Never Let This Go:

An Interpretive Plan for Leipers Fork

Williamson County, TN



Prepared for The Leiper's Fork Foundation and Community

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Introduction

When we first came to Leiper's Fork we arrived as strangers but left the town as friends. For some it was their first time making the journey to the village right outside of Franklin, Tennessee. For me it is a familiar place, yet between the group we all agreed on a common takeaway: the deep history of the village was hidden. As someone who has made semi-regular trips to the village it was shocking to see how much history was in the village and how little I truly knew about the village. This project seeks to remedy this. We were tasked with looking upon the village with fresh eyes and using our skills to create a new means of communication of the village's history. There are many different angles to explore the residents of the village, and we hope these panels will do them justice. The title of this paper comes from Paramore's 2005 self-titled album, and I find the name fitting. Never let this go is our message to the village and its residents. You all have done an excellent job preserving your history and staying true to your values as a community. We cannot thank you all enough for letting us help you in this next step of preservation. As we all know, the transplants are coming, and we hope these panels will be a great introduction to the cultural landscape that is Leipers Fork.

- Jacob Jernigan, Nashville Resident and Franklin apologist

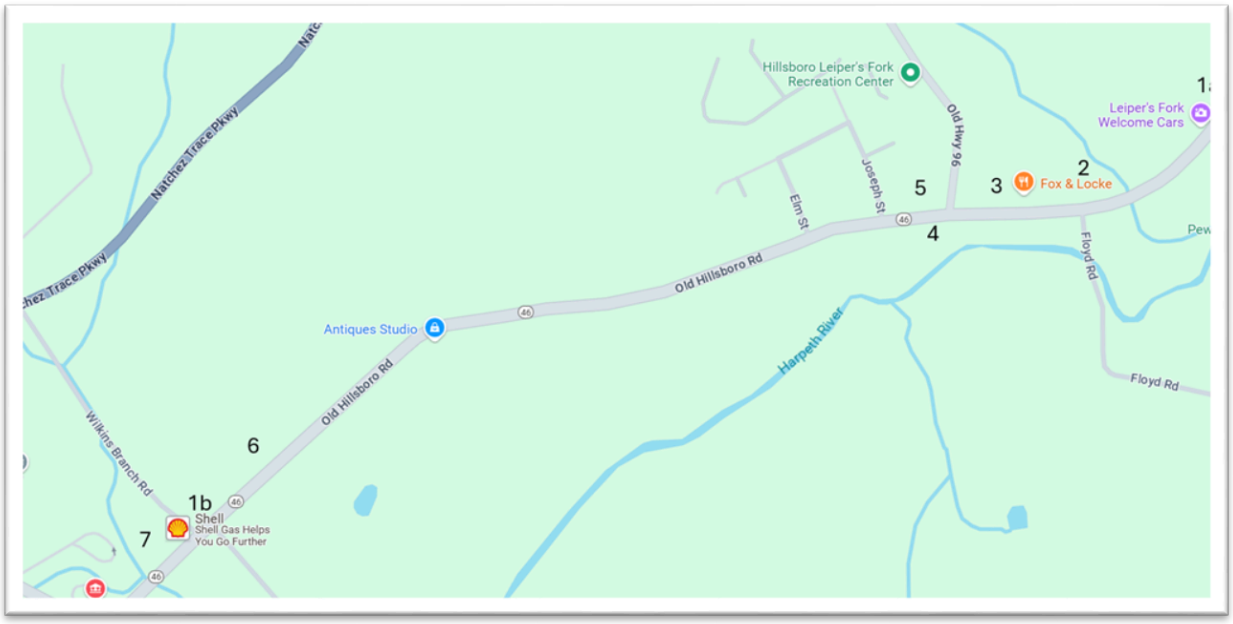
Panel Design



This project envisions this style of panel being used in the Village. Their sturdy construction gives them the ability to be placed outdoors and not be compromised by the weather. While they can get dirty over time, their faces can be easily cleaned.

