” In other words, by pooling their collective resources, cities could be “scaled up” into regional entities. Then, once these regional partnerships were established, participating cities could expect distinct competitive advantages against localities that had failed to form such networks. For these new regionalist thinkers, then, the secret to attaining economic stability was almost zen-like in its message: in order to compete, regions first would have to learn to cooperate.

Certainly, for cities interested in new regionalist theory, the goal of increased cooperation was easier said than done. Before cities could begin acting as a regional unit, they first would have to build the necessary bonds of solidarity and trust. In the business world, this repository of good will and shared responsibility was known as “social capital,” and after 1980, it became an increasingly important concept in regional development. For prospective regions, the options for generating social capital were numerous and, among these options, there were no sure-fire methods for success.

Increasingly, as the decade wore on, more and more places would begin to turn to the concept of heritage as a rallying point for regional cooperation. By building a sense of shared identity around a common history, communities could


begin to develop a sense of regional pride that would allow them to operate as a larger whole.

**Heritage Areas: A Golden Opportunity**

With their emergence during the early 1980s, heritage areas were very much a reflection of changing economic and fiscal realities. By emphasizing regional cooperation, they hoped to allow former industrial cities to compete in an increasingly competitive global climate. Also, by focusing upon the role of history and sense of place, heritage areas attempted to enhance social capital and create a sense of regional solidarity. As Mike DeWine, a Senator from Ohio, put it, “Together, we can accomplish more than working separately. Together, we are linked by geographical proximity and a shared heritage, and if we can only realize this, there is literally nothing we cannot do.”

Of course, the heritage area movement is a large and diverse program, and, in analyzing its development, it is necessary to avoid over-generalizations and claims that cannot be supported by direct evidence. Therefore, in the following chapter, I present a case study of the Illinois and Michigan Canal Corridor, the nation’s first heritage area. In it, I show how a group of struggling manufacturing towns managed to transform themselves into a fully-functional, 

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thriving regional network. By bringing together the diverse interests of environmentalists, businessmen, and politicians, the I&M Canal was able to build a regional consensus that would have been impossible just decades before. In doing so, it would sow the seeds for a much larger movement in the years to come.
Chapter 2: A Bold, Precedent-Setting Concept
The Story of the Nation’s First Heritage Area

“It is time to give us our money back!”
– James Thompson, Governor of Illinois

Shortly after 2pm on August 17, 1982, three men in business suits filed into the central offices of the US Department of the Interior. The men, all Congressmen from Illinois, were on a mission to seek administrative approval for what they called a “national heritage corridor,” a sort of “industrialized national park” that would run along the eastern confines of Chicago’s outer suburbs.\(^{50}\) The plan was a remarkably clever one, but even so, its approval seemed very much in doubt. Over the past 18 months, the Office of the Interior had become a place where preservationist ideas went to die, and for this, no one was more responsible than the Interior Secretary himself.

“James G. Watt,” wrote Salon Magazine “was the man that 80s-era environmentalists loved to hate.”\(^{51}\) Never one to mince words, he had taken office with the simple pledge to “Mine more, drill more, and cut more timber.” There was no reason, he argued, why national park lands shouldn’t be opened up for logging and drilling. After all, in Watt’s opinion, the Bible had given man the right to use Earth as he saw fit. For preservationists, Watt felt only scorn. "If the

\(^{50}\) Gerald Adelmann, Personal interview, 19 Jan. 2011.

troubles from environmentalists cannot be solved in the jury box or at the ballot box,” he once angrily declared, “perhaps the cartridge box should be used.”

For these reasons, few thought Watt would support any plan whose stated purpose was to preserve and protect a geographic landscape, especially one which required federal dollars. Therefore, when the three Illinois Congressmen emerged from Watt’s office with his full, enthusiastic approval, the general atmosphere was split somewhere between elation and bewilderment. After three years of hectic planning and consensus-building, Illinois was finally on its way towards receiving the economic help it so desperately needed. Even better, it had succeeded by beating the Reagan administration at its own game.

An Idea is Born

When Gerald Adelmann, age 29, arrived in Lockport, Illinois, after a break from his doctoral studies in Washington DC, he returned home to a community in decline. The year was 1979, and a worldwide energy crisis had already begun to cripple the local Texaco oil refinery, Lockport’s largest employer. Unable to turn a profit, the plant would close its doors forever just two years later. In nearby Joliet, the situation was even worse. US Steel and Caterpillar Manufacturing were on the verge of financial collapse, and


unemployment had already shot up past 10%, soon to reach 25%.\textsuperscript{55} Mr. Adelmann, however, had not come to Illinois to address these current economic woes. Instead, he had come to study a distant and much more profitable past.

The Illinois and Michigan Canal was generally regarded as one of the most important public works projects of the 1800s.\textsuperscript{56} Completed in 1848, the 96-mile canal linked the waters of the Mississippi to the shores of Lake Michigan, providing the final inland connection between the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico (Appendix, Figure 3). In just a few decades, the canal would help transform Chicago from a muddy frontier town of 20,000 people to a bustling, world-class city of almost half a million. At its peak, the canal would haul over a million tons of freight per year and would require the full-time service of 132 barges.\textsuperscript{57} After 1900, however, the canal fell into steep disrepair, and by the 1970s it had become an industrial waste heap of abandoned locks and crumbling foundations.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} Adelmann, Op. Cit.

\textsuperscript{56} For an early-20\textsuperscript{th} century account of the importance of the canal, see James Putnam in \textit{The Illinois and Michigan Canal} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918).


At some point, walking among these aging relics, Mr. Adelmann was struck with a profound idea.\textsuperscript{59} This old canal had once breathed life into the economy of northern Illinois; why, then, couldn’t history repeat itself? Instead of each individual community trying to come up with a solution on its own, why not come together around a shared piece of infrastructure; especially one that was already built? Through his studies, Adelmann had seen firsthand the power of the man-made environment to shape a region’s image, and with the I&M Canal, he was determined to make his vision a reality. "He was the only guy in the whole Chicago area,” a \textit{Tribune} journalist would later write, “who saw the potential in making a major recreational area out of an industrial junkyard."\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{A Stroke of Good Fortune}

As it turned out, Mr. Adelmann was not the first to express interest in the old, broken-down canal corridor. Judith Stockdale, executive director of the Open Lands Project, a non-profit agency devoted to preserving open space in the Chicago area, had been trying for years to figure out what to do with it.\textsuperscript{61} The resources of the canal were intriguing, but the surrounding area was simply too developed and built-up to be considered for a traditional public park. Even worse, each community and business along the canal seemed to have its own, conflicting

\textsuperscript{59} Aldemann, Op. Cit.


\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
ideas about how to use it. Thus, by 1979, when Ms. Stockdale received word of possible new grant money coming in from Washington, all thoughts of the canal had left her mind. “I had no idea of what project to apply for,” she would later recall, "but the very next day, I got a call from this person named Jerry Adelmann."62

Adelmann convinced Open Lands to take a second look at the canal and its surrounding townships. A national park, he admitted, was infeasible. The very idea of the federal government trying to preserve a bunch of used car lots and industrial waste sites was laughable at best. Still, he argued, what if the canal were to adopt a new way of looking at things? Instead of landscape preservation, why not focus on landscape creation?63 If townships had a common theme to rally around, then perhaps enough social and economic capital could be generated to get things flowing again. All along the canal, he explained, there were hidden gems of prosperity, both natural and historic, just waiting to be discovered. By itself, each little town did not have much to offer, but together, they would be a force to be reckoned with. For a region long used to being thought of as “the armpit of Chicago,” the biggest remaining hurdle was to convince these communities of their own potential.

**Spreading the Word: John Husar and the Power of the Bully Pulpit**

62 Ibid.

John Husar, or “Big John,” was a large, thirty-ish man with a sunny disposition and a deep, infectious laugh. He worked as a sports and recreation reporter at the Chicago Tribune, and it was said that he could write about “anything, anywhere, with clarity, brilliance and above all, zeal.” An avid outdoorsman, he had an almost child-like reverence for the natural beauty of Illinois; a reverence which, when combined with his knack for storytelling, could move even the most idle of readers. In other words, he was exactly the sort of man Jerry Adelmann needed to promote the cause of the Illinois and Michigan canal.

Early in 1980, Adelmann, now employed by Open Lands, approached the boisterous writer with a modest request for assistance. What he got was a commitment so impressive that it would forge the bonds of a 20-year-long friendship.

“For Jerry, I’m gonna work with you on a series,” the newspaperman declared, leaving little room for equivocation. “It’s gonna take three months and it’s gonna be in depth. I have the power of the ‘bully pulpit’ and I know most of the major players… would you be willing to work with me?”

For most of the spring and summer, the two men rambled across the Des Plaines River Valley, surveying properties and talking with local stakeholders. In September, their efforts were rewarded with a five-part Chicago Tribune series.


titled “Illinois: Our Hidden Wilderness,” which received critical acclaim and was featured on several front pages.66 The region, it seemed, was finally becoming proud of itself again.

Meanwhile, in Washington DC, Open Lands had managed to convince a sympathetic park service official by the name of John Piene to help formulate a management plan for the new project.67 In just a few short months, the corridor idea would be ready to share with the general public. First, though, it would have to be pitched to a much less receptive audience.

**Convincing Businesses**

In mid-20th century America, there was a distinct sense that the ideal of preservation was in conflict with the reality of innovation, and that a community could embrace one or the other but certainly not both.68 As such, most businessmen had developed a keen and visceral distrust of any agency seeking to “look after” or “interpret” their land. This distrust was directed towards government, but also towards non-governmental agencies like Open Lands, whose stated mission was to preserve and protect the natural landscape of Illinois.

