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Phillip J. “Phil” Francis
March 27, 2017

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

Phillip J. "Phil" Francis
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Philip J "Phil" Francis Jr. Interview: March 27, 2017

The reason I became interested in heritage areas was that one was created in western North Carolina while I was superintendent of the Blue Ridge Parkway. All the work that was necessary to establish the heritage area had been done by my predecessors, Gary Everhardt and Dan Brown. Western North Carolina has always been supportive of its natural and cultural resources and its beauty. The tourism industry and the cultural resources folks in the state have been very supportive. As a consequence, they were successful in getting a congressman to support the creation of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. I was lucky to be there when one was established.

At first, I didn't know what to think about it. I didn't know much about them. I had questions. The kind of questions you might expect. What is a national heritage area? What will it do for the NPS? Why should we be paying money to support national heritage areas when our park has declining budgets? As I became more familiar with the program, and met the board, I became very supportive of it. I think heritage areas are very important for national parks as well as for our overall mission in our country to protect and preserve our natural resources. I could see some real benefits.

Functions of a heritage area: They are different from one place in the country to the next, whether in Louisiana, or Charleston or the state of Tennessee. In our case, the governor appointed members to the board of the Blue Ridge Heritage Area that received funding from the federal government. I don't know if there were matching funds or not. But the state and regions did, at least, provide in-kind support through organizations particularly here in Asheville (NC) and Boone (NC) area. The board hired an executive director whose job it was to coordinate activities and try and fulfill the mission of the heritage area. I think they have been very, very successful in bringing people together and sharing from one community to another how things get done by promoting the value of these natural and cultural assets to the public and members of the state legislatures and community leaders, and working with the tourism community state-wide and locally to help protect these special places we have in this part of the world.

NPS duties with heritage area: I always attended the meetings or had my deputy attend when I could not. I thought it was important enough that we provide that kind of time for one of us to attend. I met with the executive director of the heritage area frequently. We provided office space, actually Congress provided the office space at our visitor center in Asheville. Angie Chandler is the executive director. She has a small staff that helps the NPS operate its visitor center. A portion of our visitor center is dedicated to informing the public about what sites exist in our region as well as along the Parkway.

I would go to the Alliance of Heritage Areas meeting in Washington each year with the executive director of the heritage area. We would spend some time on Capitol Hill making sure that our members of Congress were aware of national heritage areas, what they do, and why they are important.

The funding for the heritage area passed from our NPS Washington office to our regional office to the heritage area. We provided a minor amount of the oversight to the heritage area to ensure

it was operating appropriately. I had periodic meetings with the executive director and was almost always aware of what they were up to. Angie held conferences for people and organizations within the heritage area that I would support by attending. Their staff consisted of an executive director, three or possibly four paid employees and then volunteers. Since our interpretive division operated fourteen visitor centers along the Blue Ridge Parkway without that many permanent employees, we used seasonal employees and volunteers. We had two visitor desks in our visitor center in Asheville. One maintained and operated by the NPS and our cooperating association and a separate desk located just outside of our auditorium, where visitors would come to ask questions about places to stay and eat and so forth. The visitor center had a unique design. Congressman Charles Taylor provided the funds for the Blue Ridge Parkway Heritage Area. He wanted it to be a marketing center for the region. As a result, the NPS and the heritage area work together to promote the region. That was somewhat unique. I don't think that there are too many national parks promoting communities outside of their park boundaries on such an active basis. The Parkway had a history of working with communities, so the transition was easy.

Our staff work with heritage areas was not funded. We just absorbed it into our regular duties. It was just another one of those, do more with the same or less, responsibilities. The staff had become accustomed to that concept. It has been going on since the '80s and was not really fair to them.

Appropriation of funding: The budget for all of the heritage areas was approximately \$17 million a year when I left in 2013. There have been discussions about either eliminating or reducing the heritage areas budget. Others felt that the budget should be increased. That tension will continue to exist as long as the NPS budgets are as tight as they have been as a consequence of sequestration and other fiscal cuts. The current administration just submitted a budget calling for a 12% cut in NPS budgets. That would be devastating to parks and will certainly cut programs that are not traditional core programs of the NPS. I would think it will put federal funding of heritage areas at risk.

When we are faced with cutting permanent NPS staff and eliminating all of our seasonal employees, closing campgrounds and picnic areas or keeping heritage area funds, it would be difficult to continued support of heritage areas. I once spoke to former Director Jon Jarvis, who I always thought was very supportive of heritage areas and felt the \$17 million budget was not necessarily a large amount of the NPS budget. As budgets get tighter, I think that that view could probably change.

