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Allen Sachse  
February 13, 2017

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

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Interview conducted and transcribed by  
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Allen Sachse

**Allen Sachse Interview: February 13, 2017**

I first worked with the state of Pennsylvania, Department of Community Affairs (DCA) starting in 1970. I was a field person who dealt with Land and Water Conservation programs and the state's counterpart to preserve and develop parkland. The territory covered included fifteen counties of Northeastern Pennsylvania and for a period of time, twenty counties, including all of Delaware and Lehigh. The Department sought opportunities to help the communities do things on a regional bases, a larger scale. We got involved in real trail planning, converting the canal to a trail and things like that. Way back in the late '70s, I started looking to make partners work together better. In the late '80s, Governor (Robert P.) Casey was very interested in economic development issues. The agency and the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission (HMC), put some ideas together of how to use historic downtowns and how to use trails to preserve a larger landscape. The NPS regional office technical assistance helped with some of those issues. There was only a handful of us working on them. We came up with the concept of Pennsylvania Heritage Areas. At the same time, Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor was designated. The state of New York had an urban cultural parks program, which was really a regional program like heritage areas, not the scale we were looking at in Pennsylvania, but somewhat similar. The state of Massachusetts had a heritage parks program and NPS introduced us to both of those concepts. Massachusetts was basically state-owned sites within urban areas that they called heritage parks. They used it as the revitalization of urban areas, but state ownership. We were looking at a different model where locals would be the driving force.

The local partners involved with the Delaware and Lehigh Canal and another area in Southwestern Pennsylvania, a multi-county industrial area, took the concept we were working on in the state to their congressmen and got the bill to designate them as heritage corridors. The two went sort of hand in hand. I'd been interested in the concept for a long time when they were designated (1986). We got Governor Casey to agree to put some money in to help with the planning and created a state program at the same time the movement was just starting at the federal level. For the state of Pennsylvania, it has been a huge plus. When you look at a map there are so many areas in Pennsylvania because they went through the Pennsylvania process of doing the planning, identifying the resources and all that. Several of them went to their congressman with a solid plan for designation.

Delaware and Lehigh was one of the areas I worked with for the state. I was working with the Delaware, the Lehigh, the Lackawanna, the Schuylkill, and one called the Endless Mountains and another named Lumber Region as state heritage areas. I left the state and took the position with the Delaware and Lehigh Corridor in November 1999 and retired from the Delaware and Lehigh as a full-time employee in March of 2012. I continue to work with them as an advisor off and on since retiring. When I was approaching retirement, the D&L undertook a strategic planning process to prepare for the transition period. During this period, I was serving as Vice-Chair of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas (the Alliance), and I was asked if I would be willing to accept the chair. The D&L agreed to include this into their transition plan. I was elected as Alliance chair in 2012 and continued as Alliance chair through February 2016. I was involved in the formal creation of the Alliance in 2001 and remained involved until 2016.

**Criteria for a successful heritage area:** First, I think you have to have an important story that still has sufficient resources remaining to tell that story whether they be cultural or natural. Probably, most importantly, you must have a real core group of dedicated people who are willing to put in the time and effort. You have to have sufficient financial support to carry the effort. You have to have a core group of people that have the ability to deal with key officials and the public. The story is the most important. The people have to believe in the story. If they don't understand and know the story it's hard for them to engage others. The story should be seen in the landscape and heard in the communities. If the region is changing too rapidly and culture is now different it might be hard to put the partnerships together. You have to have some people who are really passionate about the story and aggressively go after the preservation of the story. They are the key ingredient.

In Pennsylvania, we were ripe for this type of movement. The landscape had changed because of the collapse of the industrial revolution and a lot of people were having a changing economic time. But they wanted to remember their grandparents and they wanted to continue life as it was. I am not sure it is the same everywhere, but that is how we were able to bring people aboard to support the movement.

