

Freedom's
Way NATIONAL
HERITAGE AREA

2026 YEAR IN REVIEW

Assabet River Rail Trail. Photo by Polly Meyer.



BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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STAFF

(until July)

Patrice Todisco,
Executive Director
Desiree Demski-Hamelin,
Deputy Director

(from July)

Lauren McCormack,
Executive Director

A Letter from the President:

This year marked Freedom's Way National Heritage Area's 17th anniversary. In just under two decades, Freedom's Way has blossomed from an idea on paper into a robust, multi-faceted organization that wields its resources in a myriad of ways to, in the words of our enabling legislation, "manage, preserve, protect, and interpret the cultural, historic, and natural resources of the Heritage Area for the educational and inspirational benefit of future generations."

It is thanks to many, including board members, volunteers, staff, and partner organizations, whose indefatigable efforts built Freedom's Way from the ground up. For the past 13 years, Patrice Todisco served as the steady hand at the wheel. Through her vision and expertise, she forged enduring partnerships across our region's cultural, natural, and historic landscape, building a vibrant network that will serve the Heritage Area for generations to come.

When Patrice entered a well-deserved retirement this past July, she left behind a legacy of leadership and impact. On behalf of the Board of Directors, staff, and the entire Freedom's Way community, I extend my deepest gratitude for her years of service and commitment. We celebrate her achievements and wish her well in her next exciting chapter.

Alongside Patrice's retirement, this past July also brought a historic moment of celebration for our broader community. July 4th marked the pinnacle of the nation's semiquincentennial, with the 250th anniversary of the Continental Congress' adoption of the Declaration of Independence. Freedom's Way led the Heritage Area in commemorations by revitalizing and updating the award-winning *Declaring Independence: Then and Now* program. Fifteen communities participated, bringing together more than 900 residents, young and old, in dialogue about the meaning and relevance of our nation's founding document then and now.

Reinforcing our commitment to local engagement, we simultaneously deepened the impact of our flagship program, *Hidden Treasures*, increasing participation, attendance, and outreach throughout the region. Along with our Partnership Grant Program and other collaborative initiatives, Freedom's Way leveraged our Federal funding in order to preserve our heritage and support our communities.

There is much more to come in the new year, including expanded programming and increased investment in our Heritage Area. As we near two decades of existence, I am excited to continue to partner with you to support our Heritage Area.

As always, we thank you for your support.



Franca Barricelli, President

MISSION

We collaborate with people, organizations and the communities of the Heritage Area to facilitate and promote preservation, conservation and educational initiatives. Our efforts inspire residents and visitors to value and engage with our landscapes, histories and cultures, and the principles underlying freedom and democracy.

VISION

A network of strong and diverse communities that work together to promote, protect, and celebrate the natural, cultural, and historical resources of the region.

VALUES

Collaboration/Teamwork:

Working together to achieve common goals through open communication, shared accountability, and a focus on collective strengths.

Honoring Diverse Voices:

Recognizing the value of different perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds which enriches understanding, fosters empathy and innovative and effective solutions.

Creativity:

Innovative, adaptable and flexible problem-solving and showing an ability to make new things or think of new ideas.

Inclusion:

Making everyone feel valued, respected, and supported, creating an environment where individuals can fully participate, bring their authentic selves, and contribute their unique perspectives.

Respectful and Professional:

Treating everyone with courtesy and consideration, while upholding high standards of conduct and demeanor, communicating clearly, and maintaining a positive and proactive mindset.



Declaring Independence

THEN & NOW

Freedom's Way 250

With the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it was only fitting that we bring back the award-winning, thought-provoking public performance piece, ***Declaring Independence: Then & Now.***

Developed with community partners, sixteen programs were held in historic venues across the Heritage Area. Each performance was uniquely tailored to the community in which it occurred, using a script written by citizen-historians. Performances were followed by an open conversation with the audience, with the intention of **encouraging and deepening civic engagement.**



Declaring Independence program in Townsend.