Skills necessary for NPS staff to work as a good partner to heritage areas: First our employees have to have a desire to do that. They must understand the purpose and mission of the heritage area and buy into it and then they certainly have to have interpersonal skills. They should understand the tourism business and why it's important to the protection of, the natural and cultural resources and the wildlife therein by such means and manners to preserve our resources for future generations. They need to understand that relationship. I think the main thing is willingness to work with partners.

I take for granted sometimes that everybody knows how to work with partners, but I guess that's maybe not true. Staff needs to understand how non-profits operate, and the requirements of non-profits. It would be helpful if people understood how 501(c)3s work and what the reporting requirements are for the different budget levels, about 990s and audit reports. Basic non-profit administration would certainly be useful for staff to understand.

Challenges: Deciding who is going to do what is one challenge. When a visitor walks through the door of our visitor center in Asheville, they see two desks. We would sometimes have uniformed people at one desk or un-uniformed people at both desks. The purposes of the two desks were different. One desk was for NPS and Eastern National staff. The other desk was operated by the Heritage Area. Which desk should visitors go to? Visitors often couldn't differentiate who these people were.

Who is in charge, was always an interesting challenge. Was the heritage area in charge of this visitor center since a member of Congress provided the funds for creating this so-called marketing center? We changed the name of the visitor center as soon as the congressman retired. Was the NPS in charge since the center was located on park lands? So, it was sometimes a challenge as to who was in charge and got the final say.

What happens in terms of staffing to make sure there is going to be adequate people working seven days of the week? How was the visitor center space to be used when it comes to provide for community meetings or meetings by the heritage area such as their board meetings? How do we integrate meetings with interpretive programming? What happens when you want to have a reception of business leaders or community leaders after hours? Who pays for the overtime for maintenance staff and other staff who may be required?

These day-to-day logistical challenges have to be resolved and everybody supporting the operating procedures or problems will continue.

Support from the NPS national and regional administrations: In our case they certainly were supportive. We worked a lot with Chris Abbett in Atlanta who was just fabulous. He was always helpful when we had questions from time to time.

There was a constant threat of having the existing heritage areas' budgets reduced as communities around the country were seeking funds for new heritage areas. Since the total heritage areas budget was not going to be increased by the Congress, there was always the feeling that the existing heritage areas could lose all or a part of its annual budget due to competing new areas.

There was the idea that at some point in time the heritage areas were to become self-sustaining. It would be extremely difficult for heritage areas to be completely self-sustaining. A more realistic view would be that heritage areas become partially self-sustaining. The question is how do they generate funds? The only way I know that they would generate funds is either through grants, which means you would have to have a permanent grant writer, some kind of private donations would be difficult to obtain depending on the purpose and mission of what's included within a heritage area, or some kind of government subsidization such as through the counties or

state or tribal tourism office. Who would provide for the subsidies? Who would provide for the budget if it weren't for the federal government? Everybody, it seems, these days are having challenges with regard to budgets. No one is overly eager to step forward and give part of their budget for something new when they are trying to survive.

Criteria for heritage area designation: National Heritage Areas, since the word *national* is there, should contain at least some level of national significance, that it is important to the overall well-being of our country as a whole. I think the tourism business, in protecting our natural and cultural resources certainly provides an area where that mission could be met. It should be a significant area. I fear that the tendency would be to say, well, everybody needs one. I could see that it would be tempting over time for much of the entire country to become a national heritage area because many people feel that the place where they live is special. To keep the heritage areas truly special, there should be standards that must be met. Some level of importance either nationally or at least regionally. The same kind of level of importance we give to protecting historic resources under the Historic Preservation Act.

I know that the heritage areas have spent some time trying to address this issue and have sought supporting legislation that authorizes national heritage areas from the Congress.

Mutual benefit of NPS and heritage areas: I think they are a great partner. Heritage areas promote the parks too. In our case, the Blue Ridge Parkway is partially contained within the heritage area in North Carolina. We have similar missions, protect the natural and cultural resources. It's good that we promote our missions to as many people as we can. I think the more the public hears about protecting our resources and understand how important that is to them, the more successful our park and heritage areas will be in meeting our mission. If we are using those same words and can provide some guidance and insight to the heritage area on how to protect and preserve natural and cultural resources, it makes them stronger.

The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area and the Blue Ridge certainly serve the same set of visitors. When people come to visit a national park, their experience is defined not only by what happens inside the park, but it is also defined by where they stay, where they eat, and the level of service they are provided by the local communities. It is that overall experience provided by both parks and communities that determines if the experience is a good one. Since part of our responsibility is to provide for a good experience for our park visitors, it is very important if we are going to have a good experience for visitors that we work together with local communities and national heritage areas as partners.

There are opportunities for parks and heritage areas to work together for their mutual benefit. Gateway community and customer service training for both communities and park personnel would be a good example.