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Elizabeth S. “Liz” Vehmeyer
November 13, 2017

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

Elizabeth S. "Liz" Vehmeyer
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This transcript was reviewed by Elizabeth S. Vehmeyer

Elizabeth S. "Liz" Vehmeyer Interview: November 13, 2017

I wasn't consciously aware of the (National Heritage Area) program until I started working as a contractor in the Cultural Resources Directorate with the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) in 2008. I then realized that I had lived in multiple national heritage areas in my life: in Delaware and Lehigh, Lackawanna, and the Erie Canal. I had always liked the historical sites they helped support. The interdisciplinary approach to landscape management with a variety of types of cultural and natural resources found on the landscape intrigued me. How you manage and interpret all those types of resources when they connect in an interpretive way. There are a handful of national heritage areas whose national stories relate to military history and history resources include battlefields. Through the ABPP's two programs of technical assistance I worked with a couple of coordinating entities of the national heritage areas and some of their partners and also was involved with some of the scaling up initiatives and how battlefields fit into that. Because of cross learning and hearing about heritage areas in Scaling Up my interest was piqued. I was also interested in working with the heritage areas to expand my public-private partnership work which I had gotten a lot through the battlefield program. The National Heritage Areas program is a unique program to carry out the NPS mission to protect and enhance our natural resources.

Duties in the National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office: With the title of assistant coordinator, I provide technical assistance for management planning and feasibility studies, coordinate reviews with outside experts we ask to review plans. By law, they are told to do the feasibility study and, in that review, I'm looking to see that the study of the planner is adhering to legislation and program guidance. I also assist in the policy and budget implications for all the heritage areas in collaboration with Martha (Raymond), Legislative Affairs and Budget Offices. I communicate with regional NPS staff and regional coordinators who are the liaisons with the heritage area managers through our monthly calls on subjects such as funding obligation through the NPS financial system.

(That process in the NPS) may become more standardized with all of NPS switching to the federal FMS. We now have a financial assistance policy office in Denver. They have tried to put out policy and guidance across the whole country, so it doesn't have to be one region doing it one way and another region using another financial system. I have talked with Martha and having heard some concerns (from the heritage areas staffs) on how we get it more standardized. How can our office help facilitate that? This is the first time I am dealing with the regional structure (of the NPS) because in the battlefield program the funding went directly from ABPP to the grantee. I have been learning about each region and how they are structured. I think it would be good to have it standardized but I don't know if it will make sense given the different procedures and differently trained staff. Maybe they do it a certain way because of the structure or limitations or staff that they have. The stuff coming out of the Denver policy office has helped with some financial assistance. Some programs are set up to fit a square peg in a round hole. Is it general enough guidance and policy where it can seem standardized but still have some leeway to have it fit with your own when you are dealing with all those potential grantees, states and local governments that may have their own processes about reporting and financial reporting and financial record keeping? Sometimes you have to do a little bit more hand holding

with the non-profits. I'm hoping our office can help to provide more guidance and a bit more standardization across the regions.

In 2017 we had to do the review for grants that were more than \$100k and some regions were hearing one thing and some regions were hearing another. I don't know if that was the product of going through the grapevine, the telephone effect, or it was regional staff saying, no, this is the way we do it, and this is the way we are going to do it. And, another region saying, this is the way we did it but with this new requirement we need to switch. Some were more willing to be flexible with it and some were like, "This is the way we need to do it and follow these steps." It also relates to who in the office is doing the work. The regional coordinator for the heritage areas has some expectation and some responsibility and usually there is also the financial officer who has responsibilities on the financial side. Just learning those relationships and how they work within each regional office is the first thing that I notice is different. With my background in financial management of the battlefield grants I can speak that language and think I might be able to work on it. If some region can explain its processes, I should be able to help with translating into the actual financial system. There are multiple steps and multiple people that have to be involved and I think I can assist.

