

The Next Ten Years: An Amendment to the Cultural Heritage and Land Management Plan (1999)

Executive Summary

In 1790 Samuel Slater began production at the first water powered cotton-textile factory on the Blackstone River in what is today the City of Pawtucket. After almost two centuries of obscurity, the story of the Birth of the American Industrial Revolution, of America's "hardest work river" that powered that revolution, and the communities of the Blackstone Valley where the revolution took root and spread across the nation, is being told.

Spurred by local recognition of the story's importance, and the value of preserving and interpreting the Valley's historic and natural resources, congress created the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor as an ambitious experiment in 1986. Ten years later, the experiment was declared a success when Congress voted to extend the life of the Corridor and its governing Commission for a second 10 years and expand the Corridor from 20 to 24 communities. This document constitutes a supplement to the Commission's Cultural Heritage and Land Management Plan: it reaffirms basic goals and commitments of the last 10 years and calls attention to important work which remains undone.

The new communities that were successful in their efforts to join the Heritage Corridor-the rest of the City of Worcester and the Town of Leicester in Massachusetts and the Towns of Burrillville, Glocester and Smithfield in Rhode Island-brought with them the headwaters of the Blackstone River, important elements of the Valley's story, and a grass-roots enthusiasm for the Corridor's mission. These communities also brought a commitment to regional awareness and responsibility, which now characterizes the entire Blackstone Valley.

Over the first seven months of 1997, the Commission met with a broad spectrum of the Valley community to brain storm and seek technical assistance. The Commission identified the core challenges and opportunities that would guide its efforts over the next decade and articulated a set of commitments and a strategy for achieving those commitments.

After extensive discussion, the Commission adopted a set of draft Core Commitments which build upon the work accomplished in the first 10 years and reflect the work still to be done:

- Tell the story of the American Industrial Revolution to a national audience and shape a visitor experience which makes this story accessible to large numbers of people.
- Promote preservation and new life for the Valley's older village centers, mills, and other historic resources.
- Assist local communities in balancing conservation and growth.
- Reaffirm an active commitment to improving the health of the river system.

The Commission then adopted a draft Development Strategy which is intended to respond to these Commitments and to leave behind a legacy of sustainable development projects and programs. The elements of this Strategy constitute the basis for a requested Congressional budget authorization of \$5,000,000 to be matched by \$10,000,000 of investment from a variety of sources. The key elements include:

Heritage Infrastructure – the signs, trails, gateways, exhibits, and other elements which together tell the story.

Heritage Programming – the educational programs, living history, arts and crafts, festivals, an annual conference on the American Industrial Revolution, “teaching teachers” programs, tourism development and marketing, and other elements which go hand in hand with heritage infrastructure.

Strategic Design and Planning Assistance – technical assistance as requested by partners to guide new investment that preserves historic resources, helps communities manage growth and conserve natural open space, and responds to opportunities which preserve the Valley’s special character.

Blackstone Valley Institute – an idea for a resource center that grew from what people in the Valley wanted for bringing citizens, local officials, the business community and others together to respond to critical issues which shape the Valley’s quality of life and its ability to preserve and interpret its historic and natural resources.

Preservation and Enhancement Programs – targeted funds to support local preservation and revitalization efforts.

River Recovery and Recreational Development – a broad-based effort to promote the health and recreational value of the Valley’s riverways.

A Transitional Era for the Commission – an examination of options for a self-sustaining management framework to continue the mission of preserving and interpreting the Valley’s cultural landscape beyond the Commission’s current federal status, should that change.

This is a dynamic plan that outlines guiding principles while recognizing the need to accommodate changing circumstances. The Commission looks to the future and its partners to help complete this agenda.