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Harpers Ferry Center's 40th Anniversary Oral History Project



Dr. David H. Wallace
June 16, 2010

Interview conducted by Michele Hartley

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Interview with: Dr. David H. Wallace

Interview by: Michele Hartley, NPS Employee

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M. Hartley:	00:00	So zipping around ...
David Wallace:	00:01	Actually, I came in on the golf cart.
M. Hartley:	00:03	Oh, perfect.
David Wallace:	00:04	Because I knew Magaly.
Audio Tech:	00:07	Okay, we're rolling.
M. Hartley:	00:09	Okay. I'm Michelle here with Dr. Wallace. If you wouldn't mind, could you please tell me your full name, who you are, and what your title was when you worked at the Harper's Ferry Center.
David Wallace:	00:25	My name is David H. Wallace. I came here as assistant to the chief of the Branch of Museum Operations. When he retired I became the Chief of the Branch of Museum Operations. When that split into conservation and reference services, I was Chief of the Branch of Reference Services. I took an early retirement in 1980 but came back four years later as a museum curator in the Branch of Historic Furnishings and I finished my career doing that.
M. Hartley:	01:10	And I'm sorry, I don't know if we ... I know when you came here but I don't know if we caught that on tape.
David Wallace:	01:16	I came here in the early Fall of 1968. My office then was in the Brackett House, so I was here when this building went up and was one of those who helped to paint the walls.

- M. Hartley: 01:31 What were the color of the walls back then?
- David Wallace: 01:33 White.
- M. Hartley: 01:34 They were white. Okay.
- David Wallace: 01:36 All I remember is painting in the lobby and as I remember it was either white or a very pale gray.
- M. Hartley: 01:44 I thought there was a story as to why the managers were involved in the painting of the building. Was there a story related? How come you didn't have painters?
- David Wallace: 01:57 I don't really know. I think they were saving a few pennies.
- M. Hartley: 02:01 Yeah.
- David Wallace: 02:02 And I don't remember how soon after the building opened that it happened.
- M. Hartley: 02:06 So when you have that particular division, could you describe what your purpose was and what your division's purpose was?
- David Wallace: 02:16 The Branch of Museum Operations was within the Division of Museums, at that time under Russ Hendrickson. The Branch of Museum Operations did several things. It managed the conservation labs. It managed the preparation of historic furnishing plans. It provided advice to park curators and historians on the collection and preservation and interpretation of the artifacts under them. And it had a kind of reference section headed by, can't remember his name, which remained in Springfield for quite a number of years after the move here. And they provided research for the graphics people, the exhibits people, and the publications people. They went out and did research on specific projects. Harold Peterson was the head of that.
- M. Hartley: 03:35 The head of?
- David Wallace: 03:37 The Reference Services, yes. And he was also, had the title of Chief Curator of the National Park Service. But he never came up from Springfield.
- M. Hartley: 03:47 And what was your specialty?

David Wallace: 03:50 Well I was an American history major and I started with the Park Service as a ranger historian at Independence Hall in 1957. But about a year after I came there I became the assistant and then the chief curator of the museum division at the park. So I came down from Philadelphia as a museum curator, as assistant to Ralph Lewis, who was then the Chief of the Branch of Museum Operations. And I did administrative work basically for them until I retired in 1980. When I came back I was a historic furnishing planner, which meant doing the research for furnishing reports and actually drawing up plans.

M. Hartley: 04:50 Did you work with Bill Brown?

David Wallace: 04:52 Yes. For a while I suppose I was his boss ...

M. Hartley: 04:57 Oh, okay.

David Wallace: 04:57 ... in the Branch of Museum Operations. He worked very independently, of course, and had his own crew during the Revolutionary War Bicentennial. But he also later did furnishing plans for us as well.

M. Hartley: 05:17 We were just sorry to hear of his passing.

David Wallace: 05:22 Yes, I heard this morning.

M. Hartley: 05:23 Yeah. Yeah. When you were working in historic furnishings, did you work on park projects throughout the system?

David Wallace: 05:30 Yes.

M. Hartley: 05:31 Do you have a sense of how many?

David Wallace: 05:33 That was the high point of my career. That was the really fun part for 10 years. I started, actually the first one I did was the first classrooms of Storer College here in Harpers Ferry, in the paymaster's house. But that was while I was an administrator. But after I became a historic furnishing planner my first project was the Carl Sandburg home in North Carolina, which I spent a lot of time down there. Had a great time. Later on I did Sagamore Hill, the Teddy Roosevelt home on Long Island. The first ranger's cabin at Mount McKinley, or Denali. I did the Cape Hatteras lighthouse keepers quarters and the rescue station, you

know Coast Guard. And an early 20th century hotel in Voyageurs National Park.

