

DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN

Muscle Shoals
National Heritage Area



Prepared for:
The Muscle Shoals
National Heritage Area

Draft:
January 15, 2013



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Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area Management Plan

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EXECUTIVE PLAN SUMMARY

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DRAFT STRATEGIES

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A. PURPOSE & APPROACH TO THE STRATEGIES

A1. STRATEGIES PURPOSE

This section of the Management Plan for the Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area (MSNHA) takes the research and planning to date to a new level of specificity. It builds upon the background work and analysis and the Foundation Statement to propose detailed strategies. As the graphic below from the “Draft NEPA Guide for NHA Management Plans” illustrates, this is the final step of the “Planning Framework.” The Framework is the composite of all of the Management Plan components created to date, including the Background Study and the Alternatives. Once the Draft Planning Framework is submitted to the National Park Service, a determination can be made as to whether a Categorical Exclusion (CE) or an Environmental Assessment (EA) will be needed.

NHA Planning Process

Issues, Needs,
Opportunities Identification

Vision and Mission
Development

Goal Setting

Strategy Development
(strategies or objectives, proposed
actions and/or recommendations)

Implementation Plan
Development
(project prioritization, project
leads and partners, cost
projections and potential funding
sources)

Interpretive Plan
and/or Business Plan
(if applicable)

Assemble and Submit
Draft Plan

Public Review

Refine and
Finalize Draft Plan

Parallel NEPA Steps

Submit Draft
Planning Framework

Determine NEPA
Pathway

(if an EA or EIS, must have public
scoping)

NEPA Analysis
and
Documentation

Current
Stage of
Plan
Creation

Graphic Source: “Draft NEPA Guide for NHA Management Plans,” NPS, August 2012 – Figure 2.1, page 4.

A2. STRATEGIES APPROACH

As noted previously, the Strategies section of the plan builds upon previous work and provides much greater detail. This Strategies section has been created using the following approach:

- 1) Utilize the previously-created Foundation Statement's six Goals and supporting Objectives as the framework for the Strategies.
- 2) Extract the ideas conveyed in the previously-presented Concept Plan developed in a PowerPoint format and use them to add detailed ideas that expand upon the Foundation Statement's Goals and Objectives.
- 3) Expand upon the other two steps above with additional new ideas to complete the Strategies component of this Management Plan



The well-attended Public Workshop utilized to help create the Task 3.0 Alternatives and Concept Plan was pivotal in generating ideas for this Strategies section of the Management Plan.

B. STRATEGIES

Goal 1: Develop the MSNHA's local coordinating entity – the University of North Alabama's Muscle Shoals Regional Center – into a highly-effective organization capable of successfully implementing the Management Plan once completed.

Objective 1-A: Establish a leadership program to help maintain the effectiveness of current board members, committees, and staff for the MSNHA, and to identify and groom potential future leaders.

In general, it is recommended that the MSNHA take advantage of existing relevant programs rather than attempting to do their own internal training. However, an occasional *MSNHA-sponsored workshop* for board and committee members could be useful in addressing issues specific to the MSNHA. Likewise, an *annual retreat* for board members (and perhaps committee members) could also be useful to discuss issues that typical meetings do not have time to allow, including establishing yearly work plans and reviewing work accomplished. Strategies should include the following:

- Consider joining the Alliance of National Heritage Areas (ANHA) at Full Membership level to provide stronger networking opportunities with other NHAs and to benefit from the various forms of technical information and support that the ANHA provides. Full membership was recently reduced to \$2,500 annually, while Associate levels of membership are \$500 annually. The MSNHA is currently a member of the ANHA at the Associate level, but full membership would bring greater benefits and available resources.



ANHA provides technical support to NHAs and offers varied membership levels.

- Send the MSNHA Director to regional and national conferences of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. If funding is available, some board members should also be sent. Because their conferences typically include concurrent educational sessions, there are usually multiple sessions relevant to heritage tourism.
- Provide training for board members, committee members and staff through workshop sessions. The Alabama Association of Nonprofits (AAN), based in Birmingham, offers such support services (www.alabamanonprofits.org). Also, the University of North Alabama's Office of Continuing Studies and Outreach offers courses for non-profit management, including "Introduction to Nonprofit Management" and "Starting or Reorganizing a Nonprofit." Relevant conferences and training offered by the Alabama Department of Archives and History should also be leveraged.
- Utilize local leadership development programs of Chambers of Commerce. For example, the Decatur Chamber of Commerce's Member Services, Investor Relations and Leadership Development Committee indicates on its website that "Leadership development is one of the three major areas of focus" for the committee. The other chambers in communities such as Athens, Florence, Muscle Shoals and Tusculumbia offer similar programs that could be beneficial to the MSNHA. The MSNHA will need to discuss with the leaders of these various chambers whether the MSNHA would need to formally join each chamber to participate in its programs. If so, the programs might be used by individual MSNHA board members, depending upon their individual memberships.