Declaring Independence program in Concord.
Photo by Ken McGagh, *The Concord Bridge*.



Participating Communities

**Acton, Arlington, Ashburnham, Ashby, Concord,
Fitchburg, Groton, Harvard, Hudson, Lexington,
Nashua, Princeton, Stow, Sudbury, Westford,
Woburn**

Sharing our Region's HIDDEN TREASURES

The 2026 Hidden Treasures Festival represented a significant expansion in both participation and public visibility, making it our largest Festival ever. The May 2026 Festival achieved record levels of partner engagement, expanded geographic representation across the Heritage Area, and substantially increased traffic to our social media and website. Many thanks to Stewart Ikeda for his assistance organizing and promoting the 2026 Festival.

ENGAGEMENT HIGHLIGHTS: 64 Presenting Organizations (up 107%); 101 Events (up 55%); 30 Participating Communities; website traffic up over 400%; Facebook usage up over 100%.

Hidden Treasures Partner Organizations

Friends of Pine Hawk, Acton
Iron Work Farm, Acton
Schwamb Mill Preservation Trust, Inc., Arlington
Arlington Human Rights Commission
Arlington Historical Society
Mystic Open Studio, Arlington
Cyrus Dallin Art Museum, Arlington
Ashby Historical Society
Sandy Pond School Association Inc., Ayer
Bedford Historic Preservation Commission
Bedford Historical Society
Bolton ConCom
Boxborough Historical Society
Clinton Greenway Conservation Trust
DCR Wachusett Reservoir, Clinton/Sterling
Bigelow Free Public Library, Clinton
Art for All Concord
Concord Prison Outreach
DCR Walden Pond, Concord
West Concord District Cultural Council
Fowler Library, Concord
West Concord Business Group
Thoreau Alliance, Concord
Guitar Museum, Concord
The Umbrella Arts Center, Concord
Old Manse, Trustees, Concord
Friends of Minute Man National Park
Minute Man National Historical Park
Devens Enterprise Commission

Fitchburg Historical Society
Friends of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park
Groton Trails Committee
Harvard Historical Society
Fruitlands, Trustees, Harvard
Hollis Social Library
Thayer Memorial Library, Lancaster
LexArt, Lexington
Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, Lexington
Historic New England, Gropius House, Lincoln
Littleton Conservation Trust
Medford Historical Commission
Friends of the Middlesex Fells, Medford
Hidden Battles Foundation, Nashua
Pepperell+
Pepperell Cultural Council
Shirley Historical Society
Rediscover Mapledale, Stow
Westford Historical Society



"A-Town Tiny Shed" concerts. Arlington Visitor Center.
Photo by Stewart Ikeda.

INVESTING in our Communities:

The 2026 Partnership Grant Program

This year's grant program **awarded \$53,114 in support of 18 projects** directly impacting more than one-third of the communities we serve. In turn, **over \$455,619 was generated in matching in-kind contributions, leveraging NPS funding 9:1.** These grants are designed to provide strategic investments in the natural, cultural and historical resources that enhance the sense of place within the Freedom's Way National Heritage Area.

2026 Partnership Grant Projects

"RECONCILING OUR HISTORY: A NEW PLACE IN AN OLD SPACE"

New Dawn Arts Center

"TOWNSEND CELEBRATES AMERICA'S 250TH BIRTHDAY"

Townsend Historical Society

"AFTER THE BATTLE OF LEXINGTON AND CONCORD"

Iron Work Farm

"1776 AND BEYOND"

Medford Historical Society

"FRIENDS OF PINE HAWK 2026 FALL PROGRAM SERIES"

Friends of Pine Hawk

"THOREAU SOCIETY ANNUAL GATHERING"

Thoreau Alliance

"FELLS NATIVE LAND LEARNING SERIES"

Friends of the Middlesex Fells Reservation

"STAINED GLASS CITY SEAL STABILIZATION"

Fitchburg Public Library

"LOUVERED GOTHIC ARCH RECREATION"