Panel Locations

We recommend panels places at the following locations. Panels 1 and 1b are envisioned to be the same panel, placed at opposite ends of the village. This design is to encourage visitors to fully go through the town and not just stay in the already trafficked areas around the southern end of the village. Panel 2 discusses the Tennessee Land Trust and is positioned over an area that provides a vista to look over the preserved landscape. Panel 3 looks at the music History of Leiper's Fork and can be placed either in the Lawnchair Theatre or by Fox and Locke. Panel 4 dives into the past and present of the town while Panel 5 tells the stories of African American history in the village. Both can be placed at a storefront like Patina or the Holiday Market. Panel 6 uncovers the history of the village as "Bentontown" and the history of Thomas Hart Benton. Panel 7 looks at Native American history of the Natchez Trace.



1) Historic District of Leiper's Fork Panel

Leiper's Fork is a historic crossroads community nestled in the hills of Middle Tennessee, just west of Franklin. The area was originally home to Native peoples who traveled, hunted, and lived along the creeks and wooded ridges for generations. After the American Revolution, settlers like Captain James Leiper and Senator Thomas Hart Benton arrived, and by the early 1800s, the village began to take shape. Its early growth was fueled by agriculture, craftsmanship, and the labor of both enslaved and free residents. Over time, Leiper's Fork became known for its deep sense of place, where stories, families, and traditions took root.

During the Civil War, the village witnessed foraging armies, guerrilla raids, and major changes that reshaped daily life. After the war, freed African Americans, like

master craftsman Dick Poyner, built new lives here, while residents turned to timber, spring water, and moonshine production to sustain the community. By the late twentieth century after the railroad left the village, Leiper's Fork had fallen into quiet decline, its storefronts shuttered and its future uncertain. But residents, along with new neighbors drawn by the village's charm and history, launched a preservation effort unlike any other. They saved historic buildings, protected nearby farmland, and created new spaces for music, art, and community life. That work continues today, as Leiper's Fork remains a living village that honors its past while embracing a creative and connected future. Whether you're visiting for the first time or returning home, Leiper's Fork welcomes you to walk its streets, share its stories, and feel its charm.

See suggested photos and captions below and on the following pages.



The Leiper's Fork Post Office with J.W., Virginia, Laura, and Bunyan Parham standing on the porch. The post office was located inside Parham's Store and operated from 1818-1918 except for a brief period in the 1860's. The post office's timeline marks the both the boom and bust of the village.[1]

[1] Rick Warwick, *Lemuel Parker, Bingham Photographer* (Williamson County Historical Society, 2022), 35.



A group of Leiper's Fork residents from the Votes for Women committee participating in the Liberty Bond Parade held on October 5, 1918, in Franklin, TN. (Any group photo of village residents would be great here).[2]

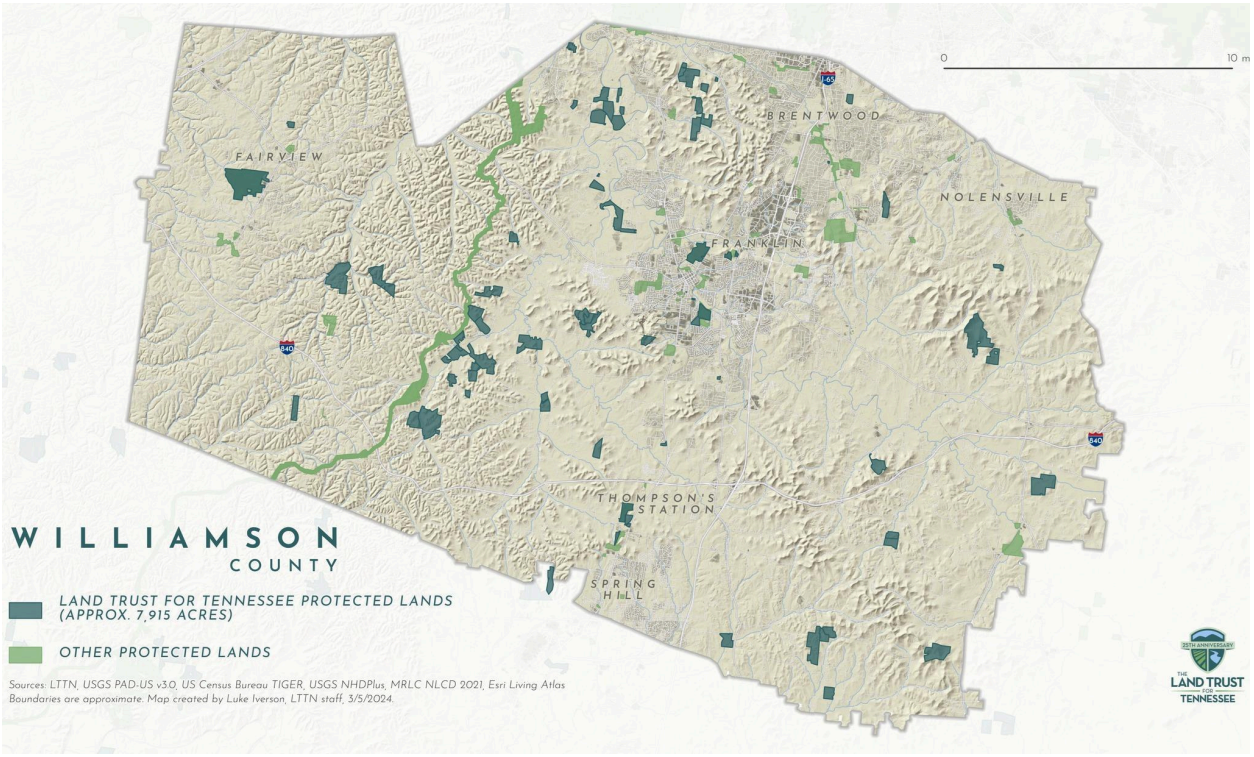
[2] Rick Warwick, *Lemuel Parker, Bingham Photographer* (Williamson County Historical Society, 2022), 18.

