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Rolf Diamant
November 30, 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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What prompted your first interest in heritage areas? What were your responsibilities related to heritage areas between 1985-1997? While based at the old NPS North Atlantic Regional Office, I was asked to work on the Blackstone as I was already working on a number of cooperative projects with the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Planning Management. Glenn Eugster and I and someone from the Denver Service Center were called to a meeting in Senator Chaffee's office. Initially the Senator was looking at the Blackstone as a potential unit of the NPS. We suggested that a new area study might not met their needs. At that time the NPS wasn't expanding and there were political headwinds facing any new unit in the NPS. Rather than going through the exercise of doing a study and having it go nowhere, we all discussed the possibility of something different which could look at a range of conservation options; a national park just being one of them. Also, part of the funding might be directed to providing conservation and interpretive technical assistance to various organizations in Massachusetts and Rhode Island to ensure, regardless of the project's recommendations, both states would get some tangible benefits from the effort. The study bill that came through Congress specifically asked for this study of options and provided for technical assistance to do conservation work along the river corridor. It also specifically requested that the regional offices in Boston and Philadelphia take the lead. I was assigned to be the project manager and I worked closely with Judy Benedict who was my counterpart in the state of Rhode Island. She and Glenn Eugster were key advisors and the three of us came up with the conceptual framework for the Blackstone legislation.

Judy and I decided to visit the I&M Canal Heritage Corridor, which at that time was the only existing anything called a heritage area. We arrived at their office, a converted drive through bank, in the middle of a snowstorm. After looking around we decided that we could do a lot more with the Blackstone.

We did a book along the way "Working Waters," a socio-geographic history of the Blackstone and published by the Rhode Island Historical Society.

There was a technical assistance component to the project, and we worked with organizations and NGOs. I went up to Lowell National Historical Park and recruited some historic preservation staff people to consult and work with Blackstone industrial preservation sites. We also completed a report on future conservation options for the Blackstone. One of the options was an adaptation or elaboration of this heritage area concept, which the Congress eventually chose to endorse.

I never had an official management responsibility for heritage areas. I worked on the early Blackstone as a planner for the Northeast Regional Office. At that time, I was coordinating new area studies and river conservation projects, which included conservation technical assistance work. Both Glenn Eugster and I worked side by side with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Program, now known as Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance. Glenn had pioneered this program in the North East: what is now the very robust RTCA program. We perhaps had a different orientation than traditional river planners in the NPS. It was essential that our projects were not

top-down designations, had grassroots support and there was a willingness on the part of local interests and officials to work together for common goals.

This is what we had worked so hard on in Wild and Scenic Rivers. In the early history of the NPS Wild and Scenic program, the focus was almost exclusively the designation of rivers on federal lands. We took this program, which had mostly been out west, because that is where the lion's share of federal lands were and started doing river conservation projects in New England on private lands. This was a radical departure from the normal formula. Our new approach was basically to work with communities, who had conservation objectives, let them largely organize and guide the process and help them reach consensus. We would assist them do a local river conservation plan or setback ordinance or negotiate a conservation easement. If they did a credible job on the local level Congress might choose to take reciprocal action to enhance these conservation efforts with a national designation that ensured federal agency consistency with the overarching conservation objectives. You can see that national heritage areas borrowed much from the eastern model of the Wild and Scenic River Program. This is the intellectual framework that influenced the Blackstone.

This is very different from establishing a national park. We wanted a model that was both bottom up and top down. States and local communities and NGOs would work together to do what they could do on their own, and from the federal level there would be some money and technical assistance to help with the work. That was a big change of direction from just making it a national park and the traditional approach of having all of the area federally owned and administered.

The heritage areas, starting with I&M and Blackstone, had three antecedents. One was the experience with collaborative management that came out of the Rivers and Trails and Wild and Scenic Rivers programs, which we have discussed; another was the influence of the preservation movement, particularly Historic Site Act of 1935, the Historic Preservation Act of 1966, and the rise of the cultural landscape movement; and lastly there was the example of Lowell National Historical Park and the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission ("the park is the city, the city is the park.")

