

Racial Equity, Community Empowerment, and Social Cohesion: Sociocultural Impacts of National Heritage Areas





Niagara Falls National Heritage Area



Looking for Lincoln National Heritage Area



REFLECTIONS FROM SARA CAPEN

Chair, Alliance of National Heritage Areas and Executive Director, Niagara Falls National Heritage Area

In the Alliance of National Heritage Areas' early years, our organization's leadership focused primarily on National Heritage Areas' (NHAs) economic impacts being our greatest strength and messaging strategy with funders and Congressional members. While reporting on NHAs' economic impact is important, it is not more important than ensuring that voices of all Americans are heard and that they can find their stories in our work – the good, the bad, the hard, and the triumphant.

NHAs have been doing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in many ways for many years. Previously, most NHAs did not identify or even realize that they were doing DEI work. It was simply regarded as our work and our approach to the work.

Under my leadership, the ANHA has evolved as an organization to share NHAs' DEI work through storytelling. This evolution is reflected in our magazine series Connecting the Heart & Soul of American Communities.

The difference I have seen in sharing Heart & Soul with our Congressional members is that it resonates just as much if not more than economic impact numbers. For some Congressional members, this is because through our storytelling, they can find the history of their families, neighbors, friends, constituents, and colleagues. Through our storytelling, they can find and see themselves.

As National Park Service partners, we take the monumental storytelling ethos of our national parks and bring it to communities. We meet people where they are. The average, every day American may not find their story in a national park, but they will more than likely find their story in a NHA. We take pride in making sure that many voices are included around our cultural heritage storytelling tables.

This is the power of NHAs. The holistic impacts of our work need to be illuminated, acknowledged, and sustained. That is what this DEI position paper is about: clarifying the ways that our work is educating, transforming, and healing American communities which ultimately protects American democracy.

REFLECTIONS FROM LOWELL PERRY

Chair, ANHA Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee and Executive Director, Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area

It has long been a practice of mine to ask the question “why” when embarking on a program, project, or movement. What is the endgame? This position paper is not a political statement, even though it alludes to current events in history, and advocates for equity for all humanity.

The Alliance of National Heritage Areas (ANHA) is comprised of a group of organizations committed to the complete and accurate storytelling of history. This is important because an accurate account of history shapes us as a diverse nation. We are dedicated to ensuring future generations receive an “honest baton” in the relay of life to make subsequent generations aware of who we really are, and why we are indeed, stronger together.

ANHA is a solutions broker in the national conversation of who the nation aspires to be as a people. We are a vehicle to drive discussions at the local level that help lead to policy change. That is where all meaningful change takes place. We invite the readers of this

position paper to sit down in a safe environment with friends, colleagues, and yes, elected officials, and have a conversation that may lead to community healing. Inaction is not an option.

ANHA is looking at itself internally, in order to be honest brokers in this process and are walking the talk. This paper announces our commitment to racial equity, community empowerment, and social cohesion through the sociocultural impacts of National Heritage Areas. We are advocating a bigger, more inclusive vision, of what is best for the ongoing growth and development of the country. We are regular Americans speaking for all Americans.

Some may still try to take this missive out of context. However, our fidelity is to our profession and responsibility as storytellers. We will continue to be unequivocal in our approach to speaking truth to power, as needed. Structural racism and the unbridled lust for power infecting this country is choking out the so-called American Experiment. By ignoring the lessons of the past, we limit our ability to move on to a better future for our kids. There are no “both sides” to this story. Only right and wrong. It is time to right the wrongs.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Like numerous other cultural heritage development organizations during the Black Lives Matter era, the Alliance of National Heritage Areas has been undergoing a reexamination process as evidenced by our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Policy Statement published in 2020 (see page 8). As National Park Service partners, National Heritage Areas are designated by Congress to tell nationally important stories that celebrate our nation's diverse heritage. NHAs achieve this by championing diverse, equitable, and inclusive approaches to cultural heritage development activities (e.g., preservation, interpretation, heritage tourism, education, grant-making, conservation, recreation, advocacy).

In addition to clarifying our position with the DEI Policy Statement, the reexamination process has revealed a need to clarify how National Heritage Areas' collective DEI cultural heritage development work is highly relevant and necessary now in American communities. We believe that National Heritage Areas can be a solutions-oriented vehicle towards ensuring that public service systems that touch all Americans – criminal justice, education, healthcare, housing, and others – are truly equitable. Additionally, through accurate storytelling and creating a more complete historical perspective, eliminating institutionalized racism heretofore inherent in those systems may be more achievable.

This position paper reports on the Alliance of National Heritage Areas' findings that National Heritage Areas' DEI cultural heritage development impacts are most effectively understood and appreciated through three sociocultural lenses:

Racial equity – Advancing policies and practices that help communities historically underserved,

National Heritage Areas' DEI cultural heritage development impacts are most effectively understood and appreciated through three sociocultural lenses:

- *Racial equity*
- *Community empowerment*
- *Social cohesion*

marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty, systemic racism, and inequality gain access to opportunity, networks, and resources.

Community empowerment – Providing resources to historically underserved, marginalized, and impoverished communities to find, save, tell, and experience their own stories.

Social cohesion – Developing a sense of belonging, trust, and upward social mobility among community members.

These sociocultural impacts align with advancing racial equity and supporting underserved communities. In addition, they provide a more complete picture of how National Heritage Areas enhance quality of life holistically in the regions that they serve, especially when combined with impact numbers tabulated annually by the National Park Service (e.g., amount of federal dollars leveraged; number of community-level grants awarded; number of cultural heritage development projects, partners, and volunteers).

