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National Heritage Areas Administrative History Project



**Paul Labovitz**  
**May 2, 2016**

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

Paul Labovitz  
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Interview conducted and transcribed by  
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This transcript was reviewed by Paul Labovitz

**Paul Labovitz Interview: May 2, 2016**

**Early interest in heritage areas:** I was living in Southwest Pennsylvania in the area now called America's Industrial Heritage Partnership. I was in the private sector and working for a landowner who leased a railroad right of way on a project that connected Cumberland, Maryland to Confluence, Pennsylvania. I was involved at the local level for years and then the NPS got money to formerly study the trail, which was in the area of the American Industrial Heritage Partnership through Randy Cooley, a feasibility study for the Allegheny Highland Trail. That started in the early and mid '80s. It was a strange happenstance because I was working privately, then on the board of a local hiking group, and then got the NPS grant to do the feasibility study. I have been involved in regional heritage projects ever since. I was hired as a temporary and then term employee and after five years got permanent NPS status. I wasn't the Midwest lead on heritage areas just happened to be doing Rivers & Trails project work that was related to heritage area work. A lot of the heritage areas had rivers and trails components, so Rivers & Trails was the logical place to do that work. We were very good at the community involvement work and the rest of the NPS was just getting involved in that. Rivers & Trails was a good fit for the heritage areas. That was a logical type of project to work on.

**Support from NPS directors and regional directors:** I would call it ebbs and flows. At the time the regional director, I want to say was Bill Schenk, and I don't think he cared that much for heritage areas. The reason I would say that. Early on in the Ohio and Erie (National Heritage Canalway) planning we had gathered Jerry Adelman, I call him the inventor of the national heritage area concept, from Illinois & Michigan (Canal National Heritage Corridor) and Jim Pepper from Blackstone River (now John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor) and brought them to Cleveland to talk about the heritage area concept to the Ohio and Erie partners and Bill Schenk was involved in that meeting. It was clear at that time that the Mid-Atlantic region was more involved in heritage areas than the Midwest because the Blackstone superintendent was engaged and the superintendent at the Illinois & Michigan Canal was not so engaged. Blackstone had field interpreters and Jerry Adelman asked Bill Schenk and before Jerry could even ask, Bill said, "No, don't even ask." Bill was not a big fan of the Rivers & Trails program either. He said to me one time that I should not be working for the NPS but for the local tourism agency. Bill was an old-fashioned park ranger guy and didn't think much beyond the parks themselves. It is understandable, that was just the way he was trained.

Now the support has grown to the point of an all-time high with Jon Jarvis who likes the Rivers & Trails program, talks a lot about it and has actually supported growth in their budget. The Rivers & Trails program was referred to as an out-house program, meaning it was inherited from the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service when that agency was merged into the NPS and there was a lot of animosity about that merger. But what it gave the NPS was a lot of people who were into community planning.

**Support from other NPS staff:** Here is how I used to characterize that particular issue. A third of the people in the NPS loved the heritage areas, a third of the people hated the heritage areas and actively talked trash about them, and the other third had no clue what they were. The hate came from the traditionalists who thought that the NPS was all about the national parks themselves and nothing else.

**Alliance of National Heritage Areas and NPS:** The NPS kept trying to be like the NPS; trying to form a heritage area program. The heritage areas were gracious and would work with the NPS. But when push came to shove the national heritage areas succeeded in the appropriations process from the members not from the administration. The national heritage areas that could wield influential political power did so and that was the Ohio and Erie National Heritage Canalway because their benefactor was Ralph Regula. Congressman Regula was on the right appropriations committee and so he could get money appropriated for the Ohio and Erie Canalway. If you look at the national heritage areas that have been more successful with their interior appropriation it relates directly with their member's clout on that interior appropriations subcommittee. The NPS would say we can't lobby and can't do this so the national heritage areas would work and try to form a program and inevitably their appropriations came from the appropriation language added in by the members. Because that's how it works.

Different regions (of NPS) had different answers for the same questions, like, how can we use the arrowhead. There was no consistency from region to region. I don't think we have it that coordinated even now.

