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Telling Our Own Untold Stories:
Civil Rights in the National Park Service Oral History Project

Michael Allen
June 11, 2020

Interview conducted by Lu Ann Jones and Cameron Nesmith
Transcribed by Teresa Bergen
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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

MICHAEL ALLEN

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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The narrator has reviewed and approved the transcript.

[START OF TRACK 1]

00:00

Lu Ann Jones: I've also started the recording here on the audio. Before I turn it over to you, Cameron, we always start the recording with an introduction. Let me say that this is Lu Ann Jones. I'm a historian with the Park History Program. I'm recording from Alexandria, Virginia, today, and we're doing this via Teams because we are in the midst of a shutdown because of the coronavirus pandemic. This is for an oral history project that we are calling Telling Our Own Untold Stories: Civil Rights in the National Park Service. So let me ask each of you to introduce yourselves so that our transcriptionist will have a good voice sample from each of you. So, Michael, do you want to go first?

Michael Allen: Yes. Thank you again, Lu Ann and Brother Nesmith for the opportunity to be a part of this engagement on behalf of the National Park Service. My name is Michael A. Allen. I live in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. I'm currently retired from the National Park Service. I was blessed and fortunate enough to spend thirty-seven and a half years with the National Park Service, which I truly enjoyed. It was memorable, it was enlightening, it was earthshaking. A lot of all the good adjectives. But again, I'm grateful that you all saw something in me that could be helpful to you all in this endeavor. So again, thank you very much.

Lu Ann Jones: You're welcome. Thank you, Michael. Cameron, do you want to do an introduction? And then, take it away.

Cameron Nesmith: For sure. Thank you again, Lu Ann and Michael for this opportunity. This is my first interview, so I'm very excited. My name is Cameron Nesmith. I'm from Atlanta, Georgia. I'm a recent graduate of Morehouse College. I'm serving this summer as an HBCUI intern for the Greening Youth Foundation. I'm excited to be conducting this oral history interview today with Michael Allen and Lu Ann Jones.

Lu Ann Jones: So, feel free to begin, Cameron.

Cameron Nesmith: For sure. I just want to start by asking you, Michael, just telling us a little bit about yourself. Describe what it was like just growing up in Kingstree, South Carolina.

Michael Allen: Well again, Cameron, thank you for the opportunity. As we learned in a previous conversation that our cultural path may have crossed, being that I grew up in Williamsburg County, which is in the eastern part of the state of South Carolina, probably some seventy-five miles northeast of

Charleston, South Carolina. I was born in Williamsburg County, that's where I grew up.

Michael Allen: My grandparents. I would say history and culture has always been a part of who I am in my fabric and my fiber. You know, I was fortunate enough, I guess at a very tender age to have an opportunity to have some time with my grandparents. Remembering them fondly at a young age. I guess, I credit my grandfather and grandmother in some respects to allow me to be here today. Because it was in May of 1966, at that time Dr. Martin Luther King came and visited my hometown of Kingstree. I was five. It was a Sunday afternoon. The focus of his message was march on the ballot box. And that, not fully understanding that at the age of five, but at least being in a crowd, I can at least say I was in his company. Many Americans can't say that. And that's a testament not only to them, but also to my parents who were civil rights activists and involved as poll workers, poll managers, folks who worked the streets campaigning.

00:04:18

Michael Allen: My fondest, earliest memory of actually being in a public engagement situation, or circumstance, was in 1972, when I was a volunteer for an African American by the name of Benjamin Gordon who was running for the State House of Representatives in the county, Williamsburg County, and in Kingstree. He was successful in winning, and he became the first African American elected to the State House from my county since Reconstruction. So little did I know all these things that I did as a child would have impact on my public life and career. So again, that got me again into history and culture, which I loved, and really partook of a lot when I was in middle school and high school.

Michael Allen: Once I was finished in high school, I said well, the next step should be college. I was fortunate enough to, in the fall of 1978, began my college journey, if you will, at SC State College, an HBCU located in Orangeburg, South Carolina. So, my desire, my goal, really was to pursue education and to become a history teacher. My mom was a teacher, so I thought I could follow in that type of footstep.

