STATEMENT OF DISTINCTION: WHY IS IT GREEN?

-by Larry Lowenthal, National Park Service historian, retired

Several generations of residents of the Quinebaug and Shetucket Valleys have sensed that their region is distinctive, but were never able to define just what it was that set it apart. This was true on both sides of the state boundary that divides the area. What had been an interesting topic of dinnertime conversation took on new urgency in the early 1990s, when the effort was launched to designate the area as a National Heritage Corridor. In the process of seeking this federal recognition, local activists had to define and articulate what gave the region its special character.

Working with the National Park Service study team, local historians analyzed the factors that made the region stand out. The final report, with its historical summary, found that these qualities were not random or accidental, but reached back to the beginning of European settlement and had been reinforced throughout the history of the region. The distinctiveness that its residents felt instinctively is the cumulative product of the region's historical development. This means that the defining characteristics are deeply embedded, as if rooted in the land itself, and for this reason are especially valued.

The first and most basic reason for distinctiveness is the rugged nature of the land itself, broken by streams and wetlands that made access difficult. The rivers, navigable only as far as Norwich, did not provide a key to the interior. When English settlers arrived in New England in the 1620s and 1630s they meant to stay, as the name itself confirms. However, their numbers were few, the country was vast, and its wooded interior seemed forbidding; so the first colonies clung to the coast or pushed up the Connecticut River Valley. Natural meadows and land already cleared by the natives looked more attractive to English eyes than hills covered with gloomy forests. Ringed by settlement on three sides, the Quinebaug-Shetucket region remained largely wilderness for more than two generations longer.

The fierce struggle known as King Philip's War (1675-76), which turned into a war of extermination between whites and Indians, reinforced the idea of the hill country as a fearful, ominous place. The losses the Europeans had suffered in the war and the lingering recollection of its terrors kept them from moving into the largely deserted land for a full decade after the natives had been crushed.

Settlement, when it finally occurred, came with a rush. In the 50 years after 1686, the region was thoroughly carved up and organized, though still raw and thinly inhabited. This rapidity of settlement provides an important unifying factor in the region, since no town had enough of a start on the others to become dominant. Although the newcomers shared many social and intellectual values, they arrived from different directions, so that no single faction could take

charge. To some extent the settlers created a new identity out of the varied elements that flowed into the empty territory.

As the relentless thump of ax strokes, the pervasive smoke of burning stumps and the bumpy, twisting trails testified, genuine frontier conditions prevailed in the region at the start of the 18th Century. Writing of the "Quinebaug Country," Historian Bruce Daniels concludes that "the scanty evidence indicates that the settlers lived a chaotic life, staunchly resisted outside authority, and governed themselves in vigilante fashion." The brutal physical struggle to wrest a living from the rough land coarsened the people who dwelled there. While Puritan intolerance and the tendency to attribute personal misfortune to the judgment of God added to the harshness of the time, some residue of Puritan restraint kept conditions from sinking to the level of barbarism that characterized later frontiers.

In itself, the frontier experience was hardly unique to the Quinebaug-Shetucket hill country; the significance is that the region retained frontier characteristics fully two generations longer than the coastal and central zones. Due to its substantially later settlement, the persistence of frontier characteristics, the general lessening of Puritan fervor after the first generation, and the deviant influence of neighboring Rhode Island, new towns in the Quinebaug-Shetucket enjoyed looser control by the orthodox establishment than was the case in the older settlements. As towns proliferated, it simply became more difficult for the legislatures of both colonies to exercise the close supervision they had practiced with the first settlements.

Especially in the Connecticut portion, this later pattern of development, lack of cultural amenities, and relative poverty inclined residents of the Quinebaug-Shetucket to challenge the established economic, religious, and political order. The tendency to resist authority and go it alone predisposed the region to support the cause of independence during the American Revolution. It suffered great hardship during the long, grinding years of war, but seldom wavered in its devotion.

After the initial surge in the 1600s, New England attracted few immigrants compared to other portions of the country. This meant not only that the region remained more homogeneous, but that the same families remained in place for several generations. The limited land area could not support the regular increase of the agricultural population, so an enormous out-migration took place. Connecticut gained a reputation as the “nursery of men.″ But those who remained behind cultivated a deepening attachment to the land and concern for its protection—persistent qualities that became more critical as the years passed.

A mighty wave of industrialization spread over the region, beginning in the first decade of the 19th Century. In time, it brought profound changes to the landscape and to the lives of the inhabitants, but paradoxically it took a particular form that strengthened the distinctive character of the Quinebaug-Shetucket region. In its early stages, industry was synonymous with textiles, and it came out of Rhode Island (though Boston capitalists later invested in a couple of towns in the Massachusetts portion).

