



## CHAPTER 5

### PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The most important need for historic preservation in Webster going forward is the engagement of residents in appreciation of the Town's history and the resources that contribute to Webster's historic character. To this end, Chapter 4 of this plan recommends using Webster's Slater family history for branding and marketing for economic development. Chapter 3 recommends nomination of North Village and South Village to the National Register to help raise public awareness and implementation of an outreach program by the Historical Commission to help inform property owners about the appropriate treatment of historic properties.

Chapter 5 outlines a proposed **Townwide interpretive presentation** to enhance Webster as a destination and attraction for visitors while also raising public awareness of the Town's history and character. This presentation would feature the Samuel Slater Experience as a world class interpretive attraction for visitors and it would provide coordinated self-guided outdoor exhibits, installations, and public art in public places throughout the Town telling the Webster story in creative and engaging ways. Such a townwide presentation can be implemented in a phased manner over time as opportunities and funding are available.

## HISTORY OF WEBSTER

To begin discussion of public engagement, however, this Historic Preservation Plan wishes to emphasize the need for additional in-depth historical research on Webster's history. The historic resource inventories for Webster addressed in Chapter 3 and Appendix E of this plan provide important background research on the Town's historical development and its historic resources. This history is summarized in Chapter 2. The proposed National Register nominations for North Village and South Village will provide additional historical information as will the inventory work proposed in Chapter 3.

But more is needed. Webster is in need of historical research undertaken by local historians knowledgeable about local history, resources, and places. Local historians have the time and ability to research topics in depth in ways that professional consultants cannot. This is not only because of their detailed knowledge of local topics, it is also because of their access to local information sources, such as newspaper articles, public records, photographs, and other archival information professional consultants do not have the time or ability to access.

In-depth local research is the job of Webster's local historical society, the Webster-Dudley Historical Society. This is not a job, however, that the Webster-Dudley Historical Society has been performing. The Historical Commission should work with the Webster-Dudley Historical Society on its mission and capacity to undertake the needed role of a historical society in Webster – collecting archival information and undertaking research. Out of this work, the Webster-Dudley Historical Society should be participating in (if not leading) public programming to residents and producing articles and books on Webster's history that can be sold to residents and visitors.

Revitalization of the Webster-Dudley Historical Society might begin with facilitated strategic planning on how the Historical Society can take steps to expand and strengthen its volunteer corps.

**RECOMMENDATION 5A: Strengthen and revitalize the Webster-Dudley Historical Society to enable it to actively undertake research and programming.** *Ongoing recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster-Dudley Historical Society with support from the Webster Historical Commission.*



The 1835 Little Red Schoolhouse, home of the Webster-Dudley Historical Society.

## TOWNWIDE INTERPRETIVE PRESENTATION

Webster has the benefit of having a nationally significant history that is preserved and embodied in its neighborhoods and historic resources. Webster's historic character is the key to its economic revitalization, which in turn is the foundation for its future quality of life.

Local residents do not appear to fully appreciate the significance of Webster's history or the importance of the historic buildings and resources that are a product of that history. This chapter proposes a Townwide interpretive presentation that can be organized and implemented over time to strengthen Webster's identity, raise public awareness about that identity, and use that identity for economic revitalization. Chapter 5 is about presentation of Webster's stories, helping residents and visitors understand how Webster developed, why it is the way it is, and why it is significant.

**A Townwide interpretive presentation phased in over time would help establish Webster as a destination and attraction.**

Webster is an attraction to which visitors can be drawn, with economic benefits to local businesses and services and to the owners of historic properties. The proposed interpretive presentation gives visitors something to see and do when they are here, an added reason to come.

The core idea is to install creative, self-guided, outdoor interpretive exhibits and installations in public places throughout Webster telling the Town's stories using historic buildings, features, and places in the storytelling. Downtown Webster, the Mill District, and historic mill village neighborhoods are places where the presentation should be featured.

