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Suzanne Copping
November 17, 2015

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 Suzanne Copping

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Tenure with Heritage Areas: Oct 2002 to Apr 2009. I started as an intern just 10 hours a week with Brenda (Barrett) and then I was a part time contractor and then a full-time contractor. I came to Annapolis for the Philadelphia office April of 2007 to Jan 2009 as a regional coordinator for National Heritage Areas. Moved to the Star-Spangled Areas Trail in 2009.

Interest in Heritage Areas: I was interested in heritage areas because I was in a Master program of historic preservation at the University of Maryland and one of the earliest courses I took was with Elizabeth Watson who has been in the heritage field for a while. She was influential. I had always had a connection with historic preservation. My father was an historic architect working in Providence RI, one of the birthplaces of historic preservation in this country, at least the 20th century as we know it. The heritage areas provided context for architecture at that place and peoples connected with place. Being in the outdoors and preservation attracted me. Being connected to special places, to landscapes. I was influenced by my teachers. Brenda (Barrett) was collecting demographic census data about the counties within National Heritage Areas, and I came on as an intern to work on that.

Scope of work: When my internship became more like 20 hours a week I started to get involved with additional issues. Working with the National Heritage Areas to identify qualitative and quantitative information to develop a baseline for performance measures so that they could report their successes over time. Back then and even now the program is struggling to get funding year to year. It was important to have quantitative measures to justify the areas. I was Brenda's assistant in a number of ways mainly in content work with the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. Taking on some of the content and working with National Heritage Areas themselves. We put out a regular newsletter and other outreach efforts and spoke with areas thinking of designation. I did work with the Alliance and National Heritage Areas themselves.

When I was a contractor, I would staff some of the Alliance subcommittees. I attended some of the National Heritage Area committee meetings and it was a good way for NPS to understand what the areas were going through in their work with communities such as developing educational materials and information that would be useful to the broader community of those interested in heritage areas.

One of the cool things in my lowly position in that office was to get to talk with superintendents about what National Heritage Areas were all about and to give advice about how they might work with communities in that framework. We talked about how the areas would benefit the NPS over time. I hope that Brenda and I were able to improve the heritage area dialogue and make it visible of how NPS could evolve over time.

Research: The way I remember it was that we had the census data at first and tried to identify trends, like correlations between ethnicity and economics, the median range of a house or salary and landscape data. We were looking at the trends, if any, in economics and people across the areas, and whether there were correlations between economics and people and the existence of heritage areas. Not all National Heritage Areas were created for the same reason so there might be different reasons for why they were designated. For example, the west coast or central basin

might have different reasons than the east coast. We particularly looked at unemployment. Looking at correlations in the socioeconomics of areas. Certain ethnic groups might come into an area for industrial jobs and then industries move on and ethnic groups are left behind. On the east coast especially there seemed to be some correlations. In the Northeast, for example, there definitely is a correlation between closed industries and economics etc.

We did some research into the money generation model developed by Michigan State University. We gathered general information about the leveraging of money. How much money came from the NPS and how much the heritage areas are able to generate. How much money came into an area because of the National Heritage Area effort. The National Heritage Areas were instrumental in developing the information. Brenda and I did a little work on the data that was collected. Augie Carlino (Executive Director of Rivers of Steel NHA) in particular was one of the more vocal local advocates for having the baseline data representative of all the areas. The National Heritage Areas provided the information and came up with suggested measures and reported on the information every year. We gathered the information, and I would spend time at the end of each year working with the areas to get the information reported. It was hard having the same consistent measures across all the National Heritage Areas. Every year we put together a one pager with about ten measures such as, money the NPS had put in, how many children were educated, etc. Some thought this effort was more important than did others. We tried to work with them in such a way that they felt like we were all in this together. We wanted them to feel the investment in time would pay off. We thought that the information would pay off and encouraged participation.

Support from NPS: We went through some administrative changes and sometimes we felt a lot more supported than at other times. A good thing about working with the Alliance was that we felt support from the movement. That was very important to Brenda and I. There were ways we could help the movement. Even just sharing factual information about becoming and operating as a National Heritage Area. There was misinformation going around such as every National Heritage Area got a million dollars a year for 15 years. Even sharing as much factual information as possible I think this provided some value.

In the years I was there in the Washington office there was always support but in some other offices not so much. Everything gets political at times. Brenda reported directly to Kate Stevenson when I worked on the program. We were within the Cultural Resources Directorate.