2) Land Trust Panel

In 1999, Nashville Mayor Phil Bredesen and Nashville residents realized that the city was growing but landowners needed a way to protect their green space. Aubrey Preston and his mother, Cora, were the first to place land in a trust, an astounding 274 acres. This land is held by the trust in perpetuity, ensuring that the community is still served by the greenspace the land provides for future generations. The Land Trust holds the land but still allows the landowners to own and live on the land. Furthermore, owners can still hunt, fish and recreate on the land. The Trust provides stricter guidelines on how the land can be developed and subdivided. Leiper's Fork has added hundreds more acres over the years, contributing to the village being surrounded by green space that is not going anywhere, anytime soon.

Communities that hold their land in land trusts see massive benefits. Outside development is restricted, but community-based development sees no issues. This helps communities retain their identities and cultural landscape amid sudden or sprawling development. While there are concrete benefits such as tax reductions, there are much softer benefits like keeping the land owned by a member of the community. Leipers Fork is the best example of the Tennessee Land Trust system in action. Anyone coming into the village is surrounded by lush green spaces and residents of the village rest easy knowing they do not have to fear opportunistic developers.

See suggested photos and captions on the following pages.



A map of land in trusts in Williamson Country made by the Land Trust for Tennessee.[3]

Editor's Note: We recommend placing this panel over a vista where a viewer can see the preserved space as no photo can do justice to the stunning views one can see from a hill in the village.

3 https://www.facebook.com/LandTrustTN/photos/our-first-ever-conservation-easement-was-signed-25-years-ago-in-williamson-count/853809196773592/?_rdr

3) Music History Panel

Leiper's Fork has a strong and continuing connection to their music scene. Green's Grocery was the primary hub for local musicians and famous country stars to play for the village. Originally a depression era grocery store, Green's served as the community grocery store but over the years transformed into Ernie's Smokehouse. The venue was the village's premier Juke Joint, residents would come out to have a drink, a good meal and hear great music. Yet in the 1980s the store would close its doors. Yet this did not phase the community as later in the 1990s the store would reopen under the name "Green's Grocery." Inspired by venues in Nashville like the Bluebird Cafe, Green's set out to be a place of authenticity, creativity and community. Country Stars from Nashville would often be seen performing here as opposed to larger venues in Nashville. This is largely due to the community and how they maintained their authenticity. Simple wooden chairs and tables, good food and a great sound system were all driving the stars to come and perform in the village. Notable stars like Brad Paisley, Michael McDonald, Kim Carnes, John Hiatt, Keith Urban, Garth Brooks, Chely Wright and many more would see notable performances. Green's felt like playing for a group of close friends for these musicians. Yet this success was not forever as in 1996 Green's closed its doors to the public for the last time. The venue still sees use but only on special occasions.

