

Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area Feasibility Study



Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area Feasibility Study Overview

The upper Housatonic Valley is noted for its scenic landscape and traditional New England towns. Writers, artists, and vacationers have visited the region for over 150 years, making it one of the country's leading cultural resorts. Encompassing 29 communities in the hilly terrain of western Massachusetts and northwestern Connecticut, the upper Housatonic Valley is considered by many to be the quintessence of a civilized, independent, and thoughtful retreat.

Many visitors and residents alike, however, are unaware of the underlying history and culture that have shaped and been shaped by the region's landscape. The

Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area has been proposed as a means of heightening appreciation of the region, preserving its natural and historic resources, improving the local economy and quality of life, controlling undesirable growth, and promoting the cleanup of the Housatonic River.

Under the federal Upper Housatonic National Heritage Area Study Act of 2000, the National Park Service has conducted a study of the suitability and feasibility of establishing the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area in Connecticut and Massachusetts. The report, addressing eight federal criteria for creating a national heritage area, found that the upper Housatonic Valley is a singular geographical and cultural region. The valley has made significant na-

tional contributions through its iron, paper, and electrical equipment industries, its scenic beautification and environmental conservation efforts, and literary, artistic, musical, and architectural achievements.

The feasibility study examined three management alternatives for achieving these objectives: 1) Continuing current practices; 2) Establishing a national heritage area; 3) Creating a privately organized local heritage area. The study recommended the alternative of a national heritage area as the most effective for accomplishing the region's goals. A heritage area would enhance the quality of historical, cultural, and natural attractions and increase connections between them. Continuing current practices would not provide any new resources or concepts for celebrating and preserving the region's heritage,

while a privately organized heritage area would lack the prestige and the resources of a national heritage area. Creating a national heritage area in the Upper Housatonic Valley requires congressional designation.

The Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area, Inc. (UHVNHA) has served as the catalyst for the heritage area study. UHVNHA, which has a broad membership of nonprofit organizations, local governments, and interested individuals, is proposed to be the organizational entity to manage the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area. UHVNHA was incorporated as a private nonprofit organization in 2000 to promote creation of a national heritage area. This heritage group has organized special projects, including history fairs, walking tours, conferences, and brochures.

Housatonic River in CT—Litchfield Hills Visitors Bureau, © Jim McElholm



Heritage Themes of the Upper Housatonic Valley

The feasibility study has identified four major themes that tell the story of the upper Housatonic Valley. The heritage themes reflect a strong "sense of place" and are connected by the region's landscape.

I. Cultural Resort

The upper Housatonic Valley is noted for a long-standing literary tradition, the work of prominent artists and architects, and world-class music, dance, and theater. Herman Melville wrote *Moby Dick* while living at Arrowhead in Pittsfield, and Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *House of the Seven Gables* at Stockbridge. Other important authors who lived or vacationed in the region were Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edith Wharton, and James Thurber. Prominent artists, whose work is exhibited at local studio museums, include Daniel Chester French, Henry Hudson Kitson, Norman Rockwell, George L.K. Morris, Suzy Freylinghusen, and Eric Sloane. The painters and writers have promoted the region's reputation as a pastoral Arcadia where one could pursue a life of culture in harmony with nature.

During the late 19th century, New York business magnates built over 75 lavish estates around Lenox, MA, and Stockbridge, MA. A large number of estates survive. Joseph Choate's Naumkeag House & Gardens, Stockbridge, MA, is a Stanford White—designed masterpiece. Edith Wharton's Lenox home, The Mount, was recently restored. Lenox's Ventfort Hall, which was owned by J.P. Morgan's sister, is being made into the Museum of the Gilded Age.

During the 20th century, the upper Housatonic Valley became the country's preeminent summer classical music resort, with the establishment of Tanglewood (summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra), Music Mountain, the Norfolk Music Festival, South Mountain Concerts, the Aston Magna Festival, the Berkshire Choral Festival, the Berkshire Opera Company, and other venues. Theater has been represented by Shakespeare & Company, the Berkshire Theatre Festival, and Tri-Arts at the Sharon Playhouse. The Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival is the foremost international summer dance festival in the country.

