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Michael Creasey
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Transcribed by Antoinette Condo
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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

Michael Creasey
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Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Antoinette J. Condo
The narrator was asked to review the transcript, but did not.

Michael Creasey Interview: October 25, 2016

Early interest in heritage areas: I was a planner in the regional office, and we were one of the first to begin to do heritage areas studies. That was back in the early 1990s. Heritage areas were a way of looking at conservation and had dynamic partnership roles for lots of different people that looked at cultural landscapes in ways that could help tell stories and preserve lands and waters. Help look at communities in ways for both economic and conservation purposes. So, I think, it was one of these blendings. I don't care if you were in the west, south-west, or the east wherever, but if you look at thinking more in a large landscape scale not in the boundary confines you find yourself in the heritage business.

I have always been in the heritage area business. I am in a heritage area right now even though we don't call it by that name. I have three national parks, of which, only 45 acres is owned by the NPS and 1800 acres are in boundaries.

NPS responsibilities: We went from four national heritage areas (NHA) to twelve and then up to eighteen and continued to grow. As it continued to grow the designations were different which meant that the partnerships were a little less integrated into the NPS's way of working with the heritage area in the field. So, I think that there was less money, less people, less capacity. The overall program grew. It never really evolved with the intent of having the NPS evolve and be a strong partner with the designated heritage area.

Part of it was that we just lost so much capacity, had less to give. At the same time the heritage areas themselves were very interested in having a relationship with the NPS and there were a lot of times that that never developed, and this led to a lot of expectations that were not being met. Led to some frustrations from the heritage areas toward the NPS because they didn't know our culture, didn't know our policies. They didn't know why we were doing certain things that we were doing for certain reasons. They thought they were coming in and the money would be flowing out to the heritage areas.

That became somewhat confusing to the non-profit, authority, commission or whatever it was that was in the field. The NPS didn't step up into a broader leadership role to bring those folks aligned to what we had to offer.

I don't put all the blame on the NPS. If you look at what is being asked of these heritage areas in their legislations, it was pretty onerous and pretty challenging given the amount of funding, amount of resources and then saying they are going to do all these things. In my case when I was at the Blackstone for a decade, we basically said we need to clean up one of the first polluted rivers in America. We needed to stimulate economic development in mill villages and mill towns that had been decaying for decades. We were supposed to preserve historic structures and bring them back to life from years and years of decay. On top of all of that we were supposed to bring back economic vitality, build bikeways and all this other stuff. And that was all within five years. You had this unreasonable timeframe and all of them have sunsets, which is a question. If you match up the sunset clauses with the actual intention of the legislation, I would think there is way too much expectation on behalf of Congress to be able to do this stuff in a very short period of time. There is an imbalance in what Congress is asking these heritage areas to do,

which is basically mimicking national park units which are built for perpetuity but asking these areas to do it in five, ten, fifteen, twenty years. There is an imbalance there.

I think you have to look at what was being legislated in terms of the national park and our responsibilities out to these heritage areas. I think it was a lot given the resources that were pretty much limited.

Sunset: I don't disagree with the sunset. First off designation should be in perpetuity but as these areas are being designated, we need to have stronger criteria that allows these places to be able to be successful. It takes time to build the kind of relationships that are intended for heritage areas. You don't just walk in with little or no money and say, ok, we are going to do all these wonderful things. It takes time to build those relationships with communities and non-profits, agencies. To give somebody ten years – it takes five to seven years to build the kind of relationships you need in order to get people energized and activated. You need to consider that, or you might have to adjust your sunset period a little bit longer. I don't have an opinion on ten or twenty (years to sunset). I think better it should have criteria for selecting NHAs, and part of it should be defining a better role for the NPS if they are actually going to be part of the family there.

Feasibility study: There was some criteria that was developed a long time ago and went back and forth and back and forth and I don't know where it's at now. I would go with what was proposed back in the mid-2000s. I don't think that having an ad hoc designation system, meaning that Congress says, ok I want x, y, z heritage area and then they do their own criteria. If it's going to be part of the NPS family then we, the NPS, should be doing the study as we do for park units. Oversee it from the planning and legislative office.

