



# Heritage Tourism In Nebraska

Nebraska State Historical Society  
Nebraska Department of Economic Development

*A report based on a 2011 study of heritage tourism in Nebraska by the UNL  
Bureau of Business Research and the National Trust for Historic Preservation*

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## “Heritage tourism”

is defined as the experience of visiting museums and historic sites. To more and more travelers it is getting a sense of “real” history. For others, it is an opportunity to explore Nebraska through its back roads and byways. Nebraska’s heritage attractions tell important stories about the state—stories that can only be experienced firsthand, thus creating a compelling incentive to choose the Cornhusker State as a travel destination. And heritage tourism allows Nebraskans to share their rich history and culture with others.

*Stories are interesting.* History is an experience woven out of actual stories of people and places making the history of Nebraska fascinating and well worth discovering. When this is added to the interest that people have in travel—an activity in which they generally meet new people, visit new places, and experience new history—a range of activities collectively called “heritage tourism” becomes a desirable social and economic force.

To better document and understand the benefits of heritage tourism, the Nebraska State Historical Society and the Nebraska Department of Economic Development commissioned the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Bureau of Business Research and the National Trust for Historic Preservation to conduct a comprehensive look at heritage tourism in the state. This effort also examined a 2007 study on the economic benefits of historic preservation in Nebraska, which was conducted by Rutgers University and the UNL Bureau of Business Research.

Tourism, the third-largest earner of revenue from outside the state, is a significant component of Nebraska’s economy. Heritage tourism is already an important element of the travel and tourism industry in Nebraska. Visiting historic sites and museums is one of the top reasons for pleasure travel. The study documented an annual economic impact as follows.

### *Heritage tourism:*

- *Generates more than \$196 million.*
- *Supports over 3,010 jobs in the state.*
- *Results in \$16.4 million in state and local tax revenue.*

That said, heritage tourism can be an even more important economic driver for the people of Nebraska. This summary of the 2011 study lays out the basics.

- Institutions that are critical to the growth of heritage tourism.
- Themes of the past that interpret Nebraska history to the heritage traveler.
- Examples of heritage tourism in Nebraska.
- Keys to the growth of this industry with advantages for communities across the state.

## *Nebraska’s* HISTORIC SITES AND MUSEUMS SUPPORT HERITAGE TOURISM

*Historic sites and museums are the backbone of Nebraska’s heritage tourism according to the 2011 study.*

Large and small, they provide engaging information about local, state, and national history.

Nebraska has:

- *More than 220 history museums and historical attractions.*
- *Nearly 500 historical markers that orient the traveler to historic places and events.*

*From the 2007 study on the economic impacts of historic preservation:*

- *Nebraska historic sites and museums attract about 3 million visitors annually.*
- *38.5 percent of these visitors come from outside the state.*

*These places provide the necessary “infrastructure” for a sustainable network of tourist attractions and visitor services.*



RICK NEIBEL

*Historical markers tell of people, places, and events.*



## Nebraska's HERITAGE ATTRACTS TOURISTS

The 2007 study of historic preservation's economic impact in Nebraska indicated that heritage tourists are a lucrative market due to some key demographics and travel patterns.

### *Heritage tourists:*

- Take 50 percent longer trips than other travelers, meaning more revenue left in the state during their visit.
- Travel longer distances and in larger groups.
- Spend nearly two and one-half times more than other travelers per overnight stay.
- Are likely to earn higher incomes, which can translate into more money spent on travel.
- Are more likely to hold postgraduate degrees, which means that they seek out authentic heritage tourism experiences.

*Heritage tourism is a solid contributor to Nebraska's tourism industry—and there is tremendous potential to grow its economic impact.*



J. NABB

## Nebraska's HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAMS ENCOURAGE THE ENHANCEMENT OF HISTORIC PLACES

More than 1,000 Nebraska properties are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. These represent some of the state's most significant examples of architecture, as well as historical events and persons. Some are used as museums or include historical interpretation, making them attractive to the heritage tourist. Historic districts can provide the backdrop for special events and other offerings. Publicly owned buildings, such as courthouses, can draw tourists, and businesses housed in historic places can provide attractive places to stay or shop.

From surveys of historic places representing every county of the state, the Nebraska State Historical Society has identified more than 75,000 properties worthy of note. While this provides only a cross section of Nebraska history and architecture, surveys indicate that there are many, many more opportunities for historic preservation.

Preserving these places makes a rich historic context available to the heritage traveler.