The NPS regional coordinators and our office and sometimes the regional financial staff have a call every other month. The alternating months are the all-NPS call where we try to bring in the park partners and the park liaisons for park planning or the scaling up people, anyone who might be involved in heritage area work; RTCA for example. Both group discussion calls, but different audiences. Before each call Martha, Katie, and I coordinate on topics and division of labor. Martha has started a Google docs so everyone on the call can see what topics callers might have suggested and assistance in planning for the call.

We noticed a drop in attendance, so I have taken on a revamp of the all-NPS call. Reaching out to park staff that have never called in and those who used to call in but don't any more to understand why. I sent out a survey to get some feedback on what they would like to see as any changes to the current format and topics. What at a WASO level do they know or need to know? One question I posed was the frequency of the calls, more or less. We would like to know how we can best serve and learn from the heritage areas.

I also evaluate the data from the heritage area annual reporting. Compile the data from all the heritage areas and create the NPS *By the Numbers* annual report. Last year 100% of the heritage areas sent in their data. We hope for such a good return this year.

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires compliance when federal funding is involved. That includes grant programs or federal assistance programs. I was the main author of a programmatic agreement of how the programs will comply with section 106. I think that prepared me well because it was working with a variety of stakeholders in a different way. There is a different relationship when someone is coming to you asking you for money as opposed to working with partners. In writing the programmatic agreement they had a different stake in this even though they were partners we had been working with. You are basically writing a document, so no money is being exchanged. It's the document that tells you how you are going to comply with section 106 in order to get the money. It was a different type of

relationship so a different type of project management. That prepared me very well because I understand that not only are some of the financial assistance processes different across the regions, so is the 106 compliance. From what I have seen so far it makes sense to do a programmatic agreement. We'll see.

When I went to Chicago for one of the sustainability workshops, each of us in a two-day workshop had to do an elevator speech on our work. What was really rewarding was the heritage area staff members' passion and emotion for the stories and places (of their heritage area). The speeches illustrated how hard they work with the local communities and how it is very much a whole community kind of effort. It was rewarding to me to know that I would be able to help these people carry on that passion. I'll help them share these stories and have these places mean something to someone, whether someone in their backyard or a visitor from somewhere else.

Challenges: One of the first challenges I felt was learning the regional system. Learning a deeper understanding of Congress and the legislative process, and funding issues for National Heritage Areas. There is such a difference in funding from national heritage and battlefield programs. The battlefield program is very bipartisan. It is never, "will we get money?" It's "How much money will we be appropriated?" It is never, "Oh, we are not going to give you any money." Going into a fiscal year it was more how much we would get and how would that equate into number and amount of grants we were going to be able to award. I understood the appropriations process, but not like it has to be understood in working with the heritage areas.

The national heritage areas are often zeroed out in the President's budget. So how does Congress deal with it if their budget is completely different from the President's? What has been happening in the past? Oh, the House has cut it and the Senate has put it back in. I never had to pay as much attention. The relationship between the congressmen and senators with the heritage areas themselves. We are both federal programs to help people preserve places. The ABPP has congressional authorization that protects the grant program. This is the exact reason I think there should be program legislation (for the heritage areas). Learning that side of the federal government at a deeper level has been a challenge but one that I have oddly enjoyed.

Another challenge has been in learning the intricacies of each core entity and how they are set up. They are not all non-profits, not all federal commissions, not all universities. I have had experience working with different types of stakeholders but when you have a grant program with a battlefield program you could work with one type of organization once for maybe a two-year period because that's the period of performance for the grant. Then you may not work with them again. You have a relationship with them but it's kind of a hands-off approach in terms of their actual work. But here (in the NPS NHA Coordinating Office) you are going to work with these organizations, ideally, year after year after year after year. The people might change, and different organizations run the heritage areas differently. Also, the funding levels and the competition that comes with that. It has been interesting to learn the competition and justifications from different areas receiving different levels of funding. Coming here and learning of all the different backgrounds and ways and tying back to Congress too of how it works out. How you navigate those competitions.

