

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

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



Thomas Lillie
August 8, 2016

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
Transcribed by Antoinette Condo
Reviewed by Thomas Lillie
508 compliant version by Jessica Lamb

This digital transcript contains updated pagination, formatting, and editing for accessibility and compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Interview content has not been altered.

The original digital transcript is preserved in the NPS History Collection.

The release form for this interview is on file at the NPS History Collection.

NPS History Collection
Harpers Ferry Center
PO Box 50
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
HFC_Archivist@nps.gov

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

Thomas Lillie
August 8, 2016

Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Thomas Lillie.

Thomas Lillie Interview: August 8, 2016

When I first went to work on the Hill for the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, I was given the responsibility for managing National Parks legislation on the National Parks Subcommittee. I started by meeting with Senator Craig Thomas in January of 2003 to learn about his specific areas of interest and priorities that he would like to have for the subcommittee. In that initial meeting he mentioned national heritage areas. He talked about heritage areas, he talked about concessions, and he talked about the fee demonstration program among other things. He mentioned certain organizations that I should have meetings with who were advocates for national parks and he wanted me to learn about their priorities. He felt there should be designation criteria that heritage areas should be judged against as part of their authorizing legislation. He was also concerned about the number of areas growing so rapidly that it could cause funding to be diverted from where the park service really had existing priorities like the maintenance backlog. He also wanted each area to eventually be self-sufficient. That was an important point that he made. Not just at that meeting but when we talked about heritage areas in subsequent meetings. The sunset clause was important to him.

Program legislation: Senator Thomas wanted program legislation. He asked that program legislation be drafted and specifically he mentioned that there needed to be selection criteria. I worked closely with people in the NPS Office of Congressional Affairs (crafting program legislation). A combination of people like Melissa Kuckro, Alma Ripps, Don Hellmann and Brenda Barrett were all involved. I'm not sure to what extent each one was involved in writing the program legislation; I believe Brenda Barrett and Alma Ripps were most involved. We (the Energy and Natural Resource Committee staff) didn't make many changes to the draft done by the NPS. We paid particular attention to the funding limits and length of each authorization. Senator Thomas felt that each new area should receive no more than \$10 million and that ten years was sufficient time for individual heritage areas to become self-sufficient. Senator Thomas did not see heritage areas as units of the National Park System. They were more of a way of stimulating the economy of a local area. Because they were helping out the economy, the local and state officials in return should find a way to put some of that money back into maintaining the heritage areas. Senator Thomas did not think it was appropriate for heritage areas to rely on federal funds for the overhead of the organization.

Senator Thomas really did not support the creation of a heritage area in the state of Wyoming without some form of program legislation. He never specifically asked me to draft any language for a heritage area in the state. We did have people come and propose it and he would mention that he wanted to see this program legislation developed first and then they could craft a proposal that met the criteria in the program legislation. He wanted to use Wyoming as an example of the way it should be done.

I thought his idea was good. He wanted some structure to the Heritage Area program. I thought that was important and, of course, tried to get that to happen. Two primary reasons that I saw of why it didn't happen (program legislation). One, new heritage areas were opposed to any selection criteria. These new areas had reasons of why they wanted to be heritage areas and wanted to pursue designation based upon those specific reasons and did not want, to on top of that, have to abide by any federal criteria. Then there were those that were already in existence

and didn't want to see a sunset clause and loss of federal funding. The new ones as well as the existing ones each had some objection to it (program legislation). We talked to Committee members, and we could never get sufficient members lined up to pass the legislation. We took the program legislation that the NPS drafted, tried to get co-sponsors, introduced it, had a hearing on it, but could not get enough members interested in passing it out of the full Senate.

I worked very closely on the Hill with my counterpart on the Democratic staff, David Brooks. He was very knowledgeable about the legislative process, understanding the interests and concerns of various interest groups. But other than that, no other government agency than NPS, was involved. There was certainly interest from the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. They were probably the most vocal. There was also interest from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Then the individual heritage area leaders and state and local officials who would also come in from time to time and meet with us during an annual visit to the Hill. We would have some groups that would quietly talk about their opposition to it. They were not as vocal as the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. But some groups expressed concern that heritage areas were going to take away resources that could be used elsewhere in the NPS for other things. Maintenance backlog, land acquisitions and other things that they felt the NPS needed. A couple of groups felt it should be more of a state or local funded effort, not a federal effort.

Typically, the Alliance members would come in and they were never completely opposed to program legislation. They just wanted to make sure that if it was passed that it was something that could be implemented. It was not going to tie their hands so that they couldn't manage their programs. They simply wanted to be an active part of the legislative process.

