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Warren Lee Brown
August 22, 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

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I started working for the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (HCRS) in 1978. At that time, I worked in the division of Federal Lands Planning and one of the topics of great interest to us in that program was different kinds of partnership models for protection of parks and other important places. Around that time there was a lot of discussion about the term of art *areas of national concern* or, *greenline parks*, that would involve a mix of private and public ownership. Back in the days of HCRS it was at the time that the Illinois and Michigan Canal was being studied and considered as a National Heritage Area Corridor. Even before it was designated, I was involved with some other people talking about the basic concept that was the Illinois and Michigan Canal. That same interest in partnership parks, mixes of private and public ownership, NPS having a role that was not specifically limited to site management. Working with partners and function was a continuing theme of interest to us in the park planning office. When HCRS was abolished I moved over to the NPS Planning Office and continued to be interested in those concepts and how they might be applied to the evaluation of potential new parks or other kinds of partnership arrangements.

I think that the level of interest in those types of arrangements that evolved into heritage areas was primarily imported back into NPS with HCRS' return. HCRS had been part of the park service before it got separated out and then put back in. The HCRS folk seemed more partnership oriented than the people who were in the NPS in the early '80s.

Feasibility studies: I was involved with heritage areas in late '80s early '90s in the sense of working in the NPS Washington Planning Office. I probably reviewed the studies about those areas and commented on them and may have consulted with the teams that were doing the studies. Monitoring what was going on and trying to be of some help. My whole NPS career was in the Washington office. The Washington office was a very small staff responsible for policy and budgeting and some oversight of the projects and the Denver Service Center was responsible for actually carrying them out. They were the technicians. Those who actually produced the plans were out of the Denver Service Center and sometimes the regional offices.

My recollection is that the Planning Office had a line item in the appropriations bills for studies of potential new areas including heritage areas. Congress would direct a study of a heritage area and that money would come through the Planning Office budget. We were funding the studies. Once the heritage area got authorized, we were no longer funding the management plan for the heritage area, the funding for that came out of the funding for the individual heritage area. Some of the heritage area feasibility studies were done by some kind of local entity. Some of them were done with relatively little NPS staff involvement. But, the more standard approach was to have the study done by a NPS staff team.

The format for the NPS lead feasibility studies were similar to that done for parks but with more emphasis on capacity of a local management entity to be effective in managing the heritage area. If we are evaluating a new park the question is, can the NPS effectively manage the area. For the heritage area the question is, can the management entity in a partnership have some track record and some capacity to manage the heritage area. Similar but not identical.

Generally, what we did in the Park Planning Office, at least while I was there, was to coordinate policy review of studies and management plans. Get comments from other interested Central program offices. We would consolidate the comments. The plans for heritage areas were usually of very little interest to other program offices in the NPS. They weren't really dealing with those offices' concerns, like the Water Resources Division would typically comment on a park management plan or study about a potential new park if there were some water resource issues but they usually just skipped over the heritage areas studies.

Regarding heritage area policy: One of the interesting questions is who is empowered to approve such things (as management plan guidelines). I don't really know the answer to that. Seems like the heritage area office or the director could say they are approved. (Lack of standard requirements) may be a reflection of a general tendency among the heritage area program people to be reluctant to establish firm rules, regulations, and procedures and have a greater interest in being flexible and adaptable and accommodating local concerns and interests.

Challenges: I think that there is a sort of a conflict or tension between the interest in heritage areas in representing themselves as being part of the NP System without necessarily meeting or wanting to comply with policy or procedural requirements that apply to park units. That has always been a little bit of a challenge.

The other thing that is a challenge is dealing with the tendency of people in central offices to want to establish rules and procedures and policies and on the other hand the interest of heritage areas of being flexible and adaptable and creative and more effective with less procedure and bureaucracy.

We in the planning office commissioned two studies of some of the other designations that rely on collaboration and partnerships. Heritage areas and some of the long-distance trails, Pinelands National Reserve, affiliated areas and, Wild and Scenic Rivers have a lot in common. There are some units of the NP System that are technically in it but are engaged in complex partnerships and intricate patterns of land use and ownership. A study report, "Collaborations in Conservation: Lessons Learned in Partnerships," was prepared by the Conservation Study Institute. We had one meeting in Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHS in Vermont and one in Santa Fe, sort of a western focus and an eastern focus. One of the objectives was to see if there were similarities among the programs with heritage areas and see if there were opportunities and experiences shared with heritage areas and other designations. There was a lot of enthusiasm trying to recognize the value of heritage areas and similar experiences that are found in heritage areas and might apply to other kinds of designations including units of NP System. The main point that came through to me is that there are sets of skills and experiences for NPS people who are engaged in these sorts of programs that apply to heritage areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and long-distance trails and affiliated areas and some of the units. Those are important skills, and they are also institutional obstacles and challenges to partnerships and collaboration and the rules and regulations and procedures that make it difficult to work with partners that need to be addressed and it's not just for heritage areas but the other kinds of designations as well.

