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

Mary A. Bomar
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Interview conducted and transcribed by
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This transcript was reviewed by Mary A. Bomar

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How did you become interested in heritage areas: During my National Park Service (NPS) career, and prior to becoming the Northeast Regional Director, I visited various National Heritage Areas (NHA). I heard about National Heritage Areas at regional meetings during my first ten years working in national parks in the old lovely Southwest and Intermountain Regions. During the early 1990's, I was assigned a regional management portfolio to my park position as a circuit rider/staff assister visiting parks in the region providing support and assistance with various aspects of park management, especially in the administrative, budget and personnel arenas.

In 1999, I was temporarily assigned as an interim superintendent of Rocky Mountain National Park by Regional Director John Cook. A plum assignment working in one of the most spectacular mountain wilderness parks in America, with an outstanding staff of professional park stewards. I attended many park briefings with staff and park partners. One particular meeting being with local and state entities regarding complex important water resource issues and the importance of Cache La Poudre River. Discussions addressed the future management of complex western United States water delivery systems. NHA designation authority was mentioned briefly and am pleased to say that Cache La Poudre River finally, some years later, received designation status as a national heritage corridor. This really was my first introduction to the role of heritage areas considering designation due to the importance of the resources. Meetings like this reconfirmed how valuable the role of the NPS is in assisting and collaborating with multi partnerships, especially in conservation, preservation and education.

My continued education of heritage areas was during my tenure as the new superintendent at THE premier cultural national park in the NPS system, Independence National Historical Park (INDE) in Philadelphia. As superintendent, and new to the northeast region in January 2003, I was invited to attend many regional management meetings with the Northeast Regional Director Marie Rust and her regional directorate. We were close neighbors, as my park office was located in the Merchant's Exchange Building, literally a stone's throw around the corner from the northeast regional offices, housed in the Customs House Building.

Not long after arriving and getting settled in our new home in Philadelphia, my husband and I spent many exploratory weekends visiting areas identified on the Schuylkill River Valley NHA located in southern Pennsylvania. We both are very interested in the industrialization and colonization history. The Schuylkill area extends from Pottsville to Philadelphia, PA. So many sites to visit telling the stories of the river's history during the American Revolution and industrial era.

During my tenure in Philadelphia, heritage areas were often discussed during management meetings, due to the northeast region being home to over half of the nation's heritage areas in the NPS system. At one of my first regional office planning meetings, I met Nora Mitchell, who was giving an update on National Heritage Areas. It was evident that she was very knowledgeable and involved with NHA studies as manager of the regional Conservation Studies Institute (CSI), located in Woodstock, Vermont. The CSI conducted several feasibility/sustainability studies for National Heritage Areas.

In February 2005, I had been asked by the NPS Director and NER Director to serve as the interim regional director of the NPS 13-state northeast region as Marie Rust had announced her retirement. I was the acting RD until a permanent successor could be named. Marie Rust retired in March 2005 after a long and very successful NPS career. At the end of July 2005, I was officially selected as the new Northeast Regional Director.

In my new role, I was responsible for carrying out the mission of the NPS in northeastern states from Maine to Virginia, directing strategic planning, management and operation for more than 100 parks and areas of national significance; home to park sites such as the Statue of Liberty, Acadia, 22 sites within the New York Harbor, Gettysburg, Valley Forge, and Shenandoah plus numerous technical assistance and partnership programs. NER is one of the most densely populated regions and heavily visited areas in the NPS with more than 50 million visitors each year and an annual economic impact of over \$2.6 billion accordingly to stats for 2005.

I was fortunate to inherit a very busy but successful and well developed NPS regional operation, with a staff that were staunch supporters of partnerships, especially NHA's.

My thanks to former NER Regional Director Maria Rust, who was a seasoned professional and knowledgeable in all park operations and management. She was a great mentor to many park service employees, to me and to the NER directorate. This region had been working with national heritage areas for many years, and I believe had become successful NPS *subject matter experts*, due to their advocacy of being civically engaged with communities in the planning process of promoting conservation and management of natural and cultural resources. Marie's leadership fostered a climate of civic engagement that opened the tent to include every one of interest in the process, reaching not only consensus, but smarter solutions/results of these unique NHA partnerships.

