

Chapter 1: Introduction

Study Background and Purpose

The Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway (Route 20) provides a travel route through the hilly and classic New England landscapes of Lee and Becket in Berkshire County, Chester and Russell in Hampden County, and Huntington in Hampshire County. In 1992, the Massachusetts legislature conferred upon the roadway special designation as a state scenic byway from the Lee town common to the Russell-Westfield town line. Designation as a state scenic byway laid the path for federal funding of a corridor management plan to inventory, evaluate, and make recommendations on land use, highway safety, and scenic and cultural resources.

Completion of that first corridor management plan in 1994 has led to nearly \$1.7 million in federal funding over the intervening years for more than 20 projects aimed at recognizing, preserving, and interpreting the resources of the built environment and the natural landscape. Through improvement of Byway resources, these projects are also aimed at helping to stimulate related economic development. (See list of projects in sidebar—**at end of chapter for now.**) Locally appointed representatives to the Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway, Inc.—the Byway's devoted advisory committee—and representatives from the MassHighway, District 1, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, and the Jacob's Ladder Business Association also have been integral to these successes.

This 2009 corridor management plan includes an assessment and reevaluation of progress made to date on the recommendations in the 1994 plan, and presents entirely new inventories and evaluations of outdoor recreation resources, natural resources, and marketing, tourism and traveler services, which were not included in the 1994 plan. In addition, the plan includes 22 maps of Byway resources developed from state, regionally, and locally derived Geographic Information Systems information for the five Byway towns. For each of the resources described for the Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway there is a revised or new list of recommendations. These recommendations have been folded together into an



Cyclists review map of the Byway at a kiosk installed by MassHighway. (Photo courtesy: Destination Development)

Action Plan that charts a course for preserving the Byway's resources in the coming years.

The completion of this second corridor management plan coincides with the Centennial of the Trail in 2010, providing an opportunity to celebrate the many accomplishments in preserving and enhancing the Byway, but also an occasion to reevaluate and reaffirm efforts going forward.

Byway Corridor Description

A Brief History

The Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway has its origins centuries ago with the Mohican and Woronoake tribes who established a travel route to and from the Connecticut and Hudson river valleys across the southern hills of the Berkshire range. Settlement of the region by Europeans made use of this same pathway to connect Springfield and Pittsfield during the Plantation Period (1620-1675) and during the Colonial Period (1675-1775). During the Revolutionary War, the trail served as a main supply route for the Revolutionary troops at Fort Ticonderoga, and in 1799 it became known as the Eighth Massachusetts Turnpike.

Many years later, in 1910, the advent of the automobile and the desire of local citizens for a good driving road through the southern Berkshires, led to the construction of "the first of the Great Mountain Crossovers" from Lee to Russell. This first mountain crossover was soon joined together with Route 20, a roadway that extended across the continent and over many other mountains to Oregon. For a couple of decades, the Jacob's Ladder Trail attracted motoring tourists and locals alike who enjoyed the adventure of a scenic drive through the rugged Berkshire countryside. The Great Depression followed by World War II, however, led to a significant decline in these activities, and the Byway became a major trucking route from the cities of Boston and Springfield to Albany and points west. The post-war era brought with it the development of the interstate highway system and construction of the Massachusetts Turnpike (U.S. Route 90). This highway runs parallel to the Byway,

How Did the Byway Get its Name?

*The following is excerpted from *Touring Jacob's Ladder Trail by Bicycle or Car* (1994)*

Various stories explain how this roadway came to be called Jacob's Ladder Trail, the name used for the past 80 years. In one commonly accepted version a man, either by the name of Jacob or who looked like the Prophet Jacob, used his team of oxen to draw the automobiles of urbanites up the steep grades of the highway. The highway was so long and steep, that early automobiles of the 20th century could not make it all the way to the top; the last stretch of hill into Becket was so steep that it was referred to as a ladder. Another possible history of the name, also involving reference to the high elevation, is drawn from the Biblical Old Testament story of Jacob. Jacob dreamed of a ladder being placed upon the earth, the top of the ladder reaching up to heaven, and angels climbing up and down between heaven and earth. "Jacob's Ladder" served as the gateway to Heaven. To many residents, this seemed to be a particularly appropriate nickname for the steep road.

and effectively conveyed high-speed motorists on a new east-west route, bypassing the Byway's local towns.

