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**Kathleen Callahan “Katie” Durcan**  
**December 7, 2016**

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

Kathleen Callahan “Katie” Durcan  
December 7, 2016

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This transcript was reviewed by Kathleen Durcan

**Kathleen Callahan "Katie" Durcan Interview: December 7, 2016**

I worked for Senator Moynihan and while I was there was the first time, I became aware of the heritage areas program. We worked on Erie Canalway and the feasibility study for Niagara Falls. Erie was created at that time while I was on the Hill. That piqued my interest. While I was in grad school, I did a paper on National Trust for Historic Preservation co-stewardship and stewardship sites. The Smithsonian had affiliate sites and the NPS had affiliate sites and heritage areas and I looked at the model of all these organizations that were moving away from ownership to partnership.

I was working at an exhibit design firm and one of my clients was the Baltimore City Heritage Area (a state designation). I enjoyed working with them and later joined their staff and worked on public history, signage, tours, partnership relationships, with the Baltimore Consortium of History Museums on school tours, camps, and trail development. My title was Trails and Byways Manager. I really enjoyed it.

Baltimore worked for about ten years as a state designated heritage area. Maryland has a really robust state program that even in the economic downturn continued to receive about \$150,000 grant from the state annually which was matched with local funds. We also had a By-Way program. At that time in the National Transportation Department, you didn't have to be a national designated by-way to receive funds, so half my salary was paid by (Department of) Transportation dollars. I worked on byways throughout Baltimore but primarily on the Charles Street Byway. Through the course of my time there I wrote the application to become a National Scenic Byway for Baltimore's Historic Charles Street. We were part of the mayor's staff and had capital improvement funds for trail development.

We had a staff of three. We had an advisory board for the byway and an advisory board for the heritage area and different committees for each of the trails. When they became a national heritage area, I started working with Martha (Raymond) and responded to a job posting. I started with the National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office on December 29, 2009.

**Duties in the Coordinating Office:** A little bit of everything. Legislative affairs, reviewing legislation, meeting with members of Congress, briefings on the Hill, writing talking points and briefings for NPS senior leadership, our quarterly newsletter, other communications, writing assignments in general. Working with partners and other federal agencies as in a group called Partners in Tourism. Working on civic engagement, which was a big push when Mickey Fearn was here. Working on the various initiatives such as Urban Initiative, America's Great Outdoors, Brand U.S.A. Our stumbling block in all these initiatives is that they (heritage areas) are not parks. Things start big and heritage areas are going to be included and it comes down to only including the parks.

**Heritage areas as part of NPS:** With Brand U.S.A. we were working on developing itineraries from which people could enter a gateway airport and get to stops in a heritage area, such as Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area or Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area. At one point we were talking about the social media kinds of things, e.g., people could enter contests. We talked about heritage areas helping Brand U.S.A. meet their match

since they had to match their funds. I think the fact that heritage areas are so many different organizations lends itself to complications in working with them. The Journey Through Hallowed Ground seemed to be the one that picked it up and worked with Brand U.S.A. Niagara Falls National Heritage Area had meetings with Brand USA.

The Civil War to Civil Rights Commemoration planners first said heritage areas could be on the map and events calendar. That started out in the tourism office and then moved and different decisions were made. I think that lends itself to some frustration and disappointment. Mainly because the heritage areas are large and more complicated. It's easier to put a point on a map that is a park than to put large heritage areas that encompass parks. They are not federal holdings so sometimes we get people in policy offices say, "We can't endorse the product that people are going to see when they visit something because we don't control it." Where I think heritage areas are designated and should have a place on NPS.gov and all these various places because we are saying they are part of the family. If it has a presence then we can explain that we don't own it, that it is a partnership. There are a lot of trails that we don't manage either but brand them as more a part of our system than we do heritage areas.

We were not on any of the NPS maps when they did the *Baby Brain* project. This was a big web initiative to have state pages. State pages would be a great opportunity to print something out if you were going to meet with a member of Congress or the public. Anyone could go on-line and look and see where the NPS was working in their state. Heritage areas were to be in phase two, and phase two never happened. All this rush around creating things, and then. At the end of the state pages, I think it does say there are so many heritage areas in the state, but we are not on the map.