Delta Jewels Oral History Partnership Community Gathering at Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church in the historic Black town of Mound Bayou, Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area



National Heritage Areas' DEI cultural heritage development activities help the National Park Service to fulfill its mission of extending the benefits of natural and cultural resources to all Americans. It is important that Congressional authorization of individual National Heritage Areas remains constant in order for them to continue working with the National Park Service to engage historically underrepresented and marginalized communities. Congress can achieve this most expeditiously by passing the National Heritage Area Act.

The Alliance of National Heritage Areas aims to educate the public about how National Heritage Areas are protectors of American democracy. Through this position paper, we trust that our diverse audiences and partners – Congressional representatives, Department of the Interior and other federal agencies, state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, educational and cultural institutions, corporations, local businesses, Tribal Nations, residents, tourists, and others – will become stronger advocates for acknowledging and sustaining National Heritage Areas' sociocultural impacts now and in the future.



Hisashi Bill Sugaya at Topaz Museum Opening, Great Basin National Heritage Area

PURPOSE

This position paper demonstrates how National Heritage Areas (NHAs) advance racial equity, empower underrepresented communities to own and tell their stories, and help to restore social cohesion and connectedness in localities that they serve. These sociocultural impacts align with advancing racial equity and supporting underserved communities.

In recent years, cultural heritage development professions — preservation, philanthropy, tourism, park management, conservation, interpretation, and others — have been reexamining their contributions, or lack thereof, to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

At minimum, this reexamination has involved acknowledging their historic and current roles in perpetuating institutionalized racism, white supremacy, and marginalization of underrepresented groups.¹

This reexamination process among cultural heritage developers has accelerated steadily since the Black Lives Matter Movement started in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African American teen Trayvon Martin. Seven years later, deaths of African Americans at the hands of white assailants continued in 2020 with George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Priscilla Slater, and numerous others, fueling Black Lives Matter nationally and globally to the point that it has been proclaimed the largest movement in U.S. history.²

DEI AND NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS

The Alliance of National Heritage Areas (hereafter referred to as “the Alliance”) has been undergoing a DEI reexamination process as well during the Black Lives Matter era. As National Park Service partners, NHAs are designated by Congress to tell nationally important stories that celebrate our nation’s diverse heritage through shared resources, partnerships, and direct community involvement. Indeed, during the 2016 National Park Service Centennial, NHAs were acknowledged as “expand[ing] the National Park Service’s role as guardian not only of American heritage, but also of American democracy.”³

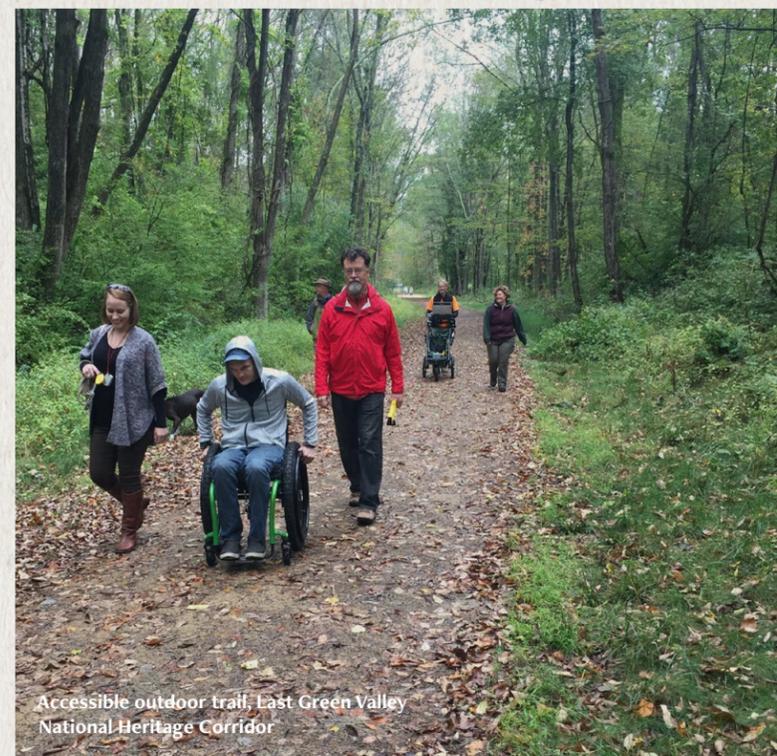
NHAs have empowered underrepresented groups and communities for many years. In the current reexamination moment, much of this previous work is being understood now as DEI cultural heritage development, which suggests that NHAs and the Alliance are experiencing a transformative self-realization process. The Alliance’s *Connecting the Heart & Soul of American Communities* magazine series – a key data analysis source for this paper – features several stories of NHAs engaging in DEI cultural heritage development including:

How **Kenai Mountains Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area** in Alaska coordinated with many partners to address the challenges of preserving local cultural heritage sites like Turquoise Bend in a way that respects indigenous peoples while educating and assisting private land owners in protecting these places.

“...during the 2016 National Park Service Centennial, NHAs were acknowledged as expanding the National Park Service’s role as guardian not only of American heritage, but also of American democracy.”

How **Niagara Falls National Heritage Area** in New York partnered with the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Commission to open the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, which reveals authentic stories of Underground Railroad freedom seekers and local abolitionists, as well as inspires visitors to recognize modern injustices that stem from slavery and to contribute towards creating an equitable society.

How **The Last Green Valley National Heritage Corridor** in Connecticut and Massachusetts has a volunteer Trail Assessment Team committed to ensuring that people of all ages and abilities can access more than 35 miles of the NHA’s outdoor trails, including residents like Gabe Sipson, a former forester and passionate outdoorsman who suffered a workplace accident that resulted in him becoming a paraplegic in a wheelchair.