Yet Leiper's Fork's musicians are not all country stars. The local school, Hillsboro School, was lagging behind its peers in Williamson County. Test scores were down and, in an effort, to revitalize the school a new program was launched: The Kids on Stage Program. This program shifted the curriculum of the school to provide an arts-based education with an emphasis on academics. The Village used the connections formed at Green's to jumpstart this program. Large donations from the community and famous stars saw the construction of a black box theatre with top-of-the-line lighting and sound equipment. Gibson even donated instruments for the program to use. Students put on an annual show, "Hillstock" and performed every role in putting on the show. Test scores went up and the success of the village soon became envied by other county residents and schools. Notable alumni of the program include Miley Cyrus, Kesha Sebert (Formerly styled as Ke$ha) and Haley Williams of Paramore. Leiper's Fork sparked a new generation of artists that went on to be titans in Pop and Alternative genres. Leiper's Fork has a strong connection not only to country music but music as a whole.

See suggested photos and captions on the following pages.



Example Caption: *A performance in Green's Grocery in 1996.*[4]

Editor's Note: Search results do not render many options for performances by students in the Kids on Stage program. We recommend going to the community to see if they have photos of the events over the years.

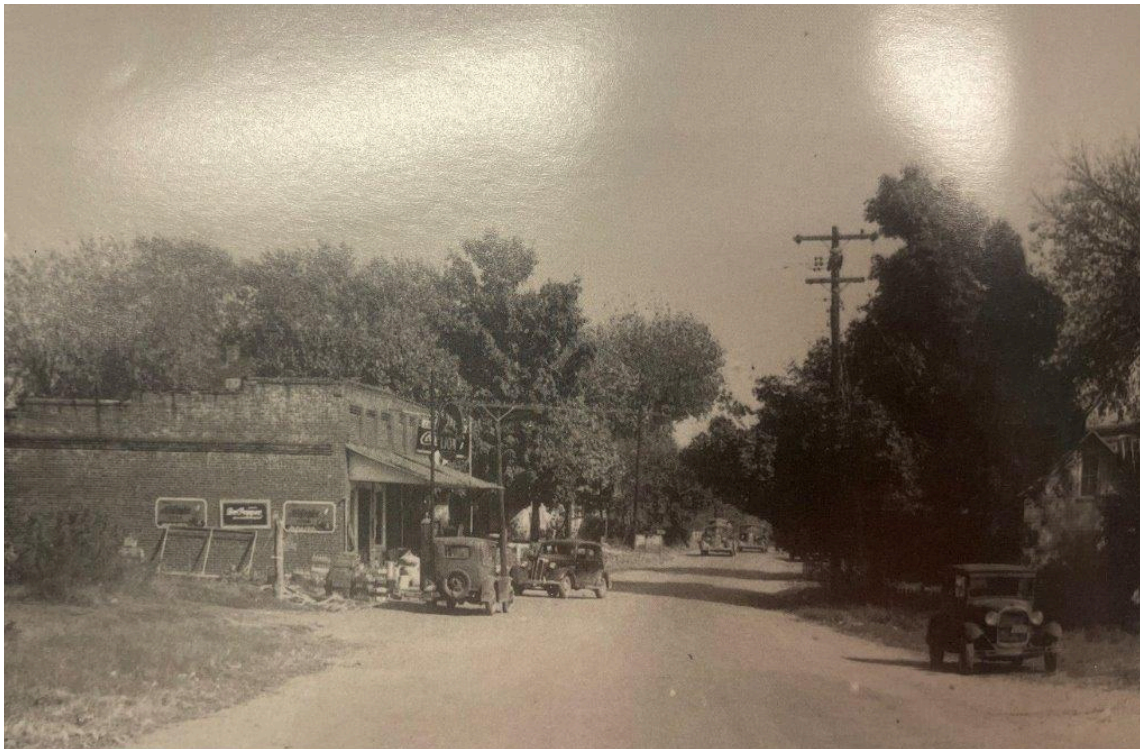
4 https://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/2021/07/15/pucketts-sold-local-who-helped-revive-leipers-fork-hub/7922067002/

4) **Village Past and Present Panel**

By the mid-1970s, Leiper's Fork was struggling. Thankfully, through the dedication and hard work of both newcomers and long-term residents, the next several decades saw Leiper's Fork revitalized. Music, history, and a strong connection to its community are the glue that holds Leiper's Fork together. Historic structures such as the Thomas Hart Benton House and Green's Grocery were saved through the town (and Aubrey Preston's) historic preservation efforts, and the quiet town began to bustle once more.

