

# **Industrial Heritage at Risk: How National Heritage Areas Have Preserved the Landscapes of American Labor and Why This Capacity is Now in Jeopardy**

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## **Introduction**

More than any other initiative affiliated with the National Park Service (NPS), the National Heritage Areas (NHA) program has emphasized preservation of sites associated with industrial heritage. Of the close to 400 NPS units, only a handful of locations focus specifically on stories and places associated with labor, while the majority of NHAs take this theme as a critical part of their mission. Whether textiles, railroads, coal, automobiles or steel, heritage areas have played a key role in protecting, interpreting and, when appropriate, imaginatively adapting landscapes linked to the history of work. This paper will examine the central role that industry has played in the designation and management of heritage areas, using specific examples from NHAs in Pennsylvania, with an emphasis on how the landscape-scale approach associated with the program has allowed for the implementation of innovative interpretive, preservation and conservation strategies.

## **Background/Context**

Almost a decade ago, in June 2003, the George Wright Society, a leading conservation policy institute, dedicated an issue of its journal, the *George Wright Forum*, to the burgeoning National Heritage Areas movement. Situating heritage areas within a broader international context, the volume called attention to changing norms in protected area planning and management. In particular, a marked shift away from what one contributor called “protected areas in their classic form, as government-owned, government-run areas set aside for protection and enjoyment,” and towards a more collaborative, de-centralized approach, emphasizing the dynamic interactions of people and place, rather than a forced severing of the human from the ‘natural’ world. (Phillips 2003, 9)

In the United States, the acceptance of these new and different models for protected area management have been comparatively slow in gaining traction, owing, at least in part, to the iconic status of the traditional National Park concept as well as long held ideas concerning land use norms and private property rights. Yet, important examples of non-traditional, cooperatively managed protected areas do exist on the local, state and national level, such as Cape Cod National Seashore and Lowell National Historical Park in Massachusetts, Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve in Washington State and the Pinelands National Reserve in New

Jersey. Created largely since the 1970s, these landscapes often comprise urban and suburban areas, feature diverse public and private ownership patterns and include significant historic resources

Among the themes that garnered significant attention in the journal's pages was the connection between heritage areas and industrial landscapes. Multiple authors highlighted the important steps that state NHAs had taken to not only preserve the history of late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century work in the United States, especially in mass production industries such as steel, automobiles and textiles, but also to coordinate the process of environmental restoration and reconnection so often necessary in de-industrialized landscapes. Beginning in 1984, with the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, and continuing with the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor in 1986, the Delaware and Lehigh Canal National Heritage Corridor in 1988, the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in 1996 and the MotorCities National Heritage Area in 2000 (among others), heritage areas have endeavored to situate labor and economy as central elements in the future of large landscape conservation efforts.

The emphasis that heritage area organizers placed on industry, whether as an interpretive theme, a physical space to be preserved or as a bridge to the outdoors and recreation, put them at odds with prevailing norms in the National Park Service (NPS), and to a lesser extent with local and state historic preservation and conservation agencies. Writing in the 2003 issue, architect and planner Constant Bodurow cogently argued that, "20<sup>th</sup> century industry left an indelible mark on the American consciousness, identity, heritage, and landscape...our nation, NPS, and its partners have not done an effective job in conserving and interpreting the nation's nationally and internationally significant industrial resources." Heritage Areas, in contrast, had attempted, "to address industrial themes and resources that convey this transcendently important heritage." (Bodurow 2003, 68)

In the ten years that have passed since the publication of the *George Wright Forum* issue, the Heritage Area movement, at least at the federal level, has expanded rapidly. In 2003, there were 23 congressionally designated areas. Now, in 2013, there are 49, with many more actively seeking recognition. New regions, especially west of the Mississippi, have joined the program and, in the eastern United States, internationally significant landscapes, including the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor on the Atlantic coast gained designation. At least with the public then, the heritage area concept remains popular, offering communities a viable framework for partnership-based planning and community development.

Yet, despite the program's expansion and appeal to diverse stakeholders, the essence of what Bodurow wrote a decade ago remains valid. Heritage Areas, especially at the national level, are still one of only a handful of initiatives dedicated to the conservation and interpretation of sites and stories associated with work, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century context. In the ten years since the

*George Wright Forum* released its special issue, only two new units with labor connections, César E. Chávez National Monument and Patterson Great Falls National Historic Park, joined the NPS system and it remains too early to determine the scope of their future interpretive and preservation activities. Why do so few sites address these themes? What can we learn from the heritage areas, which have, with varying degrees of success, taken on the difficult challenge of interpreting and preserving America's recent industrial past?