There are twelve Pennsylvania State Heritage Areas. We focused our program on the industrial revolution and how that has changed the landscape and trying to decide what aspect of that did we want to save in the communities. Resources would be different in different parts of the state, but that worked for us. There were a lot of abandoned factories, scared landscapes, and unemployed people in Pennsylvania then. It was the right time to create some partnership opportunities. We had a governor who was from one of those areas and it was easy for him to understand why this could be important. It was easy to meet with Governor Casey and his staff and say this is what we are losing in your hometown. The issues and passion came from the people who live in the communities.

**Equal attention to cultural, historical, and natural resources:** I can only speak for Pennsylvania. When we designed the program, we knew to bring the governor and his office on board we would have to look at it as an economic development tool. We had two agencies that were working to advance the concept, the Pennsylvania Historic HMC which had done some concept planning related to identifying industrial heritage needing to be preserved, and DCA where I worked, that was trying to enlist local governments in land conservation. We also engaged a larger group of agencies that brought their vision to the table of how this could work. My agency was interested in long distance trails, preserving key landscapes, and downtown revitalization. HMC wanted to preserve the history and heritage of the area.

This partnership of agencies gave technical assistance to local governments on a continuing basis. DCA took the lead but when we needed, HMC, State Parks, or Heritage Affairs, their staff would come in. We worked really well together. But things always happened. Governor (Thomas Joseph *Tom*) Ridge eliminated the DCA office and moved its functions to the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. When Governor (Edward Gene *Ed*) Rendell took office, the new secretary liked the concept but clearly put an emphasis on open spaces. Pennsylvania program still embraced a balanced approach of natural and cultural resources, but DCNR managed the program placing a priority on conservation issues. The

heritage areas that place an emphasis on landscape conservation issues were able to make adjustments and continued to move forward at a good pace. At the same time, we had bad fiscal times and the HMC suffered greatly and was no longer able to be full players. As a result, there was diminished effort on the historic preservation side and increased effort on the conservation side.

National heritage areas, like the Delaware and Lehigh (D&L), were able to bridge that gap because we had some federal money, and we could focus our federal money on historic preservation and take advantage of the increased state land conservation funds. The last two decades Pennsylvania has continued to support and sustain funding for land conservation issues.

Regarding economic development, the Pennsylvania and D&L experience has evolved from a heavy emphasis on community revitalization to a more regional approach of creating a foundation for tourism development. We are still engaged with both types of development, but the emphasis has evolved. Delaware and Lehigh, for instance, when I assumed the position there emphasized major downtown attractions. The D&L had an early success, but the other initiatives were challenged by funding support and demands on staff time. Progress was very slow. We made the decision to shift time and expertise toward the trail. This change was very timely, placing the D&L as a key conservation partner with DCNR. The D&L was in the position to leverage new sources of funding to assist both local projects and state parks. In addition, the D&L Trail was a way to engage most of the communities within the corridor.

I am currently on the board of the Schuylkill River National Heritage Area in addition to involvement with D&L. Both have an emphasis on the trail along the river, creating access and connecting to side trails, those sorts of things. The communities like that role.

The D&L has fully merged with one of our key local partners Hugh Moore Park and Museum. That is where the D&L headquarters are right now. It was principally a historic preservation agency, but they managed a large park that was owned by the city of Easton. There were four or five years when local historic preservation groups in Pennsylvania took a real beating. For a couple of years, we helped keep some of the organizations moving forward with co-sponsored projects. Everybody knew that they had to find new ways to do things, because we weren't able to help them beyond marginal projects.

I don't see D&L and Schuylkill having any problems (in balance of effort) because we still are involved with education and historic preservation. Still assisting partners, but more so with technical and planning assistance support versus investing in facilities. Funds for that have just dried up.

**Evaluation of impacts of heritage areas:** Before D&L was to face reauthorization, we felt it would be of value to measure our impact. We contracted with the NPS Conservation Study Institute (CSI) office to complete the evaluation in 2005. They interviewed partners throughout the quarter and got firsthand input on the work of the D&L. That was very valuable. The evaluation was quite rigorous and involved many hours to complete. After CSI evaluations for the Blackstone, D&L, and Cane River, the ANHA and NPS started looking at forms of evaluation. Together we have come up with two tools. One is the economic impact measure,

very valuable from a political point of view. This analysis measures tourism, jobs generated from project investments, construction jobs, and the management of those projects. Also, the NPS has developed a model for evaluating the work of the heritage areas. The practice has become that each national heritage area undertakes an evaluation prior to reauthorization.