Accessible outdoor trail, Last Green Valley National Heritage Corridor

How **Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area** in West Virginia engaged over 1,000 students, ages 3-18, in a citizen science project that educated them on non-native invasive species, which provided these youth an opportunity to develop a sense of belonging and purpose by collectively removing over 1,725 pounds of non-native invasive plants in their communities.⁴

The Alliance’s DEI policy statement published in 2020 reflects NHAs’ ongoing commitment to the American democratic principle of the common good. Through this statement, the Alliance aims to ensure that NHA-supported cultural heritage resource development includes and benefits all Americans (see following page).

¹ See, for example, “[Recommendations for Advancing Equity and Inclusion in the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works](#),” Equity and Inclusion Working Group, April 2018; Jacobs, Jeremy P. and Rob Hotakainen, “[Racist roots, lack of diversity haunt national parks](#),” E&E News, June 25, 2020; DEI Standards for Travel & Tourism, Travel Unity, August 2020; Preservation for People: A Vision for the Future, National Trust for Historic Preservation, May 2017; and “[Race, Social Justice, and Interpretation Panel Discussion](#),” National Association for Interpretation, June 25, 2020.

² Buchanan, Larry, et al. “[Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History](#),” The New York Times, July 3, 2020.

³ Barton, Alan. “[From Parks to Partnerships: National Heritage Areas and the Path to Collaborative Participation in the National Park Service’s First 100 Years](#),” Natural Resources Journal, Winter 2016, p. 24.

⁴ See *Heart & Soul Volume I* (n.d.); *Volume II* (March 2018); *Volume III* (February 2019); and *Volume IV* (February 2020), available at www.nationalheritageareas.us/heart-soul/ (accessed May 18, 2021).



Alliance of National Heritage Areas
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policy Statement
Adopted May 2020

We celebrate our nation's diverse heritage.

We create experiences that stimulate cultural equity.

We empower inclusive communities to tell their stories.

Kenai Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area

The Alliance of National Heritage Areas is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Our membership organization of Congressionally-designated National Heritage Areas and partner-affiliated organizations works collectively to protect and promote diverse people and places that tell America's stories equitably and inclusively.

We define diversity as meaningful representation of different groups in cultural heritage development, included but not limited to race, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical/mental ability, ethnicity, geography, and perspective.

We define equity as policies and practices that help communities gain access to opportunity, networks, and resources toward reaching their full cultural heritage development potential.

We define inclusion as authentic engagement of diverse groups in cultural heritage development, providing all community members with a genuine sense of belonging.

We are the Heart & Soul of America.

We are the Alliance of National Heritage Areas.

ANHA

Alliance of National Heritage Areas



Race Project KC students sharing their stories, Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area



Johnny Waits, President and Co-Founder of the Flat Rock Archives at Flat Rock African American Historical Cemetery, Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area

DEI CULTURAL HERITAGE DEVELOPMENT

To do DEI cultural heritage development, NHA leaders and partners are called upon to think and act regionally and collectively. This means that NHAs do not own the cultural heritage stories and assets that belong to the diverse communities within their boundaries. Rather, NHAs engage these communities in finding, saving, telling, experiencing, and sharing their own cultural heritage stories and assets.

Creating opportunities for residents to share their authentic cultural heritage stories is a critical aspect of the work that NHAs do on behalf of their communities. Working with diverse local and national partners, NHAs have been at the institutional forefront of empowering and engaging authentic community voices towards promoting greater understanding of ongoing DEI issues locally and nationally.

For NHAs to be effective, our work requires a deft hand and nuanced approach that sometimes can go unnoticed. Herein, erasure of the various entities involved in this work — including NHAs that are

supporting the work — is a constant concern. Our approach involves building trust with NHA residents who often feel that their communities have been unheard and overlooked historically.

NHAs often create safe spaces for difficult conversations about highly sensitive DEI cultural heritage development topics. Through our work, we aim to stimulate connections and collaboration across each of our Congressionally designated cultural heritage landscapes. While DEI cultural heritage development is complex and challenging work, it is necessary work.

NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA CONGRESSIONAL DESIGNATION TIMELINE

1984	» Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor (IL)
1986	» John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (MA/RI)
1988	» Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor (PA) » Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission “Path of Progress” (PA)
1994	» Cane River NHA (LA) » The Last Green Valley National Heritage Corridor (CT/MA) » America’s Agricultural Heritage Partnership / Silos and Smokestacks (IA) » Augusta Canal NHA (GA) » Essex NHA (MA) » Maurice D. Hinchey Hudson River Valley NHA (NY)
1996	» National Coal Heritage Area (WV) » Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor (OH) » Rivers of Steel NHA (PA) » Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District (VA) » South Carolina National Heritage Corridor (SC) » Tennessee Civil War Heritage Area (TN)
1998	» MotorCities NHA (MI) » Lackawanna Valley NHA (PA) » Schuylkill River Valley NHA (PA)
2000	» Wheeling NHA (WV) » Yuma Crossing NHA (AZ) » Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor (NY)
2003	» Blue Ridge NHA (NC) » Mississippi Gulf Coast NHA (MS)
2004	» National Aviation Heritage Area (OH/IN) » Oil Region NHA (PA) » Arabia Mountain NHA (GA) » Atchafalaya NHA (LA) » Champlain Valley National Heritage Partnership (NY/VT) » Crossroads of the American Revolution NHA (NJ) » Freedom’s Frontier NHA (KS/MO)
2006	» Great Basin National Heritage Route (NV/UT) » Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor (FL/GA/NC/SC) » Mormon Pioneer NHA (UT) » Northern Rio Grande NHA (NM) » Upper Housatonic Valley NHA (CT/MA)
2008	» Abraham Lincoln NHA (IL) » Journey Through Hallowed Ground NHA (MD/PA/VA/WV) » Niagara Falls NHA (NY) » Baltimore NHA (MD) » Cache La Poudre River NHA (CO) » Freedom’s Way NHA (MA/NH) » Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm NHA (AK)
2009	» Mississippi Delta NHA (MS) » Mississippi Hills NHA (MS) » Muscle Shoals NHA (AL) » Northern Plains NHA (ND) » Sangre de Cristo NHA (CO) » South Park NHA (PA) » Appalachian Forest NHA (WV/MD) » Maritime Washington NHA (WA) » Mountains to Sound Greenway NHA (WA)
2019	» Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta NHA (CA) » Santa Cruz Valley NHA (AZ) » Susquehanna NHA (PA)

DeSantis, Mark K. *Heritage Areas: Background, Proposals, and Current Issues*. Congressional Research Service, March 24, 2021.