Pittsfield's Berkshire Museum is a comprehensive regional museum with offerings in art, history, natural science, and cinema. Although there are many summer cultural festivals and artist colonies across the United States, none has the reputation or concentration of cultural venues of the upper Housatonic Valley.

II. Shaping a Scenic Landscape

By the early 1800s, much of the area had been cleared for farming. The iron industry required extensive tree-cutting to make charcoal to fuel the furnaces. After the Civil War, when the papermaking industry started to use wood pulp as a raw material, that industry put further pressure on the forests. In 1850, 75% of the region was deforested, while today 75% of the land is covered with trees.

Even though much of the region's forest was cleared, artists and vacationers started to visit the upper Housatonic Valley because of its scenic qualities. In order to preserve the region's landscape, wealthy residents established nature preserves on large tracts of land. Stockbridge's David Dudley Field, Jr., built carriage drives on Monument Mountain, encouraging the public to enjoy mountain scenery. Secretary of the Navy William Whitney created an enormous game preserve in Lee, MA, Lenox, MA, and Washington, MA, with a landscape plan by Frederick Law Olmsted's firm.

By the early 20th century, when the income tax and a changing economy forced wealthy families to give up their estates, several of these areas became state parks and forests. They included October Mountain State Forest (Whitney's game preserve) and Beartown State Forest (once part of the estate of engineer Fredrick Pearson), in Massachusetts, and Dennis Hill, Kent Falls, Macedonia Brook, Mohawk Mountain, and Campbell Falls, in Connecticut.

Stockbridge, MA, originated the movement for community beautification when it established the nation's first village improvement society, the Laurel Hill Association, in 1853. Stockbridge became an icon of the American small town when Norman Rockwell moved there in the 1950s and used it as the subject of many of his best-known works. The Norman Rockwell Museum, in Stockbridge, helps perpetuate popular perceptions of the area as a slice of Americana.

The Appalachian Trail, which stretches the length of the upper Housatonic Valley in Connecticut and Massachusetts, is the country's foremost regional hiking trail. Efforts to clean up the Housatonic River are making its banks available for public enjoyment.

III. Cradle of Industry

Two of America's earliest industries had a conspicuous presence in the upper Housatonic Valley. The iron industry began to develop in the 1730s, drawn by the presence of high-grade iron ore. Forges and furnaces manufactured cannons and supplies for the Continental Army during the American Revolution. During the 19th century, the region's iron industry manufactured armaments, tools, and train wheels. After the Civil War, the region's industry became less competitive, and the last iron furnace closed in 1923.

Of 44 iron furnaces operating in the upper Housatonic Valley between 1735 and 1923, portions of 6 furnaces remain. The Beckley Furnace State Park, East Canaan, CT, (operated 1847—1918), is the best-preserved iron furnace. The Holley-Williams House Museum, Lakeville, CT, tells the story of the area's leading ironmaking community. The Connecticut Antique Machinery Association Museum, Kent, CT, includes the Mining and Mineral Museum, which explains the history of iron mining in the region. Also at this site is the Kent Iron Furnace (1826—1892) and the Sloane-Stanley Museum, which features an outstanding collection of Early American iron tools and the studio of artist Eric Sloane.

Papermaking began in 1801 with the founding of Crane and Company in Dalton, MA. Crane still manufactures paper used for U.S. currency. Crane's Old Stone Mill Rag Room is a papermaking museum. By the 1840s, southern Berkshire County was the center of the country's paper industry. America's first wood pulp paper operations originated in Curtisville, MA, and Lee, MA.

The foremost 20th-century industry in the region was General Electric's manufacturing of electrical generation equipment in Pittsfield, MA. Besides its advances in electrical equipment, General Electric also made important innovations in plastics at

Pittsfield. The downsizing of General Electric since the 1980s has hurt the local economy, and PCBs released by the plant have polluted the Housatonic River.

IV. Revolutionary War Era and Development of Democracy

The upper Housatonic Valley was the site of several important events during the American Revolution. The Sheffield Declaration, an early petition of grievances against British rule, was drafted at Colonel John Ashley's House (maintained by the Trustees of Reservations) in 1773. Militias from Ethan Allen's original home in northwest Connecticut joined the "Green Mountain Boys" in their capture of Fort Ticonderoga in 1775.

