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

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Early interest in heritage areas: I was aware of heritage areas, but I didn't get exposed to them in any degree until I went to see Mary Means who was a consultant and was at an earlier point Sam Stokes's and my boss at the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Mary was the *mother of Main Street* and also had had the rural preservation program in her portfolio, which Sam and I were a part of. Sam founded the Rural Program at the Trust. My friend Peter Stein of the Trust for Public Land had told me that I should become a Loeb Fellow at Harvard and I knew that Mary had done it and so I went to see Mary. During lunch Mary asked if I would be interested in being a project manager for her consultant work with the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Area, and I said yes.

I had known of heritage areas in two ways before that. First of all, when I was working at the National Trust one day the Illinois and Michigan Canal came across my desk and I thought, "That's a funny thing [to focus on], canals." Well, what do you want with canals? It wasn't until I did the Delaware and Lehigh that I realized that a canal was an excuse for organizing a big regional landscape. The second was, at one point I was special assistant to the secretary for the environment in Pennsylvania when the Delaware and Lehigh federal legislation was passed. One of the quirky jobs my boss gave me was to help fill the state positions on their board. The governor of Pennsylvania was asked to name nominees to the Delaware and Lehigh Commission, and I did the staff work to get the first commission in place about 1988. About five years later, I think that was mostly the commission I wound up working with.

I remember there was a fight over nominating board members. The governor didn't want to give the Secretary of the Interior a choice; they were from different parties. Interior had asked for two names per positions on the commission and the governor refused and I believe that the governor won on that if you can describe that as winning. I mean that the staffers on the other side, Interior decided it was okay to take the Governor's preferred list.

When Mary asked me to join her consulting team I knew of the Delaware and Lehigh, which had a very early canal dug just after Erie Canal. This was in 1992 and I realized that there was a whole different way to view landscapes. We didn't have the strong sense I have today about the impact of economics on the landscape. Heritage areas are a fabulous way to understand how landscapes change and I fell in love with that idea. That was a really powerful period for me.

The National Coalition for Heritage Areas: Shelley Mastran, one of the co-authors of, *Saving America's Countryside*, and I, with Mary's encouragement, went to the National Trust and asked them to organize a meeting of about 60 people. For various reasons to do with other networking I had done in the environmental world I knew every person in the room except Alvin Rosenbaum. It was the pulling together, that was the big moment. Shelley and I pulled together a meeting in the oval room of the old offices of the National Trust and everyone sat around the room and made presentations on what was going on in the heritage world. It was like having an elephant in the room. We had the Rails to Trails Conservancy, and Greenways and rivers, and land trusts, just a bunch of different organizations that had found themselves working in these places but weren't really aware, weren't paying attention to the fact that they were part of a unit; that there was this whole landscape that you could put together [from the individual elements

they were each interested in]. So, it was an interesting and creative period. Henry Jordan, then chair of the Countryside Institute, was the first chairman of that group. We formed a group then and there that day. I owned a non-profit, which was in abeyance, so we reattached that 501(c)(3) to this new organization. We ran a couple of national conferences we called *rallies* and worked on legislation. [About the use of the word *rally* – that’s still the Land Trust Alliance’s word for its national conference – I was part of the conversation with Jean Hocker as a board member when LTA, then the Land Trust Exchange, chose that word.]

In retrospect, four years was not long enough for the Coalition to make a real contribution. But we did publicize the idea. If you trace the early days of many of the heritage areas that exist today, you would probably find that their inspiration came from being at those rallies that we had and from the Coalition’s newsletters. We can’t take total credit for increased number of heritage areas, but it (the Coalition) created a means for people to network and to learn from one another how to do this and what to do. There was clearly a bump in 1996 and thereafter. Blue Ridge Heritage Area got started because I went and made a presentation. We helped people understand the value of this approach. That’s where *managing entity* arose as a term. We were looking for something that got folks away from the idea of a commission and that whole federal administrative arena that was proving unsatisfactory on several levels. Another was the realization that you didn’t have to have a canal. It’s nice to have a spine, and in fact it’s more difficult to organize the landscape as a concept when there is not one, but today among the 49 there are fewer canals than other kinds of themes.

The Coalition didn’t last. I personally could not continue to put the effort into the chairmanship. Randy Cooley and Alvin Rosenbaum maneuvered it away from Shelley (Mastran) and me, in a way. She and I would talk about the problem and learned to make the gesture of letting go. The attitude at the time, for me at least, was if this is to be a working coalition it needs to go ahead and thrive. It proved difficult to sustain an organization without staffing, which we really didn’t have. It’s wonderful that the Alliance of National Heritage Areas grew out of it. It was a clear break. I don’t even know what happened to the non-profit we had. Wilton Corkern, then with the Accokeek Foundation, was a part of this as well. My instinct was that it was unsustainable as an organization and to let whoever had a need of it to take it to do what they needed with it. In retrospect I think it was fine. At the time there was some heartburn.

