

John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. JAN REITSMA, executive director; MICHAEL CASSIDY, chair, Heritage Corridor Commission. <http://www.nps.gov/blac>

Does the heritage area concept point the way to the future of cultural resource management, or is it a transitional model whose moment is likely to pass? The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (NHC), created in 1986 and due to “sunset” in 2011, presents a useful opportunity to think about this question. This heritage corridor includes twenty-four municipalities in two states, extending about forty miles from Worcester in southeastern Massachusetts to Providence in northern Rhode Island.

The Blackstone Valley was only the second American national heritage area to be designated. The idea was an extension of the “partnership parks” that emerged in the 1970s. In this model, the federal government acquires relatively little property outright. Rather, the National Park Service plays a coordinating or catalyzing role within land stewardship, planning, preservation, interpretive, and economic development efforts, as well as often conferring a sense of legitimacy and significance relating to the area’s history. In the Blackstone Valley, a federally appointed commission acts as a conduit for federally appropriated funding and as an umbrella for a large number of partnerships and collaborative projects (about ninety partners have collaborated with NPS staff on close to three hundred projects).¹ The federal government has injected almost \$30 million in funding over the life of the corridor project, leveraging matching funds that have added up to an impressive total of almost half a billion dollars since 1987.² NPS rangers and other staff are quite visible and active throughout the Blackstone Valley, unlike some other heritage areas where it is the federal government’s technical expertise and stamp of approval, rather than its day-to-day “on the ground” presence, that local organizers hope to enlist. The Blackstone Valley, then, represents a somewhat earlier version of the heritage area model, a trifle closer to a traditional national park than more recent additions to the list of forty-nine national heritage areas in the U.S.

By and large, regions seek this designation because they hope to spur heritage tourism and to “re-brand” their images, often in the wake of economic

1. Not all heritage areas utilize the federal commission model. Some are managed by existing regional coalitions or nonprofit organizations—for example, watershed groups—which have often developed partnership networks well before federal designation and are well positioned to continue their efforts after the “sunset” of direct federal involvement.

2. Figures and information about the corridor are drawn from *Reflecting on the Past, Looking to the Future: A Technical Assistance Report to the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission* (produced by the Conservation Study Institute of the National Park Service, 2005), annual reports of the Heritage Corridor, and interviews and conversations with people involved in the project. The author is grateful to those people who contributed ideas and information for this review, particularly BRVNHCE Executive Director Jan Rietsma, Ranger Chuck Arning, Worcester Historical Museum Executive Director Bill Wallace, and (in an interview several years ago) Larry Gall, who played several roles at the Heritage Corridor over its lifespan.

shifts such as deindustrialization, and this was certainly the case with the Blackstone Valley. Once a busy industrial corridor with many textile, tool, and other mills, the valley had lost much of its economic steam by the 1970s. The Blackstone River Valley NHC followed a now-familiar pattern of re-framing the area's decaying industrial landscapes in more positive terms and emphasizing its national significance as arguably the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution (one of several places to make this claim). Interpretive efforts in the valley have emphasized a centuries-long history of innovation—a kind of regional metanarrative now being applied to many historical projects in New England. An important “anchor” site in the heritage corridor has been the Slater Mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, where the first successful water-powered cotton-spinning factory was put into operation in 1789. The many “mill villages” of worker housing throughout the valley have also been interpretive foci, as have the Blackstone River itself and the remnants of the transportation canal that once ran parallel to it.³ Water is a unifying theme in this area as in many industrial history sites and culture-led revitalization projects. The Blackstone Valley NHC has partnered with other organizations working on watershed remediation and management as well as the creation of new recreational access to rivers, canals, and shorelines. One particularly ambitious plan involves bringing back to the surface a Worcester section of the old Blackstone Canal that has long been underground, which it is hoped will create an appealing “canal district” near the center of the city.

