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Michael Spratt
July 26, 2016

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

Michael J. Spratt
July 26, 2016

Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Antoinette J. Condo
The narrator was asked to review the transcript, but did not.

Michael J. Spratt Interview: July 26, 2016

The National Parks and Recreation Act was passed in 1978. One of the things that came about as the result of that Act was Congress asking us to look at potential new national park units. As the result of that I came on in 1978 as a planner in the New Area Studies program and did a lot of what they termed a *New Area Studies* (Reconnaissance Surveys and Study of Alternatives reports). As a result of those reports one of those alternatives was typically ending up being someone else was managing what we were asked to study to determine if it was worthy of being a national park or not. That was one of the early kinds of processes to understand areas and landscapes at a certain level. Were they nationally significant? Should they be national parks? If not national parks, what should they be? That was the early thinking of trying to figure it all out.

That was an important time for NPS, in regards to national heritage areas. We did reconnaissance surveys at that time. Basically, doing more of an inventory of resources themselves. The reconnaissance surveys gave us some pretty good indicators to do an analysis of whether we should even go forward to study alternatives and really to determine whether or not a lot of these areas were worthy of being national park units. Most of the work I did, did not end up being national park units. Some of them ended up becoming national heritage areas many many years later when local folks continued to push for some sort of designation. So that's how I became interested in national heritage areas.

I ended up going to Salem, Massachusetts because of that early history. I was in Salem from summer of 1988 to summer of 1991. I was the second of the planners out of the Denver Service Center that went out to look at, more working on, what we called partnership projects at that time. There had been a lot of interest in the Salem area to put together a partnership project there. They wanted to improve the Salem Maritime National Historic Site, but the boosters were much more interested in pushing the importance of Salem as well as Essex County in general. I was the planning director for that project. Cynthia Pollack was the superintendent at Salem Maritime and heavily involved and I was out of that office. We had a whole series of studies that were done, and one was of all of Essex County. That is when we developed the criteria about what sites should be involved and what sites should not. There is a report out called, *The Salem Project*. We developed three themes that we felt were nationally important and we were looking for areas within Essex County that fit those themes and were hopefully nationally significant. Many of those areas were on the National Register. These were sites that, for the most part, had been studied previously by NPS historians and others. The Salem Project report was the basis for the national heritage area to follow.

We, at the Service Center, spent a lot of time on creating criteria and templates for the studies. The old studies of alternatives vary in some respects both in level of detail and level of analysis, but they all had one thing in common, they were truly looking for what were nationally significant resources. The NPS has so many programs so in any given area were there any National Trails, any Wild and Scenic Rivers, any National Natural Landmarks, any National Historic Landmark, or National Register sites of national significance? We used the National Park System Plans for Natural and Cultural Resources to evaluate what landscapes and cultural resources were not represented in the National Park System.

We also had a broad criteria for recreation as well. That was basically close proximity to large populations of people who could enjoy and understand those natural and cultural resources.

There were a number of studies. The Columbia River Gorge would be a pretty good example, where they were looking pretty deeply trying to understand the scenic value of an area. What rises to national significance in the scenic area perspective? We all worked together in one office on most of these studies. We spent a lot of time collaborating and making sure that what we were looking at had national significance since we were really looking for national parks.

But on the other hand, when coming into the early '80s it was very clear from the funding perspective a lot of these national park units were not going to come to pass so we did a lot of work trying to put together different entities that might be involved to preserve and protect and interpret a lot of these resources that we were evaluating.

We kind of did two things. One, we had a *no action* alternative, meaning do nothing. We might have had one or two alternatives to talk about how big should it be, if it was in deed worthy of NPS status. There was typically an alternative that talked about others working in partnership to protect these areas. There was a very conscious effort very early on of looking at areas beyond the National Park System. What ended up happening is the New Areas Studies Branch, as it was called, ended up lasting until '81, '82 at the most. Ronald Reagan came into office in 1981 and the political tenor changed pretty dramatically. All who worked on those early studies basically went off and did other kinds of work. We found ways, since we were still in a centralized office, to come together to work on the requested studies. We were working on the studies (related to heritage areas) even though the New Areas Studies Branch had been dissolved.