After the Revolution, a deep economic depression spawned Shays' Rebellion in western Massachusetts. Battles occurred at Sheffield, MA, and Stockbridge, MA. The rebellion persuaded many Americans of the need to adopt a stronger federal government and the U.S. Constitution.

When the Massachusetts State Constitution (1780), which was the world's first written constitution, asserted that all men are created "free and equal," Sheffield black slave Elizabeth Freeman ("Mumbet") brought a legal claim to obtain her freedom, which courts granted. This led to Massachusetts being the first state to abolish slavery, in 1783.

Pioneer civil rights leader W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963) was born and raised in Great Barrington, MA. DuBois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* and helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

V. Other Heritage Themes: Mohican Indians, Shakers, Historic Towns

At the time of European colonization, the Mohican Indians were lightly settled in the upper Housatonic. Stockbridge's Mission House was the home of Reverend John Sergeant, who oversaw a mission to convert local Indians to Christianity starting in 1734. This was a center for a Christian Indian community until it departed to the west in 1783, eventually relocating to Wisconsin as the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians.

Western Massachusetts and upper New York State were hospitable to the Shakers, who were one of 19th-century America's best-known communitarian sects. The Hancock (MA) Shaker Village is one of the country's foremost interpretive sites of Shaker culture.

The upper Housatonic Valley has an extensive collection of historic buildings dating as far back as 1734, when English settlement began in the area. The historic town centers have a plethora of meetinghouses, commons, houses, and public buildings, many of which are on the National Register of Historic Places. Historic houses open as museums include: Bidwell House, a 1750 parsonage in Monterey, MA; the 1735 Colonel John Ashley House, in Sheffield, MA; the Revolutionary-era Dan Raymond House, in Sheffield; the Gay-Hoyt House, which was built in 1775 in Sharon, CT. There are three covered bridges in the region: Bull's Bridge in Kent, CT, the West Cornwall (CT) Covered Bridge, and the Sheffield (MA) Covered Bridge.

Monument Mountain, Great Barrington, MA. Photo credit: Trustees of Reservations

Col. John Ashley's house, Sheffield, MA—Trustees of Reservations

Edith Wharton's The Mount, Lenox, MA—Courtesy of The Mount



Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area

Feasibility Study

The National Heritage Area Concept

A national heritage area has a distinctive history and geography, nationally important resources, and a story of broad interest to tell. The United States Congress officially designates national heritage areas and funds them through the National Park Service budget. There are 23 designated heritage areas. Though the National Park Service provides



Farm in Kent, CT—Litchfield Hills Visitors Bureau

technical expertise, the work and success of national heritage areas lies squarely with the citizens of the area.

Heritage areas may be developed around a common theme or industry that influenced the culture and history of the region. In the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, for example, the water-power-driven mills