Objective 1-B: Secure dependable funding sources both to match available federal funding and to sustain the MNHA in the long-term.

While the federal legislation creating the MSNHA stipulates that the MSNHA can receive up to \$1 million dollars annually for a ten-year period, most NHAs receive closer to \$250,000 to \$300,000 annually. Also, a 50% match in dollars and/or in-kind services is also required. Consequently, a substantial amount of local funding is needed. Reportedly, the NPS's current formula for funding distribution is going to change soon. If this prediction comes to fruition, the NPS will still consider leveraged dollars, but their proportional ratio to the match will be less than the current 1-to-1 match of cash. Also, leveraging and in-kind matches will likely need to be verified more so than they are at present. Thus, the MSNHA should probably move toward a 1-to-1 cash ratio as a basis for its fundraising approach. The following strategies are suggested to achieve this objective:

- Establish an MSNHA membership program for area Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs) in which they pay annual dues to achieve the highest level of benefits. One nearby potential model is the Mississippi Hills National Heritage Area. They have a three-tiered membership structure for CVBs that is based upon their annual tourism-generated tax revenue (Tier 1 - \$10,000; Tier 2 - \$5,000; and Tier 3 - \$1,000). Members in all three categories have voting privileges on the Board of Directors. There is also a \$500 non-voting membership category.
- Establish an MSNHA membership program for individuals. An example from the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area is the following membership structure: Individual & Senior - \$25; Family - \$45; Supporting - \$75; Premium - \$125; Patron - \$250; Benefactor - \$500. Membership in the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition (an NHA in Akron, OH) is very similar, with membership options ranging between the Student and Senior levels at \$10 annually to Partner levels at \$100 annually. Benefits for membership in the Rivers of Steel NHA include: personalized membership card, 10% discount at their retail shop (discount valid on up to 4 tour tickets), e-mail updates, free admission to exhibits, and invitations to member-only events and programming (supporting Members and above receive two complimentary Hard Hat Tour tickets).
- Pursue corporate sponsorships. There are many examples of NHAs that have been successful in securing sponsorships from area corporations, and such sponsorships can amount to substantial funding. As one example, the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition has two levels of "Canal Trailblazers." At the highest level of sponsorship is the "Platinum Level" at \$5,000 annually, while the regular level is at \$2,500 annually.



The Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition offers multiple sponsorship levels that are important to their funding. The highest level of sponsorship is the "Canals Trailblazers Platinum Level."

- Continue to pursue grants from various relevant programs. The MSNHA has already exhibited an ability to secure grants. An example was the grant the heritage area secured for the Appalachian Gateway Communities Initiative. Funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), it provided funds to hire the National Trust for Historic Preservation and The Conservation Fund in 2011 to perform a study entitled “An Assessment and Recommendations Report for Natural and Cultural Heritage Tourism Development in Muscle Shoals National Heritage Area Alabama.”
- Utilize UNA's new program in Public History for in-kind services to match grants. The University of North Alabama just started a master's degree program in Public History in 2012, making it only the second such program in the state. While it currently has only six students, it is expected to grow to thirty students within the next year. Because such programs tend to emphasize hands-on experience gained through project work, there should be plenty of opportunities for student projects for the MSNHA that could also meet the in-kind service requirements for matching grants.
- Conduct fund raising events for both promotion and financial sustainability. Special events can be useful for multiple reasons. In addition to raising awareness of the MSNHA's mission and activities, events could be useful for raising money. With respect to MSNHA sponsorship of major outdoor events, such as concerts and festivals, they might initially be too much of a distraction and energy drain relative to the benefits derived. However, as staff capacity grows over time, such events might be a worthwhile endeavor. In the meantime, smaller events held once or twice a year and entailing a dinner party type event with some entertainment component might be the most viable route. This type of event would target key stakeholders (including business leaders and public officials), have a substantial ticket cost, and encourage donations as part of the event. There are numerous models of historic preservation and conservation non-profit entities in the state and region to borrow from.
- Offer fee-based services to provide technical expertise and generate revenue. If in-house staff can be added to the MSNHA having expertise in historic preservation and heritage tourism, the MSNHA could contract with various stakeholder entities in the heritage area for projects. The MSNHA could perform the work for less money than consultants, especially if it can utilize UNA Public History students for acquiring hands-on experience. A good model for this approach is the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, which is managed by Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation. The Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition has a similar program. Their “Conservation Collaborations” program provides technical assistance and support to their partners and the partners compensate the Coalition for their work. The program generates between \$15,000 and \$40,000 annually for the Coalition.
- Establish income-generating programs that also further MSNHA's mission. While many of the heritage area's programs will cost money, some might generate income as well. As an example, the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition's annual program income budget is \$120,000 and consists of “health and wellness” walking programs, fishing derbies for inner-city school children, and canal clean-ups. Through corporate sponsorships, they raise \$60,000 through these programs. They not only further the heritage area's mission, but they also help to raise money.

