

quality product

Once you have created your inventory, you can assess the materials you have for developing a first-rate product. Are your cultural heritage resources well defined and of good quality? If you are a cultural heritage resource, are you providing the public with an authentic experience? In either case it is important to remember—your product is only as good as your interpretation.

Interpretation is the key component of **any** successful cultural heritage tourism endeavor. What is your story? How does it relate to your environment? Why is it being told? How is it being told? Who's telling it? To whom? The way you present the story will vary depending on the number and type of resources available, but its success will rest squarely on the authenticity and creativity used in its interpretation.

The National Trust For Historic Preservation (www.nthp.org) has identified five basic principles for ensuring a positive heritage experience.

1. Focus on authenticity and quality—the true story of your area is one worth telling.
2. Preserve and Protect resources—by protecting the buildings or special places and qualities that attract visitors, you safeguard the future.

3. Make sites come alive. Tell a story, act it out, interpret it.

4. Find the fit between the community and tourism. Local priorities vary, so do local capabilities—local circumstances determine what your area needs to do and can do in heritage tourism. Programs that succeed will have widespread local acceptance and meet recognized local needs. They are also realistic, based on the talents of specific people as well as specific resources.

5. Collaborate. Find partners with a complementary mission.

It is important for the cultural heritage tourist to know that they are participating in an authentic experience, and that they are somehow contributing to the preservation and protection of the very resources providing that experience. These travelers expect a high-quality educational interaction, complete with background, content, and explanation. They want to connect with other people, and expect the interpretive elements to facilitate those connections. In other words, they want the site to come alive!

Whether you represent a specific cultural heritage resource, or the community as a whole, if you entice your guests with an intriguing story, you will be rewarded. By offering a positive experience you can ensure that your visitors will return, and tell others about you as well.



Caulkins Farm, circa 1900, at Burlington's Intervale, courtesy of Gardener's Supply.

so, what is your story?

The first order of business is to determine what story you can and will tell. Is it historical? mythical? artistic? Can you separate fact from fancy? If so, does the account still hold its appeal? Whatever the resource, there will be many anecdotes available to it. The building in which it is housed can tell a story; the materials used in creating a piece of craft or art tell at least part of the story; the landscape that provided the inspiration for a book, song, or military maneuver for that matter, contributes to the tale. If you do not know what your story is, look through old legal and business records, examine photographs, talk to people, read newspaper accounts pertinent to your interest. Go to the library.

After you have done your research, and have identified the central theme, assemble interested parties (educators, historians, residents, artists, etc.) to discuss the story and how it should be told. The group also needs to decide if the presentation is going to be based on fact or fiction, and how their choice will be conveyed. Ask questions—Who are the characters? When did it occur? What happened?—to determine the exact nature of the story, the premise on which it is based, and the critical components of the tale. Then and only then, can an accurate determination be made as to its appeal. Do those elements make the resource unique, and differentiate it from others? If not, can the focus be changed? If the foundation of the story remains somewhat typical, are there connections that can be made with the rest of the region, or the nation as a whole? Is there one audience; or can various aspects of the story be shared with different segments of the population?

HERE ARE A FEW OTHER POINTS TO CONSIDER AS YOU DESIGN YOUR PRODUCT.

- Concentrate on the parts of the story that fit the mission of your group.
- Never knowingly give incorrect information as fact. Accuracy is everything.
- Make sure the interpretation is free of stereotypes.
- Never be afraid to alter the story as the information base grows.
- Recognize the difference between the content of the story and the format in which it is presented.
- Understand that showing how something is done is not a story, it is a demonstration. If you want to include demonstrations in your interpretation, use them to illustrate a part of the story.
- Make sure the tale is consistent in all forms of the telling.
- Align the product with the type of economic development/ impact you are interested in creating.

resources

Cultural Heritage Tourism Practical Applications: A guide to help Arizona's history and heritage institutions develop heritage-based tourism attractions, produced by the Arizona Humanities Council, can be purchased by writing to the AHC, 1242 North Central Avenue, Phoenix, AZ 85004-1887.

National Trust for Historic Preservation. Washington, DC. Information Series. *Getting Started: How to Succeed in Heritage Tourism*.