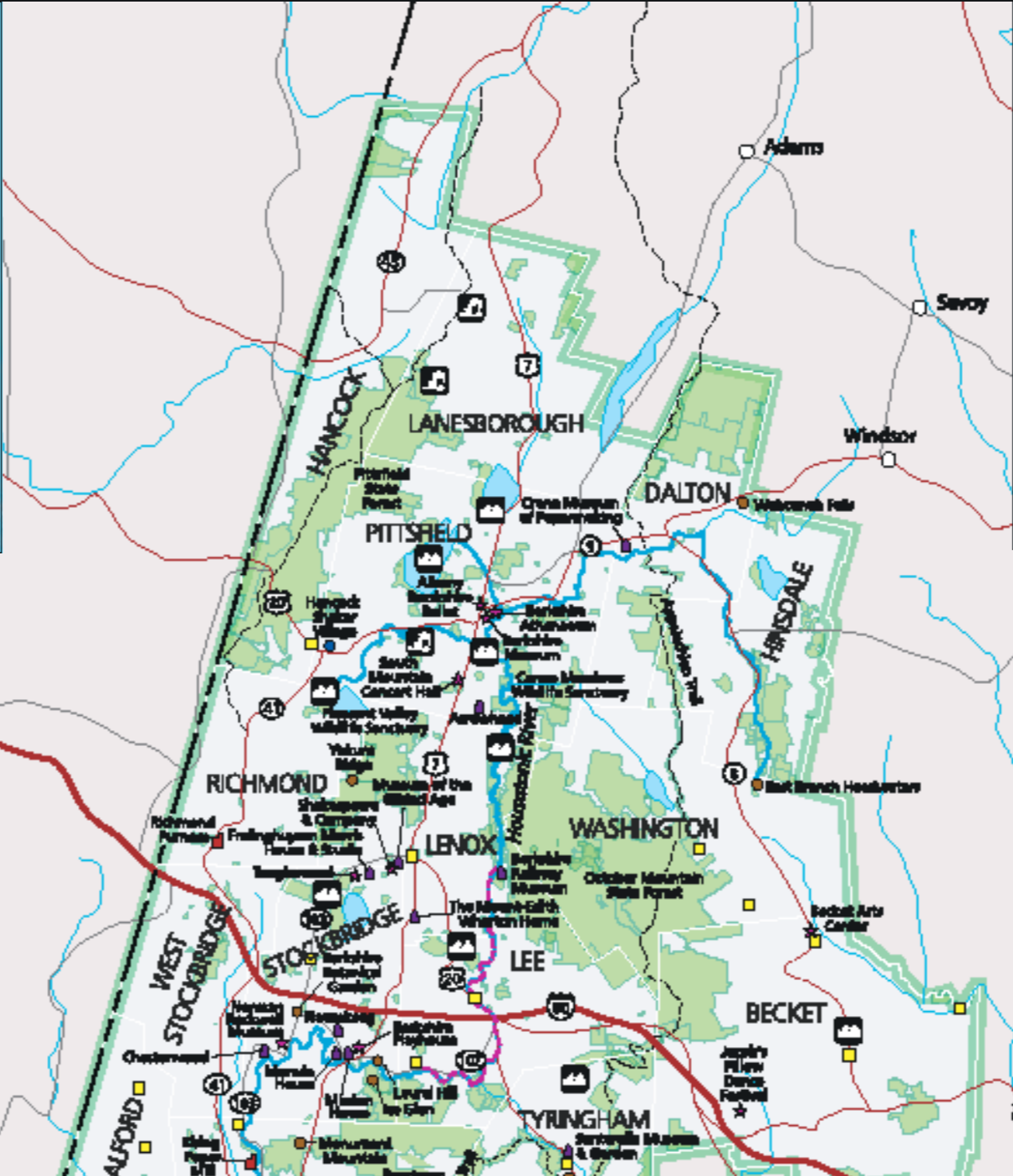


Gay-Hoyt House Museum, Sharon, CT—© Hugh Vaughan

represent the beginning of the American industrial age. There are heritage areas for the Erie Canal, Hudson River Valley, Essex County in Massachusetts, the Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley of northeastern Connecticut and Massachusetts, and the steel industry in western Pennsylvania.

Regions use heritage areas for educating residents and visitors about the region, protecting its natural and cultural heritage, and enhancing the economy through business investment, job expansion, and tourism. Nonprofit organizations are primarily responsible for managing heritage areas. Heritage areas do not have land-use regulatory powers.