Harvard Historical Society

"POP-UP ARBORETA"

Town of Bolton Conservation Department

"COLONIAL FAIRE: LIVING HISTORY FOR AMERICA'S 250TH"

Hudson Cultural Alliance

"GO FISH: A PARTICIPATORY MURAL CELEBRATING THE RETURN OF HERRING TO THE MYSTIC RIVER"

Town of Arlington's Commission for Arts & Culture (ArtsArlington)

"PATRIOTS' DAY AT MINUTE MAN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK"

Friends of Minute Man National Park

"REVOLUTIONARY WAR HISTORY SERIES"

Bigelow Free Public Library

"SARAH BRADLEE FULTON STATUE"

Looking Back at Medford History, Inc.

"BROOKS ESTATE/OAK GROVE CEMETERY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SENSITIVITY REPORT"

City of Medford Historical Commission

"MAPLEDALE 100TH ANNIVERSARY TRAVELING EXHIBITION"

Rediscover Mapledale

"COMMEMORATING 250 YEARS: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AT THE CONCORD MUSEUM"

Concord Museum

CULTIVATING the Future: Summer Internship Program

Historic Landscape Rehabilitation and Exploration In & Beyond Minute Man National Historical Park

This season, Freedom's Way hosted Sophie Cooke as a Cultural Resources Preservation Intern at Minute Man National Historical Park. Throughout the summer, Sophie contributed to historic landscape research across the National Heritage Area and landscape rehabilitation planning within the Park.

Across the National Heritage Area, Sophie has been researching landscape change and industrial development in the decades following the American Revolution. She has worked with ESRI StoryMaps to develop an interactive virtual 'exhibit' to present this research. Through working with StoryMaps, she has learned about new methods and challenges of integrating historic maps and artwork into the virtual environment. Her research has focused on several of the earliest incorporated towns across the National Heritage Area, considering how factors such as transportation innovation, westward expansion, and war shaped local industries.

In the Park, Sophie's key focus has been the rehabilitation of the Elm Brook Hill battle site in the Park's Battle Road Unit. On April 19, 1775, as British Regulars retreated from Concord along the Bay Road, they were met with heavy fire from colonial militias and minutemen staged within the agricultural landscape. A running battle ensued, carrying the Regulars from Meriam's Corner, across Brooks Hill, and up Elm Brook Hill. As the Regulars ascended Elm Brook Hill, the militia and minutemen attacked from all sides, firing upon the British column from behind orchard trees, stone walls, and boulders along the Bay Road. At least eight Regulars and several colonists were killed along this short stretch of road. In the summer of 2024, the Park and the Northeast Archeological Resources Program, with the support of the Friends of Minute Man National Park, led an archeological survey of the battle site, uncovering a wealth of artifacts that have helped piece together the battle history (see the photo of a recovered musket ball!).

Sophie has been working with park and regional National Park Service staff, as well as local historians, to develop a plan to rehabilitate this site to reflect its 1775 conditions and engage park visitors in its rich history. Sophie began this work as a National Council for Preservation Education intern at Minute Man last fall and has had the great opportunity to continue through Freedom's Way. This summer, she has continued to compile site history, create historic conditions and proposed rehabilitation maps, and work with staff and local historians to revise the plan.

Throughout this position, Sophie has been grateful to experience first-hand the importance of historic landscape research and rehabilitation across the Freedom's Way National Heritage Area.



MIMA and Freedom's Way Intern Sophie Cooke.



Fired musket ball recovered from Elm Brook Hill, 2024. Photo by Charlie Gould, MMNHP, 2024.

PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT & ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Stephen J. Adams,
Community Foundation of
North Central Massachusetts

Julie Bernson,
The Trustees

Daniel V. Boudillion,
Friends of the Nashobah
Praying Indians

Carolyn Goldstein,
Lexington Lyceum Advocates

Leslie Howard,
Westford Historical Society

Stewart Ikeda,
ArtsArlington

William Ludt,
Amherst Heritage
Commission

Rebecca Migdal,
Thoreau Alliance

Simone Monteleone,
Minute Man National
Historical Park

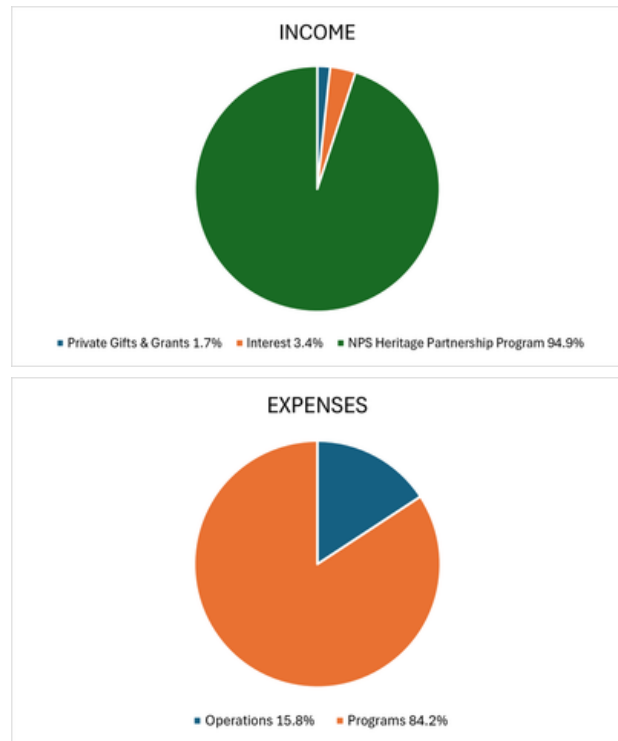
Jennifer Turner,
The Robbins House

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW - FY 2026

Income: \$487,445
Expenses: \$466,670
Net Income: \$20,775

In-Kind Match: \$637,078

*Based on unaudited financials for October
1, 2025 through September 30, 2026.*



THOREAU-ly Immersed in Nature

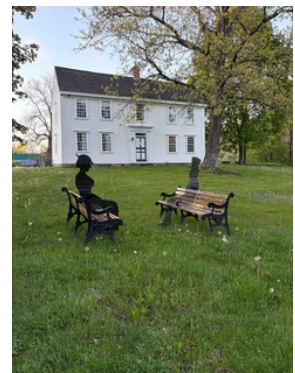
Few American writers were as closely connected to place as **Henry David Thoreau**. Many of the homes, buildings, and wild places that Thoreau was familiar with in his lifetime are still in existence.

And Thoreau Country is so much more than Concord! Many of the towns in the Heritage area have a connection to Thoreau, including the buildings in which he lectured, the places he traveled through, and the natural wonders he explored.

In 2026, Freedom's Way partnered with the Thoreau Alliance and *Discover Concord* Magazine to present a curated itinerary of Thoreau-related sites in the Heritage Area both on our website and app, as well as in a printed insert in the magazine.

Follow in Thoreau's footsteps by choosing the Thoreau Itinerary on our website or app at

<https://freedomsway.org/itineraries/following-in-thoreaus-footsteps/>.



Thoreau Farm. Image Courtesy of Thoreau Farm and *Discover Concord* Magazine.

Giving Thanks to our MEMBERS, PARTNERS & SUPPORTERS

The Freedom's Way National Heritage Area is comprised of a network of individuals and organizations who work in partnership with the Freedom's Way Heritage Association and the National Park Service. Without your support our work could not be accomplished. **THANK YOU!**

INDIVIDUALS

Stephen J. Adams · John Anderson · Franca Barricelli · Georgia Barry · Jane Becker · Sharon Bernard · Julie Bernson · Daniel V. Boudillion · Sophie Cooke · Suzi Fonda · Anne Forbes · Kara Fossey · Carolyn Goldstein · Anne Harrington · Mary Harritty · Stewart Ikeda · Penny Lacroix · Roberta Lasky · Heather Leavell · William Ludt · Pamela Lynn · Polly Meyer · Rebecca Migdal · Simone Monteleone · Michaela Moran · Kevin Natwick · Rachael Robinson · Mary Shasta · Sara Siskavich · Alison Tocci · Kisha Tracy · Jennifer Turner