Objective 1-C: Involve a broad cross-section of MSNHA stakeholders at all levels of the organization to benefit from a diverse set of perspectives and to build a strong grassroots foundation of support.

See the chart on the following page that illustrates the first three recommendations below.

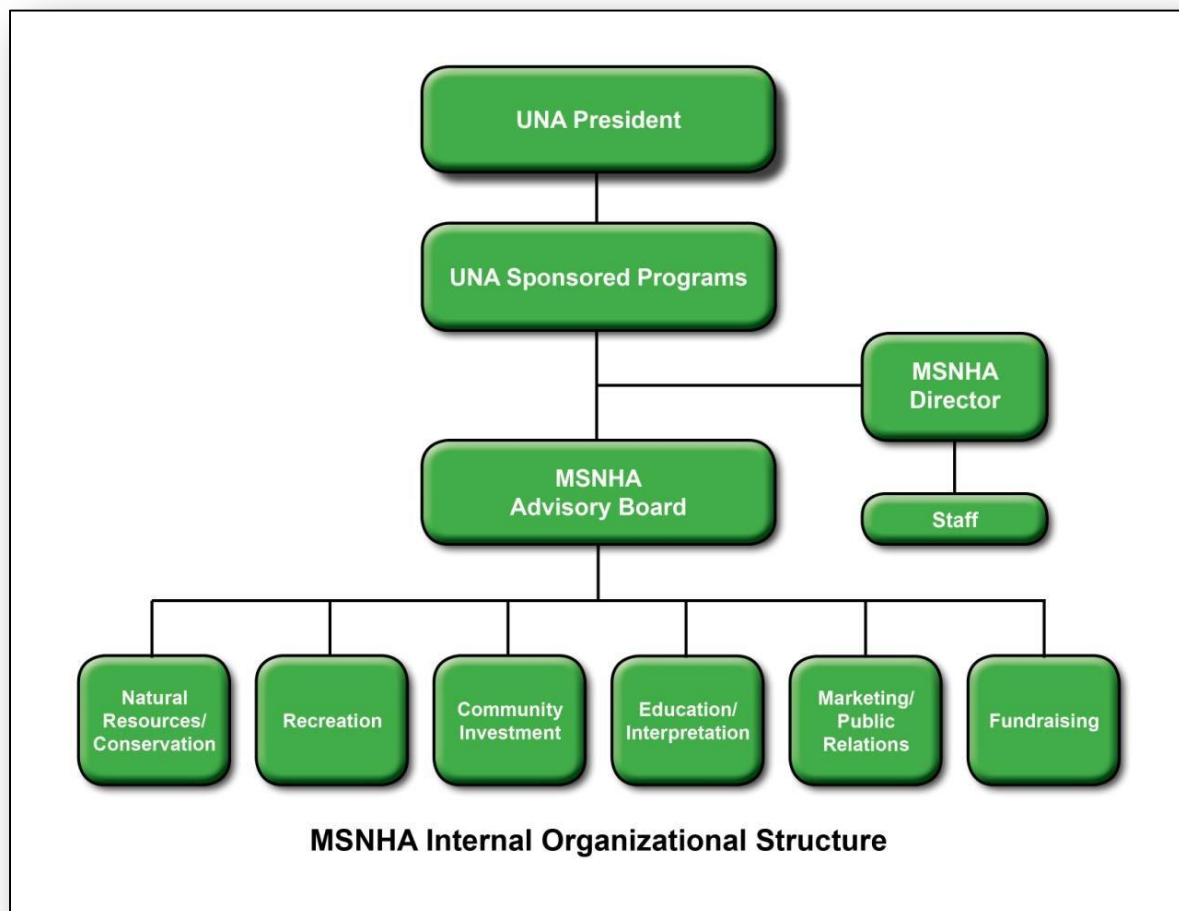
- Rename the MSNHA “Steering Committee” the “Advisory Board.” The MSNHA has elected to not have a traditional board of directors like many NHAs. Instead, the ultimate authority rests with the UNA President. However, the heritage area does still have a body of representatives of various entities and interests that function much the same. Given that this plan recommends below a series of supporting topic-based “committees,” it is recommended that the existing Steering Committee be renamed the “Advisory Board” to avoid confusion with the other recommended committees and to

