

Cultural Heritage Tourism: Best Practices and Key Concepts for Regional Initiatives

A Report for the American Folklore Society's Professional Development and Best Practices Program

by

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cul·tur·al (kuhl-cher-uhl) *–adjective* Of or pertaining to culture or cultivation.

her·i·tage (hr-tj) *–noun* 1. Property that is or can be inherited; an inheritance; 2. Something that is passed down from preceding generations; a tradition; 3. The status acquired by a person through birth; a birthright.

tour·ism (trzm) *–noun* 1. The practice of traveling for pleasure; 2. The business of providing tours and services for tourists.

Background/Context:

Ellen McHale and Lisa Overholser are staff at the New York Folklore Society. Over the past three years, the New York Folklore Society has contracted with the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor to conduct cultural surveys. Daniel Franklin Ward is curator of the Erie Canal Museum in Syracuse, a history and folklife interpretive center. In the fall of 2010, we received AFS Professional Development Assistance to attend the World Canals Conference, held in Rochester, NY. The invitation to attend the conference came as a result of our respective organizations' independent ongoing work in conjunction with the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor to document folklife and traditions of and around the Erie Canal and other waterways in New York State. Attendance at this

conference was a unique opportunity to take part in an international gathering devoted exclusively to canals.

As folklorists amongst the engineers and recreational boaters who made up the majority of the delegates at the conference, it was initially hard not to feel out of place. Yet, as we attended panels and took part in conference discussions and tours, we found ways that our approaches connected with ideas and topics presented at the conference. In part, this may be because there seems to be a growing interest in place-based tourism, something for which the folk arts field is uniquely qualified. Organizations who may not necessarily have a focus on cultural heritage (in this case, canal organizations, waterways and so on) are increasingly acknowledging the rich ways that built structures interact with local communities.

Shortly after the World Canals Conference in Rochester, we had the good fortune to be invited to a cultural and heritage symposium, Bridges to the Future – Empowerment Through Collaboration, in the spring of 2011 at Colgate University. Bridges to the Future was organized by a newly evolving network of organizations interested in fostering cultural heritage tourism across New York State. Much of the thrust of this new network's conference was in the direction of developing "corridor" tourism – the Erie Canalway Corridor being primary in upstate New York - and in fostering collaborative projects.

This report:

This report derives from our observations through participation in these two opportunities, as well as follow up discussions and meetings. Based on our observations, we have attempted to identify what we feel are best practices for folk arts organizations in relation to canal-related cultural heritage tourism. In a broader sense, these practices may also be applied to any kind of cultural heritage tourism that deals with built structures and the community that surrounds them. Neither strictly tangible nor intangible cultural heritage, this kind of heritage interpretation depends upon the interaction between the two.

Our methodology for compiling this report consisted of each of us attending as many different panel sessions and other scheduled events as we could at the World Canals Conference and the Cultural Heritage Symposium, comparing notes and discussing our findings. On March 31 we held a final meeting in Cooperstown to discuss the potential applications of what we learned.

We all heard repeatedly at both conferences that authenticity was the lynchpin of successful cultural heritage tourism. The National Trust for Historic Preservation defines heritage tourism as "travelling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past." The overarching purpose is to gain an

appreciation of the past. Cultural heritage tourism, by contrast, is “travelling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present.” The present moment becomes part of the continuum. From a resources management standpoint, cultural heritage tourism can be thought of as the branch of tourism oriented toward the experience of cultural heritage of the location where the tourism is occurring.

We concluded that, for our purposes, we could focus our observations most effectively on our interest in Cultural Heritage Tourism and the Erie Canal by forefronting the two most often asked questions as an entry to corridor-wide interpretation:

1. What was the world that created the Erie Canal?
2. What was the world that the Canal created?

These two key questions, repeatedly raised by the delegates to the World Canals Conference and participants in the Cultural Heritage Symposium and by the touring public along the corridor seem to be central to a discussion of the Erie Canalway as an historical “heritage” interpretive focus. The first of these - “What was the world that created the Erie Canal?” – is often asked as “Why here and not somewhere else?” The second - “What was the world that the Erie Canal created?” – covers all aspects of upstate New York’s development to the tourist’s present day.

So, visitors to the Canalway need to know that the world that brought forth the Erie Canal was a very different world than the one being experienced right now. The young nation was still largely a place invested in agriculture and that the re-settlement of the former Haudenosaunee territories by Revolutionary soldiers was for nearly subsistence level farming. The terrain was rough and the few existing roads were either simple dirt paths or plank or corduroy roads. Shipping of bulk goods to distant markets was unknown. The port of New York had fallen on bad times, surpassed by Philadelphia and New Orleans.

