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Phyllis M. Ellin
November 4, 2015

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

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Phyllis M. Ellin Interview: November 4, 2015

Tenure in program: 1997-2004. I first started working on heritage areas when I was in Philadelphia working for cultural resources in mid '90s. I was asked to consult with Joe DiBello's staff with the early heritage area development of the Rivers of Steel and Wheeling areas. I was going to the steel area once a month for quite some time. I participated on various heritage area working groups for NPS and then as executive director for the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor. I stepped away from heritage areas after that job ended in 2004. Since 2014, I have been handling the Midwest Region National Heritage Area Coordinating position on a part time basis.

It was interesting in those early days because we were exploring new policy areas. I thought it was challenging to be part of those discussions. What should the definition of a National Heritage Area be? How do you express its level of significance? If I remember correctly, I came up with *nationally distinctive* rather than *nationally significant* as a description. Some of these things that the task forces came up with have stuck; some have not.

Park Service Employees working in NHAs: I was executive director of I&M Canal from Aug 1999 to Oct 2004. I was always a NPS employee. The 1984-1999 I&M Canal executive director was also a NPS employee. When he retired the commission advertised the job and both NPS and non-NPS people applied for it. I think, in part, it was easier for the commission to continue to hire a NPS employee, as NPS could continue to handle all the personnel issues. I was a NPS employee assigned to be Executive Director of the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor Commission. No one ever raised a question on whether NPS paid employees could work for the commission; the commission itself was federal. The statute that created the commission also required NPS to provide an additional two staff members to the commission, so it worked well that we were all NPS staff in the office, and I could work easily with the NPS regional and national offices.

Commission management: Some of the I&M Commission members had been on the commission continuously since its origin. The committees of the commission, such as interpretation, resource preservation, etc., included both members of the commission and other representatives of state and local governments, non-profit organizations and other community stakeholders. We always had a pretty wide engagement of all the communities. My staff was very small, and the idea was not that we would do a lot directly. The committees were useful for coordination and convening of the partners to work together. The commission had always produced publications and brochures and provided funds to the non-profit partner and the convention & visitors bureau through cooperative agreements. When we got a higher allocation of funds, we started a grant program using cooperative agreements which was well received. Right before I came, they had had a lot of activities related to the 150th anniversary of the canal, so there had been a lot of engagement with the community and higher visibility. There was a feeling around that time that because the National Heritage Canal had existed so long (15 years by then) that there had been some stagnation in the commission's work.

The communities along the canal were using the county and state park recreational trails along it. Our major non-profit partner, The Canal Corridor Association, had a number of activities on

their own, some funded by the commission, for tourism outreach, interpretive programs, and some site development. We did coordinate but not as much as I had expected when I took the job. There was some duplication between the non-profit and the commission in terms of who was doing what and who was taking the lead in different areas. I think that situation contributed to the eventual sunset of the commission. Some of the commissioners were sorry to see the federal commission go away, but they did not work against the change. The two organizations had different strengths and if they had been able to work together more effectively, they could have complemented each other. The commission's contribution was probably never fully realized. The canal was in several congressional districts, and the lead congressman decided that when the commission sunsetted he would revise the legislation to allow the non-profit to become the coordinating entity.

NPS division of responsibilities WASO/Regions: I was not terribly involved in that. I don't remember a significant dispute in the early days over division of responsibility between WASO and the region. When I was in the Northeast Region, the first national coordinator position was created, and that was needed, but of course there were some adjustments in roles that came with the change. When the I&M Canal National Heritage Corridor was created, it was the only one of its kind. Between that and the fact that it had NPS staff, led the NPS regional office to treat us as a unit of the NPS system and treat the executive director as a park superintendent. The Midwest Region, I believe, did not hire a HA coordinator until sometime after 2000. I didn't have a lot of communication with other HAs in the region, as we really operated more as a governmental entity than as a nonfederal partner, as they did. I don't remember a dispute (of WASO vs region). The regions were probably doing most of the coordination work at that point. Before I was at I&M I was working with Peter Samuel in Philadelphia, and the Northeast Region was very actively involved with the heritage areas.

Difference of purpose of heritage areas and NPS: Some of the heritage areas seem to be interested primarily in economic development as an ultimate goal, with resource preservation as a means to that end. Economic development is not the primary area of expertise for the NPS. The value of having it a NPS program is that it does keep the focus on resource conservation. Other agencies might bring different things to the heritage area program, but it would then be a very different program. Not all of them have an interest in natural resources. Cultural resources and recreation are the focus for most of them. Whether it is always resulting in tangible resource preservation and to what extent, is harder to measure.

NPS attitude about heritage areas: I remember those arguments. In the early days of the program the NPS was holding back and not fully supporting because there was never program legislation. They were all individually designated by Congress. I remember some NPS officials being rather dismissive of the value of heritage areas. Even when that attitude relaxed a little bit there were still policy positions that the heritage areas should sunset from federal funding after a time and be self-sufficient and there was a feeling that they were taking funding away from other NPS programs. That has mellowed over time on both sides and the Alliance of National Heritage Areas and NPS value their partnership.

Lack of Program Legislation: My guess is that it reflects a political reality that it provides a way for some individual representatives to support their constituents without officially creating a new federal program.

Usefulness to NPS: Certainly, funds provided from the management entities for resource preservation are useful in supporting national preservation goals. Overall, some heritage areas are more effective than others. Even for the ones that are effective it can be hard to measure what they do for preservation, especially in areas like public outreach and interpretation.

Difficulty standardizing: Administratively speaking, the current practice is that the regions seem to have a lot of leeway in how they handle their grants and agreements and fiscal issues. The differences between regions make for a certain amount of confusion. But it is true that the regions of NPS have always been decentralized and do things differently. Compared to other federal agencies I think we have always had a culture like that. There is probably more standardization now than 50 years ago when people were out doing whatever seemed to make sense with much less oversight.

Cooperative Agreements and/or Grants: In the 1990s there was no question of using grants. At least in the Northeast Region, we had to use cooperative agreements because there was substantial involvement by NPS and the managing entity. We weren't just handing over money, no question. I don't know when grants came up as an option. This might be more a reflection of loose terminology than an actual change in authorities.

Criteria for evaluating a successful NHA: I think it is showing results in terms of resource preservation and public knowledge. It's hard to measure that. There has been an effort for as long as I can remember to come up with good measures.

Challenges: When I worked in the Northeast Region, the program was less standardized but a lot simpler than now. Now you have many more administrative requirements. We now spend a tremendous amount of time on the financial documentation and paperwork. It has kind of taken over the regional coordination position.

Successes: The program has become much more established and more well-known. What was initially kind of a small club of these areas is now a much more wide-ranging group of different organizations.

Asset to career: Yes, I think it was a good experience for me. But, by the end of my tenure at I&M I was ready to move on.

Regional office support: The Midwest Region is going through a transitional period because in May 2014 the regional coordinator retired, and the position has not been filled on a full-time basis. So, it is a little hard for the region to provide a lot of service to heritage areas right now. Although I&M was the first national heritage area designated, the Northeast Region really became the most active with heritage areas and now has the largest number.