In fact, just ten years earlier, Open Lands had earned the ire of local businessmen by lobbying against construction on Mooselake Prairie, a prime

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68 Ibid.
patch of real estate just south of Joliet. Not surprisingly, when a couple of self-described “wide-eyed zealots” came rolling into town a decade later and announced their plans for a new regional park, the business community did not exactly welcome them with open arms. “There was a real sense,” Adelmann recalled, “that we were just some wealthy Chicagoans coming down and trying to tell them what to do….you know, that we were stealing their land under cover of darkness.”

A series of corporate-sponsored breakfasts in Chicago, organized to mollify the concerns of big business, did not fare any better. "The reaction was chilly to hostile," remembered George Overton, president of Open Lands. With factories closing and unemployment skyrocketing, the last thing companies wanted to hear about was more regulation and more government control. Faced with a difficult situation, Adelmann and Open Lands decided to create a spin-off organization to help bolster their cause. Originally called the Upper Illinois Valley Association (UIVA), its job was to bring together various members of the business community and convince them that, far from preventing innovation, a new heritage corridor would actively encourage it.

Day after day, proponents of the corridor hammered away at the same message: the designation would not impose any new land use or environmental

69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
controls. No land would be owned, and all preservation efforts would be strictly voluntary in nature. This was a kinder and gentler form of preservation, they argued; one that was not at all opposed to progress or free enterprise. In other words, this was not your grandfather’s national park.

During the summer and fall of 1981, Adelmann and the National Park Service worked hard to create a proposal that would be acceptable to everyone involved. As the months dragged on, a few key themes began to emerge. Unlike national parks, partnership and cooperation would be key. The NPS would help with funding and technical matters, but all policy initiatives would originate on the ground. This way, local groups could have real influence over the governing commission, which would be split evenly between government, business, and non-profit sectors. Over time, this openness to all viewpoints began to win over many earlier detractors. Unlike previous activists, they noted, Adelmann didn’t come across as some sort of fanatic. One Chicago CEO, marveling at this newfound truce between businessmen and environmentalists, observed smugly that, “This [kind of thing] could never happen in a place like Russia.”


74 US Senate, Subcommittee on Public Lands and Reserved Water, Hearing on S.2157: To establish the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor in Illinois, and an Interior
As 1981 gave way to 1982, a small but growing segment of the business community had placed itself firmly behind the project. The UIVA board began to fill up with CEOs and presidents from some of America’s largest corporations. Caterpillar Tractor, Amoco Chemical and Inland Steel were just a few of the big names that attached themselves to the project. In doing so, these manufacturing giants signaled their belief that the corridor could regain its former glory, and that all it needed was a change of image.

“In image and quality of life are among the most important concerns for the retention of industry,” wrote Inland Steel VP George Ranney in a 1982 op-ed, “The improved amenities will help attract residents and jobs.” Indeed, according to the calculations of the Three Rivers Manufacturing Company, a new heritage corridor would directly create 700 jobs and leverage almost a million extra dollars in federal and state taxes. Just from the publicity alone, they argued, Illinois manufacturing could be put back on the map. As one executive would later say, "It was a good idea for business. We were competing for employees with other


geographic areas. Certainly the environment and the vision for the future (of the area) had some role in attracting people."\(^{78}\)

By the spring of 1982, virtually everyone with a say in the matter was behind the heritage corridor proposal.\(^{79}\) The previous October, Open Lands and the NPS had released an official proposal, and a revised form of the plan was already being drafted for introduction to Congress. For the bill’s supporters, however, the hardest road still lay ahead. With the exception of John Piene and a few of his colleagues, support from the park service was lukewarm at best.\(^{80}\) The Interior Department, with its ongoing budget-slashing measures, promised to be an even tougher sell. Somehow, proponents of the plan would have to convince an anti-environmentalist, anti-bureaucratic administration that a heritage area would be a good idea. Luckily, over the past few months, advocates for the canal corridor had managed to gain some powerful political allies.

**Senator Charles Percy: A Friend in Need is a Friend Indeed**

When freshman senator Charles Percy of Illinois was introduced to the public in the mid 1960s, it was, by all accounts, a case of love at first sight. Young, handsome, and charismatic, the Senate’s new golden boy was seen as the Republican’s answer to the Kennedys. In 1968, just two years into his first term, he was briefly considered for the vice-presidential slot under then-candidate

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Richard Nixon. Six years later, after Watergate cleared the republican field, there was even talk of Percy himself ascending to the highest office.\textsuperscript{81}

As the years wore on, however, much of Percy’s luster began to fade. As ranking member and later Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Percy was criticized for spending more time in Cairo, Egypt, than in Cairo, Illinois.\textsuperscript{82} There was a strong sense, Adelmann recalled, that Percy had begun to lose touch with his constituency. While people back home were struggling with a sinking economy, Percy was spending his time abroad, rubbing shoulders with blue-blooded aristocrats at fancy state dinners. If Percy wanted to be re-elected, he soon realized, he would need to start bringing home the bacon; and with challengers already lining up, there was little time to waste.

Although he himself was preoccupied with foreign affairs, Percy appointed a young aide by the name of Jim Keene to scour Illinois for potential spending projects. Luckily for Open Lands, Keene happened to be one of John Husar’s many “connections,” and after a brief tour of the canal region, the young staffer was sold. Almost immediately, Senator Percy latched onto the project with a ferocity that only a politician in trouble can muster. Somewhat awkwardly, Percy was joined in his endeavor by republican Representative Tom Corcoran, his rumored challenger in the upcoming primary campaign. Together, the two men

\textsuperscript{81} Steve Neal, “Percy Adored and Endeared, but was Nagged by Career as Might-Have-Been,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}. 13 January 1985. Web. 13 January 2011.

\textsuperscript{82} Adelmann, Op. Cit.
formed a powerful lobbying front, and it was they who set up the pivotal meeting with Secretary Watt in August of 1982.

The Big Sell

Realizing the potential difficulty of asking for a new government project in the midst of a recession, the Illinois delegation made a daring move. Instead of trying to get Watt and company to act against their will, they would attempt to convince them that the plan was actually in the best interests of the federal government.

The heritage corridor, they declared, was the epitome of New Federalism, and therefore symbolized everything that the new administration was fighting for. The plan, they argued, was “efficient,” “cost-cutting,” and “locally controlled”; all buzz words in the new federalist lexicon.83 Unlike a national park, which required millions of dollars of assistance and a huge federal staff, the proposed heritage corridor would ask for a mere 250,000 dollars a year, plus expenses for brochures and other promotional material.84 More importantly, the plan promised to give a boost to some of America’s largest corporations, an effect that certainly would be felt beyond the borders of Illinois. If the plan was successful, they concluded, then the old model of heavy-handed park service intervention was dead; an outcome that all true conservatives could celebrate.

Despite all this high-powered lobbying and careful planning, most observers were nevertheless surprised when Watt emerged from the August


meeting and declared the plan to be “a bold, precedent-setting concept” worthy of his full support. In fact, Watt’s support was so enthusiastic that it nearly scared away some of the bill’s liberal backers. Eventually, however, the bill’s supporters managed to walk the political tightrope and shepherd the bill through Congress without significant opposition.

A Dream Come True: The Nation’s First Heritage Area

Shortly after 2:30 pm on August 24, 1984, President Regan strode into the grand ballroom of the Chicago Conrad Hilton, flanked by a quartet of smiling Illinois representatives. Briefly pausing to ink his signature, Regan praised the new corridor as a model of cooperation, stating, “We believe this activity will stimulate tourism, jobs, and economic growth, as well as greater cooperation between local, State, and Federal Governments.”

After five years of stress and uncertainty, the vision of Jerry Adelmann had finally become a reality. With its designation, the I&M Canal Corridor quickly would become a living testament to the powers of regional thinking. By creating partnerships between traditionally antagonistic factions, the corridor had proved that old political and economic divisions could be transcended in the name of geographic unity. As Adelmann would put it several years later, “The corridor created a new ethic and a new way of thinking about planning in this


86 Ibid.

community. It is a region today, and it never was.\textsuperscript{88} Additionally, by treating the federal government as a “stimulating agent” rather than as a sole provider of wealth, the corridor had been able to win the backing of an administration largely opposed to more traditional means of government assistance. Now, officially designated as a heritage area, the I&M Canal could begin the long process of retooling its economy along lines more conducive to 21\textsuperscript{st} century success (Appendix, Figure 4).

In the four years following this first designation, three more regions would join the ranks of the heritage area movement. In 1986, the Blackstone River Valley Corridor was approved by Congress, encompassing the area between Providence, Rhode Island and Worcester, Massachusetts. Two years later, Pennsylvania would receive two heritage areas of its own, one near Pittsburgh and the other near Philadelphia. Like the I&M Canal, these three new heritage areas all were struggling industrial areas, and like the I&M Canal, they all hoped to build a sense of shared regional ethic around a common historical theme.\textsuperscript{89}

However, as late as the early 1990s, the heritage area program was still somewhat of a nebulous concept. As one park service official would later recall, “The first few, I think, were arguably experimental. It was a new concept and I


\textsuperscript{89} Heather Scotten, Op. Cit.
am not sure Congress knew exactly what they were doing." In other words, while these regions believed in the benefits of cooperation, they weren’t yet sure what those benefits would be. New regionalism was an appealing concept, but it lacked the hard, empirical evidence needed to back up its claims of financial effectiveness.

As the decade unfolded, however, a remarkable new development in the world of tourism would begin to lend a sense of drive and purpose to a program badly in need of direction.

Chapter 3: Profiting From the Past

“Marketing battles are not fought in the customer’s office or in the supermarkets or the drugstores of America. Marketing battles are fought in a mean and ugly place. A place that’s dark and damp with much unexpected territory and deep pitfalls to trap the unwary. Marketing battles are fought inside the mind.”