### **Challenges/Planning Insights**

On a practical level, industrial sites are expensive to restore, maintain and insure. They also frequently require extensive and complex environmental cleanup. Consider the example of Carrie Furnaces, one of the centerpieces of the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in southwest Pennsylvania. Built in 1884, the furnaces worked for roughly a century, producing iron for U.S. Steel Corporation's Homestead Works near Pittsburgh. Two furnaces, numbers 6 and 7, remain on site. A recent article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* highlighted the efforts of Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area (ROSNHA) to both interpret and protect the site, including receipt of a \$500,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources for maintenance and repairs, including roof work. (Siebert 2012) A half-million dollars may seem like a significant amount, but it only scratches the surface of projected expenditures. The full costs of stabilizing and renovating the Carrie Furnaces will likely run between \$75 million and \$100 million. (Ackerman 2006) A significant sum considering that the annual budget for Yellowstone National Park in fiscal years 2013 is roughly \$35 million.

In addition to the financial challenges of doing industrial history, the political stakes are also high. Labor and work, especially in the context of union organizing, continue to be contentious issues, which can divide communities for decades and jeopardize partnership-based planning efforts. Interpreting capitalism, in particular, is extremely difficult as there is no national or usually even local consensus or narrative to draw upon. As Geographer Kenneth Foote has noted "The issue here is one of unresolved meaning – what to make of a struggle that was instrumental in shaping elements of contemporary American society but has gradually faded from view...One aspect of the problem is that the United States itself has yet to come to terms with some elements of its past." (Foote 2003, 296-298)

Not surprisingly then, few sites, including some NHAs, have explored the subject in sufficient depth, especially in making linkages between industrialization, de-industrialization and the workings of capital. Interpretation frequently overlaps with promotion, branding or celebration, ignoring difficult questions about the nature and course of economic development – past, present and future. As Cathy Stanton perceptively asked in her text on public history efforts at Lowell National Historic Site in Massachusetts, "[w]hat are the social costs, in terms of our ability to understand and respond to the changing economic circumstances of our lives, of linking the production of knowledge so closely with the quest for economic growth?" (Stanton 2006, 8)

Similarly, Don Mitchell, a geographer, criticized heritage-based economic development in and around Johnstown, Pennsylvania in the 1980's for its focus on "the *industrial* rather than the *labor* history of the city." (Mitchell 2000, 97) In Mitchell's analysis, creating a "sellable history" became more important than representing the full and often contradictory sweep of the city's past. "There were thus no plans to represent the history of strikes, the geography of violence, or the *politics* of deindustrialization," Mitchell writes, "...[b]y stressing *industrial* history - the history of development, innovation, and the mechanics of making steel – the Johnstown landscape would minimize the contentious past within which such developments and innovations took place. The *work* of the landscape – the role it was assigned by planners – was to represent a heroic history, not a history of conflict." (Mitchell 2000, 98, italics in original)

Despite, or perhaps because of these challenges, both practical and ideological, it is useful to see what heritage areas have been able to accomplish over the past three decades, as their work can serve as a model for other communities seeking to preserve and interpret the recent history of work and industry. Such reflection is especially critical because of severe funding cuts at both the state and the federal level, with twelve National Heritage Areas facing the distinct possibility of losing their authorization to receive federal funds. Such action would be devastating to labor history efforts as the heritage areas in question serve as critical catalysts in regional efforts to interpret the stories of coal, steel, transportation, textiles, agriculture and even deindustrialization. Many have also played a crucial role in environmental restoration efforts. Keeping this worrying funding reality in mind, here then are three key lessons we can learn from the story of heritage areas and industrial landscapes.

**Lesson 1: Plan and be prepared to act quickly because no industry is safe** This may seem like a particularly dire or even morbid recommendation, but the recent experience of American industry in an age of global capital reveals the devastating speed with which whole sectors of the economy can change or decline. As historian Jefferson Cowie has written, in regards to capital flight more generally, "[a]dvances in communication and transportation, hastened by interregional rivalries for investment...have largely liberated firms from such considerations and allowed capital to evolve from a pattern of centralization into an increasingly dispersed geography of production." (Cowie 1999, 6)

In the eight-county Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area, the decline of steel production came faster than anyone anticipated. One resident of Homestead, Pennsylvania, for example, commented in a 1988 news article that, "The impact of it didn't hit at one time...Most steelworkers felt it was another layoff. They were never called back. It has only been in the last two years they've realized the age of steelmaking in the valley is over." (Eshleman, 1988) Echoing this sentiment, Augie Carlino, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the ROSNHA, noted that "...mills were being torn down...they often closed with long or short term lay-offs...None of

them had ever closed for a long period of time, and then they never opened, and they started being torn down. The realization set in they weren't coming back." (Carlino 2013)

The experience of southwest Pennsylvania provides a telling example of why a heritage area is important. Unfortunately, in the case of ROSNHA, its creation occurred only in the wake of the mill closures. However, with both the initial planning that went into its establishment and the subsequent work done in partnership with local communities and organizations, the ROSNHA region will have a far better system in place to respond to future challenges and threats.

