

HERITAGE INTERPRETATION PLANS TECHNICAL BULLETIN

Heritage interpretation plays a crucial role in sharing the cultural, historical, and natural significance of heritage sites with the public. A comprehensive Heritage Interpretation Plan (HIP) organizes key sites, identifies important themes, and determines the appropriate methods and tools for communicating that information to diverse audiences. This bulletin outlines the benefits and steps involved in preparing a Heritage Interpretation Plan. While this type of planning can be accomplished several ways depending on the resource(s) being addressed, this bulletin follows the method currently used in Chester County, Pennsylvania.

Benefits and Purpose of a Heritage Interpretation Plan

Municipalities benefit from developing and implementing Heritage Interpretation Plans.

These plans help ensure that the heritage of an area is effectively recognized, preserved, and communicated, which all contribute to a municipality's cultural identity and economic well-being.

- **Cultural Preservation and Education**
 - Protects Heritage: HIPs help municipalities prioritize historic sites, buildings, landscapes, and traditions that are significant to the local culture and identity.
 - Educational Tool: These plans foster a deeper understanding of local history and culture for both residents and visitors.
- **Tourism and Economic Development**
 - Boosts Tourism: Heritage sites and cultural tourism are significant economic drivers. A well-crafted interpretation plan can make a municipality more attractive to tourists, drawing them to heritage sites, museums, historic districts, and events that celebrate the community's past.
 - Economic Benefits: Increased Tourism can lead to the growth of local businesses, including hotels, restaurants, gift shops, and transportation services. It can also create job opportunities related to heritage management and tourism services.
- **Community Engagement and Pride**
 - Strengthens Community Identity: Interpretation plans allow residents





Examples of interpretation at various sites. 1. Interpretive kiosk at Watkins Glen State Park, NY. 2. Small interpretive sign in Great Outway National Park, Australia directing visitors' attention. 3. Interpretive kiosk at trailhead in Landenberg, PA. 4. Low profile interpretive wayside at Cheslen Preserve, PA. 5. An upright interpretive wayside is incorporated into a cycling stop along the Erie Canal, NY. 6. Ghost Rivers is a public art installation and history walk in Baltimore, MD.

to reflect on their shared history and values, fostering a sense of pride and belonging. It can be particularly beneficial in communities where there is a rich, diverse history or where past struggles and triumphs can be highlighted.

- **Inclusive Storytelling:** These plans can ensure that various voices and stories are included, particularly those of marginalized or underrepresented groups in the community's history, promoting diversity and inclusivity.
- **Sustainable Development and Planning**
 - **Informs Planning Decisions:** Heritage interpretation plans can guide development in a way that respects and integrates heritage sites. This helps municipalities manage growth while preserving the
- **historical and cultural character of places.**
- **Sustainability:** By focusing on the historical landscape and cultural sites, municipalities can help ensure that development doesn't overshadow or destroy important heritage, striking a balance between modern growth and preservation.
- **Preserves the Environment:** In cases of cultural landscapes, heritage interpretation can highlight the importance of environmental conservation alongside historical preservation.
- **Funding and Grant Opportunities**
 - **Access to Funding:** Municipalities with formal heritage interpretation plans are often better positioned to access government grants and funding opportunities for preserving heritage

sites. This financial support can aid in conservation, education, and development projects that promote heritage tourism.

- **Partnerships:** These plans can help forge partnerships with heritage organizations, academic institutions, and community groups, who may be able to provide resources, expertise, or additional funding.

- **Branding**

- **Enhanced Municipality Branding:** A municipality with a clear, well-developed heritage narrative can position itself as a destination with a unique cultural offering. Heritage interpretation adds depth to the municipality's brand and can differentiate it from others.
- **Publicity and Media:** Heritage initiatives often attract media attention, allowing the municipality to promote its history and culture more effectively through different channels like local news, publications, and social media.

- **Community Well-being**

- **Sense of Place and Belonging:** Heritage interpretation can contribute to a positive and inclusive public space, fostering social cohesion and a sense of pride in one's community, all of which are associated with

improved mental and emotional well-being.

- **Enhances the Public Realm:** Effective interpretation can beautify and revitalize areas of the municipality, making them more appealing for both residents and visitors. This can encourage outdoor activities, walkability, and cultural engagement.

Developing a Heritage Interpretation Plan

Heritage Interpretation Plans, no matter the format or subject, generally contain similar information garnered from following a similar development process:

- **Establish Goals:** The goal typically centers on communicating the heritage significance of a site(s) to visitors. Other Goals may include:
 - Educating visitors about the site's historical, cultural, or environmental value.
 - Promoting tourism and visitation.
 - Supporting preservation and conservation efforts.
 - Engaging local communities and fostering pride in the site.
- **Develop Objectives:** Develop specific, measurable objectives that support the goal.



The Kennett Square Heritage Center focuses on the history and development of Kennett Square, PA.



The entrance plaza at He Mni Can-Barn Bluff in Red Wing, Minnesota is comprised of four storyteller markers that talk about the history and importance of this site. The information is transcribed in English and Dakota with an audio component that allows visitors to hear the spoken Dakota text. The seven columns of dialogue (pictured here) round out the plaza and contain images, text, quotes, and patterns.

