

CHAPTER 3
LESSONS
LEARNED FROM
OTHER COMMUNITIES

THAMES MARITIME HERITAGE PARK IMPLEMENTATION PLAN. Prepared by QL CONSULTING, INC. and The Office of Thomas J. Martin 1994.

Chapter Review

For this Implementation Plan, the consultants and the Thames Maritime Heritage Park Advisory Board reviewed a list of “heritage communities” throughout the nation, and selected eight for evaluation (see list on next page). The selected communities are home to established heritage parks, or to a significant mass of heritage-based visitor attractions with interpretive, tourism, management, transportation, and institutional collaboration characteristics that are known to be successful in the way we envisioned for the Thames Maritime Heritage Park. The purpose of this field research was to establish benchmarks of performance in each of the strategic areas that our Implementation Plan addresses.

In this chapter, we list the sites we evaluated, the characteristics that make them comparable to our project site, and the issues that were the focus of our evaluation. For each aspect of our implementation plan (interpretation, attractions, management, transportation, collaborations, tourism marketing, phasing, funding and finance, and cost benefit), we provide the lessons that were gleaned from the research. The chapter concludes with the overall assessment of Groton-New London as compared to the communities that were researched.

Characteristics of Communities Included in the Research

NEWPORT, RI

- * Similar to Salem MA, but no National Park Service
- * Visitor center
- * Revolutionary war history
- * Navy presence
- * Naval heritage
- * Competitive site to Groton/
New London
- * Scale of community

CHARLESTON, SC

- * Maritime history
- * Navy presence
- * Multi-site
- * Harbor fort
- * Water transportation
- Scale of community
- Historic districts
- Federal involvement

LOWELL, MA

- * National Park Service
- * Water transportation
- * Mass. State Heritage Park
- * Federal/state/local relationships
- * Collaborations
- * Multi-site
- * Events site(s)

SALEM, MA

- * Maritime
- * Multi-site
- * National Park Service collaborations
- * Transportation
- * Central Visitor Center
- * Scale of community
- * Events

BOSTON NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK

- * Maritime
- * Multi-site collaborations (Freedom Trail)
- * Interpretative consistency- transportation
- * Water shuttle
- * Naval Ship Yard
- * National Park Service presence
- * Collaborations

NORWALK, CT

- * CT heritage park site
- * Maritime history
- * Attractions
- * Events

PORTSMOUTH, NH

- * Naval heritage
- * Ship building
- * Scale of community
- * Estuary (two sides)
- * Multi-site
- * Similar downtown

NEW BEDFORD, MA

- * Whaling theme
- * Maritime history
- * Historic districts
- * Attractions
- * Community heritage partnerships
- * Competitive site to Groton/
New London

Focus Issues

The lessons learned (see pages that follow) from the heritage communities we evaluated focus on the following strategic considerations:

Attractions development. What role does the physical setting play in heritage attractions development? What is the mix of attractions in the community? What is the impact of attraction size? How do visitors get from site to site? What is the quality and nature of interpretation? How do the attractions relate to the area's tourism system? How does involvement of the National Park Service impact attractions development?

Visitor Center design, exhibits and operations. How does the visitor center relate to the overall community setting? What role does it play in drawing visitors? How big is the visitor center in relation to the area's heritage attractions, and how does it relate to those attractions. How is the center staffed, and what is the staff role? How does the visitor center relate to other community events? How does it handle concessions?

Tourism Marketing and Promotion. How do the heritage attractions relate to tourism development in the community? How do these communities respond to inquiries? How do visitors get to know about the heritage sites in the community (maps and signs)? How do front-line tourism personnel relate to heritage sites?

Transportation. How do visitors get from place to place? How is the local transportation system configured and managed?

Interpretation. How are the interpretive elements oriented thematically? What disciplines are brought to bear in the development of these elements? What is the nature and quality of presentation and exhibitry? What is the impact of the National Park Service when it is present?

