

Review

Heritage Tourism as a Catalyst for Rural Economic Revitalization in the United States

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Abstract

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Heritage tourism is becoming an important way for rural communities in the United States to strengthen their economies while keeping their culture alive. By turning history, traditions, and local stories into visitor experiences, towns can create jobs, support small businesses, and build community pride. This paper looks at how heritage tourism works as both a cultural and economic tool, using three examples: the Appalachian towns of western North Carolina, the Bakersville Creek Walk, and the Mississippi Blues Trail. These case studies show how communities can use storytelling, preservation, and shared spaces to attract visitors and investment. The research uses a qualitative case study approach, drawing on existing studies and real-life projects, to explain what has worked well and what challenges remain. The findings shows that heritage tourism is most successful when local people are directly involved, when the cultural experience feels authentic, and when investments also improve life for residents. Overall, the study shows that heritage tourism is not just about protecting the past. It is also about shaping the future, giving rural communities a way to grow stronger while staying true to who they are.

Keywords: Economic, Heritage, Revitalization, Rural, Tourism

INTRODUCTION

When effectively implemented and community-driven, heritage tourism can become a powerful strategy for rural economic revitalization by leveraging cultural assets, improving local pride, and generating sustainable economic opportunities. In the present, it is playing a vital role in helping communities keep their cultural identity alive while also boosting their local economy. This is true for small towns and rural areas. In the United States, heritage sites can be anything from historic battlefields and old colonial towns to cultural neighborhoods and museums that share the many stories of America's past. These places are not just for sightseeing, but serve as living history books, where storytelling, preservation, and community pride come together. For rural areas, heritage tourism is more than just a way to share history. It can also be a steady source of income in places where old

industries, like farming or manufacturing, are no longer strong. Visitors who are interested in history, culture, and unique local stories can bring in money, create jobs, and inspire a stronger sense of identity for the people who live there.

This research looks at how heritage tourism can help both the economy and cultural life in rural America. It uses examples such as the Appalachian town of western North Carolina, where heritage initiatives have breathed new life into the community; the Bakersville Creek Walk, which blends local history with natural beauty to create a welcoming space for residents and tourists; and the Mississippi Blues Trail, which celebrates the state's deep musical roots while attracting visitors from across the world. These cases show different ways communities have reshaped their local history to attract tourists while

also dealing with challenges like securing enough funding, improving infrastructure, and protecting cultural traditions. The concept of heritage tourism has undergone numerous definitions over the years. Its meaning has been discussed, debated, and redefined by researchers and scholars from different fields in tourism, heritage studies, and anthropology. In his book, *Heritage as Crusade*, David Lowenthal discusses how the subject has defied definitions because of how what is referred to as heritage has been changed over the years.

Broadly, heritage tourism is regarded as travel that is motivated by personal interest in the historical, cultural, and natural assets of particular destinations. It is traveling to explore and engage in experiences, traditions, narratives, and communities that are historical and contemporary (Fisher, 2000). This search for authenticity has been a recurrent theme in tourism research since MacCanell's work, which explores how people who take part in heritage tourism often have real and meaningful cultural experiences. Brooks et al. (2023) affirm this by asserting that it is a practice of visiting certain sites because of a person's connection to the 'cultural, natural, and intangible heritage, which highlights a relationship to a shared past at a given destination.' The core of heritage tourism is embedded in personal and collective meaning of what the site represents (Poria et al. 2003). For instance, a person visiting a Civil War battlefield can serve a different purpose. One tourist may regard it as a patriotic act, while another can see it as a moment of reflection.

Today, heritage tourism operates on a dual functional level: cultural and economic (Timothy and Boyd, 2003). Culturally, it encourages the sharing and preservation of traditions, stories and historical sites. Economically, it is a source of income used for developing the host communities (UNWTO, 1974). What this means is that heritage tourism not only benefits the tourists in regard to what they learn through exploration and immersive exploration, but also what it offers to local populations. For many communities, particularly those rich in cultural or historical resources, tourism presents a chance to revitalize local economies, support small businesses, and invest in the maintenance of cultural landmarks. It is this dual purpose of blending preservation with profit that makes heritage tourism a powerful tool. On the one hand, tourists satisfy their curiosity while communities channel the profits to sustain and grow.

