

# CRM

VOLUME 17 • NO. 8

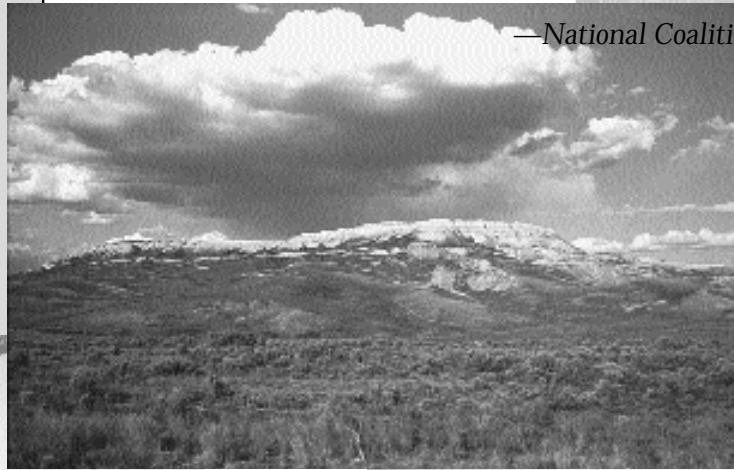
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## National Heritage Area

*“A region where natural, cultural, historic, and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity, shaped by geography.”*

—National Coalition for Heritage Areas

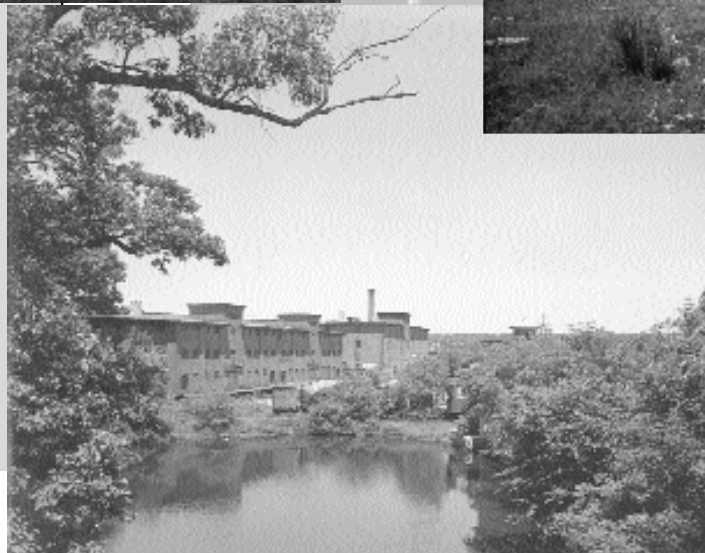
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Cultural Resources Management  
Information for  
Parks, Federal Agencies,  
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U.S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
Cultural Resources



# CRM

VOLUME 17 • NO. 8  
ISSN 1068-4999

Published by the National Park Service to promote and maintain high standards for preserving and managing cultural resources.

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# The Heritage Area Phenomenon

## Where it is Coming From

Paul M. Bray

**H**eritage areas (a.k.a. urban cultural parks, heritage parks and corridors, and partnership parks) are an accelerating phenomenon. A national coalition has been organized to promote them and legislation to establish an American Heritage Areas Partnership Program (H.R. 3707) is making its way through the “gridlock” Congress in a remarkably quick fashion.

Yet, even within the park and historic preservation communities there is little understanding of what heritage areas represent. There is something “feel good” about heritage areas because there is something (preservation, recreation, education, and economic development) for everyone which has helped fuel their growth. But there is also the confusion and doubt which led one National Park Service official at a public meeting to ask when are heritage areas going to end.

