

New York History

Historical News and Views From The Empire State

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Path Through History: An Historical Perspective

By Peter Feinman



The Path through History project does not operate on a *tabula rasa*. When Henry Hudson arrived, there were no signs to guide him. Today there are more signs than one can count. For Path through History the challenge is not to create *ex nihilo* but to create order out of chaos.

The danger is that it will simply add another layer of signs to the abundance of signs which already exist and become lost in a visual babel. The same might be said of websites which as it turns out, also exist in force. So let us explore the sign universe as

it exists before turning in the next post to proposing what one vision of what it could be.

Starting with the Federal Government, one finds signs already exist and are expanding. The National Park Service has a variety of sites in New York from Buffalo Roosevelt to Hyde Park Roosevelt. Of particular relevance here is the Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor running from Whitehall on Lake Champlain to Buffalo on Lake Erie, headquartered in Waterford on Peebles Island. Not surprisingly there already are Heritage Corridor signs along the Heritage Corridor. Imagine that!

Furthermore in August, the Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor in partnership with a New York State organization, the New York State Canal Corporation, announced a plan to install in 2013 new signs at 45 locks and canal-side access points. In addition 35 kiosks will have a community orientation panel and 20 will have local history panels. Standard panels will have a map, images and text on the 524 mile-long system. As it turns out, the Canal is also one of the primary sites designated in the Path through History project. Looks like there will be a lot of Canal signs and websites.

The National Park Service also is moving ahead with a brand new path through history to be called a Votes for Women History Trail. This trail, not path, is a recent development with August sessions having been held as part of the process of identifying the sites in New York which would be part of it. The odds are overwhelming that some of the NPS sites will coincide with the Path through History priority sites resulting in two sets of signs, one federal and one state for the same location.

Also just announced by the NPS as part of its American Battlefield Protection program, grants are being issued to protect and interpret battlefields. New York State award winners include (1) Saratoga for the American Revolution, King William's War, and King George's War, (2) War of 1812 sites in central New York, and (3) the Battle of Chemung in the Sullivan-Clinton campaign in the American Revolution. While Saratoga is a priority site in the Path program, the other locations are not. What is important at the federal level for American history may not coincide with what the state deems important for cultural heritage tourism.

Turning to the state level, back in February 2001, a governor of New York State, established the New York State Heritage Commission. According to a press release, "The program also coordinates the development of a series of thematic heritage trails." Note the use of the term "trails" here as the NPS uses. Governor Pataki later announced that five heritage trails had been identified including the Revolutionary War (with 75 tourist-ready sites according to my hand-written notes on the handout from another sign conference), Underground Railroad, Theodore Roosevelt, Women, and Labor.

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"These trails are designed to showcase New York's heritage based on significant statewide historical themes. By linking and interpreting thematically, visitors will gain a comprehensive understanding of the state's important role in the history of our nation and will be encouraged to visit more sites. The program also promotes collaborations among local communities and regional organizations to make sites more accessible and marketable."

Consistent signage and grants are promised in the effort to promote heritage tourism through web sites, brochures, kiosks and press events. Pataki even announced a \$1,000,000 matching grant for Revolutionary War Heritage Trail sites and another \$1,000,000 matching grant for Underground Railroad Heritage sites. It's déjà vu all over again.

Speaking of the [Underground Railroad Heritage Trail](#), I attended a public forum in December, 2003 at CUNY. Attendees were asked to identify sites that would qualify for the funding. I won't go through the various handouts except to note the intent to "foster the development of Regional Interpretive Centers as visitor-ready facilities" in part to compensate for the scarcity of public Underground Railroad sites in the state. To assist in the effort an approximately 100-page bound Freedom Trail Program Study from 1999 by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture was distributed.

There are, of course, Underground Railroad sites in various stages of development throughout the state but a website search for Freedom Trail in New York is just as likely to turn up American Revolution sites (and in NYC) as per the Boston Freedom Trail as underground railroad sites. In fact, in an article in the NYT on August 26, Bob Furman, searching for Revolution graves in Brooklyn called for a Brooklyn version of Boston's Freedom Trail.

