

## Overall Theme:

# THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER IS THE FLOW OF LIFE SHAPING LAND AND PEOPLES.

To assist in utilizing the overall theme and the 11 major themes, examples of stories in each category also were developed. These examples are not exhaustive or definitive, but may be helpful in triggering other ideas. They are meant ONLY as ideas and examples. Each state, as well as each attraction along the Great River Road, will think of other stories that can be told within these broad themes.

While the overall theme and the 11 major themes convey important messages, they are not necessarily in a style and format that will appeal to specific audiences or lend themselves to slogans and marketing statements. Those involved with interpretation are encouraged to consider the background and interests of their audiences, and to present their interpretation in lively, dynamic formats that touch the public.

## Theme 1: The Mississippi River is a ribbon of life for people, plants and animals.



- a. The Mississippi River system hosts vastly diverse habitats, including sloughs, side channels, and oxbow lakes, which support a wide variety of plant and animal species comprising a significant component of the continent's biodiversity. Congress recognizes the Upper Mississippi as a nationally significant ecosystem.



- b. Prior to settlement by Europeans and hydrologic modification, the Mississippi River flooded approximately 21 million acres, depositing rich alluvial sediments that supported millions of acres of forest wetland. Today fewer than 5 million acres of these forests remain as important sources for timber and wildlife habitat. The rich alluvial soils support agricultural production.



- c. The Mississippi River is home to many rare, threatened, and endangered species, including both state-listed and federally listed species. Federally listed species are bald eagle, peregrine falcon, Louisiana black bear, pallid sturgeon, Mississauga rattler, and two freshwater mollusks: Higgins eye and fat pocketbook.



- d. The Mississippi River has international importance as a migratory corridor for mid-continent water-fowl populations. The river corridor is also important for maintenance, conservation, and preservation of diverse mid-continent fish and wildlife populations.
- e. Development and change in the Mississippi River, during and immediately after the last glacial advance and retreat, have influenced the location and character of the present river, including the deposit of "Ice Age" loess soil.
- f. The Mississippi River is a dynamic system involving sedimentation, erosion, channel changes, floods, and droughts.
- g. The Mississippi River's watershed - about 1,250,000 square miles - extends from the Allegheny Mountains and drains parts of two Canadian provinces and 31 states.
- h. The natural history of the Mississippi River, including its geography, geology, flora, fauna, and ecology, is a vital component in the river's importance and relationship to the entire United States.
- i. The origin, character, and development of the river's landforms affect human use of the river corridor.

**Theme 2: As the river has influenced people, people have influenced the river.**



- a. Local, state, and federal agencies regulate, protect, preserve, and enhance natural resources. State-of-the-art resource management and environmental engineering approaches in both the upper and lower Mississippi River restore wetlands. A large portion of the upper river corridor is a federally designated refuge.



- b. Individuals and private and interagency groups (such as the Upper Mississippi River Conservation Committee, the Izaak Walton League, GREAT, and Environmental Management Programs) have played pioneering roles, especially on the upper river, in protecting the welfare and integrity of the river environment for future generations to enjoy.



- c Many areas along the river are relatively pristine and isolated despite the environmental transformation caused by historic and contemporary human activity.
- d Sedimentation alters fish and wildlife habitats, impedes commercial and recreational navigation, increases frequency of dredging, and can contribute to degraded water quality conditions. Historical erosion and displacement of rich topsoil of the Midwest have had negative effects on Midwest agriculture and way of life, but have helped create and maintain the delta in Louisiana.
- e Exotic plant and animal species pose severe threats to the river's natural inhabitants and municipal, industrial, and recreational activities on the river.
- f Pollutants from a number of sources, including spills, continue to degrade Mississippi River water quality. This results in fish consumption advisories, non-attainment of water quality standards, algae blooms, nutrient enrichment, high turbidity, and decreasing populations of intolerant aquatic species.
- j The cumulative effects of recent human intervention in the Mississippi River natural system are many: channel modifications have altered erosion cycles, channel bed stability, and sediment loads.
- k The Mississippi River is a major recreational resource. The river's easy access and diverse resources attract millions of people annually, but the increasing number of people using the river creates problems and concerns among different user groups.



### Theme 3: The Mississippi River has nurtured prehistoric and historic cultures.



- a A great diversity of cultures existed in pre-European times beginning around 12,000 years before the present (B.P.), with the Paleo-Indian hunters of the mammoth and mastodon. Archaic hunters and foragers of 9000 B.P. followed. Then the Woodland Mound builders of the Hopewell culture came. Later, the Mississippian and Oneonta cultures with prosperous farms flourished in the half-century before the time of Columbus.



- b From the earliest settlement, patterns of economic exchanges and alliances facilitated by the Mississippi River system influenced cultural developments in



the Midwest and Old Southwest that distinguished these regions from their counterparts on the East Coast.

- c The most sophisticated prehistoric Indian civilization north of Mexico, centered at Cahokia Mounds, established a regional center for Mississippian culture at the primary confluences of the Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois, and Ohio Rivers.



- d Human inhabitants of the Mississippi River Valley have adapted to its rich biotic resources; these adaptations, which involve hunting, fishing, and resource-gathering techniques, a great variety of watercraft and water-related material culture, and centuries of folk wisdom, constitute an essential unit of Mississippi River ecological analysis.



#### Theme 4: The Mississippi River inspires a variety of folk life, literary, fine art, and musical forms.



- a The indigenous music of the Mississippi River includes folk, gospel, blues, jazz, rock, country, and folk songs of traditional river people. An interweaving of Creole, Cajun, Anglo-Celtic, and African-American musical traditions inspired these unique sounds.

- b The Mississippi River Valley nourished a rich oral tradition that contributed to a distinctive regional literature and nurtured and disseminated regional linguistic diversity.

