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Deirdre Gibson
February 22, 2017

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

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Antoinette J. Condo

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I was a planner by training and had worked in private practice for eleven years and was dissatisfied with the typical way that land planning was approached in those days which should have been '70s and early '80s. No one was thinking about the future of it. No one was thinking about building strong communities. It was real estate investment driven. I had always wanted to be more involved in environmental planning. I had studied landscape architecture as an undergraduate and had heard Ian McHarg speak, a really visionary landscape architect. He must have been on his book tour for, *Design with Nature*. I said, that's what I want to be, and then found out that most architecture schools in the country had not caught up to Mr. McHarg. I worked for a long time unsatisfied. I then went to grad school and got what I thought was a part time job with NPS in Boston.

At that time, we were working on a young program, the Wild and Scenic River Program. The idea was to work with communities that expressed a strong interest to study rivers and if they wanted to get their river designated Wild and Scenic. It was tremendously exciting and exactly what I had hoped it would be. I didn't see it at the time, but it was part of a much larger movement that was happening with the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, and Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance. This developed a cadre of people who were thinking along those lines. I finished grad school and decided that I wanted to stick with NPS and move to the Philadelphia office.

Roughly at the same time I moved to Philly, which was '88, there was the designation of a heritage area in Pennsylvania. It was based on something that was happening in Massachusetts, but in Massachusetts at the state level. There were eight to twelve heritage areas all supported by the state of Massachusetts under Governor Dukakis. Some of them actually became quite well know, like Lowell, now a National Park. People did a lot of amazing experimentation and a lot of community-based planning and development. Thought about economic development and heritage preservation, sustainable use and community building. My former professor, John Lane, did a lot of planning for them.

In '88 there was the federal designation, the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor. The assignment came to our office and I jumped up and said I really want to work on that. I was fortunate enough to be able to do that and I lead the planning for the next several years and got the commission set up and pretty much staffed the commission. I ended up working on Delaware and Lehigh for quite a few years until my study was published in '93. I also worked on a few other heritage areas in Pennsylvania, the Lackawanna, and a little bit on the Schuylkill River, which was a state designation at the time and later became federal. In every case it was as a planner working from the Philadelphia office. Each of them had a slight variation on how they were set up. Each had their own executive director. The goal in Pennsylvania was largely economic development through preservation through heritage. We are a capitalist country; you need a way to fund that stuff. With Schuylkill I worked on their initial plan when they were a state area. I worked on those from '88 to '93.

After that I worked on a few heritage area task forces and more recently I participated on the 25-year update study of Delaware and Lehigh. I worked with the Schuylkill when they were a state

heritage area and on their national management plan in 2000. For the Schuylkill I worked on an assessment that the commission did looking at where they were and where they wanted to be, *Return to the River*, published in 2016. As it happens, I started with the Schuylkill in 1995 and joined the board of the Schuylkill Heritage Area in 2017 as the ex-officio NPS representative.

The folks that work with heritage areas, the community people, are so interesting and energetic. They have phenomenal community spirit. They really get and practice interdisciplinary thinking so, for a planner like me it's everything you could want from a work experience.

NPS support of heritage areas: I didn't remember Director Ridenour as a supporter of heritage areas. We went to brief him on the Delaware and Lehigh. He had other briefings and when our time came, he didn't understand where it was. He couldn't understand why we would do such a thing. He was very interested in a heritage area that was in Wheeling (WVA) which was basically an outgrowth of a city park that actually did a phenomenal job of making money and supporting itself and not needing much money from the NPS. He couldn't understand why we didn't model D&L on that. I was not sure we made any headway there.

All these years later and the NPS is still trying to get program legislation. I think that raises a lot of questions about where the agency is in terms of this. In the early years it was so much fun because it wasn't a program. It was really bubbling up from the communities. The communities were way out ahead of us and still are in many respects. We were helping them, not telling them what to do, or here is how it has to be, or you have to conform to this model, or here is what your plan should look like. It was coming from the communities, which I think is the point.