I do have a nice brochure listing 18 heritage areas put out by the NYSOPRHP and a New York State Revolutionary War Heritage Trail brochure from Heritage New York (website defunct) from the Pataki administration.

Once upon a time there also was a Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor and I have that brochure as well. I also have its Revolutionary Byway brochure. The website also no longer exists but the maps live on and were very helpful in planning the Mohawk Valley Teacherhostel/Historyhostel just prior to Irene. I hope to offer a Mohawk Valley Path through History program in 2013.

Note - There also was a Schenectady County-Mohawk River Blueway Trail Plan that produced a very nice map and brochure listing all the town supervisors and mayors who contributed to its creation.

Moving along, there is a functioning New York State and National Scenic Byways program with 20 trails, paths, and byways. At the Path through History conference I swapped my collector's item Route 20 brochure from 2006 for a 2012 brochure with John D. Sagendorf, Route 20 Association of NYS. Certainly it should be possible to create some organized heritage tourist programs that travel that route/path/trail/byway. The same can be said for the Seaway Trail for example, particularly related to the War of 1812 both for the Bicentennial and beyond.

The [Lakes to Locks Passage](#) (another term) offers many itineraries (another term) in the North County. There's even a French and Indian War Forts and Battlefield Guide (remember that ignored anniversary a few years ago) with a lovely brochure produced by the Federal Highway Administration Scenic Byway with the assistance of Senators Schumer and Gillibrand and various Representatives from areas served by the Great Lakes Seaway Trail that encompasses locations from an existing trail, an existing passage, and an existing byway. Speaking of war, there is a great brochure and bicentennial map of trails in New York called [Niagara 1812](#) produced by Canada.

Moving along there is a Hudson Valley Art Trail, recently expanded beyond New York State, not to be confused with the Hudson River School Art Trail.

The [Hudson River Valley Heritage Area](#) is alive and well. There are brochures of the Revolution, Landscapes and Gardens, and Architectural Traditions (at least those are the ones I have). It also has the Ramble, an annual event now in its 13th year and occurring right now in September where organizations are asked to submit to a website events it wishes to offer. These can range from hikes, to walks, to biking, to talks, to kayaking, etc. I have Ramble t-shirts from many years but not a complete collection.

The problem I have with the Ramble is the same as with the Path through History - it is about listing sites or events. No path is created. Events in the same locality might be weeks apart; events on the same theme might be simultaneous. There is no thematic or geographic passage/trail/byway/route/itinerary one could present to a tour operator given the scheduled events. There is no passport that can be stamped as one visits the various sites or partakes of the various activities. It's great that the Seaway Trail has a day dedicated to walks which can be taken at different locations, but suppose someone wanted to do all of them? Recently an 82-year old from Westchester made national news for climbing the 46 high peaks in the state. What do you get for completing the historic walks in the state? Is there even a list of them?



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But it's not enough to simply list sites on website be it on Route 20 or the Erie Canal Corridor. Since when is vacationing supposed to be a research project? Since when are cultural heritage tourists seeking to follow the way of the War of 1812 or the Hudson River School painters suppose to have previous experience at FedEx or in the military? What is fine for someone in the Mohawk/Hudson/Champlain Valleys looking for a day trip to entertain visitors doesn't cut it for week-long programs that would interest tour operators.

Do we really expect someone from Buffalo interested in the American Revolution in the Hudson Valley to plan the route just as if he/she was preparing for war? In New York City, I see the double-decker tour buses all the time; now imagine if there weren't any and people were solely on the own to navigate their way around the Big Apple? How would that work out? How loud would the NYC Tourism department scream?

So even putting aside all the duplicate efforts in the past to create passages/trials/passage/byways/routes/itineraries, there needs to be a proactive effort to create paths, trips people can really take, if we want this latest attempt to reinvent the wheel to promote cultural heritage tourism in New York State to be successful. In my next post, I will suggest some guiding themes which can be used to provide a framework for experiencing New York State history both in the classroom and in the field.

Peter Feinman founder and president of the Institute of History, Archaeology, and Education, a non-profit organization which provides enrichment programs for schools, professional development program for teachers, public programs including leading Historyhostels and Teacherhostels to the historic sites in the state, promotes county history conferences and the more effective use of New York State Heritage Weekend and the Ramble.

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