

The Genesee Valley: A Canvas for Preservation

by Nicole Manapol

Following over a decade of revitalization efforts that transformed their historic main street districts, municipal and community leaders in Perry, Mount Morris, and Geneseo came together in 2016 to establish the Letchworth Gateway Villages (LGV) initiative. LGV is a cross-county collaboration initially formed to answer the question, “What’s next for our downtowns?”

Four years on, LGV has grown from a three-village municipal consortium into a regional network of 70 partners working across the five-county Genesee Valley Region. This group is working now to develop the region’s potential as an outdoor recreation and heritage tourism destination as part of the USDA’s Rural Economic Development Innovation (REDI) initiative.

Fueling this momentum have been a multitude of forces. They include large-scale investments by federal, state, and private foundations to develop long-distance trail systems and blueways; growing interest in the outdoor recreation economy as a rural development strategy; and increasing consumer demand for time out in nature.

However, the real force behind this momentum remains the people who have worked for decades to preserve the heritage assets that define the Genesee Valley. This dedicated group believes that things like our historic main streets, canalways, railroads, farmland, rivers, and lakes are the keys to our economic future and success. This is the network that is reviving the Genesee Valley’s regional identity and transforming our heritage assets into new economic possibilities.

The Catalysts

LGV was a natural outgrowth of over a decade of downtown revitalization efforts championed by community organizations like the Perry Main Street Association and Mount Morris Partners for Progress, and individuals like Redhook Developer Greg O’Connell, Livingston County Downtown Partnership Coordinator Louise Wadsworth, and Perry Mayor and architect Rick Hauser. These investments not only transformed the built environments on the villages’ historic main streets, but served as a catalyst for bringing together businesses, residents, and municipal leaders to re-imagine the economic future of their communities.

Voted the #1 U.S. state park in 2015 and attracting nearly one million visitors per year to the region, Letchworth provided an important focal point for the next phase of these communities’ economic development. So in 2016, the Letchworth Gateway Villages Municipal Consortium was



Logo by Sean Daly.

established to strengthen the connection between the park and the surrounding main street districts.

Alongside LGV were other regional collaborations working to preserve and repurpose key heritage assets

in the Genesee Valley into a system of trails and blueways that would lay the foundation for a recreation-based economy. These included efforts to establish the Genesee Valley Greenway State Park, a public, multi-use trail and natural greenway corridor along the abandoned Genesee Valley Canal and its successor, the Pennsylvania Railroad; and the Genesee River Wilds, an environmentally sustainable system of 11 nature parks providing recreational access to the Genesee River in Allegany, Wyoming, and Livingston Counties. Key groups involved in making these two initiatives a reality included: the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), the Genesee Valley Conservancy, the Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway, and the Genesee River Wilds Association.

Reviving a Regional Identity

In 2018, these groups converged when LGV initiated a creative placemaking process using National Geographic’s Geotourism MapGuide Program, a tool to help communities work together to create a shared identity and market their destination in a way that promotes sustainable development. One of the outcomes from this process was the realization amongst stakeholders that while Letchworth State Park is an important anchor and draw for the region, the destination identity that emerged through the mapping process aligned more strongly with the Genesee Valley.

Building a Genesee Valley Rural Development Network

In 2019 LGV and this same network of partners were awarded two years of planning technical assistance through the USDA’s Rural Economic Development Innovation (REDI) initiative. Since October, the group has been working on a regional strategy to bolster the Genesee Valley’s potential as an outdoor recreation and heritage tourism destination.

Composed of a diverse mix of municipalities, main street groups, local chambers of commerce, volunteer organizations, park managers, education institutions, preservation organizations, county planning and economic development offices, artists, and entrepreneurs, the network is bound together by a shared belief that the Genesee Valley’s unique natural, cultural, and heritage assets are the key to advancing a sustainable, 21st century rural economy.



2019 REDI Kick-off Workshop, Humphrey Nature Center at Letchworth State Park. Photo: Katie Sutor



Friends of Genesee Valley Annual Meeting 2019, Genesee Valley Greenway trail in Belfast. Photo: Nicole Manapol

The Power of Partnerships

Groups that would not normally be in the same room are now meeting, identifying their concerns, and finding that others can help. At the group's last physical convening in February at the historic Palmer Opera House in Cuba, Mayor Michelle Miller, commented, "the REDI initiative is a great opportunity to connect with other leadership from across the region developing creative solutions to rural development challenges. Connecting with others' expertise and enthusiasm fuels our efforts and effectiveness."

Joan Schumaker, President of the Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway agrees: "The technical assistance and support provided through LGV and REDI is allowing the Friends to achieve goals we could not have accomplished alone."

For Allen Kerkeslager, one of the founders of the Genesee River Wilds and Triple Divide Trail System, "[REDI] is the first initiative I've seen in our area that is connecting rural communities across the Genesee Valley watershed, focused explicitly on the rural world view and elevating our rural potential. It's refreshing."

Kristine Uribe, State Park Manager of the Genesee Valley Greenway, points to the opportunity for meaningful dialogue amongst groups that don't always have the chance to interact: "It encourages collaboration, sparks inspiration, and opens the path to meaningful conversation amongst community

members, stakeholders, entrepreneurs, municipalities, and state/federal agencies."

Some of these meaningful conversations are leading to collaborative solutions that stand to impact the region for years to come. One example is the current effort between The Landmark Society, Genesee Country Village & Museum, Perry Main Street Association (PMSA), SUNY Geneseo, and local preservation tradespeople to establish a traditional trades program. This program would address the critical shortage of professional tradespeople trained in the art of preservation work. "When The Landmark Society spotlighted challenges with the Traditional Trades, it really resonated—not having a workforce equipped to preserve the Genesee Valley's heritage assets presents significant challenges for growing a heritage tourism economy," remarked PMSA Chair Sandy Schneible. "It's exciting to see how quickly potential solutions can emerge when we work together. This is the value of this network."



Stakeholder Learning Journey to the Pennsylvania Wilds in 2018. Photo: Conrad Baker

Although the USDA REDI Planning process is scheduled to conclude at the end of 2020, the Genesee Valley network will continue working together to activate the priorities identified during the planning process. In fact, the group has applied for and already won funding to develop a trail mapping and management tool and trail town destination training program. The training program will help additional municipalities along the Genesee Valley corridor establish their communities as hospitality hubs and gateways to the region's nature and outdoor recreation assets. Additionally, the Genesee Valley Map Guide project, ExploreGeneseeValley.com, continues to provide a platform for stakeholders to tell the Genesee Valley's unique story of place, helping connect travelers with the many attractions, businesses, and activities through the voices of the people that live here.

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