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National Heritage Areas Administrative History Project



Larry Williamson
October 25, 2017

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508 compliant version by Jessica Lamb

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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
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This transcript was reviewed by Larry Williamson

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I worked for an agency called the Pennsylvania Department of Community Affairs (DCA). In that department we had a Bureau of Recreation and Conservation (BRC). I was the bureau director. We had several regional offices spread around the commonwealth, one of those being headquartered in Scranton up in the northeast part of Pennsylvania. I had a regional advisor, Allen Sachse, who worked for the BRC, and we had a director, Ray Angeli, in that Scranton office who was sort of the manager of all the different bureaus within the Department from the regional level. They were aware of what New York was doing with their urban cultural parks program and the Lowell National Historic Site in Massachusetts. Because DCA dealt with a lot of issues of communities like economic development, human resources, planning, local government services, recreation and conservation, they got somewhat excited about these two programs in Massachusetts and New York and how they were interacting with communities at the local level. They cornered me one day as the bureau director and asked if I would be interested in pursuing a new program within the agency to look at creating something similar to the Massachusetts and New York models in Pennsylvania. I have to admit that I sort of reluctantly agreed to commit to take it on but as I got more involved in it, I got more excited, and my involvement and commitment increased.

The situation at the time when we decided that we were going to try to interject this program into the DCA was like most programs in most states at the time, there were budget issues. We were trying to figure out a strategy on how to implement a new program in a department and state government that was not experiencing a lot of revenue.

I got together some of my fellow state workers in other agencies like the Historic Museum Commission, Cultural Affairs, the Department of Environmental Resources. I knew a lot of these people from work on other projects and programs. A key person was Brenda Barrett. Brenda was running some programs in the Historic Preservation Office. I introduced this concept to them and judged their reaction to it and whether they would work on helping us implement something. Everybody got excited about it.

The strategy that we decided to use was both a political strategy and a financial strategy. We were going to try to introduce the program through our budget process within DCA. To do that we had to prepare a request to the governor's budget office that outlined the whole program and requested \$250,000 to implement the program. The governor at the time was Governor (Robert P.) Casey who was from Scranton. We knew that we would have somewhat of a chance of success if we could get this program started and initiated in the governor's home turf. Basically, we sold the governor on a model for this program that would involve his region, which became the Lackawanna Valley Heritage Area, the first state heritage area we had in Pennsylvania. The program format that we had was to use this \$250,000 to try to entice other regions in the Commonwealth to submit a request to us to do a feasibility study of whether or not this particular region could undertake the different kinds of planning and partnership building that we had worked into our guidelines and whether or not the historic and cultural and natural resources would support implementation of a heritage area. If they were deemed to be feasible, we would give them a grant to undertake a management action plan. The feasibility study wasn't a comprehensive study, but it would give us enough information to make us feel comfortable that

we would want to proceed with development of a management action plan. We figured that we would have enough money in the \$250,000. to do two or three feasibility studies and management action plans.

To our surprise, when the first round of these feasibility studies applications came in, I think we got about ten or twelve of them. We knew then that the program was going to be really, really popular. But we also knew that we would have to have more money if we wanted to go full steam ahead with these applications. In the second year of our budget for the program we doubled our money amount to \$500,000. We ended up approving out of those dozen applications about seven or eight of the regions to start undertaking their feasibility studies with the understanding that if they were found to be feasible they would have to undertake creation of a management action plan which was a more comprehensive planning process that involved a total, thorough, and specific analysis of the resources they had in the region and identification of the geographic area, the management structure they would set up to run the heritage park, and identification of how they would meet the goals that we had established for the heritage parks. Those studies could cost \$200,000 to \$250,000.

We started moving the feasibility studies as they were approved into management action plans. These plans took a year to two years to complete. They were the key to the success of not only the program but of the individual heritage parks. Over the years we changed the name of the heritage parks program to the heritage areas program because the word parks caused a lot of confusion. Most people when they think of a park they think of a specific location. People would think that the heritage parks were singular location type parks and we wanted to convey the more regional aspect of the areas.

Once we started moving the areas through their management action plans, we had to constantly, in the following years budgets, try to get an increased funding level not only to cover the cost of these comprehensive management action plans but the management action plans laid out the capital development and programmatic costs over a ten-year period of what these areas would do to implement the management action plan. What facilities were they going to try to develop? What cultural heritage were they going to present? What their capacity and structure would be. How they would handle promotion marketing. How they would handle the restoration of historic buildings and historic sites. How they would develop tourism promotion and marketing strategies. How they would raise local funds. How they would develop the partnerships that would be needed to make for success. The management action plan would identify their scope of work over a ten-year period that would be millions and millions of dollars.

