

Project Overview

With the passage of Title VII of Public Law 109-338 (October 12, 2006), the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Reauthorization Act of 2006, Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a Special Resource Study (SRS) of sites and associated landscape features within the boundaries of the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (“Corridor”) that contribute to the understanding of the Corridor as the birthplace of the industrial revolution in the United States. The primary purpose of the SRS is to determine whether the resources being evaluated meet the criteria for inclusion as a unit or units of the National Park System.

This legislation also extended the Corridor Commission (“Commission”) an additional five years until 2011 and authorized development funds through 2016. By 2011, the Commission will have been in operation for 25 years. The SRS is being undertaken concurrently with an update to the Corridor’s 1998 management plan, which is also required under this public law.

The study area encompassed the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor established by Congress in November 1986 for the purpose of “preserving and interpreting for 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 states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island.” In November 1999, Congress renamed the Corridor the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor in honor of the late senator who championed it. The Corridor encompasses all or part of 24 communities from Worcester, MA to Providence, RI. The Corridor’s establishing legislation authorized the creation of an operating commission for an initial five years and provided for a possible five-year extension, which the Commission was granted. In 1996, Congress extended the Commission for ten more years, followed in 2006 with a final five-year extension requiring that the Commission cease operation in October 2011. The Commission would be responsible for the preparation and implementation of a management plan for the Corridor. Major management plans were completed for the Corridor in 1989 and 1998.

The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor has served as a catalyst for regional initiatives since its creation in 1986. As a result, the Blackstone River Valley has developed a large regional constituency drawing from environmental, cultural, recreational, and economic interests. A number of bi-state, Valley-wide initiatives are currently underway to protect and preserve the resources associated with the Blackstone River Valley and to improve recreational access and opportunities.

The study team acknowledged the desires of the Commission and the public that the long history of federal activity and investment in the Blackstone River Valley region be recognized in the study process. The following elements were identified to ensure that these previous efforts were given adequate consideration:

- Preserve, protect and interpret resources throughout the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor that exemplify the Valley’s nationally significant industrial heritage for the benefit and inspiration of future generations.
- Support the preservation, protection, and interpretation of the region’s landscape features – both urban and rural, including the Blackstone River and Canal – that provide an overarching context for the Valley’s industrial heritage.
- Educate the public about the industrial history of the Valley and its significance to our nation’s past and present.
- Protect the substantial federal investment that has been committed to key resources and facilities Valley-wide.
- Support and enhance the network of partners who will continue to engage in the protection, improvement, management, and operation of key resources and facilities throughout the Valley.

Criteria for New Parklands

By law (Public Law 91-383 §8 as amended by §303 of Public Law 105-391, The National Parks Omnibus Management Act (Public Law 105-391)) and NPS policy, potential new units of the National Park System must 1) possess nationally significant resources, 2) be a suitable addition to the system, 3) be a feasible addition to the system, and 4) require direct NPS management or administration instead of alternative protection by other agencies or the private sector.

An area or resource may be considered nationally significant if it:

- is an outstanding example of a particular type of resource;
- possesses exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the natural or cultural themes of our nation's heritage;
- offers superlative opportunities for public enjoyment or for scientific study; and
- retains a high degree of integrity as a true, accurate, and relatively unspoiled example of a resource.

National significance for cultural resources, such as those comprising the Blackstone River Valley, is determined by applying the National Historic Landmarks criteria contained in the Code of Federal Regulations at 36 CFR Part 65.

An area may be considered suitable for potential addition to the National Park System if it represents a natural or cultural resource type that is not already adequately represented in the system, or is not comparably represented and protected for public enjoyment by other federal agencies; tribal, state, or local governments; or the private sector. The suitability evaluation, therefore, is not limited solely to units of the National Park System, but includes evaluation of all comparable resource types protected by others.

To be feasible as a new unit of the National Park System, an area must be of sufficient size and appropriate configuration to ensure sustainable resource protection and visitor enjoyment (taking into account current and potential impacts from sources beyond its boundaries) and be capable of efficient administration by the NPS at a reasonable cost.

There are many excellent examples of the successful management of important natural and cultural resources by other public agencies, private conservation organizations, and individuals. Most notably, state park systems provide for protection of natural and cultural resources throughout the nation and offer outstanding recreational experiences. The NPS applauds these accomplishments and actively encourages the expansion of conservation activities by state, local, and private entities, and by other federal agencies. Unless direct NPS management of a studied area is identified as the clearly superior alternative, the NPS will recommend that one or more of these other entities assume a lead management role and that the area not be considered as a potential unit of the National Park System.

