

Findings
from the report on the
Pinelands Heritage Partnership
Focus Groups

Prepared for
Pinelands Preservation Alliance

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Introduction

This report contains only the findings from the focus group report undertaken by Heritage Consulting Inc., a consultant to the Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA). The complete focus group report is available from the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

Heritage Consulting Inc., a consultant to the Pinelands Preservation Alliance (PPA), conducted six focus groups from July 7 to 17, 2009 as part of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance's efforts to establish and grow the Pinelands Heritage Partnership. The Pinelands Heritage Partnership is a new effort of PPA to foster new collaborations, education and policy initiatives, making the Partnership members collectively greater than the sum of solely individual efforts.

The genesis of this effort comes from PPA's belief that the heritage preservation movement in the Pinelands needs to be stronger and more effective if it is to succeed in the face of economic, natural and political dynamics that are resulting in the continued loss of resources the heritage community values.

The new Pinelands Heritage Partnership is designed to assist and empower Pinelands area historical societies, house museums and historic sites, historical commissions, downtown management organizations and other groups and volunteers to foster the preservation, interpretation and public use of the important historic sites in the Pinelands. As anticipated, the Partnership will offer local activists more information, resources, and the ability to network more readily with their peers.

In the fall of 2008 PPA gathered its first Heritage Forum, a half day meeting with many of the heritage stakeholders in the region to discuss general concerns about historic preservation. These focus groups are meant to follow-up that work, and introduce a larger number of stakeholders to PPA and the Pinelands Heritage Partnership. Information from the focus groups will help organize a second Heritage Forum to be held on Saturday November 14, 2009 at the Eagle Theater in Hammonton, New Jersey. An invitation to the second Heritage Forum will be extended to all focus group invitees.

Focus group process

Heritage Consulting and PPA staff jointly developed an invitation list for the focus groups. The list was revised from the master list created by Heritage Consulting Inc. during in the winter of 2008. The master list included all known historical societies, historic sites, certified local governments, historic preservation commissions, Main Street and downtown organizations and historic attractions in the Pinelands. The master list also included individuals who attended the previous year's PPA Heritage Series lectures and talks and the 2008 Heritage Forum. To create the invitation list, PPA added private planning firms, and some elected officials and checked many addresses.

The final list of 109 invitees represented the following groups: local and county historical societies, historic sites, house museums, commercial district revitalization organizations, preservation professionals, planners, state forest superintendents, elected officials, representatives of certified local governments and local historic preservation commissions. Each group was invited to a focus group session with just their peers.

Heritage Consulting prepared an invitation letter which PPA staff mailed on June 16, and PPA staff called to follow up to encourage attendance during the week of July 1. Additional calls were made to encourage participation by Donna Ann Harris. 109 people were invited to the focus groups but only 23 people actually participated. Two people who could not attend because of schedule conflicts were jointly interviewed on the phone by Ms. Harris.

Three of the nine focus groups were cancelled outright because of lack of attendance: planners, historic sites and historical societies. Overall, the turn out was disappointing given that many of those invited were already known to PPA staff. It is unclear if the phone calls to encourage participation occurred too late, that the July dates conflicted with vacations or if there was a disconnect between the subject matter of the focus groups—historic preservation—and PPA’s traditional focus on environmental education. Still the small turn out did not diminish the concerns and issues of those passionately interested in local efforts to foster the preservation, interpretation and public use of the important historic sites and historic assets in the Pinelands.

Donna Ann Harris of Heritage Consulting Inc. facilitated all of the discussions using a script. The same questions were asked of each group. A PPA volunteer, Nichole Josten took contemporaneous notes. All of the focus group sessions were held in the conference room of the PPA headquarters at Bishop Farmstead in Southampton. Each focus group lasted an hour and a half to two hours. Heritage Consulting prepared thank you letters for PPA to send to all participants which went out two weeks after the focus groups.

All stakeholders were informed that none of their comments would be directly ascribed to them to promote candid participation. Participants were also informed that their names would be included in a list of attendees in this report.

The notes were evaluated, summarized and analyzed qualitatively. Please see the full report on the focus groups for the unedited comments made by participants. Once all sessions were completed, all raw comments were compiled into thematic content and the findings were gleaned from these notes.

