

**9th US/ICOMOS 9th Annual International Symposium
April 19-23, 2006, Newport RI**

**Annie C. Harris
Executive Director
Essex National Heritage Commission
Salem, MA**

Historic cities: the role of heritage and history in their preservation and economic vitality

Introduction: The latter half of the 20th century was not kind to American cities. The out-migration that began as trickle after WWII became a torrent by the end of the century. The total number of people now living in the suburbs is greater than those living in urban centers. The result has been the hollowing out of the core of our cities with sprawl and endless congestion on the suburban ring-roads. From small to big – almost all American cities have suffered.

However, in recent years, some urban communities have regained their vibrancy. How have they done this? The root of their success lies in understanding each community's unique heritage and nurturing its distinctive sense of place. Communities that incorporate their heritage resources into their economic development strategies are achieving success that outpaces more standard approaches to urban redevelopment.

The Essex National Heritage Area presents an interesting case study of this principle at work. Within this 500 square mile region of northeastern Massachusetts, there are 10 cities and 24 towns co-existing in uneasy rivalry. There are urban success stories, 'works in progress' and places still struggling for economic sustainability. In this region, several of the most affluent towns of Greater Boston are adjacent to some of the state's poorest urban centers. Most of the communities have roots dating back 200 to 300 years. Some of the communities have been successful building economic development upon the foundation of their heritage. Others have ignored their heritage or been ambivalent about its value. There are lessons to be learned here – some are unique to this region but others are universal.

Background: Communities in the Northeastern United States – especially in Massachusetts - were settled in ways that are quite different from the development patterns in other parts of the country. This area was settled in 1623 by Europeans, first as a fishing camp located on Cape Ann (Gloucester), followed three years later by a more permanent settlement relocated to Salem. In 1630, John Winthrop arrived with 1,000 Pilgrims, establishing the Massachusetts Bay Colony with a distinctive outlook and legacy that still impacts the region today. Governor Winthrop's legacy is epitomized by his famous speech "A Model of Christian Charity." In this speech, he spoke of the "city on the hill" envisioning that the ideal communities in the new world would be built upon local autonomy and community responsibility (footnote 1). His stated aim was simple: "to create a society out of towns that were economically, politically, and religiously

prosperous; thereby, being a model to the world” (footnote 2). The result was an emphasis on individual communities that were knit together around town and church and where local autonomy and not centralized government held sway. Today “home rule” and the annual town meeting remain two of the strongest factors in Massachusetts politics. As a consequence, there is local competition, a lack of strong regional planning, and great economic disparity.

In many parts of the United States, cities have been able to grow through the process of annexation, expanding their boundaries and incorporating new suburbs. As residents have moved out of the center city, cities such as Houston have increased their boundaries, annexing these new suburban regions and thereby retaining and expanding their real estate tax base. This has not been an option in New England. In Massachusetts, a new settlement that was even only a short distance from its parent community was not incorporated in the existing settlement but instead became its own town – distinct and separate from the ‘parent.’ Salem spawned Salem Village (the center of the witchcraft hysteria of 1692) then Danvers, Peabody, and Beverly. Tight communities were formed centered on church and social uniformity.

Impact of early settlement on the region: From this early settlement pattern, there still exist today very diverse and distinctive communities adjacent to one another – with no unincorporated county land between. The result is that, in the Essex National Heritage Area (formed within the historical boundaries of Essex County), there are 34 communities ranging in population from 5,000 to 100,000 and with median household incomes ranging from \$28,000 to \$184,000, all within a few miles of each other. There is a long tradition of fierce competition from the annual Thanksgiving Day football games to poaching on one another’s ‘territory’ for tax paying businesses. Each of these 34 communities has its own fire department, police department, school system (although a few have shared regional high school facilities), and its own government administration. There is also a wide variety of governing systems – town meeting, mayor, city manager, and board of selectmen.