As an integral part of a larger economic entity centered in the Blackstone Valley, the Quinebaug-Shetucket region exemplified the "Rhode Island System" when an alternative form of

industrial organization known as the "Waltham System" arose and reached its fullest expression in the planned complex at Lowell, Massachusetts. The Rhode Island model was characterized by ownership by families or partners; small-scale mill villages; a less bureaucratic, less vertically integrated organization; employment of children; and encouragement or toleration of agriculture.

Although the region was thoroughly industrialized in the sense that nearly every suitable waterpower site had a textile mill, dense industrial development did not occur. Most of the land remained open, with the clustered mill villages, often in secluded locations, standing out as separate communities. Perhaps because most of the owners lived elsewhere and erected their ostentatious mansions and public buildings in those places, no dominant industrial center emerged in the Quinebaug-Shetucket region.

Instead, the products of the region, whether industrial or agricultural, flowed outward to the bustling mid-size cities on the periphery—Worcester, Providence, and Hartford. Residents gravitated in those directions to conduct much of their business and cultural activities. When transportation improvements--first turnpikes, then railroads--arrived, they reinforced these long-standing centrifugal tendencies. During the short-lived canal boom, a Quinebaug Canal had been chartered, which would have extended the length of the valley from Norwich into Massachusetts, feeding into the Chicopee River. It might have unified the valley, as the Blackstone Canal did in the adjacent valley; but practical obstacles proved overwhelming and the Quinebaug-Shetucket region continued to be pulled in divergent directions.

The proximity of Norwich and New London was one of those unplanned, illogical factors that had great influence on future development. In contrast to other ports along the Connecticut coast, these two were located in such a way that they became competitive. Norwich tends to cut off what would normally have been the hinterland of New London. As a result New London was forced to turn outward and became a center of the whaling industry, while Norwich captured much of the interior. In another sense, however, the interior highlands were blocked from what would have been their natural shoreline, reinforcing the feeling of being an island. As such it remains—a green island by day and by night a soothingly dark island amid the blazing lights of the megalopolis.

The rush of industrialization created the familiar hill/mill dichotomy in the region. While factory villages sprang up at suitable waterpower sites in the valleys, the hilltop communities remained rural and bucolic. Prompted by the lingering Puritan urge toward self-improvement, many of them beautified the town commons that now appear so charming and emblematic of the region.

Different attitudes and interests in the two types of community often made it difficult for them to co-exist within the same town. Despite these political splits, their economic interests were generally complementary, as the mill villages provided a ready market for agricultural products. By many measures, farming declined in the region after 1850; certainly its share of the population and total economic production shrank. But even as much former farmland returned to forest, the remaining farms, continuing a trend that began early in the 19th Century, became more scientific and market-oriented. Shaken by the steady procession of wagons to the West, the

surviving farmers used their Yankee ingenuity to become “smarter” —ready to try more efficient methods to serve specialized markets.

While the agricultural sector in the overall economy declined steadily, the actual practice of agriculture showed considerable resiliency in filling the needs of a changing market. Even after many Yankee farmers left the land, immigrants, notably the Poles, earned a reputation for reviving wornout farms by sheer hard work. Textiles and shoe-making, industries that gave the region a livelihood and an identity for more than a hundred years, have vanished beyond hope of recovery; but the land remains, much of it still open. This resource, and the less tangible resource of hard-earned skill at surviving under adverse conditions, may be the region’s greatest assets in the future.

Finally, in the late 20th Century, the failure to complete an interstate highway between Hartford and Providence may have been the most important factor in preserving the character of the Quinebaug-Shetucket region. By then, years of experience left no doubt as to what the coming of such a highway would do to the cherished lifestyle, and many residents battled fiercely to repel the invasion. In the end, aided by the concerns of Rhode Island, they succeeded--one of the rare examples of stopping an interstate juggernaut.

Most of the factors that preserved the individuality of the Quinebaug-Shetucket region were things that did not happen. A positive event of lasting importance was the establishment of the National Heritage Corridor in 1994. For the first time in its history, the region had a unifying name. Even the Indians who inhabited the territory were divided into several tribes and, although they obviously gave names to the rivers and other features, apparently did not have a name for the region as a whole. Similarly, although some tourists had discovered the Quinebaug-Shetucket region by the late 19th Century, the area had never made a sustained effort to develop a tourist industry. Perhaps that was due to the lack of any single overwhelming attribute such as Newport's sea breezes or the bracing air of the White Mountains. With the Heritage Corridor in place, a unified name and organizational entity made it possible at last to begin a comprehensive inventory of the region, identifying and protecting the resources and attributes that made it a special place.

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