Back in those days there was a whole other Agency called the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (HCRS). We were all hooked together in one way or another. There was a lot of competition back and forth, friction at times with the HCRS folks and when that agency was dissolved, many of those people came into the NPS. We had communications back and forth and I worked on a number of studies with HCRS people. They had a certain level of expertise that we really, truly didn't have because they worked extensively with local communities. They brought a different level of expertise that to me was really valuable. But it was very disconcerting to the *green bloods* which we call the park superintendents and the traditional NPS system. They kind of felt that these efforts were taking resources and money away from the national parks themselves. There was a lot of tension, but they (HCRS) did provide a lot of expertise. They did a lot of inventory work particularly on national natural landmarks, so they were pretty important too.

There were other people working on things (new area studies) probably way before the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978 but from my perspective, having a concentrated group of people with that very single purpose, the New Areas Study Branch was the place where it formally started.

Denver Service Center workshop of 1989: I think what precipitated the 1989 brainstorming meeting at the Denver Service Center was the pressure of congressionally mandated studies. When Ronald Reagan came in in 1981, he came in with a very staunch conservative approach to the budget. Wanted to slash the federal budget and all that. But Congress still had a lot of power then, so what ended up happening during his tenure in office was the budget of the NPS actually increased because Congress said, heck with you we are going to do what we want. We ended up with the situation of congressmen proposing their own studies. They weren't necessarily the studies that the NPS was interested in. By '89 there were so many requests the NPS really did have to try to figure out what we were going to do to stem the tide. There were a lot of studies

that I worked on later on, Moccasin Bend being one of them, that were pretty marginal resources in a lot of respects. They had a lot of backing politically. I think NPS was trying to come up with and, Deny (Galvin) would be the best source of that, a way to deal with the chaos we were under and ease the way Congress was politically intervening in the NPS particularly in trying to create new areas in the system. By 1989 NPS was truly grappling with what in the world we were going to do.

At the Tumacacori meeting (1992) Deny brought in a lot of people, NGO's and professor types and the like, to try to get them interested in what we were doing. A brainstorming of what we were doing and trying to get ideas from others.

Tourism: In the late '70s and early '90s tourism was not integral at all to what we were doing because we were really truly trying to understand if we had national parks out there. But as this whole idea kept reforming itself and became more partnership oriented, local tourism, regional tourism certainly became a focus of all these particular areas. Quite honestly, a lot of the preservationists that were interested in these areas were using tourism as their way to politically get congressmen involved so that they could get more money to preserve some of these important resources. Yes, tourism was somewhat controversial. The whole program was very controversial with the rank and file of the NPS.

American Heritage Area System *proposal*: John (Bradley) and I worked on the heritage area paper in '91 and '92. When I came back from Salem to the Denver Service Center John and I were tasked with this heritage area idea and putting together a background paper that would then be the bases for legislation. We did lots of public meetings across the country. John and I were the co-facilitators of all those meetings. We got what you would expect. We got the gamete (of comments). We had several meetings where we had the extractive industries, for the lack of a better word. They were anti- government, anti- regulation anti-anything if it would restrict any kind of mining and extractive activities they wanted to do. We made sure to kind of pack the meeting with activists in various different areas too. So, you got the other end of the spectrum, you got people who were very supportive.

The NPS people didn't comment on it (the concept paper) all that much to be honest with you. The people that commented on it were the interest groups that would be affected one way or the other. Most of our public meetings had very few NPS personnel. They were almost exclusively interest groups that were at these public meetings. State and local officials, user groups of all kinds, most of the NGOs that were really interested in promoting their particular area. Deny probably worked more behind the scenes to get the Recreations and Parks Association and all these other folks wound up and hooked in to all this.