Most importantly, Leiper's Fork never leaves its past behind. Despite all the growth and change, the town knows its own history and maintains a connection to its past. When the Center for Historic Preservation successfully had the town recognized by the National Register for Historic Places, that connection was set in stone. By always keeping its past in mind, Leiper's Fork maintains its beautiful charm while marching ever onward into the future.

See suggested photos and captions on the following pages.



Example Caption: *Leiper's Fork (then Hillsboro) with the Leiper's Fork Bank converted into a grocery store around 1934. While the town is far from bustling, two cars parked outside the grocery store show typical life during the time.*[5]

[5] Richard Warwick, *Leiper's Fork and Surrounding Communities* (Franklin, Tennessee, 1999). 40.



Example Caption: *Leiper's Fork as it currently stands. The Fox & Locke bustles with activity. While much has changed, Leiper's Fork still feels familiar. Community rests at the heart of everything Leiper's Fork.*

5) African American History Panel

African American history in Leiper's Fork largely begins with enslavement. In the journey to the western frontier in the early nineteenth century, settlers brought enslaved peoples with them to clear the land, plant crops, and build the historic structures that dot the landscape today. Despite the violent exploitation enslaved African Americans faced at the hands of their enslavers, countless individuals created ways to earn money that they used to self-liberate themselves and their families, like master craftsman Richard "Dick" Poynor.

Born in Halifax, Virginia in 1802, Dick Poynor came to Williamson County with the Robert Poynor family in 1816. It is believed that Robert taught Dick the skills of turning and joining wood in crafting wooden chairs. Dick's craftsmanship surpassed his enslaver's and developed a far-reaching reputation. By 1849, he was a free man living in Leiper's Fork as a craftsman.

In 1851, Dick and his family moved to a 150-acre farm on Pinewood Road where he, with his son James, operated a factory and produced chairs that went to prominent plantations including Beechwood Hall, Carton, the Carter House, Mooreland, and the Bennett-Cunningham House (also known as the Dr. George Hunter Farm). More recently, a Poynor chair can be seen on the cover of Dolly Parton's album *Little Sparrow,* released in 2001. Today, Poynor chairs are treasured heirlooms in Williamson County as a testament to the strength and ingenuity of the county's African American residents, past and present.

See suggested photos and captions on the following page.



Example Caption: *A ladderback side chair, known as the "fancy chair," made by Richard "Dick" Poynor. Made with primarily maple wood and a woven split oak seat, this chair was originally used at the Leiper's Fork Church of Christ and sold to raise money for new pews. As a gift from Williamson County Historian Richard Warwick, the chair is now at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.*[6]

[6] Richard "Dick" Poynor, Williamson County, TN, 1850-1860, Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts.



Example Caption: *A rocking chair and a child's highchair produced by Dick Poynor. The classic signature of Poynor's chairs is the arching mule-eared posts. Dick and his son made chairs of several sizes and functions including armed rocking chairs, armless sewing rockers, highchairs, and youth chairs.*[7]

[7] Richard "Dick" Poynor, Poynor Chairs, Trials, Triumphs, and Transformations Collection, James E. Walker Library, Middle Tennessee State University.

6) Thomas Hart Benton and Benton Town Panel

Where Leiper's Fork exists today was once a tract of 2,560 acres on the Tennessee frontier belonging to the family of Thomas Hart Benton, a congressman who represented Missouri between 1821 and 1855. In 1801, Benton, his mother, her additional seven children, and dozens of African Americans whom the family enslaved arrived in this area and established a plantation and settlement called "Bentontown." As a young adult, Thomas Hart Benton lived in Bentontown with his family and helped establish his family's plantation where they grew corn and cotton.

When the Bentons arrived in the area, dense old growth forests teeming with wild game covered the land. On the edge of a vast frontier, distant from domesticated life yet connected to the outer world through the historic corridor Natchez Trace, a tight-knit community of settlers formed. Gradually, a log-school house, a log-meeting house, dirt roads, and mills turned the wilderness into a tiny bucolic village.