Focus Issues (continued)

Collaborations. What is the nature and quality of cultural and educational collaborations in the community? How do the collaborating organizations work together? How are schools and educational institutions involved? What role can the National Park Service play in making successful collaborations happen?

Management and Governance. What organizations steward heritage development in the community? What is the relationship between public and private sectors? How does the governance of a heritage community "come together"? What is the impact of the National Park Service on management of heritage areas?

Funding and Financing. How are the projects funded and what are the roles of the various funding agencies? What role does the private sector play? How important is the role of the National Park Service (NPS) or other federal agencies in plan implementation?

Phasing. How long does it take for plan implementation? What and where are the critical sequential steps in plan implementation?

Cost-Benefit. What are the economic impacts of the heritage plans? What kind of leveraging is possible?

Lessons for the Attractions Strategy

Physical Setting. In virtually every successful heritage tourism community, close attention is paid to the overall physical setting in which the heritage park is situated. A unity of community historic fabric in and around the heritage park places the visitor in a context that is consistent with the attraction itself. Of the communities we studied, Portsmouth, Salem, Newport and Charleston are all excellent examples of historic physical settings in communities that are similar in scale to downtown New London. Within the bounds of resource limitations, engineering issues, and regulatory considerations, the more that historic fabric can be highlighted, the greater is the impact on the visitor's experience.

Mass of Attraction. A successful heritage community will be distinguished by a sufficient mass of attraction that is typically characterized by multiple sites, which, when visited as a totality, will keep a visitor overnight in the community. As indicated below, the attractions of heritage communities will include a large-draw anchor attraction that is an attractor for visitation to other sites in the the area. In Newport, Rhode Island, for example, while the mansions of Bellevue Avenue are the anchor attraction, a host of other historic neighborhoods and sites make Newport one of the best examples of mass of attraction. Often, a major heritage attraction can start small and grow in mass over time (the Lowell National Historic Site took more than ten years to "build-out" as a fully developed attraction).

Lessons for the Attractions Strategy (continued)

Tie to a Major Attraction. Major visitation cannot be anticipated for a heritage area without a major attraction(s) associated with the area itself. Several examples in the comparable communities include:

- Whaling Museum (New Bedford)**
- Mansions (Newport)**
- Boott Mills Museum (Lowell)**
- USS Constitution (Boston)**
- Strawbery Banke (Portsmouth)**
- Witches and Peabody/Essex Museum Complex(Salem)**
- Maritime Center (Norwalk)**

Visitor flow (Access, Walkability, Transportation). Successful heritage areas tend to be walkable from site to site, and, if not walkable, then some form of transportation is provided (e.g. Lowell, Newport, Charleston). In some cases, the transportation itself is an element of the attraction mix (e.g. the rail trolley and canal boats of Lowell).

Quality presentation. Successful heritage attractions are characterized by highly professional exhibitry, conservation/preservation efforts, interpretative materials and educational programs. The presence of a major local attraction with national credentials (including accreditation), tends to motivate higher degrees of professionalism among the smaller sites in the area.

Lessons for the Attractions Strategy (continued)

Tourism < > Heritage Attractions Linkages. There can be a natural conflict between heritage site management (preservation) and tourism development (visitation). In successful heritage tourism areas, this conflict is successfully addressed through a relationship of trust and respect between and among the attractions and local tourism development organizations. In such cases, the heritage and tourism interests work together to generate visitation and build the base of local attractions without harm to sensitive cultural resources. In communities where the link between heritage development and tourism is reported to be weak, local attractions managers say visitation at local sites tends to suffer.

