

Inheriting Historic Fortune

Mitzi L. Miller

Courtney and Roger Smith were living in Richmond, Virginia, when they realized they didn't want to raise their daughter in such a busy city. In a five-year effort to find the perfect small town, the Smiths researched and visited a number of possibilities; searching for places with a thriving downtown, ongoing cultural activities and a more relaxed pace.

With its thriving art scene, active tourism, and historic architecture, Lewisburg, West Virginia, became home to the Smiths. They even opened Honnahlee Toys, a downtown business specializing in unique and educational toys.

Originally tourists, the Smiths say they see visitors in their toy shop from many places, including Florida, Hawaii, California, Italy and Germany.

So what attracts tourists to small towns like Lewisburg?

Research indicates a combination of factors that include interesting shops, uncluttered and attractive streetscapes, well-preserved older homes and historic public buildings such as Carnegie Hall and the North House Museum in Lewisburg.

Travelers want to get away from the rat race of "real" life and be in quaint, beautiful and quiet places. Lewisburg is now attracting these tourists due to committed civic leadership and strategic planning in an area recognized as the fastest growing and most profitable segment of the tourism industry—cultural heritage tourism.



Developing A State-wide Initiative

In 1996, Preservation Alliance of West Virginia (PAWV), a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to the support and promotion of historic preservation and the West Virginia Development Office's Main Street West Virginia program, joined forces with West Virginia University to conduct an economic impact study of preservation programs in West Virginia. Among other findings, the study stressed that heritage tourism held enormous economic development opportunities for the state's communities.

West Virginia's history, especially when made tangible through surviving historic structures,

The historic district of downtown Lewisburg

and when compellingly presented with heritage stories, supplements scenic attractions to make it a premier heritage destination. The state also has a large and accessible market, considering that several major cities are merely a few hours away. Tourism in West Virginia is already big business. So big, in fact, more than 24.5 million visitors traveled to the state in 2003.

Based on the potential economic impact of increased heritage tourism, PAWV decided to take on the issue as a major program initiative. The effort took off when the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation recog-

nized its potential and provided the financial underpinning needed to pursue the matter on a significant scale. Thus far, PAWV has leveraged more than \$700,000 in foundation, private, state and federal funding for the Cultural Heritage Tourism Program.

Phyllis Baxter, president of PAWV, feels cultural heritage tourism is an asset-based development. "By preserving and enhancing the assets that are already here, we make the best use of what we have to bring in tourists and create jobs in our communities," she explained during a recent meeting on the subject with Tom Bulla, newly appointed secretary of commerce, and members of his staff.

In 2003, PAWV created a steering committee consisting of representatives from various state agencies, other non-profit organizations and community partners to investigate the best placement for the cultural heritage tourism development program. The committee recommended the West Virginia Development Office as a home to the West Virginia Cultural Heritage Tourism Program, working particularly with Main Street West Virginia, a well established Development Office program that uses a common-sense approach to tackle downtown and neighborhood commercial district revitalization issues.

"It just made sense to develop this program along with Main Street," says Monica Miller, state coordinator for the successful Main Street West Virginia program. She feels that both programs are interlocking because both perform business and resource development and both work with the state's small towns and communities that possess unique historical resources. She feels an integrated and encompassing program, like the Cultural Heritage Tourism Program, is needed to capitalize on this major development opportunity.

According to a recent survey, more than a third of West Virginia's top 40 tourist attractions are historic sites that are unique and non-renewable. Such sites are literally priceless. Once an Indian mound is leveled, or a building is demolished, a component of cultural heritage tourism is lost forever.

The West Virginia Cultural Heritage Tourism Program's mission is to use the state's historic, cultural and natural resources to establish sustainable heritage tourism programs for the purpose of stimulating economic opportunities for regions, communities, businesses, organizations and individuals while preserving and conserving those resources that are often non-renewable.

Opportunity Abounds

Scott Gerloff, CEO of the Potomac Heritage Partnership and a leading authority in preservation-related economic development in America, was hired by PAWV to direct the organization's effort in cultural heritage tourism. "I work in a lot of other states and have worked with cultural heritage tourism issues for almost two decades now," Gerloff says. "I believe that West Virginia has a greater potential for capturing more dollars via heritage tourism than almost any state I've worked with, the state needs to grasp that fact and opportunity."

