THE STORY STARTS HERE:

Why Museums Belong in the Travel Conversation

BY HEIDI SCHLAG

CAROL HIGHSMITH/UNSPLASH

The Philadelphia Mummers Parade has been drawing heritage travelers since 1901.

You thought you were just going out for lunch. But then you spotted a museum. An hour later, you're on your way to a winery down the road on the recommendation of the docent, a lifelong town resident with a gift for storytelling. Now you're sipping a local red and nibbling on fruit and cheese you purchased at the farmers' market you hadn't planned to stop at. The couple at the next table tells you about a cozy place for dinner and the free concert in the park that starts at six.

One lunch led to a whole day of discovery. And you may not realize it, but you just became a heritage traveler.

Who Are Heritage Travelers and Why Should Museums Care?

Although the tourism industry sees heritage travelers as a niche group, they are one of the most valuable segments in the travel economy. Defined broadly, a heritage traveler is someone who seeks out meaningful connections to the past when they travel. That might mean visiting a museum, walking through a historic district, attending a cultural festival, experiencing the flavors and customs unique to the region, or exploring an ancestral landscape.

According to the U.S. Cultural & Heritage Traveler Report:

- 78 percent of U.S. leisure travelers participate in cultural or heritage activities while traveling.
- These travelers spend more than the average tourist, averaging $1,480 per trip, compared to $915 for non-heritage travelers (adjusted for inflation).
- They're more likely to stay longer, visit multiple sites in a trip, and return to destinations that offer layered, authentic experiences.

Instead of just passing through, this audience is looking for depth. And that's where museums and other cultural institutions should play a central role.

Heritage travel can mean exploring an ancestral landscape.

TAQQY RB/UNSPLASH

Heritage Tourism is About Place

Heritage tourism isn't just about visiting attractions; tourists want to immerse themselves in a place. What makes one town feel entirely different from the next isn't the hotels or the retail centers; it's the layers of history, culture, people, and stories embedded in the everyday fabric of a community.

When we talk about "place," we're really talking about identity. A town's story is told not only through its museums and monuments, but through its small businesses, buildings, art, music, foodways, festivals, traditions, and the lived experiences of its people. Heritage travelers don't just want to see something—they want to feel it in the trails under their feet, taste it in the food, hear it in the music, and carry it with them after they leave.

That emotional, sensory connection is what sets one destination apart from another, and it's grounded in both tangible and intangible culture. Museums and cultural organizations are stewards of that culture. They help us understand not just *what happened*, but *who it happened to* and *why it mattered*. Unfortunately, these stories are often missing from tourism marketing.

We know museum staffers have a tough job, and tourism professionals face a different but equally complex task. They're tasked with defining what makes their community worth visiting. To boost hotel bookings, they often appeal to the widest possible audience by promising "something for everyone." But the result can be a watered-down version of a community's true identity.

Heritage travelers want to feel it ... and carry it with them after they leave.

MR GREAT HEART/UNSPLASH

The destination marketing organization (DMO) professionals I know genuinely want to embrace the quirky, the historic, and the deeply local stories that set their communities apart. But they don't always have access to them. It's rare for museum staff and tourism marketers to be in the same room, let alone engaged in ongoing conversation. Breaking down those silos is the way forward because when historians and marketers collaborate, great things happen. The storytellers bring the depth, the marketers bring the reach, and together, they create a visitor experience that's both memorable and meaningful.

TRENT V

Museums Must Step Into This Moment

To fully embrace the heritage tourism trend, museums should position themselves not only as stewards of the past, but as dynamic contributors to the travel experience.

This begins before visitors arrive, through digital tools and social media that spark curiosity and set the stage for deeper connection. On the ground, offer a welcoming, meaningful experience, but don't stop there. Recommending other local spots strengthens the visitor experience and roots your site within a broader story. When museums join forces with trails, parks, main streets, and other community assets, they help shape place-based itineraries that encourage visitors to explore, linger, and return.