The presentation should be coordinated site to site. It should be implemented over time as opportunities are presented, building on outdoor exhibits the Town has already installed. It should feature the world class Samuel Slater Experience as its key attraction. It should use best practices for interpretation and engagement.

**RECOMMENDATION 5B: Undertake phased implementation of a Townwide interpretive presentation as an economic revitalization strategy to strengthen identity, raise public awareness for residents, and help position Webster as a destination and attraction for visitors.** *Phased recommendation to be led by the Board of Selectmen in partnership with Webster's economic stakeholders.*

### Samuel Slater Experience

The Samuel Slater Experience is a world class attraction interpreting Samuel Slater and his establishment of Webster through experiential learning. Since its opening in March 2022, the Samuel Slater Experience has increasingly become a destination for history buffs from around the region. The museum has also become a part of the education of children from many surrounding communities. In the spring of 2024, more than 1,250 students came through on school field trips.

Samuel Slater Experience is not a traditional museum, with visitors simply looking at artifacts and static displays. Rather, the Samuel Slater story is told with high-tech media: video, audio, motion, wind, and scents, to create an immersive experience. It covers two time periods of Webster history: the early



**The Samuel Slater Experience's creativity and vibrancy can be the hallmark of Webster's Townwide interpretive presentation.**

1800s and the early 1900s — bookends of the Slater family mills in Webster. In those time periods, it covers themes such as technological innovation, the economics of mill communities, child labor, and immigration. Visitors to the museum often ask where and how they can see the historical sites that are referenced in the exhibits.

The Samuel Slater Experience is a key attraction for Webster that should be promoted as part of the Town's economic and marketing strategy to attract visitors to the Town. The Experience should be connected to Downtown Webster through wayfinding and the Townwide interpretive presentation proposed here. The Townwide interpretive presentation is an effort to spread the Samuel Slater Experience to Webster's authentic historic places. While the museum's immersive experience cannot be replicated outdoors, its creativity and vibrancy can be embraced and be a hallmark of the Town's presentation.

**RECOMMENDATION 5C: Actively support and promote the Samuel Slater Experience as a key attraction in Webster and the hub of its Townwide interpretive presentation.** *Ongoing recommendation to be led by the Board of Selectmen in partnership with Webster's economic stakeholders.*

The Samuel Slater Experience is now deep into a project that will promote their ability to attract more private events and to host community events, both with a goal to improve long-term sustainability. The lot in back of the building will be redone with a dedicated space for parking and a large grassy area and pavilion.

This exterior site project will allow them to rent space to people who would like to have an indoor and outdoor space for their event, such as a wedding, birthday party, company reception, or organization meeting. The new outdoor area can host events for the community, such as art exhibits, craft shows, farmers' markets, historical reenactments, and small concerts.

Given that the Town owns the two playing fields on either side of the site, they will also have the potential of co-hosting larger events with approval of the Town. Such events could be coordinated with Downtown or Townwide events at multiple locations as discussed at the end of this chapter.



Samuel Slater Experience is located in a former National Guard Amory on Ray Street owned by the Town.

## Branding and Wayfinding

Chapter 4 recommends that Webster use its Slater mill history as its identity and brand for marketing and economic revitalization. Identity and branding are key marketing tools central to the Webster's economic development strategy of making Downtown a regional hub of public activity and promoting its historic neighborhoods to regional audiences as desirable places to live and invest. Webster's Slater history is unique in New England and American history. This branding will unite the Town with one of its principal visitor attractions.

Chapter 4 also suggests that a wayfinding system be developed using its Slater graphic identity to assist visitors in finding Downtown and other locations. The intersection with I-395 is the principal entry point. The Samuel Slater Experience may be the most important location for visitors other than Downtown — the museum is not easy to find for those not familiar with the Town. Wayfinding will help connect Samuel Slater Experience to Downtown visually and physically.