Legislation: I had worked on the Potomac River. The American Heritage Rivers program was coming at about the same time and I had contact with Senator (Paul) Sarbanes’s staff, principally Charlie Stek, one of the great unsung heroes of heritage development over the years since – he got the Chesapeake Gateways program going while on staff with the senator, and later was instrumental in getting the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail designated and later getting the Friends group for that trail started. We, the Coalition wanted national legislation. We still want national legislation. Anybody who was ever involved in this has wanted national legislation. We asked Charlie Stek to help write legislation. Charlie is the only one I remember working with on heritage area program legislation.

So that was about 1994. I became chairman of the National Coalition (for Heritage Areas). I had been a lobbyist for the Land Trust Alliance in the ‘80s and lobbied the 1986 Tax Reform Act. So, I just knew how things worked.

I can't remember specific differences we, Coalition members, had with the legislation proposals of the NPS. If I could characterize it without having any specifics at all it would be that the Coalition would be more generous in the process for naming a heritage area and adding it to the system and that the NPS would have been somewhat more restrictive. It is moot because we haven't seen any legislation come out of this 20-years of trying.

I think that the Congress will get it one day. They just haven't yet. I can say that because I can say to you today the words *conservation easement* and you know what that is. The average reader of any newspaper in this country knows what a conservation easement is. I was a Johnny Appleseed for conservation easements and land trusts early in my career and I would have to get up and explain to audiences what those were and today we know what they are. Heritage areas have never had the spread that land trusts have had and so it's not common parlance to understand what a heritage area is. It's a shadow national park system. And I don't know that we'll ever get further without having some kind of organic legislation. I think that it's important.

When we formed the Coalition, I think my idea was to set up a process so that all interested could have admission. I think, now, it is best if they have to work to get in. That Congress starts the process and brings the NPS in to do the feasibility study and works with NPS at the beginning and they grow their idea for the heritage area together. And let the NPS take it on and love it and have them be involved in the early part of the process.

I think the feasibility process is a good one as we have it now, but I would like to refine it even more. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, I guess, was the process I was trying to imitate through the Coalition. Name them out ahead of time and get them over with in part, that is, get the naming over with. There was some sense that we needed to assure some members of Congress and buy off some members of Congress, which is to say, you would get more support for the legislation if you could get more specific about what places are to benefit. So, I guess I could see doing that. But if the community hadn't done the groundwork, it would have been unwise to have put them in like that. I had worked with a community in southwestern Montana who had a lot of potential, but they fell apart when they needed to get their congressional delegation to do the legislation. They had done the work but didn't carry through. They have since done a lot of the work and locally have committed \$15 million dollars to attract more heritage tourism, different kinds of things that would support their efforts.

Until we get organic legislation the NPS will not be able to lobby for sufficient funding to deal with the needs that these heritage areas have. And it's nothing like a national park budget. It shouldn't be. If the funding is set at level funding, it's a cut because of inflation. Managing on a declining budget is not a good model.

I don't think that sunseting should be in the legislation. If we are willing to designate the areas, we should be willing to put in the money to protect them. But if you have to have sunseting I don't agree with the idea that money will never be possible again, I think that's wrong.

Relationship with NPS: The NPS in those years came off as fearful of heritage areas. It took a while for that to change. Jon Jarvis was the strongest NPS director yet who has come out and

said how important the program is. But even back then they were beginning to recognize the benefits of the interaction between parks and heritage areas. The thing I have seen evolve with the NPS has been the importance of the parks that are inside these heritage areas. Typically, there is one. The relationship has changed over the years, but in those early years there was this strain of fear that heritage areas would require so much money. And, of course, that starts with Lowell. It was the model for the Illinois & Michigan Canal in terms of administrative structure. At one time Lowell was in the top 15 of the national park budgets so there is this fear that if you let a heritage area in that it is going to take money away from the rest of the parks. I don't subscribe to that, but I can see how people can.

