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National Heritage Areas Administrative History Project



Charles Bruce Sheaffer  
February 7, 2017

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo  
Transcribed by Antoinette 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 Antoinette J. Condo  
The narrator was asked to review the transcript, but did not.

**Charles Bruce Sheaffer Interview: February 7, 2017**

The original legislation creating the first nine (heritage areas) were basically managed by appropriations (the House Appropriations Committee). Ralph Regula was a big proponent of heritage areas, and his home state of Ohio is at the top of the list. The NPS had always had a notion that there needed to be some sort of an entity supported by the federal government that would be short of creating a national park but still provide some oversight and financial support to areas that we ultimately called heritage areas. The two ideas sort of came together particularly with a batch of nine that were very highly supported by appropriators, maybe they were all in the east. They were folks that were well positioned to make this happen. Even though they had individual legislation for each of the nine they still patterned the legislation after each other.

I was absolutely an advocate for this entity. Historically we had seen money being funneled through the national park service by way of earmarks to support outside, mostly cultural if not exclusively cultural, areas, in the era of wide use of earmarks. Frankly, even though we didn't have the legal authority to do this we were given the legal authority by virtue of the appropriation bill. It was a much more fiscally lucrative time. We were doing well, and the congressional appropriators were a big help to the NPS in those days and provided the additional funding for the heritage areas. It was all win-win as far as we were concerned. I don't know that we ever envisioned there would be 49 of them created. (54 as of spring 2019)

**Generic legislation:** I'm not sure there was ever great support coming out of the administration for heritage areas, neither Republican nor Democrat. We never saw much of it. There was always the belief that there needed to be generic legislation that would define heritage areas. Much the way our NPS organic act did for all of the parks. We proposed some that would set some limitations, some criteria and the like but it was always a proposal that never passed both House and Senate, even to this day. And all the while Congress kept adding heritage areas.

Without questions I think they should have generic legislation. You can add the individual ones on, it's fine. But we don't really have any parameters and the administration doesn't have anything to point to that it can say we're considering this as a proper and appropriate use of legislation to create these areas. While they may not be specific enough or the options for actually operating something as a traditional national park may not exist, even so, nevertheless it deserves some sort of oversight and coordination and collaboration to promote the cultural heritage of the individual areas. The program would benefit from having generic legislation. Despite the fact that there is this supposed coalition (referring to Alliance of National Heritage Areas), they don't function as a coalition. They don't represent the whole heritage program because there is nothing to represent right now. They effectively lobby for their individual heritage areas, but they don't effectively lobby for the good of the program and that is something that I have problems with. And, I have reacted accordingly.

The appropriators, the staff, and appropriators themselves vary as to how they feel about the heritage areas. The advocacy tends to be in the individual members who have a heritage area they think a lot of. That has always been a problem for me because we have always approached it by, you raise the whole program, or nobody gets raised. That has been a problem for some of

the heritage areas who think they should be favored. Who think they are more deserving than some of the others and are over there lobbying for their individual area.

One of the original supports of the program was Deputy Director Deny Galvin who was probably the strongest advocate who has been upstairs. I think for a long time it has been believed that there needs to be some generic legislation. Even before they were created, we had a need. We have always kind of defined every program we got engaged in with some sort of congressional legislation. Something that would give us mission guidance and the like. It is just a natural thing that these should have the same thing. Individual parks have individual legislation. There is nothing wrong with the heritage area having its own legislation that sets out more specific localized policy guidance. But, in all cases the overriding authority (for the parks) was in this organic act setting the general purpose. All federal programs should have some sort of a strong bases in an authorizing piece of legislation. The heritage areas are no exception.

**NPS responsibilities to heritage areas:** I think what we have seen over the years is that heritage areas, and in other technical assistance areas, that a federal presence from a national entity with one that has the stature of the NPS is essential to their success. Without that connection I don't think they have nearly the opportunities that they would otherwise have to effect change, awareness and all the other things they are attempting to do. I think if you are going to have a connection to the NPS then it has to be done in such a way that there are some standards and oversight and some agreement as to what the boundaries of that effort are to have the support of an organization like the NPS behind you, a recognition that you are connected to the NPS I think is critical to their success.