give this body a bit more weight, even if it is more of a perception. The balance of this plan will, accordingly, utilize the name Advisory Board.

- **Diversify the MSNHA Advisory Board.** At present, the MSNHA Advisory Board (“Steering Committee”) has fourteen members. Some of them represent specific entities or have expertise pertinent to the MSNHA, such as UNA’s new Public History program, the U.S. Forest Service (Bankhead), the NPS (Natchez Trace), the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (Joe Wheeler State Park), and the Alabama Historical Commission. However, most of the other members only represent the various political jurisdictions, such as counties, but lack any additional qualifications. Furthermore, as with many such bodies, some members are more involved than others. The following recommendations are offered:

-To address the issue of members who have not been active enough, develop operating guidelines that govern board member terms and insure rotations off the board. While these guidelines should be proposed by the MSNHA staff and approved by the board, one potential approach might be three-year terms not to exceed three consecutive terms per member (or nine total consecutive years per member).

-Fill seats that become available with people who bring a useful expertise, insight and/or resources, such as tourism, marketing, historic preservation, business, fundraising, and finance. Since this board is only advisory and the ultimate authority rests with the UNA President, the typical institutional representatives who might normally be non-voting “ex officio” members can serve on this board without that distinction.



- Create a series of working committees to expand involvement and to achieve key tasks. Many organizations similar to the MSNHA utilize a set of committees to help implement their objectives and to broaden the range of individuals involved with the entity. Committee members do not need to be limited to board members. An example is the National Main Street Center's downtown revitalization program in which committees are based upon the "Four Point Approach" of organization, design, economic restructuring, and promotion. It is recommended that six distinct committees be established for the MSNHA. Some of those committees should assist with a particular function of the heritage area, while others should address a specific topic. Below is a description of each committee:
 - *The Natural Resources & Conservation Committee* would focus on natural lands conservation efforts, including acquisition of open space for public use and conservation easements for private lands. This committee should include representatives from the state and regional land trusts, as well as governmental entities involved with conservation (TVA, Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources, etc.) and private entities like the Sierra Club. This committee would have a strong link with the MSNHA's "River" theme.
 - *The Recreation Committee* would concentrate on outdoor recreational activities within the heritage area, such as boating, fishing, hunting, hiking, cycling, canoeing, rafting and similar activities. Among committee members should be Parks & Recreation Department staff from the various local governments, as well as leaders of area clubs for fishing, hunting and related activities. As with the committee summarized above, this one would have a clear connection with the heritage area's River theme.
 - *The Community Investment Committee* would address everything that is "bricks and mortar" for the MSNHA. It might otherwise be considered community revitalization or development and would involve investing in the physical aspects of the heritage area to improve its condition and make it more livable, more attractive to visitors, residents and businesses, and to help improve the overall quality of life. Key participants for this committee would include Main Street program managers, planning directors, and community redevelopment officials within the various MSNHA communities.
 - *The Education & Interpretation Committee* should be comprised of local historians, history academics from area universities (Public History Department representatives from UNA, etc.), museum operators, anthropologists (including archeologists and ethnographers), and others with expertise and interest in the area's history and culture.
 - *The Marketing & Public Relations Committee* should be comprised of marketing and public relations professionals, CVB representatives, and others involved with tourism, including tourism-related businesses.
 - *The Fund-Raising Committee* may be the most important committee of all because of the critical nature and unique issues associated with fund-raising. As noted previously, anticipated changes to the NPS's treatment of NHAs and their funding will only make this issue even more significant. This plan's Business Plan section addresses fund-raising strategies in detail.

