

Cultural Heritage and Land Management Plan for the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor
October 1989

Executive Summary

This plan is founded on:

- The significant historic, cultural, and natural resources of the Blackstone River Valley;
- The Congressional strategy and purpose in the Act of Congress that established the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor;
- The findings of studies prepared for this plan and earlier surveys and plans;
- The contributions of the public and the BRVNHC Commission.

The National Significance of the Blackstone River Valley

The Blackstone River Valley is a region whose long and nationally pivotal history is still visible through its structures and landscapes and accessible through the living memory of its residents. Its concentration of mill villages and towns separated by extensive rural landscape is a characteristic feature. The Blackstone River and its tributaries were unusually reliable sources of water power. Along its 46-mile length the river drops a significant 438 feet, of which 400 feet were harnessed for power.

Several factors distinguish the Blackstone River Valley from other industrial regions in the United States and New England:

- It was the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution;
- It represents the first widespread industrial use of water power in the United States;
- It was where the Rhode Island System of manufacturing was developed;
- It was the first ethnically and religiously diverse area of New England; and
- Its industrial and transportation systems were crucial to the development of the second and third largest cities in New England.

Today, the most significant resource of the Blackstone River Valley is its “wholeness,” the unique survival here of representative elements of entire 18th and 19th century production systems. Few places exist where such a concentration of integrated historic, cultural and natural resources has survived and can be made accessible by interpretation, preservation and other management strategies.

With boundaries entirely within a single river basin, the Blackstone Valley is an ideal unit for planning and management; yet its complex political jurisdictions demand creative planning strategies. To date, although surrounded by the three largest cities of New England, the development boom of the Eastern megalopolis has overlooked the Valley. As a region that has experienced every phase of American economic development, it can be a national model for recovery through sensible growth management and environmental restoration.

Legislative Purpose and Mandate

Congress passed the Act to establish the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor in Massachusetts and Rhode Island for the purpose of ‘Preserving and interpreting for the educational and inspirational benefit of present and future generations the unique and significant contributions to our national heritage of certain historic and cultural lands, waterways and structures within the Blackstone River Valley’ in order to “provide a management framework to assist the states...and their units of local

government in the development and implementation of integrate cultural, historical, and land resource management programs in order to retain, enhance and interpret the significant values of the lands, waters and structures of the Corridor.” (Public Law 99-647, November 10, 1986.)

The Congressional strategy is a management framework, or partnership, to implement unified programs on the Corridor’s behalf. In addition to establishing the Corridor, this legislation:

- Recognized the national significance of the Blackstone River Valley;
- Established a Commission to develop and implement a plan to accomplish Corridor purposes;
- Directed the Secretary of the Interior to help prepare and implement the plan and provide interpretive services;
- Directed all federal agencies to coordinate their activities with the Corridor plan implementation, and directed these agencies to the maximum extent predictable to avoid adverse effects on the Corridor; and
- Authorized an annual federal appropriation of no more than 50% of its total operation, requiring a non-federal match.

How the Plan was Developed

Congress directed the Commission, with the assistance of the Secretary of the Interior, to prepare a plan to complement state plans and unify Corridor historic preservation and interpretation. In response, necessary reports, plans, and studies were developed as the basis for this general Cultural Heritage and Land Management Plan. Those reports are found in the Appendix and include:

- *Historic Resources Inventory*: A Corridor-wide inventory of those historic properties which should be preserved, restored, managed, developed, maintained or acquired because of their national historic or cultural significance.
- *Design Guidelines and Standards*: Guidelines for the construction, preservation, restoration, alteration and use of all properties within the Corridor;
- *Interpretive Plan*: A sourcebook of programs, activities and strategies for presenting and interpreting the Corridor’s resources for and to the public;
- *Land Use Management Plan*: A report containing the land use policies and actions necessary to retain the character of the Corridor’s landscape, protect the Corridor’s historical, cultural, scenic and natural resources, and enhance the water quality of the Blackstone River in a manner consistent with healthy economic revitalization;
- *Economic Assessment*: A review of the economic conditions of the Valley, and an analysis of the significant economic trends and their possible effects on the opportunities for guiding Corridor growth.
- *Tourism Resources Inventory*: A component of the Economic Assessment, this report identifies the travel and tourism resources in the Valley.