We got comments on the paper saying that the paper sounded like we were trying to keep new areas from coming into the system rather than creating a new entity. There is some truth in the statement because there were some projects that truly weren't worthy of national attention. Were they truly nationally unique or important, or whatever the word you want to use. Yes, I think that's a legitimate comment from the one standpoint that we did indeed try to drum out those areas that weren't worthy. Of course, that's why you do the studies to determine it as opposed to being subjective and saying it's really terrific or it's really awful. You need some sort of analytical procedure to determine whether it is or not.

The whole partnership idea during that period was kind of the key word. It was key to the NPS obviously because we didn't want to be funding all of this and yet there was a lot of pressure to protect a lot of these resources and provide opportunities for interpretation and subsequently what would happen would be tourism. It was pretty interesting from that standpoint. The Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service worked extensively with the Land and Water Conservation Fund. That's where they were helping local communities and state governments, developing partnerships.

Landscapes or areas?: There was a lot of stuff going on in the Forest Service at that time with scenic areas and that. They were using the word landscape a lot. I think a lot of it was that there was a lot of terminology out there in other federal agencies using the word landscape. Also, landscape in a way didn't portray all the different values of an area. Did it really encompass natural, and cultural, and scenic values of an area when you call it a landscape? As opposed to being more general and just calling it an area. An area needs to have some sort of defined order to it. A landscape tends to not have the feeling of a border to it. I think we felt strongly that there had to be some sort of limits to how big or small these things were. From a technical perspective that's what we were talking about.

In 1993 we had done what we were supposed to do (with the heritage area proposal) and Deny had no intention of either John or I doing this long-term. I didn't either. I just did it because I was interested in it but I was ready to move on in my career. We were planners. It was the natural progression for us. We weren't administrators. We were planners providing a product to the Washington Office and to Deny in particular. Once the paper was done and we had collected all the comments there was no more usefulness for John and I to be working on it. It was more of a political effort on Deny's part and the Washington office to determine how they wanted to work with that report and findings and keep the momentum going.

The proliferation of heritage area papers in early '90s: I think what was going on during that whole period was there was so much interest generated and people in so many different organizations felt that there was a real possibility of, not so much in trying to establish new national parks. I think people realized the writing was on the wall that that wasn't going to happen very often unless it was truly a really remarkable area. There were a lot of people over which the light bulb went on and this is the way we can get some federal money; too, this is the way to get federal planners and others involved to establish a baseline of how important is their area. How can it be developed from a natural and cultural and scenic and recreational perspective? Again, the tourism piece of it. Some of these organizations were pretty preservation oriented. They were looking at it purely as a way to try to save natural and cultural and scenic resources. It was from the confluence of all those organizations where we ended up getting legislation passed because there was so much support.

NPS attitudes about heritage areas: I'm trying to think if there were any regional directors at the time that might come out publicly against it. They were all smart enough to know that Deny was a proponent. While they may have been against it, I don't think they would have put it in a letter. The superintendents were pretty direct about their concerns that they would be losing resources because of this program. There was a strident group that were pretty concerned about, as Ridenour said, thinning of the blood.

There was a lot of discussion about that. One of the things that never got accomplished was finding different funding authorities. The reality, I think from Deny's perspective, was, you can

be for it or against it; it doesn't damn matter because if a specific congressman wants something and pushes hard enough, he's going to get it. So, why don't we do something in a more formalized way so that if somebody comes to us and says, hey, I want you to designate this area because I think it's wonderful; we can come back and say that area, while it might be wonderful to you and your local constituents is not wonderful from a national perspective so thank you very much. That was our retort to a lot of this stuff. You can either let it go willy-nilly and let Congress do what they please which won't help the National Park System, the traditional national parks, or let's study some of these areas in detail and determine how worthy they really are for any national recognition and any money or resources going toward them. That was a big push even back in the late '70s with the New Areas Studies. It (the New Areas Studies Group) was dissolved about '81 or '82 and we said well, you are going to dissolve the only unit that can actually be a filter between the federal government and Congress on establishing these areas.