- David Wallace: 06:47 The best time I think was when I did the Faraway Ranch in Chiricahua National Monument in southeastern Arizona, an old place where people came to spend their vacations. A dude ranch from the 1920s and 30s. A house that was left fully furnished when the last owner died and I had the job of doing the research on how it was furnished, because everything was packed up and stored in Tucson. But I had the fun of then going through all those boxes and finding the evidence on what was used throughout the house. And then putting it back together had the assistance of a woman who had helped the owner of the ranch in her last years when she was blind. She helped us put it back together. It was a fascinating experience and it also fitted in with one of my other interests, which was bird watching. The Chiricahua Mountains are one of the prime areas of the country for bird watching.
- M. Hartley: 08:10 How wonderful.
- David Wallace: 08:12 Yes. It was a lot of fun doing historic furnishings because you were looking into the lives of people, not just the objects, but how they used the rooms. Not all of those, in fact, probably few of those 10 or so that I did actually were carried out. A few were. But either because people objected. In Carl Sandburg, for instance, the granddaughter had helped to set it up after he died and she wanted it to remain exactly the way she and Mrs. Sandburg wanted it, which was not entirely accurate as to the way it was when he was there.
- David Wallace: 09:01 And the same thing happened at Martin Luther King birthplace where I did the research for that. I was able to interview, not his sister who would not talk to me because she was writing a book, but I talked to his uncle who lived in the house when Martin Luther King was a little boy. So I developed a plan that reflected the way it was when he was a kid. After I was gone from the project, the sister managed to prevent it being carried out. But subsequently, I believe, they overruled her and did carry it out the way that I had planned it.
- M. Hartley: 09:50 Yeah, sometimes Park Service people have to be a bit of a diplomat.

- David Wallace: 09:53 Oh, definitely. Yes. Yes.
- M. Hartley: 09:55 Yeah. Do you visit parks at all since you've retired or between your retirements?
- David Wallace: 10:06 Not very often. I often wish I could go back to the ones that I did the furnishings, but I haven't done it. I went recently to Hopewell Furnace in Pennsylvania, which was interesting because I remember going there and advising them maybe 35 years ago on what they should do and what they should not do. And they had pretty much, I think, followed our advice. So I was pleased to see that.
- M. Hartley: 10:43 What do you think the power, I know in the jobs that you did it sound like you did the plans and some didn't come to fruition. But when they do come to fruition, what do you think the power or value of a room that has gone through that process of historic furnishings and that is set up, what's the value of that?
- David Wallace: 11:05 Well, I think, for one thing, it makes it easier for interpreters to tell their story if they're talking about the life of a family. Or say Independence Hall, the room in which the Declaration was drawn up and the Constitution, it can be very helpful to the interpreter. It can also, however, be a drawback because people, particularly at Independence Hall I remember, people want to know, "Is that the original chair?" "Is that chair original?" "Are those glasses original?" And that can kind of interrupt the purpose of the interpretation. But I think particularly in a domestic situation like Sagamore Hill or Carl Sandburg, the furnishings speak very loudly to the visitor in showing the circumstances in which people lived. And they reflect those circumstances.
- David Wallace: 12:12 One of the interesting things at Sandburg, for instance, was as long as he lived there were no curtains on the windows. It's a house completely away from anyone else. There's no reason why you have to have shades on windows to keep people from looking in. And he liked the sunlight and the brightness and so on. But after his death, Mrs. Sandburg I guess had always wanted curtains, so they put up curtains. And of course my plan recommended they take the curtains down, that it should look the way it did at the time of his life. And the other argument really with the family was the granddaughter wanted it to look the way she remembered it

when she was a little girl, when he was in his heyday. Of course most of the photographs and the surviving furnishings and so on dated right up to the end of his life when he was, instead of up in his study working, he was working in the living room. My plan called for preserving that, which was very well documented, as opposed to imagining what the living room looked like.

