

# National Heritage Corridors



## Redefining the Conservation Agenda of the '90s

Rolf Diamant

*Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site  
Brookline, Massachusetts*

When we look back at the accomplishments of the 99th Congress of the United States in the field of parks and conservation, the establishment of the Blackstone River National Heritage Corridor and the Great Basin National Park present an interesting study in contrasts. Great Basin National Park, located in eastern Nevada, encloses one of the last great wild areas of the American landscape—more than 100,000 acres of desert mountains and basins. By contrast, the Blackstone National Heritage Corridor, only 40 miles in length, follows the course of the Blackstone River from central Massachusetts across the border into

Rhode Island—one of the earliest industrialized river valleys in the United States. There are only a handful of ranches within Great Basin; the Blackstone River National Heritage Corridor includes 20 communities in two states. Great Basin contains a magnificent record of geologic history, with rock formations millions of years old. Along the Blackstone, extensive historic features of 19th century industry and commerce represent a heritage of a more recent time and human scale.

But the difference between Great Basin and Blackstone is more than just size or terrain; for the U.S. National Park Service, Great Basin

quite possibly represents the close of an era—it may not be the last of the great wilderness national parks to be created, but most everyone agrees opportunities for creating more parks of this size and nature, even in the West, are fast disappearing. And while it is still too soon to tell if the number of National Heritage Corridors will grow beyond a handful, it is clear that by creating areas like the Blackstone—and now the Delaware and Lehigh—Congress has by some degree broadened the definition of heritage and landscape values which deserve national recognition and protection. And in creating the National Heritage Corridors, Congress has also crafted a new approach for cooperative planning and resource management a world apart from the traditional park management model of Great Basin and its predecessors.

A contemporary landscape preservationist, Robert Melnick, has written:

There are places in this country that we look at every day, but we never really see. They are the landscapes of heritage; places that seem so natural that they often go unrecognized, misunderstood, unprotected and mismanaged.<sup>1</sup>

The heritage landscape of the Blackstone Valley is more than the sum of its individual historic homes, mill structures, canal locks, and towpaths that still survive along the river. Rather, the landscape of the Valley is a tapestry; though frayed, often covered up and in some places torn, it still reveals a remarkable pattern of early 19th century mill vil-

lage life and the transition from farm to factory. The tapestry of the Blackstone Valley is very much a living landscape—mills are being renovated for elderly housing as well as for a variety of light industries—company-built row housing is still in use, in some instances occupied by a new generation of immigrants. Many of these resources cannot and should not be managed or cared for isolated from the larger valley community.

Heritage corridors are American prototypes of a new international category of conservation areas, referred to as "protected landscapes." Protected landscapes are defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) as "places of outstanding significance where traditional community values and ways of life endure and evolve in harmony with the environment."<sup>2</sup>

The first National Heritage Corridor legislation, for the Illinois & Michigan Canal in Illinois, was developed by Congress in the early 1980s as an alternative to national park designation and the long-term financial and operational commitments associated with federally managed parks. Fiscal considerations aside, the new corridor legislation, by focusing on a formula of technical assistance and regional cooperation rather than single agency ownership and management, offers a more appropriate strategy for responding to the unique circumstances and pre-

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Melnick, *Cultural Landscapes: Rural Historic Districts in the National Park System* (Washington, D.C.: USNPS, 1984).

---

<sup>2</sup> *Protected Landscapes—A Guide for Policy Makers and Planners*, Proceedings of the Conference on Protected Landscapes, Lake District, England, 1987 (Cambridge, U.K.: IUCN, 1987).

servation needs of many cultural landscapes.

Heritage corridors include populated productive lands under multiple ownerships and jurisdictions where extensive acquisition and administration by a single agency is both impractical and counter to the objective of preserving the land's cultural diversity and indigenous character. In defining this new "partnership park" concept, the Congress is articulating a national interest in the conservation of these landscapes, while at the same time recognizing the legitimate stewardship responsibilities of state and local governments and private organizations and individuals. This new partnership approach appears to be gaining momentum, as Congress has subsequently established national heritage corridors in the Blackstone Valley and along the Delaware and Lehigh Canals.

A key ingredient of the corridor model is the federally appointed Heritage Corridor Commission. The role of the commission is to define common ground among landowners, various participating parties and units of government in developing a program that integrates heritage and conservation objectives with regional planning and economic development.

The role of the USNPS is primarily that of a catalyst providing national recognition, technical assistance, and support. The National Park Service neither owns nor manages land within the corridor, but has the responsibility of coordinating other federal activities in the corridor to encourage maximum consistency with the program objectives of the commission.

The corridor concept draws much of its original inspiration from Lowell

National Historical Park and the success of the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission in facilitating economic revitalization outside the boundaries of the park. Lowell is a much-studied example of how heritage preservation can become a driving force in tourism and urban economic development.

Heritage corridors have also been influenced by the USNPS's successful State and Local River Conservation Assistance Program, where levels of government and the private sector are encouraged to work together in cooperative projects to conserve nationally important river values.

Ultimately the most important ingredient for the lasting success of this effort will be a strong sense of community responsibility and a willingness on the part of partners to link their destinies with those of their neighbors. Historic preservation and conservation must be perceived as a long-term investment in the future.

Perception is the first and most crucial battleground. In the case of the Blackstone, there is a clear need to build a shared perception of the valley's natural and cultural significance as a region, given years of economic decline, negative self-image, and the nature of its fragmented administrative and political jurisdictions.

High-visibility special events and demonstration projects can serve to enhance regional pride and identification with the distinctive character of the area. The importance of tangible, small successes cannot be overstated. For in a larger sense the corridors themselves are national demonstration projects where new working relationships between federal and state agencies, local communities, private individuals,

groups, and businesses are being tested.

Heritage conservation and environmental quality can serve to diversify economic opportunity, providing a more broadly based and sustainable future in contrast to the boom-and-bust cycle these corridor areas experienced in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

As the remaining unprotected vestiges of American wilderness disappear, along with the potential for more parks like Great Basin, most conservation opportunities in the 1990s will occur in places like the Blackstone and Delaware and Lehigh Valleys—where natural, cultural, and recreation resources are integrated into the fabric of existing communities. USNPS professionals, working in the challenging environments of heritage corridors, can gain new skills in building public support for conservation. This experience is directly transferable to some of the toughest management issues confronting National Parks today, particularly where the success of regional planning and cooperation between them and their neighbors is essential to ensure long-term protection of park resources from outside threats.

There may be times as you begin your planning for the Delaware and

Lehigh that you find that agreement is difficult to reach and progress seems slow, as it will involve the cooperation of many parties dealing with complex issues. But stay the course, for cooperative planning, like democracy itself, is not valued so much for its efficiency as for its eventual success in achieving consensus and a long-term commitment to the future.

I wish you well with your work along the Delaware and Lehigh canals and your new National Heritage Corridor. You have come a long way so far and have much to be proud of. We are all indeed a long way from Great Basin, but the challenge of preserving the beauty and heritage of America is wherever you find it—whether it is in mountains of Nevada or the valleys of Pennsylvania.

—

*This paper was originally presented as the opening remarks to the Conference on the Delaware and Lehigh Canal National Heritage Corridor, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, March 1989.*