The Byway Today

Today, the Byway extends an additional two miles northward to the Lee/Lenox town line, the result of further designation in 2008 by Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway, Inc., the local stewardship committee for the Byway. The Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway corridor—defined as .5 miles from each side of the roadway—runs 33 miles west to east from Laurel Lake at the Lenox-Lee town line to the base of Tekoa Mountain on the Russell-Westfield town line. The Byway extends through landscapes of tree-covered hills with rocky outcroppings and cascading streams, and narrow valleys with the winding Westfield River and classic village centers. The Byway includes five towns that have varying lengths of roadway within them: Lee (7 miles), Becket (10.5 miles), Chester (6.5 miles), Huntington (2.5 miles), and Russell (6.5 miles). In Huntington, the Byway intersects the southern terminus of the Route 112 Scenic Byway, a 51.9-mile roadway that extends north to the Vermont border.

At Laurel Lake, the Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway begins at an elevation of 1,007 above sea level and descends down to the village of Lee at about 890 feet. The road then climbs up to Becket to a height of 1,390 at Greenwater Pond and then to 1,775 feet at the famous Jacob's Ladder Trail summit, marked by a stone cairn monument. The roadway then winds steadily down to 1,289 feet at Bonny Rigg Corners (where Route 8 intersects), 625 feet at Chester Village, 543 feet at the entrance to Chester-Blandford State Forest, 373 feet at Huntington Center, and finally 235 feet at its terminus at the base of Tekoa Mountain in Russell.

Lee

The Lee-Lenox border serves as the western gateway to the Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway. The Byway travels in a south-easterly direction on Laurel Street, which directs the traveler into Lee Center. Laurel Street is lined with homes dating from the 19th century when Lee was a thriving industrial town of paper mills and marble quarries. After crossing the Housatonic River, the source of power for the mills, the Byway then descends into the downtown area. Downtown Lee, a well-maintained and functioning town center, continues to host businesses that serve local residents and tourists alike. Main Street looks much the same as it did 150 years ago, lined with banks, hardware stores, barber shops, insurance businesses and small restaurants. The Lee Memorial Town Hall and an architecturally significant Congregational Church are located at the head of the town common. Downtown Lee is known as the Gateway to the Berkshires since it is the first community that travelers encounter on exiting the Massachusetts Turnpike (Exit 2) to visit the central Berkshires. The Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway extends eastward, traveling through a mix of residential and commercial properties before intersecting with the Massachusetts Turnpike. A few motels, fast food restaurants and gas stations line the road where the Byway travels under the turnpike.

The Byway intersects Route 102 in this area, which is a major connecting road to the neighboring town of Stockbridge, a town known for its cultural institutions, including Tanglewood, summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Just beyond this section, the Lee Outlet Village is situated on a hill to the south. The outlet village is a major tourist draw on the Byway, second only to Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. Continuing eastward, the Byway travels through a largely rural area that is sprinkled with single family homes.

Becket

As the Byway enters the town of Becket, it passes by scenic Greenwater and Shaw ponds. Travelers pass through an area that is largely forested. The roadway itself offers drivers an interesting ride, as it winds its way upward through the hilly terrain of the Berkshire Hills. Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival is located just off the Byway to the north and, if not paying attention, visitors could easily pass the entrance. Continuing eastward, travelers reach The Summit, which is the Byway's highest elevation at 1,775 feet. The site is marked by a stone cairn, originally placed there for the gala inauguration of the roadway in September 1910. The cairn and the former summit house are all that is left of what was a very popular destination. A short distance away is Jacob's Well, an important site in the early 20th century, as cars of the day often became overheated making their way toward the Summit and needed water. There are interpretive signs at both the Summit and Jacob's Well.