Visitors should also know that an accident of geology made the possibility of a canal through New York obvious to a few, many of them surveyors. The Eastern Seaboard of North America is protected from the continent’s interior by mountains ranging from the arctic all the way to Georgia. The only break in this great mountain range is through a narrow valley containing the Mohawk River. George Washington – a surveyor turned soldier – first wrote of the idea of a canal at that location while fighting in the French and Indian War.

By the beginning of the 19th century, discussions of a canal through the passage became more common. Surveyors mapped possible routes and, with varying success, several private companies attempted canal systems utilizing locks. Following the War of 1812,

the need for a route across the state for military purposes was demonstrated when shipments to Fort Niagara along Lake Ontario were intercepted by British warships.

Shortly thereafter, on July 4, 1817, the State of New York began construction of the Erie Canal, a forty foot wide and four foot deep ditch. Opened in short sections at first, when the completed canal opened in 1825 everything changed. Suddenly easy, relatively fast and inexpensive transport and travel became available to and from the vast western frontier. Goods and people could be moved in both east and west directions – not just the length of the canal but from the farthest reaches of the Great Lakes to New York City and beyond into a global economy. Great prosperity and social change resulted along the canal and in the port cities, especially New York City.

So, what was the world the Erie Canal created? This is the theme that can be interpreted locally at each stop along the Canalway. Everything that exists today is the legacy of the canal. Syracuse was a “dismal swamp” before the canal drained the wetlands; Rochester was just a waterfall before the Erie Canal opened world markets for flour milled by the power of that waterfall. Buffalo was just a rocky lakeshore before the canal made it into the granary of the world and the node for Great Lakes shipping.

Though the Erie Canal continues to operate today, the place – the physical Canal itself is not the legacy. It is the part you visit as a tourist. The Erie Canal was a transformational force that hit the 1820s culture much like the popularized internet hit the 1990s. Bringing people together from diverse backgrounds gave rise to new ideas on what was still the western frontier. Abolitionism, women’s rights and many other new and radical ideas grew along the Canalway. Today the rich cultural heritage of the Erie Canalway Corridor is the centerpiece for the fastest growing industry in upstate New York: Cultural Heritage Tourism.

FIVE BEST PRACTICES IDENTIFIED

We identified five best practices for Cultural Heritage Tourism: 1. Collaborate; 2. Realize the Complexity; 3. Maximize Tools at One’s Disposal; 4. Interact With Community; and, 5. Recognize that Interpretation Is A Continuum. We will now discuss these with reference to what we encountered at the World Canals Conference and the Cultural Heritage Symposium.

1. Collaborate:

Our attendance at the World Canals Conference sprang from the ongoing work of the Erie Canal Museum and the New York Folklore Society, and our involvement with the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor. This kind of collaborative work has the

potential to benefit both sides of the partnership. Collaboration may involve historic and heritage sites collaborating, either through branding or through interpretation of their sites, to present a more complete “historical narrative” to the tourism traveller.

Collaboration can also be accomplished through multiple organizations or agencies collaborating to better accommodate the tourism visitor, as with local tourism promotion agencies, business owners, heritage sites, and units of government examining the tourism infrastructure of an area (i.e. lodging, wayfinding signage, promotion, and local capacity to accommodate visitors) and then working collaboratively to provide or encourage the necessary amenities to promote tourism.

Folklorists have long recognized the need for collaborative partnerships among many community sectors in order to develop sustainable tourism initiatives. Folklorists also acknowledge the importance to a community to interpret and manage its own heritage resources. In 2010, the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor collaborated with the New York Folklore Society to undertake a survey of the Corridor’s cultural and artistic assets to identify resources for cultural tourism. Similarly, at the World Canals’ Conference, Don Dillon of *Barges in France.com* presented their company’s efforts in France to involve the local cultural assets of a region through inviting local experts on board the slow moving canal boats to present some aspect of their community’s history, or to provide opportunities for the canal traveller to explore the French countryside or villages on bicycle or foot between canal locks. In a comparable presentation by Corn Hill Navigation of Rochester, area educators were taken on a canal boat through a portion of the Canal in order to experience the urban landscape of Rochester, New York from the vantage-point of the canalway. This was an experiential tour which was offered as part of an educational component of the conference, through which the importance of collaboration between k-12 educators and cultural and heritage sites was showcased.

