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John Debo
August 16, 2016

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
Transcribed by Antoinette Condo
Reviewed by John Debo
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NPS History Collection
Harpers Ferry Center
PO Box 50
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
HFC_Archivist@nps.gov

My Narrative
The Administrative History of the National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office

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August 16, 2016

Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by John Debo

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I came as superintendent to Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area (later renamed National Park) in 1988. I was superintendent for 21 years, and then not long after retiring took a position with the Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park which is the non-profit friends group which helps support the national park. I am the Chief Development Officer of the Conservancy, and my role is to manage fundraising in support of Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

When I came to the Cuyahoga Valley in 1988, it very quickly became apparent to me that the job of managing and helping develop a very new unit of the NP System was going to involve more than the park itself. The Cuyahoga Valley National Park lies along the Cuyahoga River. It is 20 miles long, 33,000 acres in size, and occupies the in-between space between Cleveland and Akron Ohio. The two cities are on either end of the national park, but the park does not include the cities. I was approached by the North Cuyahoga Valley Corridor organization from Cleveland early on in my tenure, and they said, John, we're interested in the idea of connecting Cleveland with the national park through some type of trail or other connections. I quickly came to the idea that while the Cuyahoga National Recreation Area, when it was fully developed, would later grow into a beautiful park. It would have much greater impact and importance if it were physically and programmatically connected north to Cleveland and south to Akron.

Very early in my tenure, around the fall of 1988, we pulled together a group of individuals to formally talk about a larger construct, the idea of connecting the park to the north and the south. The idea emerged of a heritage area or corridor that would include the national park but be a much bigger entity. Congressman John Seiberling, who had had much to do with the creation of this park, was in attendance, along with other key community people. At this meeting we came up with the concept of a corridor that would be about a hundred miles long, connecting the national park to the north all the way to the lakefront in Cleveland, and to the south to Zoar, Ohio. Zoar is at the intersection of a regional trail, the North Country Trail. We quickly gravitated to the idea of putting the national park in a more regional context, and a much longer park construct.

We then went to work on this idea. It was fairly time consuming. I realized to make this happen I was going to need staff help. I met Paul Labovitz, who exactly met the description of the kind of person I was looking for to help. Back then he was working for a private party in Pennsylvania and had extensive experience in the trails arena and working in partnership settings. He was interested in coming to Ohio to work on the project. I was able to find NPS funds and hired him as our grassroots corridor planner. It was enough to pay for a full-time staff position, and we continued to work on the idea of a hundred-mile regional corridor that would involve local park authorities in Cleveland, Akron, and Stark counties, which were the logical local partners. There was a tremendous amount of building grassroots support along the 100-mile corridor in the years of the early 90's.

Early on we were not focused upon a National Heritage Corridor legislative format. It was more a local and regional concept of a corridor. But, along the way we began to become more and more aware of the Illinois and Michigan Canal Corridor legislation, and its relevance to our work. Our effort began to gather momentum, through a lot of work with 51 governmental units

(in the corridor). There were many, many, chicken dinners, with civic organizations, non-profits, and community groups. We found that there was tremendous public support for the redevelopment, or resuscitation of the old route of the Ohio & Erie Canal. It had fallen into disuse and had disappeared in many areas. Generally, it was overgrown, and largely forgotten. We also had a railroad that extended from Cleveland to Canton, Ohio and had excursion passenger service operating in the national park. The idea formed to extend this rail service over the length of the corridor. The third linear potential asset was the two-lane scenic driving route of the National Heritage Corridor.

Creation of the Ohio and Erie National Heritage Canalway: Gradually we became more aware of the National Heritage Area model and began to think there was the possibility of getting a second piece of federal legislation passed (the first being the national park). The possibility of a federally designated National Heritage Area began to be discussed. This would embrace and expand upon the local concept we had been working on for several years. There was a fair amount of interchange and meetings that we initiated with folks at Illinois and Michigan Canal Heritage Area. We also met many times with the Rails to Trails Conservancy, and that helped build a community of interests around the heritage area concept.

As time went along, we became more single-minded and focused on the idea of potentially getting a piece of national heritage area legislation through Congress. There were others around the country pursuing legislation at this same time, and the 1996 bill that eventually passed created several heritage areas including Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor. We had huge political support from Congressman Ralph Regula, from Canton who had been a co-supporter of the legislation for Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area (later National Park). He was on the appropriations subcommittee for national parks, and there were other congressmen as well who embraced our bill.

We were given the opportunity by Mr. Regula to participate in the writing of the bill creating our heritage corridor. We had several meetings where we worked on drafting the legislation. We had the benefit of people who were experienced in legislation and the models of the three earlier designated heritage corridors. We very much customized the Ohio & Erie Canal Heritage Corridor legislation to circumstances quite different from the earlier heritage areas. None of those areas had any major NPS units involved. Our distinction was that it was the first time that a major unit of the NPS was involved in a heritage area. We included in the legislation very broad authorities for Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area to supply support and involvement in the heritage area, and beyond park boundaries. I often described the authority of our heritage area bill as allowing the national park to do anything outside the park that we could do inside the park, with the exception of law enforcement, and with the caveat that we (NPS) had to be invited to participate by a local partner. That authority was very large and did allow us to take our staff and NPS funds and work outside the national park boundaries on a broad range of undertakings. We designed and built facilities. We rehabilitated historical buildings. We prepared National Register nominations. We provided interpretive services. We had our national park rangers doing programs in Cleveland and Akron. The heritage area legislation was written very broadly and then applied very broadly, especially in the early years, 1996-2001.