Heritage Tourism and Rural Economic Development

Today, heritage tourism has become a vital aspect of rural development strategies, especially in regions struggling with industrial decline, agricultural shifts, and economic hardships (Baba and Chabi, 2024; Liu et al, 2023). According to research, the tourism sector accounted for 10% of the world economy and provided

one in every ten jobs worldwide, translating to approximately \$10.9 trillion to the global GDP and 357 million jobs. (World Bank Group, 2025). In the US, travel and tourism contributed 9% to the country's GDP, generating around \$2.5 trillion and supporting 18 million people with employment. (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2024). While these figures reflect the strength of the sector, they also highlight the opportunities unexplored by rural America. Rural communities can capitalize on the numerous benefits and gains to position themselves as heritage tourism destinations to attract travelers who are seeking rich cultural and local experiences. Referred to as rural tourism, Badal (2018) describes how rural communities can revalorize existing properties and heritage potentials into tourist attractions for rural development. In response, communities are now leveraging this branch of tourism as an instrument for reviving local communities and a strategy for socio-economic regeneration. It presents an avenue to revalue old places and bring in new income by promoting destinations and activities that represent the history and culture of communities, both past and present (Doganer and Dupont, 2015).

Scholars such as Daugstad (2008) and Ray (1998) have noted that rural communities often turn to heritage narratives to attract visitors, stimulate small businesses, and improve local pride. It helps to revalue places that may have been overlooked, offering new income sources by promoting local culture, history, and traditional ways of life. Places like restored farmsteads, repurposed railway lines, pioneer museums, and storytelling festivals now incorporate heritage attractions that rural communities repackage for public consumption. Badal (2018) opines that Rural Community Tourism is a community-driven approach to tourism that helps to display the rich cultural and social assets of rural areas while providing visitors with authentic experiences that are rooted in local traditions, hospitality, and everyday life. He highlights the activities that are unique to communities, such as cultural performances, traditional crafts, and local cuisines. When done right, rural community development can serve as a multi-dimensional strategy that preserves cultural identity and sustains development through poverty alleviation and human empowerment. More importantly, RCT aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting inclusive economic growth and preserving local culture (Uysal et al., 2016).

One of the immediate benefits of heritage tourism in rural communities is job creation. Because heritage tourism tends to encourage longer stays and higher per-visitor spending, it offers a particularly valuable return on investment for rural economies through guided tours, artisan goods, heritage lodging, and local cuisine. (Giovine 2009; Thapaliya, 2012). Locals can tap into this demand to build a web of employment that is rooted in indigenous knowledge, skills, and culture (Badal 2018). Young adults can also get trained as storytellers, tourist

guides, or site managers. Closely linked to job creation is the nurturing of local entrepreneurship, which opens doors for small businesses like the development of homestays and guided tours (Lama, 2013), the sales of artisanal goods and local products (Snowball, 2016), and the establishment of food stalls and restaurants. These initiatives also support women and youth entrepreneurship, providing occupational opportunities for the unemployed youth (Oloidi 2020). Additionally, since these business ventures are started by local families, women, and young people, heritage tourism helps to reduce rural-to-urban migration and depopulation by giving people reasons to stay and invest in their communities (Abdo 2021).

Furthermore, heritage tourism facilitates significant investment in infrastructure from governments, NGOs, or private investors to attract and accommodate tourists. Key infrastructural developments can include road maintenance and improved transport systems, electricity, improved water supply, better communication and internet networks, and development of public spaces like parks and road navigation systems (Brooks et al, 2023). Importantly, these developments, while aimed at the comfort of visitors, also improve the everyday life of residents. For example, the San Antonio Missions Historic District saw increased economic and social benefits through workforce, income, and infrastructure developments linked to its potential World Heritage designation and its connections to the San Antonio River, which includes the revitalized Mission Reach (Doganer and Dupont, 2015).