What are the consequences of this variety? The benefits are immense diversity and community character; each retaining its own unique qualities and distinctive culture. Even if you miss the welcome sign, it is usually easy to spot when you have left one community and entered another by the differences in development density, landscape, and cultural “feel” of the place. However, it also means that there are no economies of scale. There is inefficiency and duplication. Regional planning is almost impossible as there is no county government that can garner support for effective and efficient regional solutions to problems of sprawl, housing development, educational equity, and safety. You have a situation that borders, at times, on “every man (or community) for himself.” Communities that want to see growth have been bypassed, while those seeking to remain rural have been inundated with sprawl. Issues of environmental justice, the quality of schools, traffic congestion, and urban blight have been handled largely in an ad hoc fashion, community by community. It makes an interesting case study of strategies and factors that determine economic success - although “on the ground” it leaves much to be desired.

Key factors for community revitalization: There are three components that impact the economic vitality of a community: its environment (man-made and natural), its culture (history, community authenticity and social interaction), and its leadership (political, business and civic). Even communities with limited environmental features can be successful given good leadership and/or capitalizing on a distinctive culture. While communities with remarkable assets such as a beautiful oceanfront location can remain in the economic doldrums for years if enlighten leadership is not in place. In this region, most communities fall somewhere in between. They have both good and poor environmental assets, cultural qualities and leadership. In this paper, we will look at the examples illustrated by the old seaport communities - Newburyport, Salem, and Gloucester - and the industrial, riverfront town of Amesbury.

Environmental features: The Federal era architecture in Newburyport and Salem make their core urban centers strikingly beautiful, but in the mid 20th century, their architecture was not considered an asset. From 1960-1975, both cities narrowly escaped having their wonderful Federal style centers demolished as the federally funded urban renewal program swept across the United States. Salem lost 350 buildings to the wrecking ball. Newburyport lost fewer but almost all of its structures along the waterfront and adjacent to State Street were removed. Many of these cleared lots of land still remain vacant or underutilized today – although now the reasons have more to do with disagreement over their reuse and not because there is any lack of development interest. Both cities were very fortunate that local historic preservationists finally prevailed, and the majority of their magnificent Federal style buildings survived. During the mid and late 1970s both communities redirected their urban renewal funds to renovation and restoration projects. The results were that by the late 1970s-early 1980s each city had rebuilt handsome, walkable, small urban centers. But then their stories diverged. After the 1970s, Salem’s revitalization slowed while Newburyport’s economic base continued to expand. For the last 30 years the economic disparity between the cities has increase until, only recently, the rate has slowed. The reasons for this relate to the next two factors – culture and leadership.

Culture: Community revitalization is more than bricks and mortar. It also depends on highlighting its culture by creating opportunities for civic interaction, providing activities and programs, developing events and festivals, and marketing and promoting them. This is the hallmark of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s “Main Streets” program, but it is the stuff that is usually the most difficult to support with public funds because it is “soft.” It is not easy to quantify its value and the economic benefits often take a while to see. Culture also involves the history of a place, and telling a community’s ‘story’ has proved to be an effective economic development tool in many places. In Gloucester, several small waterfront museums that relate the stories of fishing, whaling and boat building are proving to be a recurring draw for families and schools groups as well as out of town visitors. In Salem, the renovation and expansion of the Peabody Essex Museum, the oldest continuously operating museum in the United States, has provided a major boast to the city’s economy since it re-opened four years ago. Downtown cultural institutions reinforced with community programming such as maritime festivals and

outdoor summer concerts are vital for attracting both residents and visitors to our urban centers.

