DRAFT December 3, 2014

2. Project Background

In 2013, the Board of the Avery-Copp House (ACH), a small, independent house museum located in Groton, Connecticut, on the advice of their special projects consultant, brought in the Yale Urban Design Workshop (YUDW), a community design center affiliated with the Yale School of Architecture, to think about how the museum could play a more vital and strategic role in the community, and increase its visibility and impact. In initial brainstorming meetings with the museum, the consultant introduced preliminary research on the dormant plan for a regional heritage park, which the group agreed had the potential of increasing the reach of all of the smaller constituent organizations and sites that could be part of the park. (Andrei, otherwise the “its” could be referring to the Copp House.) Partly as a community service and partly out of self interest, the ACH board then retained the YUDW to investigate the potential for restarting the effort, and to think about what a Thames River Heritage Park for the 21st century might look like.

The project began with a series of thematic meetings and discussions with a small steering committee, established by the Avery-Copp House, which included museum board members and staff, state and local elected officials, and citizens from the area. The group developed a working vision statement in an attempt to define the park. The vision statement is presented following the table of contents at the beginning of this plan.

This initial period was followed by an extensive consultation with potential stakeholders, local officials and legislators in the region. Over the course of several months in 2013, the YUDW conducted more than 30 individual and small group meetings, to discuss the needs and concerns of the heritage community who might benefit from being part of the park. Through these discussions, the following common issues were identified as important challenges that the heritage park might be able to address:

* Declining visitors to regional heritage-based institutions, both small and large
* Declining local, state and federal funding available to individual heritage groups
* Small heritage-based institutions struggle for funding, visibility and relevance
* Disconnected heritage sites in the region rely on convoluted automobile routes to get from one to another; weak pedestrian and transit connections between sites and between New London and Groton
* Experience of visiting different sites is uncoordinated; erratic information and opening schedules and events
* Fort Griswold, the most important Revolutionary War site in the state, is under-interpreted and under-supported by the state, despite the recent marketing campaign branding Connecticut “still revolutionary”
* New London and Groton struggle for a cohesive image as a destination in the region and nation; difficulty competing with other destinations for tourists

Through these meetings and ongoing discussions with the steering committee, the YUDW explored various aspects and potentials of the heritage park to be a framework to address many of the issues noted above, but also to be a strategy for regional transportation and economic development. On November 12, 2013, the YUDW hosted approximately 30 stakeholders at the City of Groton Municipal Building for a public presentation of the initial concept for the park and a discussion session.

Opportunities presented included:

* Connect institutions and sites, physically and programmatically, to make the whole more than the sum of individual parts
* Connect both sides of the Thames through water-based transit infrastructure
* Get people out on the water to understand the geography and environment of the Thames, New London and Groton
* Economic development benefits on both sides of the Thames
* Opportunities to link local schools and curricula to the Heritage Park and its sites
* Funding available for organized coalitions and networks
* Prepare for the arrival of the Coast Guard Museum and find ways of leveraging its visibility and levels of visitation, while mitigating the negative potential effects of traffic and parking through regional traffic and parking management strategies
* Making the Thames region a destination in and of itself, not a side show to Mystic or the Casinos.

The following were presented as key elements of a successful project:

For Groton:

* Successful revitalization of Thames Street as a lively, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented corridor, linking historic sites and properties with businesses, parking, the waterfront and the neighborhood.
* Significant improvements to the Fort Griswold site, to make it more accessible and more vivid, assuming its logical and rightful role as a premier heritage destination in New England.

For New London:

* Better and multiple linkages between downtown New London and its transit hub and Fort Trumbull.
* Successful planning for and integrated implementation of the Coast Guard Museum.

For the Region:

* Improved access to and use of the Thames River waterfront, including new and improved circulation and transportation options for pedestrians, bicycles, and especially a water taxi linking New London, Groton and the Submarine Museum.
* Improved interpretation and marketing of the heritage, environmental and cultural resources of the region.
* A broad-based and effective coalition of local citizens, institutions and governments to plan, promote, implement and manage the Park.
* Making the Heritage Park not simply a framework for regional tourism, but also making it a plan for regional cultural and educational initiatives, environmental management, as well as regional transportation and economic development.

On December 18, 2013, the YUDW and members of the steering committee were invited to Hartford to meet with and update state officials, including Commissioner Dan Esty and staff at the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), Deputy Commissioner Kip Bergrstrom of the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD), and others on the concept and progress of the planning effort.

In spring of 2014, the steering committee continued to meet to discuss specific aspects of the project and consider ways to advance the project. During this time the committee expanded to be more inclusive and diverse, especially as community interest in the project grew. In May 2014, legislators introduced and passed a state bill streamlining the process of moving the park forward.

