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



Daniel M. “Dan” Rice  
May 10, 2016

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508 compliant version by Jessica Lamb

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

Daniel M. “Dan” Rice  
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**Daniel M. "Dan" Rice Interview: May 10, 2016**

**Early interest in heritage areas:** I volunteered with the Ohio and Erie Canalway Coalition. It seemed like an interesting project at the time. It wasn't a heritage area at the time. It was just an issue, a project. We were just an evolving heritage area project.

**National Center for Heritage Development:** I got involved with it in the mid to late '90s. I think it was Alvin Rosenbaum and Randy Cooley and a guy with the Association of American Museums. I got pulled into it because I was chairman of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas at the time. They seemed to have a kind of a different approach, if you will, in terms of what they were trying to accomplish. There is a little bit of a difference of opinion, I think, and it really did not necessarily represent the heritage areas. I think that was part of the problem. I think it was related but in the long-term I don't think it really did (have an effect on heritage areas).

**Alliance of National Heritage Areas:** Ironically enough it was in response to the NPS creating the protocol or guidelines of how heritage areas would be coordinated. The reaction was that they were just basically thrust upon us without any type of input and so that was not received very well at all. This was introduced to us at a meeting in Annapolis, Maryland and it seemed that the expectation was that we would accept the guidelines as presented. We were saying we don't even know what we are accepting here. Why would we agree to something that quite frankly we haven't even seen before? That was the origin of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. It was a group of disparate individual heritage areas who decided to get together to make sure that their issues and concerns were heard.

We were just focused on nationally designated heritage areas (did not include state heritage areas). It is organized as a 501c6 trade organization. It has members and we meet three times a year. We meet twice in a region and once in Washington, DC. It really serves as a trade association for people to share best practices and hopefully everyone can achieve mutual success by learning from each other's heritage area.

I think it is safe to say that it has definitely evolved, and I think the reason it has evolved is because funding issues have always been central to the Alliance members' concerns. We have been trying for a number of years to pass program legislation. Just at its basic level it has created a forum where heritage areas can come together and share information.

**Creation of the Partnership Subcommittee of the National Park System Advisory Board:**

That was really the first and a tremendous opportunity for us to have an open dialogue. When we talk about accomplishments, I think that you could make a strong case that that was another accomplishment and that is that our relationship and our partnership with the NPS has really grown and developed over the years to where I think it is a very strong partnership and I can honestly say it used to not be that way at one time. I'm very pleased from that prospective.

What actually happened was that we were invited to participate in the National Park Advisory Board as a subcommittee on heritage areas and that started really rolling the ball for us on

improving our relationship. We produced a report. I think that the report from that committee achieved what we had expected.

It was very thoughtful. It gave a wonderful opportunity for national heritage area representatives as well as NPS leaders to tour different heritage areas and also exchange ideas. What I'm most proud of is I know a number of the NPS representatives including Director Jarvis, at that time he was the regional director, and John Reynolds and some of these other folks, they admitted that when they first sat down, they were skeptical about heritage areas. At the conclusion of the process their perspectives changed entirely, and they actually became advocates and outspoken supporters of heritage areas. It is an example of what you can do when you go through a process of that nature. There were just a lot of good people on that committee, and I had never had a chance to meet these folks before and it was incredibly eye opening for me and very rewarding. I mean it was one of the highlights of my career.

**Role of Alliance related to NPS:** I don't know that there really is a formal role, and that has been part of the challenge, to be honest with you, because we have the Washington office, we have the regional offices and sometimes they are not always entirely in sync. Just from a reporting standpoint, reports we submit to the regional office might be different than the report we submit to the central office and that tends to be confusing.

I think a lot of it just comes down to open dialogue between the coordinating office and the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. We have discussions on a broad range of issues affecting national heritage areas. The Washington office has become a very strong advocate within the agency for national heritage areas. I think there is a direct correlation between the constant advocating on our behalf and our strong relationship with the NPS and so I think they have done an excellent job from that prospective.

**Legislation:** I think the Alliance has not always had the same idea of program legislation as the NPS. But I think that is to be expected. I'm not surprised by that in any way shape or form. You know the NPS maybe takes a more park centric perspective regarding the development and creation of heritage areas. For instance, there has been a debate or discussion regarding the planning process versus the designation process and we've come down on the side of, some of us have I don't know if all of us have, but a number of us have come to the conclusion that the more planning that you do up front equates to better success for the heritage area on the back end. It enables everybody to understand what they're buying into and what the full potential of the heritage area could be. Again, I don't see that as a major thing it's just a difference of opinion based on a difference of experience.