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The National Park Service has existed for over 100 years. By comparison, the first NHA—Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor—was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1984. In nearly 40 years, the NHA movement has grown to include 55 Congressionally-designated NHAs in 34 states, from Alaska and California on the West Coast to Massachusetts and Florida on the East Coast.⁵

The past four decades have seen steady growth in Congressional support for NHA designation, as well as steady interest in the NHA designation process among regional cultural heritage development coalitions. The National Park Service provides detailed guidance and resources about what NHAs are, how they operate, how they benefit regions, and how the Congressional designation process works.⁶ The Alliance regularly produces *Heart & Soul*, a magazine series that highlights how NHAs have brought communities together for the common good through DEI cultural heritage development activities.⁷

⁵ For a detailed map of National Heritage Areas, see National Park Service’s “[Map – Discover NHAs](#)” webpage (accessed April 20, 2021).

DEI cultural heritage development instills pride of place in residents. It fortifies their capabilities to activate social and economic opportunities in the communities that they call home.

The NHA-National Park Service partnership is mutually beneficial. NHAs receive funding and technical assistance through the National Park Service, as well as gain opportunities for increased national and local exposure through a widely recognized federal brand. In turn, NHAs help the National Park Service to engage underrepresented communities that typically do not view national parks as places where they belong or as cultural resources that tell or include their stories.

For example, the 2016 National Park Service Centennial launched many initiatives “to be more relevant, to better serve communities, and to invite new audiences into parks.” These initiatives were “focused on one central Centennial goal: to connect with and create the next generation of park visitors, supporters, and advocates,” with this next generation being “one of the most diverse, multicultural generations in our nation’s history.”⁸ Many NHAs developed programs under the Centennial banner, including the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area’s Delta Jewels Oral History Partnership about African American church mothers from the region. Thus, NHAs have provided and continue to provide a valuable service by engaging diverse, multicultural communities in partnership with the National Park Service.

⁷ See “[Connecting the Heart and Soul of American Communities](#),” Alliance of National Heritage Areas (accessed April 20, 2021)



US Congressman Bennie Thompson (far left) at the dedication of the Unita Blackwell Freedom Trail Marker, Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area

WHY AMERICA NEEDS NHAs NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

As the following Analysis and Findings section illustrates, NHAs’ DEI cultural heritage development approach entails grassroots-level community engagement to enhance quality of life in socioculturally and economically vulnerable regions. NHAs work within these communities to address long-term, embedded issues of racial inequity, as well as generational disempowerment and marginalization of underrepresented groups that inhibit regional advancement.

DEI cultural heritage development instills pride of place in residents. It fortifies their capabilities to activate social and economic opportunities in the communities that they call home. It empowers them to do this using an invaluable place-based resource: their distinctive and diverse American cultural heritage.

For these reasons and reasons detailed in the Analysis and Findings section, the Alliance calls for Congress’ continued support so that NHAs can continue to help the National Park Service fulfill its mission of extending the benefits of natural and cultural resources to all Americans. Specific actions of support include authorization of individual NHAs and passing the National Heritage Area Act.

⁸ See [National Park Service Centennial Final Report: Realizing the Vision For the Second Century](#), National Park Service, December 2016, pp. 4, 11 (accessed May 20, 2021)

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Alliance finds that NHAs’ DEI cultural heritage development impacts are best understood and appreciated through three sociocultural lenses:

- 1) **Racial equity**
- 2) **Community empowerment**
- 3) **Social cohesion**

These findings come from an analysis of NHA profiles included in the Alliance’s publication *Heart & Soul, Volume 5: The American Tapestry – Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in National Heritage Areas* published in July 2020. Summaries of selected NHA profiles are included in each sociocultural impact section.



RACIAL EQUITY

The Alliance supports a broad commitment to racial equity.

As a partner of the National Park Service that is supported by federal funding, we view NHAs as vehicles for advancing comprehensive policies on racial equity through DEI cultural heritage development.

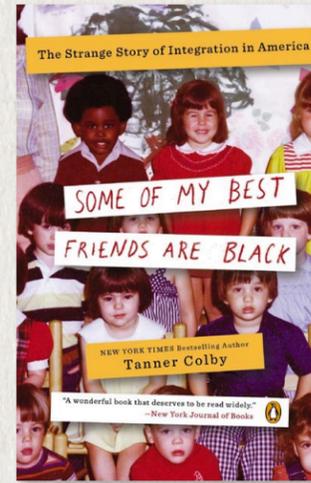
NHAs are equipped to support overarching efforts to “pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality.”⁹

We recognize that persistent poverty and inequality exist in communities throughout the nation. Several NHAs serve regions historically and presently shaped by racial and economic inequality. Their community-based projects demonstrate how NHAs have been actively addressing racial equity through DEI cultural heritage development.