What were some National Heritage Area successes you noted while Northeast Regional Director? As the NER Regional Director, my first official NHA visit in March 2006 was to Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (BRVNHC). The Blackstone Corridor Commission had made a request to the NER for the Conservation Study Institute to evaluate the corridor's progress since its congressional authorization in 1986 and provide options/recommendations for future management of BRVNHC.

Kudos to the Corridor Commission for having the vision to request such a study to ensure they created a shared purpose and vision for their future success of the heritage area. During my visit, I attended an official dinner with the commission. I was asked to give remarks and was introduced by the Commission Chairwoman, Louise Redding. For nearly 20 years, the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor led the way in modeling best practices to get the most value from these partnerships. At a planned reception, I thanked the entire Blackstone Team—the commissioners, the Corridor's many partners, and the many VIPs for all they had done to make Blackstone successful. Some of the volunteers were also in attendance at this dinner, and I should point out that in 2005 Blackstone volunteers contributed over thirty thousand working hours! Such an outpouring of volunteer efforts clearly shows the strong community/public support for the Corridor and its value to the residents.

When you consider the involvement of the community, state and local government to this heritage area, they had become an awesome force for progress. I also conveyed the following statement during my remarks....

“As the Park Service approaches its 90th birthday, the “special places” we care for mean much more than national parks alone. And rather than being the “Lone Rangers” in caring for these special places, we rely on the friends and partners to help in our efforts, and to provide us with their wisdom, involvement and support. The National Park Service will do its utmost, but we cannot do the job alone. To quote two rather popular British songwriters, “We’ll get by with a little help from our friends... Gonna try with a little help from our friends”

The BRVNHC was the second American National Heritage Area to be designated. I was given an excellent informative tour of many of the sites and was very impressed with the management and staff of this organization. Personally, and professionally, I was very interested in the history of how this industrial corridor, with many textile, tool and other mills had lost much of its economic livelihood by the 1970’s. Now I was witnessing the next chapter in the history of this very important American story.

On a personal note, I could certainly relate to this story and the feelings of local communities surrounding this heritage area, as my father was the owner of a family business... a hosiery manufacturing company in an industrial city in England. Through economic depressions, old and outdated machinery, plus lower wages abroad, many manufacturing companies had to finally close their doors. My father’s company being one!

Everyone involved with this heritage area certainly focused on preserving and promoting the understanding about the mill community as it opened a window into America’s industrial life as a young nation. Hearing the sounds and stories of life in manufacturing mill buildings provided important educational school trips for children as well as visitors. I met many volunteers and partners who were all professional, so enthusiastic and passionate supporters of the BRVNHC.

The CSI study approach involved the commission and its partners in looking objectively at the corridor’s progress and the impacts of their work in the region. In addition to documenting progress towards achieving management plan objectives, the study team gathered partners and outside experts for a one-day interactive workshop and interviewed dozens of key partners, resource managers, and experts. A collaborative research and evaluation process was used to synthesize findings and observations, identify critical ingredients for the corridor’s success, and provide a toolbox of management options and opportunities for the commission to consider. A collaborative research and evaluation process was used to synthesize findings and observations, identify critical ingredients for the corridor’s success, and provide a toolbox of management options and opportunities for the commission to consider.

The commission determined that they would seek congressional reauthorization to address several options proposed in the study.

It is my understanding that there have been some legislative changes since my retirement, that now designates a subset of sites associated with the National Heritage Area as a National Historical Park. The park's establishment was included as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, which was signed into law by President Barack Obama on December 19, 2014. It is closely related to the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, which is not a unit of the National Park System, but the National Historical Park contains only a subset of the sites associated with that National Heritage Area. The Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor continues to exist independently of the National Historical Park. Overall, I think this NHA is a successful story.

As NPS Director in February 26, 2007, I met with the Alliance of National Heritage Areas and attended a reception where it was good to see and talk with many old friends from the NHA areas and partners from around the country. As an FYI, I recognized the Alliance Executive Committee...Dayton Sherrouse, Nancy Morgan, Annie Harris Augie Carlino, Michele McCollum and Don Short. Also, the Advocacy Chairman, Augie Carlino who hosted the gathering along with John Maounis, Brenda Barrett from the DC Office and Suzanne Copping on a new Orientation Program for members that was being held that week. During that meeting I also announced that NPS Frank Dean, Superintendent of Saratoga National Historic Park and the Erie Canalway NHC Executive Director, would lead a taskforce working with our regional and Washington staff to provide outline recommendations on what needed to be done and how they were going to be accomplished, working with NHA's.