In addition to the six committees listed above that would meet regularly to further various efforts related to their particular issues, Objective 3-A has also recommended a special committee for determining "tourist ready" sites and attractions. That committee would be mobilized following an initial round of site and attraction evaluations by a smaller team of representatives from other NHAs.

- Tap into existing relevant organizations. There are numerous existing organizations within the MSNHA that have some relevance to the MSNHA's mission. They already exist, they have supporting members, and they can be mobilized to support the MSNHA. They include tourism entities such as the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association, the area's various CVBs, local preservation organizations such as the



The Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association is a key partner to market the MSNHA.

Courtland Historical Association, local governments, and academic institutions. Also, living history groups such as Civil War reenactors are another group to leverage. Other important groups include environmental and outdoor recreational entities such as those listed previously, local school districts and private schools, universities and community colleges, and economic development groups such as Main Street programs.

Objective 1-D: Develop a network of partner sites, attractions, and events that meet minimum standards of quality and contribute toward the MSNHA in return for being included within the promotion of the Heritage Area.

- Adopt a designation for sites, attractions and events that are deemed “visitor-ready.” The purpose of this program is to be able to promote sites, attractions and events that meet a minimum standard based upon best practices so that visitors to the MSNHA are not disappointed by sites, attractions and events that fail to meet their expectations. Standards to determine visitor readiness should address the following key issues: sufficient wayfinding, parking, bathrooms, standard days/hours of operation, physical maintenance of the site, historic authenticity and integrity, and accurate and effective interpretation. Sites, attractions and events that meet the standards should be formally deemed “visitor ready” and, thereby, receive full promotion benefits from the MSNHA.
- Adopt a designation for sites, attractions and events that are deemed “emerging.” This program would be intended for sites, attractions and events not yet deemed visitor ready per the best practices standards outlined above, but whose operators seek to achieve such status. To avoid failing to meet visitor expectations and potentially harming the MSNHA brand, emerging sites, attractions and events should not be promoted by the MSNHA. However, technical assistance should be provided to them by the MSNHA to help them ultimately achieve visitor ready status.

Because of the potential political nature of applying the standards and the need for clear objectivity, it is recommended that a small panel of experts be appointed to administer the standards and to make the designations for the initial round of evaluations. Ideally, the panel's experts would live and work outside of the MSNHA, and it is recommended that they consist of staff and board members from other NHAs. Potential NHAs to team with, all located in adjacent states, include Tennessee Civil War NHA, Mississippi Hills NHA, and the Mississippi Delta NHA. By creating strategic alliances between NHAs for this and other purposes, the MSNHA can lessen the politics of evaluations and do so at no or minimal cost. This approach has been used by the National Main Street Center's program and has been found to be a successful method of bringing objective “outsider” perspectives to a range of issues. See Objective 3-A for more details on this overall approach.

Objective 1-E: Establish a promotional program that not only markets the Heritage Area and its sites, attractions, and events, but that also markets the MSNHA as an entity.

Some of this promotional activity is already occurring, particularly through the MSNHA's website. The following steps are recommended:

- Utilize the new logo for the MSNHA. An effective NHA logo is simple, readily identifiable, attractive (which obvious comes with some subjectivity), and somehow conveys the overall concept of the NHA. The greatest short-coming of the previous logo, illustrating the Wilson Dam, was that it reflected only one sub-theme of one theme of the MSNHA. A recommendation relatively early in this planning process was for the MSNHA to hire a local graphic artist to create a new logo more reflective of all facets of the MSNHA. Over the course of this process, a new logo has now been adopted (see at right). It follows all of the principles suggested for an effective logo. Now that it exists, it should be used extensively.