It is a difficult thing for the NPS, because it is the polar opposite of how we do park planning. My job at Valley Forge is park planning. I think the heritage area movement has informed park planning to a very great degree and a healthy degree in terms of much better public involvement. It is two completely different approaches. The central top-down approach and the community grass roots approach. Each has its appropriate time and place. The NPS just has a tough time thinking about heritage areas or any of what they call the partnership programs.

The Mid-Atlantic Region Director Jim Coleman was there when I arrived. I do recall him as being supportive (of heritage areas), which was interesting because he was an old-style guy. He was toward the end of a long career with the NPS. He was very interested and was curious and asked good questions. Certainly gave our office the resources that it needed. My first boss in Philly was Glenn Eugster. He really was the heart and soul of this. Glenn and a few other folks were the intellectual core of the whole thing. Incredibly creative, thoughtful, made amazing connections between concepts. Glenn and a guy in Boston named Rolf Diamant, Joe DiBello to a certain extent. A lot of their thinking and approach came out of these earlier programs like Wild and Scenic Rivers and RTCA (Rivers and Trails Community Assistance). In some ways heritage areas was just another name for community planning.

NPS involvement in heritage areas: It depends on what they need. I am just now checking in again with Schuylkill after many years and I'm trying to figure out what my role is there. A lot of these heritage areas are fairly mature, at least they are teenagers. Where do they see themselves going and how can the NPS help them? I am not the money manager, that's the

regional office. What is it they can use from a park? I don't have the answer to that. Other heritage areas like D&L are not associated with a park. Steamtown and Lackawanna are very, very close. It is hard to get specific because it depends on the needs of the individual heritage area. Does having a close by park with a similar theme augment each other? Do they magnify the experience that a visitor can have?

For the older heritage area where the plans were done a while ago and have been implementing all these many years, I'm not sure what the NPS can do. Planning has really been drained out of the NPS. It has been decimated. It is kind of shocking that this organization doesn't feel like it needs to plan for the future or plan its own resources. That is another story though. Certainly, heritage areas are not going to get a lot of planning help out of the NPS. It's different than in the '80s and early '90s when all these designations were happening, and everybody needed something and needed it then.

Sunsetting task force of 2011: I was so interested in everything we talked about. It was a time when quite a number of heritage areas were about to expire in terms of their federal designations. There was a lot of concern and worry, especially from the commission, about what the next step might be and could they survive without their designations. Particularly without that little bit of federal seed money. We had a lot of meetings. We had a lot of discussions. Then I saw petering out and gee we were supposed to do this task and that task, and it looked like that didn't happen and we are all busy people. So sorry we didn't make this happen. Long story short, nothing really came out of it. I think everybody got re-designated. I like to think the sunset committee helped because there was a lot of discussion of how to frame the message and how to evaluate success, how to present the case. I like to think that the committee was helpful, but it was probably the relationship the commissions had with their Congressional delegations that really led to the re-designations.

I think it is healthy to ask the question (about sunseting). Martha's (Martha Raymond) office has been doing evaluations of each heritage area which I think are really helpful and important and necessary. Out of those evaluations it may be the case that you have some number out of the 49 designated areas that may not be meeting their goals or the measures of success. Perhaps they should sunset. Perhaps for a variety of reasons they have accomplished their goals, or they are never going to accomplish their goals, or the leadership is not what it needs to be. There are reasons that things can fail.

The heritage areas that I am familiar with, I think what they continue to accomplish is impressive. They are continuing to accomplish all the goals and objectives of their original designations. The very tiny amount of federal money that they get, as compared to the NPS budget as a whole, leverages so much other money. It pays for staff and there is no way you can raise money for staff. There are next to no foundations that provide staff money, so the federal money is critical for that. It kind of keeps the lights burning so that then these groups can go out and accomplish so much more. At the Schuylkill and the Delaware, the staffs are amazing in terms of what they do and how hard they work and what they produce. Like a lot of non-profits, a lot of these organizations, as my grandfather used to say, can squeeze a nickel so hard that they turn it into two dimes. They are really extracting value and make great use of federal funds.