We were disappointed in not getting program legislation.

When Senator Thomas died, we lost our sponsor for program legislation.

Budget: I believe \$1 million a year for ten years was in the authorizing bill for each heritage area. I remember Senator Thomas at one hearing in 2006 complimenting Charlene Cutler of the (then Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor, Inc now the Last Green Valley Heritage Area) when she reported that her heritage corridor wanted to be reauthorized to 2015, "It is our intent to be self-sustaining and not need federal funding by the year 2015."

I felt each heritage area should put together whatever budget they could justify, and it certainly didn't need to be \$1 million a year if they could not justify that. They would get whatever they could justify and not to exceed the \$10 million over the life of the program. I could see some heritage area managers coming in for reauthorization after ten years because they hadn't reached their \$10 million limit. The reauthorization would allow each area to get the full \$10 million. That would level the playing field for all of them in terms of overall funding. Managers should develop a plan, so they don't need federal funding after ten years. They should do what it takes to get some type of sponsors or some type of input from local merchants because it increases their business, increases tourism to the area. That was the types of things we were thinking about.

Individual designations: After 2007 there was not the same level of interest by other members. But there was still plenty of interest in heritage areas. We were still getting requests for new legislation. We could use the excuse of no new individual designations until program legislation was passed only so long. We could not delay new legislation as the requests were backing up. I think from 2002 to 2009 the number of heritage areas went from 22 to almost 50. That was Senator Thomas' concern. He saw no end in sight. Pennsylvania could conceivably get \$60 million because of their 6 heritage areas and the state of Tennessee would get \$10 million because of their one area. And some states had none. He was looking at it from the standpoint of how we could make it more equitable for the funding but at the same time recognize an area for its uniqueness and the reasons it should be designated.

I think Tennessee had second thoughts after they designated the whole state as a Civil War heritage area. Then they see Pennsylvania get six and they say maybe we should rethink this. When Tennessee came in talking about another heritage area we asked where they were going to put it since they had already mapped out the whole state.

Challenges: The challenges that I remember were developing national policy and finding support for that. We had Senator Thomas' interest, but we could never get any national support. I think the committee members agreed that national policy would be good but then couldn't agree on the specifics as to what should be part of that national policy. They felt that each heritage area was unique, and you couldn't just draw up a set of policies or criteria that would apply to all of them. The Alliance and individual heritage areas would come in and talk to us about how their area was different and so it needed to be treated differently.

Another challenge was trying to satisfy the many requests we would get for new heritage areas. Explaining to those people who wanted a new area why at the end of a session their bill never made it out of committee. The challenge was meeting with interested parties and having to explain why legislation either didn't get a hearing or didn't get moved out of committee. Once it got out of committee, they would turn to others to try to get it out of the Senate. They would deal with me and David Brooks in trying to get it out of the committee.

Senator Thomas emphasized the importance of Regular Order as opposed to getting legislation passed by either going through another committee without jurisdiction for that subject or adding it to an appropriations bill. Senator Thomas strongly favored getting these enacted through Regular Order. If he received word that someone was trying to add heritage area language to a bill that was going to a different committee, he would do his best to make sure that whoever had jurisdiction over that other committee knew that they were treading into his area of responsibility. That language should not be allowed to go forward in the other committee. He would do the same if someone was trying to introduce a change involving heritage areas through an appropriations bill and getting it added as an amendment. He was very effective at keeping that under control. Some members just have the clout to get those kinds of special situations addressed and not follow Regular Order. There would be times when someone would say, "Let's create an omnibus bill." Take all these bills that have kind of languished. Generally, when you were going to have something inserted into an omnibus bill it had to, at least once, get reported out of committee and was awaiting a vote on the Senate floor. I can't think of one time they were successful in getting a new area inserted into an appropriations bill. There were times

when clearly it was in an omnibus bill. But all those we were aware of, and the Senator was consulted and really raised no objection as long as we had had a hearing on it and the committee had had a chance to mark up the language and at some time voted it out of committee as a standalone bill.

Private property was the biggest concern that came up during hearings and in meetings with concerned citizens. Some individuals and groups were opposed to heritage areas in general because of the potential impact it might have on private property. It was not always well justified. Some of it was just a possibility that it could happen. Not necessarily that it did happen. I don't recall any examples where heritage areas resulted in a taking of property or anything like that. I did hear of stories when people would say that heritage areas had tried to impose certain zoning or building restrictions, when it came to renovating or modifying properties. That it was going to somehow affect the historic character or integrity of the area. So, it was almost like zoning restrictions would be imposed if you lived within the boundary of that area. I can't cite any examples where that did happen, but it was more the fear that it would happen.