Having the NPS arrowhead on the heritage areas website is complicated as well. Some have it and some do not. If there is a donate button on their website, they cannot have the NPS logo near it. Some of them have the logo on the header or footer so it's on every page. It's varied by region how arrowheads should be used. In Baltimore when they built the new Fort McHenry visitor's center, it says Fort McHenry National Shrine and Baltimore National Heritage Area on the whole front of the building. But the city and the state paid for a large portion of that building. That was based on the local relationship. That does not happen everywhere. Because Erie Canal has been more a part of the NPS because they have NPS staff and NPS presence, all of their stuff is very branded with the arrowhead, and they have highway signs with the brown. More are getting highway signage now but that varies.

The NPS is so regionally based. We had a really strong regional director in the Midwest Region who was super supportive, and we were trying to get the National Leadership Council to be more supportive and they have definitely evolved and improved over the course of time that I have been here. We have done a lot of work internally and externally with partners and NPS to convey the value and importance of heritage areas. Director Jarvis, having a strong knowledge and support of heritage areas has certainly helped. He, working on the Second Century Commission, really helped with the outcome of the Second Century Commission saying that heritage areas were really valuable. His memo was great. Our original vision of that was just to go to superintendents. He said it should go to all staff, which was great. We started at the beginning having it a Director's Order. Then, with the complications of getting a Director's

Order, it went to a memo which I think got the message across that we meant to convey in an easier way. The complication is that we have this very supportive Director with this very supportive memo, all this great documentation and materials that we produce about how great the program is but then the annual budget is always cut and gives that annual shot in the foot. We have to go back and say, we really do support this program. To say in one breath, we think this program is the way of the future for the NPS and then annually to see the budget, it's hard. The NPS is one part of the Department of the Interior and Interior is one part of the federal government and our program is really small funding wise.

We have worked really hard with our partners. Some thought that all heritage areas were still getting a million dollars annually. That perception was there still in 2010. So, we have done a lot since then to try to educate our partners and others that it's not a million dollars.

We as an agency still continue to confuse people. When Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Federal Commission was writing their management plan, no NPS staff told them they were not going to get a million dollars annually as authorized in legislation but not appropriated. They were thinking big but not realistically. In Baltimore National Heritage Area, right away, NPS explained the money situation. More people were coming around the table and the pie wasn't getting any bigger.

We haven't had any new heritage areas created since I started in this position in 2009 (in 2019 five new ones designated), but I think in the future this Washington Office should be the liaison to any new heritage areas. If there is a local liaison, we should provide that person with guidance. Because things are so decentralized that is a problem. When Niagara Falls National Heritage Area finished their management plan, the press release that went out from Senator Chuck Schumer was, let the million dollars flow. All this flow, flow, flow language about the million dollars, and this is a Senator who has a role in the funding. I told Legislative Affairs that I thought we should, as a program, as an agency, have a meeting with Senator Schumer and explain the funding situation so that he understands that if he wants a million dollars to flow that he has to put money in the program. When all the news in the Buffalo newspaper was that everything was about a million dollars, that really hurt our relationship with partners and the public because that is never going to happen in the current funding structure.

**Support from NPS leadership:** I think we have a very close relationship. We have had a direct line of communication to Stephanie (Toothman, NPS Associate Director for Cultural Resources) for several years. The Director (Jon Jarvis) did the Flat Hat Chat on heritage areas in Journey Through Hallowed Ground (NHA). At least annually we were briefing him on the program prior to the Alliance (of National Heritage Areas) meeting. Director Jarvis and Stephanie Toothman have spent a lot of time in heritage areas. They and other leadership staff attend the annual Alliance reception on the Hill. Peggy O'Dell (NPS Deputy Director of Operations) and Will Shafroth (NPS Deputy Assistance Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks) have both spoken at that event.

I feel in terms of what is said about heritage areas from the NPS is great. We had a Presidential proclamation one year on National Park Day from the President's office. That was through our work, trying to work, with OMB to change the budget language. The White House staff person

on Environmental Issues connected with us through the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). When I started with the NPS, NPCA hadn't been supportive of heritage areas because a lot of our partners saw it as a drain on the NPS budget. Through Alan (Spear, NPCA Director of Cultural Resources, Government Affairs), NPCA has had meetings with all of their top leadership and heritage area folks. Alan attends the annual Alliance meeting.

During the America's Great Outdoors initiative, several heritage areas hosted listening events, some of which Secretary of the Interior Salazar attended. When the America's Great Outdoors report was published it specially mentioned Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area and Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area and then the overall program. We are always trying to make inroads into these initiatives. Heritage areas are doing natural resource work. They are doing trail development. Sometimes other folks recognize them for that, like the Hudson Valley Greenway because they are doing the trail, and they are called a greenway locally.

