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Alma Ripps  
July 25, 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 Alma Ripps

**Alma Ripps Interview: July 25, 2016**

I started in the National Park Service in 2000 as a legislative affairs specialist in the Office of Legislative and Congressional Affairs (OLCA). We each had a region and various subject areas we were responsible for covering. I had Northeast Region, and I covered natural and cultural resources. Because heritage areas were under the Cultural Resource Directorate, and because the majority of them were in the Northeast, they were in my portfolio even though I knew nothing about heritage areas.

**NPS bills in Congress:** As a courtesy, the NPS does drafting requests for members of Congress on NPS-related topics. There are more NPS bills introduced in Congress than almost any other agency in the federal government because everything we do requires a bill: boundary changes, studies, designations, and many other actions. We normally get a request from a congressional office either via a letter or in an email since we must have some formal documentation asking us to prepare a draft bill. After several years of drafting national heritage area bills, we started making them more and more consistent using a template. When we would send our draft forward to the congressional office, we would include a paragraph stating that we had prepared this draft bill as a service for Congress, but it doesn't mean that we will support it if asked to testify. The draft bill would not have to get cleared by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), but they would get a copy of it when we would send it forward.

**Program legislation:** The first program legislation was introduced in 1993 by Representative Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) followed a few months later by a bill by Representative Bruce Vento (D-MN). Over the next two decades, various forms of program legislation were introduced. The early bills were generally introduced by Democrats while Republicans introduced almost all the bills after 1995. The Administration took various positions on bills, sometimes supporting them, sometimes opposing them. Many times, we never took any position since a hearing was not held. The first hearing on program legislation was scheduled for September 11, 2001, but as you might guess, it got cancelled.

Every two years as a new Congress starts, OLCA asks all the NPS regions and program offices if there are any bills they need to be enacted, such as a boundary expansion, to help the NPS. Those legislative proposals have to be cleared through OMB, which is a very long and sometimes frustrating process. Sometimes OMB would radically change the bills that we put forward, which can be a problem. After OMB clearance, we were allowed to contact our authorizing committees or the local member that represents the park or potential heritage area to see if they would be willing to introduce a bill for us.

We learned as we went along about what was needed in the program legislation and what provisions were important. There were many things that we learned. One was that we had to have better designation criteria for potential heritage areas. What attributes would make a heritage area successful? The first heritage area was established in 1984, the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, but there were different understandings of what this meant. One group thought a heritage area was an alternative to a park unit. If someone said they wanted a park unit and the area was too large, not appropriate being administered by the federal government, or it didn't meet other criteria for establishing a park then designation as a heritage

area made sense. But later, as more proposals for heritage areas came forward, this was viewed as the primary designation option as opposed to a park unit. Even though we were not designating the area as a park, the resources within the area and the story it told had to be nationally important or we would recommend it as a state/local heritage area. Sometimes a park unit was established within a heritage area years after the heritage area was designated, such as the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District in Virginia.

Another issue emerged that related to the time period for funding of heritage areas. Some people knew that these areas were never going to be units because they did not meet the criteria, but there could be a designation that acknowledged the story was nationally important and authorized funding for a limited amount of time to assist the local group. The heritage area would continue but the funding wouldn't. Some people thought no, these were going to be funded in perpetuity, they helped preserve resources and tell local stories. There was that push/pull that I saw in the NPS when I first started here, about the intentions of Congress when these started getting designated. Newer heritage areas knew that the funding would only be for a limited time, then they are on their own. They didn't have the expectation that older areas had for funding in perpetuity. Either way, the NPS would continue to provide technical assistance through our regional offices, parks, and the National Heritage Area Program.

Through the years, program legislation changed. For example, elements in a (feasibility) study, and what a national program would look like. Later on, there was language authorizing administrative funds because there was very little money for people who were implementing the program at the regional and national levels. They were doing it as collateral duty in some cases. There was a need for us to pay for folks to do that. Private property language was also integrated into later designation bills based on some confusion about potential restrictions if you were located within a heritage area. The truth is that being in a heritage area is like being in a water district; being within a boundary does not lead to regulatory or legal restrictions based on the designation.

**Area designation bills:** Several other issues varied among individual heritage areas including who would undertake the feasibility study that was required before an area could be designated. Sometimes Congress would authorize the NPS to conduct the study, but other times, to speed up the evaluation, the local group would prepare the feasibility study. In those cases, we reviewed it using our criteria and told them if there was missing information. Once the study was complete, we would make a determination whether or not it met the criteria.