■ **Baltimore NHA** is steeped both in the history and future of race relations. The 1968 race riots negatively impacted the business and entertainment community in Baltimore along Pennsylvania Avenue. In 2015, another wave of destruction around race relations occurred in the same area after

the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American man killed by the Baltimore Police Department after being arrested over possessing a knife. Baltimore NHA works with heritage organizations, cultural institutions, neighborhoods and, most importantly, citizens to archive the story of past and present race relations in the city, as well as improve race relations through lectures, programs, grants and initiatives aimed at healing racial divides in the city. Baltimore NHA has hosted a lunchtime lecture series *It’s More Than History* that has taken a deep dive into the history of colored schools in Baltimore, the roles of women in the steel industry, and the secret lives of the enslaved on Baltimore area plantations. With an eye to the future, Baltimore NHA also has supported youth in telling their own stories about coming of age in Baltimore, the fair housing debate, and the squeegee phenomenon.¹⁰ Ultimately, Baltimore NHA aims to help ensure that the next generation understands that they have a say in shaping the history and legacy of their community.

■ **Freedom’s Frontier NHA** has undertaken the challenging task of interpreting the Kansas City region’s divisive history of segregation and its legacy as detailed in the 2012 book *Some of My Best Friends are Black: The*



Strange Story of Integration in America by Tanner Colby. Through a partnership with Race Project KC, Freedom’s Frontier NHA has paired students from wealthier suburban schools and majority-minority schools in economically depressed areas to learn Johnson County, Wyandotte County, and Jackson County’s history of racial segregation and how it continues to impact the region today. Students encounter experts on the topic, learn vocabulary for talking about race, and build relationships with peers they might not otherwise meet. The project gives students a chance to share their own unique stories which leads to breaking down racial barriers and understanding collective strengths.

■ **Oil Region NHA** in Pennsylvania acknowledges that the story of the Native American experience in the United States



Oil Region National Heritage Area

is a difficult and painful one. Oil Region NHA has worked with the Seneca Nation to heal historic wounds. Part of that healing process took place when Oil City’s Mayor proclaimed October 14, 2017, as “Chief Cornplanter Day” throughout the community, unveiling permanent commemorations about Chief Cornplanter, an 18th – 19th century diplomat from the Seneca

Nation. Representatives of today’s Seneca Nation were guest speakers and musicians/dancers at free public events introducing a new two-story outdoor mural as well as a Commonwealth of Pennsylvania historical marker, which is strategically placed along the Allegheny River and the Erie to Pittsburgh Multi-Use Trail, which draws tens of thousands of avid bicyclists every year.

⁹ From Section I. Policy, “[Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#),” January 20, 2021 (accessed May 4, 2021).

¹⁰ To learn more about the history of the Squeegee Bill in Baltimore and its racial policy and policing implications, see “[Plight of the Squeegee Kids](#),” *The Baffler*, July 2019.

We cannot talk about addressing racial equity issues without talking about power. According to Living Cities, an anti-racist organization committed to addressing structural racial inequities through neighborhood and system transformation, “[i]n America, we often talk about racism in a hate vs. love frame, but if we are truly to address racial inequity, we must understand it in terms of power. This is necessary because racism is, at its core, a tool to establish and maintain power

structures that are centered around whiteness. When we don’t talk about power and power dynamics at all levels (interpersonal, institutional, and systemic), we perpetuate inequity.”¹¹

NHAs have provided resources to historically underserved, marginalized, and impoverished communities to find, save, tell, and experience their own stories. This approach to community empowerment often involves creating safe spaces for these communities to research, document, and share difficult stories that historically have gone untold due to shame, discrimination, and erasure.

Community-empowered storytelling and narrative change supported by NHAs have sparked cultural, social, political, and economic activities in historically underserved communities throughout the country. These activities also have created opportunities for transforming interpersonal,

institutional, and systemic power dynamics. NHAs have been at the forefront of this movement in diverse ways.

■ **Mississippi Delta NHA** and The Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University received 2016 National Park Service Centennial Awards for creating the Delta Jewels Oral History Partnership. The partnership organized 16 community gatherings interpreting and celebrating the lives of African American church mothers from the Mississippi Delta featured in University of Mississippi professor Alysia Burton Steele’s book *Delta Jewels: In Search of My Grandmother’s Wisdom*. The community gatherings engaged over 1,000 Mississippi Delta residents, visitors, and supporters in honoring the Delta Jewels church mothers and their unheard stories of surviving sharecropping, the Jim Crow Era, and the Civil Rights Movement through family, education, activism, and faith. The community gatherings also created economic stimulus for local caterers, restaurants, and gift retailers. All 54 Delta Jewels church mothers received certificates of appreciation from U.S. Congressman Bennie Thompson, the longest serving African American elected official in the state of Mississippi’s history.¹²

■ **Northern Plains NHA** regularly partners with Thunder Revolution Studios to document projects that involve indigenous heritage through an indigenous lens on the Missouri River in central North Dakota. Owner and enrolled tribal citizen Justin Deegan, whose self-described ancestry is Arikara and Oglala/Hunkpapa, said Thunder Revolution has opportunities to change tropes and stereotypes such as “poverty porn” that have become normalized from centuries of colonization. Deegan said there “is definitely a paradigm shift happening” in indigenous filmmaking, and that “it’s important to support them and encourage their work.” It is in the spirit that a Native Voices panel also was held in 2019.

¹¹ Omar, Hafizah and Nadia Owusu, “Operationalizing Racial Equity & Inclusion: Shifting Systems of Power”, Living Cities blog, May 13, 2018; see item 9 “To talk about race, we have to talk about inherent power dynamics” (accessed April 30, 2021).

¹² To learn more, view the [Delta Jewels Oral History Partnership 2015-16 Report](#), The Delta Center for Culture and Learning, Delta State University.



Historias de Nuevo Mexico conference, “Querencia Interrupted: Hispano and Native American Experiences of the Manhattan Project,” Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Area

United Tribes Technical College partnered to engage Native historians and traditional knowledge keepers to partake in public dialog. Panelists included Dakota Goodhouse (Standing Rock Sioux Nation), Donovan Sprague (Cheyenne River Sioux Nation), Tamara St. John (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate/Nation), Calvin Grinnell (MHA Nation), and Loren Yellow Bird, Sr. (MHA Nation), who served as a cultural advisor to the 2015 film *The Revenant*, a story about fur trader Hugh Glass.