Challenges: I think the biggest challenge was the tricky relationship we had with the Alliance. It was like we needed each other so much and at the same time we sometimes felt like there were so many ways we could be working better together. We saw some real progress when we finished the, *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas*, report. That was a success, and we needed the Alliance to pull that off. Our relationship with the Alliance was a little push pull. We could not have been nearly as successful without them. We wished things would move a little more smoothly. We saw some momentum when we finished the report. But then the politics changes and we lost the momentum.

We had some educational materials, and the Alliance was running a series of training sessions, partly a money maker for them, the Heritage Development Institute. They would develop

educational materials and go to fledgling areas and those who might be thinking of becoming heritage areas and offer training and advice on fund raising and advocacy etc. With the structure of the National Heritage Area program not legislated, more National Heritage Areas in the mix makes money spread a lot thinner but more National Heritage Areas would make a push for funding stronger. Some National Heritage Areas and the NPS were strongly in favor of enlarging the program and others were hesitant to expand the number of areas. The issue of how long the NPS is involved financially before it lets the baby out into the world continues to be a challenge. As with so many other programs as, e.g., the Chesapeake Bay program, which is not funded, we struggle with how to make a commitment to these other entities that are not permanently recognized.

Successes: We had a lot of momentum from the, *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas*, report at first and then the administration changed. We had a lot of support from Loren Fraser and the Policy Office to get this started. Loren was instrumental in getting the subcommittee of the Advisory Board interested. We had a lot of support from the Legislative Office. Brenda was leading the charge with the obvious support of the Policy Office in pulling it off. The Advisory Board had connections with the National Geographic which was important to get the graphics support to get the report out in a pleasing manner. The process of putting that report together helped create some new advocates, some on the subcommittee, to make individual connections with National Heritage Area people. It helped them (subcommittee members) understand that National Heritage Areas can improve stewardship and conserve resources in large landscape areas not already in the NPS system. In the various Second Century reports that have followed, I think National Heritage Areas have fared pretty well in showing what can be useful to NPS going forward. Working in partnership without necessarily owning the resources; to build an awareness of the resources and even improve economic development.

The, *Charting a Future Report...*, was a success. The process of developing it was very rewarding. It was a product that the NPS and Alliance put forward together. Also, we were able to create a more polished presence for National Heritage Areas by media upgrades for NPS and the Alliance. Gave them more visibility and the NPS role in National Heritage Areas more visibility.

Funding: Brenda and I were asked each year to review the Green Book and were involved in discussions with the Office of Management and Budget and budget allocations. Toward the end of my tenure there were discussions about whether National Heritage Areas had a management plan or not. Funding was always an issue. The funding was always contentious, what was deserving of a higher level of funding. National Heritage Areas are a collection of apples and oranges. It would be difficult to compare their qualities for funding requirements.

I still have positive feelings about the National Heritage Areas and some area directors and our relationship. I hope they felt that they had our complete support and when we were disagreeing about particular things it might be because of overall NPS policy or regulations at the time.

WASO/Regional offices: Maybe because I had already sat in the Washington Office, I didn't feel there was much contention when I was in a regional office rather than WASO office. As a regional coordinator I was tasked with working on issues very distinct to the northeast region,

e.g., worked to develop a process on cooperative agreements and how they were written and negotiating the agreement. The WASO office had a different role than the regions. WASO worked on management plans and with areas thinking of becoming a heritage area and I in the region was more involved in feasibility studies and in getting money from the NPS and other issues in funding. We did have educational sessions and create some information sharing and knowledge transfer especially in the northeast region.

Legislation: I think some of the issues (in the designation legislations) remained the same such as permanent designation and time limited. Some were influenced more by the NPS over time such as evaluations. The legislation over time became more structured on evaluation studies. Ultimately, I think we saw evaluation as potentially being a tool that could formalize the program. But, of course, the devil is in the details of whether it could help.

Leadership of the Program: Like with every partnership there is some push and some pull. Some things that you both dive in together, some things you disagree on. On the whole our relationship with the Alliance was very collaborative because we had our mutual interest in mind. I think the, *Charting a Future Report*, was one of the first products that the NPS and the Alliance put forward together. I think the National Heritage Areas felt like they were working against the NPS sometimes. But the *Charting Report* we worked on together.

Disappointments: Not getting program legislation passed. Not that our office individually, just Brenda and I, had so much influence on that. But it would have felt really good if it had happened when we were there.