*The Johnson County Courthouse in Tecumseh is the centerpiece of the community's architecturally rich downtown historic square.*



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## Nebraska's HERITAGE TOURISM COMPLEMENTS OTHER TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

*Heritage tourism complements  
other types of visitation, including:*

- Ecotourism featuring Nebraska's varied ecology and natural attractions.
- Agritourism featuring agricultural attractions and experiences, such as visiting working farms.
- Cultural tourism that includes art museums and theaters.
- Recreation and outdoor activities, such as hiking, camping, golf, and boating. A recent survey of outdoor recreational travelers conducted by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission ranked visitation to historical attractions in the top seven activities, with 57.4 percent visiting historical attractions.

When combined with these markets, the impact of heritage tourism is multiplied greatly.

*“Nature, culture and history are  
indelible. You can't erase them.  
No one else can take them.”*

*Ted Eubanks, certified interpretive planner,  
2010 Governor's Agri/Eco-Tourism Workshop, Kearney*

*Since 1921 the Burwell Rodeo has attracted  
travelers wanting to experience authentic Western events.*



MICHAEL FORSBERG



## Nebraska's

### SUCCESSFUL AND SUSTAINABLE HERITAGE TOURISM: Principles and Selected Examples of Best Practices\*

**Collaboration.** Heritage tourism requires effective partnerships to grow visitation. Current Nebraska examples include:

- **Shannon Trail.** Sixteen communities and the Santee Sioux and Ponca Tribes in northeast Nebraska came together to create a 240-mile “trail” interpreting a true story of one member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. It features a website, sixteen interpretive signs, geocaching, and contests for travelers.
- **Nebraska Byways.** Coalitions representing nine highways offer travelers opportunities to get off the Interstate and explore Nebraska's less-traveled roads.
- **Platte Valley Attractions (PVA).** This coalition brings together state recreation areas, historic sites, museums, and other public and private attractions in the North Platte River valley of the Panhandle.
- **Stuhr Museum and Hastings Museum.** These museums collaborate by offering joint memberships and promotion.



RICK NEIBEL

*A caravan of vintage automobiles travel the old Lincoln Highway near Elkhorn, part of the Lincoln Highway Scenic & Historic Byway.*

## Finding the fit between the community

*and tourism.* Heritage tourism makes a community a better place to live as well as a better place to visit. Recognizing local history and sharing it with others benefits both the community and its visitors. Historic districts and well-preserved historic places give travelers enjoyable insights to local history. Current Nebraska examples include:

- **Heritage Nebraska/Main Street program.** “Main street” revitalization attracts business and makes historic downtowns attractive to visitors.
- **Nebraska City Alliance.** This organization promotes local attractions, tourism, commerce, and collaborates with the media.
- **Old Market, Omaha.** Rehabilitation of historic buildings adds to the exciting entertainment and shopping experiences, making it a popular tourist attraction.
- **Willa Cather Historic Sites, Red Cloud.** Historic districts and sites interpret the life and writings of this great Nebraska author.
- **Brownville.** The village, founded in 1856, offers a well-rounded tourist experience in its historic district, which houses shops, events, theatrical venues, museums, and the arts.

*Historic Brownville's offerings include its events.*



E BOUVIER

*Omaha's historic Old Market is one of the city's top attractions.*



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## *Making sites and programs come alive.*

Look for ways to make visitor experiences exciting, engaging, and interactive. Communities celebrate their history and local culture with festivals. “Living history” and demonstrations of community traditions give the visitor experiences not found elsewhere. Others link their attractions with others for a well-rounded travel experience. Current Nebraska examples include:

- **River City History Tours.** A program of Omaha’s Durham Museum encourages visitors to tour Omaha in a “museum without walls.”
- **Fort Atkinson State Historical Park.** Volunteers present living history enactments reflecting military life at this 1820s outpost.
- **Nebraska Chautauqua.** An annual Chautauqua supported by the Nebraska Humanities Council provides opportunities for communities to provide historical renditions, educational programming, and entertainment.
- **Farm and Ranch Museum, Gering.** In addition to its extensive collection relating to agricultural history, the museum also hosts demonstrations of early agricultural practices.
- **Western Trails Scenic and Historic Byway.** Highway 26/92 in the Nebraska Panhandle links important sites related to the early routes of Western migration, including Scotts Bluff National Monument and Chimney Rock National Historic Site.