Presence of the National Park Service (NPS). It is important to note that where the National Park Service is present, attractions development takes a high priority, the local heritage sites tend to be stabilized, extraordinary outside resources become available and extended visitor marketing becomes possible. In Lowell, Massachusetts, the Park Service is a primary catalyst and leader for attractions development (even to the point of taking over the former state heritage park facility). In Salem, Massachusetts, the community's leadership is conducting a successful major advocacy effort to stimulate further federal appropriations for the national site in the community. New Bedford is actively pursuing this route and a feasibility study has been prepared to approach the NPS when the national heritage legislation is passed. It is also important to note that the Park Service, in conjunction with a national coalition of historic preservation and community development groups has sponsored federal legislation to support a limited number of heritage areas throughout the nation.

Lessons for the Visitor Center Strategy

Fits the setting. Visitor centers we observed were located in a wide variety of settings: new facilities, old or adaptively used buildings, historic sites, and even parking garages. The center's design should be consistent with the historic setting and heritage ambiance of the community they serve, and to the degree possible, serve as a destination for visitors in its own right.

Program/facility serves as an attractor. The visitor center should be enough of an attraction so as to draw visitors to the community -- especially those who would not otherwise stop and stay awhile in the area. Once the visitor has arrived, the center should provide the information, services and motivation for the visitor to go to other sites in the community. The ultimate goal is to get people to stay in the community as long as possible.

Scale. The visitor center program should not dominate (i.e. be more imposing) than the other attractions in the community. Rather, its interpretive components should whet the visitor's appetite for what the sites in the community have to offer. The visitor's experience in the center should thus be appropriate and to scale with the visitor's community experience and to scale with community attractions.

Personnel. The effective visitor center is staffed by knowledgeable and friendly people that the visitor can trust for accurate, timely and thorough information and direction. Staff will wear many hats, providing information about:

tourist services;

historic themes and traditions; and

local logistics (how to get the most out of a visit in the community).

Lessons for the Visitor Center Strategy (continued)

Community Education and Collaborations. The visitor center should be a venue for educational activities for the general public, including classes, concerts, lectures, demonstrations, audio-visual presentations, etc. While the heritage park may sponsor the activities, the actual implementation should be undertaken by area cultural and historic resources, generally working in collaboration with one another under the umbrella of the heritage park. The community orientation of the visitor center is particularly important in the off-tourist season (November through April) when visitor demand will be lowest.

Community Events. The visitor center should be a place where community groups can hold celebrations, festivals and public events. The center should also work closely with other local celebrations so as to provide a gathering place for participants in the celebration who are in the area. In addition, the visitor center should be available for private functions that are appropriate for such public facilities (this would provide an ongoing source of sustaining revenue).

Concessions. The visitor center program should include a store for the sale of gifts, books, tickets, reservations, etc. Such facilities are found in many visitor centers and are usually run by "Friends of..." type volunteer or nonprofit community organizations.

Lessons for Tourism Marketing and Promotion Strategy

Relationship between heritage attractions and tourism interests. There can be a natural conflict between tourism and heritage development. On one hand, the tourism industry wants as many visitors to stay as long as possible to the very maximum capacity of resources. Heritage resources, however, are sometimes fragile, and their organizational capacities can be extremely limited. In such situations, overwhelming increases in visitation might do more harm than good. Successful heritage communities are characterized by a mutual respect and common understanding of these issues between and among the local heritage and tourism interests.

Centralized visitor services/response system. Timely and accurate response to inquiries provides an important pre-visit motivation for the potential visitor. The best of the communities we researched sent our test inquiry to a number of attractions and amenities who responded with their own information and brochures. We felt very ready when it came time for our site visit.

Good map. A successful heritage community should publish a clearly coded, well-designed map that encourages visitation to attractions, services and community amenities.

Clear and consistent signage. While signage is a strong consideration for the transportation strategy, it also has a promotional and marketing value for on-site promotion. If visitors know where to go, or are drawn to an attraction or area by an appealing visual graphic, then a sign has served a promotional purpose. It is therefore important not to leave signage out of the marketing and promotion strategy.