- Al Ries and Jack Trout, “Marketing Warfare,” 1986

Tourism, of course, is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the idea of travelling to other places in order to gain a sense of enjoyment, fulfillment, or wonder is at least as old as recorded civilization itself. However, during the last half of the 20th century, tourism would be transformed from an innate human tendency into a multi-billion dollar global industry. Moreover, in the United States, as a new generation of baby boomers matured, tourism would assume a much more emotional quality than it had in the past. In an increasingly complex world, many people would begin to search for meaning and authenticity in the places that they visited. In effect, these travelers hoped to return to their roots, and they would be willing to pay a significant amount of money to do it.

As these new trends in tourism became widely accepted, the heritage area movement gained an important source of economic legitimacy. Already imbued with clearly defined themes and shared visions of the past, many heritage areas

found themselves in a prime position to begin selling their image to these prospective new tourists. By using their existing network of grassroots activists, they felt they could leverage the relatively limited assistance of the National Park Service and turn it into a much greater source of revenue. Suddenly, a program which had seemed limited in scope now seemed limitless in possibility.

**An Unexpected Development**

During the early 1990s, observers began to notice a remarkable trend occurring amongst the nation’s four existing heritage areas. Heavy industry had not returned, at least not to the degree hoped for by some of the program’s original planners. However, in its place, a new wave of tourists had come rushing in, infusing fresh life into previously struggling economies. While tourism had always been a goal of the heritage area project, its stimulating effects were developing much sooner and much more powerfully than almost anyone had expected.

In the nine short years between 1983 and 1992, tourism revenues in the Blackstone River Valley Heritage Corridor skyrocketed, from $76 million to nearly $200 million. Polluted rivers were slowly improving, new jobs were pouring in by the hundreds, and morale was higher than it had been in decades. In northeastern Illinois, a similar phenomenon had revived the fortunes of the Illinois

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and Michigan Canal region. By the mid-1990s, an estimated five million tourists were visiting the heritage corridor every year, helping to fund a wide array of downtown revitalization projects. “I used to think people [in the new areas of town] didn’t even know there was a downtown,” quipped Bruce Szafraniec, a Lemont retailer, in a 1992 Chicago Sun-Times article, “now I look out on the street on Saturday and wonder, ‘Where are all these people coming from?’”

In what can only be described as an incredible stroke of good fortune, the heritage corridor project had managed to stumble across an emerging trend much larger than anything its original planners could have imagined. With the simple act of authorization, heritage areas had tapped into a deep undercurrent of desire within the American psyche; a desire for simplicity, authenticity, and above all, meaning.

**An Inexplicable Yearning: Baby Boomers and the Search for Enlightenment**

After a brief challenge during the late 60s and early 70s, consumer culture in America had come roaring back with a vengeance during the 1980s. Baby boomers, no longer the fresh-faced idealists of decades past, were now faced with the challenges of middle age: holding down jobs, paying mortgages, and raising


families. For most, the idea of open rebellion against the existing economic and social order was unthinkable, the relic of a naïve and long-forgotten youth. And yet, even as baby boomers grew to accept the realities of the modern world, the relationship was never an easy one. In their desire to escape the monotony of everyday existence, many baby boomers found themselves challenging the system in small but meaningful ways.\textsuperscript{97} While their duties at the workplace were non-negotiable and their responsibilities at home inescapable, their leisure time was theirs alone to do as they pleased. Vacations, in particular, offered baby boomers a chance to mix things up and rediscover some of the magic of their adolescence.

For those in search of deeper social and cultural meaning, the traditional vacation hotspots of the 1980s had little if anything to offer. Week-long getaways to theme parks and island resorts were pleasurable, but to many, they represented a mere extension of the faceless, commercialized world from which they had fled.\textsuperscript{98} In order to truly put the mind at ease, vacations needed to excite the spirit along with the senses. As one vacation planner put it, “We need to go back to our roots and understand what makes us unique and what makes up our heritage. We need to see beautiful places and do authentic things.”\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{97} David Brooks, “Why Bobos Rule: Blending the Rebellion of the 60s with the Materialism of the 80s,” \textit{Newsweek}. 3 April 2000. 65

\textsuperscript{98} For a more nuanced look at the link between changing cultural attitudes and vacation planning, see Richard Prentice, \textit{Tourism and Heritage Attractions} (New York: Routledge, 1993).

This paradigm shift in vacation planning, from the pleasure-seeking to the spiritual and knowledge-seeking, was remarkably swift. In 1982, Travel and Leisure Magazine commissioned a poll asking travelers to list what was important to them when planning a trip. A mere 27% of respondents listed “Visiting cultural, historical, and archeological treasures” as important motivators. Ten years later, however, the polling agency conducted a follow-up survey which showed that number nearly doubling to 50%. Even more striking, the proportion identifying “understanding culture” as a major component of vacation planning jumped from just 48% to 88%.100

As more and more studies confirmed this trend from escapism towards personal enrichment, some very important people began to take notice. In an ironic twist of fate, a movement heavily opposed to consumerism and commercialism would end up serving the needs of a tourism industry hungry for profit.

Cultural Heritage Tourism

During the 1990s, the phrase “cultural heritage tourism” was developed to describe these recent trends in vacation planning. At the time, the growth of this new niche market was more than double that of the rest of the tourism industry, which itself was one of the fastest emerging sectors of the global economy.

Defined as “people who travel to experience places, artifacts, and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past,” cultural heritage tourists were seen as a new breed of traveler; one with intense loyalty and a remarkable propensity to spend.101

In 1997, a study by the Traveler’s Association of America showed that cultural heritage tourists spent an average of $615 per trip compared to $425 for all other tourists.102 Another study in Virginia returned similar results, showing that heritage travelers stayed, on average, one-and-a-half times longer, visited twice as many places, and spent two-and-a-half times as much money.103 Not surprisingly, cultural heritage tourists tended to be older, wealthier, better educated, and had more free time. Perhaps most importantly, heritage tourists were shown to be highly passionate and self-motivated, needing little in the way of outside prodding to explore their surroundings. "It’s different creature than regular tourism," remarked Carole Summers, cultural heritage tourism coordinator for the Kentucky Department of Travel. "They [the tourists] will drive through miles of back roads just to find a fried bologna sandwich at a general store.


somewhere.” In short, cultural heritage tourists were the tourism industry’s best friend.

As the decade progressed, more studies were released showing the real, on-the-ground benefits of cultural heritage tourism. In Georgia alone, rehabilitation of historic properties between 1992 and 1996 created 7,550 jobs, $201 million in earnings, and $559 million in total economic impact. In Florida, total annual in-state wealth creation from heritage travelers was estimated to be over $4 billion, and in Colorado, the state tourism board calculated that every dollar spent on tourism leveraged an extra 12 in revenue. The industry was especially appealing to rural areas, which did not have the technological or labor capital needed to sustain other forms of economic revitalization.

For regions hoping to obtain the benefits of heritage tourism, however, there were some organization hurdles standing in the way of success. For one, in order to attract visitors, communities would need to develop an entire network of coherent and well-organized themes; themes which were broad enough to appeal to a wide audience but distinctive enough to stand out from the crowd. In a world


where consumers were faced with increasing product choice but decreasing decision time, this ability to differentiate was seen as a key necessity in the advertising world.\(^{108}\) Thus, in order to cut through the “commercial clutter” and reach the mind of the consumer, tourist destinations would have to provide a message that was both unique and memorable. In the words of Stephen Pike, a senior lecturer at the Queensland School of Tourism, the most important question for a region to ask itself was, “What experiences can we offer that the consumer can’t find anywhere else?”\(^{109}\)

In addition to uniqueness, heritage tourist destinations would need to be perceived as authentic. This obsession of tourists to get behind the scenes and “observe the real thing” was seen by many academics as the outgrowth of an economy based on personalization and customization.\(^{110}\) To heritage tourists, the prime reason to travel was to gain personal insight and enlightenment, and this could only be done in places that had been left unspoiled by the clumsy hands of commercialism. Thus, the minute a place became “discovered” and

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 43.

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 43.

“commoditized,” it would lose its personal meaning, therefore becoming undesirable.\textsuperscript{111}

Finally, new studies were beginning to show that heritage tourists were repelled by traditional, top-down methods of learning. According to Richard Prentice, an early pioneer in heritage tourism theory, regions could not hope to “teach” their history to prospective visitors. Instead, they would need to encourage a more individualized approach to learning, allowing the visitor “to discover ‘hidden’ worlds, to seek adventure, to admire grandeur, to share secrets, to sample flavors and to uncover mysteries.”\textsuperscript{112} In this sense, host regions were not seen as educators, but rather as coequal partners in the search for personal enlightenment. As one travel agent put it, the message of a community would have to change from “What can I do for you?” to “What can we do together?”\textsuperscript{113}

In trying to fulfill these three requirements of distinctiveness, genuineness, and interactivity, heritage tourism destinations were faced with somewhat of a paradox. They needed to sell themselves enough to get the consumer’s attention, but not enough to destroy the consumer’s image of untarnished authenticity. It was a fine line to walk, and it required a high degree of cooperation and collaboration among all the stakeholders within a region. In the past, local hotels, 


museums, and parks could simply worry about maintaining their own specifically-tailored images. Now, with entire regions being sold as “package deals,” each individual business would have to rely upon a much larger, community-wide message.\textsuperscript{114} In this new climate, a region’s thematic coherence was only as strong as its weakest link, and the ability to cooperate and collaborate was seen as vital.