This isn't just about boosting attendance or hitting visitor numbers; it's about shaping the identity of a destination through its authentic past. Museums don't need to reinvent themselves to be part of the travel experience; they just need the right allies to amplify what they already do best.

The infrastructure exists. The stories are ready. Now is the time to connect the dots.

What Heritage Travelers Want

By understanding what heritage travelers are truly seeking, museums can better tailor their experiences, in turn increasing their value as tourism partners. Many institutions are already experimenting with new interpretive approaches that emphasize participation, storytelling, and personal connection. These strategies don't just attract out-of-town tourists; they deepen engagement with local and regional audiences too. Whether you're a small museum welcoming a few guests at a time or a larger institution aiming to grow attendance, creating programs for visitors who crave history, culture, and authenticity is a smart investment.

STORIES

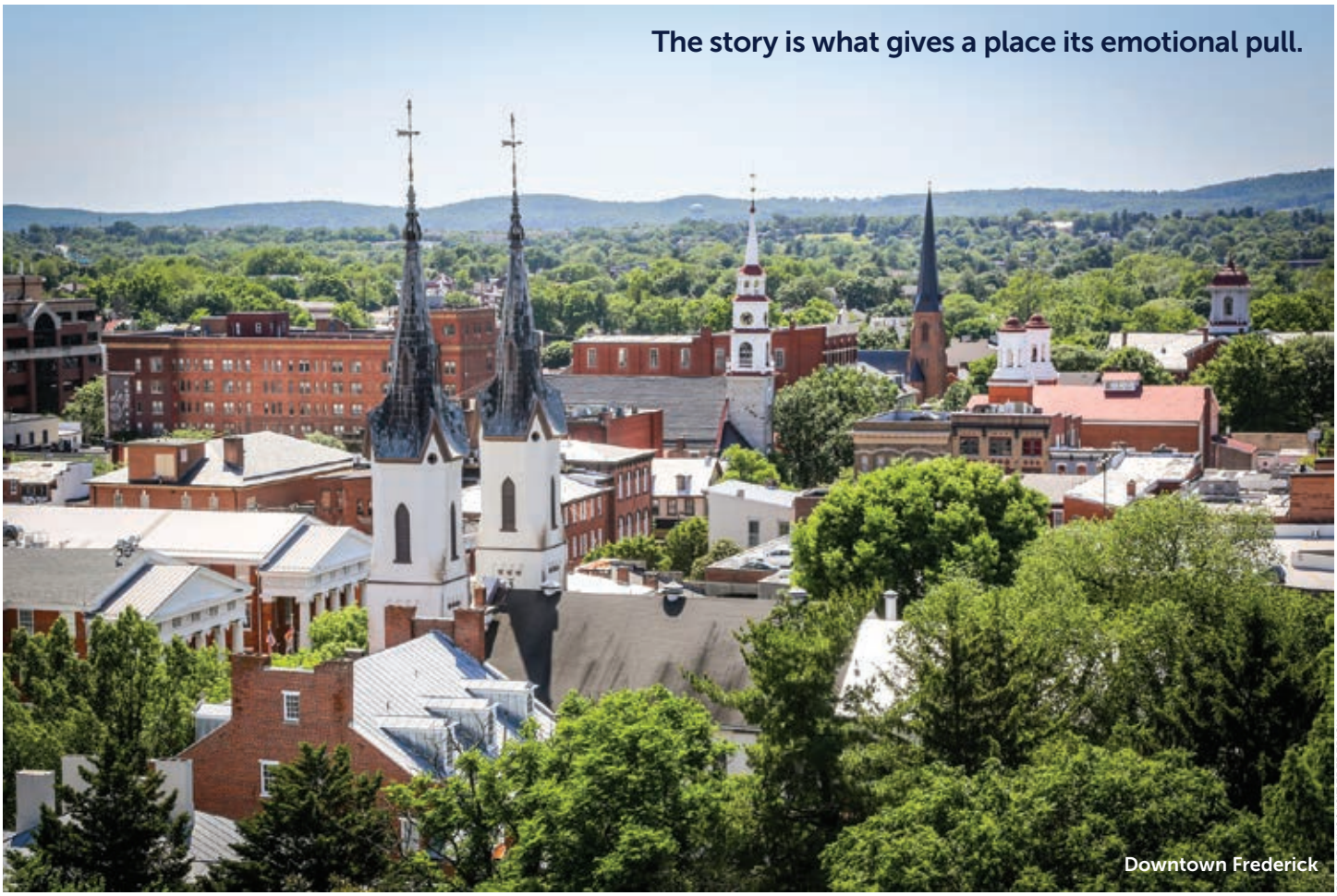
For heritage travelers, stories are the destination. Visitors are drawn to narratives grounded in real places and real people. Whether it's traced through architecture, oral history, or community memory, the story is what gives a place its emotional pull.