I'm sure it (the relationship between NPS and the Alliance) evolved. It got bigger, more people. There seemed to be an evolving leadership within the Alliance because of the new faces. The NPS depended on the strength or lack of strength of the regional area heritage area coordinators. I think Judy Hart was the first national coordinator, a nice lady. It was a herding cats exercise and I think she really cared but the bureaucracy that the NPS had was really no match for the creativity of the heritage areas. As much as the national heritage areas tried to be innovative for good or for bad, we the NPS would just slow them down and drag them down with bureaucracy. It wasn't done in a punitive way it is just the way we do things. If you know anything about heritage areas, they are anything but bureaucratic. They are very nimble and innovative, and creative and I wouldn't describe government as that way. I would describe the Rivers & Trails program that way, but I wouldn't describe government as a whole.

**NPS regional support:** I don't know. In the Midwest Region I don't think we provided much service to the national heritage areas beyond shuffling papers for them. I mean just from the contact I had with heritage areas beyond my work with them individually, they continued to struggle with somewhat obstructionist processes to do things that probably should have been easier. But to their credit they still kept coming back for more. It just shows you, I think, the value of the arrowhead association. It was really worth putting up with a lot of this to continue being associated with the NPS.

I basically led a team that wrote the feasibility study for the Ohio and Erie (National Heritage Canalway). I was involved with the Automobile (now Motor Cities National Heritage Area) study. I evaluated a couple of draft reports for the Midwest Region. The one I remember vividly was for the confluence area of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers in Illinois and Missouri. I remember again the problems caused by the lack of a program. The partners did a feasibility study on their own and then the NPS feasibility study template was a moving target and I remember the partners being told their study looked good, but it wasn't in the current format, so they had to change it. I basically told the partners to give it to the NPS and tell the NPS to put it

into the format they wanted. It just happened here in Chicago with the Black Metropolis proposed heritage area. They had a feasibility study completed a year ago. They handed it off to the Midwest Region who said, "We have a new template now, you have to reformat it." It was going to cost them \$20 thousand dollars. I suggested that they just give the NPS the study and say whatever they want. They could do it, but we are just not going to do it. That is just the kind of thing we were pulling on people. We were changing the rules as the years went on.

The Midwest Region for a time had a full-time coordinator. From what I was hearing from the national heritage areas the technical assistance was not that good. The person was supposed to facilitate agreements and they were having a bit of a power trip as opposed to being helpful. I was by that time in the superintendent job, and I would hear that stuff and just shake my head.

**Work with proposed heritage areas:** We just talked a lot about the framework of emerging legislation that created heritage areas, what to avoid. We had a bad experience with the Ohio and Erie because the legislation included, I believe, a heritage area commission that was appointed by the Secretary. It just added two years to everything, and it was really a paralyzing component of the heritage area. So, the more folks could avoid weaving complex bureaucracy into the function of their heritage area the better off they were. These new places would say they saw that most of the national heritage areas had a commission, and we would say, "You really don't want to have a commission." You really need to have a representative entity that represents the geography and special interest of the area but don't add a layer that requires the Secretary of the Interior to approve it. It sounds silly to say that out loud, but it was true.

**Challenges:** The pace of government versus the pace of the private sector. Everything just took longer with government. The lack of a systematic programmatic approach to heritage areas was viewed by me as an opportunity but for some in government it paralyzed them. We just tried to do things basically without government ties to anything. We would ask people why they wanted to be heritage areas and they would say, "Well, you can get up to a million dollars." My answer to that question is, there's a lot easier ways to get a million dollars out of the federal government besides a National Heritage Area designation. In fact, I would argue that's the toughest million dollars to get out of government. You don't even need the designation to get to be a heritage area if you just act like a heritage area. There is a lot of transportation money to build trails. You don't need to be a heritage area to get it. EPA had money for river conservation work. There are all kinds of money to do things. And the NPS money required a one-to-one match. NPS' Rivers & Trails is free consultants to communities.

**Characteristics of a successful heritage program:** Consistency from region to region and one that is there to help the heritage areas to achieve their visions and not to convert them all to government drones. These are some really innovative people doing some innovative things. We could learn a lot from them. They are great at forming innovative partnerships. They are great at incorporating the economic development community into their conservation, and recreation and preservation efforts. They are really good at wrapping a package around regional resources and promoting them and providing incentives for people to do like minded things.