Questions asked

All focus group participants were asked the following questions and this report is organized around these responses.

1. Please tell us, in one minute, your experience now or in the past with historic preservation or heritage issues. (see attendance list at the rear of the report for listing of those who attended and their affiliations.)

2. Please tell us in one minute, the one most critical issue or project you are working on related to historic preservation or heritage issues.

If we want to make historic preservation a number one priority in the Pinelands region

a. What are our key opportunities or strengths in the Pinelands?

b. What are our primary challenges, obstacles or threats?

c. What major players must be involved?

d. Which, of the issues we have already discussed, is the most important to you or your organization? Why?

e. Are we missing any key incentives, policies or funding mechanisms that would be significant or relevant for you or your organization?

f. How do you learn about preservation issues locally and statewide?

g. Do you work with Preservation New Jersey in any of your activities? Why or why not?

3. Are there other people or groups whom you think will be interested in working with us to develop the Pinelands Heritage Partnership?

4. Are there groups or individuals that have an interest in particular towns or historic sites?

The following section details the major findings from the focus groups.

Major Findings

The following findings represent common themes heard throughout all of the six focus groups and thus represent the key issues facing the participants.

Lack of awareness

Historic preservation advocates and allied history organizations do not believe that the public is aware of the history in their midst. Historic buildings, whether an historic site, a residential building or church are still being torn down in the Pinelands, much to the chagrin of focus group participants. There were several comments that few people care about historic preservation. One long time preservation professional said "I feel that South Jersey is like North Jersey was in the 1970s in terms of appreciation of its heritage; it is far far behind other areas of the state." The region has fewer buildings listed on the National Register; a dearth of historical commissions (whether regularly or advisory) and few local preservation advocacy groups compared to the rest of the state. Preservation New Jersey has few members in this region and a surprising number of focus group members did not know the organization existed. Suffice to say, preservation advocacy is not strong or widespread in the region.

No specific remedy was offered by focus group participants to the general lack of awareness, other than increased advocacy and tourism promotion. The interest in tourism seems to be the method most prefer to reach the public rather than through general advocacy, or the creation of local preservation organizations, historic districts, local preservation ordinances or historical commissions. All of these activities are part of historic preservation's planning infrastructure, but all are hard work, and require unusual and long-term volunteer fortitude to implement. Perhaps the primary interest in tourism might be--if tourists come to visit, then maybe the locals may value their history more?

The region would benefit if more people were doing the hard work: inventorying and nominating buildings, establishing preservation ordinances, speaking up at council meetings, and seeking financial support from members. Those that wish to take these actions should be supported, encouraged and celebrated throughout the region. Perhaps the Pinelands Heritage Partnership should lift up these local heroes and heroines as models for others to emulate?

Great interest in the potential of heritage tourism

There are several active and organized efforts to promote heritage tourism in the Pinelands. The Pinelands Commission, among others, was actively involved in the creation of the Pine Barrens Byway, a federal and state designation of a tour route in the 5 southern counties of the Pinelands that focuses on natural as well as historic resources. Information about the Byway appears on the Pineland Commission web site at <http://www.state.nj.us/pinelands/landuse/reg/byway.html>.

Focus group participants noted that initial planning for the Scenic Byway acknowledged that there was a Northern and Southern portion, but so far a management plan is complete only for the Southern portion (called by the State as the Southern Pinelands Natural Heritage Trail). It is unclear based on focus group comments who is providing the leadership for the creation of the Northern portion of the Scenic Byway. This is unfortunate because a Northern Byway would be a great asset as well as provide potential access to federal funding.

Bridgeton Main Street has been working with a small group to try to interest the New Jersey Congressional Delegation in the creation of a federal Heritage Area in the Pinelands. This effort is just getting started and it is uncertain yet if it will have traction. Like the other federally designated Heritage Area in the state such as Crossroads of the American Revolution, it requires extraordinary cooperation across county and municipal boundaries, as well as historic sites and attractions to move toward the creation of a planning and management proposal. Bridgeton Main Street's effort should be encouraged.

Additionally the state is in the midst of upgrading its heritage tourism efforts according to focus group participants. The NJ Tourism Office has engaged a consultant to create a strategy to pull together and highlight heritage tourism efforts for the state. The consultant's work will be complete later this year and once the report is finalized the results should be promoted widely in the region.