As we began the implementation of these management action plans, we would go into each budget cycle and ask for an increase in the funding for the program. Every year for probably six, seven years we were pretty successful in getting the additional funds that we needed up to a point where we were getting about half of what was needed, about \$2.5 to 3 million a year. By the time we had reached that point we were able to stretch those dollars across the heritage areas we had at the time. We started implementing and that is where we are today.

We have a dozen heritage areas that have been designated. Every one of them is regional in scope involving several counties. Every one of them has a manager. A difference in our

program to that of other states is that we help pay for the managers from the program funding. That assures the program is going to be professionally managed with a person there that is committed to implementing the management action plan and continuing the good work that is being done in each area.

Relationship to the NPS: Early in the process of planning the program, because Lowell, Massachusetts was a national heritage area and New York's urban cultural park program had National Park Service involvement, we knew right away that we wanted the National Park Service to come in and help us with our program. They had some expertise that we probably didn't have and experience we didn't have. Probably the key person at that time was a gentleman named Glenn Eugster. He helped set up a conference with New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania to have New York and Massachusetts present the details of their programs. We took a lot of that information and studied it, and I then formed a committee of those people I initially got together from the other state agencies, and we took that information and prepared the guidelines, and concept and format for our program. We didn't use all the stuff. We decided that on some of the issues we would go off on our own tangents. We wanted to expand the program beyond the community level which is why we made it a requirement that the heritage parks in Pennsylvania would have to be regional in scope.

From the very beginning we had a lot of National Park Service technical assistance. We had some really great people helping us not only with the program in general, but with the specific areas. In each of our heritage park areas we tried to get NPS involvement in the programs especially in the development of the management action plans. One of the things that became clear was that each of these areas in Pennsylvania had some kind of NPS involvement, whether it was National Park Service funding, or technical assistance from their Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance program. We started off with a very good working relationship with the NPS. We also looked at the NPS to help us financially through a federal state partnership to be able to fund a lot of these state heritage parks with federal and state dollars matching each other. Because the federal government was going through a similar budget situation to the states, we were mostly provided technical assistance, staff support from the NPS. We had a hard time getting any dollars from them. They would sometimes be able to match projects with some of their programs for actual project development. But, for the most part, we were not getting an appropriation from them. Over the years we started working with them on developing a national heritage areas program itself, not just specific projects like Lowell. I think there was a lot of pressure put on the NPS regional staff to not create another program in the NPS that was going to result in some additional money that they were going to have to get through their budget process.

Over the years we constantly kept hammering at the NPS regional people to take the concept of a national heritage areas program to leadership in Washington. We started to chip away at the wall of concerns. We started nominating some of our state heritage areas to become national heritage areas. They wanted to use the Pennsylvania model as their format for setting up a funding initiative that would be able to provide annual dollars into heritage areas and suddenly across the nation other heritage areas and programs started popping up. I spent a lot of time traveling around the nation talking to other states about our model.

We are sort of proud that the national heritage areas got started through the input that we had provided to the NPS and in working with them in developing the program format, the program guidelines and all that goes into creating a new program. Pennsylvania has been very successful. We have five or six that are a combination of national and state heritage areas. Generally, they were getting annual allocations of federal dollars and we would match those federal dollars with annual allocations we were getting of state dollars. In both situations, every year is a budget battle to make sure that we get these annual allocations to these national heritage areas. I know that when we started the national heritage areas program a lot of our state heritage area managers became part of a coalition of National Heritage Areas (the Alliance of National Heritage Areas) that would be the voice of the national heritage areas movement to get Congress and the President to allocate funding every year.

Funding: It is the same in Pennsylvania, every year we have to go through the budget process and fight for the appropriation of money. We are trying to change that in Pennsylvania. I am the volunteer chairman of a coalition, *Growing Greener 3*. It is a Pennsylvania program to provide funding for recreation, conservation and preservation projects. We are trying to get the third phase of the program started to give us more money to do these recreational, conservation, and restoration projects. As part of that program, we are trying to get a set aside for our heritage areas. If we are successful, we wouldn't have to fight for the money every year. We're hopefully going to come up with a dedicated source of funding that is more secure. We are shooting for \$5 million every year which is about double what they are getting now.