When the D&L undertook our evaluation, it was quite costly and at the time there was no reserve of funding to support the project. However, it definitely supported our reauthorization and changed the way the staff of authorizing committees in the House and Senate looked at heritage areas. I know that for a fact from my conversations with them. Evaluations are important. I think the way of evaluating heritage areas now appears to be effective. It took us a long time to get there. I think we are at the point where we have a fairly good system that can determine whether a heritage area is being successful with the resources they have received and whether their work should continue.

**Federal commission or non-profits:** There was an issue I wanted to include in the D&L evaluation. It was whether we should continue as a federal commission or transition to a non-profit. The CSI study didn't recommend either, but clearly defined the challenges of both structures. For some time, I had thought that we should transition to a non-profit. Understanding the benefits and challenges of both structures helped my board make a decision to fully transition to non-profit management of the corridor. We had already created a non-profit. And there were members on the board who wanted to keep both structures, the federal commission and a non-profit. I personally felt that we should make a full change for various reasons.

There are some real clear advantages of the federal commission. The NPS is more engaged in what you do and accomplish. We always had NPS staff attend the meetings when it was a federal commission. When we transitioned to a non-profit that didn't always happen. We could ask and often received additional assistance from the NPS when we were a federal commission.

However, private foundations, state agencies, and individuals would not consider funding the D&L as a federal commission. This was a distinct disadvantage. The second disadvantage of a federal commission was that you could not own anything. You could not buy land. You could not own a building. A non-profit can own a building or land as long as it does not use federal money to purchase it. That created a huge problem as a commission because as you are trying to assemble a trail and want to act like a conservancy, occasionally it was necessary to have some agency act as a straw buyer and then pass the property on to a government agency. The commission couldn't do that. We wouldn't have 20 miles of trail right now in the corridor if we wouldn't have been able to find a straw buyer to do it for us. Sometimes it became difficult to make this happen. Some non-profits buy or rehab a building and put it back on the market or rent it or charge fees for its use. I wanted to put us in a position so we could use that method to raise money. As a commission the D&L couldn't do that.

The non-profit model is really good if you can keep your key partners supporting you, the NPS, and in our case, the state of Pennsylvania. Since the D&L has gone to the non-profit model we now, on a yearly basis, secure a grant from the William Penn Foundation of about \$200,000. Same foundation that told me they wouldn't give us anything as long as we were a federal

commission. I think the best model is being a non-profit with support from the federal and state government. I have seen some state managed models, but I suspect they are faced with the same structural and operational issues facing a federal commission. Plus, they face the possibility of changes at the state agency impacting their operation. It just squeezes their operation, even though they continue to get federal support the state end of it falls apart and puts them in positions where they can't hire staff and things like that.

In my opinion the non-profit model is the best.

**Economic benefit of heritage areas:** It varies by area. In Pennsylvania, we do a lot of tourism things. The D&L and Schuylkill both do investments in towns right near trail heads. They support signage and programming that brings people to the trail. The D&L funded some initial planning for the Crayola of Discovery Center and National Canal Museum, a project which has helped to turn the economy of downtown Easton around. We didn't put major investments into it but over a period of four years or so with a little bit of federal money, but mostly state grants the D&L was able to leverage, we probably put \$150,000 into a \$4 or 5 million facility that brings 3 or 400,000 visitors to downtown Easton every year now. This changed their whole downtown atmosphere with investment in shops and restaurants that service those visitors. It has been the focal point of their revitalization.

We have done things in downtown Jim Thorpe that are very similar. Not in the same scale but investing in signage and interpretation along the streets. Helped to improve the aesthetics of the major intersections and major trail head there. D&L has created two state supported economic development programs for small towns, *market towns* and *landmark towns*.