## Interpretive Planning and Design

Implementation of a Townwide interpretive presentation can be undertaken on an ad hoc basis as opportunities arise, but it would be preferable to have a conceptual interpretive plan in place for guidance. An ad hoc approach would add new interpretive exhibits and public art as new projects are undertaken, determining on a case-by-case basis the interpretive content and design of each exhibit.

The interpretive exhibits that have already been implemented in French River Park and their related facilities are of high quality and are a good example of what can be done. The murals along Main Street are good examples as well. Both contribute to the start of a Townwide presentation. An ad hoc approach will continue to enhance the Downtown experience and can be built out over time and expanded to other places.

Preferably, however, it is recommended that Webster engage professional consultants to prepare a Community Interpretive Plan to identify places where interpretation may be offered, provide conceptual designs for those places, and organize coordinated storytelling between sites of such quality that it can be marketed to the public as a destination and attraction. Webster's Townwide interpretive presentation can be envisioned as an extension of the Samuel Slater Experience, linking authentic sites throughout the Town with high quality interpretive exhibits.

In general, a **Community Interpretive Plan** should provide a blueprint of how best to present an overview of Webster's history, character, and identity to which visitors and residents can relate. The interpretive plan should:

- Identify the **local partners** who will be involved in developing and implementing the interpretive presentation;
- Convey a **statement of purpose** outlining Webster's historical significance and the significance of its resources, and outlining the goals, guidelines, and expected visitor experience for the interpretive presentation;

- Provide a brief overview of **existing interpretation, programming, and visitor services** in Webster which the presentation can incorporate and support;
- Identify the interpretive **themes and storylines** which Webster's history and resources should convey;
- Identify the **historic resources and places** that can be featured in the storytelling, the stories with which they are associated, and the locations where exhibits may be sited;
- Identify the **exhibit types**, public art or other media that may be used in the presentation;
- Organize a design and implementation process to assure **quality control**; and
- Prioritize a program of **phased implementation** that can be used for funding purposes.

**RECOMMENDATION 5D: Prepare a Community Interpretive Plan for conceptual design of a Townwide interpretive presentation of the Slater mill town story of sufficient quality that it can be marketed to visitors.** *Priority two recommendation to be led by the Board of Selectmen in partnership with Webster's economic stakeholders, Samuel Slater Experience, Historical Commission, Historical Society, and others as appropriate.*

It is suggested that the Community Interpretive Plan be prepared under the authority of the Board of Selectmen and led by an Interpretive Committee created for that purpose. The **Interpretive Committee** should include community partners and stakeholders in the endeavor and should also include persons experienced in public history and interpretation.

**A professional consulting team** should be retained to prepare the plan, reporting to the Interpretive Committee. The professional consulting team should be experienced in museum quality interpretation, exhibit design, and landscape design. If possible, the professional consulting team should be retained for implementation on a project-by-project basis.



Existing interpretive exhibits in French River Park, fishing spot on the left with natural resource interpretation and exhibit pavilion on the right.



## Desired Visitor Experience

Webster's visitor and interpretive experience should be designed to connect people to the Town's places and resources so they recognize Webster's distinctive history and identity and appreciate Webster as a desirable place to visit and to live. Upon experiencing the Townwide interpretive presentation, residents and visitors will:

- Appreciate Webster's **distinctive history** and associated places and resources;
- Appreciate Webster's **character** and **quality of life** as a place to visit and to live;
- Be stimulated to **explore Webster** and return to favorite places for enjoyable, valued, and enriching experiences;
- Appreciate how Webster's history is related to the evolving regional and **national stories**;
- Connect local historic buildings, landscapes, and resources with Webster's broader **themes and storylines**;
- Gain a **shared identity** and sense of value that is tied to Webster's history and character among residents;
- Be supportive of public and private **stewardship** initiatives in historic preservation, land conservation, and community enhancement;
- Engage in a **vision for the future** that embraces community priorities and supports sustainability and best practices in growth and change.



One of two interpretive panels in the exhibit pavilion in French River Park. Timelines with maps and historic photos — nicely done.