**Heritage Areas: A Natural Fit for Heritage Tourists**

While other communities would have to build these partnerships from the ground up, heritage areas already had much of the necessary framework in place. During their drive to attain designation, heritage areas like the I&M Canal Corridor had already gone through the process of organizing various interests around a common historical theme. With their focus on regional cooperation, heritage areas had attained, in the words of one researcher, a “coherence of story, genre, style, credibility, and depth” that other, more fractured localities found difficult to match.\textsuperscript{115} Just as importantly, heritage areas had already gained the backing of the National Park Service, a well-known and highly respected agency.


For many regions, this support acted as a crucial “seal of approval,” lending a certain degree of credibility to their claims of national significance.\textsuperscript{116}

Considering this, it is no surprise that the first four heritage areas experienced an increase in tourism during the early 1990s. Almost without realizing it, they had managed to create a model perfectly suited to fit the demands of a new and increasingly popular national phenomenon.

**Tourism: A New Lease on Life for the Heritage Area Movement**

During a phone call with one high-level heritage area administrator, I asked him why tourism was such an attractive economic opportunity for many regions. The administrator, who asked to remain anonymous, paused thoughtfully before replying:

*Well, you get people that come from out of state, they open their wallet, they leave all their money here, and then they go home. They’re not part of the tax burden, their kids aren’t going to the school systems, their stuff isn’t going into the septic systems, but they’re leaving their money here.*

In other words, heritage tourism can be a real-life example of the benefits of new regionalism. In an era of scarce resources, tourism can offer a new chance for struggling communities to begin revitalizing themselves. By attracting

travelers from other regions, communities can gain revenue from increased visitation without having to pay the costs of an expanded population. In many cases then, heritage tourism is a zero-sum game played out along spatial lines; the more a region functions as a team, the better it can compete in the race to attract visitors.

As the 1990s progressed, many communities would start to embrace this idea of enhanced economic competitiveness through regional cooperation. During the 1980s, regional heritage planning had been limited in scope and focused almost exclusively upon industrial areas. Now, however, the demand for these new “thematic parks” would begin to sweep across the country. Of these new parks, many were designated at the state or local levels.\textsuperscript{117} However, the largest and most desirable designations were still those at the national level, an exclusive domain of the National Heritage Area program.\textsuperscript{118}

Of these regions attempting to gain national designation, only a few were industrial areas with clearly defined regional histories like the I&M Canal. Others were more rural in nature and therefore did not share the same legacies as the first four heritage areas.\textsuperscript{119} Most intriguing, however, were the group of applicants with no regional identity at all; these communities wished to gain the benefits of

\textsuperscript{117} An example of a state-level heritage area program can be found in “Explore the past; look into the future in state heritage areas,” \textit{NY State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation}. 8 August 2008. Web. 25 February 2011.

\textsuperscript{118} Katie Durcan, Op. Cit.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
regional organization and heritage tourism, but did not have a coherent theme with which to market themselves. As a group of towns in eastern Connecticut would soon prove, however, this deficiency in regional identity was no barrier to designation. When faced with a distinct lack of existing historical narratives, the solution was simple: just *create* one.
Chapter 4: The Greatest Story Never Told

The Remarkable Tale of The Last Green Valley

“\textit{I can't imagine a nicer place to get lost in, or to fall off the map while springtime emerges all around. A string of lovely little towns hung together like cool New England pearls, the Last Green Valley is paradise on Earth...and not a mall in sight.}”

- Annie Graves (Yankee Magazine)

Tucked quietly among the green, rolling hills of eastern Connecticut and South-Central Massachusetts lays one of the most successful federal programs in recent memory (Appendix, Figure 5). Formally known as the Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor (QSNRVHC), the region is more commonly identified by its friendlier and less imposing nickname: “The Last Green Valley of New England.”\textsuperscript{120}

For almost any other place, such a grandiose title might come across as overdramatic or cliché, but for the Last Green Valley (LGV), the name seems oddly appropriate. Indeed, upon visiting the corridor’s official website, one cannot help but be impressed by the breathtaking array of photos displayed there. From grassy meadows to freshly tilled hay fields and fog-shrouded forests, these photos invoke a powerful sense of pastoral nostalgia in the viewer, an effect made all the more poignant by a satellite image displayed on the website’s main page.

Taken at night, the photo shows the entire Northeastern Seaboard as one continuous chain of artificial light, unbroken except for a tiny island of darkness in eastern Connecticut; an island of unspoiled beauty within a sea of encroaching modernity (Appendix, Figure 6).

To a traveler on the ground, the effect of entering the Last Green Valley is just as impressive. After the noisy cities and exhaust-choked interstates of Southern New England, the so-called “quiet corner” of Connecticut is a welcome relief. Even the people there seem more easygoing and community-oriented than their neighbors to the west, a stereotype that they are more than happy to perpetuate. Every year, this community spirit is put on proud display during the popular “Walktober” festival, an event which draws upwards of 20,000 people from both within and beyond regional borders. There are nature walks, canoe expeditions, hay rides, food tasting, and dozens of walking tours of famous landmarks. There are paintings, brochures, and even a “Last Green Valley anthem”; a folksy ballad that sounds as if it was written at least a hundred years ago. In fact, the whole region itself feels like some sort of anachronism, a throwback to a time when places had meaning and people had roots.

If all this doesn’t sound familiar, it should. In offering a place for weary travelers to escape from the trappings of modernity, the Last Green Valley is an example of cultural heritage tourism at its finest. However, far from being a relic


122 Bill Reid, Director of External Affairs, LGV Inc. Telephone Interview, 3 April 2009.
of the past, the LGV (a name which wasn’t coined until 1993) is a symbol of the future. Before designation as a heritage corridor, the towns of eastern Connecticut and southern Massachusetts had little sense of shared history. In fact, rather than reflect a common heritage, the corridor was established to create one, primarily as a means of achieving economic stability. Initiated in 1994, the Last Green Valley marked the beginning of a new era in heritage area planning; an era where reality was no obstacle to the formation of image. More than anything, the Last Green Valley showed that, with a lot of planning and a little imagination, there was literally no limit to what a group of hard-working towns could achieve.

**The Rust Belt Comes to Connecticut**

For most Americans, the end of the Cold War was cause for celebration, but for workers in the defense industry, it was a sign that their jobs might soon be in jeopardy. During the Reagan administration, military spending had escalated at a rapid rate, creating opportunities for manufacturers of weapons, armored vehicles, and surveillance systems. Eastern Connecticut, in particular, had benefitted greatly during this period, where it was estimated that one out of every three jobs was directly dependent on the defense industry. Now, in the wake of proposed budget cuts by George Bush Sr., Connecticut was destined to experience

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a major slowdown in its economy. Among those aware of the impending crisis, perhaps none were more nervous than eastern Connecticut’s lone representative in Congress, four-term Democrat Sam Gejdenson.

Several years earlier, during the Republican tidal wave of 1984, Gejdenson had been labeled as an opponent of Connecticut’s defense industry, an accusation which had nearly cost him the election. Now, with the prospects of new economic discontent on the horizon, Gejdenson was determined not to be caught off guard once again. Together with Senator Joe Lieberman, he organized a congressional hearing on the economic future of Connecticut, a hearing which concluded that job losses in the manufacturing sector were unavoidable. In order to prosper, Connecticut would need to diversify and find new areas for potential growth. Luckily for Gejdenson, there was one sector of the economy that was showing surprising strength, and it was there that he focused his efforts as the next election approached.

**Build it and they will Come: Connecticut Tourism in the post-Cold War era**

Throughout most of the 20th century, eastern Connecticut was an afterthought in the minds of New England tourists. Those seeking culture and

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history went to Boston or Newport and those seeking natural beauty went to the White Mountains or the Maine coast. Eastern Connecticut was written off as New England’s “quiet corner,” a reputation which tended to dissuade potential visitors.\textsuperscript{127} In the late 1980s, however, things began to change. An increasing number of travelers, many of them early cultural heritage tourists, began to “discover” the attractions of rural Connecticut. Unlike the more well-known areas of New England, eastern Connecticut hadn’t been overrun by tourists and commercial industries. Savvy travelers, always searching for the next big “off the beaten path” destination, saw rural Connecticut as the perfect place to shop, hike, or just relax. In many ways, the region’s lack of major attractions was is biggest attraction.\textsuperscript{128}

Representative Gejdenson was among the first to notice this trend. “Tourism is the one segment of the economy in eastern Connecticut that is growing,” he would later explain in front of Congress, “in part because we offer the New England atmosphere which so many hope to experience but which is increasingly difficult to find.”\textsuperscript{129} The question was: How could eastern Connecticut turn this modest trickle of tourism into a steady flow of revenue?

\textsuperscript{127} Bill Reid, Op. Cit.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.

Gejdenson’s original answer was simple, and in April of 1988, he took his case to the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. Connecticut, he explained, had the lowest proportion of publicly owned land in America. If the federal government would simply assist the state in creating a new system of parks and recreation areas, Connecticut could vastly improve the quality of life of its citizens while also attracting new visitors. The National Park Service, however, was not convinced. According to the organization’s regional director, federal management of open lands would be “counterproductive and costly to the taxpayer.” Connecticut would need to find a different way forward.

It is unclear from the record exactly when Gejdenson arrived at his decision to turn eastern Connecticut into a heritage corridor. The Blackstone River Valley Corridor, situated directly east of Gejdenson’s own district, was a likely source of inspiration. So too was the I&M Canal Corridor, which Gejdenson had voted for during his second term in office. Either way, by the spring of 1989, Gejdenson’s plans were set, and unlike past heritage corridor proposals, this time the private sector lent its immediate support. A heritage corridor, they agreed, was the perfect opportunity for isolated towns to begin working together towards common goals. “Alone, we lack the resources to produce a coherent plan,” testified John D. Boland, chairman of the advisory committee established to investigate the matter, “in partnership with one another,

However, our strength is multiplied.”\(^{131}\) In fact, the plan seemed so good that it was easy to overlook its one glaring weakness; in order to have a heritage area, one first needed to have a heritage.