At the federal level, for many, many years we tried to get this same concept into the federal budgeting process that lets them develop an active program created by legislation that would have a more permanent dedicated set aside of money so that every year they wouldn't have to go through their congressman to get it through the budget process. Ten or fifteen years ago I helped write a couple of pieces of legislation to try to get this program implemented through the NPS, but it just didn't seem to ever get off the ground. I assume that battle is still going on. I assume there is still an Alliance of National Heritage Areas trying to get this piece of legislation passed and this program started.

The reason we have been able to restore the money every year through our legislators is that they see the importance of the program. Our first selling point with the legislature is economic development, tourism and small business growth. Legislators change every year. With new legislators it is an educational process that our managers are very good at: a process that shows them the value of this in their district. We continually get this new influx of support for the program.

Oversight of Pennsylvania State Heritage Areas: The DRC has oversight of all the monies going to the heritage areas. There is a lot of paperwork required to make sure that the money the areas get is being spent properly. Every so many years the Commonwealth Auditor General's office does an oversight audit. As part of the oversight the big concern is making sure that the managers are using their operational administrative dollars properly. The managers all know that there is a threat of an audit to make sure that they are not doing anything improperly. We have a very rigorous final payment. They have to account for every dollar spent. A lot of the managers will hire an audit company to come in and do the audit. A manager may implement a dozen

projects in a particular year with funding and if they feel that a project that goes out to a non-profit group or municipality to undertake might be mismanaged, they can do an audit of that particular project. When I was there, we kept track of our state money separately. Federal money we assumed was the responsibility of the NPS.

State involvement in National Heritage Areas: My comment, in 1992, (about the need for more state involvement in the national heritage area designations), was from the perspective that the states are sort of in the middle and it may not apply to other states' programs where the NPS might be dealing directly with a single project. Like, for instance, Lowell, Massachusetts where it is a national historic site. In Pennsylvania, where we are dealing with multiple regions, multiple areas, we felt very strongly that the only way the NPS could be involved in these regional projects could be through us. That we were in the middle of the NPS and our local municipalities and non-profits. We felt very strongly that we wanted to be in control of what the NPS involvement was going to be. We wanted to be a funnel for all information coming down from the NPS and up from the local area. In Pennsylvania the NPS was okay with that. Obviously, we would be doing a lot of the work and we were spending a lot of the money. I think they felt comfortable with that. In other states that might not work, especially if there is only one project in the state. I think that was the big difference. We didn't want the NPS running around behind our backs working with our municipalities or projects without us knowing everything that was going on.

Coalition for National Heritage Areas: I was working with the Coalition more in trying to get a national heritage areas program started, helped draft some legislation. Most of the interest in the national heritage areas concept at that time was coming from the Northeast. They wanted to use a lot of the stuff that we did as a model. In the first pieces of legislation that we drafted you'll see it matches up with our program in terms of feasibility studies, management action plans, allocation for funding, partnership building, and what kind of resources you could look at. A lot of that was the same.

There was always a problem with trying to break down the barrier between the regional offices and the leadership in Washington NPS. I can't remember exactly how that played out. I have to admit that there was outside of Pennsylvania, and maybe New York and Massachusetts and a couple of other states like Ohio, not much interest in Congress in this concept. I do know that after a period of time a lot of people (members of the Coalition) just gave up. The interested states just figured we would go along on our own.

There was an overwhelming fear of change. We were fortunate in Pennsylvania because we began our program in the Governor's home district, where he grew up. I think, personally, he realized the culture of his area and all the resources it had, and it could be an economic development strategy for his area. I don't know how other states got their programs started but that was one of the lessons we tried to convey to other states, the importance of the politics. We always have problems with Congress trying to accept the change. The other problem is that anything that requires more money in the budget gets a second look because they are always trying to figure out how to fund new programs.

The National Center for Heritage Development: I believe the Alliance (of National Heritage Areas) found some money to hire a full-time executive director. Al Rosenbaum might have been that person. I worked with Alvin a lot on legislation and how we could expand the program. I was asked to be a volunteer consultant to run around the country. They (the Alliance) ran out of money to pay Alvin and that movement ended.

Accomplishments of Pennsylvania State Heritage Area program: There are many different projects, but I think the biggest accomplishment is that we've been able to keep the existence of Pennsylvania's twelve heritage areas for so many years. In today's budget climate we are still a major player in the DCNR budget and the state budget. It is not a whole lot of money, but just to have a program like this become successful enough that we can convince our legislators to restore the money every year and the fact that we are now looking at a permanent dedicated source of funding is a major accomplishment. The popularity of it has increased in the last couple of years even in the bad budget years of the state. We haven't had any of the twelve drop out. Occasionally we would get inquiries from other areas wanting to become a state heritage area but for the most part they wouldn't qualify and with our regional concept we already cover 80 to 90% of Pennsylvania. So, there is not a whole lot of room for other heritage areas.