All of these reports provide a wealth of information and contributed to the formulation of the Action Agenda for the Commission, the states and local communities. Summaries and recommendations from these reports are included in Chapter 2.

The Commission has drawn resource descriptions, threats, and opportunities, and recommended strategies and actions from these reports to develop this general Plan. Much new information, strategies, and recommended actions were generated for the Plan by the public and the Commissioners themselves. Material was also drawn from other reports and previous studies. There

are many more ideas in this Plan and the reports can be accomplished by the Commission's budget alone. As the Commission finds partners to help implement this Plan, these additional ideas can be mined to achieve the National Heritage Corridor's potential.

Public Participation

The public was involved in an active participation program both to develop this Plan and to develop the partnerships necessary to see it successfully implemented. The Commission and planning team conducted a series of scoping discussions, public presentations and public meeting to present the NHC concept, develop ideas, and share planning progress. During this time, over twenty public field trips were also held, eleven Commission meetings were open to the public after public notice, eight open planning committee meetings were held, and three public workshops and a public hearing were conducted. After public notice, written comments were also received and considered.

How Plan is to be Implemented

Action Agenda

The implementation program is detailed in Chapter 3 and describes an Action Agenda for the Commission, state and local governments and private groups and individuals. The Commission will focus action in seven areas:

- Coordination and Consistency
- Historic Preservation
- Interpretation
- Environmental Conservation
- Land Use Management
- Recreation
- Economic Development and Tourism

The implementation strategy emphasizes integrated, linked actions rather than single, stand-alone projects. Balanced action in each of these areas is critical to achieving harmony among preservation, recreation and development.

The level of action will depend on available funding and willing partners. The Commission will seek the help needed to implement the Plan.

Each action, each initiative in the Action Agenda will be consistent with the overall goals of the Corridor. Some actions are short-term (one to three years) high-profile projects; others are long-term or ongoing. All activities are designed to produce spin-off effects and stimulate further actions.

Annual Work Plan

An annual work plan will specify project priorities for the Commission and its partners for each federal fiscal year, yet respond flexibly to community initiative, interest or critical need.

Evaluation

The Plan is a dynamic tool, and will be evaluated and updated regularly. Similarly, Commission activity will be assessed to assure that the Corridor purposes are being achieved, as will the Commission's by-laws, stature, and legislation. Opportunities for public involvement will be a part of the Commission's assessment and decision process.

Regular reports, assessing progress and describing necessary revisions to the legislation or the organizational and financial structure of the Commission to better achieve the purposes of the National Heritage Corridor, will be submitted to the Secretary of the Interior, the Congress and public.

Coordination and Consistency

The Act of Congress establishing the Corridor requires the Plan to include a coordination and consistency component, detailing the ways in which local, State and Federal programs may best be coordinated to promote the purposes of the Act. The elements of the coordination and consistency program are in Chapter 3.

In implementing the Plan, partnerships will be coordinated through the Action Agenda, annual work plans, and evaluation. Contributions intended to match the federal appropriation will be accepted if consistent with the agenda. Consistent standards for Commission activities will be maintained in technical by working with and through the expertise of appropriate federal, state and local agencies, such as the Secretary of Interior's standards for the rehabilitation of historic buildings, or State and local realty experts when engaged in land protection efforts.

The specific strategy for Coordination and Consistency is based on leveraging prior commitments and partners through the development of cooperative agreements to implement programs in the Action Agenda. The Commission will use its broad authority to enter into cooperative agreements when the activities have accomplished link Corridor purposes, goals and resources, and are catalytic.