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Samuel Stokes  
November 18, 2015

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

Samuel N. Stokes  
November 18, 2015

Interview conducted and transcribed by  
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Samuel N. Stokes

**Samuel N. Sam Stokes Interview: November 18, 2015**

**Early experience with heritage areas:** I worked for the National Trust for Historic Preservation two times, 1972-73 and 1976-85. (Earlier in my career I had worked overseas for the Peace Corps and NGOs.) In 1972-73 I helped develop a strategic plan for the Trust, which included a new focus on assistance to state and local preservation organizations. I came back to the Trust in 1976 as the regional director for the Mid-Atlantic states. I also initiated a rural program for the Trust that focused on protecting both buildings and their associated cultural landscapes, areas with qualities similar to the heritage areas that Congress eventually created. That was how I got started in historic preservation.

In 1990, Chris Brown, working for Bill Spitzer, chief of the NPS Recreations Resources Division, hired me to manage a program advising states on river conservation. In 1991, Bill named me chief of the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA), a position I held until 2006. Although the focus of RTCA was on assisting communities outside the national parks to conserve natural areas and develop outdoor recreation opportunities, Bill, Steve Elkinton, manager of the division's National Trails Program, and I became interested in promoting heritage areas as well. Bill encouraged his staff to think expansively. That resulted in the three of us writing, *To Recognize America's National Heritage Areas and Corridors*, in 1991, which explored the potential NPS role, and participating in a meeting on the future of heritage areas hosted by the National Trust, in early 1993. That meeting was the first to bring together people in and outside of government to talk about creating a national program to promote heritage areas. Although regional NPS staff had helped create a few National Heritage Areas, there was no organizational home for them in NPS.

**Funding:** In 1992, President Bush's administration gave the RTCA program a considerable budget increase, which allowed RTCA to devote more staff time to the development of the heritage areas program. In the early 1990s, there wasn't a separate budget for heritage areas. We saw advising communities considering heritage areas as part of our RTCA mission. Over the years, a number of RTCA staff in the regional offices and NPS employees in adjacent parks helped advise heritage areas; and communities considering establishing them. As the 1990s progressed, RTCA funding remained flat and eventually the amount of assistance that we could offer on National Heritage Areas became quite limited.

**Early NPS efforts to start a National Heritage Areas program:** In 1991, the Denver Service Center was asked to consider ideas for the NPS role in promoting and managing heritage areas. Chris Brown participated in a Denver Service Center meeting to think through how the program should be managed. There was concern that National Heritage Areas were being established helter-skelter, without national guidelines, standards for funding, or agreement on how long NPS would be involved. Congress had provided the initial National Heritage Areas with funding for a limited number of years, but over the long run they could become an unfunded mandate for NPS. The hope was that if NPS had a program for heritage areas, we could manage expectations, develop criteria for new areas and common policies governing them, and encourage the development of worthy heritage areas which might not already have congressional support.

Many NPS outdoor recreation staff, including Bill Spitzer, had started their federal careers in the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (BOR). President Carter created the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (HCRS), which combined the functions of BOR and the historic preservation programs of NPS. When President Reagan abolished HCRS, the staff who weren't laid off were assigned to NPS. The outdoor recreation staff didn't all feel welcome at NPS. Many NPS staff responsible for the parks were concerned about the added outdoor recreation mandate that NPS was being told to take on. There was tension in the 1980s and 1990s between staff who saw the agency's primary focus as national parks and staff who were mainly interested in conservation and outdoor recreation outside the parks. They were now all told to work together but didn't necessarily want to do so. The new interest in heritage areas was seen by some NPS staff as another unwarranted effort to expand the role of the Service beyond the parks.

**NPS leadership:** Some NPS leaders, notably Deny Galvin, John Reynolds, and Jon Jarvis, welcomed the idea of expanding the NPS protection role outside of the parks. If national parks were to thrive, they had to be parts of larger protected landscapes, they reasoned. The RTCA and heritage areas were ways to achieve that aim. Deny and others realized that RTCA staff had valuable experience working with community leaders outside park boundaries. Some park superintendents also saw the benefits of working with communities outside the parks, but many were interested only in managing the land that was within park boundaries.

Deny Galvin, who at the time was the NPS associate director for planning, was interested in developing a coherent heritage areas program and needed help, particularly in drafting legislation to authorize a national program. This interested me. John Bradley, also working under Bill Spitzer, had done some of the early work for Deny in 1992, but was about to retire. I volunteered and Bill Spitzer approved. Although managing the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program was a fulltime job, for the next several years, until February 1998, I spent 10 to 25% of my time working on heritage area issues.

**Legislation:** Starting in February 1993, I spent a good deal of time working with Deny Galvin and Judy Hart on drafting legislation that the administration could propose to Congress for a National Heritage Areas program. Judy was working in the NPS office responsible for congressional relations and developing legislation. Later, she came to work for the RTCA program. Deny thought it important to articulate in the legislation a vision for what heritage areas should be and I think we did that. Proponents of national heritage areas looked to the United Kingdom and other European countries for some of their inspiration. Most European national parks include a lot of privately-owned land.

