

# **The Emergence and Significance of Heritage Areas in New York State and the Northeast**

Paul M. Bray

## **Introduction**

Heritage areas originally known as urban cultural parks are a form of park that emerged in the 1960s and has grown to include 49 national heritage areas and state heritage areas in New York State, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Maryland. As a park, heritage areas are urban settings or regional landscapes that expand the traditional elements of national and state parks in that they are a means under a heritage theme to preserve and manage an amalgam of natural and cultural resources to provide forms of recreation and foster sustainable economic development.

This paper will provide an overview of New York State heritage areas, their system and program and relate this to national and some other northeastern heritage area initiatives from a writer who has been an organizer of New York's first heritage area (Riverspark), the legislative drafter of New York heritage areas law, a member of the New York state and national heritage area advisory council, a lecturer on heritage areas at universities and a long-time advisor and advocate of heritage areas. Therefore, the sources for this paper are both from first-hand experience as well as research into particular circumstances in heritage areas where the writer was not directly engaged.

Its objectives are to introduce and expand knowledge about the origin and roles of heritage areas particularly in New York and the northeast and foster a better understanding of the forces behind the establishment of heritage areas and their contributions to society.

## **Historical Context of Parks**

In order to understand the meaning and significance of heritage areas it is useful to have an overview of the historical context of parks in the USA.

Galen Cranz in her 1982 book on the history of urban parks in the USA, *The Politics of Park Design: The History of Urban Parks in America*, identifies 4 epochs of urban parks: the Pleasure Ground (1850-1900) like Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park in New York City; the Reform Park (1900-1930), the Recreational Facility (1930-1965) and the Open-Space System (1965 and After).

Each epoch represented a response to the societal conditions and needs of its time. What distinguishes urban parks in the modern 19th and 20th centuries as cities and urban areas grew and mostly flourished is that the model of each epoch endured and was augmented and not replaced by new models. Central Park, hard surface play grounds and recreation facilities like urban skating rinks, public swimming pools and baseball fields, for example, are all part of current park inventory. Cranz's final epoch is dynamic with the city flowing into pastoral

gardens and traditional park like conditions flowing into the landscape of the city in the form, for example, of tot lots, “happenings” and street marathons. Cranz wrote, “More than a simple experience, it (the happening) was an aesthetic event whose subject, typically, was the urban population which participated in it.”<sup>5</sup>

With respect to the urban setting as a park, “In the late 1970s municipal, regional, and federal agencies cooperated to preserve segments of historic towns and landscapes such as Lowell, Massachusetts. These urban cultural parks, which were intended to preserve an important part of the nation’s industrial and economic history for educational and recreational purposes, were established on the assumption that all parts of the city-its work spaces, living quarters, and connecting streets-had equal aesthetic and recreational potential, that the city was in fact a work of art worthy of appreciation and objectification.”<sup>6</sup>

American national parks like Olmsted’s urban pleasure grounds took shape as landscapes separate and apart from surrounding land uses. Park advocates for the most part distained any direct presence of commercial activity within parks, but great park leaders like Stephen Mather, first Director of the National Park Service, and Frederick Law Olmsted, fully understood their separate and apart parks depended on generating economic activity. This economic activity, for example, was a symbiotic relationship between the national parks in the west with the growing railroads. Olmsted understood and carefully followed the development and increase in land values generated by his urban parks. He was also described by writer and public intellectual Lewis Mumford as being in the vanguard of urban planning. While Olmsted parks were physically separate and apart from other city land uses, Olmsted used parkways connecting his pleasure ground parks with establishment of various parks in order to shape the development of cities like Buffalo and Boston. The seeds for parks to encompass whole urban settings as happened in Lowell, Massachusetts or whole regions like heritage areas have evolved throughout the history of parks.

### **Background to Emergence of Heritage Areas**

Author Chuck Little traces the origin of heritage areas back to the Federal writer’s project that produced state and place guides in the 1930s, a New Deal “government-sponsored national self-portraiture.”

A number of forces were at work beginning in the 1960s to foster the creation of new parks and new ideas about what and where these parks should be.

Historic preservation blossomed from its roots with historic house museums to the advancement of the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 and historic districts which were portions of

---

<sup>5</sup> Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985 at 141

<sup>666</sup> *See id.*

cities. The Report from the Conservation foundation entitled *National Parks for a New Generation* in 1985 noted that “newer historic preservation trends that move beyond the “feature” to an entire setting, offering insights into the distinctive human and economic forces that shaped our cities and countryside” was troublesome to the National Park Service. In part, this was due to the fact that “conserving and maintaining such special places requires respect for lesser buildings that make up the ‘historic fabric’ or ‘cultural landscape’ and different management responses to retain residents and encourage appropriate uses.”<sup>7</sup>

The Conservation Foundation report also highlighted greenline or cooperative parks. It declared that: “The scale of the park system of the future depends in part on the success of greenline or cooperative parks that incorporate private property within park boundaries and sometimes state and local lands as well.” It noted “the approach borrows from British ‘greenline’ parks, admired in recent years by American planners and conservationists seeking ways to protect major landscapes, natural systems, and recreational resources without incurring astronomical purchase costs or displacing desirable residential communities and economic activities.”