Collaborations between multiple local organizations help to define larger geographic areas as cultural regions. Rather than competing with each other, local organizations can collaborate to interpret their shared canal or watershed history, thereby forging a statewide or regional identity. The interpretation of smaller, more defined cultural or heritage sites may have a multiplier effect which strengthens the overall interpretation of the larger cultural region. Each discrete site can really only tell a part of the story but a defined heritage corridor can have an aggregating effect. This is an important consideration when one is operating concerned with a canal or waterway which has a large geographical reach.

Other examples of collaboration presented at the World Canals Conference included the work of the Netherlands Canal system, as presented by Nicholas van Lamsweerden, who spoke of working with small craft and large shipping vessels to better effect a safe and pleasurable marine environment so that both commercial and pleasure boats may safely use the canal. In anticipation of next year’s conference in China, Yuan Wang of

Southeast University in Nanjing spoke of the importance of collaboration in the management of the Grand Canal of China, a World Heritage Site. An implicit concept in both these presentations was the importance to recognize the concept of “capacity” in regards to cultural and heritage tourism. In many cases, local tourism should recognize that “more” is not necessarily “better,” especially in the case of visitors to a community. A community wishing to showcase its cultural and heritage assets needs to balance their desire for an enhanced economy with the reality of its community’s infrastructure. If historic sites are only able to accommodate small numbers of people at any one time, or if canal ecosystems are ecologically fragile, significant visitation will not assist that community to realize its goals. Tourism will be detrimental, rather than beneficial, to a community.

The need for better collaboration was the background discussion at the conference and, during down time it became the main topic of discussion. We were all invited into these discussions with others working in cognate fields along the Erie Canal Corridor and these discussions are beginning to yield new projects.

The *Bridges to the Future Symposium* held at Colgate University, was a showcase for model collaborations and a strategic planning session for future collaborations. The intention was to promote collaboration to increase tourism and, in doing so, to increase the “bottom line” for everyone. We were treated to presentations on county-wide collaborations like those developed by Auburn’s Historical Culture Sites Commission and to a strategic plan from Madison County’s Cultural and Heritage Symposium and we learned of a Quebec/New York Partnership built around traditional foodways and tourism.

What was clear was that cultural heritage tourism is always bigger than any one place or interpretive center or museum or historic site. Acting alone or trying to compete is counter productive. The examples shown were all successful on many levels and all led to additional collaborations. We found that collaborations are also encouraged by local funders – especially by private foundations – and by units of local government.

2. Realize the Complexity Of Cultural Heritage Tourism: Cultural heritage can mean many different things to different people, and there are many portals through which people access it and understand it as tourists. We heard reports of some sites using recreation as a means to access heritage tourism, while others utilized the concept of environmental stewardship and yet others focused on more historical aspects.

Dawn Bronson, of the Trent-Severn Waterway in Canada, spoke of the multi-faceted use of their waterway to the community at large, in addition to just locking people through and recreational use. They presented some of their initiatives that were designed to target

and highlight each of these roles. Their *Leaders of the Landscape* initiative, for example, shifted focus to the role the waterway plays in water management and environmental conservation. For the initiative, they partnered with Bass Pro Shops to design a series of programs and interpretive material highlighting the 36 species that are at risk along the Waterway.

Edward Schinkel of the LWL Industrial Museum in Germany spoke of the necessity to innovate and be creative in how heritage is interpreted. As a museum whose primary goal is to focus on the historical role that locks, canals, barges and boats played in Germany's industrial heritage, he says it was difficult to understand the value of these now non-functioning and decaying structures. By restoring one of the steamships in their possession, and relying on historic photographs and documents, they were able to do an exhibition about family life as it would have existed at that time, providing a family context. Schinkel claims such measures gave the boat "credibility" and relevance for today's visitors. They even rent the boat out for parties, concerts and other functions, transforming a historic relic into a once-again vital part of the community.

3. Maximize Tools At One's Disposal: Technology was certainly a buzzword at both the canal conference and the tourism symposium. We've broadened the term *technology* to include those physical tools that aid in the effort of heritage interpretation, which can include online technology, as well as also lesser-known and underutilized tools such as wayfinding signage. In the case of canals and canal structures, it's also important to acknowledge and realize the technology is already embedded in the subject itself, and use that as a basis for heritage interpretation.