**Lesson 2: Practice a regional, rather than site based, approach** Telling a complex story of work and industry requires not only the preservation and interpretation of specific sites, but also the integration of those sites with a broader landscape, which is likely in mixed public/private ownership. In discussing the story of steel in southwest Pennsylvania, for example, Augie Carlino commented, "You can't think of this as just a site project without understanding the dynamic of the relationship of the sites to the other industries in relationship to a mill. Homestead doesn't exist in a vacuum. The whole concept behind an industrial region is that Homestead lived and existed because of the industrial complex that existed around it. Not only the workers and the community, but the capital that was provided, capital in the sense of money, engineering, natural resources like the rivers by providing a transportation nexus... You can't just look at the mills without looking at their related industries... what went into railroads, coal and coking and riverboat transportation" (Carlino 2013)

Similarly, Allen Sachse, retired Executive Director of the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor (DLNHC) in Northeast Pennsylvania, noted that, "We (the DLNHC) deal with the landscape where people live... the park service deals with specific individuals who were giants in movements... they don't have parks related to the common man... The heritage area does because we deal with their landscape." (Sachse 2013)

This distinction is quite significant, especially when considering the history of industrial capitalism in the United States. One of the drivers of development in many urban centers, like Pittsburgh or Philadelphia, was the incorporation of the natural and human resources of the surrounding region. A nuanced story of capital in America must focus not only on particular sites of a production, a mill here or a factory there, but the whole landscape, including the experiences of residents, who labored in the industrial spaces. In explaining the early rationale behind the DLNHC, Sachse explained, "The public could embrace the big concept of a corridor like the Delaware and Lehigh. Where the coal is mined in the north, and it got on the canal system and went to the Lehigh Valley. There, it was used to make cement, to make iron, to make steel, and then either the finished product was moved further or the coal went to New York, Philadelphia or was put on a ship to London. It was an integrated system of mining, industry and marketing, all

...tied into a transportation network. It became an easy thing for people to understand.” (Sachse 2013)

**Lesson 3: The Ability to Function as an “honest” broker is key to preserving industrial sites and interpreting recent labor history** As I noted earlier, labor history is almost inherently controversial. Not only because of the violence that frequently accompanied early 20<sup>th</sup> century attempts at union organizing, but also because of politics surrounding environmental degradation and deindustrialization. In multiple regions, heritage areas have brought diverse and even hostile stakeholders into dialogue with one another in order to develop common goals. A 2006 evaluation of the DLNHC by the National Park Service found that one of the corridor’s key strengths lay its collaborative potential.

The Corridor story and activities encourage collaboration by providing an integrated perspective. Because Corridor goals reflect thematic interests, partnerships can transcend governmental sectors and cross political and administrative boundaries. In this way, the concept of heritage creates a platform for engaging people and communities Corridor-wide in ways that directly influence and support local efforts to revitalize the region. Partners note that working on Corridor projects has broadened their perspectives and their willingness to work in partnerships across multiple interests. This suggests that over time these collaborative relationships may alter the way organizations and community leaders think about the future of the D&L region. Partners also note that the D&L initiative has empowered them to think more boldly. (Copping et al 2006, 8)

## **Goals and Objectives**

The goal of this paper is to make planners and conservation and preservation professionals aware of the unique role played by National Heritage Areas in interpreting the United State’s recent industrial heritage. In particular, this paper reveals that scale and collaboration matter when it comes to telling a story of capital and labor and the heritage area model has been far more responsive to these realities than the more traditional protected area approach. An additional objective of the paper was to highlight the precarious nature of funding and support for heritage areas, calling attention to the void that would be left should the program contract significantly.

## **Conclusion**

For close to 30 years, heritage areas at the state and federal level have represented the definitive effort aimed at conserving the United States’ recent industrial past. No other initiative has come close in both the range of landscapes represented and the scale of work undertaken. Heritage Areas have been successful because of their regional, rather than site based, approach, their responsive management and fundraising structures, which vary according to the preferences of

local stakeholders and allow for the development of flexible planning models, and their ability to function as hub of collaboration and dialogue in frequently contentious environments. If program funding is cut, especially at the national level, the United States risks losing its most successful mechanism for interpreting and preserving the landscapes of American labor and industry.

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