

APPENDIX E

Guidance for **COMMUNITY INTERPRETIVE PLANS**

Towns, cities, villages, and other types of communities participating in the Freedom's Way Heritage Area's interpretive program are encouraged to prepare a community interpretive plan. The purpose of the plan is to describe how interpretation will be undertaken by individual partnering communities in support of heritage area goals and in coordination with other partnering communities and sites. The Freedom's Way National Heritage Area looks forward to supporting communities in the planning and implementation of interpretive programs. The guidelines presented below are intended to assist communities in the preparation of an interpretive plan.

Chapter 2 of the management plan, *Sharing the Heritage Area's Stories, Interpretation and Education*, outlines a broad conceptual framework for interpretation of the heritage area and suggests a strong **central role** for community interpretation. Where possible, community interpretation should be coordinated with that of existing interpretive sites located within or nearby each community. Chapter 2 also highlights a series of **guiding principles** that should be considered when planning interpretation. These guiding principles can help create a meaningful visitor experience. It is suggested that they be reviewed as the community interpretive plan is being prepared and that their considerations be incorporated into the planning process. Several of the guiding principles are mentioned in the discussion below.

Perhaps most important is development of a clear appreciation of the community's **unique stories** and their significance within the context of the heritage area's themes. Using a variety of interpretive media, the community interpretive plan should describe what those connections are, which are most important to communicate, where stories can best be told, how stories are coordinated location to location, and how the presentation can be made engaging and meaningful to residents and visitors. The fundamental idea of the community presentation is to use **authentic places** to tell those stories and make **meaningful connections** with visitors.

Step 1: Form an Interpretive Task Force

Individuals and organizations in local communities interested in preparing and implementing an interpretive plan should reach out to others to participate in the planning process. The more organizations and sites participating, the richer the interpretive presentation is likely to be. Interpretive sites important to the community's story should be included.

It is recommended that an **interpretive task force** be created to plan the community interpretive plan and guide it through implementation. A successful interpretive task force typically includes individuals who are familiar with the community's history as well as individuals who can help get

things done. Four to six task force members are suggested, but this number might vary by community.

It is suggested that representatives of local government and the business community be included on the interpretive task force to keep government and business leaders connected and informed. If any existing interpretive attractions are located within or nearby the community, they should be involved as well. Also seek individuals with experience in interpretive planning, public history, and community planning and design to serve on the task force. Local historical societies are likely to be important resources and partners. Local conservation and arts organizations should also participate. Conservation lands and trail systems may have important interpretive opportunities. Plans might include public art as an interpretive medium.

The interpretive task force should undertake following tasks to get the project moving:

- Consult with potential partners on the nature and scope of the project and on the composition of the interpretive task force formed to lead it. Inform community leaders of your project and seek their support. Identify any costs associated with the planning process and how those costs will be paid.
- Call a meeting of the interpretive task force to review the scope of the project, timeframe, and work process. Prepare a written outline of the work process that can be shared with partners and the community at large.
- Consult with the staff of the Freedom's Way Heritage Association. Discuss the work process, heritage area interpretive guidelines, points during the process where coordination and review should be undertaken, and ways that the heritage area can support the planning effort.
- Consult with local community organizations and individuals that may have a stake or interest in the project or whose involvement or support might be helpful or necessary.

Step 2: Outline Existing Conditions

Every community is different. Review existing conditions within the community to establish the framework within which the task force will explore a range of possibilities. Opportunities and challenges may either support or hinder the interpretive presentation.

- Current Interpretive Opportunities: Identify any local sites that are currently interpreting the community history and fold them into the plan. Note the themes and stories they interpret and record the site's mission, existing interpretive programming, hours of operation, visitor experience, and plans for the future. Note what types of visitor services the site provides, if any, such as rest rooms, parking, meeting facilities, etc. Explore their interest in being a part of the plan and involved in the planning process.

- **Establish a Boundary:** Identify the overall area of the community in which interpretation might be undertaken. Are you interpreting an entire town or a historic village? In part, this may be a question of historical significance— what areas have historical significance and are the **authentic places** where the community’s unique stories can be told? Authentic places are locations where historic events actually occurred. In part, this may be a question of practicality— how large an area is appropriate for interpretation so that programs, exhibits, and presentations are accessible, visually, physically, and in terms of time and distance. Consider possible modes of transportation, walking, bicycling, driving, that might be involved.
- **Define the Landscape Setting:** What is the character of the area to be interpreted? What opportunities and challenges does it present? What opportunities might exist to create connections to other community interests, such as the involvement of local businesses or the incorporation of public parks?
- **Identify Potential Interpretive Sites:** Within the area to be interpreted, what specific locations are present where various forms of interpretation might be presented? Make a list and note positives and negatives for each potential place. Locations must be **publicly accessible** and not infringe upon private property or the privacy of local residents. Publicly accessible locations are places such as town commons, public parks, street right-of-ways, conservation lands, and privately owned sites that are open to the public. To the maximum extent possible, locations should be accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Step 3: Confirm Goals for Interpretation

Based upon discussions with those involved and the community’s various constituencies, what is the objective of the community interpretive program? Goals may vary by community and by constituencies within a community. Examples may range from education or enhancement for local residents, support for local businesses and institutions, engagement of young people, support for historic preservation and land conservation, and/or other possibilities.