Another area of discussion involved when in the process the management plan should be completed. We went back and forth about whether you designate the heritage area and then do the management plan, or do you do the management plan first to make sure the local group has the vision and leadership for the area and are good at fundraising and building coalitions then seek the designation. Brenda Barrett [former NPS Heritage Area Coordinator] would say, "If you want to be a heritage area start acting like a heritage area. Prove to the government that you have a strong coalition of interested parties that can serve as the local coordinating entity. That you can do fundraising with your partners. That you are really good at identifying, interpreting, and preserving resources, working with the community, all those critical functions."

The study and designation of heritage areas took up a large amount of my time while at OLCA especially as we developed the program legislation. We got a lot of push back from OMB since one of the main staffers we worked with was not a big supporter of these areas at all. I don't think he ever understood the value of heritage areas, but instead thought it was a way to get around Congress when they didn't agree with designating a park unit and were looking for a way to get money from the government. He kept blocking our efforts when we tried to get program legislation put forward or he tried to change the wording in such a manner that weakened it. He was not the biggest fan shall we say.

**Congressional staff:** For individual designation bills, we would work with the staff of the congressional district in which the potential area was located. For program legislation, we worked with a variety of staffers through the years. One of the first people I worked with was a staffer in Representative Joel Hefley's office, a very conservative Republican member of the House from Colorado Springs, Colorado. He was very interested in getting program legislation enacted to add some sidebars to the many designation bills that were coming through the committee. His staffer was a good partner in developing workable legislation that helped the NPS. In fact, almost all the major sponsors of program legislation were Republicans including Senator Craig Thomas (R-WY). We worked with some democratic staff from the House Committee for Natural Resources. The Democrats were not as supportive of program legislation. They thought most of the individual designation bills had become very consistent, so they didn't see the need for program legislation. Also, they were concerned that some Republicans would add into the bill not only private property language, most of which we were okay with, but mandatory notification and opt-in language that would end up hurting the program and future heritage areas. They were not a big proponent of getting program legislation. They thought it was unnecessary.

**NPS bill language wanted in 2000-2007:** The Administration wanted language in the bill that we (NPS) could get funding for administrative functions to run the program, however, OMB was not very supportive. Another idea that we developed was that after your funding had sunset, there would be a new pot of money that an existing area could compete for, a kind of incentive. You could compete for a grant for specific projects within the heritage area but only if your money had sunset. You couldn't get it if you got your funding reauthorized. There was back and forth on that provision as well. We were trying to explain to OMB that it made sense because in the long run it was much less expensive to have a pot of money as opposed to getting upped again and again for another \$10 million over 10 years.

**Sunsetting.** There was a difference of thought within the NPS on congressional intent in terms of funding for heritage areas. OLCA Assistant Director Don Hellman thought that funding for these areas would sunset after a set period of time, while former Deputy Director for Operations Deny Galvin did not. He thought they served a very important purpose, and we should invest federal dollars into them in perpetuity because we are telling important stories on a much larger scale than a park could tell. We are bringing in community members. There are a lot of benefits that could be achieved for not that much money. As designated by Congress, federal funding through the NPS would sunset after a set period of time (normally 10 or 15 years), but not technical assistance nor the heritage areas themselves. The earlier ones kept coming back to get

re-upped. The later ones, I think, understood that the funding would only be for a limited time. Self-sufficiency was definitely a big issue toward the tail end of my time in OLCA. There was this expectation that the funding would end, and the area would have to become self-sufficient and be able to raise its own money and compete for non-heritage area federal funding, and from other sources.

**Critics:** Our biggest critics were generally conservative Republicans, ones who were anti-federal government. They were the ones who were very concerned about private property rights and incorrectly thought that being in a heritage area meant that the government could acquire your land, impose zoning and regulatory restrictions, all sorts of bad things. They fought the designation of heritage areas. For individual ones supported by a Republican member, they were mostly silent. But they were dead set against program legislation unless you put in all these provisions that would sink it.

There were also several property rights groups that opposed establishment of these areas. One of the biggest anti-heritage areas groups was the American Policy Center. APC's Legislative Director Peyton Knight testified frequently in opposition to both individual bills and program legislation, at the request of Republican House members. They would put out propaganda about heritage areas that warned residents that the designation would harm property rights and local governance, and impact local zoning and land use planning. After a bill, sponsored by Rep. Frank Wolfe, a Republican from Virginia, was enacted, APC found itself within the newly designated Journey Through Hallowed Ground (National Heritage Area). After it was designated, they woke up in the morning living in a heritage area, and nothing bad happened, not that this changed their views, I am sure. They were always testifying against heritage areas, always talking to the staffers, trying to stop these designations. Many of the bills were sponsored by Republican members, so the organization would turn on them.

