

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817)
National Heritage Areas Administrative History Project



Joseph DiBello
August 10, 2016

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
Transcribed by Antoinette Condo
Reviewed by Joseph DiBello
508 compliant version by Jessica Lamb

This digital transcript contains updated pagination, formatting, and editing for accessibility and compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Interview content has not been altered.

The original digital transcript is preserved in the NPS History Collection.

The release form for this interview is on file at the NPS History Collection.

NPS History Collection
Harpers Ferry Center
PO Box 50
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
HFC_Archivist@nps.gov

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

Joseph DiBello
August 10, 2016

Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Joseph DiBello

Joe DiBello Interview: August 10, 2016

I have been working with heritage areas for quite some time. The heritage areas, as I know them, came about from my work in planning. Planning was the kind of work I did for the NPS and before that with the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation and the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service in the U.S. Department of the Interior. As I think back on it, heritage conservation was an idea that was way ahead of its time. The heritage areas idea evolved from the planning process. As we go through planning, for what I will call a traditional park unit, the planning is very site specific. The focus is on resources within a confined boundary area. Federal land ownership and management is predominant. The planning wasn't very collaborative. It was resource based, very analytical. Focus on operations, and alternatives were limited. As we became more involved with planning in urban settings, and places that were more populated, a different approach to planning emerged; one that is more dynamic and requires more interaction with the community. Because land ownership is mixed, the focus of the planning changes. It is not focused on a particular plot of land or a particular site, structure or landscape. The view takes on a more regional perspective. Particularly when you are working with river corridors, trail corridors and large landscapes, it quickly becomes very complicated, multijurisdictional, and includes a range and variety of natural and cultural resources that must be viewed collectively. Considering public use, education and access further complicates the planning. The presence of cultural and natural resources and the values people place on them caused us to evolve a much more collaborative planning process. One that takes more of a regional view and takes into account the variety of resources and the variety of people affected.

Over time we moved from very specific land or resource-based type of planning approach to a more regional, urbanized, and complex landscape focus. The planning changes. Your approach for assessing and conserving resources and developing action strategies changes. The heritage areas concept evolved through changing the planning process. For example, when I was introduced to Pittsburgh, I learned about the three rivers, the region, the environment, the industry and the culture. I first got involved in the region when the center of America's steel industry was changing, and the steel plants were literally in the process of being demolished. The landscape and the economy were changing. So were the communities. What do we try to save? How can we do it? How can we save a steel site if the industry couldn't do it? How about the communities? The culture that evolved? The people and communities are there because of the steel plants. Carnegie built the libraries there. The schools, churches and communities were built around the plant. They all interacted, and now, this complicated interaction is being dissembled because the industry has changed. What do we do? I believe that is how the heritage concept started to form. How do you create a regional strategy or plan that takes into account the region's natural and cultural resource, understand the dynamic of the change that's going on and lay out a plan for the future?

Same thing at Steamtown. When we began work in Scranton, Pennsylvania we were focused on developing a plan to preserve and interpret a 40-acre rail yard. The heritage concept evolved as we started talking to people in the region. The 40-acre railyard and the steam trains that were there was only part of the story. One part of the NPS planning team (from our Denver Service Center) focused on the site development plan and the other team (from Philadelphia and the

Northeast Region) focused on the region. The railyard connected an entire region transported goods and linked many communities and the lifestyles and traditions they built. As we listened to the community leaders and the public, we gained an understanding of the dynamic of why that railyard was there, the connection to coal mining, transportation and the evolution of industry that occurred in that area. What came out of it was the realization that you had to adopt a regional view and the Lackawanna heritage concept began to evolve as has the planning process.

A similar thing happened in Wheeling, West Virginia and in the Coal Heritage Region. These were planning projects before they were designated heritage areas. This all happened in the '80s if I remember right. We were going through a learning process and the planning that emerged became embedded in our work. There was similarity in many of the regional projects that were prevalent in the Northeast at that time. All were dynamic, populated areas, changing economies, lots going on, and there was an emphasis on balancing conservation and preservation and considering economic development. I think the national heritage areas concept came about through the planning process and started through planning.

