

Historic Southern Indiana: serving the region for 25 years

One of the University's first regional outreach programs—a program that has received national recognition since its early days—celebrates its 25th anniversary this year.

Organized in 1986, Historic Southern Indiana (HSI) is dedicated to preserving, enhancing, and promoting the historical, natural, and recreational resources of Southern Indiana. It links historic sites, visitors' bureaus, state parks, and other agencies with a similar mission in 26 counties. At the outset, USI President Emeritus David L. Rice envisioned an organization that would coordinate with heritage sites and agencies throughout Southern Indiana.

Regional resource

Leslie Townsend, director of Historic Southern Indiana, said HSI has its greatest impact as a convener and resource for the region. She joined HSI in 1997 and has led the program since 2008 when the founding director, Dr. Darrel E. Bigham, retired.

"We have the broad view," Townsend said. "We are a small agency. We may not be the experts on historic preservation, for instance, but we can get community organizations to the experts. And, there is a misconception that we are involved only in history. We also deal with economic development and community outreach."

Southern Indiana is a historically and geographically distinct region. "This part of the state is where Indiana began nearly 200 years ago," Bigham said.

He called the development of HSI a unique experiment. Historic preservation and tourism were not commonly seen as compatible.

"Over the years we developed a network that people trusted because the University was a facilitator," Bigham said. "We became a model for a number of University programs in that the concept evolved out of what constituents indicated would be helpful."

National connections

In 1988, through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Historic Southern Indiana provided a two-year program that brought teachers from throughout Indiana to campus and encouraged them to use the communities as teaching tools. The \$275,000 grant was at the time the largest the University had received.

In 1989, the National Trust for Historic Preservation selected HSI for one of 16 pilot projects in the Heritage Tourism Initiative, a three-year program. That initiative defined the principles deemed crucial today to the success of heritage tourism throughout the country.

"Those were two programs early on that gave credibility to what we were doing—the idea of using the University as a resource for the region," Bigham said. "That flew in the face of what many scholars thought, but I believed from the beginning that scholarship had to be practical as well as academically sound."

HSI helped develop the Ohio River Scenic Byway and Indiana's Historic Pathways, both designated to the America's Byways collection by the U.S. Department of Transportation.



More engagement

Recently, HSI provided research and data collection to develop the 2011 Indiana 500 Tour promoted by the Indiana Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus. In 2010, students in computer information systems, graphic design, and journalism designed a web site for Indiana's Historic Pathways. Townsend anticipates more faculty and student partnerships with HSI member organizations in the coming years. Experiential learning opportunities and community engagement are priorities of the 2010-15 strategic plan.

To celebrate the 25th anniversary, Historic Southern Indiana will sponsor a two-day bus tour in October of sites in southeastern Indiana.

Bigham recently was named to the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Foundation, a successor organization to the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission on which he served as an appointee of President Clinton.

What constituents say

"Historic Southern Indiana has assisted us with a number of projects from the byways to marketing our historic attractions."

Linda Lytle is executive director of the Madison Area Convention and Visitors Bureau in Madison, Indiana.

"The staff of Historic Southern Indiana were among the first people to welcome me to Indiana. They gave me background on this park's role as a national park within Southern Indiana. Without HSI, I would have been largely unaware of many local and state organizations that are in this region. It would have taken me a lot longer to become oriented."

Brian McCutchen joined the George Rogers Clark National Historic Park in Vincennes, Indiana, as superintendent in August 2010.