The Travel Industry Association of America recently ranked the top 10 cultural heritage attraction states, and found that three of these were North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Virginia. This shows two things. First, the factors of friendly competition are apparent. Second, the interested market is right in our backyard. These tourists are already going to neighboring states, en masse and focus groups studies carried out by PAWV and the Development

Inherit the Economy

The following statistics indicate the economic opportunities cultural heritage tourism can provide for West Virginia:

- ▼ 81 percent of all domestic travelers included a cultural activity in their leisure travel.
- ▼ 68 percent of heritage groups travel by car and take three or more trips each year.
- ▼ Heritage tourists are four times more likely to have a household income of \$100,000 than the general tourist.
- ▼ Heritage tourists are 46 percent more likely to spend a greater amount on vacation travel.
- ▼ 44 percent of heritage travelers shop versus 34 percent of overall United States travelers.
- ▼ 47 million heritage tourists add extra time to their trip because of cultural activities. Nearly 31 percent added two or more nights, which means 29 million hotel nights and 87 million meals.
- ▼ 54 percent of cultural heritage tourists want to get off the beaten path (That creates rural economic development opportunities for West Virginia.)
- ▼ 58 percent of these travelers want to try different foods that provide income for small, unique restaurants.

*Statistics were provided by the Travel Industry Association of America, an industry-wide organization providing various services to the entire travel industry. ■



Office show that West Virginia can compete very well with these other programs.

Cultural heritage tourism encompasses a variety of aspects including experiences, foods, crafts and the natural setting of a place. Recent research in the Washington, D.C., area and Charleston, West Virginia, has shown heritage tourists are primarily interested in a combination of experiences including relaxation, historical appreciation and buying unique products and crafts.

This research has also shown the importance of heritage tourists buying foods made or

Lewisburg has capitalized on the Cultural Heritage Tourism Program.



The results of strategic planning have made Lewisburg a respected community in both the state and nation.

grown in West Virginia. Because of this desire, agri-tourism can also be an important component to heritage tourism. The West Virginia Division of Tourism, as well as the West Virginia Department of Agriculture, are partnering with PAWV in agri-tourism development efforts, such as a recently completed inventory of agri-tourism businesses and its economic potential for the promotion of West Virginia products.

Creating State-wide Projects

Currently, the West Virginia Cultural Heritage Tourism Program has been working with regional multi-county efforts such as the National Coal Heritage Area, the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, Frontiers to Mountaineers, the

Eastern Panhandle Rural Tourism Partnership and Wheeling heritage partnerships.

The heritage tourism program also arranged a series of workshops this year to address travel trends discovered in recent research. The first of these were held this June with several more held this past September. The workshops were designed to take information about what heritage tourists said they wanted in a travel experience to retailers, service-oriented businesses, restaurants and hospitality businesses, as well as to sites and communities.

The June workshops shared research results that cultural heritage tourists want to take home something unique from the places they visit. These travelers also want to support local businesses and they want to help entrepreneurs succeed. When a tourist buys something made in West Virginia by a West Virginian, that dollar circulates in the state more than if it were made elsewhere.

The September workshops taught participants how to communicate about their tourism product through authentic and entertaining interpretation.

“From the focus groups, we found a lot of people want to understand what life was like for people in different eras of the state’s history,” Gerloff says. “They want to know those personal stories and what people’s lives were like on a daily basis—what they did for entertainment.”

Working For The Community

Economic development professionals are coming to view cultural heritage tourism as a vital factor to the survival of some small communities.

“It really is grassroots work,” Miller says. “It’s community development by the people that live in the communities, work in the communities and own businesses there. It’s building capacity, developing leadership and in some cases, providing an opportunity for individuals to learn new skills, start new industries and obtain new business opportunities that may not otherwise exist.”

In small communities such as Lewisburg, cultural heritage tourism has had a tremendous impact. Starting with a small group of leaders in the community, an initiative began in 1972 by developing the historic district of Lewisburg. At the time, about half of Lewisburg’s downtown storefronts were vacant and its two largest employers had closed.