Importance of heritage areas: Doing the Delaware and Lehigh plan and 20 years later in 2014 writing their second plan, seeing the evolution of that heritage area was instructive. I think that it is very interesting to be this long in the business and to look back, especially having had the experience of doing Delaware and Lehigh twice and seeing what happened there. One of the things I said as a young planner that this heritage area should emerge out of the chaos of the general part of eastern Pennsylvania in a way that's distinctive. And it is. That's the thing. It's happening. These are going to be remnant landscapes that are worth saving for the American story a thousand years from now. And to tend to those in a way that recognizes they are ever going to be evolving. They are never going to be like trying to hold on to our national parks but are going to be a place that basically holds onto story and tradition and landscape in ways that really try to show Americans the best way to live and understand their place. We have got a lot of changes happening in the way we think as a society about where we live. It's really interesting to see that maybe it's the beginning of the end of sprawl. Economics are against the suburban McMansions now. And the trend, sort of popular taste right now, is urban living. So, what's going to happen to these interesting landscapes where we were pioneers, industrialists, and farmers? What are we going to do to know that history? I'm persuaded as a preservationist that you can't really know history just from the documents. You really need the resources; you need the place. To be able to go to Blackstone and see where Samuel Slater had that mill and see that river is a really important experience for understanding ourselves as Americans. I was executive director for Stories of the Chesapeake Maryland State Heritage Area from 2002 to 2008. I think there should be more than 49 national heritage areas. I still believe there should be an Eastern Shore National Heritage Area as one of those. Because there is not organic legislation, there is not a clear path.

I would never have predicted a Tennessee or a South Carolina. Augusta seems too small. But they have proven that the concept can work at any scale.

The system needs to be more robust. There are not enough of them to make an impact on the nation, and they are in the wrong places. It would make perfect sense to have a heritage area in every state but the 49 are certainly not scattered across the United States in a way that allows every delegation to have some piece of this action. Another 50 national heritage areas might give them opportunity to spread them around. Oklahoma is a really important landscape, a really important story with all the Native Americans there and they have no national heritage areas.

Oversight: Oversight of National Heritage Areas is an interesting question. Non-profit management is an emerging study. What you have to reconcile is the relationship between the

NPS and the managing entity. Different heritage areas have come up with different solutions. Most of them are non-profits. Some of them were actually federal commissions, which was unworkable at least in the case of one that I know of, Delaware and Lehigh, which converted to nonprofit status after some years of being a federal commission. When you marry this sort of local grass roots non-profit kind of organization to the semi-military organization that is the NPS, a well-honed bureaucracy, one that I respect enormously, there is definitely some collision there and it'll have to get worked out. One good thing is that after having more than 25-years experience with it, people like Peter Samuel have really figured out how to do that and do it well. He has worked out the best system for what he is doing for the NPS.

Federal commission management: I helped Delaware and Lehigh at least lay the groundwork for a changeover from the federal commission to a non-profit. My critique is that there didn't seem to be, for all that the NPS has a well-honed bureaucracy, there didn't seem to be a really good system for organizing these commissions. It seemed to take forever for procurement. And yet, you look at Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor, run by a federal commission, and they are doing just fine, thank you very much. The superintendent was an NPS employee. Blackstone (John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor) was a federal commission. They seemed to do well. It all depends on the personnel that are there to run the thing. Many of the present managers are promoters, they are tourism people. They know how to get the word out. Annie Harris is one of my heroes. She is so good at all the different things that a heritage area needs. It's really hard to find that in one person. With the commissions, if they didn't know how to pull the strings within the NPS and how it really worked, and they were learning on the job, you don't know what you don't know in that kind of situation. They didn't even know what questions to ask. So, I saw real floundering. We named the Delaware and Lehigh Commission which then took four years before they actually knew what they were doing.

I often thought that the state or local managed areas had a lot of potential. To be a heritage area takes a certain level of local commitment and understanding what you are getting into.

Changes in NPS involvement: There is going to be tension if we ever get program legislation between NPS involvement and heritage area involvement. I think one of the things that has been recognized over time by the NPS: when I began working on heritage areas the park superintendents could close the gates and be inside their parks. We weren't even thinking back then that the parks aren't nearly big enough to be protected on their own. Larger and larger concepts have evolved about what it really takes to protect a park. Heritage areas are a great way to do that. Jim Pepper talks about rotating people through heritage areas, working with parks and working with heritage areas, and I agree with him. Park superintendents were only beginning to join the Rotary and reach out to the communities when heritage areas emerged. Working in heritage areas as employees is a way for them to learn that.

Research: There is a dichotomy between interpretation and resource protection, the same thing you have in national parks. What are the effective techniques in both those areas that work in a working landscape, that is, a lived-in landscape? Not a park, not under your control. This is something I think Brenda (Barrett) is still pursuing. This protection side, the land use piece is such a puzzle because we have such an odd, distributed way of dealing with land use within a federal context. What works is complicated to figure out. We are always short of baseline

information. We won't know what people knew and thought about the resources at the time. My dream would be that when you go into a heritage area it's a greener and better and more interesting place than what's outside because someone is paying attention. And, in fact, more people are paying attention. That you could stop at the local gas station, have a conversation with the gas attendant about the history because that gas station attendant has been a kid in fourth grade and really got to know his place. Which is still a dream.