As the Regional Director, I travelled with Frank Dean to upstate New York to visit many parks and places including Women's Rights, Saratoga, Martin Van Buren and others, but on this trip Frank Dean ensured I stopped along the way to visit sites in the Erie Canalway National Heritage Area. Again, I felt this heritage area was, and I believe, is still another success story!

Local citizens came together in a grassroots effort working diligently with many partners in many government jurisdictions in lobbying Congress to designate the Ohio and Erie Canalway as a National Heritage Area. The group could express their vision, again, due to being extremely knowledgeable of the areas and visionary about the values of this heritage area. They were passionate and had excellent communication skills, coupled with the ability to engage with many partners, municipalities, organizations and different people from all walks of life. I salute this group of dedicated citizens, as their efforts paid off... The two nonprofits, Canalway Partners (formerly known as Ohio Canal Corridor & founded in 1985) and the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition (founded in 1989) co-wrote the legislation and led a successful regional support campaign that brought passage of the federal bill, signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996. That legislation recognized the Ohio & Erie Canalway Association as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization to act as the management entity for the Canalway. The Ohio & Erie Canalway Association operates as a regional extension of the two Founding Organizations.

Looking at their website recently, I see they are still going full steam ahead in preserving and celebrating the rails, trails, landscapes, towns and sites that grew up along the first 110 miles of the canal that helped Ohio and our nation grow. Annually, more than 2.5 million Americans find their way to the iconic 81+ mile Towpath Trail running through the heart of the Canalway. They have come a long way since 1996 in garnering public support for interpretation, preservation and

protection, but I see they have also focused on the development and enhancement of natural and recreational activities such as birding, biking, and hiking. I cannot over express the need for management and partners to have exceptional communication skills with the knowledge, drive, ability and personality to engage with many municipalities, organizations and people from all walks of life in promoting NHA's.

The American Planning Association honored the Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor preservation and management plan with their top national planning award. They were hailed as a model of those involved in heritage tourism and historic resource preservation. The award acknowledged the plans and innovative approach to preservation and its attention to the need to energize and enhance the strength of communities connected to the canal. Great supporting collaboration from many partners but especially the city and state entities. As the regional director, I had the opportunity to become very familiar with all aspects of partnerships and National Heritage Areas. Each heritage area is exceptional and unique; diverse and often with vast differences, not only in the resources and stories being told, but also in the overall operational management of these areas.

During my tenure as the Superintendent at Independence National Historical Park and as the interim regional Director for several months, I had many briefings and discussions with Marie Rust about the future of the NER. She was being pressured to move forward with melding the two regional offices into one... NPS/WASO plans were in place which called for the Boston offices to relocate operations and staff to the NER offices in Philadelphia, in accordance with a prior Director's NPS reorganization mandate.

After reviewing the NER financials with regional leadership staff, we knew, as with many parks and regional offices, funding was a huge issue. We could not continue to operate the NER with two regional offices in two locations. It was the right time to embark on a journey with our NER staff for all of us to have an in-depth examination of the regional operations to understand the allocation of staff and funding in all program areas. A *Business Plan* was the perfect tool to review the financials, the functions, and the goals of the regional office, which would give us valuable information on where we were today and provide information on how we could move ahead in the future, of not only the region, but more importantly, to further the mission of the NPS. Business plans were managed by Bruce Sheaffer out of the Washington office and had been very successful as useful plans to the field.

Some National Heritage Area successes noted while I was the National Park Service

Director: A good example of dynamic partnerships was with Blue Ridge National Parkway Superintendent Phil Francis and the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area executive director. As (NPS) Director, in 2008, I attended and was a speaker at the grand opening celebration of the new Blue Ridge Parkway Destination Center near Asheville, N.C. This Center was developed through a unique partnership between the NPS and the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area to promote the preservation and enjoyment of the region's unique natural and cultural resources and to promote economic development in keeping with those goals. Together they wanted to share resources so that they could tell the story of the cultural traditions and be leaders in preserving the land for future generations. I truly believe that this strong partnership is a role model, or benchmark of how the national parks should work together with NHA's and partnerships. In

addition, the Center serves as the headquarters for the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. Established by Congress in November 2003, this organization recognizes and celebrates the natural abundance and richly varied cultural history of the North Carolina mountains and is charged with the preservation, interpretation, and development of heritage resources in the 25 westernmost counties in the state and the Quallah Boundary.