We were able to tap into funding sources in Washington within and outside the NPS to get things done. We tapped into locally sourced funds and grants. The national park applied for foundation support and corporate money. But the largest pot of money was that available for the operation of Cuyahoga National Park. I vividly remember sitting down with park staff and taking us through a process to embrace the idea that the financial resources of the park should be applied both inside and outside the national recreation area (later national park), and within the heritage area boundaries for worthy projects. We actually earmarked funds from our park operations budget, sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars, for projects that would be supportive of developing the national heritage area, and outside of park boundaries. Of course, the heritage area was also receiving its own appropriations through the administrative process.

To facilitate the administration of the heritage area we relied on two non-profit organizations, the North Cuyahoga Valley Corridor, Inc. in Cleveland, and an organization we helped create in the southern end, the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition, located in Akron. Both were non-profit organizations with their own boards. We went out and sought the individuals who would participate in the new organization in Akron. Both organizations were independent of the NPS. I was not a member of the board of either. When the heritage corridor legislation was passed, the board of the third non-profit, the oversight group, drew from the members of the boards of the Cleveland and Akron non-profits to create the members of the board of the new federally created OECA. It was the OECA, Ohio and Erie Canalway Association, which received the federal appropriations for the operation and management of the heritage area.

The arrangement we worked out in those early years was that I, as superintendent, loaned a staff person to the OECA, an historical architect, so that they would have a professional staff person working for them. That arrangement remained in place for many years, filled by NPS employee Jeff Winstell. After Winstell left that position the OECA provided its own executive support. The model evolved over time. Dan Rice had come early on into the work of the Heritage Area. When the southern non-profit was created, Dan quickly became involved with that organization, the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition. Dan Rice, and his counterpart Tim Donovan, from the North Cuyahoga Valley Corridor organization, became co-leaders of the OECA. Dan and Tim remain today as the paid directors of their own organizations which are separate from the OECA.

Funding: The federal money that was appropriated for the OECA came through Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. So, technically, I was responsible for that money. It was not park money; it was intended to go to the OECA. Each year we would enter into an agreement and would move the monies over to them. I had a responsibility, as did my staff, to provide general oversight of the administration of those funds to be sure they were being used in ways that were proper and appropriate, and to insure any federal laws or regulations associated with those funds were observed properly. We were providing very strong oversight of the two non-profits, especially in the early years. And, of course, oversight of the NPS funds we were allocating from the recreation area budget to heritage areas projects. Our support enabled the heritage area to get a tremendous amount accomplished in a short period of time.

One of the things we all feel very good about, looking back, is that a tremendous amount of work was accomplished quickly in the years 1997-2000, in getting the basic framework of the heritage area in place. The Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Area stands out nationally because of

the degree of involvement and support it received from the NPS. Because a major unit of the NPS, a 33,000-acre national park, was right in the heart of the heritage area, I think that made a big difference. Some other heritage areas have little or no NPS involvement, other than oversight from a distance.

Technical Assistance: In support of the Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Area, we had really strong local National Park Service staff who had subject area expertise in interpretation, education and historic preservation, particularly. Not so much in natural resource issues. We also became involved in various Heritage Areas construction projects, such as historic structure rehabilitation and adaptive re-use. We had crews from our maintenance division building new railroad stations and rehabilitating structures for museum-type uses.

NPS attitudes about heritage areas: There were definitely conflicting views among NPS employees about working outside park boundaries, and people with very different experiences in the NPS. My background was different from many people in the organization. I had come into the NPS as a planner, not up through the ranger ranks. I had a Master of Science in Urban and Regional Planning, and worked first at Acadia National Park, where there were many issues beyond park boundaries that I was involved with. Next, I worked at Fire Island National Seashore, which is a very complex unit of the national park system. Then, at the newly created Lowell National Historical Park, I worked with a separate federal commission that worked beyond conventional park boundaries. So, I was schooled differently from many other NPS staff who were intently focused only on what happened inside park boundaries.

But, during this period there was also strong emphasis from the leaders of the NPS to work beyond park boundaries, because many parks were beginning to feel the effects of actions that were taken by others outside the park boundaries; residential development, oil and gas development, you name it, as well as pollution sources that were originating outside of park boundaries. There was tremendous organizational emphasis that developed towards working outside boundaries and, I think, this all had come together when I came to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. We had a newly created park that was sitting between two big cities and it seemed to me that this park would have so much more importance, impact, and value if it was connected to these two cities both programmatically and physically. This was as opposed to the model of the park as an island lying between two cities, but independent of them.