New York’s Adirondack Park now 6 million acres in size, larger than the State of Massachusetts, with more than half of its area under private ownership, was designated by the State to be the Adirondack Park in 1892.

The Adirondack Park on its 100th anniversary in 1992 was called a park in the painful process of becoming a park and a “contested landscape”. This experience helps explain why officials in the National Park Service were lukewarm about being responsible for parks that were not under its ownership.

In brief, the expansive and sometimes clashing visions for the National Park System in the future have increasingly embraced living landscapes like the Pinelands National Reserve, the Lowell National Historical Park and the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. Ambivalence about taking responsibilities for living landscapes from the National Park Service and state park agencies led local governments and the private sector to be the engines for a new form of park now called the heritage area.

### **Creation of Riverspark**

Riverspark Heritage Area (initially named the Hudson Mohawk Urban Cultural Park) is the first heritage area in New York.

It was established in 1977 through an inter-municipal agreement by the Mayors, Supervisors and City Manager of the neighboring cities of Troy, Cohoes and Watervliet, Villages of Green Island and Waterford and the Town of Waterford located near the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers. The suburban town of Colonie was added later. The original municipalities

---

<sup>7</sup> National Parks for a New Generation: Visions, Realities, Prospects. Report from The Conservation Foundation. Washington, D.C. 1985, at 117

were 19th century industrial communities that shared a proximity to the Hudson River and a significant industrial heritage. Yet, they were in three separate counties and can be characterized as independent of each other and not prosperous.

In the early 1970s a group of residents mostly from Troy established a civic, nonprofit organization named the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway with the intention of celebrating and preserving the industrial heritage of the Hudson Mohawk region. The Gateway was known for its bus tours that enlightened residents and visitors alike to the rich heritage of the region including its Tiffany windows, interesting 19th century industrial, church and residential architecture and diversity of industries created in the 19th century including the still functioning Watervliet Arsenal commemorating its 200th anniversary in 2013. Labor historian Daniel Walkowitz, for example, wrote the book *Worker City, Company Town* contrasting Troy with its unionized Iron industry and Cohoes with its massive company town cotton mills some of which are being adaptively reused to house workers in today's high tech businesses.

The Gateway saw the Hudson Mohawk region as being national in significance and appropriate for the Smithsonian Institute to establish a museum of industrial history in the region to tell the story of this “birthplace of the Industrial Revolution”.

In the early 1970s the Hudson Mohawk municipalities were not prospering or benefiting from urban renewal, the approach of demolishing the old to be replaced with new development. They wanted to have new manufacturing jobs and were not very interested in historic preservation or the coastal zone management act which some advocates hoped would leader to revitalization of riverfront communities.

Under these circumstances, a farsighted new Mayor of the City of Cohoes, Ronald Canestrari, forged the intermunicipal agreement in 1977 to establish the Hudson Mohawk Urban Cultural Park (HMUCP) Commission committing this group of communities to the new idea of a park, an urban cultural park. A source of the urban cultural park idea or at least name came from efforts to preserve the Louis Sullivan buildings in the Chicago Loop in the 1960s, the work of the Gateway, planning efforts in Lowell, Massachusetts that included the National Park Service and trends in the environmental and historic preservation fields. Simply stated, an urban cultural park was urban or a settled area with an “amalgam of natural and cultural resources” designated to celebrate significant and related human attainments for an urban setting in a manner that integrated goals of conservation, education, recreation and sustainable development.

Former Mayor Canestrari set in motion a process of recognition, celebration and capitalization of an inter-municipal area that is a unique American cultural treasure. The HMUCP began the institutionalization of a living or inhabited urban park and the creation of a widening circle of partnerships that has been ongoing.

In 1977 the HMUCP made a proposal to the State Legislature for state designation. It led to the enactment of two laws, one designating HMUCP as a state urban cultural park and providing for a heritage trail plan to connect the heritage resources therein. The other law provided for a plan for a statewide system of urban cultural parks.

Between 1977 and 1982 when a state urban cultural park system with designation of 13 areas of the state ranging from the 400 square mile New York City Harbor to upstate village like Sackets Harbor on Lake Ontario and including the HMUCP, the HMUCP was moving ahead with planning and projects on its own initiative. The HMUCP changed its name to Riverspark (where water ignited a revolution).