Applying the Criteria – Findings

Based on extensive analysis and with the concurrence of the National Park Service's History Program Office in Washington, the study team concluded that the Blackstone River Valley's industrial heritage resources including the Blackstone River, the Blackstone Canal, Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark District, and the villages of Slatersville, Ashton, Whitinsville, and Hopedale met the criteria for national significance.

The region, with its representative resources, remains the best place to interpret the origin and rise of an important type of American industry. These resources form a cohesive industrial district that evolved and defined the principles of the Rhode Island System of manufacture, which became a paradigm for

further American industrial development. As the nation's first heavily industrialized region, the valley became the prototype for a sweeping social transformation that included a fundamental shift in the nature of work. The multiplicity of resource types found in the Blackstone Valley reflects the many dimensions of the sweeping social and economic transformation that came in the wake of American industrialization and makes it possible to compellingly depict the lives of the working men and women who participated in this massive change.

No single, uniform process transformed the nation into a major industrial power; the course of industrialization varied by region, time period, and industry. Several distinct pathways to industrialization have been identified and, as a result, no one site can convey the full extent and complexity of American industrialization. The suitability analysis considered comparable resources representing various models of industrialization throughout the United States. These other places were more likely to complement, rather than compete with, the Blackstone River Valley in their capacity to convey the complex story of the nation's industrial development. Based on this analysis the study concludes that the resources of the Blackstone River Valley depict a distinctive and important aspect of American history that is not adequately represented elsewhere and is therefore suitable for inclusion in the National Park System.

The feasibility analysis indicated that the size and configuration of the non-contiguous sites and districts that would compose the proposed park would not be a prohibiting factor for management and is mitigated by existing roads and visitor infrastructure (e.g., visitor facilities, directional signage, and interpretive media). The area enjoys good highway access and is served by two international airports as well as intercity train and bus service. Visitor access has been facilitated by existing directional signage systems, published tour guides, and maps. Much of the primary resource base continues to be under private ownership and that is unlikely to change. Strategic NPS acquisition of key properties (in full or partial fee) for preservation or public access purposes would be one facet of the proposed park's resource management strategy. Partnerships with local communities and property owners to encourage resource protection would also be critical.

Finally, the study concludes that given the appropriate authorities, financial and human resources, the resources under consideration would be best managed with the long-term involvement of the National Park Service.

In summary, the study team finds that, based on the factors cited above and the extensive analyses conducted during the course of this special resource study, the resources associated with the Blackstone River Valley are nationally significant and both suitable and feasible for inclusion in the National Park System. It further concludes that there is a demonstrated need for NPS management of these resources in partnership with others described in this report.

Management Options

The study team has identified a range of management options describing different ways that the resources identified in the Blackstone River Valley could be protected and interpreted for the benefit of the public.

Option 1: John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Continues to Operate under Current Authorities

Under this management option, no new unit of the National Park System would be proposed. The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor ("Corridor") would continue to be recognized as a federally designated national heritage corridor. In compliance with Public Law 109-338, the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Reauthorization Act of 2006, the Corridor Commission ("Commission") would continue to

operate under its present authorities and receive operating funds from the National Park Service through October 2011. The Corridor is authorized to receive development funds through 2016. In the absence of the Commission, there would be no dedicated federal operational funding and no federal staff to operate the Corridor.

Commission staff would continue to provide planning support and technical assistance to state and local partners, and uniformed National Park Service rangers would continue to be available for visitor programming and public outreach as long as the Commission remains in operation. In the absence of the Commission, a cadre of volunteers and docents in combination with the staff of key institutions like the state parks, the Museum of Work and Culture, and Old Slater Mill would continue to offer the same visitor programs and exhibits they do now. Existing visitor facilities would be maintained and made available to the public by their respective owner/operators.

The Commission is currently in the process of developing a strategic plan to address the transition from a commission to a non-federal operating body. This process is being undertaken independent of, but in coordination with, the Special Resource Study.