My hometown of Frederick, Maryland, is a perfect example. Just an hour west of Baltimore and an hour northwest of Washington, D.C., Frederick sits at the crossroads of American history. During the Civil War, it was a key transportation and medical hub, with churches converted into hospitals and streets lined with Union and Confederate troops. Today, its 50-block historic district is filled with beautifully preserved architecture reflecting more than two centuries of growth.

North of town, the Museum of the Iron Worker at Catoctin Furnace offers a powerful example of place-based storytelling. Rather than focusing solely on industry, the museum centers the lives of the enslaved African Americans who powered the furnace. Visitors encounter forensic facial reconstructions of two individuals buried nearby, clothing they stuffed between rafters for insulation, and personal memories preserved from the laborers who lived and worked there. These stories aren't abstract—they're personal, emotional, and rooted in the land that shaped them.

Creating programs for visitors who crave history, culture, and authenticity is a smart investment.

TUBA MERT BOSW/UNSPLASH



The story is what gives a place its emotional pull.

Downtown Frederick

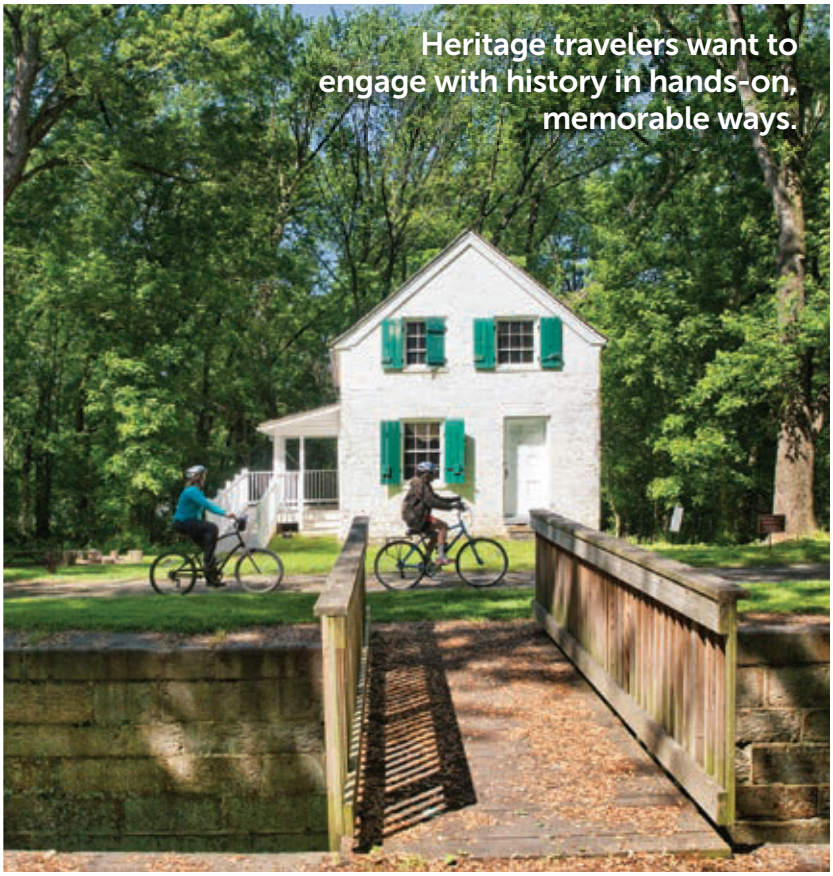
BILL ADKINS/VISIT FREDERICK

EXPERIENCES

Heritage travelers want to engage with history in hands-on, memorable ways. In southern Frederick County, they can hike or bike the scenic towpath of the historic C&O Canal, explore quaint canal towns, and learn about early American industry and transportation along what was once a vital trade route. Visitors can even spend the night in a restored lockhouse, experiencing life as a nineteenth-century lockkeeper. Surrounded by the sounds of the Potomac River, they gain a tangible connection to the past, with interpretive signage and a mobile app bringing the story to life.

VARIETY

Heritage travelers don't all move through a place the same way—some follow itineraries, while others let curiosity lead the way. In a place like Frederick, that could mean taking a guided cemetery tour or biking the Frederick History Loop, or it might include stumbling upon an improv group in an outdoor amphitheater, admiring the Community Bridge mural, and nabbing the last outdoor table at a local eatery. This style of travel is active and layered, with visitors piecing together their experience from multiple stops. For communities, it's a chance to showcase a range of assets tourists can discover at their own pace.



Heritage travelers want to engage with history in hands-on, memorable ways.

TURNER PHOTOGRAPHY/C&O CANAL TRUST

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LEARNING