The New York State urban cultural park system is designed to be a partnership with coordination and consistency between the State with its various functions like transportation, environmental conservation, housing and community renewal and economic development and locally created urban cultural parks that are designated by the State Legislature and have successfully complete a management plan approved by the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. The System law establishes an Advisory Council to help connect the urban cultural parks and state agencies. The state legislature changed the name urban cultural park to heritage area when regional additions were made to the system. Today the state heritage area system is made up of 20 state designated heritages areas that include both urban setting and regional areas.

### **Overview of Achievements of Riverspark**

Riverspark is guided by a state approved management plan under the theme of industry and labor which includes an extensive natural and cultural resources inventory of the whole areas of each or the original member communities, designation of a 26 mile heritage trail linking most of the resources, theme attractions like the Watervliet Arsenal museum and the Erie Canal Lock 2 Park, interpretive and recreational elements and a preservation strategy for both register properties and districts protected by local preservation ordinances and contributing properties. Three visitor centers have been established, though regrettably the Troy visitor center was recently closed. The original Commission, now a public benefit corporation, is the planning and programming entity while the member communities and private entities are responsible for individual Riverspark facilities.

Riverspark partners have included corporations who help underwrite Riverspark festivals like the annual Canalfest at the annual opening of the State Canal System in the Village of Waterford and nonprofit museums for whom Riverspark has been able to obtain State grants. A long term partnership has been undertaken with the State AFL-CIO to commemorate, celebrate and tell the story of industrial working life within Riverspark. The AFL-CIO called Riverspark “Labor’s Williamsburg.”

The transition from an agrarian to industrial society produced examples of dramatically different relationships between workers and employers. On the west shore of the Hudson River, Troy was a breeding ground of union activity. The Troy union of iron molders was the largest local in America at one time and the Trojan laundry workers organized the first female union in the nation. “Troy was the banner city of Americans for the trade union sentiment” declared William Sylvis, National Labor Union President in 1866.

A short distance to the north on the east shore of the Hudson River, the Harmony Mills Complex, once America’s largest complete cotton mill, made Cohoes into a company town. “Harmony Mills paternalism was distinguished by its thoroughness pervading almost every aspect of working-class life.”

The aforementioned Gateway has been restoring the historic Burden Building, the office for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Burden Iron Works, is the designated heritage tourism director for Riverspark and now is Riverspark’s managing director. The Burden Building doesn’t draw a large number of visitors, but the visitors that come are from many states and nations around the world.

The portions of the historic Harmony Mills in Cohoes overlooking the Mohawk River have been adaptively reused for 320 apartments that have attracted new residents to the Riverspark area who are finding jobs in an emerging high tech economy. Modern apartments and condominiums have been built along the Hudson River in Cohoes and a growing number of shops have opened along Remsen Street, the main street in Cohoes. A new park and overview has been developed to view the Cohoes Falls . The Cohoes Falls, also called The Great Falls of the Mohawk, were regarded as the second most beautiful cataract in New York State after Niagara Falls.

The Hudson River front in Troy has a growing number of river tour boats that stop in Troy for Gateway tours of Riverspark. Historic RPI is advancing cutting edge technologies and recently built a 21<sup>st</sup> century performing arts center, EMPAC, dedicated to advancing research and artistic production at the intersection of technology, media and the performing arts. Woodside in Troy is a restored 19<sup>th</sup> century church for the industrial barons of its time and is now a Contemporary Artists Center for artists to live/work with studios, gallery and performance events.

The Kate Mullany House in Troy was identified in a Riverspark study of site associated with labor unions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has received status as a National Landmark and an affiliated National Heritage Site. It is now part of the National Park System, though the affiliated status it shares with sites like the Tenement Museum in New York City and the Thomas Cole House in the Hudson Valley, means the National Park Service is not predominately responsible for restoration and management of the site. Paul Cole who started the American Labor Study Center with an office in the Mullany House has recently raised adequate State funding to restore Kate’s living quarters. Once this is completed, the Mullany House will be open to the public for tours.

The Village of Waterford in Riverspark has capitalized on its location on the Erie Canal to host an annual Tug Boat roundup and other festivities. Watervliet in Riverspark is home of the Watervliet Arsenal. The Arsenal founded in 1813 to support the War of 1812 is the oldest continuously active arsenal in the United States, and today produces much of the artillery for the army, as well as gun tubes for cannons, mortars, and tanks. It has been a National Historic Landmark since 1966. The Iron Building is a historic building at the Watervliet Arsenal used as the Watervliet Arsenal Museum. The Iron Building was built in 1859 and is "an outstanding example" of pre-fabricated cast iron construction. It is also the only building at the Arsenal to have a strong degree of Italianate styling.