### Audiences

In planning for a Townwide interpretive presentation, it is necessary to be aware of who the intended audiences are, their interests and capabilities, and how interpretive programming will reach them. This begins with understanding the plan's goals for interpretation and visitor experience as noted above.

The Townwide interpretive presentation has two broad sets of audiences: residents and visitors. The purpose in reaching out to **residents** is to strengthen community awareness, engagement, identity, and placemaking and, as a result, build strong neighborhoods and promote Webster as a desirable place to live. Homeowners and landlords will take better care of their historic properties, and property values will rise.

Local residents include both those living in the historic mill villages and those living around Webster Lake. They are both expected to support lakeside and Downtown restaurants, shops, and services, strengthening the local economy.

The purpose in reaching out to **visitors** is to strengthen Webster economically by establishing the Town as a regional heritage tourism destination, using historic character and interpretive programming to attract visitors from across the region who will travel here to patronize local restaurants, shops, and services. High quality interpretation will strengthen historic community character, helping to turn Webster into a destination that can be marketed.

Different audiences have different needs and expectations. The interpretive and visitor experiences planned Townwide and at each specific site must be capable of meeting the needs and expectations of the different types of audiences who are being engaged. Interpretive planning prepared for individual communities and sites needs to specifically plan for the audiences they expect to serve.

**Heritage travelers** are the common regional visitor group to which historic communities and many historic sites appeal. Heritage travelers are older, affluent, and well-educated. They tend to travel by automobile in small groups: as couples, pairs of couples, or small groups of family and friends. They do not usually travel with children.

Heritage travelers are interested in and engaged with the places they visit. They are looking for a high-quality experience. They are capable of absorbing detailed interpretive information, and they are interested in understanding the broader implications of the information presented. They are interested in a broad range of subjects, including agricultural, economic, social, ecological, and cultural themes.

Authenticity is a key attraction to heritage travelers. They want to see, experience, and appreciate the actual places where things happened. Quality of life is of particular interest. Heritage travelers are interested in a holistic experience, not just visiting attractions. They want to be in interesting places, and they want to experience the places that local residents frequent.

Heritage travelers are interested in the quality of the overall experience: the driving, the scenery, the lodging, dining, and shopping. Potential destinations must be safe and of sufficient quality. Heritage travelers are willing to spend



more money than other types of audiences. They tend to be repeat visitors if they like the place and feel there is more to see and do. They are also likely to explore from one site to another.

**Families** are a primary audience for many visitor attractions. Families are as likely to be local residents as they are to be visitors. Local families are an important constituency and should make up a significant proportion of the visitation to heritage attractions. Families are among the most important type of resident groups.

Families tend to have limited time periods for their visits. They require visitor services, such as rest rooms, places for older people to rest, friendly and respectful guides, and snacks, if possible. Families are looking for fun in a safe environment. They are more interested in the experience than in the subject matter. They need quick, easy learning. Learning should be visual and experiential, not text based. Only the high points and the basics need be presented. They are more likely to be interested in cultural themes and in people's lives and experiences rather than in abstract information.

Historic communities and interpretive sites provide places where residents can take **visiting guests, friends, and family** to have a nice time and to learn about the area. When friends or family come to visit, local residents look for something interesting to do with them. They want to show their guests where they live, take them to the best places to visit, and put the community's best foot forward. The Samuel Slater Experience as well as high quality outdoor interpretive sites help fill this need in providing something interesting to do with guests. The friends of families are therefore an important extension of the resident base visitation for a site as well as for a community.

**Student groups** make up a large proportion of the yearly visitation to the Samuel Slater Experience, though they are less likely to be important for Webster's outdoor interpretive presentation. Attracting student groups takes significant planning and effort. Visitation by student groups is regional in nature. Only school districts or home-schooled pupils within a reasonable driving distance will be able to visit a particular site, as the entire trip must fit within the time limitations of the school day.