New MSNHA logo

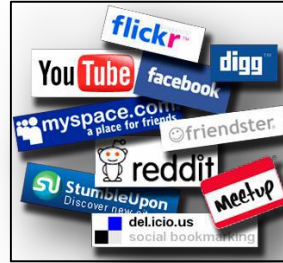
- Integrate the new MSNHA logo into the marketing of individual sites, attractions and events. Although it should be limited to use only by sites, attractions and events designated by the MSNHA as being “visitor ready,” the new logo should be used in numerous ways. It should be used for wayfinding signage, and it should be integrated into the marketing materials and websites of sites, attractions and events. Use of the logo should require formal approval by the MSNHA to insure that sites, attractions and events of inferior quality do not degrade the MSNHA brand.
- Revise the MSNHA website. The current website has many positive attributes, including being well organized, containing useful information, and having a high-quality graphic appearance. However, the “Explore Heritage” options at the bottom of the website screen are inconsistent with the themes and sub-themes as proposed in this Management Plan. Some of the revisions needed are only a matter of reorganizing the information. There should only be three key themes per this plan: the River, Native American Heritage, and Music. Some of the ten options now listed in this website section could simply be placed within one of those themes as subthemes, such as the “Civil War” and “Transportation” subthemes being placed under the broader River theme. However, some of the topics listed here are not even identified sub-themes for the MSNHA, such as “African American” heritage and the “Natchez Trace.” Those should be eliminated, as having too many themes and attempting to be all things to all people dilutes the themes and confuses the heritage tourism audience.
- Create and distribute one or more brochures for the MSNHA. Much of the text and graphics needed for brochure is already contained on the MSNHA website and other components might be borrowed from this plan, such as theme-based tour maps. It is recommended that one brochure would be about the MSNHA in general, but focusing primarily on the themes and sites, attractions and events. There could also be three supplemental brochures, each focusing on one of the three themes of the heritage area. Once developed, they should be provided in brochure racks at all regional visitors centers, at partner sites, and at relevant hotels and restaurants. A digital version of each brochure should also be downloadable on the MSNHA website.
- Secure gateway signage for the MSNHA at key transportation gateways into the heritage area. This simple signage as used by other NHAs can be produced by the state highway department and it is typically brown in color to reflect a cultural site. It might also utilize the NPS logo, as well as the proposed new MSNHA. Such signage should definitely be placed at the north and south gateway points along I-65 and at both ends of the Natchez Trace as it enters the MSNHA. It might also be considered at some key state roads into the heritage area that experience relatively high traffic counts.
- Develop positive relationships with local media and generate regular press releases about the MSNHA. Whenever any positive newsworthy occurrences avail themselves, the MSNHA staff should prepare a press release utilizing a standard format already created via this management planning project. After doing this with enough frequency, the staff will develop a feel for what types of news stories will be covered by certain media outlets and those that will not. Among the media outlets to utilize are newspapers, television and radio stations, newsletters of various organizations, and internet-based media.
- Make regular presentations about the MSNHA both within the NHA and outside of it. This management planning process has resulted in the creation of several different PowerPoint presentation that can either be used “as are” or can be adapted as needed. Within the heritage area, staff and leadership from the MSNHA should make presentations to promote the heritage area to



Gateway sign for the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor in New York

schools, fraternal organizations (Elks, Masons, Rotary, etc.), local governments, and similar groups. Beyond the MSNHA, presentations might be made at tourism and preservation conferences.

- Utilize social media to garner attention for the MSNHA. Examples of social media to leverage include Facebook, Twitter, and Linked-In. At present, the MSNHA is using Facebook and Twitter. Being effective in the use of social media requires both knowledge of the medium and frequent interaction. If the MSNHA staff lacks expertise to utilize social media, it is recommended that either a Steering Committee member, issue-based Committee member, or someone with UNA be asked to help with this effort.



While there are numerous social media outlets that can be utilized, only a couple are likely worth the effort.

- Develop strong relationships with travel writers. Travel writers prepare articles for magazines and other publications related to travel. Clearly, heritage tourism has a strong link to travel, and travel writers tend to focus particularly on places that are somehow unique and offer an authentic experience, depending upon the readers targeted. It is recommended that the MSNHA staff utilize Travelwriters.com, a professional network of travel writers, editors and members of the public relations community. According to their website, "Travelwriters.com is based on a simple principle: to connect top-tier writers with editors, PR agencies, tourism professionals, CVBs and tour operators, nurturing the important link that so heavily influences the travel media." This resource and others can be leveraged to get the MSNHA out to the broader public nationwide. Another approach would be for the MSNHA staff to coordinate with the various CVBs to "Fam Tours" (familiarization tours) with travel writers and others.

It is important that all promotional efforts be performed in close collaboration with the heritage area's other tourist entities, including the CVBs and the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association. Rather than duplicating efforts, it should supplement and reinforce current efforts. Promotional strategies should be spearheaded by the committee of heritage tourism representatives recommended previously under Objective 1-C (second bullet point).

Please see this plan's separate "Business Plan" element and the "Implementation Plan" element for more detail on ideas related to those issues.