However, the cultural story need to be authentic so that it supports preservation and does not undermine the historic resources. Salem is an interesting example of a story gone awry. The city's unique 'witch story' took off as a tourism promotional strategy about 25 years ago, and it has produced very mixed benefits for the city's economy. Salem is known around the world for the infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692, a brief nine-month period of social hysteria. The modern 'witch hysteria' has become a year-round fascination with witches and the occult that culminates in October with 200,000 visitors coming into the city to celebrate Halloween. The economic impact of this annual influx of revelers is very uneven – benefiting some merchants, creating havoc for others, and resulting in a net revenue loss to the city, at least in direct costs from police overtime and trash removal. Salem's authentic and very sad story of human persecution has been overwhelmed by plastic witches and fun houses, and much of the prime downtown retail space is occupied by palm readers, psychics, 'witch' tee shirt merchants, and haunted mansions. It has taken years of effort to rebuild the visibility of the city's premier cultural institutions, its seaport, maritime story, and its national landmarks such as the National Park Service's Salem Maritime Historic Site. Making these assets visible above the witch hubbub is very important because authentic cultural resources have greater economic value. Surveys show that the average 'witch' tourist does not stay as long or spend nearly as much as the cultural visitor. This brings us to the third factor that has proved to be important to historic preservation and revitalization efforts in the Essex National Heritage Area.

Leadership: If preservation is to be successful, there must be community leadership provided by the elected officials, the business sector or the residents – ideally by all three. The leadership needs to build a shared community vision, recognizing the heritage assets of the city or town and seeking to work with them and not against them. In some towns, the leadership has come naturally, but in other communities, the unique sense of place has been ignored in favor of new, modern, or 'it is just easier not to preserve'. As we saw in the cases of Newburyport and Salem, it took nearly a decade and the demolition of hundreds of structures before the historic preservation community was successful in redirecting their leaders. While this is not nearly so difficult today as almost everyone says that they are in favor of historic preservation, many community leaders are still shaky in their commitment to historic preservation. The importance of restoring downtown building facades and maintaining granite and brick sidewalks is often forgotten when city budgets are tight. As recently as this winter, the Town of Wenham's 1854 Town Hall was almost demolished because the Board of Selectmen felt it was too expensive to renovate.

While it is generally recognized that historic assets are 'nice' to preserve, it is not universally agreed that heritage resources have real economic value. This is particularly true in the cases of architectural details, historical fragments, and landscaping. Wrought iron fences, ancient trees, traditional irregular road layouts, and narrow walkways are very much at risk when traffic, parking and taxes are seen as the principle goals of good

government. But both large and small historic elements are critical to the ‘feel’ of a place.

Officials who understand the significance of these assets are very important because they can influence historic preservation in private development as well as in the public arena. They establish the policies that can preserve the urban fabric and promote the use of sympathetic materials and design. Those leaders that have done this often gain more tax revenues for their community as well as better projects. In Newburyport, there has been thirty-five years of sustained community commitment to rebuilding the city’s historic architecture and supporting it with cultural/civic programming. Many amenities have added to their successful and still evolving urban environment including a downtown theatre, summer festivals, window boxes, and other architectural and cultural enhancements. This was achieved despite frequent turnover at the mayor’s office because other civic and business leaders recognized and supported the architectural and historic character of the city.

In Salem, the road towards revitalization was rockier. It has only been in the last few years, with an extremely ‘hot’ housing market and the major renovation and expansion of the Peabody Essex Museum, that Salem’s urban core is seeing substantial and sustained private investment, occurring years after most of the public infrastructure and building facades were completed in the center city. Despite 1 million tourists annually and a population of 40,000, the retail center is still not robust.

The difference between the two cities comes from the difficulty that the political, business and community leaders in Salem have had in agreeing on a unified vision. Although most of the public, downtown improvements were completed by the early 1980s, cultural programming, festivals, downtown marketing and “main streets” programs were left to a variety of private organizations, usually under-funded and often competing. One of the city’s most handsome Federal style buildings, Old Town Hall, has remained almost vacant for nearly 40 years despite the fact that it could provide the hub for cultural activities in the center city. Several important projects were identified in the early 1990s as critical to the city’s economic future, including the opportunity to develop a more active harbor with a public dock and the expansion of court facilities, but timid leadership and some mild neighborhood opposition meant that several key parcels of property were not acquired. A decade later, these projects are finally moving forward and Salem’s new mayor is working on unifying the vision.