One of the overlooked, yet powerful benefit of rural heritage tourism is how it fosters community development and the renewal of cultural pride. On the one hand, it places value on traditions, stories, and ways of life that might otherwise be forgotten (Irshad, 2010). Therefore, it encourages local communities to preserve their cultural heritage and protect and restore cultural landmarks (Nkwanyana et al., 2016; Omar, 2013). It also helps communities reconnect with their past and reinforce a sense of belonging, thus triggering their rediscovery of the value of their identity history and traditions, which may have been previously dismissed as outdated or insignificant. Furthermore, as people work together to make collective decisions about their culture, it strengthens social bonds and builds a sense of belonging (Al Matris, 2023). However, it's important to note that these benefits occur when community-based tourism is prioritized. This is when locals work together, make decisions together, and eventually share the benefits (Lusby & Eow, 2015). This form of heritage tourism has proven successful in areas that adopt a participatory and hands-on tourism model, involving indigenous people in every stage of decision-making, from planning tour routes to revenue allocation. Conversely, in situations when tourism is controlled by outside investors or agencies without community input, the profit may bypass

residents (Doganer and Dupont, 2015).

A Study of Heritage Tourism in the United State

Over the years, heritage tourism has emerged as a powerful force in revitalizing rural and small-town America. It is seen as a primary economic force as other traditional sectors decline or require cash injection, like taxpayer support. Communities in the US are now recognizing the cultural and economic value of preserving their unique histories, landscapes, and traditions. Since heritage tourism invites visitors to engage deeply with local experience, it culminates in boosting US local economies as well as their identity, morale, and cohesion. In the US, the impact of rural heritage tourism can be achieved through the establishment of National Heritage Areas (NHAs), which are geared at protecting the nation's heritage through partnerships (Straehla, 1988)

Appalachian Towns - Western North Carolina

The Appalachian region of Western North Carolina, long tied to industries such as mining, textiles, and timber, has faced decades of economic decline due to plant closures, outmigration, and limited job diversity. In response, the region began embracing heritage tourism as a driver for both economic and cultural renewal. (Ohio History Central, 2020). Despite this decline, tourism has become a central economic strategy for many rural communities. The Appalachian region of Western North Carolina exemplifies how heritage tourism can breathe new life into rural communities. Towns in North Carolina have successfully used their rich cultural tapestry rooted in traditions tied to American Indian (particularly Cherokee) and Scottish ancestry, bluegrass music, folk art, and a strong oral and literary history. (Kline et al., 2018). **Figure 1**

In order to revitalize these areas, some initiatives arose to build capital projects aimed at developing physical infrastructure like public spaces, sidewalks, and restored buildings across the six Appalachian towns. While these projects were designed to enhance the appeal of the town for the residents and visitors, it fulfilled the purpose of preserving local character, which is at the heart of effective rural community tourism. The Appalachian Regional Commission's (ARC) program evaluation of heritage and natural asset projects (2010) shows tangible results from such efforts: \$28.8 million invested in these projects across the region (including \$10.8 million from ARC), 583 jobs created, 520 jobs retained, and 55 new businesses launched in communities leveraging heritage assets. These projects also generated \$1.6 million in leveraged private investment, demonstrating how heritage-based