It is not yet clear how this and other partially realized projects—a corridor-long bike path, a Visitor Center in a former wire mill in Worcester (pictured), a water-quality campaign spearheaded by a coalition of environmental groups who hope to see the Blackstone become fishable and swimmable again as early as 2015—will be affected by the looming “sunset” of the BRVNHNC Commission, scheduled for 2011. The intentionally limited lifespan of heritage areas, the reliance on year-to-year budget appropriations, and the comparatively low level of funding for the program (compared with the national park system as a whole) creates a climate of considerable uncertainty which the corridor commission and its partners are hoping to move beyond in the next few years. The commission has already successfully argued for reauthorization twice, and a request for a third reauthorization, although unlikely, is one of several options currently being considered by the Northeast Regional Office of the National Park Service, which recently produced a study (not yet made available at the time of this writing) of the possible alternative futures for the Blackstone Corridor. Options range from continuing the present arrangement to handing the entire project over to the two states involved; in between these two poles are ideas about turning selected parts (or even all)

3. A new anthology produced under the auspices of the Worcester Historical Museum and the Heritage Corridor, *Landscape of Industry: An Industrial History of the Blackstone Valley* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2009), is an in-depth exploration of many of these landscapes and the processes and cultures associated with them.



The planned Worcester Blackstone Visitor Center, a work in progress for the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, will be located in the former Washburn-Moen wire factory and is intended to serve as a northern gateway for the corridor, among other functions. (Courtesy of reviewer)

of the corridor into a national park *per se*, or perhaps creating some kind of hybrid entity that incorporates a federal presence in both a national park and an umbrella management structure like the current commission.

Discussions about these alternatives reveal differing perceptions about the more diffuse heritage area approach versus the conventional discrete national park model. At a recent Corridor Commission meeting, one audience member, associated with a partner group, expressed the opinion that the public wanted to know whether the commission wanted “to grow up and be a national park or not,” a view that seemed to be shared to at least some extent by commission members who expressed support for the hybrid park/corridor option. Others involved with the corridor, however, spoke to me about the advantages of the flexible current arrangement, where NPS staff are able to focus on their facilitating role rather than on maintaining and staffing specific sites and facilities. I was struck, listening to the commission meeting, by how much brokering and networking the commission and its staff were obviously able to do. The most valuable aspect of the federal involvement in heritage areas may in fact be the ability to bring a wide variety of players—particularly the state and local officials whose cooperation is so necessary for the kind of regional planning and coordination that corridor projects involve—to the table. In this sense, the commission acts as a kind of bridge

between government and civil society organizations. As one corridor partner, interviewed for the Sustainability Study, put it, “I have learned in my work that the point of gravity for a lot of the [Corridor’s] actions and campaigns needs to lie just outside of government.”⁴ This is an important function when dealing with the highly bureaucratic systems and diffuse agendas of government agencies, stubbornly independent New England town governments, and single-issue nonprofit groups and coalitions.

My study of the evolution of partnership parks and projects over time suggests that as “turf” within these projects becomes more defined, projects accomplished, and patterns more established, the actual range of people and groups participating tends to narrow substantially. It is in the earlier, park-making or place-defining phases that there is wider public involvement, excitement, and creativity, and the looser structure of the heritage area seems more suited to the demands of that phase. As the Blackstone Valley begins to see new challenges—for example, growing development pressure as part of the expanding suburban ring around Boston and Providence—it may be that the area will be best served by finding a way to maintain that looser structure and broader involvement, and by enlisting the National Park Service as a broker rather than—or as well as—in its traditional role as an interpreter of national history “on the ground.”

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Newport Mansions. Newport, Rhode Island. The Preservation Society of Newport County. TRUDY COXE, chief executive officer. www.newportmansions.org

The American Gilded Age left many reminders of what life was like in an era of unabashed excess. The summer homes at Newport, Rhode Island, are among the most famous examples of the lifestyles of the rich and famous of the late nineteenth century. These magnificent mansions, many of which were designed by famous architects like Richard Morris Hunt and the firm of McKim, Mead, and White, tell us much about the private lives of the inhabitants, both upstairs and downstairs. The Preservation Society of Newport County, which maintains the operations of “11 historic properties and landscapes,” runs tours of the sites as well as engages in an ongoing preservation and conservation program as well as educational opportunities at all levels. The accompanying Web site has a variety of resources that are readily available and provide information and guidance for visiting the sites. The audience for the Newport Mansions is the general public. That being said, the organization offers lectures and tours that focus on more specific elements of

4. *Reflecting on the Past*, p. 38.