

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

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



Jon Charles Smith
July 5, 2017

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
Transcribed by Antoinette Condo
Reviewed by Jon Charles Smith
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

Jon Charles Smith
July 5, 2017

Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Jon Charles Smith

Jon Charles Smith Interview: July 5, 2017

Before coming to the Park Service, I was Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer of Indiana, Director, Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology and also on the board of the National Conference of State Preservation Officers, and ICOMOS international organization. The discussion about large, big picture corridors was definitely where heritage conservation in the United States was going. I was very interested. State preservation offices had worked hand in hand with regional Park Service offices to develop these wonderful, unique assets and resources for their states and many of them ended up being multi-state. In my previous career wanting to learn as much about it and to figure out how it might work in Indiana. When I was recruited to come to the Park Service, National Heritage Areas was in my portfolio. I knew a lot about it but ended up learning quite a bit more.

Early on I was an advocate and supporting (heritage areas) for partner organizations. Coming to the Park Service as Deputy Associate Director for Partnership Programs it was a program that I directly supervised, first Brenda Barrett and then Martha Raymond. I had been pretty involved with heritage areas since 1992 in both my career track positions. I worked especially on the reporting and the evaluation process. I think the staff under Martha's leadership has done a wonderful job in ironing out what was somewhat contentious, the way we were going to do evaluations. It now seems to be flowing very easily and there is agreement in the way it has worked its way out.

I think it is the best tool (evaluations) that we have to argue for continued funding. It definitely has been stressful at times when the program might be zeroed out (in the annual proposed budgets) and not knowing what the future is. The key factor is that we have to get program legislation and an established system of how a program graduates or if there is continued minimal funding that Congress would support. I know that with all of the areas that are not currently heritage areas that there is a great deal of interest that is going to become an issue as to how you bring new heritage areas into the fold and from a budgetary standpoint how you handle the expansion responsibly to the fledgling heritage areas.

Funding formulas: Going back to the very early '90s there have been many different proposals about various options, about what would be fair to everybody, those that are established, those that are fledgling. I don't think there are any single right answers. I think there are many options. As the program gets so much attention and there are going to be states that don't have heritage areas that very much want to participate in the program. Finding the perfect solution is not going to be easy. I know there have been quite a few proposals that have been floated and hopefully it can be something that doesn't monopolize too much time during the fiscal year. It is an issue that has to be dealt with as soon as possible. There are those in Congress who have very good points that said their understanding was we would get the program going, they would graduate, we would be involved with technical assistance but free up money that would encourage important resource areas to become full members of the National Heritage Area Program. There are some tremendously important points that could be made for that. I just don't know how gradual the graduation of the senior heritage areas should be. Whether there should be a minimum base that is given annually to go toward administration regardless of success or duration of the area but would still allow enough money for the fledgling areas that

are going to need a lot more assistance and initially tremendously more funding, to get off the ground. It definitely was the intent of Congress that we get them going and stable and then weaned off. I understand why that clearly would not be popular with heritage areas close to sunseting, but that was the understanding from the early meetings that I remember, "This is a growing program, and this is how we handle it given the budget situation."

I'm sure it will get worked out. The program is too important to not have some final solution and hopefully program legislation.

As 501 c3s the heritage areas would be eligible to apply for sub-grants from all of the (NPS assistance) programs. Not only the heritage grants that we offer, but foundations which are becoming more and more critically important to all of the heritage programs. Local community and family foundations, that kind of thing.

The National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office is excellently aligned with the other heritage and cultural programs of the Park Service. So many of the heritage areas have park units that are incorporated with them, Cane River comes to mind. In the middle of Cajun country Louisiana there are these tremendous Park Service resources that have really been mutually beneficial to both the Park Service units and the heritage area by technical assistance, facility sharing. It has been very, very effective. Absolutely.

With the Cultural Resources GIS program there has been a lot done with heritage areas to explain how the technologies can work in developing electronic tours where you have an app, and the GPS indicator tells you what you are looking at. With the variety of programs that we have in cultural resources partnerships and science there's not a program that hasn't dovetailed excellently with the development and support of heritage areas.

Challenges: The most urgent and threatening is this continual possibility of not being funded. It's kind of daunting to see a zero on the paper and think it is not being funded for the next year. The heritage areas affect millions of people and are too important to lose. The only solution is that there is something ironed out that Congress agrees with that the budget office and Park Service are comfortable with and that the heritage areas are comfortable with. We spend way too much time every year defending the funding.

From the hearings and discussions that I attended related to heritage areas over 24 years, the main issue seems to be budget concerns and difficulty in arriving at mutual agreement. I don't know when will be the right time to make this happen. The whole twelve years I have been in Washington with the Park Service there is a huge reluctance to cement a program permanently. That's just where we are and that is something that has to be overcome before we can iron out program legislation.

There is not an alternative but to continue carrying on as we are without an opportunity to allow for definite guidelines for a program that everyone is comfortable with. We will probably continue to go through the annual battles and justifications until that happens.

Mutual benefit of heritage areas and the Park Service: Absolutely (they benefit the Park Service). There is an underlying understanding that during the Reagan Administration there were quite a few resource types that wanted to become park units and due to the volume, they were talking about it was not possible. Heritage areas have local resources and local people who care about them. Like Tip O'Neil saying that all politics is local, I think it is the same with resources. They are affiliated with the Park Service. They are not park units and have certain freedoms that go along with that, and they can really be the champion and advocate for their local resources. That is critical. It is a nice solution. They are able to harness the technical assistance we can provide, and the regions can offer. It's a nice program concept of the affiliation that works very well.

A concrete example, again Cane River in Natchitoches, Louisiana not only has Cane River National Heritage Area, the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training and the Cane River Creole National Historical Park with all the resources they can share with each other; expertise in erosion, disintegrating resources, cemetery conservation. In addition, they have all the expertise that goes with having the Atlanta Regional Office that is there with archeologists and historians and those that have a handle on research and interpretation skills, museum curation factors that can be brought in from the Park Service.

NPS regional and national roles: As a state preservation officer, the reporting when state offices reported to a (NPS) regional office was very inconsistent especially in the historic tax credits program. We reported to the Philadelphia office and were held to a very high standard. The Denver office was much more lenient. So, we would have situations where we would have tax credits for an architectural firm that was really trying to save buildings in Illinois that reported to Denver and those we were doing in Indiana or further east were held to another standard. It is very important to have the same exact criteria for everybody. A national presence having that process with the same people the same expectations is really critical. Ultimately, the example I give with historic tax credits, was reconsolidated back in Washington. That doesn't, in any way, make the role of the regions diminished, being the boots on the ground, being the local units being a part of the heritage area, that's critical. But, to have a standardized review process or evaluation system is very important, in fairness to everyone that's participating. They know what to expect, and it's delivered.

Look at the volunteer hours and the enthusiasm. That is what is keeping these going and vibrant. There is a caution in not getting too far ahead of yourself and growing too quickly to a level that you can't really effectively manage it. At that point things kind of unravel a little bit but regroup and work out in the end. I don't know another program that has the sense of stewardship and volunteerism that heritage areas do. Any entity that is in that corridor seems to take real understanding of what that means from residential neighborhoods to educational institutions to highway departments that have been very involved with bridge restorations. The connectivity of the corridor brings a lot of people to the table that would not be having dialogue and the collective goal of making these the most they can be and using their cultural and natural resources. This is unique. federal service-wide it is a very good collaborative example.