Heritage areas don't fit neatly within any concept or specialization we are familiar with and do, in fact, represent a sea change in traditional notions of parks and historic preservation. Planning, development, and management of heritage areas requires the coordination of many specialized skills including those of architects, landscape architects, planners, historic preservationists, educators, and tourism and economic development specialists to address the intricate relationships found in a living landscape encompassed in a heritage area. A positive consequence of this circumstance is the opportunity to enlarge the dimension of specialized skills by linking up disciplines. But it has left heritage areas to be an orphan without one specialized profession able to claim it as its very own.

The Conservation Foundation in its report entitled *National Parks for a New Generation* identified the phenomenon as a move beyond the feature to the entire setting. Under the heritage area approach, the notion of a park as a place separate and apart where nature is presumed to reside becomes instead an inhabited urban setting or region. This is not really a new idea. The century-old Adirondack Park in New York State has more than 50% of its land held in private ownership and European national parks are inhabited parks. But clearly the American park tradition is a tradition of the public estate park supported, in part, by a pastoral myth.

To better understand the meaning and significance of heritage areas it is useful to examine some of the societal forces that are driving and steering this new concept and approach.

First and foremost, heritage areas are an outgrowth of the environmental age, a time for sustaining rather

(Bray—continued on page 4)

In recent years a new philosophy of historic preservation has begun to emerge—heritage area preservation—which seeks to preserve entire ecosystems of cultural and natural resources for the enjoyment and benefit of the American people. While most heritage areas are organized around a distinctive large-scale resource such as Lowell National Historical Park, others may be natural resources such as a river, lake, or range of hills such as RiverSpark in New York; or a cultural resource such as a canal, railroad, or road illustrated by the Illinois and Michigan Canal; or may be cultural resources abandoned or in disrepair such as sites associated with the abandoned steel mills of Western Pennsylvania. Most of these sites, such as the cultural parks of New York along the Mohawk River Valley, illustrate the heritage area preservation idea which combines urbanism with cultural and natural resource preservation—linking urban culture, an emphasis on linkage and civic engagement, and enhanced public realm making city life enjoyable and a civilizing experience. While the new model of heritage preservation is still in an inchoate stage, its rewards are now becoming visible. Today, many more parks are following the example of Lowell National Historical Park and the New York urban cultural parks system. What these areas have in common is that they form part of a creative nexus based on partnership agreements between private individuals and organizations, and local and state governments to manage and come to terms with modern urban landscapes.

The Hudson-Mohawk Urban Cultural Park (HMUCP), or RiverSpark as it is commonly known, for example, is in the northern section of the heritage area proposed to be established by the Hudson River Valley American Heritage Area Act (H.R. 4720). The HMUCP Commission was organized in 1977 by a bi-partisan group of mayors and supervisors of the neighboring cities of Troy, Cohoes, Watervliet, the towns of Waterford and Colonie, and the villages of Green Island and Waterford. This local initiative was the model for the New York State Statewide Heritage Area System, and today RiverSpark is one of 14 state designated urban cultural parks.

One of the early supporters of the heritage area concept is Paul Bray, an attorney and special advisor to the Hudson Mohawk Urban Cultural Park Commission. Mr. Bray has written extensively on this subject and a discussion of his views on the heritage area phenomenon can be found in the accompanying **Viewpoint** article.

—HAB



Harmony Mill No. 3 (1868-1872), HMUCP. The Hudson-Mohawk region of New York, the home of RiverSpark, has been called “a Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution” and was considered to have one of the most diverse economies in 19th century America. Its rapid growth and transformation from an agrarian society to an industrial powerhouse is attributed to its geographic location, abundant waterpower, creative industrialists, and a large and ethnically diverse work force of men, women and children.

(Bray—continued from page 3)

than exploiting resources and pursuing the consumption based development model. Heritage area planning is holistic, resources based, and in keeping with the idea that people's true heritage is the entire Earth. It links the natural with the cultural and the past with the present and the future. If an ecologically and culturally sustainable society is still more of a vision than a reality, the vision has a useful vehicle in heritage areas to carry forth its principles.

