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Annie Harris
June 27, 2016

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

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Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Annie Harris

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Early experience: The Essex Heritage Area legislation was passed in 1996. I was working on it and many other projects starting about 1990. At the time I was working with an organization called the Salem Partnership a non-profit which had a board that included the mayor of the City of Salem, heads of the banks, head of the local college, and NPS. The Partnership focused on economic development in the city of Salem. We were looking at the assets that Salem had and one of the assets was a national park site, the first national historic site in the system. It had a pretty active superintendent, Cynthia Pollack, who was working with us who said that we should do more with the park site.

NPS actually undertook a study in 1989-90 done by Michael Spratt of the Denver Planning Office called the, *Salem Project, the Study of Alternatives*. It looked at all the nationally significant historical resources in this region both inside and outside the park. The plan gave four alternatives. We looked at it and it talked about a regional context that worked for the NPS. So, we started pushing for something in the NPS called a heritage area program. The first one had been the I&M Canal. So, we started looking at that and Senator (Edward *Ted*) Kennedy got involved and helped us get legislation passed. That was the Omnibus bill that passed in 1996, nine or ten heritage areas came in then.

I had worked as a planner for the city of Lowell. I worked at the time that there was a special study commission put together headed by Tom O'Neil looking at the potential for bringing the NPS into Lowell. When the commission was put together the planning department of the city of Lowell acted as staff. We helped in the selection of the consulting firm that was brought in. We did drawings to show the concept. I drew pictures of the canals with little boats on them thinking this would never happen and trollies on the trolley tracks. It is a thrill to go up there and see them in place now. I did a lot of historic rehabilitation work, factories, housing, office space. Worked in real estate development and real estate finance but primarily with historic properties.

Alliance of National Heritage Areas: It was organized to be a trade organization to represent the interests of the congressionally designated heritage areas which often coincide with the NPS but not always. It was formed to try to foster the heritage area program. We think that it (the national heritage area program) is an interesting and very robust program in terms of what it does in communities and its impact. We got together to share information and best practices but also to make sure there is funding for the program. Because it is not an official program of the National Park System, we have drafted program legislation in three congresses and no action has been taken. I don't necessarily agree with some of the early program legislation (from 1990s). But now we have a good bill out there sponsored by Congressmen (Charlie) Dent and (Paul) Tonko. This is the third Congress they have introduced it. Nothing is passing in Congress. There is next to no park legislation being considered in the House.

The Alliance has kept the thing going in spite of sunsets and budget cuts, particularly by President Obama, whose budget proposed cutting the heritage area program funding in half every year. Congress has restored money every year. There has been a slight increase in the program. Keeping the program alive with some funding has been key. It (the Alliance) has been very good for sharing information, in helping new heritage areas get started. It has been successful with the

NPS' help doing newsletters and web calls and conference calls and stuff. In sharing and disseminating information I think they have been very successful. For a while we were almost too successful. We were great in talking about the community benefits of the program so a whole slew of heritage areas came in and there are a whole bunch more waiting. But Congress hasn't kept pace. The funding has been challenging. It has been very nice to have a group that you can go to and find out what is going on and share information.

NPS relationship to National Heritage Areas: I think there is a much larger embrace of the heritage areas (by the NPS) than there was when we started. I think that is actually typical. You get a new program in the NPS and it takes a while for people to adjust to it. There is always a kind of old school that thinks that our money is being taken away by some new program. So, I think there is much more welcoming and understanding in the NPS of the value of the heritage areas to the NPS. I think Jon Jarvis, early on, got the value of the heritage areas to the parks. Not everybody else did but they are starting and have come around to that. With the, *Call to Action*, he spearheaded, the call for being more relevant and being more diverse, being out there more in the community.

There is a huge recognition now that heritage areas can really help the NPS be more relevant and diverse. There has been a push to get parks that are not inside heritage areas to form partnerships with the heritage areas because we can add more value. We can give the parks a much bigger voice. We can bring more diverse populations to them. We can get the park message out there much wider because we are working at the grassroots at a lot of communities.

Factors for success of heritage areas: You have to be grounded in your communities and have relationships in the communities. Over time there have been a few heritage areas that were kind of formed more top down. There was a particular congressman or senator who wanted it and pushed it on the community. Those have had more of a struggle getting started and getting related to their communities but even those have come around. To be successful heritage areas sort of bubble up from the grassroots, neighborhoods and communities, citizens want them and will do a lot of work. It is a partnership with the NPS, but it only works if the communities and the local people are there making it work. The NPS gives us some tools and some programs and some training and a little bit of money but if you don't have the local people there to work on it, it is not successful. I'm here to say that just about every heritage area is successful because they are based in their communities and they are able to rally people around the potential of using their history and their heritage and their natural and cultural resources. That's the key.