## *Focusing on quality and authenticity.*

Today’s heritage traveler is more sophisticated and expects a high level of quality and an authentic experience. Current Nebraska examples include:

- **Heartland Museum of Military Vehicles in Lexington.** This museum has a defined theme focusing on its extensive collection of operational vehicles.
- **Knight Museum and Sandhills Center, Alliance.** Visitors are presented with a unique focus on the Sandhills and regional history.
- **Fort Robinson State Historical Park and Museum, Crawford.** Buildings from the frontier era through the twentieth century bring visitors close to military life in different eras along with recreation and other activities.
- **Nebraska History Museum, Lincoln.** With the state’s largest and most wide-ranging collection of Nebraska artifacts, the museum tells the story of Nebraska through themed exhibits and ongoing programs.
- **Museum of the Fur Trade, Chadron.** This museum and the historic Bordeaux trading post tell the story of the northwestern fur industry.

*“Nebraska played a pivotal role in the nation’s history, from the pioneer trails to the railroads to the first transcontinental highways. While we may sometimes take its sturdy brick buildings, grain elevators and windmills for granted, visitors from different cities and climates find them fascinating.”*

Scottsbluff Star-Herald,  
September 28, 2007



MICHAEL FORSBERG



*America’s western settlement  
is interpreted at Homestead  
National Monument near Beatrice.*

*Fort Atkinson comes alive with volunteers who  
pose in period clothing and reenact history.*



## *Preserve and protect irreplaceable resources.*

Historic places cannot be replaced if they are lost. Fortunately, rehabilitation and restoration has been successful in many cases, adding to the heritage tourism network. And in turn, travel dollars provide for restoration, maintenance, and operations of these museums and historic sites. Current Nebraska examples include:

- **Genoa Indian School.** Funds were raised to preserve a key historic building at the former school as a museum offering Native American cultural interpretation.
- **Fairview, Lincoln.** After an extensive restoration by Bryan LGH Hospital, the former home of prominent national political leader William Jennings Bryan is now home to a museum and modern offices.
- **Broken Arrow Wilderness, Fullerton.** This historic camp hosts outings and activities.
- **Midwest Theater, Scottsbluff.** Two grants from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development have assisted local citizens in opening this historic theater for movies and live performances.
- **Joslyn Castle, Omaha.** One of Nebraska's grand homes is preserved by the Joslyn Castle Trust, which provides tours and special events.

*The historic Midwest Theater in Scottsbluff offers entertainment, which complements visitation to the area for heritage tourists.*



J. NABB



MICHAEL FORSBERG

*Fort Robinson State Park near Crawford provides both historical and recreational experiences.*



## Nebraska's HERITAGE TOURISM THEMES: Sharing Nebraska's Stories

*The National Association for Interpretation*, of Fort Collins, Colorado, a center founded on interpreting natural and cultural heritage resources through museums and other sites, defines a theme as “a central idea that links individual stories together.” Five historical themes are basic to Nebraska. Together, they represent the broad, panoramic history of the state as well as the range of heritage attractions that tell this history.

### *Nebraska's Land and Place*

Nebraska has been a home for many peoples, who have modified the land and have been influenced by it. The state extends west from the Missouri River across the stream-bisected prairies to the high plains. It includes the vast region known as the Sandhills, below which lies the immense Ogallala Aquifer, whose water literally means life to much of the state. In terms of flora and fauna, Nebraska is a transition zone between eastern and western species, with some areas, such as the lower Niobrara River Valley, showing remarkable ecological diversity.

The first people arrived in what is now Nebraska at least 12,000 years ago. They were nomadic hunters and gatherers; in later years people built permanent villages and supplemented their diet with small-scale horticulture. Today we know Nebraska's historic tribal groups as the



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*The Mayhew Cabin is associated with African-Americans who travelled the Underground Railroad in their flight from slavery.*

Kiowa, Plains Apache, Ponca, Omaha, Oto-Missouria, and Pawnee. Other peoples from neighboring areas also ranged into Nebraska including Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Crow, Iowa, and Comanche.

### *The Clash of Cultures*

Nebraska's Native American societies were encountered by European explorers and traders as early as the 1700s. Nebraska officially opened to Euro-American settlement with its establishment as a U.S. territory in 1854. Some of the newcomers coexisted with these tribes; others were determined to possess the land itself. Wars and other government policies contributed to Native Americans' dispossession and removal to reservations. Today the Omaha, the Santee Sioux, the Winnebago (Ho-Chunk), and the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska are modern, federally recognized tribes that maintain tribal cultures in the state.