There was clearly a close group of planners who converged and together created the heritage concept. I can't point to any one specific person. Philadelphia and the Northeast Region combined the traditional park planning group. Those of us who worked with National Wild and Scenic Rivers, National Trails, urban and regional planning, and external programs were combined and as a result of the melding of people and skills, a more collaborative and creative planning approach came about. The heritage area concept began to get more embedded in our work as time went on. In Western Pennsylvania there was an industrial heritage project led by Randy Cooley. He contracted with the Denver Service Center planners to work with him, and they were a mix of the east and western approaches to planning. Planners came to work in Western Pennsylvania applying their planning experiences and principles to the mix. We were also involved from the Northeast Region and we shared our perspective as well. The planning styles started to merge and combine. We, in the northeast, focused on community involvement and working with the states in these efforts. We all realized that as planners, we needed to find ways to engage people and collaborate. I think we saw the heritage concept really begin to take form. I emphasize, begin to take form. It's still evolving. The heritage concept is something that is going to grow and change over time.

Oversight: I think our philosophy was one of not oversight but of collaboration. This is where you run into the NPS internal philosophical differences. Are we as the NPS planners supposed to be the gatekeepers of the system? The overseers of the national park system? We often wrestled with the question of what our role as planners was. We focused on collaborating with partners and working with others. Here was a huge internal culture clash that was going on. One group of managers wanted to emphasize oversight. We referred to it as being, *large and in charge*. That was the nature of park management at its core. We run the park. We are in charge. We are the main entity. We have the jurisdiction. We decide what's best based on our policy. That is one approach. It works well in the places we own and operate.

The heritage areas and the other places where we are working in partnership with others called for a shared approach and responsibility. For example, our role on the Pinelands National Reserve is to represent the federal interest. Not just the NPS. We share the planning and

decision making with the state and with the other members of the commission. Early on, the planning and money for the heritage areas came through the region. Headquarters in Washington had little or no role. The region was largely responsible for the planning and the administrative requirements for entering into an agreement. Our oversight role was in administering the agreement and participating in the planning process. We did not have what I consider an oversight role but more of a service or collaborative role with the heritage areas.

In Southwest Pennsylvania some of the money was used by the heritage area to have the Denver Service Center to do the planning. In Lackawanna and other northeast heritage areas, we used regional office staff, consultants, area universities to conduct the planning. NPS in the Northeast was more of a collaborator or facilitator and focused on working with universities, the public, and others in Northeast heritage areas.

The NPS role varied depending on need in different areas. I have always been a believer and advocated that the best role for NPS with the heritage areas should be help in the planning and help with creating organizational capacity at the local level. In the early 90's people started to take notice (of heritage areas). Heritage areas and the concept really started taking off. Partners and the agency began to invest and spend a lot of effort and money. Partly because of that they were getting a lot of attention from the NPS.

Policy task group: NPS group created in February 1997. NPS managers and leaders came together, with many different opinions about every aspect of heritage areas. Someone said your view of heritage areas depends on where you are at the time. Even a discussion about the definition and mission of heritage areas was very contentious and complicated. From my perspective heritage areas, first of all, were regional efforts aimed at planning for conserving the natural and cultural resources while collaborating with the public. We planned in order to try to figure out the best recreation, tourism, education, preservation needed to meet multiple objectives, and identify an NPS role. That, in retrospect, was a tall order. As soon as we began it became clear that there were some big differences of opinion. For example, some felt that heritage dealt only with the cultural resources. Why are you talking about natural and recreational resources? The definition of the word *heritage*. I always assumed that it was inclusive. But others said, heritage is about the culture and buildings and objects. I didn't define it that way. So, you can see how there were major differences in the group right from the start.

Take the word *National*. What does it mean to be a national area versus regional or state or local? How do you evaluate or categorize something as national? In my mind this was fairly easy. Each of the heritage areas is going to be of national significance because they combine natural and cultural values in a place and the place contributed to our nation's development. Others had a much narrower definition of what *national* means in terms of significance.

Some felt that heritage areas were not part of the authority or the mission of NPS. Some felt that there is no role for the NPS in heritage areas. We don't run them. We don't own them. We don't have jurisdiction. We can't control them. We are all about managing parks we are not these other things. Others thought heritage areas were an important approach and perhaps the future of the National Park System. While the meeting was contentious, as discussions continued, I believe understandings began to converge. I think we came to some agreement that

heritage areas could be a regional approach to natural and cultural resource conservation. Bring future economic benefits.

There were people on the task force that felt the heritage areas had no place in the national park system. They were viewed as simply diverting resources or watering down the system. On the other end of spectrum, were those, where I stood, saying heritage areas are the way parks and large landscapes are going to be conserved in the future. I felt heritage areas were an enhancement, innovation and something worth an investment of time and effort. You had a divergence of that group from zero to ten on the role of heritage areas. After discussion, the final report probably reflects around a seven on a scale of ten on the applicability of heritage areas.

