Department of Natural and Cultural Resources Sunday Opening Pilot Program Report

1 BACKGROUND

S.L. 2025-89 was signed by Governor Stein on August 6, 2025, establishing a Sunday Opening State Historic Site Pilot Program ("Pilot Program") across thirteen State Historic Sites within the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources ("DNCR"). The session law appropriated one hundred fourteen thousand dollars ($114,000) in each year of the 2025-2027 fiscal biennium to implement the Pilot Program. This is the first of three reports required on the implementation of the Pilot Program.

The sites included in the Pilot Program are:

1. Bentonville Battlefield
2. Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson
3. Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum
4. Fort Fisher
5. Governor Charles B. Aycock Birthplace
6. Historic Bath
7. Historic Edenton
8. Historic Halifax
9. North Carolina State Capitol
10. Reed Gold Mine
11. Roanoke Island Festival Park
12. Somerset Place
13. Thomas Day State Historic Site

Phase 1 of the Sunday Pilot serves as a "test and adjust" phase of implementation to allow for the Division of State Historic Sites to collect information and determine sites with the most promise for success. Phase 2 of the Sunday Pilot, discussed below in Section 4, will be a more robust Pilot Program from March 2027 through August 2027, utilizing data collected from Phase 1 to ensure the most efficient use of state resources and best representation of findings for DNCR's final report.

1.1 METHODOLOGY FOR HISTORIC SITES SUNDAY PILOT

The timeline selected for this pilot was Sundays from June 8, 2026- August 2, 2026, because DNCR believed that summer was most likely to produce the highest success for this Pilot Program. Although the Division of Historic Sites ("Historic Sites") sees high visitation in April and May, much of those monthly visitation numbers include large school groups which presumably would not be visiting on Sundays. Historically, July is the third highest month for visitation across Historic Sites.

Although June and July straddle two fiscal years, DNCR felt this time period showed the most promise in sampling Sunday visitation numbers at Historic Sites.

Each of the Pilot Program sites reported data on walk-in visitation, retail sales, total staff hours, number of full-time staff, and how Sunday hours were advertised each week. Pilot Program sites operated for four hours on Sundays compared to eight hours on other days. Because of this, DNCR normalized the data by dividing the average visitation and retail sales reporting over eight hour days by two so that the data would be comparable to Sunday reporting.

Historic Sites also received qualitative data from staff on the ground each week to evaluate how the Pilot Program was operating in practice.

2 RESULTS

2.1 HIGHEST PERFORMING SITES

Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum, Thomas Day State Historic Site, Historic Bath, Reed Gold Mine, Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson, Somerset Place, and **Fort Fisher** show promise based on 1) percentage of Sunday visitation compared to average visitation over four-hour days during regular weekday and Saturday hours and 2) when looking at comparative percentages of retail sales compared to the average. The charts below show sites that performed relatively well in green and sites that did not perform as well on Sundays in orange. Charlotte Hawkins Brown rents out a baseball field on Sundays for a local little league team, so high visitation rates on Sundays are correlated with the popular use of that space and will remain the same regardless of the Sunday pilot. Advertisement through flyers and social media marketing were similar across all sites and did not seem to determine Pilot Program success.

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North Carolina Historic Sites

Percent Change in Visitation Sundays Compared to 4-hour Tues-Sat on Average

Historic Site	Tues-Sat Visitation 4 Hour Avg.	Avg. Sunday Visitation Total	Percent Sunday Visitation Compared to 4 Hour Week Avg.
Charlotte Hawkins Brown	7.5	20.0	267%
Thomas Day	2.1	1.9	88%
Bath	16.3	12.4	76%
Reed Gold Mine	83.1	58.6	71%
Brunswick Town	30.4	17.3	57%
Somerset Place	7.1	3.5	49%
Fort Fisher	380.0	167.4	44%
Roanoke Island	93.5	35.8	38%
Aycock	2.0	0.8	38%
NC State Capitol	124.9	44.8	36%
Bentonville	65.9	21.1	32%
Halifax	35.5	9.0	25%
Edenton	34.3	2.4	7%

