

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817)
National Heritage Areas Administrative History Project



Linda Stonier
September 25, 2017

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
Transcribed by Antoinette Condo
Reviewed by Linda Stonier
508 compliant version by Jessica Lamb

This digital transcript contains updated pagination, formatting, and editing for accessibility and compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Interview content has not been altered.

The original digital transcript is preserved in the NPS History Collection.

The release form for this interview is on file at the NPS History Collection.

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

Linda Stonier
September 25, 2017

Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Linda Stonier

Linda Stonier Interview: September 25, 2017

I have always, it turns out, myself been a heritage traveler. When I was a child, we took family trips to many of the Civil War battlefields, to historic forts, and to museums and other attractions of historic and cultural interest. As an adult I have continued to choose travel destinations and activities that reflect my life-long interest in natural and cultural heritage, including cherry picking in the Okanagan Valley, riding and hanging out with a herd of paints in Idaho, attending a church service in Honolulu sung in Hawaiian in an historic church made of coral which Hawaiian free-divers had brought up from the sea, and following a world music DJ on a tour of regional music concerts in Turkey. These are just a few examples. The list is quite long.

Responsibilities: This December, I will have worked at the National Park Service for 30 years. I had an interest in the National Heritage Program since the first heritage area was designated in 1984, and when the Great Basin National Heritage Area was designated in our region in 2007, I was asked to help coordinate our regional program. At first, I had a colleague in Seattle, Gretchen Luxenberg. She and I worked together to help Great Basin get up and running. We divided up the work for the emerging areas, she provided the staff support for the areas in Pacific Northwest and I worked with the areas in California, Hawaii, and Nevada from the regional office in San Francisco.

Early on, we spent a lot of time on the Great Basin because they needed to develop their management plan, and we needed to get to know the area and the partners. There was a lot of work to do. Once their management plan was approved, I spent more time on the emerging areas and some special projects for the Washington office. This is still the case.

Essentially, I am in a collateral duty position to the NHA Program as my FTE is in the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program. My heritage area work is funded with the NHA Program's administrative funds. The exact amount of time I have spent in each of the programs has varied over the years, as these are both partnership programs and the direction of the work depends quite a lot on the partners, and it can be unpredictable. Some years one program subsidizes the other, but it's all the Partnerships Program.

Both my RTCA supervisor and the Manager of the Partnerships Programs here in the region are very supportive of the NHA Program and of work with the emerging areas. We have multiple emerging areas with legislation pending right now. If those were to be designated, we would need additional capacity and funding to tend to those areas.

Technical assistance: The region and the park are both assisting the Great Basin National Heritage Area in different ways. The technical assistance provided to the heritage area by Great Basin National Park has changed over time. The park was heavily involved in helping to develop and get the management plan approved and now provides the administrative support, which means the administrative technical representative (ATR) who signs and manages the cooperative agreement for the federal funds to the heritage area is a park employee.

Currently, the Great Basin National Heritage Area has a grants program with a couple of grant rounds each year. I usually participate, remotely, on the grant review committee. The

committee members independently review the applications, and we meet via conference calls to decide how to fund the project proposals.

Work of the Coordinating office: I see the Coordinating Office in Washington as being the primary liaison to the administration, to Congress, and to the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. I count on them to provide guidance to us in the field on administrative issues, to provide good examples of feasibility studies and management plans, and to answer particular questions that come up about those. They also administer the funding from Congress to areas and the regions from that office.

Funding formula: I have several ideas on that. One is that all heritage areas with approved management plans would get equal funding, and the new areas would get what was left over. Another idea would be to have the heritage areas submit budgets in certain categories, that is, make a request for the amount of money they need for their staff, for their programs, for their overhead, for their projects, etc. each year. The problem would be that the budgets would all have to be reviewed and approved and balance out. That would be pretty labor intensive, but it would have the advantage that the areas would have to justify what they need. Another idea would be to provide base funding for staff so the administrative function for the heritage area would be covered, and they would compete for everything else. We would need criteria in the program to make those decisions. I could see the advantages and disadvantages to any of those approaches, but I think there would be more understanding. The formula we have now doesn't seem to have much rationale behind it.

Sunsetting: I don't necessarily think that the heritage areas should sunset at the end of their term, but I don't think they should continue to maintain the same level of funding.

Evaluation measures: One would be a healthy grant program. A second would be an effective and stable staff. Third would be a high functioning coordinating entity. Another would be an up-to-date three-to-five-year strategic plan. And we should see demonstrated progress on the goals in the strategic plan.

