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Bi-State Partnership Seeks National Heritage Area Designation in North Central Kansas and South Central Nebraska

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HERITAGE AREA
PARTNERSHIP

The Kansas Nebraska Heritage Area Partnership, a diverse, bi-state partnership of environmental, cultural, and historical organizations and individuals, has formed to

establish a National Heritage Area within 49 counties between North Central Kansas and South Central Nebraska.

The mission of the Kansas Nebraska Heritage Area Partnership is to connect communities and attractions, instill pride of place, and promote immersive experiences for residents and visitors to enhance appreciation for the region's unique landscape and nationally significant cultural history.

Heritage tourism is a branch of tourism oriented towards telling the story of the people, over time, where the landscape helped shape the traditions of the residents.

Republic County Economic Development Director Luke Mahin, co-chair of the Kansas Nebraska Heritage Area Partnership, says a high percentage of domestic and international travelers participate in cultural and/or heritage activities while traveling, and those that do stay longer, spend more, and travel more often.

The Willa Cather Foundation, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization created in 1955 that owns and operates the National Willa Cather Center, Red Cloud Opera House, Willa Cather Memorial Prairie, and the nation's largest collection of nationally-designated historic sites dedicated to an American author, partnered with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2016 to explore regional heritage tourism strategies. The students looked at tangible assets, including food, lodging and other basic community services, and intangibles such as the arts, religion and culture.

The Willa Cather Foundation and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln realized the potential for a National Heritage Area in an expanded region involving many stakeholders across two states. In 2017, a volunteer board was formed to explore opportunities, define its mission and look at initial feasibility.

Shaley George, Curator of the National Orphan Train Complex and a member of the Kansas Nebraska Heritage Area Partnership Board of Directors, says this grassroots, community-driven group has identified six nationally important themes to include the

historical stories of: Settlement and Migration, Homesteading, Land, Native Americans, Rural and Nature.

In 1984, the first National Heritage Area, Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Area, was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan. In his dedication speech, Reagan referred to National Heritage Areas "a new kind of national park" that married heritage conservation, recreation, and economic development.

Congress has established 55 National Heritage Areas across the country in the last 37 years. One area is the Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area, which encompasses 29 eastern Kansas and 12 western Missouri counties and preserves, interprets and promotes stories of the Missouri Kansas Border War and enduring struggles for freedom. Visitors are invited to explore nearby museums, archives, libraries, historic sites and other attractions in either Kansas or Missouri to learn about the events that led to the Civil War and experience from many viewpoints the strong freedom story that runs along the Missouri Kansas border.

National Heritage Areas commemorate, conserve, and promote important natural, scenic, historic, cultural, and recreational resources. National Heritage Areas are partnerships among the National Park Service, states, and local communities, in which the National Park Service supports state and local conservation through federal recognition, seed money, and technical assistance. Unlike lands within the National Park System, which are federally owned and managed, lands within heritage areas typically remain in state, local, or private ownership or a combination thereof.

Laws establishing national heritage areas often contain provisions intended to address concerns about potential loss of, or restrictions on use of, private property resulting from National Heritage Area designation. For example, Public Law 116-9, which established the six newest National Heritage Areas and was signed into law by President Donald Trump on March 12, 2019, included various private property provisions. These provisions stated that designation of the new National Heritage

Areas would not abridge the rights of any property owner; require any property owner to permit public access to the property; alter any land use regulation; or diminish the authority of the state to manage fish and wildlife, including the regulation of fishing and hunting within the National Heritage Area.

George said heritage areas are entertaining and educational places for tourists, and may involve activities such as stories, music, food areas, walking tours and celebrations. Through increased tourism, communities benefit locally when services and products are purchased. In some cases, increased heritage tourism has attracted broader business growth and development.

National Heritage Areas might receive funding from a wide variety of sources.

Congress typically determines federal funding for National Heritage Areas in annual appropriations laws for Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies. National Heritage Areas can use federal funds for many purposes, including staffing, planning, and executing projects. The fiscal year 2021 appropriation for the National Park Service for assistance to heritage areas was \$23.9 million, including \$22.9 million for grantmaking and direct support and just over \$1 million for administrative support.

National Heritage Areas leverage an average of \$5.50 in public-private partnership funding for every \$1.00 of federal investment which aids in creating jobs, generating revenue for local governments, and sustaining local communities through revitalization and heritage tourism.

The Board of Directors for the Kansas Nebraska Heritage Area Partnership is currently working to establish non-profit status in both states and gather the funding necessary for a feasibility study. The feasibility study provides the U.S. Congress and the National Park Service with the information they need to determine if designation is suitable.

Supporters see National Heritage Areas as generally more desirable than other types of land conservation. They often prefer the designation of National Heritage Areas to other federally established designations, because the lands typically remain in nonfederal ownership and are administered locally.