Basically, *market towns* were up in Poconos area. It took six small communities that we were building the trail along and got the communities thinking of tourism. Each made investments at points where trail heads were going to be. All of those communities have done small but appropriate-sized investments in business surrounding the D&L Trail. For instance, a bike shop next to the trail head. Significant private investments were made in Jim Thorpe, Lehighton, Slatington, and White Haven. The citizens would not have invested if we hadn't built the trail.

The *landmark towns* are down in lower Bucks County near Philadelphia along the Delaware Canal, a historic landmark. The D&L brought the four largest towns along that canal together to create a strategy to share programming, events, and services. When one community had an event, the others would sponsor activities on that same weekend. There were weekends when you could take a trolley from one end to the other and do festival activities in two or three communities. They developed a common signage program. We did marketing of historic preservation issues. There are a lot of things we've done to increase the preservation in small and large downtowns. We've done marketing of those events and festivals too. We've had a staff working on those initiatives over the years. We did most of that with state funding through the Pennsylvania Downtown Center. The D&L always shared the cost of the staff person with the communities. There were a lot of things we were able to do to improve economic development.

**Skills needed by heritage area staff:** You need to have people who really are passionate about what they do. People who have to be able to work with partners and figure out; how to put a deal together; how to get partners to contribute something to the pie; how you can take a small amount of resources and help that partner do a little bit more. They really have to be someone who believes in the resource. Believes in the mission. Someone who gets along well with people; knows how to see an idea become a reality. When I interviewed candidates, I would ask them what community organizations they were involved in. Someone was involved in Scouts or Little League or Softball League or something like that, if they were on that board for a number of years, they probably know how to get things to the table. It's people like that that you need on your staff.

You want diverse backgrounds with skills in preservation and conservation and interpretation. Most often you don't have the financial resources nor the need to have someone in each area. If they can't figure out how to get things done with minimum resources, they are not going to be successful, even if they love the project.

**Role of NPS in heritage areas:** The first responsibility of NPS is to administer the Heritage Partnership funding. Make sure the national heritage areas carry on their fiscal responsibilities, spend the NPS grant money properly and report it accurately. Training is very important. The NPS can offer training opportunities that can help heritage areas succeed. NPS does have a lot of internal expertise. It would be great to be able to access this expertise for certain projects. Making the heritage areas an equal partner with parks and external partners in accessing the small grants programs.

**Changes in NPS work with the NHAs:** I have seen an awful lot of changes. When I first came on board, the message I got was that the D&L would go away some time and we were not an important part of the NPS. Just sort of a grant activity and, by the way, there is not much technical assistance in how you manage it, but don't make a mistake. We were not part of the family.

When Brenda (Barrett) came on board Brenda did a lot to elevate the heritage areas position within the NPS. Made the NPS understand that they have more responsibility to a heritage area than just putting the money out there and slapping their hand if they did something wrong. There was a huge change there.

However, the big change came when Jon Jarvis became director of NPS, and that was about the time that Martha (Raymond) came on. Jarvis recognized heritage areas as important to the mission of the NPS. That they were important to the external outreach to partners. When that changed, it was clear that we were more embraced by the NPS. We started to get more recognition and more technical assistance from the regional offices.

There have been three levels of changes. Again, the first period we pretty much were there but don't bother us. The second period, Brenda came in and she was a champion of heritage areas. She came from Pennsylvania and was familiar with the PA heritage areas because she was involved with the design of the program. She elevated the dialogue with the NPS that these areas were important and shouldn't go away. Then, when Martha came on board about the same time



as Jarvis, there was a recognition that national heritage areas are affiliated with the NPS. That's actually about the same time the ANHA were looking at evaluation issues. The D&L had just completed ours, as had Blackstone and Cane River. Brenda had spent a lot of time helping us develop an evaluation protocol and using that assessment internally in the NPS. I think that made an awareness that these are valuable tools for the NHAs and NPS. It made a better atmosphere for Martha to work to advance some of the tools that we needed. Since Martha has been there, we have developed more tools, more training, fine tuning the evaluation, reporting has become clear.