ORGANIZATIONS

Acton 250 · Arlington Human Rights Commission · Arlington Visitor Center · Art for All · Ashburnham Historical Society · Ashby Historical Society · Bedford Historic Preservation Commission · Bedford Historical Society · Bigelow Free Public Library · Boxborough Historical Society · Clinton Greenway Conservation Trust · Concord 250 · Concord Museum · Concord Prison Outreach · Cyrus Dallin Art Museum · Destination Groton · Devens Enterprise Commission · Fitchburg Art Museum · Fitchburg Historical Society · Fitchburg Public Library · Friends of Bedford Depot Park · Friends of Fitchburg Abolitionist Park · Friends of Minute Man National Park · Friends of the Middlesex Fells Reservation · Friends of Nashobah Praying Indians · Friends of Pine Hawk · Fruitlands Museum · Goodnow Library · Groton Conservation Trust · Groton History Center · Groton Trails Network · Guitar Museum of New England · Harvard Historical Society · Hidden Battles Foundation · Historic New England · Historical Piano Concerts, Inc. · Hollis Social Library · Hudson Cultural Alliance · Hudson Historical Society · Icon Museum and Study Center · Iron Work Farm · Looking Back at Medford History · LexArt · Lexington Arts and Crafts Society · Lexington History Museums · Lexington Visitors Center · Littleton Conservation Trust · Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation · Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati · Medford Historical Commission · Medford Historical Society & Museum · Minute Man National Historical Park · Mystic Open Studio · Nashua Historical Society · Nashua River Watershed Association · New Dawn Arts Center · NOA Gallery · North County Land Trust · OARS · Old Manse · Old Schwamb Mill · Pepperell+ · Pepperell Conservation Commission · Princeton Historical Commission · Princeton Historical Society · Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association · Rediscover Mapledale Committee · Robbins House · Sandy Pond School Association · Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library · Shirley Historical Society · Sons of the American Revolution · Stow Historical Society · Sudbury 250th Committee · Sudbury Historical Society · Stow Historical Society · Thayer Memorial Library · The Icon Museum & Study Center · The Old Manse · The Thoreau Alliance · The Umbrella Arts Center · Town of Bolton, MA · Town of Lexington Visitors Center · Townsend Historical Society · Townsend Public Library · Wachusett Reservoir Watershed · West Concord Cultural District Committee · Westford Historical Society & Museum · Woburn 250th Celebration Committee · Woburn Historical Society · Woburn Public Library · Wright Tavern Legacy Trust · The Nashua Historical Society

BUSINESSES

Barefoot Books · Hannaford Bloomin' 4 Good Program · Keene Metaling · MassDevelopment · Rockland Trust Charitable Foundation · Voyager Publishing LLC

Highlights of the Freedom's Way National Heritage Area



Hollis, NH



DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum



Westford Museum



Sudbury History Center and Museum



Groton History Center



Lexington History Museums



Acton Arboretum

CURATING A VIRTUAL MUSEUM OF THE REGION

Visit Us Online & Keep in Touch

Download Our Free Mobile App

Available on iOS and Android devices, the Explore Freedom's Way NHA mobile app can be used to:

- Navigate an interactive map of places to go and things to do!
- Peruse our selection of thoughtfully curated itineraries or create your own!
- Create personalized travel plans using the 'My Plan' feature!
- Share the details with friends and family!



Subscribe to Our Monthly e-Newsletter

Our monthly e-newsletter includes curated content from throughout the region including "A Closer Look," upcoming events, updates on programming and projects, and so much more!



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A MEMBER OF THE
**National Heritage
Area System**



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