Heritage travelers are learners at heart. Frederick visitors might discover that the town was ransomed during the Civil War or that bustling Carroll Creek Park is also a triumph in flood management. They can learn about bookbinding at the Frederick Book Arts Center or delve into Maryland's deep whiskey roots at McClintock Distilling. For these travelers, learning is part of the fun. It transforms a visit into a journey of discovery, where every corner holds the potential to reveal something unexpected.

AUTHENTICITY

What sets heritage travelers apart is their desire for authenticity. Instead of generic experiences, they want to engage with a community on its own terms. In many cases, this means finding the working parts of a community. Events like the Great Frederick Fair or the weekly Alive at Five concert series at Carroll Creek allow visitors to participate in local rhythms, not just observe them. This kind of everyday access to a place's identity is exactly what heritage travelers are looking for.

How to Bring Heritage Tourists to Your Own Community

The success of tourism in Frederick (1.9 million visitors in 2023, generating $539 million in revenue) is a result of decades of care taken by officials to preserve its historic buildings, support its heritage and culture, and fund tourism initiatives. The staff at Visit Frederick excels at showcasing Frederick's history through its "Hip and Historic" slogan. But not every community starts with those advantages. Many places have rich, meaningful histories that remain untapped because they've been forgotten, dismantled, or simply never woven into a shared identity. That doesn't mean the opportunity isn't there. It just means someone needs to help connect the dots. Here's how to begin:

1. Identify the Stories Only Your Community Can Tell

Start with your collections. What objects, sites, or people reveal stories only your town can tell? These don't have to be headline-making events; they might be about craftsmanship, innovation, immigration, agricultural traditions, or local cuisine. From there, look beyond your walls. Are there other organizations telling parts of that same story? Begin to build a network of places that, together, create a fuller narrative. Heritage travelers love connected experiences.

2. Build a Relationship with Your DMO

Get to know the people at your local or regional DMO. These organizations control messaging, media outreach, and often funding for tourism development. Many DMO staff are eager to tell better stories; they just need input from those who know the history. Set up a meeting. Invite them for a tour. Brainstorm together. Offer to help connect their work to heritage sites.