Program legislation: Basically, NPS doesn't have a program and so it's all ad hoc. We should continue to advocate for a program. If we are going to have a National Heritage Areas Program, then we should have program legislation. In the program legislation we should have criteria in terms of the feasibility of what should be designated a National Heritage Area. I do believe that if we just let the political process roll these places out it doesn't do the NPS any good and probably doesn't do the area any good because five or ten years from now nobody will even know what it means because it wasn't built right. I support program legislation that would define all those things right up front.

The program legislation should have built into it the language of what that criteria and feasibility should be. We may define differences in areas. Some areas may have stronger relationships with NPS than others. The problem I see right now with some of the heritage areas is an ad hoc conglomerate not truly a program. They are all individual. There is not a program. They are not considered a NPS unit.

Blackstone Commission: I was a big advocate of the commission itself. The way that the NPS and the commission worked hand in hand and advocated for goals in the two-state region was really powerful. It was much more powerful than a non-profit entity because it represented a large area, two states, eight members of Congress, forty-four cities and towns. It was a really great body of believers in the whole way of thinking of landscapes. Combining economic

development with historic preservation, environmental restoration and recreation, and landscape management. We needed that kind of body in order to move us forward and it gave us tremendous leverage at the state and local government level. It gave us tremendous leverage with other federal agencies whether it was the Army Corps, Fish and Wildlife, or EPA and others. The commission itself was a really effective tool and I know that we look down upon commissions these days, but it made the association with the NPS.

My position as executive director was appointed by the regional director as well as the chairman of the commission. They both had a stake in and that forced the NPS and the heritage corridor to work together and it really elevated our role. At the time, the commission was something that worked well for us in the Blackstone.

The fact that we had a term limit or a sunset forced people to think towards action rather than bureaucratic strategies. We worked really hard. We had an attitude of thinking very entrepreneurially. A lean start-up approach to how do we begin to look at our organization's ability to leverage other peoples' actions. A collective impact model on the landscape itself and begin to give people hope in an area that had economic challenges and community challenges.

We had a great organizational structure that mixed planning with storytelling, place making, fund raising, leveraging dollars, outdoor recreation development and historic preservation planning. All using the resources the NPS had at its disposal. We began to activate some of the places that were pretty run down through historic preservation. It was set up right.

We had great opportunities because people believed in it. I'm not sure that people in some heritage areas believe in it because they don't know enough about it. Or, it became too political or one local organization might have wanted something, the money or the prestige of the designation and didn't give thought to building power at the local level.

I think Blackstone was different. We built some things from the ground up. The commission gave us our stature as well as leveraging money. There are hundreds of non-profits in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and for the commission to step forward and have all these state agencies and non-profits and others working on the commission level with the staff of the NPS, it made for a good 1,2,3 punch.

The commission members were appointed by the governors, appointed by the Secretary, and by local agencies from people with some expertise. Somebody needed a background in historic preservation. Someone needed a background in museums and storytelling, and things like that. There were 19 members on the commission.

The commission had fiscal oversight of all the moneys it received. I had a treasurer just like you would have in a certain non-profit. There were checks and balances of how the money was expended. We ran two books. One for the commission and one for the NPS. We had multiple sources of money; NPS money funded some of the staff through a technical assistance statutory aid fund account, money that went directly to the commission, and grant funds. It was somewhat complicated but a lot less complicated than it is right now.

The factories on the river had all ceased working by the mid-1950s. Either shuttered and not being used or used for storage. It wasn't until the 1980s when the heritage area came into play that they started reusing them (the old factories) for housing and commercial retail to some extent. Historic preservation tax credits had a lot to do with the whole rejuvenation of the fabric of the Blackstone. A huge help. Couldn't have done it without it. When Worcester came into the corridor, we had great help with the environmental movement from the Audubon and some of the Land Trust, the city's Department of Environmental Management and visitor's center, and the state agency that ran the headwaters, and the schools were very strong. Worcester was a strong advocate at the time. We did have different levels of support depending on what the community had the desire to pursue.

