

Regional

treasures

Heritage tourism 'a natural' for Sussex County

BY MICHELE WALFRED

SWEET POTATO HOUSES MAY NOT BE THE first attraction a typical Delaware tourist has on their itinerary to visit, but David Ames, director of the University of Delaware's Center for Historic Architecture and Design, has a strong hunch that this is about to change. And heritage tourism is the reason why.

Ames spoke before one of several heritage tourism planning sessions held at the Elbert N. and Ann V. Research and Education Center in Georgetown, Del. at the invitation of UD's Coastal Communities Enhancement Initiative, (CCEI).

CCEI is a collaboration between the three public outreach arms of UD: Sea Grant Marine Advisory Service in the College of Earth, Ocean, and Environment; the Institute for Public Administration in the College of Education and Public Policy; and Cooperative Extension in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

CCEI is taking the lead in assembling community leaders, organizations and businesses and asking them to be key actors in developing the strategic marketing of lesser known, charming locations and bringing attention to the elements that comprise Delaware's unique heritage

Bill McGowan, Sussex County community development agent, and co-director of CCEI, has been organizing a series of workshops over the past year exploring the ways to develop a heritage tourism industry for southern Delaware.

"Heritage tourism is a natural for Sussex County,"

says McGowan. "While most people think of the resort/beach aspect of Sussex, we have so much more to offer visitors and in turn create economic opportunities for Sussex County residents."

Sussex County is at a crossroads, balancing the reality of unprecedented growth with a desire to preserve working agricultural land and historic vistas. Heritage tourism meets these challenges by designing itineraries around an appreciation of Delaware's unique and diverse history and rural economy. Promoting this type of tourism can provide much needed economic development to the area. The concept integrates the use of scenic byways and discovery zone locations.

As with much of the nation, the small towns of Sussex County, affectionately known as "the 25 jewels," have been hard hit by the recent economic downturn. Revenue streams that relied heavily on real estate transfer taxes have dried up.

Southern Delaware is rich with historic sites, such as sweet potato houses. Photo by Derby Walker



Heritage tourism seeks to inject new opportunities for these towns by offering a new way to look at what they already have in place.

Sharing that new vision is the mission of Christine Thomas, a former CCEI intern and current field representative for Preservation Delaware and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Thomas encourages town leaders and citizens to “look at a structure in different terms.” An old house doesn’t have to be a restored as a house museum.

Instead, it can be a gateway to a larger, more inclusive concept. “Rethinking gives a structure, and by extension the community, a larger purpose,” Thomas says. She asks towns to consider “how can this structure, house, artifact, become an economic engine?”

Heritage tourism’s focus isn’t just upon history and artifacts however. It also seeks to celebrate the cultural ingredients that give communities their identity—qualities that draw tourists and their dollars.

Thomas and the heritage tourism planners say they are eager to include artisans, agri-tourism sites, garden centers, gift shops, art leagues, and galleries into the dialogue and plan.

An inspiration for Sussex County heritage tourism has been Southern Maryland Trails, successfully in place for more than two years. Speaking before the planning group last May, Christine Bergmark, executive director, says that Maryland’s heritage tourism concept works because it allows tourists to “feel the countless generations of people who worked the land.” Sites on their publicized driving trails are designed to “meet the maker” she says.

And this includes places with personality. Scott Thomas, executive director of Southern Delaware Tourism, recently organized a heritage tourism field trip with fellow planning group members to experience firsthand what Maryland has in place and says he believes Southern Delaware also offers similar treasures.

It is smart business to invest in heritage tourism, Thomas says. “There is less economic leakage leaving the community. We shouldn’t put all our economic eggs in one basket.”

Thomas points to the seven common threads or themes on which heritage tourism can provide meaning to people—the natural environment, maritime tradition, beach resort communities, historic architecture, agriculture and agritourism, small towns, and religion.

Sue Fox, of Milton, Del., attended one of the workshops and found the exchange of information and ideas an important first step. She believes the development of heritage tourism would also benefit those who have made Southern Delaware their new home. “There is a thirst for knowledge about their surroundings. They want to know as much as they can about the area,” Fox says.

Interest in heritage tourism is growing. Its emer-


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gence as a major trend can have profound influence on the well-being of towns, especially in western Sussex. According to Ames, a typical heritage tourist will plan three trips a year, and has a special appreciation for authentic experiences, artifacts and activities of a region’s past.

In January 2010, Delaware Department of Transportation approved a new Western Sussex Scenic and Historic Highway, Ames says. Agricultural buildings will be part of the featured narrative.

Ames envisions a conversation that heritage tourism hosts will have with their temporary guests on a variety of topics, each beginning with the question “Did you know...?” followed by a fascinating tidbit about Delaware history, culture or architecture.

And, that includes sweet potato houses. In the mid-19th century, sweet potatoes were a major production crop in Delaware, peaking in the 1920s. After harvest, the sweet potatoes required a storing process in a specially constructed building—tall, with double-lap exterior siding, an interior furnace to maintain a constant temperature and a trap door flue located in the floor. Although they have been placed on the National Registry of Historic Places, their specific category does not mandate restoration. Many have fallen into disrepair or have been converted to other uses.

Though only a few vintage sweet potato houses remain to dot the Delaware landscape, they still have stories to tell, and with heritage tourism in place, a brand new opportunity to experience them. 

For more information about Heritage Tourism, see the Web site christina.wra.udel.edu/HeritageTourism