3. Involve Small Businesses, Artists, and Cultural Keepers

Heritage travel creates opportunities for an entire community to participate in storytelling. Collaborate with your partners to turn stories into themed itineraries or tours. When multiple establishments share different pieces of the same story, it becomes richer, more rooted in everyday life, and more memorable for visitors. Those throughlines create a sense of connection that lingers long after the trip ends.

4. Believe That Your History Has Value

Some communities don't invest in their past simply because no one has taken the time to name, research, and share what makes them unique. If you're starting from scratch, begin by listening: to the landscape, to longtime residents, to voices that haven't always been heard. These are the stories heritage travelers are most eager to hear.

DMOs: Your Partner in Storytelling

Many museums and cultural sites naturally prioritize local audiences. School groups, longtime residents, and history enthusiasts are the backbone of a museum's support system. They're your volunteers, advocates, and donors. They attend your events, bring their families, and help keep the lights on. But in today's funding environment, serving only your core

The 411 on DMOs

Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs)—also known as Convention and Visitors Bureaus (CVBs)—exist to promote a city, county, or state as a travel destination. Most are nonprofits or quasi-governmental agencies. Their mission is economic: get people to visit and spend money in the community. They do this through advertising, media outreach, websites, social media, visitor guides, and events. Their audiences include:

- Leisure travelers
- Tour operators and travel planners
- Journalists and influencers
- Meeting/event organizers
- Local residents looking for things to do

What Museums Can Do to Partner with Their DMO

Build the Relationship

Introduce yourself to your local or regional DMO. Invite them for a tour. Share your mission and goals. Offer to be a resource for content and expertise.

Submit Your Events

Most DMOs maintain free calendars, visitor guides, or event listings. Make sure your museum's programming is part of what they're promoting.

Share Photos and Video

DMOs need great visuals. Send them your best images (with captions and credits), and they may include your museum in blogs, ads, or social media.

Offer Expertise

Historians and curators can lend valuable context. Volunteer to fact-check local stories, contribute to blog posts, or be available for press inquiries.

Participate in Media Opportunities

DMOs often coordinate press tours, influencer visits, and travel writer itineraries. Being available can lead to valuable exposure.

What DMOs Can Do for Museums

- Promote your story to regional and national audiences
- Include your museum in media campaigns and influencer tours
- Help fund collaborative marketing through grants or co-ops
- Create themed itineraries that feature your site
- Connect you with other partners to strengthen your tourism ecosystem

base may not be enough. Audience development is a strategic focus of most museums, and as the statistics on heritage travelers demonstrate, history is quite marketable in the twenty-first century. These visitors are already looking for the kinds of meaningful encounters with history that museums are uniquely equipped to provide.

TIM MOSSHOLDER/UNSPLASH

Of course, reaching new audiences takes resources. With small staffs and tight budgets, many museums can't easily invest in marketing, especially not the kind of regional or national promotion that attracts heritage travelers. That's where your local or regional DMO can make a real difference. DMOs exist to promote the entire community, and they have tools most museums can't easily access on their own: professional media connections, advertising budgets, photography and design support, and an increasing focus on experiential, story-driven travel. In Frederick, the partnership between heritage organizations and Visit Frederick has shown just how powerful that collaboration can be. It's a model that proves how amplifying the stories you're already telling can drive both visibility and impact.

Of course, not every museum wants to attract busloads of tourists. A small local history museum might only be interested in out-of-town visitors for one or two major events a year, while a larger institution may be actively working to grow regional or national tourism. Both have a place in the DMO ecosystem.

It's also important to acknowledge that not all DMOs are equally invested in history or cultural storytelling. If your local organization hasn't yet embraced heritage as a tourism driver, you can help them get there. Start small: continue working with partners to develop itineraries, cross-promote events, and build collaborative products. The more cohesive your story becomes, the easier it is for a DMO to promote it. You can also frame heritage tourism in terms DMOs already understand: visitor demand, economic impact, and destination identity. Framing your site as something that adds value to the visitor experience helps DMOs see how it fits into their goals.

TOM BROWN/UNSPLASH

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