The Samuel Slater Experience is already experienced in planning for student groups. The range and quality of programming that it provides is impressive. Engaging programming is the key; the Samuel Slater Experience's immersive experience is engaging and real. It is not only interesting and fun for students, it also make the work of the teacher easier and more successful. Student programs are planned in accordance with curriculum guidelines and the interests of teachers, students, parents, curriculum planners, and administrators. Meeting the educational needs of specific courses and subject matter is important.

Webster's overall Townwide interpretive presentation should support the Samuel Slater Experience's student programming.

## Outdoor Exhibits

A centerpiece of the Townwide interpretive presentation would be a set of Outdoor Exhibits used for self-guided interpretive experiences at historic sites, on streetscapes, within parks and other public open spaces, and along trails. The Outdoor Exhibits will enable publicly accessible sites to tell their stories without the need for staffing or for indoor museum programming. Self-guided sites can be made visitor ready with great flexibility and minimal cost such that they can be marketed to visitors alongside larger attractions, such as the Samuel Slater Experience and any others that might be developed.

Self-guided outdoor exhibits would be the centerpiece of the Townwide interpretive presentation.

Implementation of the Outdoor Exhibits should be managed by the Interpretive Committee mentioned above in association with other stakeholders. Interpretive content, design, and implementation would be prepared by the retained professional consulting team. Professional interpreters should provide guidance and quality control in accordance with a defined design and implementation process.

Installation of the Outdoor Exhibits at identified sites should coordinate interpretation specific to the site with Webster's Townwide themes and storylines. Once installed and visitor-ready, sites or groups of sites may be marketed along with other attractions as part of the Townwide presentation.

Webster's Outdoor Exhibits should use a common graphic format based on the Town's graphic identity. High-quality customized exhibits, kiosks, and installations like the existing exhibits at French River Park are encouraged. It is possible, however, that standard National Park Service exhibit carriers could be used to simplify the design process and reduce costs.

The exhibit program should also consider the use of digital content that can be accessed using smartphones, tablets, and online. Digital content should be rich in its visual presentation and has the advantage of being able to be easily and frequently updated.

Implementation of the Outdoor Exhibits requires coordination and planning and may be undertaken in a manner that is flexible and easily executed. Exhibits should be readily perceived as a coordinated Townwide presentation linking a number of small scale self-guided interpretive sites. It is important that the program have a consistently high level of quality, content, and visual appeal. To that end, a simple process should be established to guide implementation in the preparation, installation, and maintenance of the interpretive exhibits. Selected sites must be publicly accessible seven days a week, year-round.

**RECOMMENDATION 5E: Use Outdoor Exhibits at sites throughout historic Webster in realizing a Townwide interpretive presentation.** *Priority two recommendation to be led by an Interpretive Committee under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.*



National Park Service exhibit carriers are widely recognized by the general public for their appearance and professionalism, and they are available in a variety of sizes and formats.



Customized exhibit carriers convey a sense of design quality and are preferred for presentations wishing to make a strong impression. (Photos: left, Cloud Gehshan; right, C&G Partners)

Implementation of Outdoor Exhibits may be phased in over time in accordance with the availability of funding. Prioritization should be given to interpretive sites that are visitor ready, well organized, and may be coordinated, linked, and marketed as a network with other sites thematically or physically. Over time, a wide range of sites may be included presenting various themes and storylines.



## Public Art

Public art is an important medium through which public places may be enhanced and interpretation may be offered. Webster has used public art to enhance its Downtown historic district and French River Park.

Historically, monuments, statues, plaques, historic objects, and similar forms of public art have been used as a means of commemorating places and events. Where they are present, such traditional works of art should be recognized and preserved and perhaps supplemented with additional interpretation. Veteran's Park adjacent to Webster Town Hall is a prime example and may be featured and further interpreted and enhanced as part of the Townwide presentation.

Many communities use public art such as sculpture, murals, and other creative installations to enhance streetscapes, plazas, parks, buildings, sidewalks, and trails, enlivening the landscape and visually interpreting community stories. The large mural in Downtown Webster at the intersection of Davis Street and Main Street is an excellent example of public art used as a landmark and placemaker to establish community identity.