Objectives may include:

- Enhancing visitors' knowledge about the site's significance.
- Encouraging sustainable tourism and conservation practices.
- Providing diverse, engaging experiences for different types of visitors.
- **Identify the Audience:** Understanding the target audience and their needs is key to guiding the development of the interpretation to ensure that it resonates with intended visitors. It is important to understand:
 - Who the visitors are (residents, tourists, students, etc.).
 - What kind of experiences appeal to a diverse audience group (educational, emotional, interactive).
 - Accessibility requirements (physical, sensory, and cognitive needs).
 - Technological preferences (e.g., digital apps, audio guides).

Interpretive Planning Process

Interpretive planning is an organized process that helps determine what stories a site can tell and how to communicate those stories effectively. The process includes defining themes, setting goals, and determining the media to be used.

- **Initial Research:** Interpretive planning begins with thorough research to identify sites and stories. This early research helps guide the future interpretive activities identified in the plan by determining the stories and perspectives that should be prioritized.
 - Engaging with community members, experts, and potential audiences.
 - Identifying the significant historical, cultural, and natural stories associated with a site.
- **Identify Interpretive Goals:** These goals help prioritize which elements of the site's heritage should be emphasized.
 - What do we hope to achieve through interpretation?



An interpretive wayside captions the landscape and historic site that visitors are looking at in Carson National Forest, NM.

- What key messages or emotions should be conveyed?
 - Are there specific actions we want visitors to take after experiencing the interpretation?
 - **Creation of Interpretive Themes:** Research reveals stories and messages that will become the core of interpretation. These stories are grouped into themes, which form the foundation of the interpretive plan. Chester County developed, through their Heritage Tourism Plan, a series of primary themes for the county. These themes are not exhaustive, they highlight the significant stories of the county as a whole but Heritage Interpretation Plans for a municipality or smaller region can focus on different themes while connecting into the countywide Heritage Interpretive Network. The primary themes identified in Chester County:
 - The Natural Landscape
 - The Cultural Landscape
 - Evolving Vales
 - The Philadelphia Campaign
 - Iron and Steel
 - Creative Expression
- ## Heritage Interpretation Network and Master Planning
- It is at this stage where sites are then identified as they relate to the Heritage Interpretation Network.
- The Heritage Interpretation Network is a system used to classify locations based on their suitability for visitor access, connection to other related sites in the network, and size of potential interpretive facilities. The four classifications are:
 - Gateways
 - Locations suitable for large-scale interpretive facilities
 - Allow for larger groups of visitors to
 - Greater range of educational activities and programming
 - Include public amenities such as restrooms, water fountains, etc.
 - Functions as the ideal first stop in learning about the identified themes before visitors then disperse to Heritage Centers and Interpretive Sites
 - Examples would be visitor centers in a state or national parks, and the Brandywine Battlefield Museum
 - Heritage Centers
 - Medium scale interpretive facilities
 - Smaller group of visitors
 - Shorter visitor experience than a Gateway
 - May include public amenities
 - May be indoors and/or outdoors
 - Highlight a main theme
 - Connect visitors to surrounding interpretive sites
 - Interpretive Sites
 - Small scale interpretive facilities like a wayside
 - A few visitors
 - Amenities are not likely
 - Highlight a specific event or cultural tradition related to that specific site
 - Viewing Corridors
 - Identified areas along transportation routes
 - Highlight the landscape and buildings and their importance within the interpretive framework of the community and the region

- Can be along driving, cycling, or walking routes
- Following the classification of heritage sites as either a Gateway, Heritage Center, or Interpretive Site, the entire network is reviewed to identify where themes will be addressed and storylines told.
- Interpretive site themes are often easily identified based on the site's physical location and resources.
- This framework helps guide recommendations and implementable strategies including phasing of interpretive elements.

Draft Concept Plans: Concept plans are developed for identified Heritage Centers and select Interpretive Sites to visualize how interpretive elements can be used to convey information. Any necessary site enhancements such as ramps for accessibility or additional parking can also be shown. Concept Plans can include:

- Media: Images, text, video, and digital resources
- Built Objects: Exhibits, interpretive panels, monuments, or statues
- Programming: Guided tours, events, workshops, or performances
- Landscape alterations: May include additional walkways or site installations

Cost Estimate: Drafting concept plans allow for preliminary cost estimates to be developed based on recommended interpretive tools and site modifications. These cost estimates guide the phasing of the network elements and provide

municipalities with an understanding of funding requirements for implementation.

Recommendations and Implementation Plan: Recommendations are developed to guide the implementation of the Heritage Interpretive Plan. These can be phased to better align with municipality time and resources. Key partners are identified for each recommendation that lays out which municipalities, commissions, or organizations have a role in the implementation process.

Collaboration with Stakeholders and Community Engagement: As with any municipal planning document, Collaboration with local communities, cultural organizations, educational institutions, and the public is vital. Engagement happens throughout the planning process and plays a key role in identifying potential heritage sites, how users interact with heritage sites, and what residents are interested in.

Conclusion

A Heritage Interpretation Plan is an essential document for connecting stories across a municipality and region. It uses the Heritage Interpretation Network to classify sites and create a cohesive set of sites that visitors can easily identify. Interpretation plans identify sites and themes that will most effectively communicate the significance of the sites and region's heritage to visitors. The process involves extensive research, identification of themes and goals, development of interpretive tools, and collaboration with various stakeholders. By following a structured approach the result will be a plan that can be successfully implemented over time with interpretive media that engages a diverse audience.



Interpretation at Batoche National Historic Site in Canada.