I applauded them as they did not want to duplicate services and costs. They felt working together they could build and operate a visitor center that was right on the cutting edge of energy-saving technology. Constructed to LEED® certification standards. (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), the building features active/passive heating and cooling, radiant floor heating, a *green* roof and other energy efficient features. During this process, they also developed a new interactive map of the entire parkway which provided multimedia information. Kudos to Parkway Superintendent Phil Francis for his leadership and for playing a vital role in the creation and success of this special partnership. Seasoned Superintendent Phil Francis strengthened many partnerships with several organizations, states and community centers during his NPS career. I was also very impressed with the NHA's dynamic Executive Director Penn Dameron Jr.

Many superintendents followed in the footsteps of Phil Francis with regards to partnerships. But that was not always the case. For many years, and for many reasons, the NPS did not reach out to form such partnerships, mainly, I think due to shortage of staff and funding. However, superintendents always have and had tremendous relationships with surrounding communities and other city, state and federal entities. Their focus and mandate, in the past had been totally directed to meet the mission of the NPS and take care of their parks. I do believe that when I first joined the NPS workforce in 1990, I felt some parks were guilty of hiding their lantern under a bushel basket. But am pleased to report that thinking has changed tremendously over the past 30 plus years.

Funding formula for heritage areas: This is a difficult question for me as I have been retired for over ten years now. Lots of changes have taken place legislatively with the addition of many new heritage areas. I believe the greatest challenges in preparing a funding formula for heritage areas at this time cannot be answered without having a comprehensive methodical examination/study of *all* NHA starting with the first being signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1984. He referred to National Heritage Areas as a new kind of national park that married heritage conservation, recreation, and economic development. In 2019, there are now 55 National Heritage Areas across the country.

In the fall of 2006, I met with the Alliance Executive Committee and other National Heritage Area group members on Capitol Hill for the release of the National Park System Advisory Board report, *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas*. The Advisory Board report made a ringing statement on the value of this program for the conservation of historic and natural resources, for the 70 National Park units within heritage areas and for the 62 million American people who live in a heritage area—and for millions more who come to visit.

This is indeed a new conservation model and one from which the NPS can learn new ways to engage the public and leverage our investment in the nation's heritage. In 2005, National

Heritage Areas reported leveraging \$6 for every NPS federal dollar. They also recorded thousands of volunteer hours and almost 3,000 formal and informal partnerships. A priceless opportunity for many to participate in the preservation of their heritage.

Here we are over a decade has passed and several new National Heritage Areas and studies have been developed along with new National Heritage Areas. Newer designations are subject to new law requirements. In turn, the NPS is now to evaluate accomplishments of the areas through management assessments, three years prior to expiration, of the authorization for federal funding. Findings and recommendations are to be reported back to Congress.

Prior to my retirement in 2009 as Director, my final NPS Director's Report for 2008 confirmed that there were 40 designated National Heritage Areas at that time.

I would strongly recommend that Congress, working with the NPS, contract services for an unbiased national report. Within the scope of work for these services, it is extremely important that the study include a wide swath of partners but must also include NPS personnel, not only the Park Service Director; Washington directorate staff; and regional directors but also park superintendents, and other concerned entities to truly engage in an honest and open dialogue about the history and future of National Heritage Areas. Also, I think It is imperative that you include management from successful and struggling National Heritage Areas.

I have said many times that, "to continue our relevancy into the future, we must have a shared destination for success." There have been times when a heritage area waits until the final years of authorized federal funding to advise the NPS that they are concerned about the future financial solvency of their areas, as they have become reliant on federal funding assistance and want to continue with that arrangement. That was never the intent of this program! As we all know National Heritage Areas have expressed their interest in seeking NPS designation. Previous reports and actions show that Congress, DOI and the NPS have resolved some of these issues regarding extensions of further federal support and funding. How many National Heritage Areas raised matching federal funding and how much? So many questions need to be answered. At this time, I feel this is a huge opportunity to present a current overview/report to the Secretary of the Interior and the President showing the value of National Heritage Areas to America, its citizens and visitors from all over the world.

