

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817)
National Heritage Areas Administrative History Project



Brenda Barrett
February 1, 2015

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
Transcribed by Antoinette Condo
Transcript reviewed by Brenda Barrett
508 compliant version by Jessica Lamb

This digital transcript contains updated pagination, formatting, and editing for accessibility and compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Interview content has not been altered.

The original digital transcript is preserved in the NPS History Collection.

The release form for this interview is on file at the NPS History Collection.

NPS History Collection
Harpers Ferry Center
PO Box 50
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
HFC_Archivist@nps.gov

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

Brenda Barrett
February 1, 2015

Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Brenda Barrett

Brenda Barrett Interview: February 1, 2015

Interest in Heritage Areas: I had a bachelor's degree in Anthropology and Master in Archeology and then a Law degree. I was looking for an interesting job and applied to the NPS as a legal assistant for NPS under Carol Shull and Kate Stevenson. I worked at NPS only about a year and then I got a job at the Pennsylvania Historical Commission and progressed quickly to Director of the Pennsylvania Bureau for Historic Preservation where I stayed for 20 years. I was excited by the Pennsylvania program of state heritage areas which was modeled after the NPS heritage program. Pennsylvania was very influenced by the work of Glenn Eugster and Randy Cooley who had been setting up systems to federally designate large landscapes. There was a lot of innovation going both ways. The NPS really got out the door first with the early heritage areas and heritage planning. The NPS early planning, the RTCA planning influenced Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania program is robust with twelve heritage areas now under the Bureau of Recreation and Conservation (in the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources) which I ran when I went back to Pennsylvania (after working for the NHA Coordinating Office). Some of the Pennsylvania heritage areas have the same boundaries as the federal heritage areas, e.g., Delaware and Lehigh and Schuylkill. All the federal heritage areas in Pennsylvania are also State Heritage Areas. The early Pennsylvania heritage areas had very thorough planning. They actually reflected what people cared about. Communities don't see the division between nature and culture like we do in state and federal government. A lot of heritage areas (HAs) capture a lot of natural resource issues. They try to balance the issues of nature and culture. But most of them are focused on culture. They are not as *green* as they could be. Pennsylvania more recently pushed the Pennsylvania heritage program in a greener direction.

When I left the Pennsylvania Bureau of Historic Preservation (in the PA Historical and Museum Commission, a position I held for almost 22 years) I was immediately hired by the NPS to be Coordinator of its NHA program. It was the best job I ever had even though I had no budget for the program.

Coalition for National Heritage Areas: I joined the coalition along with Larry Williamson from PA Department of Community Affairs (the department that was sponsoring the state heritage area program). We actually made an alliance of many different interests that were very excited about this new heritage areas heritage corridors approach. I don't know how much was tangibly accomplished, although we certainly did a lot of legislative work and drafted legislations and tried to get federal and state agencies involved. The Coalition, with NPS funding, held conferences. We talked with all sorts of people about the heritage areas movement. We made a lot of connections that went on forever. So many people were involved in that movement. Mary Means, Jeff Soule, Glenn Eugster were actively involved in the Coalition. Elizabeth Watson and Mary Means have done half the HA plans in the U.S., (well, at least in the early days). Larry Williamson is still to this day advocating and pushing the HA program in Pennsylvania single handedly getting funding through his political advocacy.

The legislation we (Coalition legislative working group) were writing did not always correspond to what the NPS was putting forward, but it was collegial. I think there was always a tug about

who was in control, who gets to approve what, who's in charge. The Coalition legislative group was asking for more flexibility, more local control, less oversight. I would say we had a pretty close relationship with the NPS, even if we disagreed. This was back when laws mattered. We really, really argued and debated every word and phrase. We felt this was the way we were going to reach the potentiality of the heritage area program. We thought that if we could get good legislation it would all work out. What a pipe dream that was.

There were multiple roadblocks to program legislation. It was such a new idea. I don't think there were real disagreements with the NPS that slowed it down. There just wasn't enough momentum. To have a congressional champion was critical.

What was really tragic was what happened to the Coalition. There was a three-way split in the Coalition. There were the national and bureaucratic partners, state and federal government people. There were the new and up and coming HA group of newly designated or wanting to be NHA directors. Then there was Randy Cooley and some of the established NHA managers who felt the movement should be run by just heritage areas not by other partners. Randy Cooley and Alvin Rosenbaum then launched their own organization (National Center for Heritage Development) with some funding through Randy Cooley's program in Southwest Pennsylvania. Meanwhile the leaders of NHAs were off trying to get organized themselves (into the Alliance of National Heritage Areas) and everyone else was cut out.