**Breaking the Mold: An Odd Fit for a Heritage Corridor**

During a phone call with Bill Reid, the Director of External Affairs for the Last Green Valley Inc., I asked him if the towns of eastern Connecticut had shared any sense of regional identity before their incorporation as a National Heritage Area. After two or three seconds of thoughtful silence, he slowly replied, “Well…no, not really.”

Indeed, at the time of Gejdenson’s proposal, Connecticut was arguably the least regionalized state in the nation. By 1960, it had abolished all forms of county government, joining Rhode Island as the only state without functioning regional jurisdictions.\(^{132}\) Each township was largely self-sufficient, a reflection of that old “Yankee spirit of independence” so cherished by New Englanders. As for heritage, it was difficult to find one narrative that all towns could agree on. Some traced their history back to the early mill settlements, while others identified with a more agricultural past. Even the demography was split; many towns were still largely blue collar, while others had experienced a recent influx of wealthy

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urbanites from out of state.\textsuperscript{133} In short, it would have been difficult to find a group of towns less suited to take on the challenges of becoming a heritage corridor.

Another potential problem arose from the currently accepted definition of what a heritage corridor could be. Although there were no written guidelines, all previous corridors had been heavily industrialized, with high rates of unemployment. Eastern Connecticut, while certainly a hub for military manufacturing, was over 70% forested, with unemployment rates well below 10\%.\textsuperscript{134} Thus, unlike past heritage corridors, which simply had been trying to stop the economic bleeding, Connecticut was trying to jumpstart its economy before things went downhill. Rather than try and save manufacturing jobs, Connecticut was hoping to circumvent deindustrialization altogether by focusing its efforts on an entirely new sector of the economy. In this sense, heritage tourism more than just a means to achieve a larger end; it was an end.

As the plan for the new heritage corridor began to take shape, its backers were faced with a difficult situation. In order to receive designation, they would have to create a sense of shared regional identity where none had existed before, and, with no similar corridors to act as a blueprint, they would essentially have to do it in a vacuum.

\textbf{The Last Green Valley: Building the Legend}

\textsuperscript{133} Richard Madden, Op. Cit.

\textsuperscript{134} Bill Reid, Op. Cit.
On the Last Green Valley's website, there is an official statement of distinction which outlines the region’s case for national significance. Residents of the Quinebaug and Shetucket River Valley (QSRV), it argues, had always known that they lived in a special place; they just had a hard time explaining why.

Indeed, between 1989 and 1993, the QSRV seemed to embody a different historical narrative every week. At first, the corridor’s supporters emphasized the region’s old mills and factories, which they claimed had helped unleash a new age of American industrialization. Unfortunately, this message was uncomfortably close to that of the neighboring Blackstone Corridor, which billed itself as the “Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution.” Unwilling to engage in such a costly “brand war,” the QSRV decided to develop a more generalized theme, calling itself “The transition area from ‘Puritan’ ideology to ‘Yankee’ ideology.” Unsurprisingly, very few people understood what this actually meant, and in April of 1993, the National Park Service stepped in to set things straight. Distressed by the region’s lack of a coherent narrative, it filed a report stating, “The historic, natural, and recreation resources make the QSRV distinct from other parts of Connecticut, but do not reflect national significance.”


136 Ibid., 84.
137 Ibid., 92.
clear that, in order to gain authorization, the valley would need a much more compelling story.

Not long after the disappointing NPS report, a breakthrough came in the form of a 17-year-old document discovered deep within the state archives. Back in 1976, a commission called the Eastern Connecticut Resource Conservation and Development Project had conducted a land survey of southern New England. In their analysis of the data, they had briefly noted that the area between the Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers was much less developed than the surrounding territory. In many ways, they noted, the area represented a kind of “last green valley within the Megalopolis.” Nearly two decades later, QSRVNHC Inc., the main interest group in favor of the corridor, stumbled across the old document while searching the state records for information. After years of indecisiveness, the group finally had found the theme it was looking for.

The name, they agreed, was perfect. In just four words, it captured everything that had made the region attractive to heritage tourists in the first place. It implied authenticity. Green valleys were places of natural beauty, untouched by the corrupting forces of modernism. It also implied uniqueness. As “the last” of its kind, visitors were assured that they wouldn’t be able to find a similar experience anywhere else. More than anything, however, the name implied vulnerability; a sense of being under siege from outside forces beyond the

region’s control. For all those hoping to catch a glimpse of unspoiled New England, the name offered a kind of ultimatum: come quickly, or risk missing everything.

The brilliance of the plan was in its flexibility. Rather than define itself by what it was, as previous corridors had, the Last Green Valley was defined by what it wasn’t. It wasn’t modernized or commercialized, and that’s what made it special. What is did stand for was left up to the individual towns themselves. Whether the towns chose to emphasize history or nature, mills or farms, it didn’t matter. As long as what they emphasized fell under the banner of “authentic New England,” the theme would remain intact. In this way, the diversity of the region was not a hindrance but an asset. With just one name, the Last Green Valley had finally forged an identity, and it was a formidable one.

A New Breed of Heritage Corridor

It did not take long for the new theme to catch on among the valley’s residents. Spurred on by the publicity efforts of a new interest group, the Last Green Valley Inc., more than 4,000 residents turned out over Columbus Day weekend in 1993 to celebrate the region’s heritage.139 During the next 12 months, private citizens and public officials came together to produce brochures, visitor’s guides, and press releases for local newspapers. In just one year, volunteers logged more than 10,000 hours of service and more than 7,000 people took part in

the valley’s regional education programs. By the time the corridor bill reached Congress in the fall of 1994, the Last Green Valley movement had been transformed into a vibrant grassroots effort, unsurpassed by anything in New England.

On November 2, just five days before the midterm elections, the QSRVNHC was designated by Congress. The vote was unanimous. Five years later, the valley was expanded to include nine towns in South-Central Massachusetts, bringing the total area to just under 1100 square miles. Today, the Last Green Valley stands as one of the most successful land use programs in the country, recently announcing its intentions to become entirely self-sufficient by 2015, a first among heritage areas. Situated less than 90 minutes from Boston and New York, it has become a magnet for heritage tourists, raking in an estimated $89 million over 15 years, compared to just $4.8 million spent by federal sources. More importantly, the Last Green Valley has developed into a distinct cultural region, something it never could have claimed just 20 years earlier.

Through its designation, the Last Green Valley opened up a whole new realm of possibilities for the heritage area movement. Prospective regions no

140 Bill Reid, Op. Cit.
143 Ibid.
longer had to be industrial wastelands with clearly defined histories in order to receive the benefits of heritage tourism. Rather, all a region needed was a compelling story and a strong grassroots movement to tell it. In this sense, it didn’t matter if the story was largely made up or opportunistic; in the race to attract heritage tourists, image was often more important than reality.
Chapter 5: Turning Ideas into Actions

Are Heritage Areas Really Profitable?

“If you want to understand democracy, spend less time in the library with Plato, and more time in the buses with people.” - Simeon Strunsky

In attempting to gauge the profitability of the heritage area program, empirical data is decidedly difficult to come by. One survey, conducted in 2001 by the Pathways of Progress Heritage Corridor in Pennsylvania, concluded that designation was responsible for the creation of 337 jobs and $18 million in annual revenue.\textsuperscript{144} Another study, commissioned by the Essex National Heritage Area in Massachusetts, showed an even larger impact: 3,500 annual jobs and $130 million in tourist spending.\textsuperscript{145} Finally, a statistical analysis by Michigan State University estimated that heritage areas had attracted 32 million total visitors, generated 3,000 public-private partnerships, and netted 167,000 hours of volunteer service during the fiscal year of 2003.\textsuperscript{146}


Of course, with the exception of the MSU study, all of these quantitative analyses were conducted by organizations affiliated with heritage area programs. Therefore, because of the strong potential for bias, these results should be taken with a grain of salt.

However, despite this lack of reliable empirical evidence, it can be fairly stated that, during the 1990s, there was a marked increase in the perceived profitability of heritage areas. Before the Last Green Valley, only four regions had been designated in 10 years. After the success of the LGV, however, there were 19 designations in just six years. In fact, the flow of applications was so fast that Congress found itself unable to deal with them on a case by case basis. Instead, it was forced to combine several of the proposals into larger omnibus spending bills and pass them all at once. Clearly, something quite significant was driving this spike in national interest.

A Quick Break from Theory

Over the past few chapters, I have argued that the heritage area program was a logical response to newfound concerns over regional identity. These concerns, I believe, were driven largely by the forces of economic decline, geographical competition, new regionalism, and later, heritage tourism. Up until this point, my claims have been largely academic in nature, relying upon books, journal articles, and the occasional telephone conversation with park officials.

However, in January of 2011, I received an opportunity to attend an actual planning and strategy session for the Freedom’s Way National Heritage Area in New Hampshire. In doing so, I feel I was able to gain a degree of valuable first-hand insight into why the heritage area movement had grown so popular.

**Freedom’s Way: The Anatomy of a Heritage Area**

When I walked into the meeting room, I was struck by how ordinary everything seemed. Here, in a tiny conference room in Milford City Hall, were seven men and women, sitting around a table so cramped that their arms and legs were nearly touching. As I took a seat, they introduced themselves as Freedom’s Way Inc., and then told me why they had arranged the meeting. Two years earlier, Freedom’s Way had achieved designation as a heritage corridor, stretching all the way from Concord, Massachusetts, to Southern New Hampshire. Now, in 2011, Freedom’s Way Inc. was working on formulating a management plan, which was due to the Secretary of the Interior in March of 2012. In order to complete this management plan, each town would need to conduct a formal resource inventory, explaining its cultural significance within the context of the larger region. At the time of the meeting, however, the process was running behind schedule, and Freedom’s Way Inc. was searching for ways to speed things up. After introducing myself, I sat back and listened to the committee deliberate.