Per super-investor Warren Buffet, "In the business world, the rear-view mirror is always clearer than the windshield." This study will be a tremendous tool in making smart and realistic decisions about the future of National Heritage Areas also to Congress and the future role of the NPS

NHAs must be thriving operations that preserve natural and cultural resources but also provide enjoyment for the visitors. I think too, it is very important to ensure that the lives of the local and surrounding communities are taken into consideration. They must feel a sense of ownership too as many heritage areas affect their day to day lives.

How much involvement should the NPS have with the individual heritage areas? NPS professionals should and do play a vital role in the formative years of NHAs assisting

communities in many ways pre-and post-designation. But once the heritage areas are designated, established and have completed necessary initial operational informative planning studies, along with qualified management staffing on board, the responsibility of the NPS should be drastically reduced to an advisory role but still maintain a supportive partnership. The NPS also serves as the legal entity for directing federal funds to nongovernmental entities. The decision-making authority should be in the hands of the National Heritage Areas, local citizens and various partners/organizations that include city and state officials.

During my tenure, discussions took place changing legislation to grant a National Heritage Area a longer period of time to establish operational stability from 10 to 15 years, but funding would still be limited to \$10 million dollars total for the 15-year period and must be with matching funds. I agree! It has been reported that significant matching funds have leveraged NPS dollars in heritage areas. There is a requirement for at least a 50% match. National Heritage Areas have shown and feel the federal dollars have exceeded that matching requirement benefiting the heritage area. I do believe national parks and National Heritage Areas are economic engines for any community.

Often the required foundational planning and development studies take up to three or four years to finalize. As with any new studies, following implementation will take some time. Cooperative Agreements must include specific, realistic deadlines on completion of required planning documents.

I would strongly recommend that National Heritage Areas focus on the preparation of individual professional business plans as they are an extremely powerful communication tool that can be used to communicate financial needs to all principle stakeholders. Also, this plan ensures that everyone sings off the same page...know where they are today and where one is going in the future.

I know that the Alliance of National Heritage Areas works collectively to support NHAs as a membership organization congressionally designated by Congress. While their goals support the mission of the National Heritage Areas and serve as one voice on interests related to all National Heritage Areas. Is there an opportunity for the Alliance to form a partnership creating a "NHA Friends Group," (like the National Park Foundation)? An organization that can focus all of their energies on fundraising efforts strictly for National Heritage Areas. An entity that can launch a national fundraising campaign, which will also shine a light on the values and needs of National Heritage Areas. Individual NHAs have tremendous freedom in raising funds vs restrictions placed on the NPS as a federal entity prohibited from soliciting donations.

Bottom line with regards to park service assistance and involvement: NPS personnel are seasoned professionals, trained throughout their entire careers in park management and are extremely knowledgeable and well equipped with the skills to be rated as one of the finest trainers in park management in the world. They are more than willing to assist National Heritage Areas, as long as they have the available staff and funding resources for such NHA commitments by law.

We are all astutely aware that the NPS has a \$12 billion-dollar maintenance backlog. Parks have suffered from underfunding for many years. I salute the grey and green, especially those in the field, as they are on the front lines meeting and greeting visitors with interpretive services, maintaining facilities, ensuring resource protection along with safety in all parks. The NPS staff are focused on meeting the mission mandated by Congress—the Organic Act of 1916.

NPS administration of heritage areas: Seemingly there is not conformity among NPS regions in interaction with heritage areas. All seven regions within the national park system operate under the same federal administrative and operational regulatory structure. Naturally, regions that contain a higher number of National Heritage Area partnerships will be more involved and tasked with more responsibility than those regions that have, maybe one or two heritage areas.

Was there a positive attitude toward heritage areas in the National Leadership Council during my tenure? During my tenure as regional director and director, I found all National Leadership Council members to be very positive regarding National Heritage Areas but must say that National Heritage Areas topics were probably not very high on the NLC agenda at regular council meetings unless there were issues. Funding national parks needs was, and still is, a hot topic at NLC and park meetings. The northeast region funded the staffing and operations of the Conservation Studies Institute. But, when one starts talking about National Heritage Areas and funding, we were all reminded about the many needs of small parks suffering with outdated equipment and facilities that need maintenance.

