

2007 Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area
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Thank you, Mister Chairman, members of the Committee, Congressman Cramer and members of the staff of the National Park Service for giving me the opportunity to talk about The Muscle Shoals of Northwest Alabama.

We are pleased to share with you the work of the Muscle Shoals Regional Center on the work of the Muscle Shoals Regional Center at the University of North Alabama towards designation of the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area.

The very definition of a National Heritage Area describes the Muscle Shoals story. The story is one of a place where natural, cultural, historic, and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive nationally distinctive landscape shaped by patterns of human activity shaped by geography. And as place where those patterns are an important part of our Nation's story.

The area to be included in the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area encompasses the six counties in Alabama of Colbert, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Franklin, Morgan and Limestone in which historic and contemporary activity ties the people and places together by their location on the unique geographic topography represented by a series of shoals on the Tennessee River in Northwest Alabama.

The Muscle Shoals is described as the section of the Tennessee River extending from Brown's Ferry Island near Decatur, Alabama, for a distance of thirty-six miles, where there is a fall of 136 feet. This is greater than Niagara's fall on the American side, and indeed, is the greatest fall beneath a major river in the United States.

The series of shoals and shallow water impeded defense, transportation, commerce, settlement, and development from the earliest recorded history of the region. The challenges of dealing with the unique landscape resulted in pivotal and standard-setting solutions to overcome obstacles, both natural and human.

The Muscle Shoals area of Northwest Alabama touches the states of Tennessee and Mississippi geographically and historically, the Tennessee River connects the region to the Gulf of Mexico by the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, and by land to the Natchez Trace Parkway.

In fulfilling the intent of the legislation that authorized the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area Feasibility Study, community meetings were held throughout the six-county region with an attendance of more than 450 people. The comments and ideas that came from those meetings were compiled to identify themes, significant people, places, and events, as well as resources available for study and documentation.

The discussions at those community meetings centered on whether or not the citizens of the region felt that our history met the definition of a National Heritage Area. The consensus was that the definition applied and that there was a willingness to pursue National Heritage Area designation. The Muscle Shoals story would be one of a place where natural, cultural, historic, and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive nationally distinctive landscape. The Muscle Shoals is a place where patterns of activity shaped by geography are an important part of our Nation's story, whether pre-history or contemporary.

The stories of the people, places and events of the region are representative of the courage and ingenuity of the American people. Those same people have, through their lives and work, set standards in many disciplines – government, science, technology, regional planning, the arts and culture, sports, and world affairs. What may seem at first glance to be just a list of people, places and events, those lists reflect the extraordinary contributions of ordinary people. That spirit of leadership, entrepreneurship, experiment, energy, courage, creativity and tenacity of the people associated with The Muscle Shoals are part and parcel of America's story.

It was the courage of citizens, sons and daughters of The Muscle Shoals, such as Jesse Owens, Helen Keller, General Joe Wheeler, and those who left the banks of the Tennessee on The Trail of Tears who have helped create a Muscle Shoals chapter in America's story. Helen Keller, "America's First Lady of Courage", will be honored in the near future by her inclusion in Statuary Hall. Miss Keller's Birthplace, Ivy Green, is located in Tusculum, where the Helen Keller Public Library is one of the earliest to be established in the state. The extraordinary career of Jesse Owens is told at the museum that bears his name.

The Muscle Shoals region is represented in Statuary Hall by General Joe Wheeler. General Joseph Wheeler began his military career in 1859, as Major General and Commander of the Confederate Cavalry in the state of Tennessee, and later Commander of all the United States Cavalry, operating in Cuba under Lt. Col. Teddy Roosevelt. He also served his district in the Congress of the United States. The Wheeler Family Home, Pond Spring, is a historic site operated by the Alabama Historic Commission. Wheeler Dam, Wheeler Lake, Wheeler Wildlife Refuge and the Wheeler Basin Public library are named in honor of General Joe Wheeler.

It was the ingenuity of engineers, scientists, and planners who tamed the Tennessee with canals, dams, and locks and set high standards as part of the creation and work of the Tennessee Valley Authority. That extraordinary planning effort also set standards in the

fields of archaeology, transportation, health care, education, library services, navigation and recreational land and water development to create another chapter.

The people who called the Tennessee the “singing river” in ancient times helped create the distinctive sounds that are part of the fabric of modern American music – whether it is embodied in the works of W. C. Handy, “The Father of the Blues”, or by Sam Phillips, “The Father of Rock & Roll”, or by the hundreds of songwriters, producers, and musicians who have created a distinctive and unique American sound identified as the Muscle Shoals sound.

The Muscle Shoals culture is both distinctive and distinguished. A creative spirit of storytelling is evident in the work of three Pulitzer Prize winners, professional actors, artists, filmmakers, writers, photographers, and educators.

There is a dedication to telling and sharing the region’s stories through tourism events, festivals, and in collections in museums and libraries, and by experiencing the natural beauty in the region’s parks and public lands.

Upon designation as a National Heritage Area, the management plan for the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area will explore ways to draw together in a cohesive way the various themes and stories through the development of interpretative, educational, and cultural tourism programs. Themes which were identified in the community meetings- Music, Civil War, Folklore, Arts and Literature, Architecture, African American history, Native American history, Recreation, and other sub-themes will be the basis of the interpretative project development. Due to strong cooperative efforts that already exist in the region, it is anticipated that programs will be developed through appropriate partnership and that the work of the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area will take into consideration existing efforts.

It is anticipated that much of the work of the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area will be in partnership with other agencies and programs. Exploratory efforts are underway to find ways to identify and promote existing cultural assets and identify under-utilized assets.

Another outcome of the community meetings and research related to the Feasibility Study has been the identification of extraordinary resources and collections that could be used for documentation. A possible next step will be to conduct a Feasibility Study to look at the creation of The Shoals Archives to conserve and index fragile collections, both public and private.

A series of meeting have been held in partnership with public and academic libraries to talk about how materials might be made available for research through new technology and methodology.

The development of supplementary curriculum materials related to the themes identified in the Feasibility Study for teaching of the region's history at all levels has been suggested.

An inventory of Cultural Sites will be used for program development. A high level of interest has been expressed to create a calendar of events that would focus on the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area, both print and web-based that would support the work of state, regional, and local tourism agencies and foster a regional identity.

A partnership with the Alabama Community Scholars provided assistance with the research related to the folklore and folk life of the region.

The imposing architectural marvel, Wilson Dam, recorded in the American Engineering Record and a National Historic Landmark, serves as a symbol of The Muscle Shoals and how a region has made the transition from impediment to creative solution. Architectural Trails could be developed to tell the story of people as well as the structures. Those stories would include a wide range of architectural styles ranging from the log cabin of W.C. Handy to the Village created to house workers, who were building the dams, to the recording studios, from the Palladian Belle Mont Mansion, to the Frank Lloyd Wright Rosenbaum House, and others. A visit to Ivy Green, the birthplace of Helen Keller, helps the visitor to understand the life and work of "America's First Lady of Courage".

Following designation, the management plan will be developed to determine how the programs and projects of the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area will be defined and implemented.

Prior to developing the management plan, the study team from the Muscle Shoals Regional Center at the University of North Alabama has visited several existing National Heritage Areas in the southeast, asking the same questions of each staff about management, challenges, and successes in their own Heritage Area programs. The high standards set by the existing National Heritage Area programs will serve as a model for the development, implementation, and management of the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area.