Role of NPS in a heritage area system: I thought our best role was the feasibility study, interpretation realm. Were these areas feasible? I worked on the Mississippi Delta study; an eleven-state gigantic thing. That one, more than any other, told me that we in the NPS, working with others, were the only ones who could really provide a national perspective on areas the local people may think absolutely wonderful, but it's not from a national perspective. To me, I think our usefulness was in determining whether or not these areas were really truly worthy of being an American Heritage Area. From there the next piece would be to provide at least a modicum of funding for these areas. To me it is then up to the directors of these heritage areas to be reaching out to others for funding and for help. I think the NPS should primarily do the feasibility study work then to provide a kind of an oversight of these national heritage areas and a modicum of money, not a lot, for some sort of staff for each of these heritage areas to be looking to develop partnerships. Feasibility studies should be our bread and butter. I would not have any NPS personnel on staff at any of these heritage areas. I think that's not a good thing. I think to provide some level of funding so that these heritage areas can have a minimal staff is important. Then the NPS provides oversight, either at regional office level or national headquarters level.

The heritage areas task force of 1997: I think it was a chance to get interested people together and share what was going on. By that time people were pretty interested in the program. I don't know if a whole heck of a lot came out of all that. I think the most important thing is there became a real group of people that were interested and Deny kind of wanted to keep them engaged any way he could. They asked me to come in and help out just because of my background. But by that time, I was heavily involved in an Alaska project.

Sunsetting: My only thought on that is that I'm against it. The only way that I would ever agree to sunset a heritage area is if it became so compromised because of development and destruction of resources that made it important. That would be the only reason I would sunset it. I wouldn't do it as just an arbitrary goal. If the values that were there are truly gone it shouldn't be a heritage area any more.

Heritage area work: After my work in Salem, which finished in 1992, I was asked to come in on other feasibility studies for proposed heritage areas. There was nobody probably that was doing these studies full time specifically on heritage areas. It was just one of many tasks that people did. I worked on Essex, Southwest Pennsylvania, Atchafalaya, Cane River, Mississippi

Delta, and Man in Space (which didn't become a heritage area) and I was a consultant to Silos and Smokestacks, and others.

Support the mission of NPS: Yes, I think the heritage areas do actually support the mission of NPS. The sad part of it all is there is not enough funding for a lot of these national heritage areas to be particularly viable. I suspect that depending on the directors of each area depends on how successful they are. Some of them have National Trails running through them, National Wild and Scenic Rivers, National Historic Landmarks, National Natural Landmarks, a lot of National Register sites. All programs the NPS is involved with. It's really positive from the standpoint of the NPS providing some technical assistance from time to time and makes people more aware of these resources. Hopefully it's just kind of like national parks. You want people to visit national parks so they can come away with an appreciation of nature and culture. I don't think it's any different with national heritage areas. You can get people to visit these areas, understand a little more about the history and about the natural resources and scenic resources of these areas, that's a really good thing. 'Cause it's all about conservation and preservation and that's part of the mission of the NPS.

My impression of the program is that it's holding on by a shoestring. I would suspect that there's not a whole lot of money going into them. You talk to just about anybody in the public, they won't have a clue of what a national heritage area is. So, the presence of that particular moniker, from a public perception aspect, is pretty low. We have Cache La Poudre River Corridor National Heritage Area here and anybody I've ever talked to, they don't have a clue what it is. There is a recognition piece that's missing. I don't know if without an infusion of interest from Congress and money, hopefully not from the NPS, it is just probably going to be what it is. If it can conserve a few resources, more power to it.

This whole effort of talking about partnership, working together to conserve and protect and interpret natural and cultural and scenic resources hopefully it rubbed off on a lot of the more traditional NPS types to realize that there are things going on outside the borders of the parks that they need to deal with. I've never claimed that this is the reason that NPS superintendents are now more sensitive to what goes on outside. But I think it did help because it brought up a lot of discussion in late '70s and through the '80s about what the roles of the NPS and national parks were.