The heritage area idea is also a response to the surfeit of sameness of sprawl and the despair that marks the discarded industrial landscape. Pat Mogen, the pioneer advocate for the Lowell Urban Cultural Park, talked of transforming a gritty city from a place where everything is dull into a place where everything is interesting. The idea spread as people realized that their city and region have the story of their cultural and natural heritage to tell, and organizing to become a heritage area is a means to bring out the specialness of their locale. Perhaps a bit like the city beautiful movement, the heritage area phenomenon can be viewed as the city or region as a special and interesting place movement.

Heritage areas carry on an urban park tradition of serving society's need for integrating and unifying forces. Olmsted's pleasure grounds were intended to attract and equally serve all citizens from all social groups and be an integrating force in a democratic society. By finding recreational and educational potential in all parts of the urban landscape—workplace, living quarters and streets—heritage areas provide a broader context to serve all social groups and in the process bring vitality to cities.

Olmsted also advocated and planned systems of complementary parks and parkways in cities like Boston and Buffalo to provide not only varied pleasure and recreation grounds throughout the city, but in addition to redeem disagreeable environs and prevent random spill of city expansion. Olmsted believed it was an error to regard a park as something complete in itself. Increasingly, parks as heritage areas encompassing whole settings and landscapes are becoming a major unifying force in urban and regional planning. The National Park Service is bringing national park philosophy, policies, resource management skills, and park professionalism to give reality to underlying unity of resources in regional settings like Gateway National Recreation Area, Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, the Illinois-Michigan Canal Heritage Corridor and the Blackstone River National Heritage Corridor.

Although home rule localism and regionalism often conflict, heritage areas arise because of a conjunction between the desire for stronger local voice in governance as well as a desire for regional solutions. Heritage areas have clearly been a bottom up phenomenon. Local citizens and organizations have sought to capitalize on their heritage. They have formed alliances and sought partnerships with state and federal authorities. Although locally driven, it has not been limited by local political boundaries which have defined the playing field of home rule. Rather in keeping with the aforementioned environmental age factor, the local playing

field is being defined by natural and cultural heritage and is therefore frequently regional.

Finally, heritage areas are a response to a societal need to reconcile conservation and economic imperatives. Economics have always been a factor in park making. Some parks were established because the land they encompassed had no development value. Other parks were established with the hope that they would enhance the real estate value of neighboring property. In a letter to me, Michael Hough, landscape architect and author of *Out of Place* wrote "...the early British parks were based on the idea of transferring the countryside to the city, but without the overriding basis that maintained that rural environment in the first place—the economic imperatives of agriculture and land management. In this sense again, I find your cultural parks, that incorporate economic viability into their structure, most interesting." By addressing economic viability upfront with conservation goals, we gain parks or heritage areas that are living settings managed to foster both inherent values of conservation and sustainable economic activities. The heritage area planning and management process has institutionalized collective efforts for conservation and economic viability by enlisting the participation of conservation and economic interests.

These driving societal forces have countervailing forces not the least of which are based on tradition. Parks are a conserving and conservative force which does not easily accept change. Parks have been separate and apart from working and residential landscapes and a product of a pastoral myth. To say now that a park may be a city or a region is disorienting to say the least. But that is what is happening.

Whether the American Heritage Areas Partnership Program bill is enacted this year or not, it still will have achieved remarkable success in the legislative process. This success should not surprise anyone who realizes the driving societal forces at work. Heritage areas are the parks for an environmental age, for people seeking to be more uplifted by and attached to their local and regional landscape, and for a society in dire need of socially integrating and physically unifying forces, and of finding the conjunction between conservation and economic viability.

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Paul M. Bray is an attorney from Albany, NY. He was a founder of the Hudson Mohawk Urban Cultural Park, has lectured and written on the subject of heritage areas, and will be teaching a course in environmental heritage planning at the State University of New York at Albany.

Photo page 3: Cohoes Falls, Mohawk River, HMUCP. Photos courtesy Ann Luby, RiverSpark.