**Special bill provisions considered:** There were several provisions that were added to pending heritage bills that were problematic. There was an opt-in provision that required that every property owner within a potential heritage area to proactively opt in to be part of the heritage area. We would have to notify every landowner and resident via a letter that they were within a potential heritage area, and they would have to send a letter back agreeing to be included in the heritage area. We had to have all these letters in our files so we would know who was in the heritage area and who wasn't. Some of these heritage areas had over a million people so just the price of stamps to notify everyone would have been a huge problem. Plus, it didn't make any sense because you would have a heritage area that looked like a checkerboard. You can't have a boundary that looks like that. That was something that sounded almost benign but would kill the heritage area if you had to do it. Some bills had an opt-out provision as well, where property owners could send a letter and be taken out of the heritage area. The local coordinating entity who was managing the heritage area would have to know who was inside and outside the boundary since there were grants available to people for heritage-related projects, but only if they were within the boundary. If a property owner had asked to be taken out, then sold their property and the new owner wanted to participate, they would have to send a letter asking to be put back in. As you might realize, this would be an administrative nightmare.

The only heritage area where you could actually acquire property was the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Heritage Area. Specifically, when the Shenandoah heritage area was established, they wanted to acquire battlefields. That was part of the congressional bill. That was the only one that had the authority to acquire land. Every other designation bill has specific language saying they could not acquire private property which was fine. That is not what a heritage area is supposed to be. We didn't have a problem with that, but the opt-in or opt-out language, mandatory notification language, all that was unworkable. The members stopped putting that language in because we had the private property protection language and because we kept testifying about the harmful impacts of the other language. We kept telling them designation had no impact on zoning. These areas couldn't acquire property.

People just didn't understand what it meant to be part of a heritage area. That was the biggest problem. They thought the designation would result in restrictions on the use of their properties or limits on other activities. We would say that being within a heritage area is like being in a water district, it's just a boundary. If you do not want to have anything to do with the heritage area you don't have to do it. You are in one, but it makes no difference in your life. However, a private property or business owner who is excited about being in a heritage area would be eligible to compete for funding for projects like the installation of a wayside exhibit. You could be working with the NPS or the local coordinating entity and it could be a very positive experience, an opportunity to educate the public and visitors about your local heritage, to bring dollars into your communities. You would want to be a partner in that effort. There were a lot of upsides to the designation if you wanted to do it. If you didn't, no one would have any authority over you. One outcome that was used against heritage areas was that some local jurisdictions would impose land use restrictions as a result of a heritage area designation, but they could do that anyway whether or not there was a heritage area. Many localities were pushing heritage tourism, and realized that they needed to preserve these resources, and think long-term in their planning and land use. This was a local decision having nothing to do with the NPS, yet we got blamed for it.

There were even examples of counties being adamant about not being within the boundary when an area got designated, but after they saw the tourists flocking to the sites within the area, spending money, they pressured their member of Congress to pass a bill to expand the boundary to include them.

**Hearings:** Part of our job in OLCA was to brief the NPS staff member who was going to be testifying on a study or designation bill, or program legislation. We would be sure they knew all the details about the area, the benefits of designation, what potential questions they might be asked, and what response they could offer. Associate Director for Cultural Resources Kate Stevenson testified a lot. She was really good. She was the queen of the heritage areas.

During the hearings, the first panel would be federal witnesses, and normally that was just us. Then the next panel would be some of the groups in the heritage areas that gave glowing testimony about the resources and partnerships and all that. They didn't always testify. There also might be someone from the anti-heritage area group, almost always Peyton Knight from the American Policy Center, who might be invited to speak about how any federal designations were a bad thing for a community. Sometimes on program legislation we were the only ones

testifying. The heritage areas speakers were on the same page as the NPS speakers. The only time we were ever critical in testimony was sometimes the feasibility study was not as strong as it needed to be and we might testify that the study needed to do x, y, and z, recommending that the committee put off the designation until the local group provided more information and we could make a better determination about suitability. The group needed to go back and do whatever the part of the study that was needed for us to make our decision. But we were always working closely with many of these groups, proposing creation of a heritage area, and some were just not quite ready, and we would say, you need to do these other things first. By the time the bill went forward, and we were testifying, everyone was ok with it generally.

