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Jonathan “Jon” Jarvis  
December 9, 2016

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo  
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My Narrative  
The Administrative History of the National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office

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This transcript was reviewed by Jonathan Jarvis

**Jonathan "Jon" Jarvis Interview: December 9, 2016**

**Early experience with heritage areas:** It was through my staff work for the NPS Advisory Board. Frankly I did not know that much about heritage areas prior to that because I had spent most of my career in traditional service, traditional parks in the west which hasn't been an area with many heritage areas. The NPS Advisory Board was doing an evaluation of the heritage area program and I was on the team. We traveled to Blackstone and to Essex and to Cane River where we toured and met with staff. That was how I got my education about heritage areas.

**Charting a Future report:** It may have had an impact in NPS because it raised the profile of heritage areas and did a better job of explaining what they are to the people in the Service who did not know about them. I don't think there was anything prior to that report that was equivalent to it in terms of articulating how these things work and what they were, and what the growth is. In terms of Congress, probably individual members have referred to that report or communities that were interested in becoming a heritage area have referred to that report. Congress as a whole, probably not. In my role (as director) and talking to Congress that has been a reference document.

**Sunsetting:** I have never thought that sunseting is a good idea. The concept of sunseting is actually often misconstrued. In its original concept it wasn't that the heritage area was going to sunset but that the federal funding was going to sunset. Advocates for heritage areas have often portrayed the sunset as the heritage areas are going away. The original concept of this was that the amount of appropriations was term limited. You would ultimately launch the heritage area into some sort of self-sustaining financial model. What we have learned over the tenure of these areas is that some level of federal appropriation to continue on is appropriate.

Once a heritage area is established, I think it should continue. There is no sunset to the heritage area. An initial fairly generous federal appropriation that declines over time down to a base level that is retained in perpetuity is appropriate (a base that would last forever). Just like a park, but not one that grows over time except to keep up with inflation. Given a sustained base level. They can leverage the federal dollars, in many cases, ten to one. That is part of the expectation.

**Program Legislation:** I have been supportive of program legislation from day one. We actually introduced it early on as a part of the original centennial legislation. We took it to Congress formally back in 2010. I would call it organic legislation for the heritage areas. One of their biggest problems is that they lack (a legislated program). Each one is formed out of whole cloth and yet there is no overarching programmatic or organic legislation with the heritage areas. I think that's needed. The people that think it's inflexible are naïve and don't understand legislation. That's like saying that the Organic Act of the NPS is inflexible and yet we have Rosie the Riveter and Yellowstone under the same Organic Act.

Let's face it, people out there would love it if you give them federal appropriations and have no constraints on it whatsoever. Well, that's never going to happen. I mean, this is the taxpayers' dollars. There are responsibilities that come with that. Having some umbrella legislation that aggregates the collective of heritage areas gives them a much longer sustainability from an appropriation and an authority standpoint than each one of them standing alone.

**Policy changes:** We have had to make accommodation for the lack of increase in the level of heritage area funding. We have changed the policy in terms of allocation. It’s a growth industry with new heritage areas coming in but not a lot of money. We don’t really have NPS management policies over heritage areas, so I haven’t seen anything in particular.

**NPS responsibilities to heritage areas:** One of the big findings in the report that we did for the Advisory Board is that heritage areas are the most successful when there is a unit of the NP System within the broad boundaries of that area, e.g., Cane River has the Cane River Plantation. Even when they are little postage stamps inside of a heritage area, having a uniformed NPS person with an understanding of federal bureaucracy, federal accountability and advocacy seems to have made the heritage areas more successful in reaching their ultimate goals. They are more successful when they have an actual uniformed national park service employee, particularly one that understands the role of partnerships and the broader community engagement aspect of the heritage area. On one hand we have a responsibility, when we have a unit within a heritage area to have engagement with the broader community and philanthropic community that are trying to preserve that history. The programmatic side of the NPS: the National Register, the National Historic Landmark, the Historic Preservation Tax Credits Programs, and RTCA are all components that can be brought in to assist the heritage area to accomplish its goals. These are assets to be applied, including the Land and Water Conservation Fund. These are other assets of the NPS that when they are brought in can assist in that regard. Obviously, we have a role in approving the heritage area plan and assisting them to complete it in the legal time frame and recommending, to Congress, whether a new heritage area is established or not.

**Benefit of NPS to heritage areas:** The NPS is the most highly respected U.S. public agency. It has the greatest set of professionals in the world of historic preservation, in many cases of conservation, in terms of storytelling, and in history. Those assets of the Service are available to a heritage area that wants to preserve its own story, its own history and tell that story. By links to the NPS they have access to all that expertise.

**How the heritage areas support the mission of NPS:** The U.S. can rightfully claim the national park idea. The idea that we would protect and set aside the places most important to us from a historical or natural standpoint. Very early on, Yellowstone, Yosemite, Crater Lake, and in the ‘30s the battlefields came to us and then in the ‘60s some of the civil rights sites, so on and so forth. What’s interesting about that concept is that we took that idea of national parks and we launched it internationally out into places like Europe and Africa and Costa Rica, India and other places. These landscapes in those other parts of the world were much more lived in. So, the national park idea had to be adapted to rural landscapes, engagement of local people, inclusion of communities, and protection of lifestyle as well as quality of environment. That idea, after it had been around the world, was different. When it got back here, we realized there was an alternative to a national park designation. We’ve learned a lot from different parts of the world and needed a model that we could apply to a broader geographic area that had nationally significant assets but had people living there and there were businesses and communities and historical architecture and river fronts. For some places the classic national park model was inappropriate and if applied would never fly politically. The concept of heritage areas began to take form, so I look at heritage areas as part of the family of parks and protected areas uniquely

in that they are non-regulatory. They are an overlay. They are actively created from community engagement, at least in principle. The Community gets to say what's important to them and how you can protect those resources. The community decides what are all the bits and pieces that can be aggregated and applied at the community level to protect those things that are the most important and form the core of the heritage area.