Downtown Lewisburg appeared much as any other city in West Virginia of the day: intrusive and unattractive signage, cluttering electrical wires above the sidewalks, a disorganized array of colors and false fronts on buildings, parking meters and virtually no landscape architecture.

Today, the results of strategic planning and implementation by visionary leaders have made Lewisburg a community respected in both the state and the nation. The small city has garnered honors such as being listed as one of the 75 best small town visits in America from *National Geographic* Magazine and being cited as one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Dozen Distinguished

PRE-CUT LOG HOME PACKAGES

- MULTIPLE LOG PROFILES & CORNERS STYLES
- GRADE STAMPED LOGS AND TIMBER FRAME BEAMS
- 5/25 YEAR WARRANTY
- BORATE PRESSURE TREATED LOGS
- LOG SIDING & RUSTIC RAILING
- FLEXIBLE DESIGN OPTIONS



Your Best Move Yet

APPALACHIAN™

LOG STRUCTURES

CALL FOR OUR \$12 CATALOG & FREE BROCHURE.



800-458-9990 www.applog.com

info@mail.applog.com RIPLEY, WV

Destinations in America, along with such better known towns as Napa, California and Newport, Rhode Island.

However, PAWV believes that Lewisburg is not the only community deserving of such development success because similar successes can be duplicated in many of West Virginia's towns. Developing this heritage market includes everything from improving signage, to restoring historic buildings, to working closely together to tell the authentic stories in interesting ways. The importance of leadership and volunteer spirit to create a successful heritage tourism effort should not be underestimated.

Kim Cooper, executive director of the Greenbrier County Convention and Visitor's Bureau, reported its 2001 revenue showed more than \$148 million in tourism revenue into the county.

"It's about looking ahead for the future of your community," Cooper says. "We need to constantly look ahead and see what we can do to make our communities better not only for the residents, but also for future visitors. Heritage tourism can bring in a lot of money. It definitely makes an impact on the bottom line. And, there is always room for improvement, even if your community is doing well with this segment of travel." ■

.....
For more information on Preservation Alliance of West Virginia or how you can become a member, please visit www.pawv.org or contact David Vago, executive director, at info@pawv.org. For information about the WV Cultural Heritage Tourism Program, contact Mitzi Miller at mmiller2@wvdo.org.



The Super Highway to History

The West Virginia Cultural Heritage Tourism Program has also developed a Web site for individuals and businesses seeking business locations in small towns through www.wvtourismbusinesssites.org. The West Virginia Cultural Heritage Tourism Business Site Locator began as a pilot project utilizing vacant property in four Main Street communities. Still in the early stages of development, the site will be expanded to additional communities in the coming year.

a prime example of the vision for cultural heritage tourism program.



The business locator program may have huge potential for communities in the state. By grouping communities together on one site, they have an advantage they might otherwise not have if they were to develop individual sites on their own. The program will provide one-stop-shopping for both providers and seekers of business locations. Such cooperative efforts offer

The program is also developing, in collaboration with West Virginia University faculty, an economic impact measurement tool that will assess the value of heritage tourism to the state of West Virginia. This study will ultimately provide communities with a feasible measurement model that can be used to assess the economic impact of heritage tourism on individual communities. ■

Product Line of the Year.

bizhub

KOMAX
Business Systems

KONICA MINOLTA
AUTHORIZED DEALER

500 D Street South Charleston, WV 304-744-7440
www.komaxbusinesssystems.com

An advertisement for Komax Business Systems. The top half features a white Bizhub copier on a blue background. A yellow hand-shaped sign with the word "bizhub" on it is pointing upwards. The text "Product Line of the Year." is written in white. The bottom half of the ad has a white background with the Komax logo (a yellow star in a blue circle) and the text "KOMAX Business Systems". To the right is the Konica Minolta logo and "AUTHORIZED DEALER". At the bottom, the address "500 D Street South Charleston, WV" and phone number "304-744-7440" are listed, along with the website "www.komaxbusinesssystems.com".