Alliance of National Heritage Areas: Sam Stokes (and probably others from NPS) came to the Annapolis meeting (April 1997) saying here are the new program regulations and he was thrown out by the HA managers. The managers said that they were going to do what they want to do. They were not going to do what the NPS said. The managers went to Debbie Weatherly on the House Appropriations Committee and had all the heritage area administrative money given to them. When I got to the NPS (January 2001) it was not a happy place because the Alliance was on their high horse and had the feeling, *we might talk to you and we might not*. Not only that, but the NPS had to reconstruct the budget. There was no money, only what had been Judy Hart's salary (the former NPS program leader). All the administrative money was being run through the heritage areas. I convinced the Alliance to give some of the money back to me to hire Suzanne (Copping) and later Eleanor (Mahoney). And I begged money from Kate Stevenson (Deputy for Cultural Resources and my direct supervisor). The whole time I was there, there was never any money. The regional offices got no money either and they were not a happy group.

The executive committee of the Alliance was the same for 18 years. Augie Carlino, Dan Rice, Allen Sachse, Dayton Sherrouse, and Annie Harris ran the show. They swapped around the president position. When they all retire, we will see what happens. The Alliance had a fraught relationship with the NPS. It was money, power, survival.

NHA Coordinating Office under her tenure: I coordinated the initiative from Jan 2001 to Oct 2007. Worked part time the first year and then full time. Every one of them (the heritage areas) had a grant. Every one of them had a cooperative agreement. There were constant assaults on the program. There were a million things to do. There was budget writing, testimony, GAO

reviews, OMB reviews, writing articles, newsletters, briefing high level people in NPS, DOI, Congress, presentations at conferences. We were busy and active.

Is NPS a good home for NHA: I can't think of anyplace else for it to go. It is a very cultural and natural resource- based program. Economic development programs are incredibly fragile. NPS steady as she goes. If HAs had been in economic development, it would be totally gone by now. I have seen whole tourism programs vanish at the stroke of a pen. Fifty people being laid off. I really feel this is a resource-based program. That feeling varies with the HAs.

Benefit to NPS: HAs are a natural extension to the NPS. This is a natural external constituency for the NPS. It develops partnerships for them. NHA can tell a large complex diverse story of American history. No other program or partner can tell these stories at this scale and so cost effectively. We have incredible stories to tell, e.g., industrial heritage like steel, Erie Canal, Motor cities; Stories of diverse communities like Gullah-Geechee and Norther Rio Grande and Pueblo culture, and agricultural heritage. HAs can play a fundamental role in that. Some NPS regions took advantage of that aspect, others haven't. The challenge is who is getting the credit. I was pushing the NHAs all the time, to brand with the NPS. Not just from a tourism point of view but from a value-added point of view. But many of the heritage areas' attitude was, *ah, do we really want to brand with the NPS?* Without that it is hard for the people in the community to know that the NPS is involved. I am always amazed people want to be a heritage area. It's not just about money. It's about recognition. It's about reclaiming the stories of people at the local level.

Budget: Every year the NPS would add a little to the budget. It was still microscopic. They got a little money here and there from the various programs. A little money came out of the National Register Programs or wherever. The HAs were lobbying directly for their money and then there was program money that had to come from the NPS budget. When I first got there, I was charged with trying to make sense out of this. OMB cut NPS budget for HAs in half and the Alliance lobbied back their bit. OMB cut, they lobbied, and that was the dynamic. Bruce Shaffer, NPS Comptroller, worked directly with the congressional appropriation people. Every year they worked together to cut the budget and every year he would say the Congress will just have to find the money from someplace else. A lot of my work was briefing, arguing. Stephanie Toothman was wonderful. She actually funded a position or two besides Martha (Raymond). And, they actually have a travel budget.

Senator Craig L. Thomas' interest: He said, "We are going to get a grip on this system." He was fantastic, very involved. Amazingly enough we put together this group for the *Charting the Future ...* report and by chance one of the people who came onto the committee was Honorable Clarene Law who was a former representative from Wyoming and recommended by an Advisory Board member and a friend of Senator Thomas. Don Hellmann and I went on the hill with Ms. Law, and she talked Senator Thomas into doing a program bill for heritage areas. He also hosted a special meeting including the groups who were opposed to heritage areas. We got the bill pretty lined up with the recommendations from the, *Charting A Future ...* report. But then he became ill and died of leukemia just like that. That was the only clear chance I ever saw of getting program legislation. And still, the Alliance didn't like that legislation. Who knows if it

ever would have gone anywhere. I decided then that I was done. I was tired of pushing the rock up the hill.

Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas: The Partnership Subcommittee of the NPS Advisory Board that put this together was a star-studded cast. We held meetings in Blackstone, Cane River, and Motor Cities. The subcommittee included former NPS deputy directors, current regional directors, current superintendents, NHA presidents, politicians, and Loren Fraser (NPS Chief of Policy who was really responsible for development of the partnership subcommittee of the Advisory Board) who got the National Geographic to design and print the report. This was a critical, critical project. It was a lot of work and I think it gave the HA program a lot of friends and credibility in the NPS and a boost. If Sen Thomas had not died, I think it would have been a very different story. Maybe the HAs program just isn't meant to be. Maybe it's so hard to keep them going. Maybe they just won't. Maybe they'll fade away. But I do think that how the NPS does policy work nothing ever happens that quickly. Everything is incremental. You can't expect one report is going to change the world.

Legislation evolution: When I was there, and I think it has continued, we pretty much standardized the legislative language, and the goal was to keep the language as standardized as possible. That was accepted by the legislature. The designation bills were written very much by the NPS. Unless there was something really radical, the authorization committee took the language. When it came to program legislation the Alliance had its own ideas. Now, the program bills are introduced without anyone expecting them to go anywhere. A program bill is not a priority for the NPS. They give lip service but it's not. Maybe it is not important enough.

Evaluations: It's very difficult to evaluate large landscapes because you have very small inputs both from a monetary and human capital perspective. Think of how little money and few people are put into large HAs. HAs have had two GAO studies, OMB PART studies, millions spent on individual evaluations and in every study, except PART, the findings have been pretty positive about the HAs delivering value. So, the evaluation program now set up for the HAs is very good, but it doesn't seem very meaningful. For spending many millions on these evaluations shouldn't there be an outcome such as more monetary support or more legislative support for the program?

Sunsetting: Some people might have thought they were going to sunset, but I never did. I personally felt that was a false argument. Every piece of legislation has an end date. I don't think anyone ever felt it was 15 years and out. It was a little experimental so they put in that after 15 years they would reconsider. That is a totally bogus argument. Ones that really don't have public support maybe they will sunset. I don't think it is a bad thing to go back every 10, 15 or 20 years and ask how they are working. But I don't think they will ever sunset. It became part of the mythology.

Research: Suzanne (Copping) and I put together a meeting at the National Trust to set a research agenda. Then in a following meeting with Lucy Knight who met with the Alliance looking at what could and couldn't be measured, e.g., volunteer hours, number of educational programs, miles of trail etc. We knew there were more complicated things that needed to be analyzed such as governance and economic impact, but we needed something that could be

useful, and we could do first. The customer was the American people and we needed measures appropriate to that audience. The Alliance paid for Suzanne's salary to put together the information for realistic program measures. We had very good compliance from the HAs especially while Suzanne was there, and we tracked the responses from the HAs.

Training: We did a lot. Suzanne and I initiated the monthly newsletter. Put on training programs at regional offices for HAs and regional park staff. Tried to bring together the superintendents, program head officers together with the HAs of their region. Management planning with HAs and regional park staff and issued the Management planning notebook. Ann Ariel Vecchio, a consultant, wrote the notebook with involvement by the Alliance.

Challenges: Taking a program that had nothing and trying to build it into something. Losing Kate Stevenson for a stint at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Having to build trust with the Alliance and yet not kowtow to them. Building awareness within the NPS. Building strong relationships on the Hill. Building the evaluation program. Building the major components of the program. There wasn't really a program. You can still question whether there is a program. There was a lot of concern over money. The NPS seemed to think, "It's all very well but where is the money going to come from?"

Use of the arrowhead: Some were using it when I got there, and I pushed some kind of standardization of it as a branding issue. By the time I was there the NPS didn't seem to be concerned that the arrowhead was used. Some HAs used it some didn't.

Standardization across NPS regions: NPS is a really regionalized culture. We had to keep training NPS staff over and over as the contact person would change. I got Kate (Stevenson) to set up a coordinator in each region. Some were not getting any money so were snippy about it. We had monthly conference calls with each region. In the Northeast Region they felt ownership of the HAs of their region and had been working on it for some time and were wondering why I was trying to tell them what to do. Other regions could care less about them (HAs).

Success: One of the things I do take some credit for was setting up that research agenda, building a research awareness and writing published articles that gave a broader visibility for the HAs. What's different about HAs is that you do all this fabulous NPS planning, provide some funding, but then with some guidance, you give the power back to the community. You have this recycle route (of plan and implementation). That is what makes it very, very different.