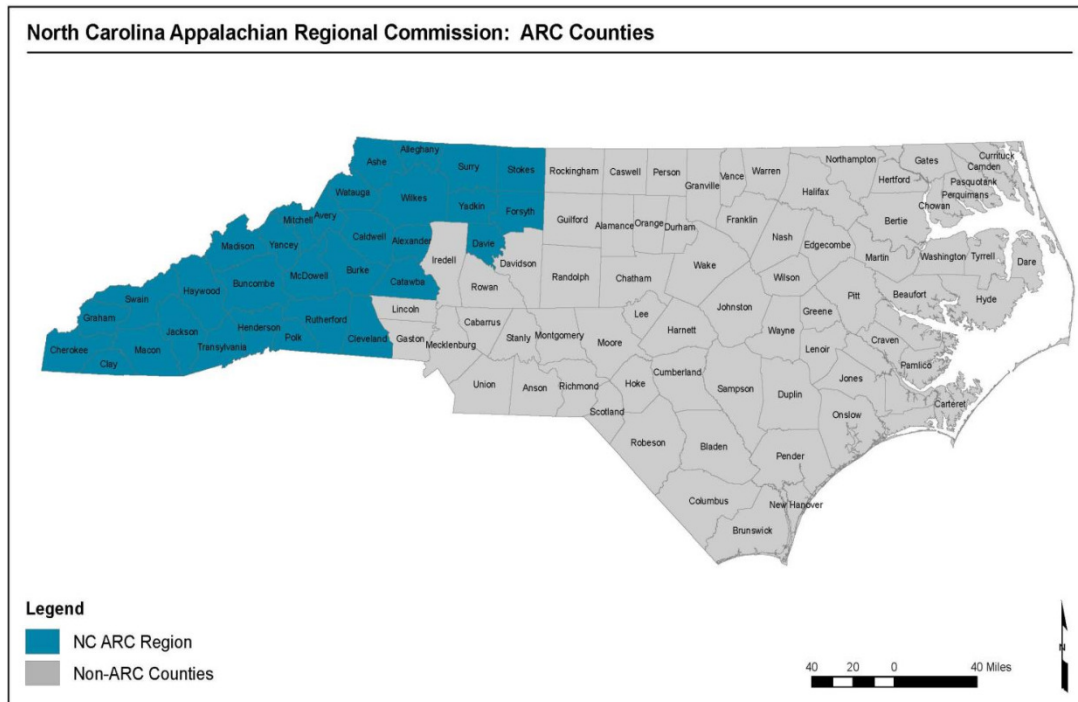


Figure 1. North carolina showing Appalachian Regional Commission counties

Source: North Carolina Department of Commerce

initiatives can spark further economic activity.

Within this region, specific counties demonstrate a strong reliance on these heritage and natural assets for tourism. Swain County, North Carolina, home to major tourist towns like Cherokee and Bryson City, boasts significant cultural attractions such as tours of the Oconaluftee working village, which demonstrates traditional activities like basketry and canoe hulling, and re-enactments of tribal history (Galloway, 2010). Moreover, these initiatives target local artisans such as woodworkers, weavers, potters, blacksmiths, and musicians whose crafts are central to the Appalachian identity. By creating heritage-based tourism experiences around these crafts, the initiative enabled communities to retain their cultural identity while generating new sources of income. Economically, the initiative helped to stabilize local businesses and encouraged entrepreneurship in places where employment opportunities had declined. According to ARC (2020), these efforts have led to job creation, youth retention, and the expansion of small businesses that cater to heritage travelers. The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area (BRNHA) also reports that key attractions such as the Folk Art Center draw more than 250,000 visitors annually, creating a consistent flow of tourism spending that supports hospitality, retail, and cultural sectors. On the social level, the focus on heritage rekindled community pride, encouraged volunteerism, and connected people across generations to celebrate shared traditions (Markusen and Gadwa, 201

Bakersville Creek Walk

Started as a simple walkway along Cane Creek, the Bakersville Creek Walk became a volunteer-led organization that rallied the community to create a space that reconnected people to their town, neighbours, and their identity (Hoffman and High-Pippert, 2007). The Creek Walk inspired more than good feelings; it quickly sparked real change and set the stage for events like "Music in the Park" and a juried arts festival, which helped Bakersville emerge as a recognized arts destination. These events gave locals a reason to gather and gave outsiders a reason to visit, further fueling the town's economic recovery and community identity (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). Furthermore, the Creek Walk's success triggered a domino effect of community improvement as the once-quiet town began to bustle with festivals, arts and new businesses (').

The storytelling here is in the space itself. Every bench, bridge, and stretch of the Creek Walk tells the story of a community that worked side-by-side to turn disaster into something beautiful. Walking the Creek means seeing where children now play, where artists display their work, and where music fills the air during summer evenings. Visitors don't just attend events; they become part of a living story about resilience, creativity, and community pride. The NC Rhododendron Festival, Bakersville's biggest heritage event, brings thousands of visitors. In 2006, it was estimated at 2,000–3,000 people,



Figure 2. Gazebo at the trail

Source: Bakersville Creek Walk official website



Figure 3. Marker of B.B. King Birthplace

Source: Wikipedia

and later reports put it at over 3,500 for the two-day celebration. The festival has also helped attract big funding, with about \$750,000 in grants tied to it over the years.

Investment in the Creek Walk continues. In 2024, Bakersville received \$500,000 from the North Carolina Division of Water Resources to extend and restore the

Creek Walk, adding nearly 700 feet of stream restoration, 900 feet of greenway, a stormwater wetland, and a new footbridge. Seasonal programming, like holiday walks and Christmas 'Neath the Roan, keeps people coming back even outside festival season. The Creek Walk isn't just good for the economy, though it helps shops, restaurants, and inns during big events. It's also a place

where the whole community can gather, volunteer, and celebrate together. It's both a public park and a cultural meeting place, showing that when people invest in a shared space, they invest in their shared future.

