stewards & storytellers

THE GREAT MARSH, the largest salt marsh in New England, is home to dozens of bird species, and is a favorite among hikers, boaters, and beachgoers. OPPOSITE: The primary caretakers of Pioneer Village: Elizabeth Peterson with her husband, Jason Kouse (left), and son, Temujin Frost (front right), along with his friend Jahan Venk.
Essex National Heritage Area in Massachusetts is one of dozens of heritage areas making America’s best idea even better

BY KEVIN GRANGE • PHOTOS BY JASON VARNEY
Elizabeth Peterson never dreamed that one day she’d be managing America’s oldest living history museum, but at 9 a.m. last July 4th, she found herself unlocking the gate at Pioneer Village for the first time. Built in 1930 to celebrate the first large wave of settlers that arrived in Salem, Massachusetts, from England in 1630, Pioneer Village hosted popular re-enactments of colonial life, inspiring similar living history museums such as nearby Sturbridge Village, Plimoth Plantation, and Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. But lately, Pioneer Village’s thatched roof cottages, blacksmith’s shop, and Governor’s Faire House have sagged under rotting floorboards and unstable foundations; mice and squirrels have claimed the wigwams and dugouts; vandalism is a persistent problem; and visitation has plummeted. Peterson already had a full-time job as manager of Salem’s popular Witch House when she heard the city was considering closing the five-acre site nestled in the woods beside Salem Harbor.

“I couldn’t let it happen,” she says. “Pioneer Village is a remarkable testament to how dear our history is to us and a wonderful educational opportunity for the community.”

So there she was on Independence Day, unlocking doors, throwing open window shutters, and wondering just what she’d gotten her family and herself into. Her 14-year-old son, Temujin, grabbed a broom and began sweeping up dirt and animal droppings, while her husband, Jason, walked the perimeter fence, looking for recent break-ins. Could they restore Pioneer Village to its former glory, Peterson wondered? And, even if they did, would anyone show up? To her, Pioneer Village had always been one of the highlights of Essex National Heritage Area. Later that night, as distant fireworks reflected in the calm waters of Salem Harbor, Elizabeth and her family huddled around the fire pit, cooking dinner.

“This feels like camping,” she said. “With a purpose.”

Essex National Heritage Area is a dream for nature lovers and history buffs. This 500-square-mile region north of Boston has two units of the National Park Service, nine state parks, one national wildlife refuge, 26 national historic landmarks, 86 historical sites and museums, and more than 9,900 sites on the National Register of Historic Places. Charming antique towns like Salem, Danvers, and Ipswich—which boast the largest collection of First Period Homes (built from 1625 to 1725) in the United States—highlight our nation’s early settlement history, and waterwheels, mills, and a reconstructed blast furnace at Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site explore the birthplace of the American iron and steel industry.

Equally important, of course, are the fishermen and seafaring merchants who braved the North Atlantic and...
Pacific for centuries and are celebrated at sites such as the Maritime Heritage Center in Gloucester Harbor and Lowell’s Boat Shop in Amesbury. Built on the banks of the Merrimack River in 1793, Lowell’s is the oldest operating boat shop in America and the birthplace of the fishing dory, a small, flat-bottom fishing boat with steep sides and a pointed bow. Unlike competitors who constructed their boats upside-down over molds, Lowell’s workers built boats right-side up, with the frames acting as molds; they revolutionized fishing by creating stackable dories, allowing schooners to carry more dories, fish a wider swath of sea, and increase their catch.

Like Elizabeth Peterson’s dream of revitalizing Pioneer Village, the idea for a national heritage area often begins at the grassroots level and rises up. Local residents realize that the cultural, historical, and natural resources of their region—when combined—tell a nationally important story and begin promoting the idea. The goal? Create a national heritage area operated by the people and for the people. In 1990, the National Park Service completed a special resource study of Salem and the surrounding region, highlighting the rich history of early settlers, local fishermen, iron workers, and seafaring merchants who opened up the Pacific trade by sailing to China and India. But it took an ad-hoc commission of townspeople, business owners, local politicians, and volunteers to really give the idea shape and momentum. Public support quickly followed, and Sens. Ted Kennedy and John Kerry eventually jumped onboard. In 1996, Congress designated all of Essex County a national heritage area (NHA).

A national heritage area differs from a national park in a number of ways. First, there are no land-use restrictions and the residents lose no property rights. Each national heritage area is created by a separate, authorizing legislation and operates under its own unique provisions. The goal of most national heritage areas is to establish long-term, multi-partnership community and conservation projects. Although NHAs fall under National Park Service jurisdiction, the agency offers limited—but important—resources and mainly plays an advisory role.

**BY MID-SEPTEMBER**, Pioneer Village was operational. Just before noon one Saturday, as a group of guests approached, Elizabeth quickly changed into a colonial-style satin gown, and Temujin and Jason pulled on their breeches, buttoned up their 17th-century linen shirts, and slipped work aprons over their shoulders. Jason stoked a fire in the forge, a hearth
used by blacksmiths to heat metal, and, as the tour guide brought in the first guests, he and Temujin hid their Home Depot tools and demonstrated how settlers made tools, working pieces of blazing iron with antique hammers and tongs.

The following week, Peterson toured the property with Annie Harris, head of the Essex National Heritage Commission, which manages the area. As they walked, the two brainstormed ways to further improve the site. Maybe they could ask the Park Service to bring their new landing craft to Pioneer Village and trace the route of John Winthrop’s historic arrival in Salem? Perhaps putting more lights and adding cameras along the perimeter fencing would cut down the vandalism? And Peterson would love to host a night of costumed storytelling at Pioneer Village. With every idea Peterson generated, Harris suggested a few experts who might offer their help, in addition to potential grants and other funding sources. To date, the Heritage Commission has issued more than 380 small grants totaling $1.9 million, which, in turn, have acted as seed money, leveraging more than $20 million in total.

