

Thinking Beyond the Boundaries— Creating Heritage Networks

By Amy Acheson, Communications Committee Member

What if there was a mapmaker that didn't care so much about drawing lines, but rather impressions in one's mind of a sense of place? If we erased the borders that so clearly define us today—our towns, cities, counties and regions—perhaps we might see a new kind of map emerge that was collectively shaped by an area's outstanding features of landscapes, historic places and cultural backgrounds.

These high points are often waiting to be discovered, as the stories lie deep within our land's history—it takes effort to uncover them and preserve them for the future. The National Heritage Areas Program supports this large-scale, community centered conservation initiative. The original idea sprung from a conversation between Midwest residents and the National Park Service staff in the late 70s. The vision went beyond museums to living landscapes where people actually reside. For example, just south of us in Northeast Iowa is Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area. Their tagline boasts, "Where the Story of American Agriculture Comes to Life." People share farming traditions of the heartland's past as well as the present. In Illinois the Abraham Lincoln National Heritage Area offers a unique collection of historical sites and interesting stories and is the only heritage area named for a President.

"Across the country national heritage areas are creating partnerships that include government agencies, philanthropic organizations, educational institutions, non-profit groups and private citizens—all working toward the same goal of preserving, protecting and ultimately improving the economic vitality of communities," according to the Heritage Area Impact and Sustainability Report of 2009. "The National Heritage Area Program expands on traditional approaches to business development, tourism, education, conservation, preservation and recreation by creating networks committed to developing projects that are locally designed, locally implemented and locally sustained."

This symbiotic approach has some key components (see criteria list on the next page). According to Sue Pridemore, Midwest Regional Heritage Area Coordinator, "There needs to be a nationally important story—a story that can only be told there and no other place in the country." Furthermore, the NHA explains, "The landscape must have nationally distinctive natural, cultural, historic, and scenic resources that, when linked together, tell a unique story about our country."

An interactive map on www.nps.gov/history/heritageareas/ explores the many established heritage networks that dot our country. Although Minnesota doesn't have a designated area yet, one can only start to imagine the possibilities that might exist.

A tremendous sense of community is built around these places as they have made something greater than any one part could be alone. By bridging resources together, the program also helps the local economy.

It's to experience not only a time and place, but to walk away with a larger sense of the landscape's history where travelers discover the area with a new kind of map that more clearly defines the places in which we live.

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Becoming a National Heritage Area

Critical Steps

The National Park Service has outlined **four critical steps** that need to be taken prior to congressional designation of a national heritage area. These steps are:

1. Completion of a suitability/feasibility study
2. Public involvement in the suitability/feasibility study
3. Demonstration of widespread public support among heritage area residents for the proposed designation
4. Commitment to the proposal from key constituents, which may include governments, industry, and private, non-profit organizations, in addition to area residents

Suggested Criteria

The following components are helpful in assessing whether an area may qualify as a national heritage area.

A suitability/feasibility study should include analysis and documentation that illustrates that:

1. The area has an assemblage of natural, historic, or cultural resources that together represent distinctive aspects of American heritage worthy of recognition, conservation, interpretation, and continuing use, and are best managed as such an assemblage through partnerships among public and private entities, and by combining diverse and sometimes noncontiguous resources and active communities

2. The area reflects traditions, customs, beliefs, and folk life that are a valuable part of the national story
3. The area provides outstanding opportunities to conserve natural, cultural, historic, and/or scenic features
4. The area provides outstanding recreational and educational opportunities
5. Resources that are important to the identified theme or themes of the area retain a degree of integrity capable of supporting interpretation
6. Residents, business interests, non-profit organizations, and governments within the proposed area that are involved in the planning, have developed a conceptual financial plan that outlines the roles for all participants including the federal government, and have demonstrated support for designation of the area
7. The proposed coordinating entity and units of government supporting the designation are willing to commit to working in partnership to develop the heritage area
8. The proposal is consistent with continued economic activity in the area
9. A conceptual boundary map is supported by the public
10. The coordinating entity proposed to plan and implement the project is described

The National Park Service



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