In 2004-6, what were your particular interests in working as staff for the Partnership Committee of the NPS Advisory Board? After my early Blackstone work, I worked as a park superintendent, but I continued to be involved with heritage areas because people were aware of my previous involvement with the Blackstone and my ongoing relationship to the work of the National Park System Advisory Board. This was a period where I provided a lot of staff assistance to several Board committees at the request of Loran Fraser, NPS Chief of Policy. The Advisory Board had started to think about heritage areas in a 2001 report, "Rethinking the Parks for the 21st Century." The Advisory Board was always interested in the NPS relationship with the heritage areas. There is a quote from their 2001 report in which the Board states: "The Heritage Area Program should be established to support partnerships among communities so that the full scope of the environment is revealed." This is three years before the Partnership Committee.

I didn't have a work plan that said to do this for heritage areas or do that. I was asked for help and I provided it. Actually, the heritage area work fit nicely with the conservation mission of Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park and in particular, the NPS Stewardship Institute, based at the park. I was superintendent and basically my own boss so I used my discretion and where I thought I could be of help I got involved.

I was also doing a lot of writing and speaking on the early history of the national park system and heritage areas. North East Regional Director Marie Rust asked me to prepare a PowerPoint presentation on the evolution of national heritage areas for the first meeting of the National Park System Advisory Board Partnership Committee's working group on national heritage areas (in 2004) that was held at Blackstone. Marie Rust and Loran Fraser subsequently asked me to continue helping the working group.

Do you think that the 2006 report of the Partnership Committee, *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas*… had any effect on NPS or congressional policies related to heritage areas? The Partnership Committee report, *Charting a Future for National heritage Areas*, absolutely had a lasting effect. It is a nuanced one. It didn't have an effect like a light switch, few things do. In my entire 40 years working inside and outside the NPS very few things have an effect like a light switch. You are talking about a long-term gestation. To some degree you are talking about culture change and changes that you have to have. The reason we do administrative histories is to have a benefit of lessons learned that continue to influence people and have an effect on the future and that's why history is important. If history were only about the past, people would not spend so much time on it. Did Congress turn around and pass legislation just on the bases of this report? It would have been nice if that had happened, a good thing to happen. But there are so many different factors in that decision, and so many different players. It was hoped that this report would have a positive impact on Congress, and I think it probably did have some impact on individual members of Congress, but it was important that the Advisory Board go on record and send a message to the NPS that the Board had come to the consensus that heritage areas were a worthy part of it, not an illegitimate child. That was an important message at the time to send. It was an important message for the administration. An important message for the NPS. An important message for the Department of the Interior, and for the Congress, and for the heritage areas themselves. It was in fact hugely important for the heritage areas to hear some affirmation that this made sense. That it was not only good for preservation for the American people and the heritage of this country, but it was also good for the National Park Service and System. That there are mutual benefits. That is a very important message. Did it result all by itself in national legislation to create system legislation? Unfortunately, not. But did it have an impact? Yes, you bet. Can we say that the impact was decisive in some way? Time will tell.

If the Advisory Board had come out and said, heritage areas were a bad idea from the start. We don't really think that NPS should be involved with them. Our advice to the NPS is to get out while you can, cut your losses and run. It would have had a very different outcome, different impact.

What challenges did you encounter in your work on heritage areas issues? The debate over sunsetting was a recurring challenge for those working on heritage areas. For example, in 1991,

one of the working groups for the 75th (anniversary) Vail Agenda, chaired I believe by Bill Briggle, former deputy director, recommended sunsetting NPS involvement with the heritage areas. I submitted comments, to the effect; why would the national significance of renowned heritage resources, such as the Hudson River Valley, ever be extinguished? Given the perpetual nature of that significance to the nation, why would the NPS simply turn its back and walk away on an arbitrary date? My argument was, if these areas are of such national significance; though they might never be national parks because of their geography, their population, and other circumstance; are they not an irreplaceable part of the nation's heritage and by extension the historical preservation mandate of the NPS? Why should there be an arbitrary cutoff date as long as there is a helpful role that only the NPS can provide? The Briggle paper was symptomatic of the existential tension over heritage areas that exists within the NPS since the beginning of heritage areas and has never gone away. The congressional and agency indecision over whether heritage areas should be reauthorized or not has played out like an endless record and this indecision and resistance to making a commitment has bedeviled the NPS relationship with the heritage areas for far too long.