We don't have a whole lot of people engaged in there, in the heritage area implementation. But bear in mind that anytime federal money is being given to an entity, it is just not a carte blanche check that you write. It comes with some strings attached by either generic...: these are the kinds of things you can do with federal money; these are the things you cannot do with federal money. Or, focused on accomplishing certain goals with the money you are given, and certain performance based on, in this case, the plans that you develop sets out certain goals for accomplishment. If it is going to have federal recognition someone needs to see to it that that's the plan they are following. That they are doing what they say they are going to do.

We have very little administrative money that goes into that program. We have Martha (Raymond) here who is trying to manage the program with all these different interests around the country. Sometime people split their time part time in the regions to oversee the program. So, it's not a heavy hand with which we operate. (Work by the NPS) is various at various times. Some of these are authorized without any infrastructure there. In some cases, I know there hasn't even been an entity, a coordinating body. Nothing, no people. It was just a thought. Somebody has to help get that organized. Somebody has to draw the attention and get the focus.

Any time you sign an agreement and receive federal funds there is supposed to be some sort of oversight to see to it that they comply. On occasion, and we have had this occur, without that sort of guidance they can misspend the money. Once you are caught misspending it then you lose your opportunity to receive additional money until you get your organization procedures in order. We are engaged on many levels with many non-profit groups throughout the country and

sometimes just by virtue of their size they don't maintain a very strong administrative staff. So, it is easy for people to not know the rules, what constraints come along with federal money. There has to be some expectation there will be oversight. The NPS does the best they can with the limited resources they have to make sure that they, for their own good, don't veer from the agreed to plan and constraints that are put on federal money.

The errors in judgement by the grant recipient tend to come on an exception basis. Sometimes it is even their internal people who turn them in because they think there is something done wrong or have stumbled on to something. You can't catch everything. You can't review every expenditure, but you can have some sense that they are accomplishing what they set out to accomplish. They are doing the work that was envisioned by the creation of the heritage area and its generic legislation, which is fairly broad frankly. Nonetheless, sometimes the relationship between what they are doing, what they are spending money on can be somewhat obscure. Between what they are spending and what we are trying to accomplish. I think they are given fair latitude in trying to accomplish some goals with a relatively small amount, three to five hundred thousand dollars each.

The funny thing about oversight of federal spending is, programs get heavily criticized and chastised and even brought down for a lot less so, sometimes it is not the dollar amount that is critical. It's the credibility of the program gets lost when something like that is caught. You don't want to have ten heritage areas caught spending money on things they shouldn't be spending money on because ultimately it hurts them all.

**National Leadership Council attitude regarding heritage areas:** I think it varies by region. In the Northeast they have a lot, a number of them, some of the original ones. Some in the Southeast. So, they are more concentrated in the east. I think you'll find their attitudes have always been supportive. Given limited resources and time and the fact that they all have more parks than they can manage too. I don't know that I can describe the attitudes as being more or less changing over time. The critical member of the NLC that engages with them is the Associate Director for Cultural Resources. Dependent on who is in that office more or less time is spent on heritage areas. Mostly we deal directly with Martha who given her time and resources does an exceptional job of keeping the balance between advocacy and some sort of oversight and coordinating role.

The early ones (heritage areas) felt entitled. In large measure because they represented themselves, they had advocates on the Hill, and they didn't necessarily have to do much of anything the NPS suggested. That has changed. They no longer have that sort of access (to appropriators). They are now more cooperative (with NPS). They used to march to the Hill, make their demands and were heard. That does not happen anymore. They do not have as big a voice as they once did. They may not agree with me on that.

**OMB and heritage areas:** OMB is not enthusiastic about heritage areas for a couple of reasons, and it probably varied by individuals over there, not generally. There is one stumbling block for people in OMB and elsewhere. These things were originally seen and defined in their original legislation as having a beginning and an end. Both limitations on amount of money and time. They were established for a period of ten years. That was the pattern they all followed.

The idea was to develop a plan to become financially independent in the course of that ten years and then you would sunset out of business. That didn't happen. None of them sunsetted at the end of ten years. They all got extended one after the other as they came due.

I think OMB saw that when the legislation says they are going to sunset you don't expect them to just keep rolling over. Nor were they showing any desire to retire from federal funding. I am not suggesting that this was the right thing to do. I think there should have been some compromise. None the less, there were strong opinions on the Hill and at OMB that they violated the whole principle of a heritage area, which was to be a federally aided start up effort. Once you got in there you would draw outside sources or resources or create some avenue of income to keep you going in the long run. Some of them have had some success over all but still they are the ones arguing to continue the federal support. Again, I don't have a lot of trouble with it. It is difficult to raise money for support staff. That is the one thing that federal money can be very helpful with; the overhead that donors don't want to provide.