Another difference is in the discussion of the funding formula. A subject of much debate among the heritage areas themselves. What is the need for base level funding? But, again, I give the NPS Washington office a lot of credit because initially they didn't necessarily support base funding or the continued need for federal funding for national heritage areas. So, they have really shown a willingness to examine the issues and come up with a proposal. Another area where the NPS has played a key pivotal role has been with the evaluations. Again, that was a mutually agreed upon decision that we came together with the NPS, and we said that before you decide whether you need to have a continuing role with national heritage areas why don't you do

an evaluation? And so, from the very beginning when these were piloted a number of years ago to today, I mean the NPS has successfully completed, I guess it is at least over ten studies. Now they know the full impact of the heritage areas and of their investment.

Another area they piloted, and we were in on, was the economic impact studies and a number of these studies have been completed and they're very educational and informative regarding the value of national heritage area work. Overall, I would almost say that our areas of consensus and collaboration are greater than the areas we do not have consensus on.

I think now we have overall consensus that we need to have program legislation. Today we have 49 individual pieces of legislation and that's been part of the challenge. Program legislation would provide a framework and an organized structure for the planning and designation for national heritage areas as well as the evaluation of them. It would just provide some structure and also give it credibility within the agency as well as with Congress. But our situation is not uncommon. A lot of other programs started out in the same place that the national heritage program has whether it was national seashores or long-distance trails. They started out as an interesting idea and continued to evolve to the point where it was finally decided that what was needed was actual formal legislation.

I don't know if there is one easy answer to the question of why Congress has never passed program legislation. I think a couple of things. One is educating members of Congress about what heritage areas are and how they further the mission of the NPS. I say that somewhat tongue in cheek, but it hasn't been but the last four to seven years that the NPS itself has recognized that heritage areas should be part of the family. I'm sure you have seen the Director's Order that he sent out at least seven years ago in which he basically directed everybody in the agency to recognize that heritage areas are part of the family. But that took a long time for that to happen and only through the incredible leadership of Director Jon Jarvis. I think it's education awareness.

There is the perception by some still that heritage areas drain the NPS. They don't see it as a plus. You are always going to have the challenge of funding issues, which are historic within the NPS agency. I just don't know that it is a simple one answer.

Private property lobbies haven't had anything to do with congressional reluctance. I might be in error if I say they have no impact, but I don't think it's the reason. There is a perception already that heritage areas are tools of governments to tell property folks what they can and cannot do. They have yet to provide one example of that. Every time they continue to bring this up their argument further dilutes itself because they are not able to come up with any examples. If anything, this is a great example of local stewardship and ownership and investment. It's actually quite the opposite. But sometimes perception is reality for other people.

**Ohio and Erie National Heritage Canalway:** Early on we were a little bit different than some of the other heritage areas in that ours was a very bottom-up approach, a very grass roots approach. We took the ownership on our own here at the local level to try to organize and preserve and develop our resources. The advantage of that is we have been very successful in building up local community investment and ownership of our resources. What we have been

able to do is utilize our federal funding for our grant program and local partners continue to leverage private and local and state investment in the Ohio and Erie Canal to restore historic buildings and natural areas. At least 70% of our operations are funded from local resources. Very little of it utilizes the federal funding. That has enabled us to take our federal funds and put them right back in to the community where we believe those dollars should be put.

**Funding:** Federal money is basically through a grant program. Every heritage area in their legislation, unless it is something different, all can receive up to a million dollars. Early on in our existence I think it was one or two years that we actually did receive the full funding but since then funding has been reduced by about 40% to where we receive about \$600,000. We are very grateful for that. We certainly recognize that if we had more, we would be able to do more but we are very fortunate to be able to receive what we have, and we utilize those funds very responsibly to implement our management plan.

There is a funding formula that has been drafted by the NPS with input from national heritage areas. You were allowed to have input, but I was not a member of the committee. I think now, myself as well as several other people have now come to realize that maybe that's a funding formula that should be revisited. As I'm fond of saying, there is nothing magical about some of the numbers. They are recommending a base funding of about \$400,000. But upon reflection five or six years later I've come to the realization that there is nothing magical about \$400,000. In fact, I would suggest and argue that it is not enough. The base funding amount that we have in the program legislation is \$750,000 I think that that is more realistic for base funding. And that would be for all 49. (54 as of spring 2019)

**Criteria for designation:** The program legislation really sets that up and having as much planning up front as possible is really important particularly from a business planning prospective. The sources of local funds committed to a project are really important. Sometimes in the past people have thought, "I'm just going to get my legislation passed and then I'm just going to have the federal money truck come up to my backdoor and start dumping money." And it just doesn't happen. Just because you get legislation passed does not guarantee you are going to get funded. Every year we have to go in (to lobby Congress) and that's why the program legislation is so important.