Several participants mentioned that local efforts to promote tourism seem to be hampered by lack of visitor infrastructure including public restrooms at sites, adequate parking facilities, way finding and directional signage and quality web site presence for individual sites.

The Southern New Jersey Tourism office is a bright light for heritage tourism promotion in the region. They are making great strides to link both natural and historic sites within the organization's own service area. These include tours, pod casts and an upgraded web site. However their service area is only those counties bordering the Delaware River (Mercer, Burlington, Camden, Gloucester and Salem) and there is some but not wide overlap in the Pinelands.

While there is no unified effort to promote tourism to the Pinelands now, except through the State Division on tourism, focus group participants seem satisfied that this is an agenda item that is getting sufficient attention.

If the Pinelands Heritage Partnership is seeking a broad agenda and constituency, it would be best served by championing both the Northern Scenic Byway and proposed Pinelands Heritage Area. Both of these bring large groups of historic sites and partners to the table; brings new federal funding for planning and implementation; and can broadly define the region for tourists as well as residents. Both of these efforts create "big tents" for many different stakeholders. They are complimentary efforts, not competitive and deserve additional study and support.

Lack of coordination and cooperation among sites and organizations

The Pinelands region is large; it encompasses about 22% of the land mass of the state, includes seven counties and all or part of 56 municipalities according to the Pinelands Commission. Any coordination effort will surely be difficult.

Several focus group participants noted the perceived “provincialism” of many of the historic sites and museums in the region. Participants with statewide perspectives were especially concerned about this problem. Coordination and cooperation do not happen automatically, it must be nurtured and tangible benefits provided to encourage such.

We learned that several of the County Cultural and Heritage Commissions have been successful in organizing their county history entities, especially in Burlington, Camden and Gloucester based on comments made by focus group participants. Other counties have just begun to encourage cooperation or are lagging according to focus group attendees. Some of the county cultural and heritage offices offer small grants, and are often viewed as being the best source for information about their county. Some have web sites to promote their sites from a tourism perspective, others do not.

There seems to be an opportunity to tie together the groups via a list serve or on-line forum. Based on comments from participants, there since there seems to be no one source to get news or alternatively to promote programs in the Pinelands to the larger history community. If a new on line forum is viewed as perhaps further splintering the state’s history community, then individual sites/groups could be encouraged to use the NJ Historical Commission’s list serve History to share more with others in the region and state.

It is likely that incentives will be needed to encourage broad cooperation across municipal and county boundaries. Enlightened organizations understand that working together magnifies everyone’s efforts. National Heritage Areas and National and State Scenic Byways are particularly valued because they bring new funding from federal sources. However, they take years of effort to plan and implement. There is a universal belief among focus group participants that the historic and cultural riches of the Pinelands deserve such an effort.

Not enough money for restoration projects, public or private

Focus group participants complained about the lack of resources available for preservation projects. Most were able to make the distinction between the need for private investment in private historic properties, and need for public monies for rehabilitation and restoration of nonprofit and government-owned buildings. Homeowners seeking to maintain or restore their homes must gather their own capital to do so, as the state has no homeowner tax credit, grants or other incentives for private property owners to restore historic buildings (unlike more than 40 other states in the country.) Because only one focus group member mentioned this fact, it is unclear if this is common knowledge in the region.

The New Jersey Historic Trust provides support for both planning and bricks and mortar grants, No one mentioned that this source would disappear if the November 2009 bond issue is not passed by voters. It is unclear if focus group participants are aware of this threat or that it was common knowledge. The region seems to have received its fair share of NJHT funds over the last ten years, so more comments about the threat to NJHT funding would have been expected.

It is unclear if focus group participants are willing to advocate for new funding from government sources. Some of the larger nonprofit historic site participants have been the beneficiaries of significant county and New Jersey Historic Trust funding for their preservation projects. The small groups do not have the organizational capacity or infrastructure to support large projects and thus are relegated to small scale fundraising from members, their municipality or county.

State forests are understaffed

There was a strong contingent of focus group participants from state forests or nonprofit groups that manage historic sites in the state forests. All expressed major concerns about cutbacks in state forest staffing, especially in interpretation, as being a major threat to these important historic and natural resources of the Pinelands.