Abatement of contention between heritage areas and NPS: The only way I can think of as a summary is constant communication and encouragement of the heritage area management entity

to help them understand the policies and procedures and rules that apply in dealing with the NPS and vice versa, for people in the NPS to understand when they are dealing with private sector individuals and organizations and state and local governments and non-profit entities that they are different cultures, different attitudes, different experiences, different capacities and to recognize those things and try to work with them creatively and effectively. Rather than saying, Those People just don't understand they have to do it our way or vice versa.

One of the continuing themes that I recall is that the procedures and rules and regulations for the NPS to deal with partners are frustrating to the partners in terms of their complexity and lack of flexibility. I think there are a lot of opportunities to improve on the way the NPS enters into partnerships and deals with funding partners.

Program legislation: I thought it was a good idea. Rather than trying to invent a new template every time a heritage area proposal came along having a standard set of basic elements in terms of the heritage area program and how an area would be evaluated and how and who would develop a management plan etc. It made sense to me that it would be considered a system rather than just a collection of areas that may or may not have had the title.

Mutual benefits of NPS and heritage areas: The NPS offers a great deal of expertise in inventorying and recognizing and identifying historic resources especially, but also natural resources. The experience available through the staff working with National Historic Landmarks and Historic Preservation programs. NPS offers a lot of expertise in planning and community involvement. NPS offers a certain level of prestige and recognition of the name and agency and to some extent the connection with the entire park system. It offers thematic connections between heritage areas and related units of the NPS.

My understanding from just overhearing and reading about things is that some of the most successful heritage areas have been the ones that are literally connected to a park geographically or thematically. Cane River in Louisiana, Ohio and Erie Canal come to mind, where there is a park directly engaged with the heritage area.

The NPS brings to the heritage areas this prestige and recognition and seal of approval and in turn, the heritage areas can build a lot of public support and civic engagement that benefit the parks. If we believe, as some folks do, that the NPS mission is to build a conservation stewardship ethic and appreciation for heritage generally, the heritage areas are a way for the NPS to do that with a very modest investment of time and money and staff and certainly doesn't entail any interest in managing infrastructure. That's a topic people worry about these days.

The other underlying tension you have probably encountered is that some people in the NPS feel like heritage areas are taking money away from parks and that money should be paying for rangers to range and somehow heritage areas are competitors. On the other hand, I'm more persuaded with the argument that heritage areas help build constituencies for what the NPS does generally and that's a good thing. The amount of money that goes to heritage areas as a percentage of the overall NPS budget is pretty miniscule. So again, heritage areas are a good investment.

Seems again like this conflict that I recall back to the '90s or so. Some of the heritage areas just said, well, give us the money and leave us alone. Others were actively welcoming some guidance and direction from the NPS. The amounts of money that seemed to be at stake for the heritage areas were pretty paltry for the most part, given the magnification of the benefits of a few dollars provided to the heritage areas. Seems like heritage areas are a good place for investment in conservation for a little bit of money.

Sunsetting: As I recall the original heritage areas were authorized to get support from the NPS for ten or fifteen years. Then, the NPS financial commitment would end. I don't think that's worked out. It's like, we are really doing well, ten years has gone by quickly and we need another ten or twenty years. I don't know if it needs to be consistent and clarified but it seems there is this case by case basis agonizing over should a heritage area be extended in terms of its authorization for funding. Be kind of nice to settle on that and decide the level of funding would go down after a certain number of years but the NPS would continue to support the operations of heritage areas if they are meeting the standards.

The heritage area office was initially staffed by Judy Hart and then Brenda Barrett, generally one person. Suzanna Copping was there for a while. Given the expansion of the number of heritage areas and the number of inquiries about heritage areas, the work load involved, it was kind of remarkable that one person could be charged with the work load of trying to provide some guidance and assistance to all those areas. I guess those people in Washington had counterparts or relationships with people in the regions, and to some extent in the parks. But they need more people power.

There are some things like heritage areas which are not called a heritage area. In my backyard is the Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Program. It is very much like a heritage area. I'm looking out my window at part of the Captain John Smith Trail that has got a lot of things in common with heritage areas. The heritage area concept is very successful and can be found in lots of places throughout the country.