In one of the most dazzling presentations at the World Canals Conference, Walt Aikman, adjunct professor of Biology at SUNY - Cayuga Community College, demonstrated the effectiveness of geo-spatial mapping as a tool in embedding a sense of responsible land stewardship. He described his experiences working with several internship students from Great Britain over the summer in putting together a proposal for the Four Canals State Historical Park. They used ArcGIS, a group of software products used for geographical mapping, as well as information obtained from the GIS Information Clearinghouse, to provide specifications in the proposal. Using this technology, the student interns were able to locate and record forgotten sites from the abandoned and fragmented sections of the historic Erie Canal. This information was then overlaid with current mapped images of the same area to present a virtual snapshot of both past and present. Geographic case studies like this, particularly with the inclusion of geospatial mapping technology, not only makes history appear to come alive, it ultimately leads to a better understanding of local geography and instills better critical thinking skills for those utilizing the technology.

Geo-spatial mapping was also discussed in a presentation by David Edwards-May of Great Britain and France. Rather than using mapping for interpretive purposes, David Edwards-May spoke of the importance of “Euromapping” for better navigational and wayfinding purposes. For tourism purposes, the ability to locate oneself has important ramifications for the safety and health of the traveller; with the use of Geo-positioning one can more quickly receive aid in the case of an emergency.

Finally, Anani Lazare Sossou-Agbo, from Cotonou, Benin, framed the waterway itself (in this case, the Lagoon-Waterway Complex of the Ouémé Basin) as a technological tool that had important implications in transforming local human development. He explained that among some local ethnic communities, although women outnumber men in oyster farming and as fish merchants, they still experience a lag in education and contribution to the gross domestic product. These women have increasingly worked with micro-credit agencies, but as he says: “Micro-credit agencies give them the power to organize, but the canal gives them the physical ability to carry it out.” Thus, as a tool that has the ability to transform local life, it’s important to acknowledge the technological basis for interpretation that the canal in this case provides.

4. Interaction With The Community Is Key:

One high point of the World Canals Conference was an amazing demonstration program that illustrated the potential of tourism to revitalize a place. It involved mixing visitors to Rochester with members of the local community and their community leaders. The event became a topic of discussion that lasted throughout the week, both among the visitors and among the local community. Indeed the conversation spurred by the event continues in the local community.

For many years a small group of Erie Canal enthusiasts had been organizing to have the City of Rochester re-water the historic Erie Canal through the downtown business district. Like most of the upstate New York cities that were built along the canal, in the early 20th century, Rochester had the canal re-routed to bypass the downtown business area. Unlike the bypass projects in Syracuse and Buffalo, however, Rochester chose not to fill in the canal prism with debris and pave a boulevard on top of the fill. Instead the old Erie Canal through Rochester was “capped” by Broad Street, leaving the old canal bed under the street for a subway tunnel which was used for many years and then abandoned. Uncapping and re-watering the canal would be relatively easy compared to re-excavating a canal as would be necessary in other Erie Canal municipalities.

The downtown Rochester section of the Erie Canal has a distinctive feature in its stone arched aqueduct over the Genesee River. In recent years the abandoned subway has become an underground city for homeless people. The aqueduct under Broad Street is the center of the underground homeless community.

The conference organizers decided to add a special event to the conference program - a dinner inside the 1842 Erie Canal Aqueduct that would assure to mix the canal enthusiasts from all over the world with local citizens and, hopefully, some influential local decision makers and politicians.

The homeless were chased away and a “clean up” of the aqueduct began. A wooden staircase allowing street-level access was constructed. Almost immediately the homeless returned and burned the staircase. The homeless were again removed, the staircase rebuilt and this time security guards were put in place to keep the empty aqueduct free of interlopers. By the beginning of the World Canals Conference, the entire aqueduct was cleaned, hung with canal-related artworks, carpeted wall-to-wall and equipped with stages for “canal musicians” and other entertainers, food serving stations, full service bars and tables for a five-hour mixer called the “Dinner in the Ditch” by the organizers.

By 2010, even before the event, many local leaders had already begun to take the re-watering proposal seriously. After this event, nearly all were convinced that re-watering the canal should be a high priority project. Members of the local community finally saw the possibility and the potential of a re-watered Erie Canal through the downtown district. If they missed the point of the demonstration, several hundred tourists were at the party to hit the idea home.