I think the NPS has waxed and waned over the years in terms of its view of the national heritage areas. Some of its Directors have been more supportive than others. Director, Jon Jarvis, was very supportive of heritage areas and what they represent. It's been a struggle over the years because many have felt they have been a drain on the more traditional units of the system and believe they ought not to have status as units of the system, nor strong funding support.

More broadly in the NPS there were a tremendous number of people, and many in leadership positions, who saw working beyond park boundaries and development of heritage areas as a drain on the traditional role of the NPS and its financial resources. I think, in one sense, you can't argue with that. Funds that were appropriated for heritage areas and other kinds of initiatives did, in fact, in some measure come at the expense of the traditional units of the system. But my feeling was that the NPS has always been short-funded from the day that Yellowstone

was created. The answer to the funding challenge with heritage areas was not to shy away from those opportunities, but to embrace them. Treat heritage areas with the kind of attention and respect they needed and continue to seek the funding they needed. Never give up on the effort to convince Congress to provide the kind of financial support needed to properly fund the system that they authorized to come into existence.

We find ourselves in this uncomfortable position today that Congress has created a system of national parks and heritage areas that it does not adequately fund. There are people and organizations out there who are trying to help the NPS get more money from Congress, but it has become clear that philanthropy is going to have to play a much bigger role in the future of our national park system. This is evidenced in the explosive growth in the number of friends groups around the national park system.

Charting a Future...: In my view, the 2004-2006 NPS Advisory Board Partnership Committee was a very dynamic group, very forward thinking. Many of the individuals involved were well-grounded in understanding the traditional role of national parks, but also had a forward-thinking perspective on the future of the system.

We had very thoughtful dialogues. We were well supported by the Washington office and had leadership at high levels of the NPS involved. Clearly the views of the majority of the committee were progressive, and looking to, in part, try to redefine the future of the NPS. A major recommendation was that heritage areas be brought closer to the NPS, and that going forward they be treated as formal units of the NPS. That would have been a significant change. As units of the system, they would have been assured of continuous support, including administrative, policy and financial support. Otherwise, heritage areas are always at the mercy of Congress for annual appropriations. Heritage Areas' temporary status may not continue in the future. They continue dependent on those who continue to lobby for congressional support. Accreditation of the heritage areas (as suggested by the Advisory Board), might be a good concept but would be very difficult in implementation. Heritage areas are tremendously diverse, and to apply an accreditation template would be difficult.

NPS policy changes: From 1988-2009, there came to be increased oversight and regulation of heritage areas. It was looser at the beginning. The NPS brought in more formalized feasibility studies and management plan requirements for new as well as older heritage areas.

Challenges: One challenge for me, as Superintendent of a complex national park, was the time commitment required to attend to the heritage area. I spent tremendous amounts of time on the heritage area, especially on weekends and evenings when outside groups would meet. I was superintendent of a major park unit, and then had the overlay of a heritage area, which took huge amounts of time and energy. But I think that energy and time has resulted in a more robust and successful national park. A national park that is a part of a much larger network of protected open spaces, recreational linkages, and programmatic connections. When you look at this national park, it's undeniable that Cuyahoga Valley National Park has accomplished far more in a heritage area context than it would have as a simple stand-alone park. The impact of the park and our ability to implement the mission of the NPS has been amplified a hundred-fold by the fact the park functions in this broader context.

Another challenge was working with all the diverse cast of players that come into play when you are working in a heritage area format. There is absolutely no question that it creates opportunities for conflict and disagreement to arise. In our heritage area, there was a considerable amount of competition and conflict between the two primary non-profit organizations involved. Although a huge amount of great work has been accomplished, there were underlying policy conflicts and conflicts for resources that put the National Park Service in a difficult position. It was continually a challenge for the NPS to remain neutral and to remain a positive influence in the administration of the heritage area.

There was also a significant challenge in the question of allocating financial and operational resources in Cuyahoga Valley National Park. In a national park that didn't have all the resources it needed to accomplish its mission, allocating some of those resources to the Heritage Area was always a contentious matter. There was disagreement internally among national park staff, and decisions to be made that weren't always popular.

There were these various challenges in working with heritage areas, but it was all self-inflicted pain. Embracing our heritage area was the right thing to do, and it was hugely productive. I don't regret a minute of the time I spent working on the Ohio & Erie Canal heritage area. Working in a national format with others to try to advance the proposition that the heritage areas were a good thing for the NPS was also the right thing to do.

Relationship between NPS national and regional offices: I had a fair degree of autonomy in managing Cuyahoga Valley National Park, which I think is true for many superintendents in the NPS. But our park may have had more individual discretion than most, for two reasons. One, we were very far away from our managers in either Washington D.C. or Omaha, NE. Second, Cuyahoga Valley also had a singular advantage in funding support through intense support from Congressman Ralph Regula. It was just the luck of the draw that our local congressman happened to be the ranking member of the House Appropriations Sub-Committee with jurisdiction over national parks. This resulted in funding on an annual basis for both the heritage area and the national park and enabled an enormous amount of work to be accomplished.

I think our work in heritage areas did have good support at the Washington level. Staff in the WASO heritage areas program was very accessible, knowledgeable, and supportive of our work in the field. We were in frequent communication. Our regional office in Omaha was not very engaged in these matters.