**Lessons for Tourism Marketing and Promotions Strategy
(continued)**

Knowledgeable and friendly personnel. Front line tourism personnel (desk clerks, cab drivers, bus operators, visitor center greeters, waitstaff, etc.) are a key ingredient for successful on-site promotion and marketing. It is important that such staff are well-trained, not only in the skilled disciplines of their work, but also in the importance of serving visitors in a warm, friendly, and well-informed manner.

Lessons for Transportation Strategy

Good map. A successful heritage community should publish a clearly coded, well-designed map that facilitates the visitor's access to attractions, services and community amenities.

Clear and consistent signage. Signage for both auto travelers as well as pedestrians is a critical element of a successful heritage community. Signage not only helps the visitor find the starting point (i.e. from highway to visitor center) but also enables the visitor to visit the multiple sites and attractions that are in the community.

Integrated transportation center/services. The traveler should experience local transportation elements as a seamless web of access to area attractions, amenities and services.

"Walkable" or "We'll get you there". Ideally, the sites that the visitor will attend should be within walking distance of a central drop-off point. If not, some form of inexpensive transportation or clear directions should be provided to get the visitor started.

Lessons for Transportation Strategy (continued)

Recreational transportation components follow market demand. Commercially successful transportation systems in heritage park settings will tend to be feasible only where the market pre-exists. Most transportation providers in heritage communities tend to be private enterprises, operating as concessionaires (the National Park Service-run trolley at the Lowell National Site is a notable exception). However, the private providers will require public subsidy to carry the service prior to the development of stable, revenue-generating demand.

Interpreted Pedestrian Trails. With the importance of "walkability", the heritage attractions require a good system of pedestrian trails with consistent signage, interpretive markers, and services/amenities along the way. The Freedom Trail in Boston, the Heritage Trails in New Bedford, and Bellevue Ave. in Newport are excellent examples.

National Park Service (NPS). When the NPS is involved in the transportation component of a heritage community, resources, stability and clout for a quality visitor transportation system are virtually assured.

Lessons for Interpretation Strategy

Primary Theme(s) and Sub-Theme(s). An overriding primary theme(s) dominate(s) the interpretative aspects of a heritage community. The primary theme(s) are woven into every aspect of the park's presentations, activities and materials (exhibits, signage, promotional materials, research activities, educational programs, etc.). A variety of diverse, yet related sub-themes are creatively developed to highlight special characteristics of the community, thereby embellishing the primary theme(s). The Lowell National Historic Site is an excellent example of creative theming; industrial history, textiles, urban planning, water power, transportation, immigration, women's rights, invention, and labor are all threaded together into an exciting overall visitor experience.

Scholarship. Heritage communities pay serious attention to scholarship, research and cultural conservation from several disciplines, including history, anthropology, folklife studies, archaeology, and sociology. Cultural conservation is an overriding issue to heritage park development. For example, in the development of heritage parks in Pennsylvania, folklorists typically conduct extensive cultural resource inventories of heritage areas under grants from the state heritage affairs commission.

Presentation. Exhibits should have a compelling message and be implemented with state-of-the art technology. One of the best examples is the new Boott Mills museum in at the Lowell National Park, where the museum visit starts with a walks through a cavernous and room filled with working looms operating at a deafening volume (ear plugs are provided).

National Park Service (NPS). When the NPS is involved in the interpretative component of a heritage community, resources, stability and clout for quality exhibitry are virtually assured. The NPS has a very active and large cultural resource management division that is involved in the interpretive development of NPS sites.

Lessons for the Collaborations Strategy

Collaborative educational programming and exhibitry. The programming of the park facilities should be highlighted by the regular involvement of the region's cultural and heritage resources. Collaborative grants and cooperative staffing can be of benefit in cases where the individual local resources are not strong.

Consistent quality in programs and services, and facilities. The heritage park program should set high professional standards that can be modeled by all organizations that participate as collaborators. The objective of collaborations should be to strengthen the programming and organizational capacities, audiences and stability of each and every collaborating group.