- c The fluidity of populations in "golden era" river towns (before lock and dam) gave the settlements a diverse and boisterous character. Long-lasting stereotypes of "river rat" behavior and character emerged, furnishing never-ending fuel for literary imaginations and contributing to the American frontier's mythology.



- d. The Mississippi River has served as a channel for the movement of ideas, and the dissemination and diffusion of material, folk, and popular culture can be traced both east and west from the Mississippi River, as well as along its north-south course.
- e. A wealth of intricate traditional knowledge regarding the Mississippi River survives among the few people whose livelihoods still depend on the river. While river people have adapted this knowledge to modern times, it still shares much with what the pilots of Mark Twain's time knew, connecting river users through the ages.
- f. The Mississippi River Valley has a multicultural history, with many ethnic peoples playing significant roles and contributing to the arts, letters, music, historic events, and traditional culture.

### Theme 5: The Mississippi River has profoundly shaped American history.



- a. The historical Mississippi River fur trade merged Indian and European cultures. Native people, trappers, and the parent trading companies interacted to have an impact on European settlement, regional economic growth, European American and American Indian culture, and American Indian/European American relationships. As the fur trade moved up the Missouri River, the trans-Mississippi west opened to American settlement.
- b. The central story of post-Columbian American Indian history in the Mississippi River valley is the process by which European and American settlers displaced native tribes and disrupted their cultural base.
- c. The history of the Mississippi River is significant not only to Americans but to Europeans, as the river was an important border zone between rival colonial powers and played a major role in opening the continent to French, Spanish, British, and American exploration trade, and settlement.
- d. The Mississippi River system (including the Ohio and Missouri Rivers) provided access to the interior and southern outlet for surplus goods, linked the eastern states with the west instead of with Europe, allowed for political unity via the Louisiana Purchase, supported the spread of the southern cotton economy and slavery-based labor system, and sustained a distinct American culture.



- e. Slavery became a significant political, economic, and social issue in American history because of its expansion into the Mississippi River Valley. The river was central to the operations of the plantation and the creation of a planting "aristocracy" in the antebellum South, which dominated political, economic, and social affairs in the lower Mississippi River Valley. The river also served to transport enslaved people downriver and offered a route north to freedom for escaping fugitives.
- f. By providing growth and opportunity, the Mississippi River Valley supported an American democracy composed of individuals with strong beliefs in social ideals, responsibility, and populist reform.

**Theme 6: The strategic importance of the Mississippi River has resulted in conflict between nations and peoples.**



- a. The Mississippi River has played a central role in American Indian, American, and international military history. The river was a prize of war and a boundary in treaties. It also served as home to Civil War presidents and generals, and became key to the Civil War's outcome. Later, it supported mobilization in World War II.



**Theme 7: Mississippi River architecture reflects distinctive styles affected by cultural and natural resources.**



- a. Architectural styles in Mississippi River towns were affected by climate, topography, natural resources, ethnic culture, and construction dates.



- b. Consistent architectural styles in Mississippi River towns reflect rapid communication and flow of ideas along the river, the rapidity with which the river was settled, the cultural backgrounds of the first immigrants to make permanent settlements, and a deep cultural and communicative gap between river people and inland farming people.



- c. Vernacular architecture along the Mississippi River reveals many ethnic influences.
- d. Surviving river town architecture represents the boom years of wealth along the river, wealth generated through transportation and other river-based commercial activities.
- e. The ethnic diversity of the small river towns provides international visitors with shared architecture, language, cultural events, and history.



**Theme 8: The Mississippi River is one of the world's great rivers noted for its beauty, grandeur and diversity.**



- a. The richness and beauty of much of the Mississippi River corridor remain one of the nation's "best-kept secrets." Scenic resources along the Mississippi River are many and varied, offering majestic bluff vistas as well as tranquil, low-lying views.



**Theme 9: The history of Mississippi River transportation is a dramatic story reflecting the river's economic and commercial importance.**



- a. The Mississippi River is a vital interstate trade route linking North and South, and through its tributaries the Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, and Arkansas rivers, linking East and West.



- b. Mississippi navigation has evolved from the transportation of goods in dugouts, pirogues, rafts, bateaux, flatboats, and keelboats to the heyday of the steamboat era to establishment of the present inland waterway system with its towboat and barges.
- c. Eastern attempts to reach the Mississippi, the interior river of commerce, resulted in internal improvement such as canals, turnpikes, bridges, and railroads.



- d. Evidence of historic river transportation is preserved in the numerous documented and undocumented shipwrecks that are recorded for the Mississippi River channels and its backwaters.
- e. The Mississippi River plays an important role in bulk commodity transportation and world trade and provides the nation's most inexpensive means of transportation.
- f. The Mississippi River System is a federally designated navigation channel, providing economic benefits to river communities and the region.



### Theme 10: Mississippi River towns and cities reflect mid-19<sup>th</sup> century life.



- a. For most towns, the river was the location and site factor in economic development before the 1870s. Only limited, capital-intensive conventional economic development has ensued, but the river now offers important opportunities for tourism development.



- b. The physical layout of river towns provides access to the river and to adjacent lands, securing an economic and cultural advantage over inland towns.



- c. Navigation and flood control improvements on the Mississippi have changed the river's landscape to such an extent that both the upper and lower Mississippi River today differs markedly from the natural river viewed by Indians, explorers, and early settlers.

### Theme 11: The Mississippi River is a working river sustaining many industries.



- a. Many industries depend on the river for water power and transportation and use the river for its natural resources.

- b. Historic river-based industries, including commercial fishing, pearl button, ice lead, and timber, have given way to the present-day oil, cement, limestone, grain, and coal industries. Other industries, including milling and hydroelectric generation, have spanned the decades.