*“Our Nebraska history, in museums, historic parks and sites, buildings, and both rural and urban districts, attracts tourists. Their experience with our pasts creates memories and opportunities for sharing Nebraska stories across America and around the world thus producing future benefits for the Cornhusker State.”*

*Michael J. Smith, Director/State Historic Preservation Officer  
Nebraska State Historical Society*



J. NABB

*Native Americans share their culture at powwows.*



## *America Moves West*

Nebraska became an American path of travel. The Missouri River was a corridor of exploration and commerce, and the broad Platte River valley proved to be a natural highway for fur traders and later for emigrants on the California, Oregon, and Mormon trails. New generations of transportation followed the Platte: the short-lived Pony Express (1860-61), the transcontinental railroad, which linked the nation in 1869, the Lincoln Highway (1913), and today's Interstate 80.

## *Living on the Great Plains*

Attracted by the railroad and the Homestead Act, settlers poured into Nebraska during the second half of the nineteenth century. Drovers ran herds of Texas cattle north to Nebraska and the railroads carried the animals to markets in the east. Settlers brought in their own cattle to feed on the prairie grasses, replacing the native bison that were hunted to near extinction. Cattle ranching soon became a major industry in the state.

Farmers also arrived and although challenged by drought, grasshopper plagues, and blizzards found permanent homes. They also practiced dry land farming techniques for corn and wheat. Irrigation systems were under development by 1900, and today much of the state's farmland is watered by center-pivot systems.

Towns grew up along the railroads, bringing businesses, culture, educational and social institutions, industries and architecture. And while Nebraska is not primarily an industrial state, agriculture led to stockyards, meat-processing plants, and milling, and public power harnessed the state's wealth of its waterways. Today, Nebraska has many diversified industries.

## *Chimney Rock near Bayard witnessed America's westward movement.*



J. NABB

## *The Faces of Nebraska*

Some Nebraskans have earned their place in history for personal achievement; others, as members of groups that have shaped the state's culture. In the case of Native Americans—the first Nebraskans—that culture is tied to the land itself. Other immigrant groups came seeking a better future, lured by land and agricultural and business prospects. They brought with them customs, traditions, and religions and still celebrate their roots that tie them to their ancestral lands, or—in the case of Native Americans—to Nebraska itself. Today, Nebraskans share this diversity with newly arrived groups, such as Eastern Europeans, Central and South Americans, Asians, Africans, and those from Arabic nations.



MICHAEL FORSBERG



G RYAN

*The Stuhr Museum in Grand Island recreates a town of the prairie pioneer period.*

*The well-preserved Dowse house in Custer County is constructed of native sod and is open to the public.*



*Heritage tourism showcases the people and places that defined both Nebraska history and continue to shape our identity.*



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*Historic South Omaha is rich in ethnic diversity.*

*Arbor Lodge in Nebraska City was once home to J. Sterling Morton, who earned a place in history as the founder of Arbor Day.*



J. NABB

*The George W. Norris House in McCook was home to this prominent United States Senator.*



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# Nebraska's HERITAGE TOURISM PLAN

*Selected recommendations* to create a growing heritage tourism industry for Nebraska.

*Use geography and historical themes to promote heritage tourism.*

- **Nebraska Travel Guide.** Ensure that the guide clearly conveys the statewide heritage themes to provide guidance for meaningful heritage travel experiences.
- **Nebraska Welcome Centers.** Seek out opportunities to share the five statewide heritage themes with visitors.
- **“Visit Nebraska” website.** Look at opportunities to provide visitors with the ability to create customized online itineraries using heritage site information and GPS coordinates.
- **Interstate 80.** Given the large concentration of heritage attractions close to the Interstate, develop an “I-80 Adventures” travel promotion, telling travelers about heritage attractions that can be found off each Interstate exit.
- **“Nebraska Passport.”** Continue efforts to promote in-state travel through this program. Seek to expand the number of heritage attractions participating.

*“Heritage Tourism is traveling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present. It includes irreplaceable historic, cultural and natural resources.”*

*National Trust for Historic Preservation*



RICK WEBEL

*The Great Platte River Archway near Kearney is a major tourist stop on Interstate 80.*



ERIK STENBAKKEN



## *Assist Nebraska heritage attractions to reach their full potential.*

- Identify heritage attractions as a funding priority in existing grant programs.
- Tap into county lodging taxes as a funding source for heritage tourism.
- Utilize the Division of Travel and Tourism’s “Tourism Assessment Resource Growth Evaluation Team” (TARGET) to provide guidance and capacity building for communities and heritage attractions.