Chester

Leaving Becket, the Byway descends and rounds the base of Pine Hill passing exposed granite cliffs along the northern side of the roadway. Together with Round Top Hill to the south, these cliffs provide a natural framework for the entry into Chester. In this stretch, the Byway

passes the picturesque Pine Hill Cemetery (1834), and steeply wooded hillsides with some homes nestled into the few level places along the roadway. The journey into Chester Factory Village is punctuated by neat two-story homes. The cluster of buildings in the center of town includes the Chester Village Market, the school, library, and



Homes line the Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway in Chester.

a few churches. All along this route from the boundary with Becket, the waters of Walker Brook serve as companion to the Byway, racing alongside and down hill to meet the West Branch of the Westfield River on the eastern side of Chester. Chester Factory Village is a settlement dating back to the 1840s arrival of the railroad and the heyday of the emery and mica mines, and granite quarries in the surrounding hillsides. Here too the CSX rail line joins along just north on a parallel journey with the West Branch of the Westfield River and the Byway. The southern side of the Byway is lined with steeply forested slopes and an occasional single-family home until the start of the 2,308-acre Chester-Blandford State Forest, which extends more than a mile along the southern edge of the Byway. In this stretch, there are entrances to Sanderson Brook Falls, a 150-foot cascade, the state forest campground and headquarters, and to Boulder Park, which takes its names from the giant boulders left behind by the last ice age. Boulder Park has an easy-graded Universal Access interpretive trail and a pavilion set amidst the shade of Eastern Hemlocks.

Huntington

Traveling into Huntington, the roadside forest canopy gives way to sky and wider views of the railroad tracks and Great Moose Hill to the northeast. The canopy then closes in again for a short stretch, shading moss covered rock outcroppings along the southern side of the roadway. Historic homes line the entry into Huntington Center and the rail line turns to the north to track a more distant parallel route. Huntington Center is a



Stanford Hall and other historic buildings grace Huntington's Town Common.

classic New England village with a cluster of shops, church, and municipal buildings organized around a village green. From the roadway just beyond the town center, the river becomes noticeably larger and wider as the West Branch of the Westfield River has now been joined by the middle and east branches. The Byway passes several homes, Gateway Farm and Pet, and a popular rest area by the river.

Russell

Heading into Russell, the Byway passes steeply forested hillsides braced by a series of stone retaining walls to the south, while the river closely hugs the Byway's northern edge. The Byway then descends into an area of Russell known as Crescent Mills, a small village begun in 1806 that still retains many old mill structures and historic homes.



A glance down Russell's historic Main Street provides views of Shatterack Mountain's exposed ledges.

view northward from the Byway down Russell's historic Main Street gives way to an impressive backdrop of exposed ledges on Shatterack Mountain (1,140'). Passing around the bend and the State Police Barracks, the Byway provides more good views of the surrounding exposed ridges and hilltops of Tekoa Mountain (1,130') to the north and northeast, and to Punchbowl Mountain (1,094') and Russell Mountain (1,078') to the south and southeast. Descending into the mill village of Woronoco, the old factory chimneys provide a storied foreground to the background of rocky hillsides. The last stretch of the Byway continues through this landscape of exposed hillsides and ridges and then terminates at the stepped slopes of Tekoa Mountain.

From Crescent Mills, the Byway continues through a landscape with the river to the north and steep rocky and forested slopes to the south. In many places, small waterfalls crash down the rock faced slopes to pass under the Byway and enter the Westfield River. At Turtle Bend Mountain, the roadway winds around to the south while the Westfield River winds around to the north. The Byway passes a stretch of homes as it makes its journey into Russell Center. The

Planning Process

In developing this corridor management plan, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission and the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission worked on an ongoing basis with the members of the Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway, Inc. This nonprofit organization has representation from each of the five Byway communities, along with a representative from the Jacob's Ladder Trail Business Association and the two planning commissions. MassHighway, District 1 staff also actively participates and provides technical support when needed.