Size, complexity and location range widely between regions and National Heritage Areas, but the ethos remains the same when it comes to managing America's national parks or their role working with heritage areas. They are managed in accordance with federal law/regulations. I found that most National Heritage Areas want to emulate the NPS model of management and operations. What a great compliment to our national parks' leadership and staff. National Heritage Areas certainly have much more freedom as a non-federal entity, especially when it comes to raising funds. But on the other hand, fundraising for nonprofit executives does cause constant pressure to meet financial needs and does take one's time away from the office and daily management of operations.

The official description of the role of the NPS working with national heritage areas is stated in the 2017 budget justification:

Ref: 2017 Budget Justification Statement: As the keeper of 409 park units, 23 national scenic and national historic trails, and 60 wild and scenic rivers, the NPS is charged with preserving these lands and historic features that were designated by the nation for their cultural and historic significance, scenic and environmental worth, and educational and recreational opportunities. Additionally, the NPS further helps the nation protect resources for public enjoyment that are not part of the National Park System through its financial and technical assistance programs. The NPS will continue to carry on its stewardship of cultural and natural treasures of national significance and to provide enriching experiences and enjoyment for all visitors, as detailed in the Department of the Interior's Strategic Plan and strategic objectives. NPS programs and activities will strive to continue to protect and restore ecosystems, preserve and conserve cultural resources, provide visitors with venues for physical activity and natural experiences, and assist

states and local communities in developing recreational sites and facilities and preserve historic assets. National parks are significant drivers of economic activity and health, particularly in gateway communities.

Benefit of heritage areas to the NPS: I think, National Heritage Areas are in the same business as the national parks. They contribute tremendously in many ways, to their communities, visitors, and not only to the NPS or America but to the world in telling the stories and history of this great country to millions of people. National Heritage Areas contribute and complement our efforts in conservation and stewardship of some of the most amazing natural and cultural resources in this country. They open doors for the NPS to engage in networks with the local communities. Not only a partnership is created but a friendship and supporter that is beneficial to all parties. Just to see each other regularly, have a cup of coffee with National Heritage Area staff and with the locals and other partners to collaborate and share ideas about events, issues and opportunities that they can support together--form strong alliances. I found that the leadership, management and staffing of heritage areas showed their energy was boundless, and I noted that energy was contagious with all they met in all stages of development and management. Most superintendents are working hand in hand with park partners on many fronts.

Again, the official language about the role of National Heritage Areas working with the NPS is as follows: **Ref: 2017 Mission Overview:** The Heritage Partnership Program (HPP) supports the NPS mission by contributing to the conservation and stewardship of diverse natural and cultural resources and the provision of educational and recreational benefits for the American people through partnership programs.

Benefit of NPS to heritage areas: The NPS renders tremendous support to National Heritage Areas as federally directed. NPS leverages its institutional expertise to enhance NHA management and support the work of areas and their partners, providing technical assistance and guidance, administrative support, information and support on budget and policies, and the coordination and dissemination of information to partners and the public. Additionally, the NPS seeks to encourage standards and accountability for NHAs through a variety of avenues including research, measurement, monitoring and evaluation; to support organizational sustainability, business planning, and financial resource development planning; to encourage consistency and quality in heritage areas while working towards a cohesive network; and to encourage best practices in the protection of cultural and national heritage resources.

One very important and prestigious benefit the National Heritage Areas receive from the NPS, besides the assistance of a highly professional staff, is the honor of being able to use the NPS arrowhead and to be included in national advertising through the NPS media and website.

The NPS employees are professional, knowledgeable and extremely skilled in training and want their partners to be successful. They will do their utmost to meet the mission mandated by Congress. Many National Heritage Areas strive to emulate the administration and operations of the NPS, but with much more freedom than their NPS partners, who are working under very strict federal regulations.

Superintendents and their staff are great partners, upstanding professional members in their communities, giving professional advice and guidance in all operational areas. The NPS has come a long way reaching out and helping partners, which can be very difficult with a shortage of staff and financial funding to their parks.