■ **Northern Rio Grande NHA** joined with the Northern New Mexico College to present the Historias de Nuevo Mexico conference in October 2017. The conference theme was “Querencia Interrupted: Hispano and Native American Experiences of the Manhattan Project.” The Manhattan Project was established by the U.S.

government during World War II. The Project gave rise to paid job opportunities and new possibilities for education and technology. Over the years, the Project also created deeper community divides in income and social standing. It also silenced local voices about how the Project changed lives and local culture dynamics. The Historias de Nuevo Mexico conference created a new dialogue by recognizing contributions of locals, allowing participants to share their own stories, opening the discussion of continuing issues, and honoring the surviving participants with a specially commissioned Story Protectors medal. The conference also has propelled intercommunity discussion and the inclusion of local oral history profiles.

SOCIAL COHESION

The Alliance acknowledges that minority communities — Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and others — have been victims of erasure and even genocide in the name of cultural “cohesion” and assimilation. These terms have been

used to advance the damaging idea that

minority communities become accepted as more fully American when they downplay, deny, or give up altogether their distinctive cultural traditions, stories, and experiences.

This is not how the Alliance defines social cohesion in the DEI cultural heritage development context. Our definition of social cohesion aligns with the Organization for European Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)¹³, of which the United States is a founding member.

The OECD defines a socially cohesive society as one that “works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility.” The OECD finds that social cohesion contributes to maintaining long-term economic growth.¹⁴

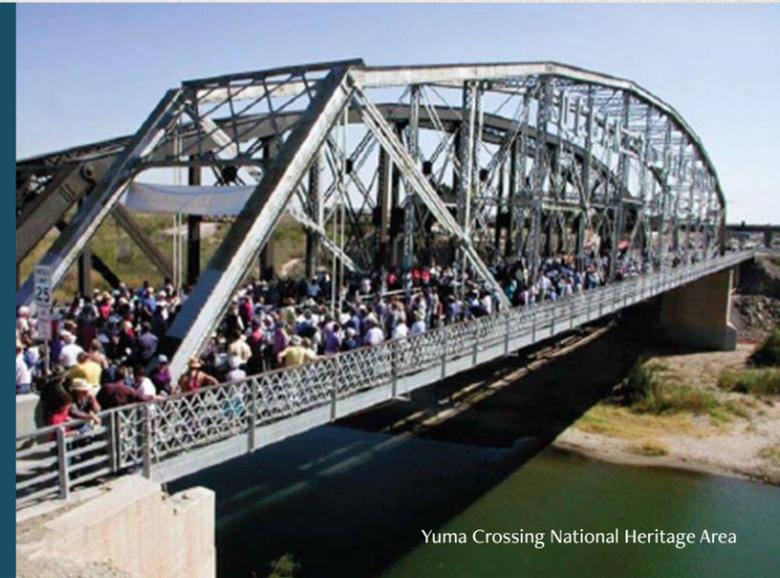
At the community level, social cohesion encompasses sense of belonging among community members, as well as relationships among members. NHA-supported projects have restored belonging and connectedness in communities that live with legacies of traumatic events, group conflict, and discrimination.

■ **Great Basin NHA** supported the creation of the Topaz Museum, which tells the story of the Topaz Internment Camp in Delta, Utah. The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II was one of

“NHA-supported projects have restored belonging and connectedness in communities that live with legacies of traumatic events, group conflict, and discrimination.”

the worst violations of civil rights in the history of the United States. Following Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order #9066, which effectively stripped Japanese Americans of their constitutional rights and led to the imprisonment of 120,000 men, women, and children. Through decades of outreach and fundraising efforts, the Topaz Museum board not only built the museum, but also raised awareness of the camp with area residents, many of whom knew little or nothing of this important piece of local history. Exhibits at the Topaz Museum serve as both a memorial to this tragic episode in American history and as an educational tool, enabling profound learning experiences for students throughout the state and visitors from across the nation and around the world.

■ **Yuma Crossing NHA** led the restoration and re-opening of the historic “Ocean to Ocean Highway Bridge.” Built in 1915, the bridge connected tribal land to downtown Yuma, Arizona, but was closed in 1989 for structural deficiencies. The closed bridge became symbolic of the historic divide between the Yuma community and the Quechan Indian Tribe. Distrust and suspicion weighed heavily on



the relationship ever since the U.S. military took control of the Yuma Crossing away from the Quechan in the 1850's. Yuma Crossing NHA secured \$1 million in grants but needed \$400,000 in local match to restore the bridge. The City agreed to provide \$200,000 of the match but wanted the Tribe to enter into a complex Intergovernmental Agreement to assure the Tribe's share of the match. The NHA worried that an overly legalistic approach would hinder the growing trust among the parties. Their worries were put to rest when the Tribe voluntarily provided a check of \$200,000, payable to the City of Yuma. Tribal and city residents met on the bridge to celebrate the re-opening of the bridge which both literally and figuratively reconnected the communities. Recognizing that over 60% of the Yuma population is comprised of people of Hispanic origin, the NHA also convened a Hispanic Advisory Committee to ensure that the historic contributions of this important segment of the Yuma community was finally recognized. Yuma is in fact the birthplace of Cesar Chavez.

Alliance of National Heritage Areas' Commitment to Advancing Racial Equity, Community Empowerment, and Social Cohesion:

- Work with the National Park Service to get sociocultural impacts included in annual NHA reports towards illuminating holistic contributions of NHAs.
- Develop the NHA Storyteller campaign, which will include developing a digital archive of Congressional letters of support and gathering stories and digital materials from NHA supporters.
- Encourage NHA board and staff members to sign and share the ANHA DEI pledge.
- Serve as a guiding resource for NHAs to conduct DEI organizational assessments and audits by connecting NHAs to experts internal and external to the Alliance.

