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National Heritage Areas Administrative History Project



Stephen Morris
July 13, 2015

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
Transcribed by Antoinette Condo
Reviewed by Stephen Morris
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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

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Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Stephen Morris

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Primary work on National Heritage Areas: I was working with Sam (Stokes) and worked on heritage areas from mid-1996 through 1997. I was in the Cultural Resources Program and Sam asked me to work on the work group that Deny Galvin had established to develop criteria for national heritage areas under the assumption that Congress might pass legislation with criteria. He thought the NPS should work out for itself what we would want to see in such a program. I was working in the Battlefield Protection Program in Cultural Resources at the time. That's how I got involved, because Sam asked me if I would work with him on national heritage areas. Phyllis Ellin was one of the members of the work group. We could focus the heritage areas and lay out a program in a better way so that Congress would buy into this approach. Then we could get heritage areas that would be a justifiable or defensible program.

Eventually Judy Hart ended up heading the program. We had some time together on the program and she became the lead. There may have been some tension with the heritage areas themselves. They were unhappy with the service the NPS was providing them. I'm sure that has been a leitmotif through the years. They were unhappy with the NPS. I think they saw Judy as an ally, and it gave them someone new to work with. I was the junior person. I was not in the lead at all. I remember going to a meeting with her (Judy Hart) at Salem, MA and it was the first meeting in which she was in charge. There had been a lot of tension and it was kind of an iffy situation. It was an Alliance of National Heritage Areas meeting that we were invited to. The working group had finished by then as I recall. They came out with a list of recommendations.

Heritage areas sunseting: I remember that the idea was the heritage areas would get a limited amount of seed money to get themselves set up and then they would eventually go off the dole and be self-supporting. I thought in theory it was a reasonable idea. The government couldn't afford to continually spend the money on these areas if they were not going to be true national parks. I think it was Deny Galvin's effort to keep Congress at bay so they wouldn't be continually adding units to the park system, but we could offer Congress something to have the prestige of the NPS for a time. They are just responding to their constituents to get help. This way the government could lend a hand without becoming forever responsible for these areas for ever and ever. I thought it was reasonable. I think, in reality this was naive.

Goals of Heritage areas: I thought the heritage area push for tourism and economic development was fine. If you can't find reasonable uses for old buildings and old structures they are not going to be around. Have to make them useful in a modern society or they will be dispensable. I did worry that they might not be protecting the resources but only just be a tourism promotion thing. The balance between protection and promotion I was not always comfortable with.

National significance: I always thought that they were required to be nationally significant. Different programs I have worked in like, right now, the World Heritage Program, have to have an official national designation before we can consider it.

Cooperative agreements vs grants: It was considered at first that we didn't have the authority to make grants that is why we went to cooperative agreements (CA). The program was simply

created. Did we have legislative authority to do it? I guess the NPS was allowed to have a small administrative overhead to give out the funding to the areas. I believe that is the reason we went to CA because of lack of authority to make grants.

Responsibility sharing: I don't remember that much (NPS) regional involvement. Maybe at that time we hadn't thought about having a program with representations in the regions. I had some interaction with the regions later on. The regions got involved in the funding side of it.

NPS relationship with heritage areas: I recall there was a lot of tension between NPS and the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. They were often unhappy with the NPS. They seemed to feel that they were being dictated to and didn't have enough say in decisions that were being made about them. They just seemed to want the money to be passed to them with no strings attached. We were trying to establish some vigor to the program, so it wasn't just a funnel. We felt that they had to do something to qualify for that money. It had to be put to good use.

I think the idea that appealed to me about heritage areas was mixing cultural and natural together and saying this is the bases for economic development and tourism. To have both of those things integrated. That responded to my background in planning where you are used to looking at the big picture and relating the pieces together. It seemed to be a good way of articulating culture and nature. Humans have occupied the landscape but they're responding to nature to organize their lives. How nature had molded human society.

Challenges: The politics of it was always very difficult. The notion that we could get Congress to refrain from just willy-nilly putting on a label. They had to respond to their constituents; getting legislation to have the heritage areas do certain things. The heritage areas had strong relationships to their congressional representatives. They weren't going to take kindly to the NPS to tell them they had to do XY and Z to get their money. How to rein them in to some degree. They each had their own member (of Congress).

It never came to be that there was a national program. It was disappointing to a lot of us who thought this has real potential as an approach but needs to be more standardized and have a more rigorous set of criteria to be legitimate. A number of people have said it's just bogus. It just drags down the whole concept if you have these areas that are not what anybody would think are true heritage areas. Just a way to slap on a name and get funding. Some were worthwhile in my estimation. I remember going down to Augusta, Ga and touring the national heritage area down there. It was one of the better conceived ones.

A lot of states had their own state heritage area program with specific criteria, and I thought that strange. I ended up thinking it must have been confusing to the public to have different kinds of heritage areas. A heritage area is a nebulous concept to begin with.

The position helped my career in the sense that it gave me exposure to a different set of issues and more things the NPS was involved in. I worked on heritage areas as a temporary assignment from Cultural Affairs. At the end of the assignment Sam Stokes offered a RTCA position and I moved to that department.

NPS attitudes about the National Heritage Area Program: There were definitely people who thought national heritage areas were not a good idea but were a drain on the NPS. They felt the funds should go to the Historic Preservation Fund at least in part. There were people who didn't believe in the concept of heritage areas. And there probably still are. Whenever you try something new, there are always people who are skeptical until something proves itself. I'm not sure the jury is out on national heritage areas.