What are the benefits of the NPS to the National Heritage Areas? In almost all cases NPS provides heritage areas a certain national recognition that only the NPS brand can offer. That can be a huge advantage for tourism and economic development associated with tourism. The NPS can also serve as a third party in terms of being a convener and a hub for the exchange of information and to facilitate cooperative joint ventures between partners. The NPS is usually exempt from the baggage associated with the local community political environment. NPS can also bring a fresh and impartial point of view to the table. In many cases, NPS can help leverage good work that otherwise just needed a bit more help, a bit more coordination to see fruition. There is always a role for convening different interest to coalesce around common needs.

Do the National Heritage Areas contribute to the mission of NPS? I was recently in the Hudson Valley at the Wallace Center at Roosevelt – Vanderbilt and gave a talk to an audience of Valley conservation NGOs and local and state officials. The Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area very ably convened the event. Here is a valley where the NPS has important park real estate including Martin Van Buren, Eleanor Roosevelt, Vanderbilt, and Thomas Cole National Historic Sites, Natural Landmarks and an extraordinary number of National Register properties. This portfolio includes the first National Landmark District in the nation. This huge NPS investment in its Hudson portfolio is largely dependent on the conservation of the greater Hudson Valley. Until the establishment of the Hudson National Heritage Area, there was no way for NPS to effectively coordinate with all relevant conservation interests. The Hudson National Heritage Area also serves as a respected convener and hub for information exchange. The national heritage area keeps its eye on the big picture while each of these smaller, individual park units, and landmarks are often focused on their own piece of this larger picture. This role the heritage area plays is unique, and it will not disappear after five or ten years.

There are also some very practical advantages to the NPS participation in heritage area work in terms of capacity building. There are a number of very successful superintendents who honed their skills in heritage areas. Mike Creasy, who is superintendent of Boston National Historical Park, Boston African American Historic Site and the Boston Harbor Island National Recreation Area, was as executive director of Blackstone. The superintendent of Indiana Dunes National

Park, Paul Labovitz, worked with the Ohio & Erie Canalway National Heritage Area near Cuyahoga (Ohio). There are many parks that are imbedded within the boundaries of larger heritage areas or have a heritage area as a neighbor and cooperator. This can be a huge advantage to national parks. A good example is Cane River Creole National Historical Park's relationship with the Cane River National Heritage Area. There is not a single national park that is not worried about landscape and ecosystem conservation beyond park boundaries. The parks that are fortunate to work alongside heritage areas invariably benefit from heritage area projects, whether it's developing more sustainable communities, protection of watersheds, cultural landscapes and ecosystem services, or establishing key recreational linkages. The vast majority of parks do not have nearby heritage areas but those that do, see them as real assets.

It is important in this conversation not to lose sight that NPS is the heritage agency of the U.S. government. The mission of the NPS is not just the care and feeding of parks. That is an important part of its mission, but just part of its mission. The 1935 Historic Sites Act and the1966 Historic Preservation Act direct the NPS to play a meaningful role, outside the boundaries of the national parks, in preserving the larger heritage of the nation. The network of national heritage areas is playing an expanding role in carrying out this NPS preservation mandate and, as such, represent an increasingly valuable component of the National Park System.

The NPS seems to continually discuss definitions, funding formulas, evaluation criteria, and program legislation as they relate to heritage areas. Why are no final finals seemingly reached? I understand the ambivalence within the NPS over heritage areas. National heritage areas are different from national parks and it's very hard for an organization that does one thing very, very well to stretch itself to do a number of different things. But, if you look at the legislative mission of the NPS, it is a diverse mission with broad responsibilities.

Some of that ambivalence also arises from the fact that there are just not enough resources to spread around; too many mouths to feed, not enough pie on the table. I understand that. I think though that there may never be adequate funding for everything that should be done. That does not mean that the agency can arbitrarily abandon elements of the NPS mission. To some degree I would argue that the more we do in serving the American public and reaching new audiences that we don't traditionally reach with our established national parks, the more we can build up a new generation of supporters eager to pay for its care and funding.

Retrenchment is not a strategic investment. If you look at the absolute amount of dollars being spent on heritage areas versus the total budget of the NP System, it is a very, very small percentage. In my opinion heritage areas are a smart investment in building new support, new engagement with the national park system, and new investment in the national parks heritage areas also represent an opportunity to engage with parts of this country that don't have national parks but have places that are important to the NPS, and to the cultural and natural heritage of the nation.