- Outline the community’s goals in creating an interpretive presentation. Use a sentence or short paragraph to describe each goal. Consider the possible implications of each goal for the development of the interpretive plan.
- Review a set of written goals with partners within the community and work toward consensus.
- Host a public workshop to outline the project to interested individuals and organizations and obtain their input. Encourage them to become involved.

Step 4: Understanding Stories

Freedom's Way National Heritage Area's heritage area-wide interpretive presentation focuses on **the stories of local communities and sites to illustrate larger heritage area themes**. The heritage area management plan outlines how themes will be introduced to residents and visitors heritage area-wide through a variety of means, including the heritage area website, published materials, educational programming, events, and introductory exhibits in communities and at regional interpretive attractions. This introductory material will provide an overall context for the story of the heritage area, the big picture that relates the significance of the heritage area to communities, landscapes, and sites.

Interpretive themes are the big ideas about a place or subject that should be communicated to visitors to provide them with a meaningful experience. The interpretive themes for Freedom's Way National Heritage Area are described in Chapter 2 of the management plan. Through the introduction of these themes at communities and regional attractions as well as through a variety of other means, the heritage area sets the stage for the telling of detailed stories that illustrate and fill out the themes with a richness that should make them come alive.

It is the role of Freedom's Way Heritage Association and regional attractions to make sure that the **overall context** for the heritage area is provided. It is the role of local partnering communities and sites to **tell their own unique stories**, relating them to the heritage area themes and context. The purpose of the community interpretive plan is to describe how that will be done in a specific community. By telling a rich array of local stories connected to the heritage area themes, residents and visitors will be **encouraged to explore** throughout the region to experience the wide range of stories told.

In order to begin, each community and site must understand its own stories and connect them to the heritage area-wide themes and context in interesting and meaningful ways. The following tasks are suggested as a means of making these connections.

- Prepare an **annotated outline or short history** of your community highlighting its development over time. Keep the description to about a page. Touch on the big picture, the dynamic forces that shaped its evolution.
- Consider how the community's history relates to the heritage area's themes. **What themes does it best illustrate?** Please note that there are many ways in which connections can be made.
- Briefly identify what is **most unique** about your community. Why is it significant? Why is it relevant to the heritage area? Using the heritage area themes and context, prepare a brief **statement of significance** for the community, no longer than three or four sentences.

- Extrapolating from the heritage area themes and context, identify the topics associated with the community's history and significance that best represent the heritage area themes that have been selected. Prepare a brief **sub-theme statement** for each topic you have identified, one sentence long. What big ideas about the community illustrate the heritage area themes that have been selected? How are the themes illustrated through the community's experience? What is the key message about the community that should be related?
- Finally, identify the **potential stories** that could be used in the community to illustrate heritage area and local themes and that relate the community's unique identity. Stories could be about people, events, places, things. List as many as possible. Think about which are most representative of the community's story and character. Which are most striking and significant and had the most impact? Which are most telling or most touching? How might individual stories be connected?
- At this point, **review** the materials that have prepared and conclusions drawn with interested stakeholders. Obtain their input and comments. Review the work with the staff of the Freedom's Way Heritage Association and their colleagues.

Step 5: Developing a Conceptual Approach

Once consensus has been achieved upon the themes and sub-themes best represented by your community, consider how the interpretative presentation might be made. That involves selecting the best stories, identifying places where the stories can be presented, and considering the most appropriate medium through which the stories can be conveyed.

- Review the stories that were listed during Step 4 above and select the **stories that best represent your community** and illustrate the themes and sub-themes you identified.
- The **accuracy** of the stories is essential. The information associated with the stories must be accurate, and sources for the information should be **cited**. See the guiding principles for interpretation outlined in Chapter 2. The staff and colleagues of the Freedom's Way Heritage Association that will be reviewing your plan and working with you on your exhibits will help you assess the accuracy of information associated with the stories you wish to tell.
- Review the list of **publicly accessible locations** where interpretation might be offered that was prepared under Step 2. Match these locations with the stories that have selected. As noted previously, concentrate upon interpreting the **authentic places** where things happened. Are the most important stories associated with a particular place? Is that place publicly accessible? Which locations are appropriate to which stories? Which are the best matches? Do

any key stories not have an appropriate location where they can be told?