¹³ The OECD is an international coalition of 37 member and 5 partner countries that aims to “shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity and well-being for all” through a range of evidence- and solutions-based applications including “improving economic performance and creating jobs to fostering strong education and fighting international tax evasion.” For more information, visit <https://www.oecd.org/about/>

¹⁴ OECD (2011), Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/persp_glob_dev-2012-en, p. 17

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

NHAs engage diverse audiences and partners including the National Park Service, Congressional representatives, community-based cultural organizations, educational institutions, Tribal Nations, residents, tourists, and many others. The Alliance invites these critical stakeholders to join us in advocating for continued federal, state, and local support of NHAs.

Through this support, NHAs can continue to protect American democracy and help create better quality of life in American communities by stimulating racial equity, community empowerment, and social cohesion.

Based on our analysis and findings, below are general and specific actions that the Alliance recommends for NHA stakeholders.

■ US CONGRESS

The Alliance appreciates ongoing support from Congressional senators and representatives. NHAs need sustained Congressional support, especially as there have been attempts to defund NHAs in previous years.

The Alliance calls for Congress to pass and fully fund the National Heritage Area Act which will (1) establish a National Heritage Areas System and (2) authorize appropriations for each NHA.

In the unanticipated event that Congress cannot pass the National Heritage Area Act, the Alliance calls on Congress to continue appropriating funds for the NHA program in perpetuity.

■ NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The Alliance appreciates the National Park Service's ongoing partnership. In particular, the economic and programmatic impact numbers tabulated annually by the



1 Tree planting celebration, Mountains to Sound Greenway National Heritage Area

2 Fisk University Jubilee Singers, Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area

3 Alliance of National Heritage Areas members and U.S. Congressional staff at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture honoring Black History Month, February 2017

4 Essex National Heritage Area's Future Leaders program

5 Fishing Derby, Ohio & Erie Canalway National Heritage Area

National Park Service have served as important reference points for NHA advocacy at federal, state, and local levels.¹⁵

Towards providing a more complete picture of how NHAs protect American democracy and improve quality of life, the Alliance calls on the National Park Service to work with us to incorporate racial equity, community empowerment, and social cohesion impact areas in future NHA reports. These impact areas should be integrated into data collection reports that the National Park Service gathers from NHAs annually. Our analysis provides a framework for NHAs to report this information to the National Park Service.

■ STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

NHAs are required to leverage federal funding from the National Park Service at a minimum rate of 1:1 dollar for dollar from non-federal sources. This non-federal match can be cash or in kind and serves as documented evidence of community-level buy-in for NHAs.

Several NHAs receive non-federal match support from their state and local governments. The Alliance calls upon state legislatures and local government entities to continue to provide critical support that helps to

¹⁵ For more information, see the National Park Service's NHA "Celebrate Success" and "How National Heritage Areas Spent 2020 By the Numbers" web pages (accessed April 30, 2021)



Trail ribbon cutting,
Schuylkill River National Heritage Area



Cherokee Heritage Festival,
Blue Ridge National Heritage Area



Kids in Kayaks program,
Baltimore National Heritage Area

sustain NHA sociocultural and economic impacts among local constituents.

More specifically, state legislators can serve as key intermediaries between federal and municipal government representatives. The Alliance calls for state legislators to let their federal counterparts know that they support the NHA program and that they need to work together to identify and protect sources of non-federal match. State legislators also can work with local governments to provide matching funds to NHAs.

■ COMMUNITY PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS AND VOLUNTEERS

The National Park Service keeps track of the number of partners and volunteers that NHAs work with annually. In 2020, the National Park Service reports that NHAs “engaged 2,829 formal partners and 5,210 informal partners in heritage area activities” and that NHAs “benefited from 23,152 volunteers contributing over 394,463 hours for heritage area projects – a \$10.1 million-dollar value.”

Behind these numbers are community organizations, residents, and even visitors who believe in NHAs and are passionate about helping to support their work. The Alliance recognizes that partners and volunteers are vital assets who have powerful stories to share about their experiences working with NHAs.

The Alliance invites NHA partners and volunteers to join us in sharing the benefits of NHAs with federal, state, and local government representatives. The Alliance facilitates letter-writing campaigns to Congressional representatives that include the voices of partners and volunteers. For example, many community organizations that have received grants via NHAs have sent letters to Congressional representatives thanking them for their support and encouraging continuation of federal funding.

The Alliance is developing a digital archive of these letters as part of the NHA Storyteller campaign. We ask that partners and volunteers upload past and current letters of support to the website at NationalHeritageAreas.us.

■ NHA BOARDS OF DIRECTORS AND STAFF

NHAs are models of collective self-advocacy through their active membership in the Alliance. For several years, every February, the Alliance has hosted its annual meetings in Washington, DC, where NHA representatives – board members and staff – educate Congressional representatives on the Hill and at legislative receptions about NHAs’ contributions.

To enhance this important work, the Alliance calls on NHA boards of directors and staff to strategically adopt racial equity, community empowerment, and social cohesion approaches in their organizational governance, goals and objectives, and programming.

By doing so, NHAs will position themselves to generate quantitative and qualitative data that the National Park Service can capture in annual NHA reports. The Alliance then will be equipped with advocacy tools to share with Congress, ultimately creating a more holistic picture of NHAs’ contributions to American communities that can lead to ongoing Congressional support.

The Alliance also calls on NHA board of directors and staff to:

- Sign the pledge committing to the Alliance’s DEI Policy Statement. The DEI pledge is available at NationalHeritageAreas.us. NHA board members and executive directors are encouraged to sign together and list specific NHA projects, initiatives, events, etc., that demonstrate the NHA’s commitment to DEI.
- After signing the DEI pledge, share with various stakeholders for their co-signatures, such as Congressional caucuses, National Park Service, state and local governments, community partners, residents, and visitors.
- Conduct DEI assessments of the organization. The Alliance website lists resources available for doing this critical work. Involve the Alliance in conducting these assessments by inviting our DEI experts to facilitate board discussions, help to define success metrics, and develop strategies for documenting progress and sharing impacts.