We had lots of visitors to the Blackstone, NPS Directors, DOI Secretaries, members of Congress, everybody wanted to come and bottle up what we had and take it across the country and show what could be done in these landscape style parks. I had President Clinton come as did Directors Kennedy, Mainela, and Bomar. I had a lot of visitors to the Blackstone because of its success. It says a lot for what was going on at the time. We were front page news on every newspaper from Providence to Worcester any time a cabinet member or president or congressman from out of state came on study tours of the area. We always took advantage when we knew some of these people were coming. We would hype it as best we could to the advantage of the Blackstone communities.

Charting the Future...: I traveled around the country with the members of the Advisory Board Partnership Committee as staff. A lot of reports were crafted to try and get people in the NPS to understand what these things (heritage areas) were. The biggest thing that never came to fruition was the idea of having program legislation. That would allow the NPS to have a programmatic idea of what their responsibilities were and a budget and feasibility studies and criteria of how they come into the system. The positive side of that report was that it elevated the understanding for heritage areas. The downside is I don't think it moved the mark in terms of how we have done anything from a programmatic standpoint.

Difference between Lowell NHP and a National Heritage Area: Lowell is in perpetuity and has a base budget of about \$9 million annually. NPS owns properties in Lowell. But, honestly, Lowell is a heritage area. It's the entire city. The downtown district of Lowell is within the boundaries of the national park. The designation as a national park gave the NPS responsibility for management and interpretation. You could take Blackstone and Lowell and overlay them, and the difference would be that the NPS didn't own anything in Blackstone.

The parks I have right now, the first paragraph of the management plan for Boston National Historical Park, created about the same time (as Lowell), says, "... the creation of the Boston NHP signifies an entirely new character for the NPS. This park of nine historic properties of various ownerships will be managed jointly by the NPS and the organizations associated with the site. This general management plan is intended to reflect both a national constituency and the needs and interests of the people, communities, and organizations that have procured the preservation of these national treasures." Boston Harbor Islands is the same thing. I don't own anything in the Boston Harbor Islands. There are 34 islands and peninsula in Boston Harbor National Park. We own nothing. But I have a permanent responsibility, this is why I get back to

perpetuity, management responsibility. Boston African American National Historic Site the same way. I own nothing there, not the Black Heritage Trail, not the Shaw Memorial, not the Abiel Smith School, not the Museum of African American History but all of them are in the national park. So, the idea of partnership is not new and not dead. It is about how we define these places. Some of the places are defined in much smaller landscapes than others. It is something that I wish everybody would start paying attention to. We have heritage areas that are not called heritage areas all over the park system. We have partnership parks that are just like heritage areas except that they are embedded in the NPS. There is criteria that has set those places out to be part of the NPS system not just out there in some ad hoc area.

My whole philosophy is embedded in how you look at larger landscapes beyond boundaries. How you look at leveraging what I have from the NPS with others and how do we really begin to look much more broadly at our role within society, within these communities. From my planning days to the Blackstone to Lowell to National Parks of New York Harbor to Saint Gaudens to Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller to Boston Harbor, 32 years which have given me a pretty good perspective of how the NPS works as a whole, but heritage areas and partnership parks will continue to be where the future is of the NPS. It has been a real value to me to have both the planning background and a decade of being director of one of these places.

Evaluations: Generically national parks and national heritage areas, we should all be evaluating ourselves in one form or another. I think any business that doesn't evaluate its bottom line is probably going to fail at some point in time. The difference is, if the bottom line fails for a heritage area then they pay the consequences. If a national park fails you keep getting the same amount of money, the same amount of people. There is very little incentive for national parks to be super successful. Whereas heritage area, we treat them differently.

I am an advocate for evaluation. We apply it to everything we do. I think it is just healthy for all organizations to do it. We shouldn't be treating heritage areas like if you don't meet the standard you don't get the extra dollar. I don't know how we use the evaluation to encourage people to be successful. I think we evaluate them because Congress wants to know if they are successful. And then we don't do anything with it. Yes, we should evaluate but I'm not sure why we are evaluating. Or, what they do with the evaluations.