**The mural on the Davis Street side of a Downtown commercial building draws attention to the access road to French River Park, the Riverwalk, and public parking area behind the Downtown commercial buildings.**

The use of public art as an interpretive medium to tell local stories and enhance the character of historic places is encouraged and is a means of addressing experiential learning. Public art may be integrated into the interpretive presentation at any historic site and should be featured in the development of the Townwide interpretive presentation.

**RECOMMENDATION 5F: Use Public Art at appropriate sites throughout historic Webster in realizing a Townwide interpretive presentation.** *Priority two recommendation to be led by an Interpretive Committee under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.*

Funding may be sought expressly for outdoor art installations presenting local interpretive themes and stories. Local artists may be engaged to create art installations for communities on a case-by-case basis. Regional arts and cultural organizations may be included in collaborative efforts to interpret communities and sites.

The process for using public art as an interpretive medium should be similar to that used for Outdoor Exhibits. Sites appropriate to the use of public art should be identified along with the themes and stories to be related. Proposed art installations should be sympathetic to the character of the landscape in which they are placed and should work in conjunction with other forms of interpretation being used.

Conceptual designs should be developed for art installations and refined as appropriate. Accurate cost estimates should be prepared by qualified fabricators, with whom consultations may be undertaken to find the most cost-effective materials and means of fabrication. Installation may be coordinated with other desired site improvements.



Mural in Downtown Webster (left); restored historic sign painted on the side of a commercial building on the south side of Main Street – a form of public art (right).



Slater's Sheep Community Art Project – one of many sheep sculptures painted by artists and located at sites throughout Webster to support opening of the Samuel Slater Experience in 2022.



### Landscape Installations as Placemakers

Placemakers are objects or installations used to enhance a site and convey information visually without words. A form of public art, such installations visually and immediately communicate with visitors; no words are necessary.

Public art and landscape installations convey quality and add an element of experiential learning to outdoor interpretation.

Landscape installations are particularly appropriate as placemakers within a historic landscape context or natural area. Some nature preserves prefer art installations over signage for interpretation because they are more in keeping with the experiential appeal of the natural landscape and because of the high-quality experience they communicate to visitors.

Within a historic context, landscape installations can combine with artifacts and remnant site features to interpret an area in a striking manner and with great appeal. Webster's mill district is a particularly appropriate place for use of landscape installations.

Creative landscape installations may be used as a form of public art to interpret important sites where a substantive interpretive presentation is desired on a large scale and where a self-guided experience is necessary. Landscape installations may employ structures, objects, sculpture, night lighting, vegetation, and other means and can be used to create an engaging, impactful, and high-quality interpretive presence with minimal signage.

Landscape installations should be incorporated into the Townwide interpretive presentation in as robust a way as possible and could be a signature feature of Webster's interpretive experience.



The inlaid granite paver on Webster's Riverwalk is a creative means of providing interpretation to visitors.





Erie Canal Harbor in Buffalo, NY is the site where the Erie Canal connected to Lake Erie. Filled and paved over as a parking lot, the City of Buffalo transformed the site into a waterfront interpretive park. Historic building foundations were uncovered and preserved, the end portion of the canal was reconstructed, an historic bridge was recreated, a museum was built, and interpretive exhibits were placed throughout. The project is a demonstration of the use of different types of creative landscape installations. A similar approach could be taken in the long-term redevelopment of Webster's mill district. (Photos: C&G Partners)





Creative landscape exhibits and installations at the West Point Foundry Preserve in Cold Spring, NY. The historic foundry is an archeological site with ruins and site features but no buildings. Creative and high-quality landscape installations were used to convey the nature, scale, and use of the historic structures that had been located there. (Photos: C&G Partners)

## Guiding Principles

The following principles may be used to help guide interpretation and visitor experience for Webster's Townwide interpretive presentation. Webster has a distinctive history and character. Its interpretation is about illuminating that history and character and drawing meaningful personal connections. The guiding principles outlined below represent best practices in the design of interpretative experiences.