Almost immediately, the conversation turned to money. Apparently, Freedom’s Inc. was running low on funds and could no longer hire the
professionals needed to conduct each town’s resource inventory. Instead, it would have to rely on volunteer assistance, primarily from local historical societies. However, many of these historical societies had been reluctant to take on the extra work, and Freedom’s Way needed a way to get them excited about the heritage area concept. After discussing the problem, Peter, a local historical society member, offered his own opinion.

“We need to sell this thing as something where everyone can benefit,” he said, “When people come to visit, they need to buy gas, they need to buy groceries…there’s revenue in this for everyone.” Richard, a local bookstore owner, nodded in agreement. “There’s nothing but gain in this for them,” he exclaimed, “This is the type of program that cuts to the bones of economic development…the more people know about their community, the more they take care of it and value it.”

At this point, the group narrowed its focus to the town of Hollis, New Hampshire, a town that was ready for the next step in the planning process. Freedom’s Way wanted to help Hollis promote its resource inventory, but in order to do that, it would need a source of revenue. After a few minutes, the idea of a travel brochure began to emerge. Inside, it would offer a map of Hollis’ historic and cultural landmarks, along with a walking route for potential tourists to follow. “This is the kind of tourism I’m looking for; self-guided,” said May, a chamber of commerce official, “It’s interactive. They can go out with the kids and walk, and come back any time they want.” After printing the brochure, the revenue would
come by selling ad space to local businesses. Instead of actual ads, however, each business would pay to have its name and location highlighted in the historical map. “That way,” May explained, “we can advertise without really advertising.”

Before this idea could be approved, however, Peter stepped in once again. “I think Hollis might want to have a say in this,” he argued, “We need to find a mover and shaker within the town. We can’t do this from the outside; it is a regional effort.” Celeste, treasurer of the Milford Historical Society, voiced her agreement. “Yes, we need to eradicate these imaginary lines and start working together.”

Eventually, the group settled on a compromise. It would help to organize a steering committee of six Hollis residents, which would work alongside six members of Freedom’s Way Inc. By forming a partnership, the planners hoped to secure the right mix of professional experience and local enthusiasm needed to produce a successful brochure. According to Richard, this kind of regional cooperation was the wave of the future. “There is a national force afoot,” he said, “and we just need to find a way to ride it.”

As the meeting drew to a close, I knew I had witnessed an extraordinary display of heritage area planning in action. In just 90 minutes, the members of Freedom’s Way Inc. had expressed many of the same thoughts and ideas I had been reading about for months. However, this time, those ideas had been expressed right in front of me, by real people with identifiable names and faces.
According to these men and women, the heritage area program was indeed an important mechanism for attracting tourism dollars. However, more than this, it was seen as a catalyst for community partnerships and a wide variety of coordinated activities at the local level. In a world where regional cooperation was an economic necessity, these planners saw heritage areas as a chance to begin breaking down artificial barriers and working together as a cohesive unit.

Before the meeting ended, I expressed this viewpoint to the members still in attendance and asked them if they agreed with it. Peter, always quick to offer his opinion, provided an immediate answer. “Normally, I can’t even get 12 people to come to one of my meetings at the Brookline Historical Society,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, “but if we have a network in place, then we can start to get people excited. Essentially what this whole thing is is a funnel. It is there to help us do what we want, whatever that is.”

A Closer Look

With nearly 50 designations, no two heritage areas are the same, and it would be a mistake to assume that all of them are profitable. Furthermore, due to the lack of unbiased empirical data, the link between regional cooperation and increased economic competitiveness is difficult to quantify. However, for the activists in Illinois, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, there was no doubt that these regions represented an opportunity to begin thinking as a team. By scaling up and forming inter-jurisdictional partnerships, these communities felt that
heritage areas could allow them to revitalize their economies and stimulate interest, both among residents and among tourists. Thus, to these places and many others across the country, the heritage area program was a decidedly good thing.

However, a closer look at the program reveals some serious flaws. For one, as it grew more popular, it would become increasingly political in nature. Rather than reflect true national significance, designation was more often the result of vote trading or patriotic posturing. Furthermore, because of the haphazard and inconsistent criteria for designation, heritage areas would become easy to get, difficult to regulate, and almost impossible to get rid of. As the program grew ever more crowded, many people began to wonder: just where would it end?
Chapter 6: I Can’t Believe It’s Not Bacon!
The Political Implications Behind Heritage Area Designation

“Oh, I don't blame Congress. If I had $600 billion at my disposal, I'd be irresponsible, too.” - Lichty and Wagner

Inside the train car, Senator Ted Kennedy sat facing a small group of reporters, a bright smile etched upon his face. “Have you ever heard,” he asked jovially, pointing across the room to Congressmen Richard Neil and Peter Blute of Massachusetts, “A Republican say nicer things about a Democrat, or a Democrat say nicer things about a Republican?”148 Some of the reporters shook their heads in agreement. It was October of 1996, just three weeks before Election Day, and the bitter tones of partisanship were already evident across the country. Here in this train car, however, the unmistakable feelings of bipartisanship felt like a breath of fresh air to everyone on board.

Just the previous week, a bill had passed through Congress reauthorizing the Blackstone River Valley Heritage Corridor while also expanding its borders into southern Massachusetts. The bill’s passage had been in jeopardy until the final moments, and it had taken the full cooperation of democrats and republicans to pull off the legislative victory. As a “thank you” gesture, private backers of the bill had staged a celebratory train ride from Worcester, Massachusetts to

Woonsocket, Rhode Island, at which point the two state delegations would meet in a triumphant show of unity.  

As the train reached its destination, an excited throng of politicians and activists gathered around the platform to greet their guests from Massachusetts. First among them was Senator John Chaffee, an early and influential supporter of the original corridor plan. As he strode up to the train car, Chaffee gazed out at the sea of smiling faces and issued a mock groan of disappointment. Speaking just loud enough for reporters to hear, he grinned wryly, saying "Just my luck for all this to be happening when I am not running for reelection."  

Although it was a lighthearted remark, Chaffee’s comment nevertheless revealed an important force behind the newly ascendant heritage area movement. As the perceived profitability of these areas became evident, more and more politicians saw them as an opportunity for political patronage. With a little persuasion here and a little compromise there, savvy politicians found themselves able to direct funds towards their districts at little to no political cost. While some legislators criticized this practice of “pork barrel” spending, many of them changed their minds when it came time for them to receive their own designations. After all, one congressman’s pork is another’s bacon.  

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149 Ibid.  

Scratch my Back and I’ll Scratch Yours: The Art of Political Log Rolling

By the 1990s, heritage areas had become a hot commodity on the political market, and the number of new designations rose accordingly. However, at first glance, this dramatic rise seemed counterintuitive. While certainly profitable, the effects of heritage areas tended to be localized and only felt by a handful of districts. Why on earth, then, would a representative from outside of a proposed heritage area vote to support one? With no possible benefit to one’s own district, why waste taxpayer money on such an obvious example of pork barrel spending?

The answer, it turns out, is actually quite simple. When representative A introduces a bill to obtain funding for his or her district, the bill’s passage represents a huge net gain for A but only a minor net loss for everyone else. Oftentimes, another representative, B, will agree to suffer this small loss and vote for the bill anyway. However, in doing so, B is not acting irrationally. Instead, by supporting the bill, he has essentially earned himself an “IOU” from A, the value of which far exceeds the price that B paid to get it. At some future date, when B needs support for a bill of his own, he may redeem this IOU in exchange a crucial vote. Thus, in this way, both sides end up getting what they want.\textsuperscript{151}

This strategy of give and take is known as “political log rolling.” Through its actions, pet spending projects, many of which would never pass on their own, can end up becoming law. Because of this, log rolling has become an increasingly

indispensable part of the legislative process,\textsuperscript{152} and, during the 1990s, it would serve as an essential tactic in the drive to establish new heritage areas.

In 1996, Congress created an omnibus bill combining the proposals of 12 different heritage areas.\textsuperscript{153} With so many regions slated to receive designation, the bill could count on the support representatives from across the eastern seaboard. However, representatives from west of the Mississippi were not so easily convinced. Heritage areas had not yet caught on in the Western U.S., a region still dominated by national parks, and many western legislators were still dismissive of the entire concept.\textsuperscript{154}

Thus, shortly before the bill came to a vote, one of western legislator, Senator Frank Murkowski of Alaska, decided to throw a wrench into the entire process. Using his position as Chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Murkowski refused to let the bill come to the floor. Stating his opposition to the project, Murkowski nevertheless hinted that his support might be attainable; all Congress had to do was agree to a controversial provision that would allow commercial logging in Alaska’s Tongass National Forest. With Election Day fast approaching, a small group of eastern legislators reluctantly

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 49.


agreed to a side deal with Murkowski, thus ensuring the bill’s passage. Log rolling, quite literally, had saved the day.

An even more intriguing incident occurred in 1999 when the Last Green Valley was attempting to expand into Massachusetts, and to everyone’s surprise, Senator John McCain of Arizona went out of his way to endorse the plan. Just two years earlier, McCain had castigated the heritage area program as wasteful spending, but now he spoke out as one of its biggest supporters. The difference was that, this time, McCain had a heritage area of his own to endorse. The Yuma Crossing Heritage Area was due up for designation the following year and McCain wanted to build up as much good will as possible. Additionally, he had recently made the decision to run for president, a decision that would require support from key allies in the New England region.