I did an evaluation for Blackstone that was titled, "Reflecting the Past, Envisioning the Future." When I left after 20 years, we did a sustainability study for the Blackstone. Through the Conservation Study Group, we did evaluations for Blackstone, Cane River, and Lehigh and Delaware. Then that evaluation process turned into something a bit more substantial, and Congress had a ruling that we needed to do so many evaluations and here's what you are doing. So, we did them a different way. But what are we doing with those evaluations? Are the units doing them in a way to help them be more successful or achieve their mission? Or are we just using them to say, gotcha, or? It's not certainly used to get the heritage areas any more money. Not used to get program legislation. Not used to define whether you should have a sunset or live in perpetuity. I'm not sure that the reasons we are doing evaluations are contributing to anything to make the place better or contributing to the overall system better. I haven't tracked them for over five years or so.

The evaluation should look at the legislation defined purpose. The way we crafted our evaluation with the Blackstone was to determine if we met our goals; historic restoration, environmental restoration, outdoor recreation development, economic development, interpretation, storytelling, and we had to match our monies ten to one. Did we match our money? Did we meet the mission? And how then do you find that out? A lot of people would want to go directly to the bottom line and look at your books, the spending, the leveraging. But, really, what was the outcome? Part of this, building the relationships and network. The stronger your networks are, the stronger the heritage area will ultimately be. So, we added another layer that looked at the social networks of the corridor itself. Where did we begin when the corridor was designated in 1986? What were the relationships? Who was engaged with the creation of the heritage corridor? Over time did we grow those partnerships, relationships? Also, over time, what investments were made. That's what we looked at and I think we should still look at the strength of the network, strengths of our partnerships over time because ultimately that's going to be your sustainability factor and your leverage.

It may not be the economic valuation of place overall but if that is part of your mission how can you not evaluate it? Why is the NPS getting involved with economic development if there is no heritage related to it? So, it really should focus on the heritage. Economic development of that (heritage restoration/conservation), not did we bring in fracking businesses, a casino. Did I bring in an auto plant?

There is a real difference between just generic economic development and heritage development. Defining that up front would be pretty important. It depends on what you are established to do. Do you evaluate it, or do you allow others to talk about why this particular landscape is important and that's why they contributed to it?

There should be a sustainability factor in there. It's really important in evaluations but especially when you have a sunset clause.

Legislation: The legislation should not be too prescriptive. These things change. Landscapes change, partnerships change, NPS changes, leadership changes. You set some broad principles, based on why they have been set aside. That piece you should have really tight. Once they are established and go into operation there shouldn't be a cookie cutter approach about how heritage areas work. That would be pretty non-productive.

Value of heritage areas to the NPS: It expands our constituency. It expands congressional understanding of what the NPS is meant to do in our country. It provides for greater diversity of the types of stories and landscapes and people and places that get interpreted. If the NPS were to accept heritage areas I think they have tremendous value in thinking about it in those ways. But, I think we have a ways to go there. It's our future. It's really important that we understand now how we work within these landscapes and how we work in partnership and how we leverage our work with other peoples. We just can't do it all. We need to pay attention to where the heritage area movement has come from and where it's going. The more and more you see national parks being established now days. They may be national parks, but they certainly look like national heritage areas to me.

Best use of NPS by a heritage area: The brand is significant. If they didn't want to be affiliated with the national park brand, why is it a heritage area? Why not just create a non-profit organization and call yourself something else? We just saw in the centennial how the NPS means a lot to the American people.

The brand most importantly but then there are the NPS and heritage area values that should come hand in hand. The opportunity to share resources. Share ideas and understand the traditions of the NPS and also how we can learn from the entrepreneurial spirit of the heritage areas. You're connected with 23,000 employees and 413 national parks, there's got to be something you can learn from all of that muscle power. Brand, network, and resources.

End notes: Congress has a lot to do with the way the heritage areas are set up. It is important for the requirements and management styles of the heritage areas and their relationship to the NPS. NPS is put in a funny spot in that they have some responsibility but do not get enough money to adequately exercise this responsibility. This has to some extent fueled a love-hate relationship between heritage area directors and the NPS. Cracking that nut would be huge after 20 years of asking the question of why certain things haven't taken place. There is so much that needs to be worked out in the relationship that never was.