The organized nonprofit organizations fear changes in their lease arrangements with the state, because they anticipate the state seeking more financial support. These sites, because they rely on volunteers, are also vulnerable to the changing demographics of volunteers today. None of these stakeholders said their volunteer corps was growing and acknowledged that attracting younger volunteers (anyone under 60) was increasingly difficult.

Need for a comprehensive historic preservation inventory

Finally, most stakeholders acknowledged that we do not yet understand what is worthy of preserving in the Pinelands because there has not been a comprehensive inventory of historic resources. Most felt this was the responsibility of the Pinelands Commission as part of their mandate for the National Reserve. Several stakeholders said that they felt that historic preservation was a very low priority for the Commission, and that its one historian, who worked part time most recently, has now retired. Advocacy for a region-wide historic resources inventory was viewed as a good project for PPA and the Pinelands Heritage Partnership as it would benefit all stakeholders in all counties.

Focus Group Attendees

1. Todd Ditzman, Chair Historic Preservation Commission Southampton
2. Janet Worrell, Treasurer Batsto Citizens Committee
3. Joe Laufer, Elected official Southampton
4. Liz Mortiz, NJ Plumbers association, Council member Tuckerton Borough, former Mayor of Tuckerton
5. Susan Phillips, Director, Whitesbog Preservation Trust
6. Chris Bethman, Superintendent
7. Cynthia Cortiz, Superintendent, Brendan Berne State Forest
8. Rob Auermuller, Superintendent, Wharton State Forest
9. Tom Keck, Reginald Superintendent. NJ Division of Parks and Forestry
10. Joyce Goldsmith, Smithville
11. Candace Lille, Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, Staff naturalist
12. Barbara Irvine, Founder, Alice Paul Centennial Foundation, Former director New Jersey Historic Trust
13. Mike and Lee Tamm, Railroad Museum Pemberton Board members
14. Margaret Westfield, Partner Westfield Architects and Preservation Consultants, former PNJ board member
15. Debbie Kelly, Consultant at Preservation Partners, New Jersey Historic Trust board member, former PNJ board member and staff
16. Barbara Stolem Stull, Historian and local author
17. George Flemming, Historian and local author
18. Penny Watson, Watson and Henry Architects and Engineers, PNJ Board member
19. Tina Yerkes, South Jersey Tourism Corporation Staff
20. Tim Hart, Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission staff
21. Eric Webber, Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission staff
22. Flavia Alaya, Bridgeton Historic Preservation Commission consultant *
23. Carola Hartley, Main Street Bridgeton Executive Director*

*These people were jointly interviewed on the telephone by Donna Ann Harris.

Credits

This report was written by Donna Ann Harris with Alexander Balloon. Notes were taken by PPA volunteer Nichole Josten.

Biographies

Donna Ann Harris is the principal of Heritage Consulting Inc., a Philadelphia-based consulting firm that works in three practice areas: downtown and commercial district revitalization, historic preservation and organizational development. Since starting her firm and during her career, Donna has assisted citizen groups and government agencies to identify appropriate reuses for threatened historic properties that ensure the long term preservation and maintenance of the site. Throughout her twenty five years in the preservation movement, she has led start up and mature statewide preservation organizations as an executive, was first staff member of a land and building conservation organization, and led a wide variety of projects for the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Corporation. Donna's new book *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Homes* was published by AltaMira Press in April 2007. She has published articles about reuse of historic house museums in *History News* and *Forum Journal*. Her articles about advocacy, membership development and Business Improvement Districts have been published in *Main Street News*.

Alexander Balloon received his Master of Science degree in Historic Preservation with a concentration in Urban Development from the University Of Pennsylvania Graduate School Of Design in May 2009. His undergraduate degree is from the College of Wooster in Urban Studies and History. He has worked with Heritage Consulting Inc. on a variety of assignments the past year. Working with another local organization, Alex completed a variety of projects in the City of Philadelphia including documentation, feasibility, and re-use studies for historic sites and properties. His most recent project includes drafting a neighborhood historic preservation strategic plan for the University City Area of Philadelphia. He was also a summer fellow with the Cleveland Foundation, where he worked with a local economic development organization. Alex worked on a number of preservation projects in Northeast Ohio, including a re-use project to convert a historic Craftsman Bungalow into a dental office.

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