Percent Change in Retail Sales Sundays Compared to 4-hour Tues-Sat on Average

Historic Site	Tues-Sat Retail Sales 4 Hour Avg.	Avg. Sunday Retail Sales Total	Percent Sunday Retail Sales Compared to 4 Hour Week Avg.
Charlotte Hawkins Brown	$ 15.51	$ 15.87	102%
Somerset Place	$ 9.01	$ 6.60	73%
Fort Fisher	$ 978.86	$ 671.86	69%
Reed Gold Mine	$ 699.87	$ 392.35	56%
Roanoke Island	$ 286.07	$ 108.75	38%
Bath	$ 30.32	$ 6.98	23%
Brunswick Town	$ 56.61	$ 7.00	12%
Halifax	$ 25.19	$ 2.50	10%
Aycock	$ -	$ -	0%
Bentonville	$ -	$ -	0%
NC State Capitol	$ -	$ -	0%
Thomas Day	$ -	$ -	0%
Edenton	$ 5.09	$ -	0%

2.2 Operational Costs

The Phase 1 two-month "test and adjust" period provided useful information about both Sunday operations and the resources needed to support them. Cost information for Phase 1 was developed using a combination of directly identifiable expenditures and reasonable estimates of staff time and operating resources used during the Pilot Program. Because some activities were supported within existing staffing and operating budgets rather than separately charged to the Pilot Program, the Phase 1 estimate does not capture every component of the full ongoing cost of Sunday operations. The experience from Phase 1 will inform a more structured approach to staffing, cost tracking, and implementation in Phase 2.

Staffing represents the most significant cost component of the Pilot Program. Historic Sites used a combination of temporary personnel and permanent employees to provide Sunday coverage. Temporary staffing costs were isolated through payroll and Temporary Solutions data. Permanent employees at some sites shifted portions of their regular schedules to Sundays to minimize the burden on staff for the two month pilot. While those schedule changes did not necessarily create additional payroll expenditures, the staff time represented a real resource used by the Pilot Program and in some instances reduced staff availability during the regular workweek. For a sustained Sunday operating model, Historic Sites will likely need to consider the appropriate balance of temporary staffing and permanent staff capacity so that Sunday coverage does not reduce the level of service provided during the rest of the week, which may result in additional permanent FTEs needed. Site feedback already identifies staffing-capacity concerns associated with the Pilot Program. Phase 1 cost estimates for the two months therefore include the attributable value of permanent staff time used for Sunday operations, in addition to temporary staffing costs, to provide a fuller picture of operational costs.

The estimate also includes facility operations and supplies, including allocated utility costs and estimates for supplies associated with Sunday openings. These costs were derived from site operating information rather than uniquely identified Sunday expenditures and should therefore be understood as reasonable allocations of resources used during the pilot. Other facility impacts, such as additional housekeeping, maintenance, grounds, or similar operating needs resulting from increased site use, were not consistently identifiable during Phase 1. Phase 2 will include work to identify material site-level operating costs to better inform the final cost assessment of the Pilot Program.

Implementing Sunday site openings also required planning, administration, and other shared departmental support that was largely absorbed within existing budgets. DNCR estimated these costs at 10% of direct site costs. This is intended as a reasonable estimate of resources devoted to staffing and onboarding, budget and payroll administration, reporting, management, and other program support during Phase 1.

Marketing and communications efforts are considered separately. Phase 1 relied primarily on existing DNCR and Historic Sites communications channels, including a press release, website updates, site-level promotion, and social media. DNCR has identified approximately 45 staff hours associated with those activities over the two months. The cost of that staff effort can be reflected in

the Phase 1 estimate, but it does not represent the cost of a dedicated promotional campaign. Phase 2 will include increased investment in a targeted marketing campaign to highlight Sunday operational hours.

The Phase 1 cost estimate is intended to show the resources used to operate the initial two-month Pilot Program, while distinguishing where possible between direct expenditures and resources absorbed within existing operations. It should not be interpreted as a complete estimate of the recurring resources that would be needed to operate these sites on Sundays on an ongoing basis. Phase 2 will provide an opportunity to improve site-level tracking of staffing and operating costs, test a more intentional staffing and marketing approach, and produce stronger information for DNCR's subsequent funding recommendations.

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North Carolina HISTORIC SITES

Sunday Historic Sites Pilot – Phase 1 Two-Month Estimated Costs

Historic Site	Temporary Staffing	Permanent Staff	Utilities	Supplies	Per Site Cost
Governor Charles B. Aycock Birthplace	$0	$2,592	$241	$161	$2,993
Historic Bath*	$452	$899	$518	$168	$2,038
Bentonville Battlefield	$853	$1,675	$406	$172	$3,106
Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson*	$581	$1,180	$255	$173	$2,189
Charlotte Hawkins Brown Museum	$581	$530	$1,442	$162	$2,715
Historic Edenton	$426	$1,586	$769	$162	$2,943
Fort Fisher	$1,270	$5,607	$2,996	$260	$10,132
Historic Halifax	$0	$1,056	$604	$165	$1,824
North Carolina State Capitol	$0	$934	$642	$180	$1,755
Reed Gold Mine	$896	$2,492	$492	$192	$4,072
Roanoke Island Festival Park	$4,394	$3,615	$2,100	$182	$10,291
Somerset Place	$762	$1,469	$270	$163	$2,664
Thomas Day State Historic Site	$508	$764	$231	$161	$1,664
Sites subtotal	**$10,723**	**$24,399**	**$10,966**	**$2,298**	**$48,386**