I think the heritage public/private partnerships are set up to help the resources in their regions be more successful, from helping small museums get more audience to helping people do interpretation around their heritage whether it be coal mines, railroads, industrial revolution and more. People can tell their stories. There has been a lot of pressure from OMB, in particular, for heritage areas to be what they call self-sufficient. We'll give you a little bit of money for a few years and then you have to provide all the rest of the money; you can't have any public money. As I have argued with OMB that is not the way we are set up. That is not the model. Look at our management plans, that's never been part of it, to be totally self-sufficient. Yes, we have to match all the money we get. Yes, we have to raise private money. That's perfectly reasonable. But, to not have any public money isn't realistic. It's very hard to attract and hold the private

money if this is supposed to be a partnership and there is no partnership from the NPS, from the public sector.

Management plan: I think when we started it really wasn't clear what the management plan components were, and it's now obviously much more codified and clear what has to be in it. I think it's been good. I think unfortunately it's taken an incredibly long time to get the management plans approved for some of the newer heritage areas. I'm not sure I understand why because I haven't been involved in the process. We just did one (management plan). There is no requirement to update the management plan. We have done other plans since then, a strategic plan, an economic development plan, and other plans. But one of the oddities of the program is it doesn't require that there be a management plan update. What was required in getting it reauthorized was that there be an economic development study done.

The economic study is measuring the economic impact of having historic, natural and cultural resources, cultural tourism, preserved and enhanced and promoted. They measure some of the direct jobs that we create, measuring a piece of the cultural tourism. I think they did a pretty good job. And they were pretty conservative about the numbers. I think all of us spent some time reviewing what they did and what Tripp Umbach does is good work. They have done many other economic development studies and they are pretty conservative on all of their estimates.

Evaluation of a heritage area: The NPS WASO has been working for a long time on their annual assessment of the heritage areas. I think there is a lot of validity in what they have come up with in terms of numbers of partnerships, numbers of people impacted. We take these yearly reports very seriously. We spend a lot of time on it. It measures miles of trails preserved and maintained, numbers of visitors, numbers of partnerships, amount of money spent and the numbers and amounts and leverage of grants. There are a lot of different measurement pieces in there. It took a lot of work and we take it very seriously and spend a lot of time on it and have found that it is pretty helpful to see the impact of our work each year. It isn't easy to measure these things. We have been talking about measuring things since day one. I think what has been developed to measure the number of things that heritage areas do is very successful.

Charting a Future: I thought it was a very interesting process certainly. I've used some of the results of *Charting the Future...*, and some of the other studies for some of the work that we've done. The work of the NPS Advisory Board is internal so I don't know what the full impact of its recommendations might be. It's hard to tell, but every once in a while, I see parts of it pop up.

International subcommittee: It's hard to describe heritage areas to a lot of people. I was very interested in, still am, in what is done in other countries. Particularly France has the French regional nature parks and England has a program. Brenda Barrett and Eleanor (Mahoney) encouraged a group of us to go look at the French nature parks. Four of us did do a trip over there. I found it really fascinating. It's different from the heritage areas here but similar in many ways. I think there are a lot of worthwhile lessons to be learned back and forth. I couldn't figure out a way to keep it really sustainable. The folks at Augusta Canal (NHC) kept the connection with the French a little longer than we have. They actually did several more exchanges. We had a contingent from the French Regional Nature Parks leadership come over to Detroit when we

had an international conference there. I just couldn't figure out how to fit it in to all the other work we were doing. Especially how to finance it and sustain financial benefits for both groups. They call them nature parks, but they are really heritage areas. They are cultural landscapes, and they look at how you deal with a large lived-in landscape, and how you try to keep the tradition alive while still providing for growth, modernization.

They didn't seem to be subsidized by the federal government as much as we had expected. They were supported more by regional and local government and less by the federal government. They signed compacts with the communities. In a region with 30 communities, they spent a lot of time getting a compact with each community. As a part of that there is a payment from those communities and agreements to certain things like building laws, use of certain materials. Lighting laws, e.g., you can't have uplighting in the night sky. They are used to a more regulated environment than we have. And they are used to providing a little more money. In New England it's very difficult for us to get even city and regional money because we don't have county government and we are set up with a system of home rule (individual town authorities). Most funding is provided town by town so it's very hard to do things regionally and get money for it. Occasionally we do, but we have had more success bringing federal money into the region. Scenic Byway money or other transportation money when there was some.

They (the French) were very interested in the philanthropy and support we got from individuals and fund raising. That was something they weren't strong in.

Just being out there and working with a lot of different places and people and figuring out where the gaps are where we can help fill or make up or reinforce. The work is interesting because it's always changing because there are always new relationships. You may have a relationship with an organization and then they change their leadership or their focus and change what you are doing with them. You just have to be open to opportunities and possibilities.