■ RESIDENTS AND VISITORS

NHAs exist to instill pride among residents by creating opportunities to learn about, share, and celebrate diverse cultural heritage assets within their communities. By helping to make residents aware of the immense value of their cultural heritage, NHAs help to empower residents to provide unique transformational experiences to tourists, particularly around challenging topics like race relations, poverty, immigration, and LGBTQ and gender issues.

The Alliance encourages residents and visitors to learn more about how NHAs support communities in telling their cultural heritage stories by reading the Alliance’s Heart & Soul magazines.

We encourage local residents to be actively involved in the work of NHAs as volunteers, board members, and staff. The NHA program is a big tent that is welcoming to all people, each of whom plays a role in shaping our national story.

We then ask that you join our NHA Storyteller campaign website at NationalHeritageAreas.us. Here, you can share your stories about living in and/or visiting a NHA by posting comments about an experience, writing a poem or short essay, or uploading videos or photos. The story archive that you help us to create will be made accessible to and shared with NHA stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

“From the time I enlisted in the Army National Guard, to the time I was given command to lead citizen soldiers of our great nation, to the time I retired, I understood then, and now, that **our regional and national heritage is what gives us our identity. It is who we are individually, and collectively as a nation.**

America is represented through the regional diversity reflected in every National Heritage Area. Our ideals and aspirations as a democratic republic are charged by this heritage.” (emphasis added)

—Retired Major General David Sprynczynatyk, Testimony to Congress, April 19, 2019

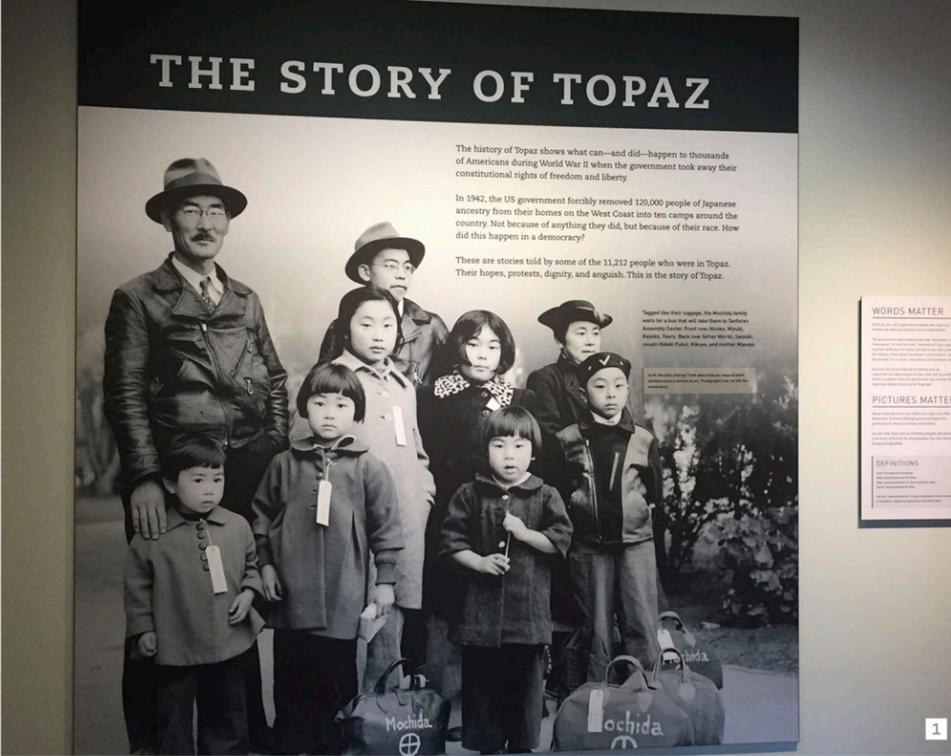
The Alliance wholeheartedly agrees with this statement. NHAs are the amplifiers of diverse heritage voices that live in communities across our nation. These voices enrich our understanding of American experiences, past and present, that have shaped who we are as a nation. To exclude, silence, erase, or lose these voices is a violation of our American democracy. The DEI cultural heritage development work that NHAs do ensures that these voices are not excluded, silenced, erased, or lost.



We trust that the analysis and recommended actions presented in this position paper will lead our stakeholders to align further with NHAs. The Alliance is committed to supporting and advancing the sociocultural impacts of NHAs – racial equity, community empowerment, and social cohesion – by taking the following actions:

- Work with the National Park Service to get sociocultural impacts included in annual NHA reports towards illuminating holistic contributions of NHAs.
- Develop the NHA Storyteller campaign, which will include developing a digital archive of Congressional letters of support and gathering stories and digital materials from NHA supporters.
- Encourage NHA board and staff members to sign and share the ANHA DEI pledge.
- Serve as a guiding resource for NHAs to conduct DEI organizational assessments and audits by connecting NHAs to experts internal and external to the Alliance.

Like the American stories that we protect and preserve, NHAs also need to be protected and preserved for future generations. Indeed, the sociocultural impacts of NHAs manifest over time. Sustaining NHAs is critical towards ensuring that American communities benefit from these impacts for years to come.



- 1 Topaz Japanese American Internment Camp Museum, Great Basin National Heritage Area
- 2 A former internee points out her family's barracks at the opening of the Topaz Museum, Great Basin NHA
- 3 African American ring shouters, Gullah Geechee National Heritage Corridor
- 4 Native Voices panel event, Northern Plains National Heritage Area

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