National Heritage Areas (NHAs) are created by Congress through federal law to promote the conservation of natural, cultural, and historic resources that combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape. Through their resources and communities, NHAs tell nationally important stories that celebrate our diverse heritage. NHAs provide a grassroots, community-driven approach to heritage conservation and economic development. Through public-private partnerships, NHAs support historic preservation, natural resource conservation, recreation, heritage tourism, and educational projects. Matching federal funds and leveraging additional resources for projects, NHAs partnerships foster pride of place and an enduring stewardship ethic.

WHERE NATURE AND CULTURE CONNECT

PROGRAM HISTORY
On August 24, 1984, President Ronald Reagan signed a law establishing the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor as the nation’s first national heritage area—a new kind of national park that married preservation, conservation, recreation, education, and economic development. Today, the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor covers the 87-mile towpath as it is located on the same path once used by mule tenders. The area, with many historic structures, including canal locks and lock tenders’ homes, draws more than a million visitors annually.

As of 2020, the program has grown to 52 areas in 34 states that celebrate and preserve the nationally important history—our American story—of our past by protecting the places that make us unique country—from the rise of our nation’s tall president to historic events in the region. National Heritage Areas are to historic sites and landmarks National Heritage Area; to the industrial heritage of Big Steel and Big Auto at Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in Pennsylvania and Metro fees in Mich.,; to vibrant Native American stories in many NAs. NAs represent the vast history of America lived in communities and landscapes.

RECREATION AND TRAIL DEVELOPMENT
NAs improve access to the cultural and natural resources they were designated to celebrate and protect. Granting access to recreational opportunities is important for public engagement and stewardship, which are essential to the mission of all NAs. Many recreation projects in NAs focus on the creation of multi-use hiking and biking trails along historic infrastructure—canals, industrial sites, and railroads. Trails wind through natural and urban environments, with historic resources providing points of intrigue for hikes, skiers, runners and walkers. Just as trails rely on partnerships within communities, they also serve to create and strengthen connections between communities, across the country people enjoy National Heritage Areas as destinations for hiking, biking, paddling, walking and running. NAs also support many other events that help towns, draw visitors, shoppers, and others. NAs also offer school tours, camps, and other outdoor activities that help residents get reinvigorated and connect with resources in their own backyards.

CONSERVATION
Conservation is a hallmark of NAs. By conserving natural resources and leveraging the private sector, the NAs work to protect the places of pride for the benefit of communities who live and work in the area. NAs are conservation efforts that improve water quality, air quality, healthy ecosystems, beautiful places to live, and create urban and rural neighborhoods. In some cases, NAs are working with partners to restore polluted areas. Through consistent planning and implementation, NAs provide projects that are creative and comprehensive approaches to conservation. These efforts have resulted in the loss of historic downtowns and communities, engagement that National Heritage areas were created to achieve. Your Economic growth enabled ventures during the Celebrate Area.

BECOMING A NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA
National Heritage Areas are created by Congress through legislation. NAs work with National Park Service (NPS) to promote the conservation of natural, historic, scenic, and cultural resources, while sustaining the area’s economic viability. The NPS assists the NAs’ coordinating organization in developing a management plan for the administration, use of federal funding, and interpretation of the heritage area.

Prior to designation by Congress, local groups may conduct a feasibility study to determine whether a heritage area is the most appropriate approach to achieving the region’s goals. Congress has directed NPS through law to conduct a feasibility study and other planning work to identify potential heritage areas. To learn more, visit https://www.nps.gov/reports/heritageareas.

PRESERVING OUR HERITAGE WHILE FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES
The benefits of historic preservation are as varied as the resources that make up the NAs program. National Heritage Areas work to affirm and reinforce connections between the American people and our past in all its richness and diversity. Building on the linkages between our natural and cultural heritage by working with partners, historic sites, parks, and citizens to reinvigorate buildings and economic, while instilling pride in local history and traditions. They attract visitors who support local businesses, increase job opportunities, revitalize both urban and rural communities, and encourage the reuse of historic buildings.

Through use of historic preservation tax credits, grants, archeological excavations, adding sites to the National Register of Historic Places, and NAs’ land stewardship efforts, NAs are preserving important historic buildings and districts. Because of these efforts, landmarks in our nation’s engineering and labor history have been reclaimed and incorporated by leveraging resources and the support of local communities.