Pending legislation: They all have strong congressional support locally. I am told that there are some people in Congress who do not like the program and one person in particular is in a position to effect whether legislation gets passed or not. The people on the ground have a good story and all have feasibility studies.

Management plan guidelines: The management plan document was started by someone who is no longer in the program. Brenda (Barrett) seemed to take an interest in the management plans and tried to engage the heritage area community in discussion about their content, but no one had the interest or was instructed to continue to finalize the document once she left. There is not consistency in the way management plans are developed. Even the approval is done case by case. The management plans are done in the way the heritage areas think they can get them done. I think that the expectation from Washington on the contents of management plans have evolved over time. Certainly, from the time I came in 2007 to now. It has been distilled and focused in ways that have to do with the staff that we have and how they interpret the requirements. Also, each piece of designating legislation is specific about the content of the

management plan for that area. We don't seem to have a *demand* for management planning guidance because there are no new heritage areas coming into the system, hence we are not writing that many plans. (This last comment would have to be revised by new heritage areas in 2019).

The designation bills written for the areas in our region, the ones that haven't passed, were provided to us in the region for review. We had the opportunity to at least make recommendations to the Legislative Affairs Office about the content of the bills. Since we are very close to the ground, we are able to understand the areas and the capacity of the coordinating entity and who they really are. That might be another reason of why they (the designation bills) have evolved and become more specific.

The program is maturing, and we have more data about what works and what doesn't. We have a high functioning national coordinating office to be part of that feed-back loop.

Training needed by regional coordinator: If I was the ATR for a heritage area, I would need training in that administrative function, however I would prefer that the contracting officer in the region had that responsibility as they already have that expertise. The regional coordinators should have training in organizational development and strategic planning.

Why different directions are given to the NHA entities by NPS offices: The NPS is a very decentralized organization from the parks to the regional offices. The park superintendents and regional director have a lot of authority. Also, we have no program legislation to instruct us on how to run the program. Some of the regions have lots of heritage areas, some have less, and we have one, so the workload is different.

Characteristics of a successful heritage area: A healthy grant program is a good tool. Involvement across a spectrum of partners is healthy for a heritage area, as is implementation of projects that protect both the region's physical heritage and also its customs and traditions. High quality interpretation of the nationally important story is also key.

NPS attitude regarding heritage areas: The Great Basin National Heritage Area has a park right in the middle of it, so they have a very symbiotic relationship. I think most of the managers and staff in our region, except in the Partnerships Program, don't know much, or care much, about heritage areas because they are park-oriented rather than partnership-oriented.

Advantage of NPS to the heritage areas: There are several. They get to use the branding of the arrowhead, and they receive technical assistance and funding. They are also part of a system. So even though we are a decentralized agency, the heritage areas are part of a network of their own, and they share information. Also, we are an agency with a national reach, and that is a benefit to heritage areas.

Heritage areas contribution to the mission of the NPS: I don't think they necessarily contribute in the way that most people think of the NPS mission, as setting aside land that belongs to all of us. But, in terms of our national cultural heritage, they contribute because there

is an emphasis on public access to that story no matter who owns it. Part of the mission of the NPS is to share our heritage.

Why no California heritage area?: Most of the heritage areas were created in the East. The idea has moved westward over time, but slowly. The proposed Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta National Heritage Area has been pending in Congress for five years now. This has a nationally important story and a highly competent coordinating entity. It is mystifying why that bill hasn't passed. There have been and are currently emerging area studies underway in the state. Those may become heritage areas in the future. The last National Heritage Area created in the West was Great Basin in 2007. We have a lot of latent demand. Congress just does not seem to be interested in new designations. (Until 2019 when Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta was designated).

Program legislation: Not having program legislation and standardization has been a problem. We tried and failed some years ago to develop some administrative guidelines that all the regional coordinators could buy into as we were all doing things differently. Even though we could agree on some things we had to work with our contracting officers, and they weren't necessarily willing to comply with standards we might want in our administrative guidelines. So, without program legislation we all do things our own way.

I think it can be frustrating to the heritage areas because they talk to each other and realized they are administered differently. The system of heritage areas is big enough that we should have more standardized guidance to the areas. I think this would help us justify our decisions and create more trust between the areas and the NPS. It seems to be in a good place right now but there have been times, even since I have been in the program (2007) when the level of trust has dipped pretty low.