**Sunsetting task force:** It was about what to do in a sunseting process. We were faced with a big chunk of heritage areas about to sunset. Heritage areas were on the task force, regional folk, highly concentrated with the Northeast Region because they were the ones facing the greatest impact. We talked about what the impact would be. What would be the potential for NPS involvement beyond the sunset? On the flip side; who is sustainable, who would continue to operate? What kind of organization would they have without these funds? Also looked at who had reached their funding ceiling and who hadn't. If the heritage area was going in for reauthorization for more time they might need to go in for more time and raise their ceiling. In most cases most of them were not close to their authorization ceiling. They could go back to Congress and ask for more time and continued funding, but to ask to raise their funding ceiling would be a harder ask. All the areas were reauthorized. We decided that we should suggest that they had a year to draw down all their funds before reauthorization.

We had working groups and teams and were talking to Legislative Affairs, but it produced no formal report or policy. We discussed possibilities of working with the heritage area after it sunset from federal funding. Only Southwestern Pennsylvania is considered a sunset heritage area and we do nothing with them, have no contact with anyone on the ground there.

**Commissions:** We only have two currently. Federal commissioners are hampered from raising match money. Commissioners in their role are not supposed to be fund raising. Cane River appreciated their commission because they felt that the federal commission helped them rise above the local organizations. Their commission went away and most of their commissioners are now the non-profit organization. Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Area, Shenandoah National Heritage Area, a lot of the older heritage areas started with federal commissions and transitioned into a non-profit.

The commissions do have a nice potential start up role if they are already an entity operating prior to designation. In the Niagara Falls NHA they made a commission, the legislation created a commission and limited to five years and directed the commission to create a non-profit that would continue upon their expiration. One thing that was unfortunate was that they made it five years from the passage of the legislation and the commission wasn't seated for two years. That

basically just gave them three years to work which I think hamstrung them a bit too because they didn't have the opportunity to work for five years. I guess the thought process behind those who wrote the legislation was to get things moving faster to have it start from the day of legislation but if anyone knows the pace of government, it takes time for people to make nominations to a commission. It took two years.

**Administrative process guidelines:** It started out as an initiative of the Southeast Region. K. Lynn Berry was putting together an administrative guide for her region and it was looked at as an opportunity to make things more national. My understanding overall in the NPS with cooperative agreements, these types of granting relationships, things have been handled in a very disjointed manner. Regionally rather than having national guidance. I think the hard thing for an organization that functions so much on a regional basis is that there is no line authority for us to tell a region how to function. It became evident that not all regions were participating in the effort. Without the bulk of the heritage areas participating then it really wasn't a national effort. We had a meeting at the training center in Shepherdstown (West Virginia) at which all the regional coordinators came together. It was a really good effort, and in those meetings we were talking about the administrative guide and shared comments. I volunteered to take the comments and make them into a package that people could agree on. While working on that is when Heidi Sage (NPS WASO Financial Assistance Branch Chief) and other folks in contract management started working on guidance for the NPS on how these things were developed.

The Southeast region used the draft. I added some information about conflicts of interest and match and other edits from comments. While drafting contracting and financial disbursements changes to FBMS and ASAP (Financial and Business Management System (**FBMS**) integrates and streamlines the Department of the Interior's financial and administrative functions across all DOI Bureaus using Automated Standard Application for Payments (**ASAP**). We would prefer to have consistency and it's clear in the evaluations that the lack of consistency is a challenge at different points.

**Policy changes:** The biggest one is that they (heritage areas) are reauthorized. I do think the evaluations have had a positive impact, because it has been a way of demonstrating their impact. The evaluations aren't perfect but currently they are the best thing we have for looking at the totality of the heritage area. Are they perfect? No. I think they have provided some good information. Looking at those individual entities and their history has been really useful.

Some heritage areas had evaluations written into their original law, like Baltimore (NHA) as a newer one. The older ones didn't have it originally but in reauthorizing Congress told NPS to evaluate the NHAs and look at the results of the federal investment. The first evaluation, referred to as an evaluation, though a different model, the John H Chafee Blackstone River Valley, Can River, and Delaware and Lehigh were done by the NPS Conservation Study Institute. The pilot evaluations were done by NPCA Center for Park Management for Essex, Augusta Canal, and Silos and Smokestacks. The methodology developed is now used by contractors to independently assess the outcomes and answer the questions in the law which told NPS to conduct the evaluations.