Part of my job was to talk with congressional committee staff about what should go into the legislation. We created countless drafts. There was strong interest amongst both Democrats and Republicans. Some of the support on the Hill came from legislators concerned about runaway pork barrel spending on individual heritage areas if there was no national program to set funding limits. Although legislation passed in the House, it never did in the Senate.

A concern I expressed in our internal discussions was criteria. Deny Galvin thought we should be enabling communities to decide what was important to them at the local level and if they had

Congressional support, then their areas should be designated, regardless of national significance. Others thought that there should be a higher bar for establishing National Heritage Areas. Some of the early ones had outstanding resources that were clearly of national significance. Many of their leaders thought new areas should also meet a test of national significance. I tended to agree and thought it would be difficult to justify a program if there were no national significance criteria.

**Responsibility for creating National Heritage Areas in proposed legislation:** All agreed that it was important that Congress, not NPS designate heritage areas. We hoped that members of Congress would look to the generic legislation and fit the heritage areas they wanted to create into it and not come up with new guidelines and ways of funding them each time one was created. As part of the RTCA program, we weren't supposed to be encouraging the creation of National Heritage Areas, which could become a drain on NPS funding, but it was OK for us to talk about them as possibilities for communities to consider, and to explain how they might work. It would not have been well received on the Hill to hear that NPS staff were promoting the creation of heritage areas that the Congress would then be expected to fund.

**Time limit on federal funding in proposed legislation:** In order to get congressional support, we thought that there should be a limited number of years during which individual National Heritage Areas would be eligible for federal funding. The legislation creating the initial ones all included such a limit. But we all recognized that the leaders of the designated areas themselves would lobby hard to continue their funding, which they did successfully.

**NPS management of National Heritage Areas:** We thought the agency itself should administer the national program and not contract it out. It was an important service the NPS could offer. We wanted the private sector advice but, didn't want to cede control. The early heritage areas often had NPS staff managing them, but we didn't see that as a continuing role for the NPS. Even those that had NPS staff managing them didn't expect that arrangement to continue over the long-term. We all agreed they should be managed locally and not by NPS.

In the NPS, the Washington office controls the allocation of funds and sets policy, but implementation of programs is the responsibility of regional offices. That's typical of how many federal domestic programs work, but it's an oversimplification and often there isn't a clear line between headquarters and regional responsibility, which results in tensions. By and large, I would call the tensions between WASO and the NPS regions healthy tensions: the dialog and negotiations that took place between them resulted in better programs. However, it also meant that programs like NHA and RTCA weren't implemented in the same way in all regions. Some were more enthusiastic about National Heritage Areas than others.

Steve Morris and Alan Turnbull worked under my supervision as RTCA employees, but also spent 10 to 25% of their time on heritage area issues. In 1996 Judy Hart transferred to the RTCA program to work full time on heritage areas, first under my supervision, and starting in February 1998 for Chris Brown. I had no further responsibility for NHAs thereafter. Later, Judy coordinated the national heritage areas program under the direction of Associate Director for Cultural Resources Kate Stevenson. The program now had a separate budget from RTCA.

**National Coalition for Heritage Areas:** We were supportive of the National Coalition for Heritage Areas, although their leaders' ideas did not always line up with those of NPS. Through cooperative agreements, we provided funding to the National Trust for Historic Preservation to work with the Coalition. The Trust hosted three conferences on heritage areas. Shelley Mastran, who managed the Trust's Rural Heritage Program, led the effort for the Trust. Shelley, Elizabeth Watson, and I co-authored, *Saving America's Countryside: A Guide to Rural Conservation*, a book published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1997. Creating heritage areas was one of the techniques discussed in the book. Elizabeth had earlier worked for me at the National Trust and later as a private consultant advising heritage areas on planning.

**National Center for Heritage Development:** Meanwhile, in 1997, Alvin Rosenbaum established a National Center for Heritage Development. Alvin presented an unsolicited proposal to the NPS, proposing that his center run the heritage areas program on contract for NPS. His proposal was not well received by NPS or by the existing National Heritage Areas, which did not want to be represented by the Center.

**Alliance of National Heritage Areas:** After the Annapolis meeting in April 1997, the Alliance of National Heritage Areas took the lead in the private nonprofit sector. Dan Rice (affiliated with the Ohio and Erie National Heritage Area) was the first leader. The Alliance wanted NPS funds, but not necessarily NPS oversight or leadership in establishing an NHA program. We tried to reach common ground, but not always successfully. The NPS, the Alliance, congressional staff, and individual heritage areas all had their own ideas. Concerned about available federal funding for heritage areas, leaders of some of the existing ones wanted to limit the creation of new ones.

**Summary of some of the challenges:** 1) Standards for heritage areas: there was not necessarily agreement within the NPS. 2) Legislation: It was frustrating to never get to the point of enacting national program legislation. 3) Control: The extent to which the program would be run by NPS was often an issue. The Alliance pushed for more control over the program than we thought appropriate. We wanted their advice but, did not think it was appropriate to cede control. 4) NPS staffing: Which office would be responsible and who would be reporting to whom.