There was also a divergence on whether heritage areas should be labeled significant, distinctive, or relevant. Some thought we should set very tough criteria for heritage areas to qualify. Others felt heritage areas are important and special and we could identify some general criteria as to what constitutes a heritage area. This camp leaned more toward being inclusive and helping with the planning. Their feeling was that if heritage areas could stand on their own, then they could be included in a system of National Heritage Areas.

Inclusion of natural resources: I still do not understand why this was ever considered not relevant. Why are all the steel mills in Pittsburgh? Because three rivers converge there. Power, transportation, water, land and that's why the industry is there. Coal and all the natural resources that surround the area. How could you not include a discussion of the natural heritage? But others in the group felt that heritage was simply historic sites, objects, and culture.

The one thing I felt very strongly about and argued for was to conduct management planning before any designation. Heritage areas evolved before we had any kind of program or vision for how they relate to the National Park System. The heritage areas concept continues to evolve, and we still don't have program legislation. I still believe that the National Trails System Act and the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act could serve as models of authorizing legislation for the Heritage Areas, with modifications of course. Those that created legislation for National Trails, National Rivers, Land and Water Conservation Fund, had the foresight to create these very bold dynamic initiatives. Using the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the National Trails Act and building on our experiences with Coal Heritage and Steel Heritage in the Monongahela Valley and Wheeling I drafted a proposal that I felt might serve as a model. The big difference was adding a management planning requirement before designating a national heritage area. I think someday we will have some enabling legislation for heritage areas. I hope it includes a provision for developing a management plan before designation. Management planning is not only a practical approach, but it will also make management more effective and sustainable.

NPS roles and responsibilities: The division of labor was discussed because we needed to determine how heritage areas fit into the NPS organizational structure and culture. This is something that is always changing but the divergence can be categorized as those who prefer a command and control structure and philosophy versus one that's not. Generally, those that are in headquarters prefer control. Those in the region and field generally prefer more collaborative and shared division of responsibilities. You also have organizational dynamics. Some people feel that a centralized approach to government is better than one that's more dispersed. Some

feel that by centralizing all functions you gain efficiency. Others feel that you can disperse and manage things with flexibility. When you add the word *National* to heritage areas, some people will think that then there should be a national leader. The roles and responsibilities of the offices are based in that organizational dynamic. Foremost is the need to understand and appreciate that the planning process is really essential to determine what role we play in each particular area. That is really what needs to dictate what it is we need to do in our different places. Every place is different. It's simply that. If we look at heritage areas as a program that needs to be managed and reduced to the minimum common administration, then I think you can put a person on it in a central office and be done with it. If we want to be more involved in shaping and helping the heritage areas, then we'll have to focus on planning and devote time and effort and more involvement of regional and field offices.

The national heritage areas formed an Alliance of National Heritage Areas to help deal with these many issues. They said, "We want the NPS to be more flexible and responsive to our needs. We don't want to work with someone who is just dividing up allocated money." The NPS has responded differently depending on the capacity and capability of the staff. Overall, the job of NPS is running parks and most of the agency's resources and people are devoted to that. Heritage areas are not traditional parks. You can't plan or manage them the same way. Heritage areas are still new and evolving. They are not at the core of what we do and Not something that's universally accepted or supported. A heritage area is a challenge compared to a national park. Think about it. I can tell you exactly where to go and find a park's visitor center. Where do you go to get that for a heritage area? Because of the regional and dispersed nature of the area, you are going to have multiple options and places to visit. It is a different visitor experience than a national park visitor might have. A heritage area is a regional planning concept to promote all of the resources in that area. Valley Forge is part of the Schuylkill (River National Heritage Area). They are a different scale. They require different approaches to marketing, visitors, education programs and so on. Heritage areas tend not to be destination points. Heritage areas are regional approaches to conservation, economic development, education and tourism.

Economic impact: Measuring economic impact is complicated for heritage areas. We were very focused (in 1998) in trying to quantify the economic impact of heritage areas. Tourism is just one important element of it. You need to know destination points, what visitors are doing, how much time they spend and what they are spending money on. There are different types of tourism experience, drive through, drive by, heritage tourism focused on history, etc. How about hunting, fishing, hikers, snowmobiles etc., etc.? How do you factor all of that in? If you conserve land perhaps that increases land values in the surrounding areas. If you renovate a historic building or district and reintroduce commerce through rehabilitation efforts and now have shops and restaurants, that's economic development too. These are types of economic benefit the heritage areas want to encourage while also preserving natural and cultural resources the best way you can. Because heritage areas are regional, it is difficult to quantify the impacts approach. At a place like Valley Forge NHP you can count the number of people who come in and out of the visitors' center and count vehicles in parking lots, users on a trail and the like. How do you do that for a heritage area? Much more challenging and there are more economic factors than just tourism. It's very dispersed. You have to be able to target what a particular

heritage area is about. What are we trying to do? Then try to quantify. Visitation to a site is just one part of it and it is a regional approach versus a site-specific approach.