- Consider the range of places where the community's most significant stories can be told. To the maximum extent possible, **use the landscape to tell the story**. Whether it is a building, site, neighborhood, landscape, natural feature, or view, the audience will relate to the story more directly if it is associated with something tangible that they can see, experience, and (when possible) touch and interact with. This is a good place to ask for assistance from peers and colleagues who would bring a fresh perspective to the discussion.
- As conclusions are drawn as to the best stories and the best locations to tell them, look at the patterns that are developing. What **logical sequences** of stories and locations are becoming apparent? Is there any way to use the sequencing to follow a logical progression that **builds the stories** one site to the next and **draws connections** between them? Under most circumstances, it is not possible or even desirable to strictly control the sequencing of stories in community interpretation. Sequencing can be suggested (such as in a walking tour) but the audience will **freely explore** the interpretive presentation in whatever sequence they wish.
- In planning the presentation, consider the full range of interpretation that may be implemented even if only a portion can be implemented at first. In **phasing** the plan, begin with the sites and stories that are most **central to the presentation** and best connect the community to heritage area themes. Use later installations to build upon and enrich the central stories.
- It is recommended that at least one location in the interpretive presentation be used to introduce the heritage area context and themes to which community stories connect. The site selected for this **introductory exhibit** should be publicly prominent and an ideal starting point for the presentation. It is best if the place chosen offers restrooms, drinking fountain, food and beverages, or some other means of refreshment. A comfortable visitor is a happy visitor.
- Consider which **media formats** are most appropriate for communicating stories to the audiences. Freedom's Way staff and colleagues can assist in this consideration. The Freedom's Way media and exhibit program outlined in Chapter 2 is available to play a central role in community presentations. Design guidelines for heritage area exhibit carriers and for the development of exhibit content may be made available from the Freedom's Way Heritage Association. However, other forms of interpretive media are also available and have been used creatively by communities and interpretive sites within the heritage area. They might include public art (such as sculptures and murals), objects, walking tours, driving

tours, audio presentations, QR codes, cell phone and website downloads, brochures, guidebooks, films, guided tours, events, and others. Mix and match these potential media in interesting ways as most appropriate to community. Try to keep in mind the need for long-term maintenance and who might take responsibility for that need.

- For each site selected, think about the possible need for **landscape enhancements**. Some exhibits installed by communities may be located in public commons or on conservation lands where no additional landscaping is needed. However, others might be installed in new locations and enhanced through the installation of new paving (needed for ADA accessibility), benches, waste baskets, fencing, trees, or other plantings. Consider what is most appropriate to provide an appealing physical context for the exhibits.
- Finally, map the locations where interpretation is proposed. To accompany the map, prepare a written overview of each interpretive site. Briefly describe the location and its attributes, including whether it is accessible to anyone (including times, physical challenges, intellectual challenges, et al). List the theme, sub-theme, stories, and key message to be conveyed for **each site**. List what interpretive media format will be used and landscape enhancements needed. Identify the locations proposed for the first phase of implementation. Prepare an estimated cost for each interpretive site and for the project as a whole. Freedom's Way may be able to help fund costs through its small grant program.

Step 6: Review and Assessment

Review the interpretive plan with potential and current stakeholders, leaders, and other interested parties within the community as well as with the Freedom's Way Heritage Association.

- Have meetings with other representatives of the community to brief them on the plan and receive their input. It is important that local government leaders be kept informed, especially if public lands are included as interpretive sites.
- Consider how well the plan meets the goals for the project set out at the beginning.
- Review the interpretive plan with the staff and colleagues of the Freedom's Way Heritage Association. Freedom's Way staff will advise you on the process and timing for their review.
- Host a public workshop to present the plan to interested individuals and organizations and obtain their input.
- Make any necessary revisions to the interpretive plan based upon the input received. Work to achieve the broadest consensus and

greatest involvement possible while assuring a high quality presentation.

Step 7: Phasing and Implementation

Once the interpretive plan has been finalized, incorporating needed revisions to the satisfaction of the various constituents, begin planning for implementation. It is hoped that a wide variety of community partners will participate in the plan's implementation in a variety of ways. This could include hosting a site, contributing financially, providing services, or other ways.

Regional interpretive attractions within the heritage area have years of experience in implementing the interpretive exhibits and enhancements and are leading heritage area partners. In collaboration with Freedom's Way Heritage Association staff, they can provide advice and support in how the plan might be implemented. Together, they will help refine stories, develop interpretive content, and ensure the quality of the community interpretive presentation.