Committee members provided input in the development of the chapters and feedback in refining drafts and finalizing the document. They also helped to arrange meetings and solicit input from their town boards and outreach to the general public to ensure that the document directly addresses and meets community needs and desires. Advisory committee members are: Linda Cysz and Dee Dee Fraser from Lee; Bill Robinson and Barbara Stuhlmann from Becket; John Garvey from Chester; Linda Hamlin from the Jacob's Ladder Business Association; Steve Hamlin, and Jeff Penn from Huntington; Sue Maxwell from Russell; Ed Lausier and Peter Frieri from MassHighway, District 1, and staff from the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission and Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.

Mission and Goals

Mission

The Articles of Organization for the Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway, Inc. provide a mission statement that remains relevant to the purposes of this second corridor management plan.

"...to promote economic development, historic preservation and tourism along Jacob's Ladder Trail; to enhance its intrinsic resources; protect it from activities that would have a negative impact on those intrinsic resources; to promote the improvements of highway facilities and guide future development in keeping with the character of Jacob's Ladder Trail."

Goals

For this plan, members of Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway, Inc. have defined six goals:

Promote economic development

- Work with the Jacob's Ladder Business Association, the Lee Chamber of Commerce, and other local groups, to create linkages and find ways to support their efforts;
- Encourage and promote events that create local economic opportunities;

- Provide opportunities for local businesses to promote themselves, through the JLTSB, Inc. website and other marketing initiatives;
- Work to find ways to nurture, support, and promote artists, craftspeople and cottage industries in the Byway area.

Promote historic preservation

- Assist in preservation of significant structures and sites through advocacy, outreach and by acting as conduit for funding;
- Support local historic societies and commissions by offering assistance, outreach and inter-community connections;
- Help to document and raise awareness of the history of the Byway area.

Promote tourism

- Improve the effectiveness of the JLSB website, by adding downloadable tourist documents and maps;
- Promote passive recreation throughout the Byway region, especially in the state parks, forests, and other public lands;
- Maintain tourism at a manageable scale, reflective of both capacity of the advisory board, and wishes of local residents;
- Help local communities to expand infrastructure and services in a sensitive manner.

Enhance the Byway's intrinsic resources

- Work with landowners, such as Department of Conservation and Recreation, Department of Fish and Game, Army Corps of Engineers, Springfield Water Department and other stakeholders, to improve access to, and value of, natural and recreational resources in the Byway region;
- Work to improve roadside attractiveness and view-shed visibility along the Byway through pruning and planting, etc., and, where appropriate, thoughtful selective clearing;
- Promote identity continuity and buy-in through consistent and attractive interpretive, identification and wayfinding signage;
- Work to limit sign clutter by identifying unnecessary or redundant signs for removal, and combining signage on posts.

Promote improvements of highway facilities

- First, do no harm: advocate against current highway policy that dictates changes to the Byway that will damage the character of the road;
- Work with MassHighway to enhance cycling along the Byway, using common-sense strategies that do not compromise the aesthetic qualities of the road;
- Advocate for maintenance and redesign policy that balances current need with historic use and character;
- Respect the heritage: for example, when in doubt, give preference to historical layout.

Guide future development

- Develop a package of planning materials aimed at community boards that:
 - Makes a case for bylaws and other guidelines, such as set-back and frontage that are consistent with local conditions, to integrate new development with existing villages and promote greenbelt village separation;
 - Provides case-by-case suggestions of standards that might be adopted or used as models;
 - Provides tools that town officials can use to build support for byway-friendly bylaws.

Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway Projects to Date
<i>The following projects were accomplished in a phased program, numbering from I to XI.</i>
☞ 1994—Developed first corridor management plan , which inventoried and evaluated Byway resources and set a course of action for protecting and enhancing the Byway's resources.
☞ 1994—Produced <i>Touring Jacob's Ladder Trail by Bicycle or Car</i> booklet , which described 12 possible tours off the Byway, varying in length from 10.6 miles to 25.7 miles. Tours include the "Skyline Trail" from Huntington Center up to Chester Center and a tour called "Backroads and Quarries" from Blandford Center north to Quarry Hill and then back south through Otis State Forest.
☞ 1994—Developed JLTSB logo and highway identification signs through a competition. The winning logo was printed on small three-color aluminum highway signs, 18" by 24", and placed along the Byway on 6-foot poles on each side of the road.
☞ 1995—Created <i>Scenic Byway Improvements Plan</i> that provided design plans and cost estimates for highway safety improvements and other amenities.
☞ 1995—Developed design review guidelines handbook to help JLTSB communities plan for development that is in keeping with rural and scenic qualities of the Byway.
☞ 1995—Constructed five highway turnouts with landscaping and interpretive signs.
☞ 1996—Formed Jacob's Ladder Trail Scenic Byway, Inc. , a locally appointed advisory committee with representation from each Byway town, MassHighway, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, and Berkshire Regional Planning Agency.
☞ 1996—Produced <i>Discover Jacob's Ladder Trail</i> brochure on recreational opportunities, cultural events, and seasonal festivals that take place on the Byway.
☞ 1998—Reproduced and marketed a series of antique postcards .
☞ 1999—Produced an educational video program on the natural, scenic and historic features of the trail entitled, <i>Discover Jacob's Ladder Trail: The First of the Great Mountain Crossovers</i> .
☞ 1999—Produced series of two bicycling maps for western and eastern regions of Byway entitled <i>Jacob's Ladder Trail Off-road Bicycle and Multi-use Trail Map</i> .
☞ 1999—Produced <i>Jacob's Ladder Trail Vegetation Management Plan</i> to guide conservation and enhancement of the Byway's scenic quality.
☞ 2000—Constructed H. Newman Marsh Hiking Trail and Overlook with interpretive signage at the Chester-Blandford State Forest.

<p>☞ 2002—Created mobile history exhibit of JLTSB with accompanying brochure entitled, <i>From Wilderness Trail to Scenic Byway</i>.</p>
<p>☞ 2002—Installed gateway sign for Byway in Lee at Thousand Islands.</p>
<p>☞ 2003—Designed and constructed accessible trail in Boulder Park at the Chester-Blandford State Forest.</p>
<p>☞ 2003— Fabricated and installed an eastern gateway sign in Russell, and displayed mobile exhibit on Jacob’s Ladder Trail at the Greater Springfield Conference and Visitor Center.</p>
<p>☞ 2004—Purchased a scenic easement at the JLTSB Summit Cairn and installed interpretive signs and landscaping in the cairn area.</p>
<p>☞ 2004—Developed marketing strategy to promote the Byway as a tourist destination through the services of a consultant.</p>
<p>☞ 2004—Purchased seven acres of scenic open space on the Byway in Huntington Village for passive recreation and with deed restrictions to protect land, historic site and views along the Byway; and donated the land to the Town of Huntington.</p>
<p>☞ 2005—Designed and constructed parking area, spur trail, and improved trailhead at turnout in Lee and Becket for the Appalachian Trail.</p>
<p>☞ 2005—Developed website for the Jacob’s Ladder Trail Scenic Byway as a guide for travelers with information about the roadway’s history and major attractions.</p>
<p>☞ 2005—Developed press kit to gain media attention and to complement online marketing of the Byway.</p>
<p>☞ 2006—Redesigned and improved the website for the Jacob’s Ladder Trail Scenic Byway.</p>
<p>☞ 2008—Rehabilitated roof and steeple and painted exterior of former Methodist Church building in Chester.</p>
<p>☞ 2009—Renovated Hampden Park in Chester with the restoration of trails, seating and picnic areas, and the pavilion.</p>
<p>☞ 2009—Planning, design, and construction for multiple roadside improvements, including wildflower plantings in Lee, installation of trees and shrubs at intersection with Route 8 in Becket, installation of trees at VFW site in Russell, and selective pruning and tree removal in Chester, Huntington and Russell to improve views to the Westfield River.</p>