Program-wide shared costs		
Marketing / communications	45 staff hours identified; staff-time estimate	$1,722
Administrative support	10% of direct site costs	$4,839
Estimated Phase 1 Cost		**$54,947**

1. Temporary and permanent personnel totals include applicable employer payroll and benefit costs. Only FICA was added for temporary staff.
2. Utilities include electricity and water. Supplies include paper and cleaning products.

3 CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 CAROLINA HURRICANES PARADE DAY OUTLIER

The North Carolina State Capitol estimated over 20,000 people visited the Capitol on June 16 during the Carolina Hurricanes Stanley Cup celebration in downtown Raleigh. Because this was a rare event with unprecedented visitation, DNCR determined that the June 16 Capitol data should be excluded from this analysis.

3.2 VISITATION VARIES BROADLY

During the summer months, Fort Fisher sees much higher visitation than the next highest visited Historic Sites across the division. Fort Fisher is a major attraction for beach goers. Because of this, DNCR compared visitation and retail results on Sundays as a percent of averages for each individual site, so as to measure success against the site itself rather than to compare metrics across sites that vary widely in overall visitation.

3.3 VISITATION COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

For this Pilot Program, sites counted visitation by in-person walk-ins to primary information centers. However, at certain sites with large grounds and multiple buildings, visitors often do not enter the primary information building during their visit are therefore not "counted" using this methodology. In a future Pilot Program, DNCR will instead utilize data from car counters at sites such as Aycock Birthplace where car counter devices can yield more comprehensive visitation estimates than hand-counting visitors that walk in. This data is typically collected on a weekly rather than daily basis so Sunday car counts could not be isolated during this reporting period.

3.4 QUALITATIVE DATA

Staff Capacity: All sites reported the Pilot Program opening was unsustainable without adequate funding to hire additional full-time positions. Due to limited staff, the sites were often not able to offer guided tours or other programming like panning at Reed Gold Mine that were offered during the other days of the week.

Weather as a factor: Many of the pilot weekends were exceedingly hot, which often correlated to lower visitation as individuals and families limited outdoor time and travel. Harsh weather conditions like extreme heat and rain significantly impact daily visitation numbers across DNCR sites.

Marketing: All sites displayed flyers throughout the sites and posted regular information on social media and the Historic Sites website about the Sunday hours being offered. However, most sites

saw significantly lower visitation on Sundays compared to other days. Frequency of social media posts or number of flyers did not correlate to having higher Sunday visitation percent comparisons.

4 RECOMMENDATION

Thomas Day, Historic Bath, Reed Gold Mine, Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Somerset Place, and **Fort Fisher** were at or over 50% compared to typical visitation or sales which show promise that with more staff and dedicated funding for marketing, these sites may be able to successfully be open on Sundays. Thomas Day is expected to close in March 2027 for renovations; therefore, it is not recommended for participation in Phase 2. DNCR recommends Phase 2 of the Pilot Program from March through August 2027, with the above six identified sites to 1) test the pilot during a different busy season to compare results and 2) see if there is continued improvement in Sunday visitation with more advertisement for the pilot.

With the above findings, DNCR recommends adding **Thomas Wolfe Memorial, Fort Dobbs, Alamance Battleground, and Bennett Place** to Phase 2. These sites have indicated interest in participating in the Pilot and they believe there is a promise of success.

Many sites observed extreme heat in July 2026, influencing visitation and as such, recommend that Phase 2 include cooler months of the year. DNCR also believes additional marketing funding beyond what is possible to execute internally would be needed for Sunday visitation to be competitive with normal visitation days. DNCR recommends hiring temporary employees for longer than the pilot period, as hiring for such a limited amount of work and on Sundays proved extremely difficult. Phase 2 will reflect these recommendations.

In summary, DNCR plans to proceed with Phase 2 of the Sunday Pilot Program from March through August 2027, and will include the following sites: **Historic Bath, Reed Gold Mine, Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Somerset Place, Fort Fisher, Thomas Wolfe Memorial, Fort Dobbs, Alamance Battleground,** and **Bennett Place.**