I know OMB never really bought the whole idea. It never was really defined properly. It seemed to have no limitations. It was a program ultimately invented by Congress without OMB's input.

**Allocation of funding to heritage areas:** I think it was a compromise that they agreed to, this current tiered formula. In the past I have looked at an allocation process that would look at a variety of factors and we went down a number of paths: look at the size of the area, the complexity of the area to see if there was something that would allow you to, just like a park. We don't give every park the same amount of money. We determine what reasonable resources are needed given their responsibilities and their plans. But it was a failed effort. We were never going to be able to get to the point where we could say that one heritage area deserved to have more resources than another. The natural fall out from that was that basically whether they were a little tiny entity or an entire state, like the state of Tennessee, the federal contribution will always be the same amount once they have reached the same level of planning and maturity. I don't think the way they are doing it now is all that bad of a thing.

Congress struggles because they have individual advocates and they do not care about what the other 48 get. What that would require is that everybody agree and reach the point of saying that given the amount of money we have to allocate, every one of them gets \$400,000. So, just know that. That is what you are going to get. That is all you are going to get. If you choose to add three, four, or five or ten more heritage areas you either have to add the money so that they can sustain that level or be willing to accept everybody else getting a lower amount so that these newer units can receive the funding.

Or you develop a plan that says you get to keep that level of funding for ten years and then you go back to a lower level of funding so then we can reallocate to areas that are still in the development stage. All of those conversations have been held but they tend to fall back on the easy money in the end. So, we try to maintain some level of discipline and the equitable way to make it work out. Given all the other influences and discussions and the like I don't think it's actually a bad system. The one we are now advocating for is, once you graduate and get your plan in place and all that stuff you get the same amount that everybody else gets. There is the

hope, on top of that, recognizing that there ought to be opportunities for other monies beyond just that basic allocation, would be some sort of a grant program. They could compete for a pot of money that they all would compete for. That would be fine and then you would be looking at individual proposals and determining which ones merit the funding. We have just not been able to get anybody to agree that that needs to be.

It's the job of these people to stir interest in the private sector in a variety of ways, financially included. Some of them are very successful at it and others are not. Just by virtue of opportunities not so much their efforts.

**NPS as good fit with heritage areas:** I think it is a good fit. I think they absolutely contribute to the mission of the NPS. I have seen the evolution of the creation of new national parks, and the interest that having a national park or a heritage area brings to a certain area. Frankly, from a budgetary standpoint it is more of a headache than anything else. They take an inordinate amount of a lot of people's time in terms of the budget process. But I think they are perfectly suited to be in the NPS. I can't think of anywhere else that they would be better suited.

When it comes to budgetary decision making, there are much richer organizations that they might be better off in, might be. I think we are the right organization. I think we are the strongest advocates for heritage, cultural resource preservation in the country. By far. I can't think of where else they would fit more suitably. To varying degrees, they are contributing to our mandate. I think some of them are far more effective than others. Like anything, it is always uneven outcomes and performances.

We have to make a lot of decisions in this organization. People confuse not getting a favorable decision with meaning that we don't advocate for them. You have to make priority decisions. People in certain areas that think they have not done as well on the budget process over the years naturally think that I, therefore, don't advocate or don't think highly for the program. You are talking about a \$3 billion organization with 400+ national park areas, 49+ heritage areas, literally dozens of other programs, internal and external, grant programs, construction programs. The budget process absolutely demands that you make priority decisions. The money is not flowing to the organization right now nor has it been for some years. The only issues that I have ever had with the Congress creating these new programs is that they tended not to fund them. That has gone on for years.

I'm sure there are times when I have said stop adding these things, they are not getting the money to fund them. People see that as not being supportive of the program. That's not true. It is the struggle between authorizing and appropriations that has always been an issue for me. Here and other places Congress loves to pass authorizing legislation. These are perfect examples where outside of that first nine when they were strongly supported by appropriations. After that there was one authorization after another, and the money just wasn't building as fast as the areas were coming in. Following the path of the original intention was an annual cap of a million dollars we should be getting 49 million dollars today instead of 22 million. That is how people perceive that I don't support them and haven't over the years.

The concept as Deny (Gavin) defined it originally, I absolutely was in favor of. It was seen as bringing focus to these areas without making them national parks. That was our discussion at that time.