**Training needs:** Even though we have been a heritage area for about 20 years I'm a big believer that you can learn a whole lot by just interacting with folks. Maybe more about interpretive programs, new sustainability fund raising methods, even partnership are just some examples of areas for training for the heritage areas.

I think these might be the same needs of the NPS staff working with heritage areas. In the Midwest Region our heritage area coordinator has changed. It's been pretty consistent in other regions, with the exception of the Southeast Region. But that is part of the challenge. You have the Washington office and then you have all these different regions, and they almost treat heritage areas like different fiefdoms. For instance, the Northeast Region is very progressive. Certainly, it has the most heritage areas. So, I get that. They are very proactive with their heritage areas. In the Midwest Region, we lost our coordinator and now there is a quarter-time person so there really isn't that level of engagement in a meaningful way. I mean she does it as

best she can, but she is very clear with us that she is only doing this a quarter of her time. In the Southeast Region my colleagues down there complain that it is sort of an afterthought. They don't have a whole lot of interaction, and it's not helpful at times. That's the part that's really challenging. When you have different regions treated differently like this there's no consistency. That's a problem.

That's where program legislation would come into play. Much like there are no two parks alike there are no two heritage areas alike. Their needs are going to be different but at least if there was a kind of overall structure from program legislation there would be better coordination. Why should the other regions not have the same level of engagement that you have in the Northeast Region? That just doesn't help everybody. The Northeast Region, for example, takes some of their technical assistance money that comes from the NPS and actually go out and ask what kind of training the heritage areas would like to see done, and how can we best use this money. We are starting to do that in the Midwest Region but in the Southeast Region they use that money not for training but to cover the cost of their staff who are supposed to be providing coordination and assistance to heritage areas. If you ask the people in the Southeast, they don't feel they get any assistance at all. So why is that? It sends the wrong message.

**Elements of successful heritage areas:** Locally driven, local investment and local commitment. Very clear vision of what you are trying to achieve, and the very clear common denominators are heritage areas that have done a lot of planning up front, a lot of local investment up front and really tried to grow at an appropriate pace consistent with their ability to leverage private, local, and state resources. Stable staffing is also important. A good governance structure in place, good board that is able to provide direction, but also able to provide access to resources. And genuine authentic resources. I think those are about the common denominators.

**Evaluation of heritage areas:** They should be evaluated. When we had ours, they looked at what we said we were going to do. This is what you are going to do; this is why you are going to do it; this is how you are going to do it. Again, because each heritage area is unique, it's a matter of defining the what, the why, and the how. Not so much measuring for success in the terms of pass/fail, but in terms of how are you making progress on these different components of your management plan. Describe for us the nature of your partnership network. How is it working? What are the strengths? What are the weaknesses? How is that then translating into access to resources? Access to dollars? Then what are some outliers? What are some issues that quite frankly are preventing you from pushing forward and achieving success? A number of years ago when we did our evaluation. I was honest and said that when we had the economic downturn in 2007, 8 and 9 that hurt us a lot because a lot of our private funding actually dried up, as well as the private foundation funding. We had to really tuck quickly to figure out how we adjust to this. I think those are some topics that could provide an outline for the evaluation.

**Economic indicators:** Absolutely we have used our economic indicators. Our study showed about \$408,000,000 annually can be attributed to a community economic standpoint as a result of the Ohio and Erie Canalway as well as 2,700 jobs on an annual basis. It's pretty powerful. I use this information every opportunity I get. Whenever I make speeches, or when I'm talking with our partners, our donors, and particularly our officials at the local and state level. Because they say it's nice that you want to preserve the canal and develop a walking path but at the end of the

day, ultimately, we're talking about jobs. Talking about community and economic development. It is a very powerful tool that we utilize.

**Benefit to NPS:** I think the NPS is a very good fit with heritage areas, in the way we are able to further the mission and export the NPS ethic of resource conservation to audiences that the NPS would never have an opportunity to reach. We have actually had the superintendent of Cuyahoga National Park say that. That we are reaching beyond their 34,000 acres of the national park. We're into urban areas. We're into rural areas; areas that they have never had the opportunity to access. It has furthered the importance of that national park. It is within our boundaries. It's surrounded by national heritage areas.

**Future for the heritage area initiative:** Our project continues to evolve. We are not only in the four counties that are in our legislation but adjacent counties. We are developing regional trail plans that connect into the 101-mile towpath trail. The impact goes far beyond the original legislation. It's really powerful to see. Different organizations, different foundations are involved. Partnerships evolve because of this spine of resource conservation.

Having stability within the Washington Office, Martha Raymond has been there a number of years and she has been incredibly effective and Heather Scotten (now Heather Scotten Passchier) as well.