**Significance:** We were always hung up on the national significance discussion. Because there was a big inference that for an area to be a national heritage area the theme or themes that were

there had to have national significance. Many times, what we would run across was that the themes were significant in some way or other but what was nationally significant was the fact that there were so many different things in a certain piece of geography and that the collection of themes was what was significant. That was a tough thing for people to get a handle on. I will tell you I used to do a little bit of special resource study work for the NPS too and I would often go into a community anywhere and everyone would show me something that they would characterize as nationally significant, and it should be a national park. They were very proud of it, very excited about it and trying to protect it and appropriately develop it and they were probably right at a certain level. I used to joke that it would have been much cheaper for us to just designate the whole country a heritage area and then legislate out of that what isn't. It would be faster and cheaper. I mean the whole state of Tennessee is a national heritage area, which is amazing and what does that mean? Van West, who was a friend of mine, was behind that and it is one of the best organized heritage areas out there. They are the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. They have different pieces of the state that are doing amazing things under their own brand and the state heritage designation is just another overlay that helps them market and promote themselves.

**National Heritage Areas oversight by NPS:** Some kind of quality control. Simple is better than complicated. For me, the hang up was always passing the federal money to the heritage area. We seemed very reluctant to give up the money. We create these massive bureaucracies to transfer the money and we really don't need to do that, I would think. We have made the cooperative agreement process more difficult instead of easier over time.

There is a point in time when there may be a place proposed as a national heritage area that may not be appropriate for whatever reason. Either a significance issue or some facet of it and we get to say, "You know what? This doesn't fit." We have turned down potential national parks. I remember we turned down a reservoir in Kansas that Senator Dole wanted to be a national park. I think we studied it three times and turned it down. I think it was Wilson Lake. And every time we studied it, we said, "You know this isn't suitable for a national park." And they would ask again, and we would come up with the same answer three years later. There is a vibe you get from a well-defined heritage area, and if you don't get that vibe then it is probably not suitable for a national heritage area.

**Benefits to the NPS:** I think we get to affect the achievement of our mission at about one hundredth of the cost for the geography. Which I think is a real big positive but for the folks that hate heritage areas the fact that we don't regulate what goes on in them is the piece that I think bugs people. You don't have to own it and regulate it for the success to happen. I think the heritage areas have proved that. The mission of the NPS is achieved over a broader geography with much less cost to the government. We get to have a role in some wonderful places and stories about our country and we don't have to own them like we do in Yellowstone.

I think it is a great way to achieve the agency's mission. It does provide a real framework for resource protection. What it does is empower people locally, doesn't rely on a federal regulatory role, and I think that's a positive.

I have been away from it enough now I'm not even sure where the National Heritage Area program is in its evolution. Do we have a program? Another thing I think about the heritage areas: I used to hear Martha's (Raymond) voice on tourism council calls. The NPS in my mind has really missed the boat when it comes to tourism effort. Heritage areas actually offer us probably the best nexus we have with that industry that we are not taking advantage of. This is my sound bite about that. The largest industry in America, tourism, the NPS represents most of what would be considered their product and yet we have no systematic engagement with that industry. They could be our advocates for budget. I just don't understand it. Someone said to me the other day that they believed that we would be selling out if we used tourism as an excuse to fund us. That is the basis of the problem with NPS. National Heritage Areas are doing resource protection and promotion and development under a different model where economic development is okay and the NPS fights particularly what we do in economic development because they believe it is a sellout. That is a weird thing in my mind. I respect the 100-year tradition of how we have been doing things, but you have got to look ahead, you can't look back. And we have a good story to tell with economic development. I think they (Ohio and Erie National Heritage Canalway) have success in economic development with just the bicycle trail alone, the number of people who use that trail. The economic projections of what those people spend is staggering. The trails are not cheap to build but they are certainly cheaper than highways. In the northern part of the Ohio and Erie Canalway the park and recreation departments are building multimillion-dollar trails because they know that that is what the demand is for. When these trails are built other development follows. It is as simple as that. That was what was fun about the Rivers & Trails program, the work that we did. It might take twenty years for the stuff to actually happen.

The heritage areas executive directors were some of the most creative people I have ever worked with.