Developing Cultural & Heritage Tourism in Albany

Prepared by JF Neidl and Mark Schaming for Albany's Cultural Heritage & Tourism (CHAT) Partnership
Drafted in November 2015; updated March 2018

VISION AND GOAL

The City of Albany's distinctively long history yields untold opportunities to develop a robust tourism market centered around the rich heritage and cultural resources of the city and region.

A coordinated heritage-tourism development initiative will open up much-needed economic development opportunities and—just as important—better develop a *sense of place* for visitors and *pride of place* for those who call Albany and the region home.

The best path forward for Albany in developing heritage and cultural tourism is to undertake projects guided by the goal of connecting visitors to experiences that highlight Albany's singular, deep roots in our national history. This approach has the best potential for making the biggest impact in 1) defining our city's identity, 2) creating the biggest draws for and deepest appreciation of Albany, and 3) framing the work in a focused way that will keep projects on track and yield results.

The purpose of this effort is to undertake projects that together make heritage and cultural tourism a highly visible, accessible, vibrant, and reliable economic and quality-of-life-enhancing force in the city of Albany.

DEVELOPING AN APPROACH TO GROWING HERITAGE & CULTURAL TOURISM IN ALBANY

Albany runs deep. Our city has a bottomless trove from which to draw stories that only we can tell as the oldest continuously settled city in the nation. Albany is, in so many ways, a city of beginnings, a city of firsts, and it is the historic and operational heart of the Capital Region and the state.

To be effective in communicating and marketing a cohesive, appealing Albany identity, we need to view the city through a lens that focuses on which stories we can best tell and deploy story-telling and place-making strategies that are both impactful and achievable.

Members of the CHAT Partnership identified 5 Themes under which to develop projects in Albany that connect us to the region and beyond. To arrive at these themes, we explored the following questions:

- What are Albany's best strengths?
- What's specific about here that's rare or nonexistent in other places?
- What happened here that is of national or broader historical and cultural significance?
- What is "authentically Albany"?

The 5 Themes are a distillation of Albany's singular strengths. No one else can tell these stories. These themes do not cover every base, but they provide a focused framework around which we can build projects and programming in a cohesive and compelling way.

Woven throughout each of these themes, as a strong thread that holds this all together, is the expression of our city's social history and with it our profound, historic diversity and a commitment to highlighting that diversity wherever possible. We are confident that this is the best, most progressive way to tell the fullest story and give the most complete and human picture of Albany.

5 CULTURAL HERITAGE & TOURISM THEMES

For now, and for working purposes, these themes are untitled. We imagine that naming the themes for marketing purposes might happen down the road, but we want to be sure that titles clarify, and don't obfuscate, the themes for public consumption.

I. Early Albany
Albany was one of the most important points of contact between Native Peoples and the New York's first European settlers, the Dutch. Downtown Albany is the location of the oldest commercial street in the country—State Street—and one of our nation's earliest gateways to the west. It was here that Colonial America's first economy, the beaver pelt trade, took root, seeding our nation's growth over four centuries—from small, scattered settlements to upstart colonies to an independent nation to a global economic and innovation superpower unlike anything else the world has ever seen. Albany has an important, and entirely singular, place in telling this national story.

Projects undertaken in this theme will illustrate the point of contact and the national and global implications of Albany as America's oldest continuously occupied European settlement and a uniquely, richly diverse place from its very origins.

II. Industry, Science, and Technology History
From the vitality of the beaver trade to its long tradition of brewing and distilling to the boom of nanotechnology, Albany has stories to tell about its important place in the development of industry, science, and technology in the United States and the world.

Projects undertaken in this theme will highlight, by subject, institution, or person, what happened here—whether it's the birthplace of modern electricity or the foundation of paleontology, to name just a few—and why each development was of lasting interest and significance.

III. Transportation History
At the heart of the Capital Region and northeastern United States, Albany is, and always has been, a natural transportation hub. With the convergence of the Hudson and Mohawk rivers, the Erie Canal, the Port of Albany, our proximity to major cities and rural areas, and a developed highway system, Albany is a place of powerful confluence.

Projects undertaken in this theme will highlight the long history of Albany and the region as a hub, the various waterways and avenues that define the region and the evolution of the methods by which humans have traversed them. From canoes to ships of all kinds, the *Clermont*, the birth of the U.S.

railroad, the D&H predominance, and the controversial creation and legacy of 787—there are so many ways to tell the story of the history of modern transportation with Albany as the stage.

IV. Architectural History

Buildings and streetscapes are the canvases on which our lives unfold, both behind the closed doors of our homes and in the public forum. Albany is home to some of the most unique architecture in the world, as well as a large stock of styles that are quintessentially American.

Projects undertaken in this theme will highlight buildings that are stylistically significant, as well as buildings and places that have stories to tell about what happened there. This will include historically significant events but also stories about everyday Albanians and how their lives were lived in these buildings and neighborhoods at different times throughout the city's history.

V. Political History

Albany was designated the state capital in 1797, but long before that its position as a convenient crossroads had established it as a meeting place for leaders and those who governed or sought to govern. The Albany Congress was held here in 1754, and from it drafted the Albany Plan of Union—the precursor to the U.S. Constitution and the first attempt to unite the colonies in an organized way.

Projects undertaken in this theme will tell stories about leadership, both elected and community, in Albany at the local, state, and national levels, and how what happened in Albany has shaped eras, laws, and lives.

PROJECTS AND PRODUCTS

Albany's cultural heritage and tourism projects fall into two categories—theme-fulfillment projects and projects that serve an administrative, supportive function in coordinating and advancing the overall heritage and cultural tourism effort. *Products*—whether signs, events, merchandise, or a success metric, etc.—are the results of *projects*.

Theme-fulfillment projects include, for example, development of the following products: interpretive signage, tours, exhibits and displays, merchandise, and events that illuminate the 5 Themes.

Administrative support projects include, for example, creation of a Visitors Center planning group; alignment of hours between participating sites; creation of a joint-ticket and/or multi-site "passport"; exploration of additional wayfinding infrastructure; creation of metrics to gauge visitor experience and means to act on collected input; brand development and management; and creation and administration of social media campaign.

Several of these project teams already exist and projects are underway in various stages.

Both theme-fulfillment and administrative projects will be developed by self-selecting project teams, the members of which will be drawn from the CHAT Partnership. Project teams may also include outside appropriate content/skill experts enlisted by partners as needed (e.g. historians, designers, artists, researchers).

<u>**SUMMARY**</u>

The CHAT Partnership cannot stress enough the importance of *focus* and *nimbleness* as distinguishing features in the dynamic of the group. Because of Albany's long history, it is tempting to try to tell every story, but we are confident that picking a few themes, at least to start with, is the best way to move forward in making projects real and creating an engaging, appealing, and marketable brand/identity for the city of Albany.