I am not involved in reporting anymore. However, I do hear that people think it is becoming overburdening. I can't speak to that. This past decade there have been three positive changes of how the heritage areas have been received by the NPS. I hope the progress continues.

At the regional level there has been up and down too. I would generally say it has been smoother at the regional level. We have a good ally in the Northeast (region) in Peter Samuel. Peter has a strong background in the heritage areas movement. He has a good background on how you have to put partnerships together and things like that. From my perspective the Northeast Regional Directors have usually strongly embraced the heritage areas. Of course, one would expect that because there are so many heritage areas in the Northeast. The NER has always taken it very seriously. The NER has always been more supportive than what we get from Washington. From what I hear from my colleagues around the country, that is not always the case. The last two (Northeast Directors) Mike Caldwell who is there now, and Dennis (R. Reidenbach) have been very supportive.

**Skills needed by NPS regional coordinators:** They should know partnerships and how to work with non-profits. They should be someone who understands clearly how local projects come together. It needs to be someone who has the ability to work with locals, work with state agencies, and figure out how to deal with projects that have multiple partners. They obviously have to know the NPS programs. The grant programs besides the heritage areas program. Planning is a good background.

**Alliance influence on NPS policy:** If it wasn't for the Alliance, we could still be back at the late 1990s with many of the NPS people wanting us gone. The work of the Alliance has made the NPS realize that some important stories are being saved. We have the ability to gather public support to preserve important resources and stories. National heritage areas are a viable and practical option for preserving the American story. It took time for the NPS, as an agency, to realize that. Mainly because NPS is recognized as a land management agency, and understandably the focus has been on managing the resources that they own.

NHAs do add a new dimension to the NPS. We certainly present the opportunity for the NPS to reach far beyond the boundaries of parks. Schuylkill River Trail, for instance, would never come together if it was Valley Forge Historical Park trying to put a trail that connected the city of Philadelphia to Pottsville. You need local partners to do that, and the Schuylkill NHA is that local partner. Likewise, the Delaware Lehigh trail from Philadelphia up to Wilkes-Barre would have never come together even though the trail connects two major state parks. State parks don't have the ability to work out far beyond their boundaries. Even though half of the 160 miles is

state owned, the D&L Trail would have never happened without the D&L NHC putting the state/local partnership together.

If you really want to accomplish big things you need an organization like the heritage areas. The NPS finally realized that when they started doing Second Century visioning and looking beyond the traditional role of NPS. The heritage areas have become good models for landscape conservation.

**Alliance influence on Congress:** Every heritage area came about because of an act of Congress. Because citizens in that area went to their congressman and demonstrated that their story is important, and they need their help to preserve the story. The heritage areas have a connection to Congress because we represent, particularly if you are a non-profit, the citizens of that area and are doing work with a lot of groups in that district that have relationships with the Congress. If Congress didn't have an interest in the partnership work, national heritage areas would have been gone a long time ago. There have been many members of Congress that wanted them to disappear.

Congressmen having a heritage area within their district understand and appreciate the work of the heritage area. Ever as members of Congress change, they continue to support the partnership. As far as congressional relationships, it is probably one of the better programs the NPS has going because we reach members of Congress that the NPS probably never reach. For example, the D&L impacts four congressional districts and there is not a national park within the corridor. But there is never a time that a congressman hasn't supported the work that we've done, and aggressively supported it.

Recently, the NPS has been trying to connect heritage areas to national parks and/or building a heritage area around the park. I don't necessarily think that's the best model. In places like the D&L, where you have important resources and a significant story – a 60-mile canal designated as a National Historic Landmark, six-eight National Historic Districts along the canal, 160 miles of historic trail, and much more, this is a *park* of great importance. The national heritage areas bring congressmen to the table in support of the NPS. I think the NPS has been a little short sighted on that aspect. I think heritage areas expand the support for the NPS.

**Generic legislation for heritage areas:** I think we would have gotten a national program advanced if the NPS had worked closer with the ANHA years ago. Until Director Jarvis, there was a lot of resistance to creating a national program. I don't think the NPS realizes the political value that the heritage areas, for a small amount of money, bring to the table. I think a lot of NPS still think the heritage areas take money away from the NPS. In reality heritage areas add value and support to the NPS.