- M. Hartley: 13:35 Was there a lot of activity around the 1976 time period here at the Center that you can recall? The Park Service was pretty much abuzz, I think.
- David Wallace: 13:47 Very much so. But particularly in publications, AV, and exhibits more than historic furnishings. I don't remember, I'm sure we were involved, of course I was involved at Independence well before that. But those aren't the projects that stick out in my memory.
- M. Hartley: 14:15 And getting your invitation to come here. You were 40 year old and you were here before the building was even built. Are there any memories that you often recollect or come to mind about this place, whether it was a project or just being here working with the people that you worked with?
- David Wallace: 14:35 Well, one of my most vivid memories predates this building. It was when I still worked in the Brackett House. We had an ice storm, a really severe ice storm, and I lived in Frederick, 20 miles away. But I came into work and I got halfway up the hill in my car and it slid into the ditch on Division Street, I think it's called. So I walked the rest of the way up to the Brackett House and the old stone steps there were very uneven and completely coated with ice and I went up on my hands and knees. One other person showed up who lived in Shepherdstown. The ones who lived closer didn't show up. And I sent him home and left myself after the sun had come up and melted enough of the ice that I could get my car out. And then, of course, I do remember painting the lobby here. And of course, what were then very modern furnishings. All, like the exhibits of that period, stemming from the Park Service exposure to the 1964 New York World's Fair, had a tremendous influence on the Park Service designers. And so of course we had the orange plastic chairs. I don't know if any of them have survived.
- M. Hartley: 16:22 I don't think they have, unfortunately.

- David Wallace: 16:22 They should have saved one.
- M. Hartley: 16:25 Maybe they did.
- David Wallace: 16:26 It was a well-known designer. I've forgotten who it was.
- M. Hartley: 16:32 Herman Miller?
- David Wallace: 16:33 I guess they were Herman Miller, yes. And of course we had the open office space which gradually became more and more closed as time progressed because people found it was very difficult to carry on telephone conversations and to concentrate on your work without some kind of a cubicle to isolate you.
- M. Hartley: 17:00 Well this certainly has been a place filled with scholars and creative people, which is combined I think in historic furnishings. But as an administrator, what was it like to have to supervise probably a pretty eclectic group of folks?
- David Wallace: 17:23 It was not my cup of tea, really. I never really chose to do that, but you sort of get squeezed in. And mine was, particularly in Branch of Museum Operations, was a very mixed group. You had the scientists in the conservation labs leaning on you and the historians down at Springfield. I was not particularly happy doing that kind of work. I tend to like to do it myself rather than to tell other people how to do it. And I think sometimes, particularly secretaries, found that I would give them too much leeway and they wanted to know exactly how do you want it done? And I would say, "You know, if you think this is better." It was not my strong point. I was very happy to come back as a worker.
- M. Hartley: 18:33 Yeah. So, one more question, unless you have anything else to add. What do you think the value of the Harpers Ferry Center is within the National Park Service system, as it was then or as it is today?
- David Wallace: 18:51 Well, it certainly helped to elevate standards, quality standards in publications, exhibits, in every respect. And I've always found it was very valuable for me to visit parks in the rest of the country because they tended to be somewhat suspicious of eastern urban types. And to go out and actually visit a park and talk to them face-to-face and hear their side of problems. I always felt that when I made a field trip for a specific project or projects, I would try to

visit as many parks as I could during that time, partly because I enjoyed doing it, but also I found establishing personal relationships between the Center and the periphery was very important.

- David Wallace: 19:59 And I would like also to say in reference to administration, my immediate boss during most of my time was, maybe it'll come back to me.
- M. Hartley: 20:21 I know, I don't have all the history down of names.
- David Wallace: 20:24 Marc Sagan's assistant from Cuba, New York. Anyway, he was a very, very good administrator. Marc was a great idea person but he was not the hands on type administrator. But my immediate boss was very much hands on. But he knew how to get the best out of the people that he had and I always appreciated working for him. And if I find the name I'll pass it on to you.
- M. Hartley: 21:05 Come back and tell me. Yes. Yes.
- David Wallace: 21:07 That's horrible. I used to tell people that I retired when I discovered that I couldn't introduce my secretary to somebody because I couldn't remember her name.
- M. Hartley: 21:23 Well I'm so glad you came back to help us celebrate. We really appreciate you letting us record you.
- David Wallace: 21:29 I hope you cut out part of, the end of it there. The silence.
- M. Hartley: 21:36 We're doing this because we think the Center, there's been so many changes and such an evolution here and such a history of what we do for the Park Service. I think it's good to capture that. So thank you. Well, Winnie may know this. Winnie, who was Marc Sagan's assistant?
- Winnie Frost: 21:57 Here's Marc Sagan right here, to come talk to us.
- M. Hartley: 22:01 Hi, there.
- M. Sagan: 22:01 How are you?
- Winnie Frost: 22:04 This is for you. Thank you so much for ...
- M. Sagan: 22:05 Sure.

Winnie Frost:	22:05	We're totally impromptu on all this. This is for you. Thank you very much.
M. Hartley:	22:05	I am Michelle Hartley. I'm with the AV division here. So I understand you're coming in for an interview?
David Wallace:	22:17	I couldn't remember your assistant's name, was my boss.

END OF TAPE