Successes during my time in the Coordinating Office: One was the sustainability trainings. The three workshops last year and this year continuing through the agreement through the Northeast Region and the next phase of the sustainability training. Peter Samuel (NHA Coordinator for the Northeast Region) is taking the lead. He has created his own advisory group on what phase three should look like. That has been a success in the way that heritage areas are actively thinking about it, trying to do stuff to get to be more sustainable organizationally and financially. Continuing along the path to become a success.

Another success has been the evaluations that went through over the summer. I know it seemed like a long process to get those letters approved and sent to Congress. It was a program success.

The success of reacting to the DOI level of reviews for all the agreements and doing that in a short period of time. We ended up clumping them all together, the 47 that would actually get money through NPS. The money is all coming from the same pot. Coordinating that and getting it up really fast was a success because at the budget office level, the ultimate department level reviewers, need to see that these are all in the same program from the same money.

A success with the regions and the coordinating entities themselves was the positive attitudes and creative approaches that came in the wake of the President's budget, the proposal to zero out the funding. For a few days or weeks there was a dismal feeling after that came out. The success was not only rising from that and coming up with what we needed to do, what we needed to say, how we were going to do this, but also recognizing that if this is really what is going to happen, then what type of plan or strategy do we have going forward? What does that mean for us? What does that mean for a region? It was a success because if there were different types of people or different types of management it could have stayed in that doom and gloom forever. It was normal to have that kind of feeling, but we didn't stay there. The NHA Office in DC took a proactive approach and set up a briefing series to inform other program/managers in the NPS and the Department of the Interior about what we do as a Program within NPS, what the heritage areas do as partners, history of the program, and how legislated activities are being carried out through the management plans and evaluations. We showed the value in the continued federal connection to the heritage areas. I believe the heritage areas themselves have done their own briefings with congressional members and members' staff and making special trips to DC to meet in person.

What the NPS put together as a three-tier funding formula and what the Alliance put together for the funding formula don't match. I got the sense from the Alliance that the House asked them specifically to submit a plan, as it had the NPS. The Alliance plan was submitted after much compromise and gnashing of teeth. The funding is a yearly challenge.

Future goals: In the immediate future I would like to work on that nationwide, program wide guidance on section 106 compliance and also the NEPA compliance. Those kind of go hand in hand. Heather (Scotten Passchier) had worked on NEPA guidance for the management plans. Some of it is now out of date because the NPS has put together updated NEPA guidance from 2015. Some updates would need to happen. Potentially updated management planning guidance.

Since there haven't been any new heritage areas designated since 2009 should we put our efforts into doing updated management planning guidance? Right now, on the Hill, there are two bills that would create five or six new heritage areas if they get passed. We want to be ready for those if they happen, but if the last couple of years tell us anything, they probably won't. I do think that in general I see that happening in the next couple of years. (Six new heritage areas were designated in spring 2019)

While not in our real control, the program legislation would be good.

Qualities of a successful heritage area: A strong rapport with an NPS unit. It helps the public. It helps the NPS. It helps see the value in the heritage area. Like Crossroads of the Revolution. There is a NPS unit at Morristown. Explaining that there are more resources relating to that time period and those stories in New Jersey. But the NPS and the federal government can't or won't own all of that, so the heritage area helps tell that bigger story connected to that NPS unit. I'm not saying it is a make or break. But, in my opinion, I have seen it helps if there is that stronger rapport with a NPS unit.

Another is that they have a feasibility study prior to designation. It helps set the coordinating entity off on a good foot. My understanding is that even if a heritage area candidate only passes seven or eight of the criteria on their feasibility study (and then would not be nominated by DOI), Congress could still designate them as a National Heritage Area without them meeting those three other criteria. I'm working with the Northern Plains now on their management planning. I am getting the feeling that some of the things they are trying to address in their management planning should have been hashed out in the feasibility study, and they have a feasibility study. It seems that if it had been a stronger feasibility study, we wouldn't be hashing out some of the things in the management plan like list of resources. That should already be understood. If the effort is put in the feasibility study, it sets them off on the right foot going forward. You already know what your themes are. You know what your important resources are. You already have it set what the coordinating entity is going to be.

