

# Sowams National Heritage Area Feasibility Study Informational Paper



## I. National Heritage Areas

National Heritage Areas (NHAs) are living, working landscapes that honor the important role of a region in our country's development and celebrate its contributions to American history and culture. Through dynamic public-private partnerships, NHAs provide a way to recognize, share, and conserve a region's significant history and outstanding qualities.

National Heritage Areas preserve and revitalize cultural, historic, and natural resources, providing recreational and educational opportunities to residents and visitors. NHAs are part of the system of the National Park Service, but unlike national parks, they are community-based projects that protect and promote a region's history, heritage, and culture and use those assets to advance local economies through tourism, recreation, and community development.

## II. The Significance of the Sowams Region

Sowams, the homeland of the Pokanoket Tribe and their leader, the Massasoit Ousamequin, is the setting for one of our nation's origin stories, the critical alliance that established 50 years of peace between the Indigenous tribes that had farmed, fished, and hunted the region for millennia and the English settlers arriving on the Mayflower. Sowams is also ground zero for the fracturing of that alliance during King Philip's War, a devastating conflict that ultimately encompassed Indigenous and colonial communities throughout New England. At the heart of that conflict lay divergent worldviews of law, land ownership, and personal freedom. In Sowams, the legacy of those differences has shaped the complex history of the region from prehistory to the present.

This legacy can be seen in how people have valued and used the eastern shore of Narragansett Bay; how Roger Williams and others codified religious toleration in the founding of Rhode Island; and how ship owners in the region amassed enormous wealth in the global trade of human chattel, including people from the region's Indigenous Tribes and people of African descent. In addition, the clash of Indigenous and European ideals first seen here would repeat itself across the North American continent and set a precedent for the colonization of Indigenous lands, leaving wounds that can still be felt today. The history of the Sowams' landscape has molded the political, economic, and social heritage of the nation.

## III. National Heritage Areas Program Background

The NHA program began during President Ronald Reagan's administration, during which he supported NHAs as a cost-effective way to tell America's stories and conserve places that are special to our nation's history and culture. Today, there are 62 NHAs across the United States that foster economic development, heritage tourism, education, and community development without any form of federal government ownership, control, or management.

### Steering Committee

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Seekonk Town Planner

**Tracey Brown**

Sachem,  
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Coordinator, Sowams Heritage  
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**Diane M. Williamson**

Town of Bristol Director of  
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NHAs have a proven record of fostering job creation and advancing economic development based on heritage. In addition to creating jobs, NHAs generate valuable revenue for local governments and sustain communities through revitalization and heritage tourism. Importantly, NHAs have undergone rigorous independent evaluations by the National Park Service that document the program’s value to local economies. Through innovative public-private partnerships, NHAs have effectively leveraged federal resources, attracting an average of \$5.50 of private funding for each dollar appropriated. In fact, the program has proven so successful that the number of NHAs that have been Congressionally authorized has nearly doubled in the last 15 years.

#### **IV. The Process of Becoming a National Heritage Area**

Today, Sowams includes Barrington, Bristol, East Providence, a portion of Providence, and Warren, RI, as well as Rehoboth, Seekonk, Somerset, and Swansea, MA. To become a National Heritage Area, a community must prove the cultural, historic and natural ecosystem form a cohesive, nationally significant landscape.

As a part of the process, Congress requires the submission of a feasibility study, which assembles resource information, demonstrates community support, and provides justification for Congressional designation. A Steering Committee comprised of a coalition of Pokanoket leadership; town planners; representatives of tourism entities, historical societies, and museums; and other volunteers is leading the feasibility study to consider development of an NHA in MA and RI. The public is invited to become involved through a series of meetings over the next year, and through special events held in communities across the region.

As our past is important, so is our future as a community and a region. National Heritage Areas celebrate our life today and instill a sense of pride in community and a determination to invest in the future of the place where citizens live, work, and recreate.

#### **V. What a National Heritage Area WILL DO:**

- Share an important story in American history through multiple voices
- Create a framework for local stakeholders to collaborate and better fulfill their missions
- Raise awareness of Sowams’s unique history and sense of place
- Increase capacity for residents to steward their heritage resources and assets
- Provide federal funding appropriated annually by Congress, and matched locally, to support NHA projects and programs

#### **VI. What a National Heritage Area WILL NOT DO:**

- Will NOT add any new regulatory authority or restrictions on private lands
- Will NOT infringe on private property rights or require any resident or property owner to participate in any plan, project, or activity conducted by the NHA
- Will NOT add federal oversight over local management decisions

#### **VII. Economic Impact of National Heritage Areas**

- On average, NHAs have had a five-to-one return on investment, leveraging up to \$10 million in federal monies to build \$50 million in contributions from other sources.
- Nationally, NHAs contribute \$12.9 billion annually to the U.S. economy.