- Use the Nebraska Historic Resource Survey and Inventory, administered by the Nebraska State Historical Society, to provide guidance and heritage tourism planning assistance at the county level.
- Strengthen the Nebraska Museums Association (NMA) and its ability to build leadership and capacity for Nebraska’s museums.
- Create an online heritage tourism “toolkit” to promote existing and new tourism resources, including heritage tourism best practices.



*The Knight Museum in Alliance offers quality exhibits telling the story of the Sandhills.*

## *Collaborate in linking Nebraska’s heritage into larger visitors’ experiences.*

- Build capacity for promoting heritage tourism through the Nebraska Byways program.
- Develop and expand regional heritage tourism partnerships.
- Seek opportunities to create new regional thematic corridors or trails.
- Position Nebraska’s heritage facilities as “gateways” to nearby thematic and/or geographically connected heritage experiences.
- Look at potential opportunities to collectively market Nebraska’s heritage tourism experiences using a thematic focus.

## *Improve signage and way-finding.*

- Collaborate with the Nebraska Department of Roads to investigate opportunities to expand the number of museums and attractions signs on highway rights-of-way.
- To complement signage, explore opportunities to use technology as a way-finding tool by ensuring that all of Nebraska’s heritage attractions are registered and appear when travelers use GPS devices and cell phone downloads.
- Create a web-based map of Nebraska’s historical markers.



*The Broken Arrow Wilderness, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, hosts family events as well as other activities.*





*The Durham Museum in Omaha features not only superb Art Deco architecture and informative exhibits, but uses ways to outreach by hosting a “Teacher’s Night.”*

### *Enable Nebraskans to be quality ambassadors for their State’s heritage.*

- The VFR (visiting friends and relatives) market is one of the largest visitor segments. Many Nebraskans do not always tout their historical attractions when friends and family come to visit. One way is to expand and improve efforts to cultivate and train the current and next generation of “ambassadors.”
- Create a “Nebraska Heritage Attractions School Program Directory” for Nebraska teachers, listing school programs offered at heritage attractions.
- Seek out opportunities to expand the history-based “Nebraska Teachers’ Institute” summer teacher training program statewide.

### *Enlist people to help support heritage tourism and make them aware of existing and new heritage tourism resources.*

- Create a permanent Nebraska Heritage Tourism Advisory Committee within the Nebraska Division of Travel and Tourism to help oversee the implementation of this plan’s recommendations.
- Establish a statewide conference to promote opportunities in heritage tourism.
- Identify other state, regional, and local conferences to include sessions on heritage tourism.

- Sponsor regional heritage tourism workshops.
- Develop a fact sheet on heritage tourism and its impacts for broad distribution.
- Include representation by the Nebraska State Historical Society on the Nebraska Travel and Tourism Advisory Committee.
- Work with regional tourism organizations and with destination marketing organizations (DMOs) such as convention and visitor bureaus to sponsor “familiarization” tours in different regions of the state.

### *Create a statewide Nebraska Heritage Tourism program.*

- Position the Nebraska Division of Travel and Tourism as the lead agency for heritage tourism marketing and the Nebraska State Historical Society as the lead agency for heritage tourism development efforts at the state level.
- Create a staffed statewide heritage tourism program with sufficient funding to coordinate the implementation and recommendations of this plan.
- Research additional funding opportunities for heritage tourism at the local, regional and state level.



## *Partners in Heritage Tourism*

Nebraska Department of Economic Development, Division of Travel and Tourism

Nebraska State Historical Society

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Nebraska Humanities Council

Heritage Nebraska

Nebraska Museums Association

Community Chambers of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureaus

Public Officials

*Each year, the Nebraska State Capitol hosts thousands of students and tourists, including many international visitors.*



RICK NEBEL

## *Conclusion*

Heritage tourism is a cost-effective approach for Nebraska because it represents an asset-based economic development strategy that builds on Nebraska's existing assets and resources. An investment in heritage tourism helps build a sense of pride of place, making Nebraska a better place to live, a better place to locate a business, and a better place to visit.



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For the complete text of the Nebraska Heritage Tourism Plan, visit the website:  
[www.nebraskahistory.org](http://www.nebraskahistory.org) Search “Heritage Tourism.”





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