In September, 2014 the project was publicly presented at a press conference at the Groton Monument as part of the remembrance of the Battle of Groton Heights. A two-weekend long pilot of the water taxi program, connecting New London, Groton and Fort Trumbull, complete with temporary heritage park signage, was run with great success. Boats ran continuously almost to capacity.

HERITAGE PARK HISTORY

The first mention of a heritage park centered on the Thames River appeared in 1966, when planners at the Southern Connecticut Regional Planning Agency proposed a “Marine Heritage Area” for Southeastern Connecticut in the pages of *Historic Preservation* Magazine. The concept arose out of a comprehensive planning process for the 516 mile Southeastern Connecticut region, which identified the high density of important institutions, attractions and sites related to the history of American maritime culture in this area. Proposed to span from New London east to Stonington Borough, the heritage area would have included a variety of distinct sites illustrating different aspects of this areas 300 year long affiliation with the sea—of trading, fishing, whaling and ship building—including Fort Griswold, Mystic Seaport and Stonington Lighthouse.

It was not until 1987 that the state passed the Heritage Park System Act (Public Act 87-463), envisioning a statewide system of heritage areas focused on particular themes, and which would be educational and recreational resources for these communities while also encouraging tourism. It was around this time that the federal government was also establishing its National Heritage Area program within the National Parks Service, with the first area designated in 1984. Following a detailed planning period, the state identified the Thames estuary as a site of particular interest and national importance in the history of American maritime culture and designated it as a model study area for the system. The next year they initiated plans for the Thames River Maritime Heritage Park.

The park, as proposed in 1987, focused more narrowly on the Thames estuary, extending from the Submarine Force Museum in the north, south to the Ledge Light at the mouth of the river to Long Island Sound. To structure the park, an extensive water taxi system, connecting important points of interest on both sides of the river was coupled with new pedestrian and bicycle trails in Groton and New London. A primary park visitor center with interpretative museum was proposed in downtown New London on the waterfront to anchor the operation, along with a new visitor center at Fort Griswold Battlefield State Park (Fort Trumbull was still a military installation at the time of the study).

In 1990, $2.6 million in bond funds were allocated for the state park and an advisory committee consisting of 10 representatives of Groton and New London was formed to establish the boundaries of the park, its name, themes, and sites to be included. In 1991 a new advisory board replaced the first, and later an implementation plan was commissioned from QL Consulting of Lexington, Massachusetts with Tom Martin of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The report identified six strategic components to the park’s execution: construction of an interpretation and visitor center, establishment of collaborations between local sites and attractions, development of new and expansion of existing attractions, creation of a management system for the park, implementation of a transportation concept, and finally, creation of a promotion and marketing campaign for tourists.

Parallel to this effort, the State was working to make Fort Trumbull into a new state park. Beginning in 1990, in a Base Realignment and Closure Process, the United States Navy merged their Naval Underwater Sound Laboratory, which had occupied Fort Trumbull since 1950, with the Naval Underwater Systems Center in Newport, Rhode Island, and began the base closure process. Under the Federal Parks to Lands Program, 16 acres of the former facility was later transferred to the State of Connecticut for the creation of the park. By 2000, when Fort Trumbull State Park opened, the site had been cleared of most of its 20th century structures, and the imposing and well preserved granite structure of the fort itself, which had been hidden for the greater part of a century, was revealed.

Throughout the 1990’s, the park advisory committee continued to meet and worked on advancing aspects of the heritage park.

Beginning in 1990, the group grappled with the location for the park visitor center. Unforeseen infrastructure costs and difficulty with DEP permitting associated with the original proposed site for the visitor center, on the waterfront behind Union Station in New London, caused it to be set aside. A long search for a new site considered options around the New London Parade and elsewhere. Union Station was the last site to be officially considered by the advisory committee and much work was done with the assistance of DECD to promote the location, but protracted negotiations with the owner failed to procure the site.

Work on the water taxi infrastructure continued. By 2004, the Fort Street Landing, a water taxi dock serving Groton Bank and Fort Griswold had been constructed. Water taxi docking facilities were also installed at Fort Trumbull State Park.

Beginning as early as 2004, the State of Connecticut began to negotiate with the United States Department of the Navy over the placement and ownership of the floating dock that would give the water taxi access to the Submarine Force Museum and USS Nautilus. The state did not wish to gift the dock unconditionally to the Navy, but the navy was only willing or able to accept unconditional gifts. Discussions lasted for several years and around 2009 apparently petered out without a resolution.

Whatever the specifics, it is clear that despite the progress that had been made, by this time, fatigue over the protracted implementation period had stalled the project. The remaining state funds allocated in 1990 were spent to support improvements to the New London Parade Plaza and conservation work on the Groton Monument.