The author of the re-watering plan and the genius behind the “Dinner in the Ditch” was Thomas X. Grasso, President of the Canal Society of New York State and Chair of the World Canals Conference. By 2010, Grasso had been advocating for the re-watering project for years. Over that time he learned a great deal about how to educate decision makers. He knew that to bring canal experts from all parts of the US and the world to downtown Rochester was only as difficult as bringing the annual World Canals conference to town. Knowing the enthusiasm of these delegates, Grasso was sure that they would favor the re-watering project and would speak eloquently in defense of the idea. To mix canal interested delegates from the world over with local community members – including power brokers - would seem to be a tougher job but Grasso was certain that the novelty of a “Dinner in the Ditch” would be difficult for any Rochesterian to resist. Everybody came. Everybody had fun and ate well. Everybody talked. Possibilities were visualized. Since the 2010 World Canals Conference, urban planners and engineers are looking at the removal of Broad Street and the eventual re-watering of the Erie Canal through Rochester’s downtown. The “Dinner in the Ditch” was a memorable experience for the visitors to Rochester. It also demonstrated the power of an unusual event – well planned – with direct visual reference to change minds and possibly cityscapes. It also showed how tourism can impact a community’s ideas about itself.

5. Interpretation Is A Continuum

Interpretation should be viewed in a continuum through both space and time. More complete interpretations of the Erie Canal through space and time involve the use of narrative and oral histories, as well as rigorous archival research. As illustrated by Craig Williams of the New York State Museum, Albany in his talk, “Eire Canal Myth-Busters: What Not to Teach,” the Erie Canal’s story is often falsely reported and misrepresented in New York’s k-12 school curriculum. Complete and non-biased research using archival sources is needed to accurately tell the story of New York’s Erie Canal.

A sensory illustration of interpretation as a continuum was enacted at the culmination of the World Canals Conference, in a two day boat excursion on the New York Sate Canal System for approximately forty of the delegates. The delegates packed on board the historic 1931 Mary Jemison from Corn Hill Landing near downtown Rochester. The intent was to study “innovation, social reform and religious movements in America’s Erie Canal Corridor” but the experience transcended the study of history.

Following an early departure the tourists received a blow by blow narrative description of the passing cityscape and then the rural landscape from canal historian, Victoria Schmitt. When appropriate, Captain Rob Mangold announced important structures along the canal over a public address system. At mid-day, the May Jemison docked at Palmyra – once known as the Queen of the Erie Canal Towns – for lunch and a land tour of the historic village where Joseph Smith had lived and first published the English translation of the golden plates he had found in nearby Hill Cumorah.

The tour was led by a local historian provided by Historic Palmyra, a non-profit corporation. Historic Palmyra's mission is “to save the history of Palmyra and vicinity through preservation of architecture, artifacts, and archives; teaching and educating all in that history using its museums and collections.” This mission is served primarily through the operation of four unique museums, of which the tourists visited only one. The Phelps General Store is billed appropriately as the museum "where time stands still.” Proprietor William Phelps completed renovations to the store by 1875, which were subsequently left untouched by his son Julius, who locked the doors of the fully stocked store in 1940. He left a unique time capsule that was only recently dusted off for cultural heritage tourists to explore.

The afternoon’s voyage included more travel and more narrative from the tour guide and the captain. At 4 pm, the boat docked in Newark where the tourists were led on a tour of a Barge Canal lock and power station, some recently-painted canalside murals and a walking tour over two abandoned sections of earlier Erie Canals. The tourists had dinner on their own and retired to a local hotel.

Early next morning the Mary Jemison departed Newark for a non-stop run to Seneca Falls. Lunch was served on board and, noting that he was ahead of schedule, Captain

Mangold extended the trip by a few miles to show the tourists the ruins of an original stone arched aqueduct. The boat then navigated out of the Erie and into the Cayuga-Seneca Barge Canal for a run into Seneca Falls where National Park Service provided an amazing program on social movements of the 19th century and then returned everyone to Rochester by van.

Conclusion

Cultural Heritage Tourism as a concept was concretized in the mid-1990's, as international, national, and state agencies and non-governmental organizations worked to define it. In the United States, the 1995 conference *White House Conference on Travel and Tourism*, helped to energize the linkages between travel and tourism, and heritage, humanities and the arts. In the ensuing sixteen years, proponents of cultural and heritage tourism have developed strategies and techniques for sustainable tourism. These strategies and core concepts were in evidence at the 2010 World Canals Conference which took place in Rochester, New York and which showcased New York's Erie Canal. These core concepts (collaboration, a recognition of the complexity of interpreting a community's heritage, the use of technology, the importance of community interaction, and the necessary use of sound interpretive practices and research) are important to consider when designing and implementing sustainable cultural heritage tourism. The use of these core concepts will help to ensure a credible, authentic, and consistently positive experience for the cultural and heritage traveller. Additionally, acknowledging these core concepts will ensure that the local "host" community receives the economic benefit from tourism while it experiences an increased interest and pride in its own cultural assets without negatively impacting the community's natural and cultural resources.