**Future of heritage areas in NPS:** I would hope, and I have told the Alliance (of Heritage Areas) over and over again, that they need organic legislation. That is where they should be focused. Get a congressional sponsor. Build up support in Congress to get a legislative act. Another thing to think about, a heritage area is also an alternative to a classic park designation. Everybody wants the NPS arrowhead. Everybody wants the brand. There is not a day that goes by that someone from Congress or some senior person wants to talk to me about how they create a national park. They've got something, maybe significant, maybe not, that they want to designate. Depending on what it is, a heritage area may very well be a better alternative. It's a cheaper alternative for us, because parks can become ultimately pretty expensive. Whereas a heritage area might be expensive up front, but you leverage it. Even if you get a small appropriation, \$250-350K a year, that's a whole lot better than \$3 or 4 million a year to run a park. If I had the powers I would pursue, organic, active legislation for the heritage areas program. Then, work to secure a reasonable formula for the appropriations process. With an up front, get it started investment, a declining investment, then a stable investment over some time frame. From the NPS standpoint, we have a responsibility to help them be successful in a behind the scenes but a very supportive role. NPS can't run everything. That's not our job.

**Challenges:** There are a couple of things. One is managing the high expectations and low capacity. The program in the NPS is small. People that do it do a great job but there is not a lot of capacity there to support all the heritage areas. There are some heritage areas that probably need to be rethought because they undermine the broader concept such as the entire state of Tennessee? You could designate every state and then it just looks like pass through money.

We need to learn from the successful ones, e.g., Blackstone, Essex. Some of the older ones have done a really good job and I think people have short memories. They forget that you could have walked across the Blackstone on the car bodies that were in that river when it was started and today it's got a river walk and restaurants and things that have been really, really improved. Take those concepts and help others be inspired by them around the system.

There is a lack of understanding in the NPS about what heritage areas are and in these tight budgetary times they are viewed as a drain on the system. That is still the case. That is why we zero out the budget every year.

The park service is a legal construct that has the Organic Act, the general authorities, Redwood Act, and then other programmatic legislation you have to follow. All of those are legislated requirements of the NPS. Nothing from Congress has told me I have to do anything with heritage areas. That is why I keep saying, you need organic legislation. Because when I submit my budget through OMB they are going to say, well, you need to take care of your parks first. You need to take care of these programs first. These are your priorities. Each year during the last decade OMB says, "Okay here is your base level and I want five% cut on top of that." So,

we are going to look at the programs that don't have legal mandates. I apologize to the heritage areas, but they don't have a legal mandate. They have an established heritage area with an authorization, and they are defended by their individual members, and they (Congress) always put it back in the budget. We always know that.

If the National Park System was made up of individual parks with no Organic Act, it would be the same situation. Whitman Mission National Historic Site doesn't have to do battle for its own individual budget because it is part of the system. We can aggregate them, and they don't have to fight their battles individually. The heritage area program is still fighting the battle individually. That's why they are struggling.

The NPS needs to realize that the second century of the NPS is going to have a couple of really critical components to it. One of those is that we are no longer in a position to do the work to achieve our mission independent of others, without key partners on the ground. We are learned enough now to understand that we have to think and operate at a much larger geographic scale than we have ever done before. Superintendents used to be able to think, this is my turf, and I can draw a line around it and sit in here and protect my little space, whether its Fort McHenry or Yellowstone. The big wake up lesson to me about that was when I was superintendent of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska. It is thirteen million acres, same size as West Virginia. If that is not big enough to just stay inside your park boundaries, I don't know what is. But I found that I still had caribou that migrated in and out, salmon went to the ocean and back, the native communities (four linguistic groups and a dozen or more native villages with subsistence activities) in and out, the pipeline community was in and out. It doesn't matter how big these places are, you must actively be engaged with the external communities, users, stakeholders, all of them.

The NPS is going through a transition in the way we think about how we manage parks. I have always said that we forget that we have a programmatic side to the NPS that are actually doing all of that stuff already out there in communities. Heritage areas being one of those and other things like the Registry programs and RTCA are already active in those communities. So, we already have the capacity to understand how to function in a slightly more ambiguous environment. My feeling is that some of our most creative managers, people like Michael Creasy, have been very active in the heritage area program, have learned how to leverage assets we have with communities, with the private sector, with mayors and city councils and county commissioners and local preservation and historical organizations to accomplish bigger goals.

The NPS needs to do as I do, which is, to look at the heritage area program as an asset not as a drain. It is a powerful asset for us to take the concept of preservation and leverage it out into a broader community. I have always felt that an entrance to a park should not be an abrupt change. You go to Lowell or to some of these other parks where you don't even know where the boundary is. You don't even know if you are in the park or not, because we have taken the heritage areas concept and applied it externally. The positive benefits of that, the economic revitalization of the community, the engagement, the new immigrants that see they can be part of this. All of that is very powerful. I think that that's what the Second Century Commission was saying. What our Advisory Board was saying. What the new Advisory Board reports around

engagement are saying. The new theme studies we are adding, the National Park System plan, all of that leans into the value of the heritage area.