So yes, ask the question and evaluate heritage areas and if it's just not going to make it and it can't work to make it then yes, it should sunset. I don't think that is the case with most of them. They are so far down the road now the support they get from communities and the value they add to communities it is highly worthwhile to continue to support them.

Challenges of NPS: I don't know how we can add value at this point. I don't think we really have the planning shops anymore. The staffs have been cut to such a great degree. I'll be sitting down with the director of Schuylkill to specifically ask that.

NPS benefit to heritage areas: I think our greatest use to them in the early years with the ones with which I am familiar, Delaware, Schuylkill, and Lackawanna, organizational help, planning help, in some cases being the only staff person for a while until staff could be funded. Bringing in other resources that the NPS had at the time. I remember with D&L I was able to prevail on our interpretive folks to help the community members, commissioners to understand what interpretation is and how it could be.

In the early days when there is just nobody else at home that's a big service that the NPS offered. Now, again, as the heritage areas have matured and become institutions in themselves, I look forward to discovering what the NPS can still do. I would say that at Valley Forge and the Hopewell Village National Historic Site and Independence, all three part of the Schuylkill National Heritage Area, that we each participate with the heritage area in different ways. That makes sense because there is not a direct physical connection to the river for Hopewell and Independence whereas at Valley Forge the river runs right through the center of the park. We do a lot of cross programming.

For example, we host an exhibit that the heritage area has every year of artwork associated with the heritage area, painting, photographs. It is held in Pottstown, which is at the center of the heritage area and then we have the second showing here in the park. We do that every year. We do educational programs. There is the Schuylkill Sojourn every year, a kayak trip of 150 miles. They stop here in the park and we do programs with them. We just did a really cool quilt show with them. A quilt show that was initiated by Biscayne Bay National Park. These were gorgeous art quilts that told the story of climate change on national parks. This was a juried show that traveled around the country and some of these quilts just would give you chills they were so beautiful and evocative. The heritage area wanted to do the show and didn't quite know how to go about it, so our curator partnered with the staff at the heritage area to bring this show here and get it up and running.

Heritage area support for the mission of the NPS: In my experience, one of the key things that heritage areas have taught us is to be more committed and more consistent about civic engagement. Especially in the planning that we do for parks. I do the planning for Valley Forge and my experience working with communities has been informed in the way we do planning at this park. That was a huge and important lesson for me. Heritage areas expand our interpretive message. For example, the slogan of the Schuylkill heritage area is *Rivers of Revolutions*, and it's the American Revolution, the industrial revolution, and conservation revolution. We share parts of that story here in the park. A visitor can come to Valley Forge and we can tell them

about all the other places they can go in the heritage area and vice versa. They can hear those same stories. It really multiplies the interpretive mission of the NPS.

Heritage areas are about conservation. It's economic development through heritage preservations. It helps to keep the ideas of preservation and conservation in the public conversation. In the front of citizens in the way that a tiny little park unit somewhere can't do.

The only part of the mission that we don't necessarily share is economic development. Although our gateway communities would beg to differ on that. It is not our specific mission.

NPS policy changes related to heritage areas: I think it has been benign neglect in this region for many years. I don't see strong support. Nobody is arguing against heritage areas, but I don't see strong support. That's been pretty consistent for the last twenty years or so. It is just not a strong program in the region.

I have a few images on my wall and one is from the Delaware and Lehigh and it prompted me to say that I look back on those years when I worked with heritage areas more closely that were the most satisfying years of my entire career. It was satisfying at every level, intellectually, with the people there, with the resources there.