Another success story might be when we went over to the DCNR from DCA. The DCNR looked at the program with a leery eye because DCNR is primarily a state parks and forests agency. The Bureau of Recreation and Conservation, which dealt with mostly communities and non-profit groups, was a stepchild in DCNR in terms of their priorities even though the legislation that created DCNR said that they should deal with heritage areas. Over the years I think we have become very successful at convincing the DCNR leadership, the cabinet secretaries, that this program is an extremely important asset to the agency. We have been able to work with our individual heritage areas and change some of their projects and their goals to deal more with DCNR related goals and accomplishments, specifically dealing with greenways and trails and rivers conservation. A lot of the work that heritage areas are doing now is projects dealing with conservation and recreation types of initiatives in line with what DCNR wants to do in terms of working on more parks and trails. A lot of the heritage areas are actually implementing DCNR type projects in their state parks and state forests. That marriage, which got off to a rocky start, has had a happy successful ending. Again, the flexibility of our heritage managers to be able to pull this off is noteworthy.

If we get enough money to handle the current implementation of the management action plans, I would like to see the whole program be evaluated on whether it should continue in the same direction or go off on some tangents of other priorities we need to address in the commonwealth.

The legislation that we passed in 2017 gives the heritage areas a certain foundation of money so that they know every year they would be getting an amount of money that they could count on. We were told that the legislation would not be passed if we put an appropriation in it so we had to take that out and still will have to go through the budget negotiations each year.

Challenges: The movement of the heritage area program from one department to another was a challenge. The only other reasonable agency that could be a home for the heritage areas now would be the Department of Community and Economic Development. There would be more of a

relationship and priority with community revitalization, and tourism economic development with that agency. But the community development aspect of that agency over the years has been cut and they have been more focused on state-wide economic development. So, I don't think our program would be as widely accepted in that agency as we currently are in DCNR. We had to work pretty hard in making sure that we became a viable program and an important one in DCNR and I would hate to lose all that hard work.

The primary challenge was the budget. The program funding would be zeroed out and we would have to spend a lot of time, especially the heritage area managers going back to their legislators and convincing them that this is a viable program that is good for their political districts and constituents. You get the money restored and the next year you go through the same thing. The biggest challenge right now is trying to find some kind of dedicated and more permanent funding, so they don't have to spend so much time on the politics of trying to keep their areas going.

I also had the challenge of convincing some staff in my bureau that this program was worthwhile. It was a major change from the goals and activities of our bureau. For years we were primarily focused on community parks, trails, and community recreation areas, and the staff that worked on those projects had a hard time of understanding the concept. Why do we want to preserve a historic building, the culture of the area? I'm sure there are still some people opposed to it in the bureau, but it is not a major problem. The challenge of trying to get people to change is major.

Sunsetting: I did (believe that they should sunset) when we first started the program and put in our guidelines and application materials that we expected the heritage areas in Pennsylvania to be self-sufficient in ten years. It wasn't a sunset clause because we knew that we were experimenting so didn't actually say that in a sunset clause. We suggested that our goal was that at the end of the ten years of implementation the area would be self-sufficient enough that they could raise local funds and we could back out of the program, and we would add other areas. Two things happened. We were hit so heavily by the popularity of the concept from the beginning. We thought that we could do one or two of these a year for five or six years. Well, we were amazed at the number of applications that we got. People liked the concept and wanted to be part of it in the beginning. We didn't have the luxury of graduating any. We thought that ten years would be enough to do this graduation. We got twelve of them established right away and knew it would not be feasible for us to add any more as we were covering 80 to 90% of the state with the twelve areas.

Another reason was that after starting the process we saw how ridiculous it was to put a ten-year limit on them. We wiped that out of our guidelines. After that we never thought about the idea of closing them out.

There is just so much to do in a region. I can see where the NPS might look at something like Lowell, a singular site, in ten years they might be able to accomplish their implementation strategy. But to look at a region, some of our regions cover a dozen counties, to be able to implement all of the projects in those counties that deal with cultural, historic, recreational, and partnership building, it is definitely going to take more than ten years. I wouldn't even try to

guess how long it would take to implement all the possibilities in one of our regions. We completely abandoned the idea that there was going to be a sunset.