**Experience of Place:** Use the historic and natural landscape as the vehicle through which stories are told, relating stories to real places and tangible features and evoking a sense of place. Use authentic physical features – buildings, streetscapes, site features, landforms, waterways, plant communities, and other resources – to tell the stories.

**Significance and Meaning:** Interpretation goes beyond conveying a story's facts. Good Interpretation draws connections, significance, and meaning to audiences. In developing interpretive content, examine each subject or story for its significance, for a key message to be conveyed by the story or exhibit. Communicate this significance or message to audiences in ways that connect to their life experiences.

**Shared Human Experience:** Provide interpretation in ways that help audiences relate it to experiences in their own lives. Using the authentic stories of real people in their words in the actual places where events occurred is encouraged wherever possible. The expression of universal concepts such as love, loss, uncertainty, and success to which everyone can relate in their lives helps forge personal connections to a story.

**Points of View:** Present stories from multiple perspectives in their thematic and historic context to help audiences appreciate how different people from diverse cultures see things and communicate differently. Encourage audiences to draw their own conclusions from each story.

**Acknowledge the Unpleasant:** Cultural stories are not always pleasant or uplifting. Difficulty and conflict are represented both in the challenges of life and in the interactions of diverse groups of peoples. These difficulties and conflicts should be accurately represented in the storytelling.

**Context:** While individual stories may be unique, they should all connect to the Townwide themes. Stories should illustrate the themes and connect to the bigger picture in ways that make them immediate and understandable.

**Connections:** Where applicable, connect the stories of specific sites to the stories at other sites as part of the communication of context, significance, and meaning. Encourage visitors to visit other sites within the Town's presentation to learn about other aspects of the related themes and stories.

**Accuracy:** Stories and content must be well researched and accurate. If the stories are based upon legend, lore, or oral tradition, clearly state so.

**Quality:** Every interpretive installation and experience should meet the highest standards of quality in terms of location, design, orientation to resource, storytelling, physical installation, accessibility, and visitor



experience. Guidelines, review processes, and technical assistance will be needed to help maintain quality standards. The Townwide presentation cannot be marketed to visitors unless it is of high quality.

**Experiential Learning:** People learn and remember things better when they physically do them. Emphasize communication that is visual and tied to real things and authentic places and features over the reading of waysides and text. Physical activities provide visitors with various sensory experiences—the sights, the distances, the sense of landscape and landforms associated with places and events. The Samuel Slater Experience is an excellent example of experiential learning. While more difficult in an outdoor presentation, experiential learning should be the goal.

**Variety of Experiences:** Provide a variety of interpretive approaches to satisfy the interests and capabilities of different age groups, temperaments, and orientations. Options should offer varying levels of activity, timeframes, and levels of required concentration. Provide alternative ways to experience interpretation for individuals with physical limitations or disabilities. Make use of cutting edge technology where useful and appropriate.

**Opportunities to Explore:** Present themes and stories in ways that encourage audiences to explore other places and sites. Draw interpretive connections, insert tempting leads, and provide the information and tools needed to spark and follow through on their interests. Encourage audiences to explore the landscape physically by inviting them to move around from place to place.

**Depth of Information:** Primary interpretive content should be succinct and well written, emphasizing key messages, context, and connections. In addition, develop information and guidance for exploring subjects in greater detail to encourage those who are interested to explore subjects to whatever level of detail they wish.



The Slater family grave site at Mt. Zion Cemetery is an important potential interpretive site. Many other historic Webster residents could be interpreted there as well.

## COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING AND EVENTS

Webster can offer programming and events to residents and visitors as part of its Downtown revitalization initiative and Townwide interpretive presentation. Many **Main Street** communities offer a set of annual programming and events over the spring, summer, and fall seasons to attract and engage visitors, support local businesses, provide educational and cultural experiences, and showcase the sites where they are held. Webster should build up a set of community events as part of a Main Street initiative as discussed in Chapter 4.