Further examples: It is encouraging to note that in the time that Newburyport and Salem have been working their economic comeback, there are several other notable examples of communities in this area that are achieving successful revitalization in similar but unique ways. The underlying factors are the same, but the results have a different character in each place.

Gloucester is a gritty, small city that was built upon the economy of the fishing industry. In the later part of the 20th century, the city underwent a severe economic turn down as the fishing industry went into decline. Its industrial waterfront became the subject of

intense debate within the community, and there was tremendous disagreement over its future. Recently, the city has become increasingly successful in blending the different aspects of its heritage into a new economy based on complementing its authentic industrial harbor with compatible and interesting attractions that highlight its maritime history including boat building, marine painting, fishing, and summer resort traditions. There are now more buildings being renovated than demolished; the new drugstores and supermarkets that 15 years ago were being located near the waterfront have given way to renovated, traditional storefronts on the main street. Along the harbor front several small museums have been created that speak to the fishing and maritime past and engage students in environmental learning and maritime skills. Along with the spectacular Cape Ann Historical Society museum and the Rocky Neck Art Colony, there is now a strong, complex, and very interesting and evolving center city that is attractive to old and new residents and businesses.

Amesbury is another example of a community that has focused on its heritage and has used it successfully to revitalize itself. Located in the northern portion of the county, along the Merrimack River, Amesbury was once the center of buggy manufacturing and hat production. Slightly more than a decade ago its downtown was shabby with underutilized or entirely vacant factories and commercial properties. These buildings are now filled with new restaurants, stores and housing. Although Amesbury's architecture is not as renowned as the Federal style structures in Salem and Newburyport and it is not a seaport, but it still has seen its property values soar in the last few years as the historic preservation projects in the downtown and its mill yards have been constructed. The attention to detail in the public spaces coupled with private development projects 'incentivized' with some careful public investment has resulted in a very successful urban environment. The leadership that has been provided by the public sector and supported by the business community has enabled Amesbury to make the most of the assets it has. Whereas only a few years ago, it looked like so many other tired old New England mill towns, it now presents itself as a very interesting and vital community with small museums, artists lofts, a river walk interspersed among restaurants, shops and renovated offices.

Are there examples of communities that have not been successful or whose economies and quality of life still hang in the balance? The answer is yes. Despite the 'hot' Massachusetts real estate market and the general recognition that urban redevelopment based on a strong foundation of historic preservation and smart growth principles is the most likely scenario for success, there are still communities fighting for a comeback. But even in these communities, we can see that redevelopment efforts focused on renovation, historic preservation, and the community's culture are producing positive results. It is encouraging to observe that as communities improve their commitment to heritage preservation, leadership, and vision, they are becoming more successful.

Regional Heritage Preservation: However, even the most successful communities can only go so far. 'Home rule' means that there is still a lack of regional coordination and that there is conflict between communities. There is great difficulty in coordinating

transportation, clean water, emergency services, and other important issues that cross town boundaries.

The isolation is beginning to slowly change, partly from economic necessity and partly due to other factors. The obvious benefits of sharing purchasing power for buying goods in bulk and health insurance have led to new areas of cooperation between our traditional towns. There is also coordinated fire coverage and emergency services in many communities, although their snow plows and school buses still don't cross their town boundaries.