**Scaling up:** Heritage areas fit into this initiative. It is one opportunity to expand the NPS focus from just parks. Martha is the lead for heritage areas on that initiative. It is something that has a huge national interest. The large landscape cooperative people are often in the west, so again kind of inserting heritage areas in the conversation. Saying we're here and can we participate. Heritage areas don't necessarily fit into conversations about wildlife corridors, but they are part of it. In those linkages of trail networks, rivers, and canals, there are corridors. I think heritage areas have done a lot for landscapes that were spoiled landscapes, every landscape has been shaped by man at this point. How you keep that conversation about the cultural use and ranchers and farmers and folks engaged and learn that heritage areas have done a good job where there were private property concerns.

There was a Director's Order that they were working on (related to use of the arrowhead). We worked on making sure there was language for heritage areas. For the Centennial, NPS created a second mark with a blue outline of an arrowhead that the National Park Foundation uses and a green outline of the arrowhead. That resulted from the decision that everybody can use those, but the brown arrowhead is NPS. That was more for the friends groups. Friends groups are doing things for parks and specifically raise money for parks. Some think heritage areas are like friends groups but they are legislatively created with their own management plans and goals. There are parks and foundations for parks within their boundaries such as Journey Through Hallowed Ground (NHA) and Gettysburg Foundation. They receive federal funds rather than friends groups that raise funds for park use.

When I worked in Baltimore, we got Preserve America grants and Chesapeake Bay Gateway grants that required showing NPS logos and signs on the property saying, "This property is being preserved with funds from Preserve America National Park Service." NPS wanted people to know that this was a federally funded project. NPS grants otherwise spell out how the signage is supposed to represent NPS.

**Roles and responsibilities of WASO and Regions:** When I went to Fundamentals, they were talking about that. Fundamentals training covers the roles of the regions and the roles of the Washington office, the role of parks and the role of superintendents. Some of the pre-training was picking out what office was responsible for a particular situation. So, it is not unique to our program. I think from an outside perspective of the taxpayer, you would think the way they talk like the Washington office being the heavy and making all the decisions. We have no direct managerial responsibility over regional coordinators. We are in Cultural Resources. The Southeast, Intermountain, and Pacific West Regions are all in Partnerships. Northeast is in Cultural Resources. A lot of heritage area ideas came out of RTCA, they did a lot of the planning.

**Accomplishments:** I do think the mindset of heritage areas being a drain on the parks has changed, based on the conversations we've had and the briefings we've done. We haven't been able to change the budget line. The fact that they say heritage areas are the wave of the future, this is a great model, all has benefits. We haven't lost any heritage areas in the time that I've been here.



The fact that NHAs have good relationships on the Hill is good in terms that they (Congress) do continue funding the heritage areas. They have raised funding ceilings. The program still exists. We weren't wiped out like Preserve America and Save America's Treasures. Martha is now co-chair of the Partnership Council. We tried hard in the Centennial to be included. Overall, I think, the attitude is good. People are positive about the work heritage areas have done.

**Challenges:** The decentralized way the agency is organized hurts partnership at times. It isolates the heritage areas from the other workings of the NPS. I think that not having to do the environmental statements in management plans helps going forward because it was obvious in the evaluations that having to do the EA or EIS was expensive and not necessary. The program is different than parks. I don't know why it is different than trails. I think we should be closer aligned with how trails are treated. Some trails have superintendents, but not all. More trails have ONPS money.

**Benefits of NPS to heritage areas:** Money. They wouldn't get our federal funds. The national branding with the NPS helps with their local and other agency funding efforts. They get help from other NPS programs, e.g., RTCA. Even if residents don't know that they live in a heritage area, it helps with funders. Helps with making those linkages over state and county boundaries.

Each heritage area is so unique. Unique in the kind of relationship they have with NPS. Some have national parks within their boundaries and can complement each other on interpretation and education.

**Benefits to NPS from heritage areas:** It is more the public benefitting than NPS. Some of the historic sites in the heritage areas would not be open to the public without them. Or, some of these areas would have become parks today if the heritage area was not working there. The benefit of not owning an area, the financial benefit of not managing another park. Portions of JHC Blackstone River Valley NHA became a park, while the NHA remains.