Shaker barn, Hancock, MA—Hancock Shaker Village

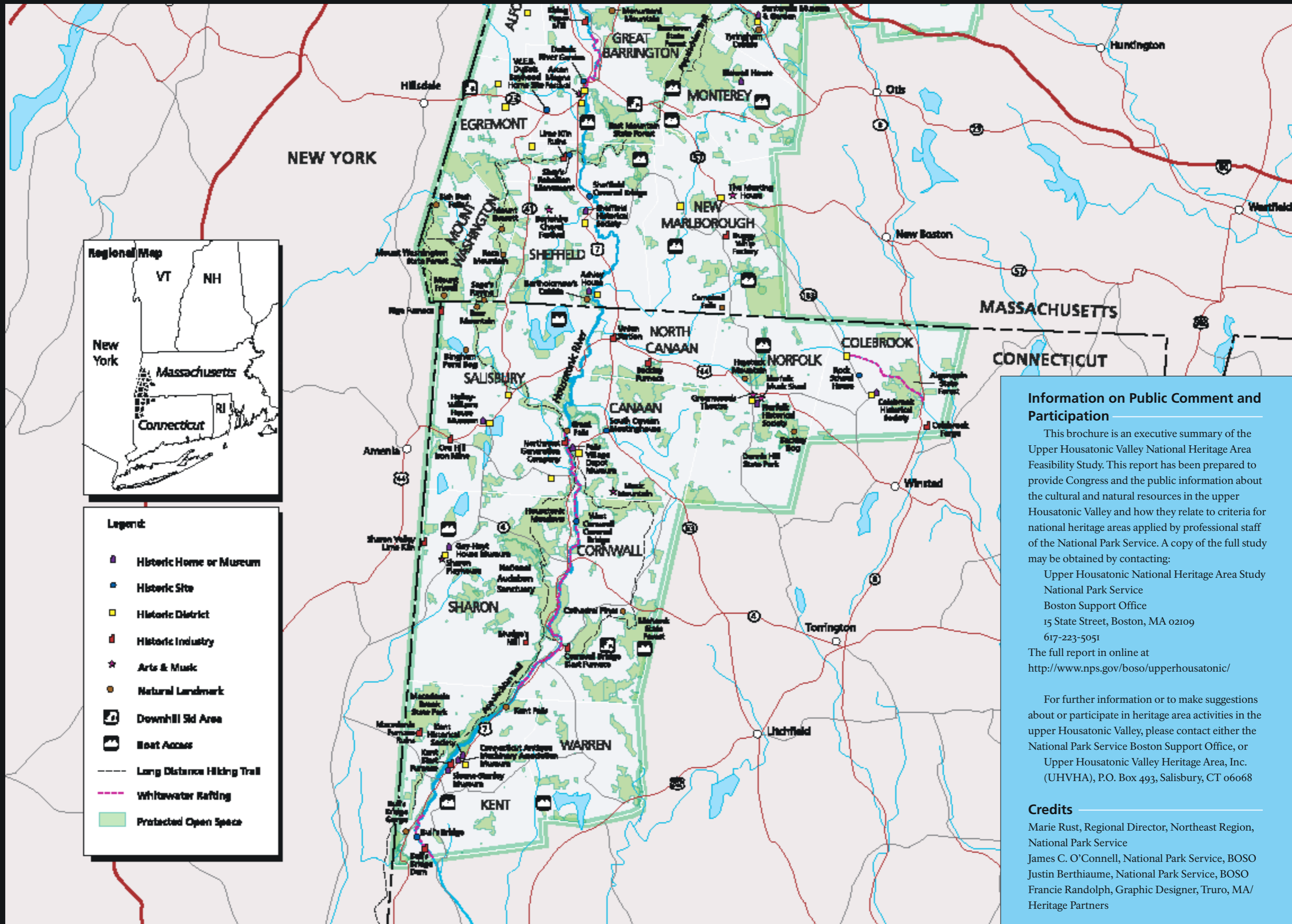


Admirers of the Housatonic

“The best tonic is the Housatonic.”
 OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, SR.
The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table

“The Valley of the Housatonic: a ‘Happy Valley’ indeed! A beautiful little river wanders singing from side to side in this secluded paradise.”
 FANNY KEMBLE, ACTRESS, 1835

“I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills.”
 W.E.B. DuBois, *Darkwater*



Information on Public Comment and Participation

This brochure is an executive summary of the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area Feasibility Study. This report has been prepared to provide Congress and the public information about the cultural and natural resources in the upper Housatonic Valley and how they relate to criteria for national heritage areas applied by professional staff of the National Park Service. A copy of the full study may be obtained by contacting:

Upper Housatonic National Heritage Area Study
 National Park Service
 Boston Support Office
 15 State Street, Boston, MA 02109
 617-223-5051
 The full report is online at
<http://www.nps.gov/boso/upperhousatonic/>

For further information or to make suggestions about or participate in heritage area activities in the upper Housatonic Valley, please contact either the National Park Service Boston Support Office, or Upper Housatonic Valley Heritage Area, Inc. (UHVHA), P.O. Box 493, Salisbury, CT 06068

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