

P. LYNN SCARLETT

The Boston Globe

Preserving our local landmarks

By P. Lynn Scarlett | July 21, 2004

WITH ITS hand-crafted cedar shakes and intricate stained-glass windows, the Swedish Baptist Church in the Quinsigamond Village of Worcester reflects the artistry, faith, and craftsmanship of the 19th century men and women of the Blackstone River Valley who ushered in America's industrial revolution. Yet just a few years ago the historic structure stood abandoned, awaiting a date with the wrecking ball to make room for a bank parking lot.

Fortunately, a local nonprofit group, Preservation Worcester, interceded, raising \$50,000 to relocate the church to a donated plot of land near the center of town. A local developer then restored the structure and reopened it this year as a cafe and children's bookstore.

The near-destruction of the Swedish Baptist Church, built by immigrants who worked at the nation's first wire manufacturing plant, illustrates the risk that a vital part of our national heritage will be lost unless we make a concerted effort to preserve it. Likewise, the renovation of the church demonstrates how communities can tap into their heritage as a boost to tourism and an economic engine that creates jobs.

With plans underway in Worcester for the restoration of many heritage landmarks, such as the transformation of the old wire factory into a multi-use visitor center for the region, the church project is viewed as a harbinger of things to come.

"The church restoration signaled a change of direction for the village," said the project director, Stephen R. Bishop. "There's an appreciation of the city's heritage and its place as part of the story of the Blackstone Valley."

To promote this kind of community-based historic preservation, President Bush last year signed an executive order establishing the Preserve America initiative to provide recognition and resources to communities and citizens eager to preserve and share their history and culture. The primary goal is to empower communities to capture what is unique in their heritage in an age of homogenization where every mall guarantees the same fast-food restaurants and chain stores.

Last month I was pleased to designate Worcester as one of 24 new Preserve America Communities in the Blackstone River Valley for its efforts in preserving such historic structures. Other Massachusetts communities honored at the event included Blackstone, Douglas, Grafton, Hopedale, Leicester, Mendon, Millbury, Millville, Northbridge, Sutton, Upton, and Uxbridge.

We have found that many communities, given encouragement, will rise to the challenge of telling the stories of the people who built America. In Uxbridge, for example, the town is working to convert the

Central/Stanley Woolen Mill, which dates to the 1850s, into a retail complex expected to attract 200,000 people annually.

Likewise, local groups are taking over ownership and operation of 300 historic lighthouses along our coasts. Recently, Interior Secretary Gale Norton handed over the historic Thomas Point Shoal Lighthouse to the city of Annapolis, Md., and a group of partners. The 1875 lighthouse will become a museum to tell the story of the watermen, merchants, and other peoples of the Chesapeake Bay.

Every community has a story waiting to be told. What has become apparent in recent years is that history can be an economic boon.

Spurred by federal preservation tax incentives, private groups pumped \$3.2 billion into historic rehabilitation projects approved by the Interior Department last year. The cost to the Treasury was less than \$520 million.

Each project created an average of 42 jobs, or more than 50,000 jobs nationally.

The White House, in partnership with the Department of the Interior, the Department of Commerce, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, has already designated 104 Preserve America Communities across the country. These communities will be eligible to apply for grants if Congress approves President Bush's \$10 million request to fund the program.

We have a long list of communities awaiting designation and are expecting many more. Communities interested in applying for grants can go for information to www.PreserveAmerica.gov.

We are eager to help Americans tap into the richness of our shared heritage. Our past is also our future.

P. Lynn Scarlett is assistant secretary of the interior for policy, management, and budget. ■