Option 2: Old Slater Mill Historic Site

This management option proposes that the Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark District be considered as a potential unit of the National Park System that would be jointly operated, preserved, and maintained by the Old Slater Mill Association (OSMA) and the National Park Service. The site would continue to be owned by OSMA, though the National Park Service would acquire a preservation easement on the property to ensure its preservation for future generations. The National Park Service would enter into a cooperative agreement with OSMA that would define the roles and responsibilities of each party in the operation and management of the site. The proposed boundary would coincide with the boundary of the National Historic Landmark District as depicted in Figure 2 in Chapter Two: Historical Overview and Resource Description.

In order to convey the full influence of Old Slater Mill on the early development of the American textile industry, NPS would be authorized to enter into cooperative agreements with private and public entities to engage in the interpretation of Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark District and the Rhode Island System of manufacture as it existed in the Blackstone River Valley.

Option 3: Blackstone River Valley Industrial Heritage National Historical Park

This management option envisions that a new unit of the National Park System would be created by an act of Congress. The new unit would include specific nationally significant sites and districts located within the Blackstone River Valley that possess high resource integrity and effectively convey the industrial heritage themes of the valley. The park would engage in visitor programs and resource protection primarily for the sites and districts that would be named in potential legislation establishing the park including:

- Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark District, Pawtucket, RI
- Slatersville Historic District, North Smithfield, RI
- Ashton Historic District, Cumberland, RI
- Whitinsville Historic District, Northbridge, MA
- Hopedale Village Historic District, Hopedale, MA
- Blackstone River and its tributaries
- Blackstone Canal

The non-contiguous historic districts named above and as depicted on maps found in Chapter Two: Historical Overview and Resource Description would form the boundary of the proposed park unit.

These areas of national significance and NPS interest are where potential acquisition could occur in full or partial-fee. Properties in which NPS acquires a partial interest (e.g., a preservation easement) could also be cooperatively managed if appropriate. The following properties are possible candidates for full or partial-fee acquisition by NPS:

- Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark District, Pawtucket, RI
- Blackstone River State Park, Kelly House/ Old Ashton segment, Lincoln, RI (adjoins Ashton Village Historic District in Cumberland, RI)
- Centennial Memorial Park, Slatersville, North Smithfield, RI
- The Parklands, Hopedale, MA
- Castle Hill Farm, Whitinsville, Northbridge, MA

The NPS may also seek to acquire and develop other locations in the village historic districts for interpretive purposes (e.g., a residence could be acquired and developed to interpret a mill worker's daily life). The NPS may also acquire properties along the Blackstone River and Canal that are historically significant or that provide for continuous linkage, supporting public access, and resource protection. A General Management Plan would be developed for the park that identifies priorities for acquisition (full fee or partial fee), and protection and public use of the resources. Any NPS acquisition would occur on a willing-seller basis, and properties currently in public ownership could be acquired only by donation.

In addition to land acquisition authority, within the park's authorized boundaries NPS would have the authority to enter into cooperative agreements to provide assistance for resource protection and interpretation. The park would also be authorized to provide interpretive assistance to thematically-related resources located throughout the Corridor.

The National Historical Park would be operated by the National Park Service in cooperation with a regional partner that could be specifically identified in the park's enabling legislation and with other local management partners, as appropriate. The NPS would be authorized to enter into a cooperative agreement with the regional partner to undertake activities that support the purposes of the park. The regional partner would assume a lead role in preserving, protecting, and interpreting related industrial heritage resources throughout the Corridor that fall outside of the park's boundary, as well as the region's larger rural and agricultural landscape. The regional partner is likely to be Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, Inc. ("Blackstone Corridor, Inc."), a newly formed 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that will assume responsibility for the Corridor after the Commission expires in October 2011.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The NPS is required to identify the environmentally preferred alternative in its NEPA documents for public review and comment. The Environmentally Preferred Alternative is the one identified which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources.

Management Option 3: Blackstone River Valley Industrial Heritage National Historical Park would be considered the Environmentally Preferred Alternative for the following reasons:

- This management option best supports the project goals articulated in Chapter One of the study. These goals call for a regional approach to protecting and interpreting industrial heritage resources, thus addressing the protection of the natural, cultural,

recreational, and scenic values that provide its context and the connections among non-contiguous resources.

- Through the proposed relationship with a regional partner that would be tasked with working beyond the park boundary, this management option offers the greatest opportunity for NPS to support both interpretive and protection efforts throughout the Blackstone Valley; and could bring about a greater level of resource protection; and could foster a greater level of public understanding and appreciation of these resources than either Management Options 1 or 2.

Public Comments