Mississippi Blues Trail - Mississippi

Beyond being an archive of musical tradition that has influenced American culture, the Mississippi Blues Trail is home to more than 200 markers that span across the state and beyond its borders. Each trail holds the story of a person, place, and events that make the blues what it is. Some of them talk about famous blues musicians like B.B. King or Muddy Waters, while others mark important places like the Blue Front Café in Bentonia.

The Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale also helps keep this history alive, displaying items like Muddy Waters' old cabin. Storytelling is at the heart of what makes the Blues Trail special. Aside from giving names, these markers paint a picture of the life, struggles, and successes of the people who made the blues. For visitors, the experience can span from having the opportunity of standing in the very place where a song was first played to understand how the music was born from real-life experiences. These stories are what turned the Mississippi Blues into living history lessons. Economically, grants have helped to maintain these markers. The National Endowment Humanities gave \$305,000 to start the project, and in 2018, the Delta Blues Museum received \$360,000 from the same group, plus \$100,000 from other sources, to add more exhibits. In return, the Blues Trail is a source of income for Mississippi. In 2023 alone, the state attracted 43.7 million visitors, generating \$11.5 billion in direct visitor spending and contributing to a \$17.5 billion total economic impact. While all of these did not come from the Mississippi Blue Trail, the impact is undeniable. The Mississippi Tourism Association also reports tourism as the state's fourth-largest industry, with \$17.5 billion in economic impact, over 133,000 jobs, and \$1.1 billion in tax revenue (Capital Area Tourism, n.d).

CONCLUSION

The examples above show the benefits of heritage tourism to sites. They illustrate that heritage tourism can protect local culture, attract visitors, and help local economies grow. As stories bring life to places, the example of the markers at the Mississippi Blues Trail tells the stories of musicians, clubs, and events that shaped the blues. In Bakersville, the Creek Wall shows the resilient narrative of a town that turned a natural disaster into a beautiful community space. Similarly, the Appalachian region, the interpretation of the living traditions of the Cherokee heritage, crafts, and music, all

create reasons for visitors to return throughout the year instead of making one stop. Together, these stories help tourists feel connected both to the site and the people and their history. When visitors feel this connection, they are more likely to stay longer, spend more money, and share their experience with others.

Furthermore, these projects highlight how local partnerships make tourism work in the long run. For instance, the Creek Walk was built mainly by volunteers, and over time, local groups and the town contributed by building relevant facilities. The Blues Trails, in collaboration with museums, music venues, and local businesses, help keep the sites relevant and alive. The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area (BRNHA) and Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) coordination aided in amplifying reach and impact to secure larger grants and wider marketing. Economically, these sites have recorded varying levels of success that attest to the benefit of rural community tourism. It portrays how tourism works best when there is more than one reason to visit a site. In the cases of these sites, investments and creation of spaces have made it possible, and substantial investments have been pumped into building facades and performance spaces to make cultural experiences easier to access and spend money on. Bakersville's well-kept Creek Walk turns festival visitors into repeat guests. Along the Blues Trail, interpretive stops drive traffic to nearby clubs, museums, and restaurants, proving that cultural interpretation and local businesses can thrive together.

Beyond these case studies, these benefits show that when communities tell their stories well, work together, and combine events with lasting improvements, heritage tourism can preserve history and, at the same time, boost the local economy. This approach can be applied to towns and cities across the United States, especially in places looking to protect their culture while creating new growth opportunities. Places like the Bakersville Creek Walk and the Mississippi Blues Trail show that keeping culture and history alive can also help a community's economy grow, build pride among locals, and attract visitors. By hosting events, festivals, and activities linked to each site, these places protect important stories and traditions while also bringing in real income for the area.

When cultural heritage is included in tourism plans and the community is involved, it keeps these sites active, meaningful, and useful for today's world. As these examples show, the key to successful heritage tourism is finding the right balance between respecting the past and creating benefits for the present. This balance can guide other communities that want to use their own cultural treasures to grow and thrive over time. Taken together, these findings suggest that heritage tourism is not just about preserving the past but also about shaping the future. Successful projects demonstrate that when communities integrate storytelling, collaboration, and strategic investment, they create tourism models that are

both economically sustainable and culturally authentic. The key lesson is that balance: respecting heritage while ensuring contemporary relevance can guide other rural and urban communities seeking to use cultural treasures as pathways to growth over time.

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