Rivers of Steel frame our industrial heritage by restoring historic sites and sites into attractions by offering unique tours, workshops, exhibitions, and festivals. Sites open to the public include the I.U.A. Young & St. FOundry and Machine Shops, a National Historic Landmark built in 1868, that made parts for steamboats, coal mines, and railroads. Augusta Canal NAs restored the historic Enterprise Mill site, a offices, apartments, a Brown’s, and Discovery Center. Restored hydraulic turbines provide power to the mill while excess power sold to Georgia Power, generates revenue for programs.

NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS

- Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Heritage Area
- Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Area
- Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Area
- National Park Service
- National Heritage Areas
- Northern Plains National Heritage Area
- Silos and Smoke Stacks National Heritage Area
- South Park National Heritage Area
- Northern Plains National Heritage Area
- Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area

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National Heritage Areas

EDUCATION & STEWARDSHIP

National heritage areas preserve and present historic and cultural resources by engaging the public through a variety of educational programs. NHAs work to reach new and diverse audiences, share meaningful stories, develop curricula to connect residents, teachers, and students to history in their own backyards. They work with their partners to connect students and educators with their natural and cultural resources to interpret the public understanding of the relevance of heritage sites, which foster pride and support local economic development.

By conveying the value of those resources, educational programs help to grow stewards of our national resources.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIES

Along with the goals of cultural, historical, and natural resource protection, national heritage areas also strive to improve the quality of life in their regions by fostering the development of sustainable economies as set forth in their designation legislation. This designation highlights the importance of their resources and the national story they told.

Preservation and conservation projects undertaken by the NHAs, and their partners, have, over time, added economic value through increased heritage tourism, increased recreational opportunities such as trails and water access, and improved the quality of life for residents by reconnecting them with the resources that make their areas unique.

They support communities, increasing economic stability by keeping funds in productive use while encouraging citizens to recognize, restore, and explore their resources. NHAs are required to match their Heritage Partnership Program funds as appropriated by Congress. They often leverage funds from both private and public sources to support their mission, including increased heritage tourism, increased recreational opportunities such as trails and water access, and improved the quality of life for residents by reconnecting them with the resources that make their areas unique.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ROLE

NHAs collaborate with the National Park Service (NPS) and local partners to develop conservation and education approaches, by supporting community-driven initiatives. NPS staff provide planning, technical assistance, and financial support as appropriated by Congress. NHAs are not National Park units but instead are public-private partnerships where a designated coordinating organizational entity named in federal law works with communities and organizations to carry out and support the NPS development mission, as approved by the Secretary of the Interior. Many heritage areas have National Park units within their boundaries or developed close partnerships. These partnerships allow both organizations to fulfill shared stewardship, interpretation, and preservation goals.

LANDSCAPE & PRESERVATION

As lived in landscapes, NHAs common resources on a large scale. NHAs offer the NPS a strategy to expand stewardship beyond park boundaries. Examples of this connection: The 550-square-mile Essex NHA, in the heart of Iowa’s tallgrass prairie, tells of American agriculture’s global significance through partnerships to celebrate the land, people, and communities of the 25-county area. Freedom’s Way NHA includes the homes and landscapes of noted authors, such as Orchard House, home of Louisa May Alcott when she wrote Little Women, the Ralph Waldo Emerson House, and Walden Pond, made famous by Henry Thoreau. Seger’s Grots Mecklenburg’s ancient meanders, more than 3,000 square miles, showcases the rich history of south-central Colorado’s San Luis Valley. The massive area includes Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, national wildlife refuge, national forests, forest wilderness areas, wildlife areas, river sites on the National Register of Historic Places and the headwaters of the Rio Grande system.

NHA PROGRAM FACTS & FUNDING

After Congressional designations, NHAs are eligible for Congressionally appropriated funds through the National Park Service Heritage Partnership Program (HPP). The annual appropriation for an HPP project matches federal funds with in-kind or nonfederal sources. The financial assistance component of the program is secured with legal agreements, accountability measures, and performance requirements for NHA entities. NHA designation does not affect private property rights or impact federalism. While a National Heritage Area designation is permanent, funding from the HPP is authorized for a limited number of years, and the roles and responsibilities of the NPS may over time to meet the needs of the region and law.