Changes in relationship of NPS and NHAs: More with the leadership under Jon (Jarvis) who is more supportive of the areas. I think there has been a change in the NPS with people that are coming up in the system that are more comfortable with partnerships. They like to deal with external people and are not as uptight about the people who are not wearing the grey and the green. I think there are still challenges in the contracting office. Some of it understandable for some of the pressure the NPS has gotten from Congress. But, in general, the culture of the NPS is more outward focused and more receptive to working outside the boundaries and understanding that they really have to do that. I know the public still thinks of the NPS as first and foremost the big parks that start with Y. Within the system, the parks are still very important but there is a larger appreciation from more people in the NPS for the value of their programs. And an understanding of how the heritage areas are important for the broader reach of the NPS. It's the future, but there is a way to go.

Challenges: You are dealing with a huge region. We deal with 34 communities, each with its own government and needs. For us it's an enormous benefit that we have phenomenal resources here, historical, cultural, and natural resources. But there are so many that it's hard to get incredibly strong themes and promote them because there are so many nationally significant

resources. I sometimes am a little envious of a place that has one strong theme such as a canal then they are all about interpreting the canal. We have three themes and a thousand resources.

The most challenging thing has been this threat of legislative sunsets, of going away. The idea, particularly with OMB, that this is a short-term program; we need to nip it in the bud and get rid of the money. Instead, heritage areas are a long-term effort. Change in your region takes place over a long period of time. The plans we do are all long-term. We put up signage along our coastal scenic by-way. It took ten years, I repeat, ten years, to get these signs up. These are long-term projects that show change over time. Some people in Congress and OMB have this idea that we are just going to give you a little bit of money for a short period of time and that's it! And we are going to sunset you and we are going to cap you. It is very much out of sync with the way heritage areas perform their work and do their planning and do their management plan. So we still have a disconnect. Not with everybody. We have great congressmen who love the program and are very supportive, but we do have other people who want to cut the program off.

Benefits of NPS to heritage areas: We have taken advantage of some of the other programs that the NPS has. We got involved six or seven years ago with their new Park in Every Classroom Program which is a place-based education program that the folks up in Vermont developed. We've taken it and we do training for teachers at our two national park sites where teachers are trained to use local resources in their classrooms. What the teachers learn at the parks, they can then take back to their communities and use to get kids out into their local resources. That's been a great program and it's really grown. Our local NPS (Salem Maritime and Saugus Iron Works NHS) has gotten some real recognition for it and we have too.

We've done a youth job corps program, called Future Leaders, with the NPS too. We teamed up with them and worked together on it. For the last five years, thirty-five to forty youths between the ages of 16-26 years have been hired each summer to work in the parks where they are trained in historic preservation, visitor services and collections management. Our national heritage area has been an important part of the success of this program.

We like the NPS especially their mission and their brand. We enhance what we do by saying we are part of the national park family and our national parks here particularly encourage that because they are small parks and want more visibility. The Salem Maritime National Historic Site has a regional visitor's center that opened about 20 years ago. I actually was involved in helping to get it developed when I was with the Salem Partnership. We've teamed up with NPS in the visitor's center; we help to staff the main desk there, we have movies about the region that are shown at the center, we give out visitor information, and we encourage other sites in the region to provide information related to the themes told by Salem Maritime and Saugus Iron Works NHS. We also have done a number of other partnership programs with NPS including helping to raise funds to build Salem Maritime's tall ship Friendship and assisting with her ambassadorial trips to other ports.

Yes, the money through the heritage partnership program has been important to us because it's the base money from which we raise all the other money. It helps us keep the lights on. Keep the basic staff. But for us the partnership has gone much beyond that because we do have these two park units and are able to do a lot of things with them.

Benefit to NPS mission: Our mission is similar to the park mission. Heritage areas enable local people to, “preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values,” of a congressionally designated region, “for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.” Creating a heritage area is like creating a national park but without the federal ownership. With the local buy-in, local people preserve and enhance a place for the public enjoyment. So future generations can experience these great resources and hear these really good stories. The local buy-in doesn’t always work. People don’t always agree that these things should be preserved, or the stories should be told. Sometimes buildings get torn down so you don’t have the protection of a national park where it wouldn’t get torn down. But heritage areas are extremely successful a lot of the time because you have local people doing it, telling their stories, promoting it. A lot of them are nationally significant stories. Many of them are untold stories because they are stories about lesser-known people or people of more diverse backgrounds or people who aren’t white.

I remember going to a heritage area several years ago and before I went there, I thought it was going to be really dull because it was the story of anthracite coal. I was certainly wrong. It turned out to be fascinating! We went down in a coal mine with a retired coal miner who told us incredible stories about his experience in the mines. The stories stayed with me because they were told by real people about their experiences. They are very important stories and under Jon Jarvis’ leadership there has been much greater recognition that these stories should be told. For historic and cultural sites to be relevant we need to tell lots of different stories, and not just those about dead white men. There is a much broader and richer history when you bring in multiple voices. If you want resources and you want your national parks to be around in future, you must get people engaged in history and in natural resources and enjoying the outdoors. I think heritage areas are a great way to get people engaged locally. We are able to engage people where they are and then help encourage them to go see the bigger world. We also help local people to understand that they need to be engaged in taking care of these resources. We show them that it’s not going to be here if you don’t get engaged and help us.