All of the planning, all of the work that it takes to build collaboration is exponentially more challenging. That applies to everything. A heritage area can be difficult to define, harder to set criteria, harder to do the planning, harder to quantify the economics of a regional planning effort than to do a very specific park area.

Skills needed by regional heritage areas coordinators: I think they need to be great planners. They need to be able to navigate the administrative system. That is a big challenge today. In some ways we have been reduced to writing contracts and agreements and passing money through. We are less focused on the planning and substance of the heritage areas. We are paying more time and attention to the administrative requirements because of new requirements, increased scrutiny and stiff competition for funding. My observation is that we do not have the people, training, skills needed to help the heritage areas. We are stretched too thin, and our administrative systems and requirements are just not quick or flexible enough to accommodate heritage areas. There is not a recipe to follow. To do a good job we need to be creative and flexible but that is difficult in today's environment.

In the earlier years we did have the luxury of staff capacity and were able to devote time and attention to heritage areas. Now less so. We have less staff, fewer experienced people, less training, and less people who have backgrounds and skills in planning.

Duties of the regional NPS coordinators: From my experience in the Northeast region, we tried to provide each heritage area with an NPS point of contact. It was usually a regional office person or associate to the regional director. That varied and changed over the years. There were always tensions over priorities, the amount of money, staffing demands, between Washington and regions, regions and parks, and with parks and heritage areas. A park might ask, why aren't these planners working on my park? Why are they in Wheeling? As the heritage areas got bigger, faster, and spoke with a louder voice by forming the Alliance (of National Heritage Areas), they began considering program legislation, obtaining more money and requiring additional attention and profile. NPS leadership became more aware and more responsive to demands that we get more involved with our parks and communities and collaborate with the heritage areas. NPS leadership began encouraging parks to work directly with the heritage areas in their region. Theoretically, Valley Forge National Historical Park would provide guidance, planning and administrative help to the heritage area. In some places there was no park-heritage area interaction. In other places it worked very well. I think, the NPS is evolving and taking a case-by-case approach to determine the best approach for working with heritage areas. With Jon Jarvis as Director, our top leaders very much supported the partnership philosophy. The regional directors followed his lead.

You are going to see a wide variance in the regions depending on who the regional director assigns to work with heritage areas. In the Northeast, my impression, not having worked directly with heritage areas in about five years, is that the region has diminished capacity to deal with heritage areas particularly with planning and administrative duties. I feel the regions should play a strong coordinating role with the heritage areas. But the capacity is just not there.

Alliance impact on NPS policy: They have had a huge positive influence. Because they are an Alliance they can speak loudly and clearly regarding their cause and reach the highest levels of the NPS and Congress. They get much more attention than an NPS staff person would. They are a much more effective voice. Because we have had a long working relationship with the Alliance, I would hope that they consult with the NPS staff at the regional level. I have worked with the Alliance quite a few times by facilitating meetings or advising them. I think it's extremely effective when we work together.

The Alliance has to continue to be the strongest voice for heritage areas. There is always going to be an emphasis on NPS to communicate and be as transparent as possible. That is where the heritage areas have made a difference in NPS' operating style. They let us know when we are not doing a good job with our administrative requirements. If money is not flowing or reports not getting done, they speak up. That may also be why NPS is focused on administration of cooperative agreements. If we don't have good agreements and strong systems that get the money out to them, they can't accomplish their goals. They are going to keep us accountable. Another area in which they have been extremely effective is working with Congress and liaison with the public. There would be no funds or legislation or designations if it weren't for the Alliance. The NPS would never ask for these kinds of things. We just don't work that way. Congress tells NPS what to do. Who talks to Congress? The Alliance.

The last area where I would see the Alliance as having an influence on NPS is interpretation. They have great dialogue with stakeholders and constituents. They talk about their heritage. They promote projects in very creative ways. I like to view it as a learning opportunity for all of us. They are basically a teaching and learning lab for NPS. I think they have influenced the way we do our planning and interpretation in urban settings.