I think best practice within heritage areas has been still something I wish existed. They are doing some good stuff on economic impact. They're trying. It's been difficult doing that. It's still hard to sort out the noise, data regarding impacts from general trends, and the actual impact because there are other things going on in these economies. They are big unbounded areas in some ways and it's hard to get your arms around understanding how the interpretation has unfolded. No one is doing that right now in a way that makes some sense. Each heritage area has its own themes and that's fine. I think it's great. But how are they following through with it? I think that's where NPS in creating an organic act and a program could potentially have some of its best influence, the storytelling side of it. NPS people are funny, they are representing the American people and they go out there and they are really passionate about this stuff, and they wind up telling people what to do and so this is another part of the conflict between heritage areas and the NPS if you try to put those two systems together more than they already are.

Trying to get a better handle on how visitors and residents experience the story of the place and the resource protection piece. The story is how you protect it and I'd like to know how that is working in these heritage areas. Are they just talking to a few of the faithful or are they figuring out how to actually change things for the long-term? Each heritage area has a different kind of fingerprint. Augie (Carlino) is a developer. He is just phenomenal. He has figured out how to get the money and the power and the people all together and really get some change there. And, as a result of that I think you have people paying attention in Pittsburgh. In Essex Annie (Harris) has made a real dent in people's awareness. Yet, I know that Annie was really fearful when they were first doing these logic models and evaluations that they had Westat come in and do because they were going to be asking people at large in Essex County and she was afraid she was not going to get a good evaluation.

Getting back to the Coalition, four years is not enough time. Thirty years is a serious amount of time to do something. How do you flip the switch in a community who knows they have important stuff and help them figure out how to work together to protect their resources and tell their stories so that they are handing on something to future generations that's whole enough so that other people who come after that will understand? How do you measure that? How do you research it? Everything from what works for tourism and tourism relationships, to interpretation, resource protection, and circulation of the story, and the planning and the topics that go with that. Those would be my research topics. Non-profit management. What do people know and how are they protecting it? Measured at the beginning and years later. What do people know and how are they protecting it? You should see a change. Two other topics: education and the arts, two big ones. Blue Ridge National Heritage Area has done a wonderful job with the arts. You should be able to see a difference in people's awareness of place, and what makes their place special from one decade to another as a result of the work. I'd give it a decade at minimum.

A big one is education. Silos and Smokestacks were really early with a website and curriculum before anybody knew what they were. They originally wanted to build a big visitor center but then that didn't go anywhere. I worked with them on an interpretive plan when Don Short was executive director and Candy Streed was there and she had already started the education program. John Deere company had some real impact with them talking about how they had a need to make the residents of that area aware of the importance of farming. Elevate farming as an occupation. In addition, there was Future Farmers of America work and I would love to see what kind of impact that has had. That should be measurable. Because teachers were involved there should be some record there for a baseline.

I would love to see in Crossroads (of the American Revolution National Heritage Area) what has changed. There were more than 100 mom-and-pop historical societies and incredibly important Revolutionary War sites all over the state's fourteen counties [in the heritage area]. That's when I started worrying about the future of historical societies across the nation because the members are aging out or don't want to do any more. So, what's happening there? The state had disinvested in its own sites which we considered of regional significance. Have they (the managing entity) organized their many sites and done something with them? They have done a lot of good stuff with public events. They have organized events in Trenton.

There are a lot of those sorts of things out there to track qualitatively. I would love to see some actual statistical evaluation, measuring those sorts of things so you could show real changes. I get tired sometimes of always just trying to measure the money and what's the value of this thing that we're doing. Having always to ask, "How much payback have we gotten for this thing?" I think that if it is an important story and that it is an important place with important resources. And I think Crossroads is a classic example. We need to be there, and we need to be doing it. And, as long as we've got enough followers working to protect these things then that's enough. I guess that is where you get back to the difference between the environmentalist and the activist, is the protectionist side of it. This is me on the side of the NPS. Because I know that the NPS loves the story too, but I think most people who are in the NPS really get the resource protection side. And that's me too. Because we can always save it for another day. For the day when the public comes back to it or the day that the public can be willing to spend its dollars on interpretation and the popularity is coming back or whatever.

I think we don't do enough with message. Of actually making those trends happen, the popularity. Making people understand. There is a lot there, but most heritage areas are doing a good job of hanging on, but they don't have the resources to really move the needle in terms of total public opinion. It would be hard to do that.