The Arsenal celebrating its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013 has become a critical hub in New York's Tech Valley. Today it is also the home of a growing number of high tech companies like Vistec Lithography that moved to the Arsenal from Great Britain and M&WM+W U.S., Inc. that is part of the M+W Group, a worldwide leader in advanced technology facilities.

The aforementioned are only some of the highlights relating to heritage tourism, education, livability and high tech growth that have occurred since Riverspark was established in 1977.

The role of the Riverspark Heritage Area has varied on each of the highlights but overall it has connected seven communities with a shared geography and heritage, fostered the ideals of historic preservation, celebrated the shared heritage that has led some to call the Hudson Mohawk area "the 19<sup>th</sup> century Silicon Valley" and has helped make the past a living part of an emerging future economy that didn't exist before Riverspark was born.

### **The Larger Picture**

Riverspark and New York State are proud of their leadership role with heritage areas, but there have been other leaders deserving of recognition. "Massachusetts developed a strategy, based on the success of Lowell, for conserving and promoting the cultural resources of aging and declining cities to build community pride, enhance quality of life, and stimulate economic revitalization."<sup>8</sup> Pennsylvania has been another leader in the heritage areas movement. "The commonwealth was well versed in integrating state-run environmental, cultural, and economic programs in cities and communities and had been exploring the state heritage park approach. In 1984 the commonwealth developed a framework for a Pennsylvania Heritage Parks Program 'to preserve cultural resources in a manner which provides educational, recreational and economic benefits.'"<sup>9</sup>

Maryland is another state with a heritage area program. Heritage Areas are locally designated and State certified regions where public and private partners are committed to preserving

---

<sup>8</sup> J. Glenn Eugster, Evolution of the Heritage Areas Movement, *The George Wright FORUM*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2004, at 55.

<sup>9</sup> *See id.* at 58.

historical, cultural and natural resources for sustainable economic development through heritage tourism. The Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA) provides targeted State financial and technical assistance within a limited number of areas designated as “Certified Heritage Areas.”

The first generation of national heritage areas surfaced in 1984 with the designation of the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor. Today, there are 49 national heritage areas designated by Congress, four of which are within New York State. National heritage areas have been regional and some like the Tennessee National Heritage area encompasses the whole state of Tennessee while the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor in New York State stretches for 542 miles across the state to include state’s whole system of canals.

## **Conclusion**

The American heritage areas movement has been diverse. Some heritage areas have been urban and many have been regional. It is still looking for a permanent, nurturing home like the National Park Service for national heritage areas and state park agencies for state heritage areas. Heritage areas are also still looking for acceptance in the American family of parks. The notion of a city or region as a park remains hard for many park professionals to accept and for the public to understand. Although the Adirondack Park is more than 100 years old, one can still find bumper stickers on the cars of residents declaring “This is no damn Park, I live here”. Fortunately, in the case of the Adirondack Park, in recent years there has been for the first time real signs of collaboration between park residents, park advocates and park managers to find their common ground that the park really is a park. For heritage areas we need more conversations in many forums to be able to full take advantage of this wonderful civic achievement the heritage area movement has given us in the last four decades.

## **References**

- Bray, Paul. 1994. *The Heritage Area Phenomenon*. CRM, Vol 17 No. 8. Washington, DC.
- Bray, Paul. May 1988. *Possibility of Parks Unbounded*, Environment, University of Waterloo, Canada.
- Cranz, Galen. 1982. *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Eugster, J. Glenn. 2003. *Evolution of the Heritage Areas Movement*. George Wright FORUM, Volume 20, Number 2. Hancock, Michigan.
- Hudson-Mohawk Urban Cultural Park Management Plan*. 1984. The Hudson-Mohawk Urban Cultural Park Commission. Cohoes, New York.
- National Parks for a New Generation: Visions, Realities, Prospects. 1985. The Conservation Foundation. Washington, D.C.
- New York Urban Cultural Park System: Summary Plan. 1981. New York State Office of Parks and Recreation. Albany, New York.



*Partnerships in Parks & Preservation: Proceedings and Bibliography*. 1991. Co-sponsored by the National Park Service; The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and the National Parks and Conservation Association and its New York Chapter. Albany, New York.

*Parks: New Directions in Resource Planning: Proceedings from a symposium at Cornell University*. 1989. Sponsored by Cornell University's Department of City and Regional Planning and its Graduate Program in Landscape Architecture; the New York Parks and Conservation Association and the New York Regional Plan Association. Stuart W. Stein and Paul Bray, editors. Cornell University. Ithaca, New York.

Robert Weible. 2011. "Visions and Reality: Reconsidering the Creation and Development of Lowell's National Park, 1966—1992," *The Public Historian* Vol 33, No 2.