Although the NPS career program people were supportive of many designations, depending on the current administration, it didn't always mean we would testify in favor of designation. For example, during the Bush Administration, we were always forced to testify that although this (designation) meets all the criteria, we do not support it because of the maintenance backlog. That became our template for all this stuff. The Hill ignored that last line. Members would ask if this meets all the criteria and we would say yes, and they would ignore the boilerplate stance we would take. That just happens with administrations. Some are more supportive than others. Maintenance backlog was brought up a lot for the reason why (we didn't support the bill). Why would you recommend creating more heritage areas that will require additional funding when you have these other commitments? Another refrain was that they met the criteria, but we would not support any until program legislation was enacted. That was another way of putting it off because they knew the program legislation wasn't going anywhere. Every couple of years there was some standard language that OMB would make us put into our testimony. But, again, the Hill just basically ignored that. They heard it in every piece of testimony we did. This was an issue in both Republican and some Democratic Administrations.

**Disagreements between NPS and Congress:** Private property was the big one. That always came up in program legislation. The Democrats would bring it up and ask us softball questions like, "Does this bill allow the NPS or the local group to impose zoning?" We would say, "No, congressman, it does not allow it." It would help to get on the record that there was no authority for zoning etc. in these bills. We would get on the record that given all the heritage areas that had been established and the millions and millions of people living in them, there was not a single solitary example of a heritage area requiring zoning or doing any sort of restrictions on private property, or any sort of activity. There were no examples. We made this point during all our hearings and even asked the anti-heritage guys if they could offer an example that we could look into to make sure there were no issues, but they couldn't.

Some of the more conservative members of the House Natural Resources Committee staff would want to change bill language. We worked with one staffer who worked for several of the conservative subcommittee members on the House Natural Resources Committee, National Parks Subcommittee. He was our major staffer for many years. The chair of that subcommittee changed a lot and some of them were anti-heritage areas and some of them didn't care so he was reflective of that in how he would change the program legislation. We also had some Appropriations Committee congressional staff who didn't like heritage areas either.



**Why program legislation never passed:** From the Democratic side, they really didn't see the need for it and thought it might harm the program in the end. Although you had some Republican members who were really pushing the legislation, you had a lot of conservative Republicans who were trying to stop it or sabotage it so there was a lot of drama, and it didn't go forward. I think the administration, especially OMB, was very anti-heritage areas so it wasn't a priority for the Administration. It just kind of floundered since a lot of people thought we had a program even though, officially, we didn't. Heritage areas were being studied, were being established so why do you even need a (legislated) program. The reasons we would offer included having dedicated funding, respect that comes from a legislatively authorized program, having an official heritage area network, not just staff working with potential and designated areas. It just made sense from our perspective. Even though the heritage areas are established in perpetuity, Congress wanted them to come back to get federal dollars reauthorized and make the decision of whether or not they were self-sufficient yet.

The heritage areas had a variety of expertise when it came to management. Some of them had a very strong local coordinating entity that was really good at fundraising and had an established track record of being able to raise matching dollars that were required to receive federal dollars. That was something they had to be good at. In the earlier ones, people didn't worry about that as much but raising that match is critical to the success of an area. If you can't raise that match then being a successful heritage area might be an issue for you since you might struggle with developing and implementing projects within the area, forming partnerships. Some places like Gullah-Geechee (Cultural Heritage Corridor) have had just a really hard time. Many of the members who sit on the board have not gelled as a group and many of them did not come into it with a strong fundraising background. But the resources and stories in that area are very special and unique so the NPS is always trying to help them be successful. I think they have gotten better as a partnership as time has gone on.

**Commission and non-profit management entities:** The earlier ones had federal commissions, but we really have moved away from that model since these require a dedicated NPS staff member to help run the commission. The Office of Policy oversees the committee management function within the NPS. We provide support to regions and parks that work with advisory committees and operating commissions. The only two heritage areas that still use a commission model are Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor and Gullah-Geechee. We work with them on getting the members appointed by the Secretary and tracking when members' terms are about to expire. We put together the packages (of proposed appointees) that go up to the Secretary. We work with the White House to get the names vetted. It takes a long time, six to eight months. In an election year the White House has been clearing them quickly because the door is closing. There comes a point before an election when we just stop putting people on commissions and committees even though they are non-political appointments. People who clear them start going off and doing other things. They leave the administration and there is the feeling that someone new is coming in and if any of these packages are in process they'll probably be stopped. A new administration coming in, whether the same party or different, will want to review them. The whole process takes a very long time.

The NPS plays a much larger role in a federal commission (than with an NGO). For Blackstone (John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor) we actually had an

executive director who was an NPS employee. We are trying to get away from that. It was too big a federal role, it should really be a local group. Federal commissions are also expensive, and it takes a long time to get members appointed. Just a lot of costs involved with it. The commission eventually transitions to a non-profit anyway so why not just start with a non-profit. But in some of them you don't have an obvious non-profit group who could serve as the local coordinating entity. When Niagara Falls was first established, the idea was that in five years they would transition (to a non-profit) but when the time came there was no obvious group, state or local, so that commission got extended.