“This is a small program with a big impact.” But it’s not all about money. Peterson and Harris wanted more feet on the ground, so they decided to connect with the Park Service’s Future Leaders Youth Program to see if students would be interested in working at Pioneer Village as carpenters, groundkeepers, and interpreters. For the last five years, more than 100 underserved teens from the area have spent their summers working for the Park Service. The Essex National Heritage Commission helped connect the dots, bringing dozens of these volunteers to the Park Service. Once under the supervision of park staff, the students scraped, sanded, primed, and painted historic buildings; repaired roof shingles; learned how to cut spare keys; gardened; restored more than 200 park signs throughout the Northeast—and they learned resume-writing and job-hunting skills, too.

“Every custom sign is hand-made from wood and finished with stain or paint, and many feature intricate designs with gold leaf,” says Doug Law, facilities manager at Salem and coordinator of the Future Leaders program. “Since we have outstanding craftsmen, I thought it would be great to teach the kids everything from sign planning and design, to creation and delivery.”

After they had restored signs at Salem and Saugus Iron Works National Historic Sites—including one for the historic Custom House, which once employed Nathaniel Hawthorne—the teens, ever the entrepreneurs, approached Law about expanding the program to other states. Law reached out to facility managers at other parks, and orders poured in from parks in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York.

“These kids go from not knowing the National Park Service is in their community to feeling they are part of it and that there are real-life job opportunities available to them within the Park Service,” says Law.

Daniel Mondragen was one example. When he entered the program as a freshman, Mondragen was having trouble with schoolwork and struggled to keep commitments. But, while working for the Park Service, he quickly rose to a leadership position; he’ll join the U.S. Air Force later this year. “The program taught me responsibility and appreciation for the city and its history and opened new doors for my future,” says Mondragen.

Samantha Lobao, 20, has been with the program for six years and is now one of the team leaders. Without the Park Service youth jobs, she says she wouldn’t have known how to write a resume or think about the first steps toward a successful career.

The Future Leaders program is also a winning example of the kind of partnership that “must be a hallmark of the NPS in the decades that lie ahead,” as Park

Two Weekends of Walks & Water
Want to experience the best of Essex National Heritage Area for yourself(32,933),(116,959)? Every September, Trails & Sails features more than 150 free events, including walks, guided hikes, sails, historical tours, and boat-building lessons. Learn more at www.essexheritage.org/ts.
GRAHAM MCKAY
PLANING WOOD for a Merrimack Skiff in the workshop of Lowell’s Boat Shop, Amesbury, Massachusetts.

OPPOSITE: Essex local Marie-Noelle at the end of Island Road, Essex, Massachusetts.
National Parks Service Director Jon Jarvis said in a 2012 Policy Memorandum. Working together, the Park Service and the Heritage Commission created a program in which the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. The Park Service outlined the mission for the Youth Jobs Program and provided funding and a well-supervised work experience. For its part, the Heritage Commission brought in additional funding, hired the students, and offered them the opportunity to work at other sites in the area, expanding their skill set beyond what the Park Service could offer. The result was a unique partnership that allowed the Park Service’s reach to exceed its grasp.

In addition to preserving and promoting some of our country’s most historically significant and scenic areas, national heritage areas have proved to be a great investment, leveraging federal dollars to create and sustain preservation initiatives. A recent report prepared by the market research firm Tripp Umbach, on behalf of the National Park Service and the Alliance of National Heritage Areas (ANHA), found that the 49 national heritage areas currently support 148,000 jobs and generate $12.9 billion annually in economic activity—as much as Starbucks. A national heritage area designation was also found to raise the number of properties on the National Register of Historic Places because the NHA and Park Service staff can assist the community with preservation awareness and implementation.

“It is our experience that heritage preservation and jobs go hand in hand. Strong economies occur in places where there is a deep community pride and stewardship,” says Harris.
Despite the success of this 21st-century preservation model that protects land without adding federal acreage, national heritage areas have their challenges. Many people mistakenly believe NHA funding removes funding for national parks when, in reality, it is a separate line item in the Department of Interior’s budget. The majority of the work national heritage areas do—revitalizing communities, developing trails, and creating scenic byways—consists of long-term projects, but funding must be renewed annually; in the last several years, the House of Representatives and the president have threatened to cut the NHA budget item in half. Worse, the federal funding for each heritage area generally “sunsets,” or ends, after 15 years, long before their long-term benefits have been realized. Even without federal funding, Essex National Heritage Area would retain its designation, but if 40 percent of its budget were to vanish, people like Annie Harris and Elizabeth Peterson would lack the financial means to preserve and protect the cherished sites at the heart of the community. (A recent appropriations bill addressed some of these worries for the short-term—see box, opposite.)

In late October, just before the snow forces Pioneer Village to close for the winter, Elizabeth hosts “The Dark of Night,” where costumed storytellers share ghost stories and local Native American folklore inside three candle-lit cottages. The night is a resounding success and, for the first time in years, Pioneer Village ends the season in the black. Peterson believes it was the size of Winthrop’s fleet and its commitment to the land that really secured the success of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and, by extension, America. “I am able to live here now and do what I do because of what they did then.”

KEVIN GRANGE won a 2013 Lowell Thomas Award for his National Parks magazine story, “Sacred Water.”