The program legislation put forward by the NPS over a decade ago would have created a heritage areas program but spun them off before they were viable partners. It would have been a technical assistance program; providing assistance for a limited period of time. In my opinion it wasn't a good piece of legislation. Just because NPS supported program legislation doesn't mean they supported the program. They supported legislation that created the program and made the heritage areas temporary. Didn't make it a permanent relationship. The Alliance has felt that

we needed a long-term relationship with the NPS because the stories we are telling are nationally important. That early legislation would have created a lot of heritage areas, but most would have come and gone.

Generic legislation would be of benefit if it was designed the right way. It could destroy the program if it is designed wrong. Some of the earlier bills were designed wrong. Congressmen Dent and Tonko have advanced a new bill. The intent is to create a strong and lasting relationship with the NPS. There is some language related to sunset and things that the NPS, under Jarvis, was recommended be eliminated. We agree with that totally but there is a realistic issue trying to get legislation through Congress that if you don't have something in there with sunset it'll never happen. Our want and desire is to have a long-term relationship with the NPS. When I was chair of the Alliance, as a group we weren't going to accept legislation for legislation's sake if it wasn't leading to a better relationship. We thought it short sighted that we would get assistance for a few years and then be out of the system. If the planning is done properly and the story is determined important enough it should be a long-term relationship.

From a personal perspective, I believe these could be parks of the future. As the economics of the NPS gets tighter and tighter and there is more pressure to create parks, particularly in the East where you can't assembly land easily, why not put a partnership together in a heritage area with non-profits and others to tell that story versus the federal government taking over. I don't know if we will ever get to that point in time, but this is a reasonable alternative for certain situations. When people first met with the congressman and the D&L legislation started, the first intent was to have part of the corridor become a national park. As we talked about it further and discovered there were two emerging partnership models out there, I&M and Blackstone, people said, well, maybe that's a better model. We'll keep ownership of resources where they are and get help from the NPS and it works. The original intent was to turn Delaware Canal over from a state park and make it a national park. I don't know if it would have ever happened but that was the original intent.

We have gone much further with the D&L than if the Delaware Canal had become a national park. A trail of 160 miles traveling through many villages and town with economic development projects and improved visitation to the entire region versus restoration and visitation to a 50-mile Delaware Canal.

**Alliance benefit to all the National Heritage Areas:** Alliance has worked hard to increase funding. We have been able to sustain funding level for the program with very modest increases when national heritage areas complete their management plan. We have helped the NPS develop an evaluation system. We have worked with the NPS to measure economic impact. The members constantly share experiences. We meet twice a year at various heritage areas and visit their projects and can gather many ideas from what other people have done. We have helped each other one-on-one an awful lot. The strength of numbers has been really beneficial. I think that is another reason that the NPS, under Jarvis, has slowly embraced the concept. He has seen the unity in the group and the support they receive.

**Challenges:** Fund raising is always a challenge especially when the D&L was managed by a federal commission. The locals thought that we had more resources to do things than we did.

I also believe securing a long-term affiliation with the NPS will continue to be a challenge.

Beyond that, I see the heritage area partnership as a very empowering idea. I am someone who worked in an agency for 29 years assisting local governments and encouraging multi-agency projects. Hard to accomplish. One must have a lot of patience. I saw the D&L as an empowering agency. The D&L created a shared vision which empowered partners to each do more. Because we had some federal resources, we had a way to give people seed money to make things happen.

If you develop the vision and people agree to the management plan, it is easy to get people to do things. The biggest problem was finding sufficient resources to keep everything moving. At the very beginning it was hard to get some of the key partners to take us seriously because they didn't think we would be around long. We were the new kid on the block. There were some state agencies, offices within the NPS, and other federal agencies that simply assumed we would not be around very long.

Bringing all partners together, big and small, is always a challenge, perhaps the greatest. But when they are together, things really start to happen.