

the **hammersmith** group  
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# Branding Historic Cities

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Author Lucas Conley offers an excellent and well-reasoned critique of branding in his recent book, *Obsessive Branding Disorder*. Conley spoke out against the amateurish efforts at branding cities and real estate developments. I could not agree more with his criticisms of the second-class efforts – but when the branding is done well and in alignment with a thoughtful municipal master plan, it can be a very powerful tool for economic development.

Let me tell you a story about one of the oldest towns in the United States.

The town played a role in nearly every chapter of American history – from King Philip’s War and the Salem Witch Trials to the Revolutionary War and the Industrial Revolution. The town has the history, location, and architecture to make it a dream project for strategic branding.

It’s a town of pioneers, revolutionaries, artists and entrepreneurs. While other New England towns embraced the Witch Trials, this town’s leading citizen Judge Nathaniel Saltonstall (1639-1707) recused himself from that mockery of justice in 1692. Another early settler, Tristram Coffin (1604-1681) left town to found Nantucket in 1659. His daughter Mary Coffin Starbuck inspired the name of the character in Melville’s *Moby Dick* and eventually the ubiquitous coffee company. In 1851, entrepreneur R.H. Macy opened his first dry goods store there, and held the first Macy’s parades downtown. Louis B. Mayer opened his first movies theaters in downtown before moving west and becoming a Hollywood mogul.

An affluent citizen hired Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) to tutor his child, and ended up backing Bell’s “telephone” experiments. One of the first telephone calls was made in the town. The town’s city solicitor and future Supreme Court justice William H. Moody (1853-1917) rose to fame here as a prosecutor in the sensational Lizzie Borden ax murder trials of 1893.

The town has one of the best celebrity endorsements: George Washington visited town on his victory tour in 1792, and declared that it was “one of the most pleasant villages” that he had seen.

The town has pop culture appeal as well. The town’s high school inspired cartoonist Bob Montana to create Archie Comics. Montana based his characters such as Betty and Veronica on his classmates, and his stories defined the American high school experience for generations, and became the precursor of teen comedies such as *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* and *Sixteen Candles*.

The town became the setting for stories by horror authors H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) and resident John Belleairs (1938-1991), as well as poet John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892) and Andre Dubus, Jr. (1936-1999). It was the childhood home of Robert and Eric Cummings, who achieved fame in movies and music through *White Zombie* and *Powerman 5000*.

So, does this sound like a town that you might like to visit?

Imagine weddings or special events held at the tavern where George Washington stayed in 1792. Or a film festival held at the downtown theaters where Louis B. Mayer’s career began, before he became a Hollywood mogul. Or 1950s-themed parties in the same settings where Betty and Veronica attended prom.

All of this history and culture is much more than just nostalgia. It can help drive economic development through heritage tourism, cultural economy initiatives, and by ensuring that the town remains a differentiated product – it isn’t just delivering generic “housing” that could be interchanged with what other towns are offering.

And yet all that history is nearly worthless without a tangible way for visitors and residents to connect with it.

The Saltonstall estate, Harrod’s tavern, and the downtown theaters have been demolished. The iconic high school was converted into City Hall. No sign marks the building where R.H. Macy started his first dry goods store. The town’s annual Thanksgiving parade makes no reference to the early Macy’s parades. No signs mark the site of the Native American raids on the early colonies.

Individually, such buildings, signage, and stories have a minor effect on the everyday lives of residents and visitors. Yet collectively, they are deeply transformative.

The town has a rich heritage that should be the envy of even more affluent towns. Yet it seems to be turning its back on the economic development opportunities that could be realized by leveraging the buildings and places linked to this heritage.

For example, towns like Deerfield, MA have interpretive signage that mark the battles and raids and help not only drive tourism, but also serve an educational purpose about the different ways to interpret the historic events. Cities like Salem, Newburyport and Newport have extensive historic sign programs that make the town's history accessible to visitors.

Salem also has a statue of Elizabeth Montgomery, who played Samantha from *Bewitched* – but no whimsical statue commemorates this town's relationship with Betty and Veronica.

Speaking of statues, the town does have the first American statue erected in honor of a woman – yet the town has such a conflicted relationship with the statue that some leaders have publicly suggested that it be removed.

Driving through the city today, a visitor would find very little to point to the long history. The historic town center – with homes from the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s – was demolished during Urban Renewal. Today, it is a town with no bookstores, no theater, and very little sense of identity except as a has-been town long past its prime.

A strategic rebranding of the town could make some of that rich history accessible, and could help increase the perceived desirability of living or working in town. However, the town brand can't stand apart from the goods and services – in aggregate, call it a 'lifestyle' that the town provides.

Making people aware of the town's history and heritage is a first step, but it cannot be separated from the broader issues of eco-

nomie development, real estate development and urban planning. If you consider a town as a brand and as a product, you cannot separate the brand – the perception of what it's like to live there – from the day-to-day moments of what living there actually has to offer. Does walking out at night mean you're coming from a movie or a dance performance, on your way for a glass of wine? Or does it mean that you're walking along scary streets past abandoned storefronts?

Propounding a brand beyond what it can deliver is the surest way to alienate potential residents who will feel that they were overpromised and that the town underdelivered.

Even thinking in terms of towns having brands is a significant break from the majority of cities who ignore their history and develop without a broader strategy or plan. These cities tend to become bland, interchangeable places.

In the end, the combination of a thoughtful plan that is being well-executed along with a brand that clearly communicates the value of living in town makes the difference between a place where people live because they have to, and one in which they choose to live.

Oh, and in case you were wondering about the town described above ... it's Haverhill.

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