Characteristics of successful heritage areas: Force of personality of management. Is there really one factor? It's kind of a chicken and egg situation. Say you've got this river. A really great river. What do you do with it? Do you become a greenway? Do you become a heritage area? It depends on which idea you found first. There are 14 American Heritage Rivers. What often causes these things to work is one super individual. What every one of these landscapes has had is leadership that would say it is important. One person who has been willing to stand up and be passionate to get a large enough following to go to the Congress and get the recognition.

I think what is needed is a guidebook. One decent book that tells people what these are. These American lands. Because Americans do love history. We had a program that Shelley did at the National Trust where they went around and talked to people and titled it, *Thirst for History*. I thought it was a great title because Americans hate schoolroom history, but they love this stuff when they finally find it. Just, not enough of them are finding it right now.

Recreation has got to be a part of it. At the same time as we have been seeing heritage areas going on, we have seen rail-trails, and all kinds of pedestrian and biking and all sorts of things. That has been a huge, healthy movement, wellness through recreation, we have seen and is something heritage areas can take advantage of. It has to be the experience of place. How do you actually get out in it and enjoy it? And then, the story comes from that.

NPS as best place for heritage areas: Ultimately yes. It has to do with Americans' recognition that the NPS takes care of special things about this country. The skills that you build within the NPS really can be spread further than the parks themselves. There is still a cultural conflict in the NPS between the historic preservation people and the recreation people [note: *still* is referring to my observation of the effort back about 1978 to put the historic preservation and outdoor recreation people together into a new federal agency, HCRS – the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service]. They are just not the same kinds of people. Very different education, very different life outlook. But the NPS has dealt with that internally and I think they are best prepared to stick with it. I can't see starting with another agency. There would have never been another one (for the heritage areas) to start with.

You could put another agency in Interior (it would have to be in Interior). But then you would have to have some way of getting BLM, and heritage areas, and parks, and Fish and Wildlife all talking to one another. In Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, Colorado all those resources agencies are involved, and we suggested that they have one visitor center for them because there are so many phenomenal public-lands resources there. Those agencies were already learning to work with one another within that landscape.

I keep waiting for the Progressive Era to come back 1890's-1920's. In the Coalition days there was that moment when we could be progressive about heritage and culture and protecting resources. Things were really shifting about 1996. That whole period you are asking me about, politics really changed. Do we need another agency to run this program? No. Emphatically said.

NHA and NPS: I think the relationship is improving. Everyone has settled down. There are not new areas making their demands. Now everyone has their plans. As we plied our trade as heritage planners from heritage area to heritage area, we would encounter differences in the way the different regions and among even the heritage areas different things got done. There were differences even in the way match was being measured. The way the money was flowing from one year to the next. One person who shall remain nameless was sitting with me at one point in an Alliance meeting and asked, "When are we going to get a manual, so everybody knows the rules?" It's like you make your own side deals and depending on how long you've been there and how many relationships you have built you have more ideas, more ways to pull strings and make things happen. I remember being really amazed that Debbie Conway at Niagara Falls

National Heritage Area could just make the trains run on time figuratively speaking. Although now she is literally making trains run on time as Superintendent of Steamtown National Historic Site. It was awesome. I thought if everybody could have a commission like this one with a superintendent who knew what was going on, we'd be golden. She got the Secretary's approval within a reasonable amount of time while others in our recent experience languished.

Why has it been so difficult for each of these programs to overcome hurdles? To learn their business. I don't know. It has a feeling, in spite of the NPS not because of it, I say that with due respect for Peter Samuel who I think the world of and who's really done some wonderful work with these heritage areas, but when you move out beyond Peter's stuff and even within Peter's area you see variations. What is that? Is it people? Is it rules? You don't know what you don't know so you never know to ask? I don't know. If you ask each of the heritage area managers, each of them will have a story. I'll bet all 49 would have a story to tell you of thinking it was working one way and finding out it wasn't when they got down the road. That shouldn't be. I feel sorry for the people who have had these encounters when they had to figure it out. Again, it's not easy. And, if you have a bad board. It's definitely not all the NPS. If you have bad or confused leadership at the local level, you don't get this. It's just really hard. I think the NPS for their part has probably shied away. I mean you have only two wonderful people running the program. I think they shy away from doing it (giving specific instructions) because once you have it written down you have to live by it and what if you get it wrong? And who wants the fight of getting it written down? I get why it's not written down, the manual for running heritage areas. Sam (Stokes) tried to give direction and he was vilified for that. Martha (Raymond) has survived and that's good too.