Programming and events can be part of the Townwide interpretive presentation as well, holding the events in historic locations where interpretation is offered and organizing living history and other types of presentations as features of an event.

**RECOMMENDATION 5G: Develop a set of annual community events to attract visitors and residents, support local businesses, and showcase Webster's Townwide interpretive presentation.** *Priority two recommendation to be led by Webster's economic development stakeholders under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.*

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the **Samuel Slater Experience** is deep into a project that will enable it to offer outdoor events adjacent to its museum both as a community attraction and a source of funding. An area on the 2 ½ acre site in back of the museum building is to be improved with a dedicated space for parking, a large grassy area for gathering, and a pavilion for shelter.

The new outdoor area will be able to host events for the community, such as art exhibits, craft shows, farmers' markets, living history demonstrations, and small concerts. It will also allow the museum to rent space to people who would like to have an indoor and outdoor space for their event, such as a wedding, birthday party, company reception, or organization meeting. The ability to host private events as a source of revenue will help the museum improve long-term sustainability.

A set of annual community events can be offered connecting various sites including Downtown and the Samuel Slater Experience.

Community events at the museum can be coordinated with events being held Downtown, at Indian Ranch, Memorial Beach, or within the mill district. Outdoor exhibits and landscape installations may be installed as part of the Townwide interpretive presentation, building on the world class interpretive experience offered indoors. The Town-owned playing fields on either side of the Samuel Slater Experience offer the possibility for co-hosting larger community events.

As the Town of Webster expands on the goal of highlighting its history and becoming a destination for visitors from around the region, it is exploring how to convert the historic auditorium in Town Hall into a performing arts theater. Currently in the early planning stages, the historic 1,200-seat auditorium could become a major regional venue, the **Samuel Slater Theater for the Performing Arts**. The new theater would be able to host community events such as plays and musicals and Town activities such as community meetings and voting. With

its centralized location, the Samuel Slater Theater would be a cultural focal point in the Downtown area and contribute to an increasing level of activity.

**RECOMMENDATION 5H: Collaborate with the Samuel Slater Experience and other partners in the development of outdoor event spaces and a performing arts theater to enhance Webster as a visitor destination.** *Priority two recommendation to be led by Webster’s economic development stakeholders under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.*

## WEBSITE AND ORIENTATION

Webster’s economic revitalization initiative and Townwide interpretive presentation should have a comprehensive website to attract and orient visitors. It should also be an engaging vehicle for online interpretation.

**Webster’s interpretive presentation can be coordinated and promoted through a website offered to visitors.**

The proposed website should present information on background, history, visitor sites, community events, and educational resources. The website should use the Town’s Slater graphic identity and branding discussed in Chapter 4 and should be a full-service site for virtual visitors. It should be the foundation for a state-of-the-art online media experience, serve as a portal to and from other media formats, and be a launching point for features, services, and utilities that may be developed.

The proposed website may be a stand-alone creation but should be a featured link for heritage tourism from the websites of the Town, Samuel Slater Experience, Webster-Dudley Business Alliance, Webster-Dudley Historical Society, and others.

The website should orient potential visitors in their visit to Webster, offering information on places to go and things to see, including Webster Lake. It should include educational and interpretive content that is engaging and fun to explore—filled with photographs, maps, videos, and varying depths of information. Content should establish context, elaborate upon interpretive themes; provide substantive background and context for various storylines; and relate storylines to sites, experiences, walking and touring routes, and places to visit. A family of maps, brochures, and publications that can be downloaded or displayed should be created based on Webster’s interpretive themes and storylines. The website should feature a community calendar to inform residents and visitors.

**RECOMMENDATION 5I: Create a promotional website with visitor information and educational and interpretive content .to engage, attract, and orient visitors.** *Priority two recommendation to be led by Webster’s economic development stakeholders under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.*