Funding for administrative and technical assistance to heritage areas: Always a challenge and another cause of tension. Initially, our work was project based. For example, Wheeling would have a project. The funds would come to the NPS and be passed on to the region. We would use some of those funds to fund NPS staff to help with the project. Some of it might go to the area so they could hire consultants or planners to help, and we would work in tandem with the heritage partner. When we had five or six projects going on someone said we had to simplify and put all of these projects in one place. They might be scattered throughout, some in Rivers and Trails, some in Park Planning, a line-item appropriation and program, etc. Our budget planners like to categorize things and keep them *accountable*. Put them all in their own box.

When heritage areas were categorized and boxed, NPS began to retain, or some would say *take* some funding for administrative and overhead. Then an amount was needed to cover regional staff or planners and so on. The rest would go out to the heritage areas. Every unit in the NPS has a line item in the budget. Heritage areas are moving in that direction. Basically, a line item for each heritage area and then a portion stays with NPS and a portion goes out to the heritage area. There is a need for a line item for NPS to administer heritage areas so that we can properly staff and work with the heritage areas. If there was national legislation that provided for the administrative overhead NPS headquarters would likely keep an amount and then dole all the rest out to the regions for their administration and technical assistance duties. The regions would be

in a better position to hire dedicated staff for heritage areas. That would be in addition to each heritage area having a line item based on what Congress determined is appropriate for that particular place. Years ago, sunset provisions were in vogue and most of the heritage areas had one. Congress would fund this program but say in ten years this legislation and the money expires. It was not in perpetuity. The units of the NPS are in perpetuity. I think the longevity is undecided right now and that affects how funding is allocated and how it might go in the future.

The most important thing to keep in mind about heritage areas is that it's still an evolving concept. It's going to take many, many years before we can define what constitutes a heritage area and actually define and deliver an effective heritage program.

Challenges: Within the NPS the greatest challenge is being able to muster the time, resources, and talents to work with heritage areas in the present fiscal environment. How much can be done within the existing capacity available? Heritage areas, as explained earlier, are not a priority of the NPS because we have to necessarily take care of the parks we have. That is a challenge in and of itself. Secondly, planning is a very important part of the heritage process. Heritage areas are more of a planning project and can be viewed as an investment in the future. I personally believe it is an investment that will pay off and I don't think the concept will go away. If the NPS leadership commits to dedicating talented planners and positions to working with heritage areas, they can become an important part of the national system of parks.

Criteria to measure NPS Regions' success with heritage areas: It is critically important to the heritage areas and to the NPS that we can describe and measure the value of heritage areas externally as well internally. How were partnerships increased? How were funds leveraged? How did this help communities? You need to be able to quantify results and show the relationship of the heritage areas to the National Park System. How many people were reached? How many acres, buildings or places were conserved? How about visitation, tourism and land value? What was the general benefit? I think that measurable criteria are being developed and there are documented results. Assessing the benefits and economic impacts of heritage is necessary but it's a complicated undertaking and it requires resources. As someone once told me, if it's easy to do, it's probably not important. Internally we need some criteria too. How's our customer service? Are the funds we use spent efficiently and effectively? Administrative accountability of how and on what the money was spent. Benefited other units of the NPS? The partnerships are solid, well understood and developed. There is good communication going on between the heritage areas and the NPS at all levels. You have to be able to quantify these things both inside and outside in order to evaluate them fully and be able to convey this to the public. It is essential to have open communication and Transparency. It requires shared information between Washington, the regions, parks and the heritage areas.

Heritage areas were largely a northeastern phenomenon. I had the pleasure of working in the planning program and with heritage areas in the Northeast from 1980 on. Looking back, I can say I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time. It was a time when a lot was going on in the Northeast. From a planning perspective it was a period of high energy and creativity. We had a great group of people to work with and the regional leaders were supportive. They dedicated resources to planning and they were firmly committed to working with communities and the public.

In 2000 and 2001 I also had the pleasure of sharing the heritage concept with Italy and other countries that were establishing national park systems. The heritage approach was viewed as a tool to help conserve large landscapes and engage communities within them. This idea (heritage areas) was starting to emerge in the west.

In 2002, I facilitated a meeting we called *East Goes West*. At that meeting we brought together people from across the country, the NPS and heritage areas. It was a time when the energy around heritage converged and some of the thinking about a national heritage program began to take form. I thought that was an important moment. Never before had all the regional offices and Washington and park superintendents and all of the heritage areas gotten together. That was a big deal in my mind. I think the discussions there helped people look at the broader picture and put the *National* to the heritage area idea.