By 1818, Bentontown was known as Hillsboro after Hillsboro, North Carolina, the homeplace of the Benton family. However, due to a post office in Coffee County already named Hillsboro, the community chose Leiper's Fork instead. The evidence of this early period in Leiper's Fork history is seen today in the dry-stacked rock walls built by enslaved people that border the highway in front of where the Thomas Hart Benton house stood until 1996 when it burned down.

Suggested photos with captions are on the following page.



Example Caption: *Thomas Hart Benton in 1845 as a Democratic Senator from Missouri.*[8]



[8] Mathew Brady, "Thomas Hart Benton, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing three-quarters to the left," 1845, photograph, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2004663876/.

Example Caption: *The early home of the Benton family in 1916. Thomas Hart Benton helped construct this house and other buildings on the Benton family plantation using local resources such as timber and stone.*[9]

7) Natchez Trace and Indigenous History Panel

Long before Leiper's Fork was a crossroads village, it was part of a vast and ancient Native network. The land here was used by the Creeks, Cherokee, and other Indigenous nations for seasonal travel, hunting, trade, and spiritual connection. One of their most important routes, known today as the Natchez Trace, passed just south of the village, linking the Mississippi River with the tribal lands of Middle and East Tennessee. This path was deeply embedded in Native lifeways long before it became a military road or postal route for settlers. Even as settlers claimed land grants and cleared fields, they walked in the footsteps of those who had shaped this landscape for generations.

Though much of this Indigenous history was disrupted by forced removal and loss, the legacy of Indigenous peoples remains part of the Leiper's Fork story. In 2005, Leiper's Fork joined the Natchez Trace Compact to promote heritage tourism and protect this cultural landscape. The nearby creeks, trails, and ridgelines remain important reminders of how deeply Indigenous nations shaped this region. Native people still maintain ties to this region, and efforts to protect these landscapes help ensure their stories are not forgotten. Understanding this history helps us better appreciate the land and the many stories it continues to hold.

See suggested photos and captions on the following page.

[9] Tennessee Library State Archives, "Early Home of Thomas Hart Benton," photograph, 1916.

Photos from Natchez Trace Compact joining, Native American removal or any other phots of Native peoples in the area, or photos from the area behind the market where the marker will be placed. (land change over time)

1b) Historic District of Leiper's Fork Panel 2

Leiper’s Fork is a historic crossroads community nestled in the hills of Middle Tennessee, just west of Franklin. The area was originally home to Native peoples who traveled, hunted, and lived along the creeks and wooded ridges for generations. After the American Revolution, settlers like Captain James Leiper and Senator Thomas Hart Benton arrived, and by the early 1800s, the village began to take shape. Its early growth was fueled by agriculture, craftsmanship, and the labor of both enslaved and free residents. Over time, Leiper’s Fork became known for its deep sense of place, where stories, families, and traditions took root.

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See suggested photos for this panel under *Town Overview and Map 1*.

Future Recommendations:

While this project laid out several key areas for historical interpretation, a few went unaddressed. For example, as with most towns in Tennessee, drawing a Civil War connection could allow for access to additional funding. In addition, the Leiper's Fork distillery did additional research into the local and county-wide distillery history, which could provide another interpretive area.

Leiper's Fork has the tools required to improve its historical interpretation, however some potential problems which fall outside of the scope of this project make it difficult for visitors to enjoy that interpretation. For example, Leiper's Fork lacks a visitor's center. A central location for visitors to begin their time in Leiper's Fork would improve their stay and give a starting point for any potential walking tours or pamphlet guides through historical interpretation. In addition, several key points of interpretation lack sufficient parking areas, making it difficult for visitors to get out of their cars and enjoy the historical and natural beauty of the town. However, when visitors do exit their vehicles, several areas of Leiper's Fork are difficult to reach on foot. Some areas have narrow sidewalks which force foot traffic to only move one way on busy days, and some areas lack any sidewalk at all, including areas with historic interpretation. For visitors to fully enjoy their time in Leiper's Fork, additional and improved walkways are a necessity. Finally, on particularly busy days on the town square, such as weekends or festivals,

closing downtown roads to create additional space for pedestrians would make historical interpretive areas easier to navigate.