**The Policy Office staffs the NPS Advisory Board.** Over the years, program legislation and establishing an official system of heritage areas has been discussed and recommended by the National Park System Advisory Board (Advisory Board). The Advisory Board issued at least two reports that referenced this ([Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas](#) in 2006 and [Advancing the National Park Idea](#) in 2009), but the Board has not done much with heritage areas in recent years. It came up several years ago that program legislation would be important. This really was the future of the NPS in many ways because it's telling the NPS story on a much larger level, it requires fewer federal dollars, and depends on partnerships and local community leadership. That definitely has been the emphasis not only for the NPS, but for the Advisory Board, the Department, and the Administration. This Department has emphasized NPS programs; the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA), historic preservation programs, heritage areas, partnership programs where we really work in communities. One of Director Jarvis' favorite sayings is, "In our first century, we brought people to the parks, now we are bringing the parks to the people." He definitely has emphasized NPS programs, not just parks. Several Department of the Interior Secretaries, I think starting with Ken Salazar, were constantly using RTCA and heritage areas as great examples of us working in communities.

The only specific policy we have that relates to national heritage areas is Policy Memorandum 12-02, National Heritage Area Program, which was issued in March 2012 by Director Jarvis. I don't know of any other specific policies. [Management Policies](#) (2006) only mentions heritage areas in a list of NPS programs, it does not include any guidance beyond what would apply in any external program.

**Challenges:** Internally, it was resistance by OMB. Externally, it was people just not understanding what they (heritage areas) were. That is the number one challenge. People did not understand what a heritage area was and what it meant if you were within one, so they didn't like them. They didn't trust them. It was just government overreach. You draw a boundary around something and something horrible is going to happen. As the program matured, we moved towards the idea of self-sufficiency and requirements for doing three-year out reports that evaluated an area's ability to exist without NPS dollars. This effort took up a lot of time trying to figure this out. How to develop the reports. How to evaluate heritage areas. The Conservation Study Institute, in conjunction with the national heritage area program, developed these reports. Congressional staffers also weighed in on what would be included and how it would help inform Congress' decision whether or not to extend funding for a limited number of years until they could be successful.

Over the years, how funding was allocated changed. I think up until fiscal year '07 they were earmarked by congressional committees that decided which area got which amount. Then it became more of a formula. The newer ones got a lot less money than the more mature ones. The number of heritage areas was growing, but the pot of money was not. There was push back from the older areas that saw their money dwindling and the newer ones looking to get what they were authorized when designated, normally \$1 million a year not to exceed \$10 million overall. Not that these areas ever got that much money in the end, but the expectation was there. There was a conflict between the haves and have nots. They were competing for funds. There was no huge upswing in money that was going to heritage areas, but more areas had to compete for limited dollars.

There got to be an issue that so many areas were pending we felt like everything was going to be a heritage area. Every member (of Congress) wanted a heritage area. There would be conservative Republicans with anti-federal government beliefs, however when there was a group who wanted a heritage area in their district or state, as long as there was protection for private property, they would support the designation. That makes sense since it is coming from a local group, the local community. So why wouldn't you support it? It was your constituents.

A few years back, the General Accounting Office (GAO) came out with a report that we were not doing a good job accounting for the money that these groups were getting, the matches they were raising. There were changes to the program after that to resolve these issues.

Through the years, we improved the definition of what a heritage area is although it was still very subjective. Some people had a very narrow view of what a heritage area was emphasizing specific, single resources in various areas. Others thought of a heritage area on a larger scale involving the whole community telling its story, acting as the proponents of it and educating the public on the resources and activities. When viewed in this manner, the community normally supported a much larger boundary.

We have learned a lot since '84 about these heritage areas. We continue to learn a lot with them. We have learned that they need to be a workable size. They can't just be so large that everything is within the heritage area such as the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area that takes up almost the entire state. You really need to be focusing on the key resources and partnerships. It is important that people have a business background and good fundraising ability. That is critical and was not a part of the early heritage areas at all. There are now more consistent standards of how we evaluate them, potential ones and ones that are up and running, the administration of them. Making sure that these groups are reaching out to communities, ensuring the match is raised, doing all the things they need to do. Some of the earlier ones it was more a hodgepodge of management. The title *local coordinating entity* was developed during my time. Went between Management Entity and Local Coordinating Entity but Brenda Barrett preferred LCE since it was a local partnership doing the work not just the management.