Through the recent Centennial Initiative, the NPS seeks to engage all Americans in preserving our heritage, history and natural resources through philanthropy and partnerships. The heritage areas and our historic preservation partners offer our agency new ideas and new strategies to meet our stewardship mission and engage the public outside and inside park boundaries. Former Secretary of the Interior, Dirk Kempthorne was a huge supporter of the parks, and together we attended many listening sessions at towns and cities across this great nation. After all, as the Advisory Board report stated, “National Heritage Areas provide people of all ages with outstanding opportunities for place-based education and a forum for public engagement.” Citizens from all walks of life confirmed their love and support for both national parks and heritage areas.

The studies provided by the CSI are another perfect example of professional services provided by the NPS. I often stated at many NPS gatherings that superintendents should work with our partners and local communities and remember that their office should be a stage and not a refuge. I must salute them and their staff as they bring tremendous knowledge, skills and support to their parks, National Heritage Areas, their partners and the local communities.

Heritage area tourism generates tremendous income to their local communities and state. I believe an in-depth study, as I mentioned earlier in my comments would reveal financial income that should be dispersed to the National Heritage Areas from local and state taxes generated from tourism.

These NHA partnerships have been developed with full cooperation by the NPS, showing their total commitment to stewardship of natural and cultural resources, outdoor recreation, educational programs telling the great American stories.

I believe the NPS has one of the best volunteer programs in America. Another success story is that NHAs have replicated and even expanded the Volunteers in the Parks program. So many benefits, to not only parks and the community: volunteering is an opportunity to bring people together working toward a common goal; promotes personal growth, especially for young people as they gain professional experience. Volunteering gives Americans an opportunity to give back to society and their community.

Generic program legislation benefit to heritage areas: Criteria are needed to assist communities and the NPS in assessing the appropriate direction for NHA proposals.

In past testimonies, we have identified the specific steps for national heritage designation and the components of a useful suitability and feasibility study. These have been field-tested and have shown themselves to be valuable, yet they have never been formalized. They are included as a possible starting point for any future efforts to set some criteria and standards for the establishment and management of National Heritage Areas.

The NPS has outlined four critical steps that need to be taken and documented prior to congressional designation of a national heritage area. These steps are: (1) completion of a suitability/feasibility study; (2) public involvement in the suitability/feasibility study; (3) demonstration of widespread public support among heritage area residents for the proposed designation; and (4) commitment to the proposal from the appropriate players, which may include, governments, industry, and private, non-profit organizations, in addition to the local citizenry.

Sunset of NHAs: Bottom line as the former Director of the NPS: I am a huge supporter of assisting National Heritage Areas, as stated in many of my remarks. They complement the national parks and their mission. NHA's are a legal congressionally designated partnership with the NPS. One that offers an alternative for communities to formally work together that blend education, cultural conservation and resource protection, recreation and community revitalization. All of which are central to the mission of the NPS. But I do support a firm sunset date from which NHAs would no longer receive federal funding, while National Parks continue to be drastically underfunded and short of employees.

Unfortunately, under the current funding conditions, the NPS continues to suffer due to prolonged dire underfunding of not only park operations but is strangled with a huge maintenance backlog. Park visitation continues to soar generating billions of dollars for the economy as well as providing thousands of jobs in the private sector. Businesses, especially hotels and restaurants, and citizens rely on tourism to national parks and heritage areas. Congress has continued to champion the creation of new parks but has been lax in providing sensible adequate federal funding to the NPS budget. National parks are economic engines for the tourism industry and communities blessed with national parks and heritage areas. They are the goose that lays the golden egg but it's time to take care of the goose!

National parks will always have to be dependent on federal appropriations and are restricted from soliciting funds from the private sector. For years, we have asked that donations could be made through the IRS annual tax return process.

I strongly urge Congress, the Department of the Interior Secretary, NPS leadership and the National Heritage Areas executive directors to conduct an immediate study that will be the vehicle to communicate and convince Congress, and the President of the importance of investing in our National Heritage Areas.

I was not born in this country, but I am an American by choice; I know that whether your ancestors came here two centuries ago, or if you arrived just two weeks ago, there are places that unite us all as Americans. National parks and national heritage areas are those places!