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Shelley Mastran
April 8, 2016

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
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My Narrative
The Administrative History of the National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office

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Formation of the National Coalition for Heritage Areas: In the early '90s I was director of the Rural Heritage Program at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, looking at preservation in rural communities. Anything that had land or history involved was dumped in my lap.

Elizabeth Watson and I were colleagues. We were both interested in preservation, rural issues and easements, etc. Our interests were in common. We were tuned in to the novel designation of these large landscape heritage areas, I&M Canal, Blackstone Valley and so on. There was a lot of talk going on about them at the time.

We saw these heritage areas as a wave of the future. These were the new national parks, these hybrid public/private partnership arrangements. We started talking to other people. Somehow, we dreamed up the idea of having a meeting of interested parties at the National Trust.

That is kind of how we got started. Elizabeth and I were really the jump starters; really Elizabeth was more than anybody. She had worked with Sam Stokes in the Rural Heritage Program at the National Trust. She is probably the one who had the biggest interest in it.

At this all-day meeting (Feb 9, 1993) about 60 showed up from all across various interest groups. Not just from Washington, but from New York, Pennsylvania, all over. NPS people, heritage area people, NGOs, a bunch of different interest groups came to this big meeting and talked about what these things were. We broke into small groups, had lots of brainstorming going on, and at the end the consensus was to create the National Coalition for Heritage Areas, *for* heritage areas deliberately (not of heritage areas, as we were interested in advocacy, education, and promotion of them). It was thought that it was a good idea to house the Coalition in the National Trust, which gave it an official status. Elizabeth was the brain behind it. I was executive director, like the manager who did all the paperwork and stuff, but Elizabeth was the brain.

The first conference after organizing (with a steering committee and other committees) was in Morgantown, West Virginia, and then a big one in Baltimore, and the training session at Annapolis. NPS paid through a grant for the Baltimore and Annapolis meetings.

Morgantown meeting - October 25-29, 1993: Lots of sessions, lots of talk, it was early sharing stages. I think a lot of them (heritage area managers) felt that they weren't getting proper support from the NPS. They (heritage areas) weren't considered legitimate, not considered as important as parks. They weren't being paid attention to. Later on, it came up that they didn't want the NPS telling them what to do, because they thought they had already figured it out. They wanted more recognition but not to be told how to do it (heritage development).

Work of the Coalition: The Coalition made a lot of progress sharing information. I think that was our number one goal, education, telling the cool stories. We did well in that regard. We also got interested in getting some legislation passed. We recognized that the way National Heritage Areas were being designated was very ad hoc. If you had a senator and/or congressman in the right place, you might get a designation. There was not necessarily a lot of legitimacy in

the designation. We worked to draft legislation and getting a bill passed that included a process and criteria for being designated. We worked with NPS on this. Elizabeth was the major drafter of the legislation and Brenda (Barrett) helped. Elizabeth really cooked it up. We went to Capitol Hill and met with Ohio Congressman Regula's staff multiple times because we thought he would be the best sponsor of the bill (the Ohio & Erie Canal corridor was in his district). Legislation was introduced multiple times but never got through.

National Heritage Areas designation: The NPS wanted a much more rigorous process, stricter criteria for designation. I think I probably favored somewhat strict criteria. I think I was a NPS leaner. It seemed like a movement that was taking off. But some of the places! Twenty-one counties in Iowa and 64 counties in Tennessee, come on! It seemed you could blanket the country with heritage areas and so the designation would be meaningless.

I think the idea was largely celebrating history and conserving resources. Again, I was working for the National Trust, so my interest was more in conservation and history than in economic development. Tourism, I got that. A National Heritage Area designation could potentially be a vehicle for accomplishing a lot of things as well as regional planning at a higher level. I didn't think heritage areas necessarily should go on forever; it would depend on individual cases.

Lack of passage of program legislation: Maybe part of it was that congressmen saw this as an opportunity and didn't necessarily want restrictions on that opportunity. What a deal. You could tell your constituents that you had created such and such national heritage area and were going to bring them money. That they were now eligible for grants. It was a way to bring home the bacon. But if you make the process or criteria too legitimate, too strict, a lot of places are not going to qualify.

Coalition goals: There was a mixture of goals in mind. All these different interest groups came together. Some were genuinely interested in real conservation, real preservation, or land conservation. A lot of advocates were in it for consulting work, for money. It was a great way to bring home federal dollars like Southwest Pennsylvania, a way to get potential money coming back to a lot of those counties that were in bad shape.

Generating potential heritage areas: A lot of people contributed to the lists (of possible heritage areas). We knew of them, heard of them. I guess we were asking for people to send us stories or tell us of places that were all *but* heritage areas. Gosh, we got some crazy places that thought they were doing heritage area work because they were doing regional planning like Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy was conserving land but considered itself as broader in scope, and other places like that.

End of the Coalition: That was a bad thing. There were factions on our board, as a couple of years went by, who thought that the National Trust was not an appropriate place to have the Coalition. Nothing was being accomplished. Legislation wasn't getting passed. We weren't going anywhere. I think some thought me a weak link because I was a member of the National Trust. The National Trust did not step up completely for heritage areas. The organization tolerated but did not embrace the concept.

Randy Cooley, Alvin Rosenbaum, Mary Means and some others really decided that this organization needed to morph into something else, into a different organization. I remember going to a meeting in Altoona or someplace in Randy's territory where it was decided that the Coalition was dead, and this new organization was going to take its place. It was to be run by Alvin and his son. Alvin and I were not on the same page in any way or form. Ultimately, he didn't accomplish anything either. He fizzled out in a short time. The Coalition just stopped. I think that the board agreed grudgingly that the coalition had run its course. Even I felt, 'What more could we do?' Legislation was not being passed. I didn't know what more we could do to advance the heritage area agenda. These designations were being done each year. The criteria were very loose. Of course, now they have management plans, but I think at the beginning the NPS was pretty loose about that.

Coalition influence on the NPS National Heritage Area initiative: I think so (that it had an impact). A lot comes down to personality. I think Deny Galvin, Sam Stokes, and others who came out of R&T were very supportive. I think we were on the same page. At least with those directly involved. After that board meeting (that led to the Coalition's breakup) I think we did not continue to work on the legislation. We just kind of gave up.

Annapolis meeting in April 1997: We had some educational sessions. We brought in Michael Conzen, a geographer from the University of Chicago who had worked on the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor, as one speaker. There were lots of different opinions about National Heritage Areas, disparate views at that meeting. There was a lot of tension again between centralized control and, "We are doing our own thing and know exactly what to do and we are the pros on the ground." Again, the pros on the ground wanted the money and support but did not want to be told how to do heritage development and didn't want to be forced into any kind of restraints. There was tension also in the NPS as a whole. After all, the NPS is about the parks, not these hybrid things that aren't legitimate. Don't take money away from the Great Smoky Mountains or Yellowstone! As an outsider I could feel that tension and there was discussion of how heritage areas were diverting attention and money from important NPS work. It was just something that people brought up.

Not long after the Annapolis meeting in 1997 I left the National Trust. The guy who took my place could care less about heritage areas. Nobody else at the National Trust cared about heritage areas either. I went to work as a consultant and did a few feasibility studies for heritage area hopefuls.