Acknowledging this fact, McCain jokingly asked that the corridor be expanded into New Hampshire, the first state to vote in the presidential primaries. “While we are moving,” quipped Joe Lieberman, who was also running for president and trying to attract support in the South, “why don’t we expand it into

155 “Senate to Vote Today on Omnibus National Parks Bill; Massachusetts Park Measures at Stake as Senate Considers Controversial Murkowski Rider,” Op. Cit.


South Carolina as well?" As the Senate chamber filled with raucous laughter, it became clear that, in the great legislative cog of Washington, a little elbow grease always comes in handy.

**Park Barrel Spending: A Bridge Too Far**

Despite the success of the legislative compromises, the heritage area program soon found itself under attack from a variety of government watchdog groups. These groups, many of them aligned with the anti-bureaucratic "Sagebrush Rebellion" in the west, ridiculed what they saw as an outrageous waste of taxpayer funds. Eventually, these complaints from the private sector began to spill over into the halls of Congress, leading one Republican representative from Missouri to angrily declare that “Private property owners in this country are tired of dealing with government bureaucrats who attempt to classify mud puddles as wetlands and give kangaroo rats equal footing with the human species.”

Indeed, by the late 1990s, a movement that had begun with relatively little opposition now found itself the target of an increasing array of partisan attacks. As the new millennium approached, many observers began to wonder if the

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158 Ibid., 7.


heritage area project would end up collapsing under its own weight. In 2001, however, these questions were put on indefinite hold after the horrific attacks of September 11th forever changed the way that Americans thought about themselves and their surroundings.

As American As Apple Pie: Heritage Areas in the Post 9/11 World

Any American old enough to remember the events of 9/11 will certainly recall the intense feelings of patriotism and pride that swept the country in its aftermath. Old scores were forgotten, internal conflicts were put on hold, and partisan divides were temporarily obscured. The drive to come together around a common set of values was overwhelming, and everywhere, people sought to define just what it was that made them American.161

Unsurprisingly, this drive to rediscover the roots of American identity played right into the hands of the National Heritage Area movement. Tourists, dismayed by the threat of additional hijackings, turned away from distant and exotic locales in favor of more intimate settings, preferring instead to visit places of local or regional importance.162 The heritage tourism industry, already enjoying spectacular growth, reached a whole new level of desirability. Indeed, by the


summer of 2003, heritage areas across the country were reporting record levels of visitation, a surge which many attributed to the recent attacks.¹⁶³

Meanwhile, as visitation rates increased, political opposition from conservative groups suddenly vanished. Attacking symbols of American heritage after 9/11, they realized, would be akin to political suicide. Cognizant of this fact, new heritage areas began to embrace their status as American symbols, adopting titles like “Freedom’s Way,” “Freedom’s Frontier,” and “Journey Through Hallowed Ground.”¹⁶⁴ Essentially, by playing up the theme of nationalism, they were rendering themselves immune from potential criticism.

Thus, by the beginning of the 21st century, the heritage area movement had found itself increasingly enmeshed in the messy world of politics. For many regions, the path to designation lay, not in improving the credibility of their theme, but rather in gaining the support of as many senators and representatives as possible. Essentially, support from the National Park Service was seen as a prize, and the regions that could lobby and organize most effectively were those most likely to win it. In this sense then, the emerging competition between regions was not only economic, but political as well.

Up until the present day, however, this competition for heritage area designations was not viewed as a zero-sum game. Indeed, with 49 bills and 49

¹⁶³ Dan Rowe, Op. Cit.

votes of passage,\textsuperscript{165} there certainly seemed to be enough room in the program for everybody. However, in recent years, there has emerged the ever-growing threat of overexpansion. With no clearly defined criteria for what constitutes national significance, virtually any region can become a heritage area. Furthermore, with no enforceable means of cutting funding, a region, once designated, remains on the federal payrolls indefinitely. Thus, unless things change from their current path, the heritage area program will soon run out of money, and if it does, the regions slowest on their feet will be left with nothing.

\textsuperscript{165} Katie Durcan, Op. Cit.
Chapter 7: No More Room at the Inn
The Coming Crisis in the Heritage Area Movement

“When everyone is special, no one is.” - The Incredibles

In October of 2010, I spoke with Heather Scotten, assistant coordinator for the National Park Service’s heritage area program. After a few minutes of conversation, I asked her if the program was in danger of outgrowing the relatively limited amount of funds set aside to support it. “I think that’s a great question,” she replied candidly, “and it’s something that we’re really struggling with as a program.” In her opinion, the popularity of the heritage area movement was incommensurate with its financial support, and barring a change in the designation process, the National Park Service would be unable to keep up.

The following week, I spoke to the other assistant coordinator, Katie Durcan, and received a similar response. “Our biggest challenge,” she said, “is our own success. Just since 2006, our program has doubled in size, but the funding has remained the same. The math just doesn’t add up. We have 49 areas, each trying to reach the million dollar funding cap, and we only have a $17 million budget…….17 divided by 49? Well, you get the picture.”

Clearly, among those closest to the program, there is a growing concern that the heritage area movement is unsustainable. This unsustainability, however, goes far beyond simple concerns of funding and resources. Rather, the problem is systemic; from the moment a region applies for designation to the moment it is
scheduled to stop receiving funding, the entire process is awash in subjectivity, irregularity, and above all, inconsistency.

The Slippery Slope of National Significance

In 1994, a group of congressmen introduced a bill that would establish criteria for the designation of new National Heritage Areas. One such requirement was a clearly-worded definition of the term “national significance,” which until then, had been left up to each individual region to define on its own terms. The problem with this, according to the bill’s sponsors, was that the process was entirely subjective. In the words of Representative John Duncan, “Why, you can come up with a historical reason to designate just about any place in the country.” With more than 800,000 buildings, objects, and structures listed on the National Register of Historical Places, there was literally no limit to what a region could use to justify its significance. Because of this, the designation process was necessarily dependent upon political factors rather than historical ones, a situation which the backers of the bill found unacceptable.

Although this drive to establish a consistent designation process was supported by the park service, it would nevertheless fail to be approved by


Congress. Over the next 17 years, no less than eight different bills would be introduced to remedy the situation, and not a single one would pass.\textsuperscript{169} This gridlock was encouraged by many leaders of the heritage area movement, who feared that a standardized designation process would hamper the efforts of a program defined by its creativity and diversity.\textsuperscript{170}

For supporters of the standardized approach, however, these protestations from heritage areas were nothing short of ridiculous, and in 2003, Senator Craig Thomas of Wyoming decided to take his concerns to the Senate floor. Addressing Kathryn Higgins, Vice President of Public Policy for The National Trust for Historic Preservation, he asked her if the entire designation process was not just a thinly veiled excuse to stimulate economic development. When she replied that designation was more about partnership and local activity, Thomas responded, “Well, do you not suppose that there are more than 40 little towns across the United States that could use some main street activity? If there is going to be no criteria, then why can’t I sign up for a few [heritage areas] in Wyoming?”\textsuperscript{171} For Thomas and others, there seemed little reason why some areas should be deemed “significant” enough to receive federal help while others should not.

\textsuperscript{169} Katie Durcan, Op. Cit.


A Backwards Process

In addition to defining national significance, each heritage area is required to submit a management plan to the Secretary of the Interior outlining its overall theme and administrative structure. However, rather than submit it before designation, each region’s management plan is not due until three years after its initial establishment. Thus, when Congress votes on a proposal, it often has little idea about how a given region actually will be operated. With few details to criticize, opposition is frequently limited, and among all 49 heritage area proposals introduced to Congress, not a single one has ever been voted down.

For many critics, this process of “planning after designation” was decidedly inefficient. Rather than allowing regions to justify their existence after the fact, they argued that heritage areas should be forced to make their purpose clear right from the start. However, despite these objections, the heritage area designation process would remain unchanged.

A Never-ending Commitment

In their enabling legislation, most heritage areas are designated with so-called “sunset provisions.” Essentially, these provisions authorize funding for a certain period of time, usually 10 to 15 years, after which the region is expected to


stop relying upon federal money and support itself. However, although many heritage areas are more than 15 years old, no sunset measures have ever been invoked.\footnote{Heather Scotten, Op. Cit.} Rather, when regions reach their funding limit, they almost always apply for reauthorization in order to gain another 10 to 15 years of federal support. One heritage area, the Illinois and Michigan Canal, has even been re-authorized twice. In most cases then, these supposed deadlines are largely meaningless, and what begins as a temporary means of assistance can often turn into a never-ending commitment.

However, while demands for funds have been steadily increasing, actual assistance has not. Between 2004 and 2010, the heritage area program received an average annual budget of approximately $15 million.\footnote{Ibid.} On February 11, 2011, however, President Obama called for a 50\% reduction in heritage area spending in response to growing concerns over the federal budget deficit.\footnote{“NPS FY 2012 Budget at a Glance,” National Park Service. 14 February 2011. Web. 2 April 2011.} With the NPS already suffering severe losses, the administration hoped to free up more funding for the country’s national parks, and to do this, other efforts such as the National Heritage Area program would have to be de-prioritized. As of April 2011, no decision has been made by Congress, but even if Obama’s cuts are rejected, it seems only a matter of time until the heritage area program feels the effects of an increasingly tough fiscal climate.
Looking Forward: Future Problems for the Heritage Area Program

For nearly 30 years, the heritage area program has managed to survive with a haphazard, shoestring approach to the designation process. When resources were abundant, this subjective and inconsistent model often was ignored, largely because every proposal that came to a vote succeeded in achieving designation. With a 100% success rate, few regions had any inclination to register complaints. However, with a shrinking base of resources, the heritage area program will almost certainly be forced into making some difficult decisions. If, at some future point, the park service feels the need to begin supporting some regions and not others, then suddenly, the inconsistent and political nature of the program will begin to become more problematic. In essence, the federal government would be supporting geographical regions simply because of their superior lobbying and organizational skills, a situation which would call into question some of the very basic tenets of new regionalist development.
Conclusion: The Never-ending Struggle

“Don’t hate the player, hate the game.” – Unknown

With its emphasis on celebrating cultural identity, the heritage area program obscures what is, in reality, a much larger struggle to attain the benefits of regional cooperation. By using heritage as a rallying point for a wide variety of grassroots activities, many communities feel that they can build the vast networks of social capital needed to survive in an increasingly austere economic climate. In this sense then, heritage area designation often serves as an important spark. With the legitimizing support of the National Park Service, local communities can begin to leverage their vague feelings of shared identity into more tangible economic results.