But 'home rule' is a difficult tradition to let go. This is where another new factor has become important. Ten years ago the Essex National Heritage Area (ENHA) was created. The borders of the Heritage Area comprise the historic boundaries of Essex County, encompassing the 500 square mile region north of the City of Boston. Established by an Act of Congress in 1996, the ENHA is one of only 27 National Heritage Areas (NHA) in the United States. Each National Heritage Area represents a unique facet of American history and development, but all the NHAs share certain core principals - most notably a regional approach to community and economic revitalization based on heritage development. The activities of the NHAs include community renewal programs, trail promotion, cultural tourism, educational outreach, and environmental clean-up. National Heritage Areas seek to build cooperative partnerships by working with the shared heritage, traditions, and the distinctive sense of place in their region. What makes them especially unique is that NHAs have no regulatory powers. With small amounts of public funds usually from an annual federal appropriation through the National Park Service, matched by state and local funds, NHAs facilitate multiple cooperative ventures around the heritage and unique resources of their region. In some cases the heritage is a canal or river, and in others, it is an industry such as steel manufacturing and coal mining. Some NHAs interpret a specific era in history such as the American Civil War and Reconstruction in Tennessee, or they seek to preserve specific places such as the Civil War battlefields in the Shenandoah Valley, Virginia. In all cases, the focus is on using existing resources and history to build a new economic future while preserving and respecting the historic assets.

Essex National Heritage Area: In the Essex National Heritage Area, there is a complex matrix of heritage themes and natural resources that make it a particularly interesting and rich heritage region. ENHA works with three heritage themes: early European settlement; U.S. maritime history with a special emphasis on the Great Age of Sail and international trade from 1797-1820; and the American industrial revolution with a focus on planned industrial communities and the early labor movement. Intertwined with these three historic themes, the Area has four very significant landscapes: great marshlands along the northeast coast; a rocky seashore with historic seaports along the eastern edge; a wide river valley in the north; and farmlands and traditional New England villages in the center.

The National Heritage Area works with these resources in several ways. The Area is 'governed' by a non-profit Commission that works on programs linking the stories and

the sites. The Commission's goal is to build bridges between communities so that, instead of one isolated history or natural resource vying for visitors, members and funding, there is a community of places and organizations working cooperatively together. Not only can the region's heritage be understood more clearly by showing the continuum of its history, but visitors feel that it is "worth the journey" to the region (footnote 3). The Commission works with more than 250 diverse resources and organizations on linkages and cooperative ventures. It has developed thematic heritage trails and, more recently, activity trails such as a regional bird watching trail. The Commission organizes area-wide awareness events, seeking to draw more residents into using and enjoying the region's heritage and thereby encouraging them to become stewards of the Area's heritage assets. The most significant of these events is the annual *Trails & Sails: a weekend of walks and water* which attracts more than 3,000 participants to 100+ hikes, boat rides, historic walking tours, and other heritage-based activities that develop year round interest in the heritage resources.

The goal of the Commission is to build partnerships that enable local groups to work more effectively together for the purpose of (1) the preservation and economic vitality of their communities and (2) to further the stewardship and health of the region. An example of such a partnership is the Heritage Landscape Inventory, a project with the National Heritage Area, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, and citizens from around the Area. Over an 18 month period, more than 300 people in 25 communities came together to identify and discuss what are the key characteristics and physical assets in their communities that really matter to them and their sense of place. Waterfront access, town commons, farmland, cemeteries – in total more than 1,300 assets - were identified and surveyed. For most of the communities, this was the first opportunity in many years (perhaps ever) that general citizens, members of various boards and commissions (including conservation commissions, planning boards, boards of selectmen, historic preservation activists, and trail advocates) and elected officials had a chance to sit and exchange ideas about their community in a conversational, non-confrontational manner. They were able to discuss what they share in common as core values in their community and what they most care about. From the standpoint of the National Heritage Area, we were able to see across a wide spectrum of resources and discover common issues and problems that need to be addressed. The magnitude of this undertaking and the variety of projects is immense but the needs and directions are clear. We must develop strategies to preserve these core community assets, and connecting and enabling citizens to help do this is very important.