Another thing I've noticed is if they are going to have more than one full time staff (they are more successful). It is a lot for one person to do. The heritage areas I hear more about probably have a person who just does communications. A heritage area that has a strong youth coordination program probably has someone dedicated to youth. With just an executive director and a board there is only so much that can get accomplished.

If they have sub-grants to the local community that helps them have an annual program that the community recognizes and can look forward to. It helps solidify their position; it makes sense to people. Here's a non-profit in my community that gives out funding. That helps create those partnerships. I saw that when I was at Great Basin for the Alliance meeting. We went to different partner sites, and they could say that once they had gotten a grant (from the heritage area) after the end of the grant they continued to work with the national heritage areas on projects in general without having to receive an additional grant or knew they could go to the NHA just for technical assistance or advice. The grant program probably started some of that.

Levels of success can be objective, but these are the things so far that I would rate as success.

Oversight of heritage areas: Oversight of the management of the federal funding. Monitoring that. Monitoring the cooperative agreements. Each of the heritage areas understanding the responsibilities that come with that. Federal law and NPS compliance like with section 106 or NEPA. Oversight of best practices which would probably come from the regions. That could either be financial best practices or project, preservation, conservation. Sharing information and best practices through calls, meetings, workshops. Another component is the marketing of a cohesive system of heritage areas across the nation.

NPS helpful to National Heritage Areas: At one of the workshops at the Alliance meeting in Great Basin a person had been brought in who was familiar enough with the Great Basin National Heritage Route but not necessarily of the whole program and other heritage areas. We were doing introductions and I mentioned that I worked for the NPS in Washington and made a self-deprecating joke, "Oh I don't do all the cool stuff that you've heard people say, I just do policy and budget." Someone from a heritage area turned and said, "Yah, but without you we wouldn't be able to do what we do." That was kind of an eye-opening thing and those are the kinds of moments you need. They needed that moment, and I needed that moment. We sit in an office in D.C. and don't get to go out and have those face-to-face interactions that create these memorable moments. We help them receive their federal money. We help them do these best practices, whether it is project by project or development of management planning, feasibility studies. I think we are disseminators of information and a hub they can come to and conduit to NPS Legislative Affairs or Budget office or others. I see us as disseminators, coordinators, networkers.

Heritage areas contribution to mission of the NPS: When you become a permanent federal employee of the NPS you take a two-week course titled Fundamentals. There you have new permanent employees from across the NPS and they talk about the mission. They pose the question, "Do you think these other programs that the NPS runs fit in with the mission as it is written." The class then has debates about that. Coming professionally from the program side, I see that the National Heritage Areas and these other programs fit within the NPS because I emphasize, "preserving the natural and cultural resources," and "for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration." While there is a part here that says values of the National Park System, I see that as being the units of the parks. What the heritage areas do is exactly to help preserve these places for future generations and the NPS has some responsibility as the national designated agency for natural and cultural resource management. We are responsible for putting out guidance and policy to help do this. Through these partnerships we are able to do it.

When you are talking about conservation or preservation you are working with similar partners. Whether the NPS, other people at the state and local level, non-profits, it just makes sense that we are all together with NPS carrying out a similar mission, so the heritage areas fit in to that.

I have thought about where National Heritage Areas should sit in the NPS. They do things that are not just cultural resources. They do recreation, natural resources, heritage tourism that involves this economic driver. In some of the regions the heritage areas coordinators aren't within the cultural resource section. They are more in the partnership side. While we, the WASO office, are under the Associate Director for Cultural Resources we may be dealing with

coordinators who don't really fall under that same structure. It would be interesting to see why. I don't know that it should be under partnerships, the natural side, RTCA, or cultural resources.