As with any new fad, however, latecomers often are excluded. With increasing demand for funding and a finite supply of resources, the heritage area program is nearing a point where it will no longer be able to accept new designations. At this point, the federal government will find itself supporting some regions in their quest to achieve geographical competitiveness while leaving others behind. Furthermore, these regions will be receiving support, not because of their historical worthiness, but rather because of their ability to recognize economic trends and act on them more quickly than their neighbors. Thus, in many ways, the heritage area program is simply an extension of the competitive new federalist ethic that emerged more than thirty years ago.
Of course, in looking at heritage areas, it is easy to criticize them as inherently unfair or objectionable. However, in a larger sense, it is difficult to blame these communities for wanting to ensure their economic survival. In a world where public-private partnerships and regional coordination are essential, one region’s gain is often another region’s loss, and places that fail to adapt are likely to get left behind.

Thus, in the end, any unfairness must not be blamed upon individual regions or even upon the heritage area program as a whole, but rather upon the basic realities of resource apportionment. For as long as governments have existed, they have always had the unenviable task of distributing a finite amount of wealth to a virtually endless amount of interests. The only difference is that, today, these interests are being defined less by ideology and class, and more by geography. Certainly, in looking at the heritage area movement, it is legitimate to criticize the disingenuous and misleading manner in which it has been carried out. However, in the grand scheme of things, heritage areas are just one possible solution to a struggle as old as civilization itself.

After all, though the rules may have changed, the game remains the same.
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APPENDIX

Figure 1: National Heritage Area designations through 2006. Regions are numbered chronologically by date of designation. Note the high density of NHAs east of the Mississippi River, especially in the urbanized Northeastern corridor.

Source: http://www.naturalclimatechange.us/GlobalGreenDictatorship.html

Figure 2: Total number of NHA designations over time. Note the relatively slow rate of increase before 1995 and the comparatively fast rate of increase after 1995.
Figure 3: The Illinois and Michigan Canal. Completed in 1848, the canal stretched 96 miles from Chicago to La Salle, connecting Lake Michigan to the Illinois River. Today, the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor comprises 450 square miles of land on either side of the now defunct canal.

Source: Illinois State Archives

Figure 4: Timeline of I&M Canal Corridor Designation overlaid with a graph of Illinois state unemployment between 1976 and 1986. Note how the entire planning stage occurs during a period of severe rising joblessness.

1. Jerry Adelmann pitches plan to Open Lands
3. Official Heritage Area Plan Drafted by the NPS and Open Lands
4. Heritage Area Bill introduced to Congress
5. Meeting with Secretary Watt
6. Congressional Hearing
7. Illinois and Michigan Canal NHC officially designated by law

Source: US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics
Figure 5: A map showing the extent of the Quinebaug and Shetucket River Valley National Heritage Corridor (Last Green Valley). The original 1994 designation included 26 towns in Northeastern Connecticut, and was expanded in 1999 to include nine additional towns in Massachusetts.

Source: Last Green Valley, Inc.

Figure 6: The satellite photo displayed on the Last Green Valley’s official website. It attempts to depict heritage corridor as the sole breach in the metropolis between Boston and Washington DC.

Source: Last Green Valley, Inc.
CAPSTONE SUMMARY

Background Information

National Heritage Areas (NHAs) are federally approved entities, affiliated with but not directly administered by the National Park Service (NPS). In a very broad sense, NHAs exist to showcase the natural, historical, and cultural resources of a particular geographic region. By raising such awareness, the program hopes to preserve these “nationally significant” landscapes for future generations to understand and appreciate.

However, unlike their close cousin, the National Park, heritage areas are not owned directly by the federal government. Although all heritage areas are approved by Congress, the NPS acts as a purely advisory body, providing technical and monetary support to regions that request it. In this relationship, the federal government is unable to impose environmental standards or land-use restrictions of any kind, and all activity within the region ultimately derives its legitimacy from local sources. In this sense, heritage areas represent a new trend within the National Park Service, one which is focused less upon top-down control and more upon cooperation and partnership across multiple jurisdictions.

In recent years, heritage areas have become quite popular, especially among urban areas in the eastern United States deemed unsuitable for national parks. Over the past 30 years, 49 NHAs have been designated by Congress, and today, nearly one-third of Americans live within the confines of these regions.
Despite their increasing ubiquity, however, heritage areas have generally been dismissed as insignificant by the general public. Furthermore, academic literature on NHAs is decidedly sparse, and the articles that do exist tend to focus exclusively upon the local and regional benefits of designation.

However, as I attempt to show in my paper, I believe that the NHA program is a reflection of much deeper changes occurring within the American political and economic system. As federal assistance grew increasingly scarce after 1980, there was a distinct trend towards inter-regional competition in the United States. By forcing individual communities into direct competition with each other, the government created a system in which the ability of a locality to out-innovate and out-compete its neighbors was necessary for its long-term financial stability. In this environment, the concept of geographical place became progressively more important, and increasingly, communities found the need to pool their collective talents in order to succeed on the national stage. Thus, while there was a trend towards competition *among* regions, there was a simultaneous trend toward cooperation *within* regions.

By helping communities to coalesce around shared regional themes, heritage areas often acted as important tools in this struggle to obtain scarce economic resources. With the legitimizing support of the NPS, many communities felt that NHAs could provide the spark they needed to begin working together as a regional entity. In other words, heritage areas were more than just abstract
representations of culture and history: they were tangible mechanisms to stimulate cooperation and collaboration in a competitive economy.

Behind these seemingly useful benefits, however, heritage areas also represented a more troublesome reality. With its haphazard setup, NHA designations were a highly subjective process, guided more by the whims of politics than by any substantive claims of national significance. Furthermore, with limited funding, those closest to the program realized that the rapid pace of designations would soon become unsustainable. Still, as of 2011, no efforts to address these problems have been adopted.

Thus, with these distressing realities, a few important questions about the overall nature of NHAs must be raised: If every region can be nationally significant, then what is the ultimate purpose of the program? Is it simply to promote economic development through intra-regional cooperation and increased visibility? If the goal is indeed to improve regional competitiveness, then is it fair for the federal government to give some regions a leg-up and not others? If funding does run out, which regions will be left with designations and which regions will be left with nothing?

Ultimately, I conclude that, given its current setup, the NHA program is an inherently exclusionary movement. By helping some communities in their quest to attain comparative geographical advantages, the park service is essentially providing a few select regions with the tools needed to out-compete their
neighbors. However, in making this point, the paper does not attempt to impose a value-judgment one way or the other. Rather, by providing a clear and truthful account of current developments, it simply hopes to uncover a side of the NHA program that has so far not been made clear to the general public.

**Methods Used**

In making sense of the NHA program, I attempted to enlist the support of both primary and secondary research materials. In the early stages of the project, I relied primarily upon existing books and articles to help build up a background of knowledge on the subject. Next, once I had a firm grasp of the nature of the program, I made an effort to speak with a variety of experts in the field. Over the next several months, I held in-depth conversations with both NPS officials and academic observers, and in January of 2011, I was able to attend a planning session for the NHA in my home state of New Hampshire. Finally, I was fortunate enough to speak with Gerald Adelmann, the man generally credited with the creation of the heritage area concept. Through these conversations, I was able to supplement my secondary research and transform my ideas into something more concrete and reliable.

Additionally, because the NHA program is extremely large and diverse, I found it necessary to take a more inductive approach towards understanding it. To this end, I focused the majority of my research upon three individual heritage areas. By choosing three areas with significantly different backgrounds, I
attempted to gain as wide an understanding of the program as possible given my limited time and resources. Furthermore, with personal contacts in all three of these regions, I was able to utilize first-hand accounts largely unavailable from the other 46 regions.

Lastly, in telling the story of the NHA program, I made a conscious decision to deviate from the traditional methods of academic discourse. In my mind, the intended audience of this paper was not fellow researchers, but rather intelligent and inquisitive members of the general public. Considering this, my writing style was generally more informal and dialogue-based than most undergraduate theses. By engaging with my audience in such a manner, I hoped to make my arguments more accessible and enjoyable to the average reader.

**Significance**

As an object of study, NHAs transcend the limitations of any single field of academia. In their expression, they can be analyzed from a variety of different viewpoints, from the scientific to the conceptual, and everything in between. With my paper, however, I attempt to show that, rather than economics, politics, or history, it is *geography* which ties the stories of these regions together. Other fields may be able to explain the individual components of heritage areas, but it is only through geographical analysis that a deeper understanding of the larger whole can be reached. In a very real sense, it is these spatial interactions between regions that give the movement its real significance and meaning.
Thus, with this paper, my goal is not only to raise awareness about a fascinating federal program, but also to provide readers with an introduction to the discipline that I value so deeply. By leading them through a careful and thoughtful examination of a specific problem, I hope to show that geography is more than an academic discipline; it is a way of thinking about and engaging with the broader world.