In addition to fostering community cooperation, the Commission provides an umbrella under which individual community projects are being linked. Most recently, ENHA is serving as the 'umbrella' for several local rail trail and bikeway projects. After years of frustrating and contradictory public policy and private ownership issues, the potential for a regional bike and trail system is gaining momentum as trail advocates, elected officials, and policy makers sort out the road blocks and develop coordinated solutions. Perhaps in our lifetime the dream of the Border to Boston rail trail will become a reality.

Conclusion: The revitalization of a community starts with respecting its environment and unique sense of place, and it grows by linking heritage resources across community boundaries and building shared projects. To create economic success, these efforts must be sustained over long periods of time by vision and leadership.

This is an organic model of economic development that relies on preserving indigenous assets – architecture, landscapes, natural resources and human stories and traditions – and re-positioning these assets to be relevant in the 21st Century. The fundamental goals of heritage development are not just the preservation of historic resources but their authentic and productive reuse. If we hope to keep our heritage resources alive, they need to be compelling, interesting, and important to the next generations. They must be incorporated into our lives and jobs without being compromised.

The heritage development success stories that we see occurring in the Essex National Heritage Area employ the region’s historic assets – both tangible and intangible – to build community identity and vitality. There is a clear blueprint that is emerging from these stories. To be successful, communities need to:

- Understand the value of what exists and respect the unique sense of their place
- Identify the community’s common culture and develop ways for all citizens to support it together
- Pay attention to details including unique urban design elements, walk-ability, streetscapes, finishes
- Create places for civic interaction and for individuals to mingle
- Understand that the community’s ‘fabric’ is comprised of many small pieces which taken together add up to a whole much greater than its parts - seldom is there one big solution for downtown revitalization
- Build opportunities for community engagement that go beyond bricks and mortar
- Provide opportunities for recreation and entertainment
- Develop broad-based consensus and vision that can withstand changes in leadership
- Value the community’s history but don’t be so bound by it that it cannot be adapted to this century.

This is both a new model of community planning/economic development and also one that harks back to the way communities were traditionally developed before the advent of the car. For many elected officials and business leaders this model of development seems less compelling than building a new big industrial building or shopping center, but time is showing that community development built on the principals of heritage preservation is proving to be more economically robust. This is how our communities were built in the past and this is what many people in the new creative economy businesses are seeking. Just as New England’s Puritan founders desired to have “autonomous parts making up strong wholes” so this is the principle upon which we are building the economy and quality of life in this region. Governor Winthrop stated the concept clearly 376 years ago when he said: “There is no body but consists of parts, and that which knits these parts together gives the body perfection.” (footnote 4)

In the mid and latter 20th century, the fascination with the automobile and the urban planners who extolled separation of work – play – live spaces, helped us forgot what it takes to make livable communities. Although the car oriented, gated communities and the suburban dream house on one acre are still very strong American icons, many people are seeking better living alternates. The pleasures of the urban environment and its architectural variety are being rediscovered. Those communities and regions that recognize this are growing again. Places layered in history with unique cultures and diversity of people, intermixed with interesting and human scale environments that allow people to interact spontaneously and in unplanned ways, are gaining new residents and business. It is happening in our small and medium sized cities and towns as well as our big cities.

Author and contact:

Annie C. Harris, Executive Director
Essex National Heritage Commission
221 Essex Street, Suite 41
Salem, MA 01970
978-740-0444
annieh@essexheritage.org
www.essexheritage.org

Education: MBA Harvard University 1983; M Arch MIT 1973

Footnotes:

Footnote 1: *Events that Changed America Through the Seventeenth Century*, John Findling and Frank Thackeray, eds. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000): 59-69.

Footnote 2: *Building a City on a Hill*: paper by Rick Kennedy at www.ptloma.edu/HistPolSci/faculty/R_Kennedy

Footnote 3: Any Michelin Green Guide uses this term to describe its best recommendations.

Footnote 4: *Building a City on a Hill*: by paper Rick Kennedy at www.ptloma.edu/HistPolSci/faculty/R_Kennedy