Collaborators work together equitably. Collaborations will take place between and among organizations of varying size and type and capacities. Any collaborative effort should respect and accommodate these differences so that the collaborators participate at a level that matches their capabilities and resources. This type of equity should apply as well to any collaborative marketing efforts.

Schools and Educational Institutions. The area's public school systems (teachers, administrators, students and parents) should be integrated into the collaborative aspects of the heritage park. From school visits, to teacher training and curriculum development, the heritage park should be viewed as a resource for the public schools. The Heritage Park should also include faculty and administrators from the region's colleges and universities in its collaborations mix.

National Park Service NPS). When the NPS is involved in the collaborative component of a heritage community, resources, stability and clout for quality programming are virtually assured.

Lessons for the Management and Governance Strategy

Stewardship. Typically, one or one or more strong lead agency(ies) will steward the process of heritage park development. Some examples include:

**New Bedford W.H.A.L.E.
Salem Partnership
Newport Preservation Society
Lowell Preservation Commission**

Partnerships. The key to success seems to be rooted in the concept of partnerships, both public-private as well as multi-jurisdictional (federal-state-local).

Motivational Factors. Each and every successful heritage community can show a point in time when a confluence of energy, motivation, and financial support was offered by public and private local leaders who were committed to a cohesive vision for improving the community.

National Park Service (NPS). When the NPS is involved in the governance of a heritage community, resources, stability and clout for management and administration are virtually assured.

Lessons for the Funding and Financing Strategy

Heritage parks derive capital and operating funds from a variety of sources:

Non-earned Sources (appropriations and contributions). Financial support for heritage parks should come from multiple sources, both public and private, earned and contributed. No single source should dominate. Financial participation of local business leadership tends to be a recurring theme in the most stable of heritage communities. Where such financial involvement is missing, the heritage attractions must rely on relatively unstable annual public appropriations (state appropriations for the Massachusetts and New York State Heritage Park Systems have been notoriously inconsistent or nonexistent over time). Multi-year (minimum of three years) would be a more appealing method of public funding (the proposed legislation for National Heritage Areas promotes the concept of extended funding -- as much as 20 years has been proposed). However, the ideal form of public support is a legislated independent source of annual funding (e.g. millage-type tax).

Earned Revenue. Earned income should also be an important source of revenue and can be channeled through a "Friends of..." group, or other sources. Earned income can be generated through gift shop sales, rental of space for functions, admissions to special events, tenancy of community organizations, and other sources.

National Park Service (NPS). When the NPS is involved in the funding of heritage projects, more substantial resources for the project are virtually assured.

Lessons for Phasing Strategy

Most heritage parks are staged against master plans that carefully lay out a sequence of activities that will take place over near and long term development cycles. When master planning cycles are too extended, however, local momentum can deteriorate (in some heritage park systems, the planning process lasted more than a decade before tangible results were seen).

Phasing is most often guided by funding cycles and patterns. Development plans are driven by the availability and magnitude of dollars for capital as well as operational support.

"Critical mass" of attraction is a key factor in getting things going. Getting to a critical mass may take time, and, therefore, creative strategies (celebrations, events, media promotions, signs, etc.) need to be implemented to keep interest high prior to the achievement of critical mass (see below).

Initial development "results" can be designed into the phasing process in order to show tangible forward progress prior to full build out. Arranging for an interim visitor center while the final site is being developed would be an example of such an early implementation action. Early results can motivate community enthusiasm, thereby expediting further development.

Lessons for Cost-Benefit Analysis

Heritage parks have real economic impact. This impact is found in jobs and regional income. This has been demonstrated in visitor impact studies conducted in Lowell, Massachusetts and in other communities.

Heritage projects have leveraged other real estate and economic development in their respective communities. Lowell, Newport, Norwalk, Charleston, and virtually all of the communities studied for this plan have had additional development associated with heritage park and related tourism development.

Heritage parks support economic development because they are initiatives for increasing overall community pride and quality of life. Communities that turn a good face toward the visitor tend to feel good about themselves and want to make themselves even better.