Michael Allen: But lo and behold, in the spring of 1980, another opportunity was afforded to me, and that was the National Park Service. My then-history advisor came to me and said that the National Park Service would be on campus soon. They were going to be interviewing for young men and young women for consideration for opportunities in employment with the National Park Service. I think because of your background and your experience, you could be a good candidate. So, I had some knowledge of the National Park Service, not a lot. So, being the adventurous person that I was, I guess as I say, I placed name in a hat.

Michael Allen: Fortunately enough, I was selected, and on June 1, 1980, I began my Park Service career. So, I attribute experiences, opportunities that I had in my formative years, in my high school years, which kind of grounded me became, you know, the guideposts, if you will, for what I attempted to do, and what I may have done for the next thirty-seven and a half years with the National Park Service.

Cameron Nesmith: For sure. For sure. I appreciate, I appreciate that answer. I just want to follow up a comment going back a little bit to your parents.

Michael Allen: Okay.

00:06:55

Cameron Nesmith: You mentioned, could you just describe to us what they did a little more? And kind of the challenges they faced dealing with the Jim Crow South? And how they helped kind of shape your mind?

Michael Allen: Okay. Great. My mother, again, as I say, she was a teacher. Prior to integration, which came in 1970, she taught at a rural African American school. In fact, I'm confident of that, because the very night that Dr. King was assassinated, she was not at home. She was teaching adult education at Blakely High School, which is not that far from Nesmith, where your lineage is from. So that's where she was. So, I know exactly where I was when I saw the message on the screen that he had been assassinated. She was not at home. She was teaching adult education.

Michael Allen: My father didn't grow up in South Carolina. He grew up in Florida. But my parents moved, when my grandparents got kind of elderly and sick. He was fortunate enough to get a Civil Service job, as many African Americans did, working in the post office initially. You know, doing menial work and so forth. But eventually he took the test and passed, and he then became a mail carrier. What's so significant about that, he was the first African American to be a mail carrier in the county since Reconstruction again. So, Reconstruction is a continuing narrative in my life.

Michael Allen: Now, today we talk about driving while black, birding while black, sleeping while black, shopping while black. He was a postman while black. Because he not only delivered mail quote in the "black section" of Kingstree, he delivered mail all over Kingstree. So often he was challenged or stopped or inquired as to why he was in various neighborhoods or communities. Even though he had the post office uniform on, and he was in a postal vehicle, he still had to deal with delivering mail while black. So that was a challenge to him. He didn't talk

a lot about it. But you knew that that was a pressure point for him. So, between them being involved in politics, community activity, civic engagement, the church world, educational opportunities, these were the things I saw through them.

Michael Allen: Then I had to navigate through this situation as well when in 1970 instead of going to an integrated [segregated] school as I had for the previous four years of my schooling, well actually five, in kindergarten, now in the fifth grade in 1970, I'm in an integrated situation. Kingstree Elementary School, 1970. I think as I look back now, I'm not sure how well the school district was prepared for integration. Just my personal comment.

Michael Allen: So here I am in 1970 in this integrated class. Thirty individuals in the class. I was fortunate, I guess, by my testing or aptitude or whatever, I was placed in the top class for fifth grade. But in that class of thirty, there was myself and three others of us of color. So, we had to navigate just being in that type of environment, number one. Sometimes feeling that the teachers that were teaching us were not thrilled that we were in that building, first of all. Then also trying to navigate now, just not only dealing with myself and the other three African Americans that were in that class, but for the other twenty or so whites that were in there, I had no knowledge who they were, what their background. Sometimes tempers flared and it became conflict. I'll just say that. And dealing with that.

Michael Allen: So again, being in that type of environment was a challenge, but it also was an education. To be honest, in many respects, being in that class in 1970, looking back now, was a preparation for the National Park Service. Because often as I grew and I moved through the ranks of the agency, whether it was in conferences, whether it was in training, whether it was at public events or presentations, sometime I may have been the only person of color in the room, or one of a few in the room. So, I can kind of look back to 1970, I guess, as a benchmark for an experience I would have in my thirty-seven and a half years in the Park Service.

00:11:55

Cameron Nesmith: Of course. Now could you describe a little bit the transition from actually going to like a completely integrated classroom environment, to going to or choosing, HBCU, where now you're surrounded completely by individuals who look just like yourself?

Michael Allen: Well, you know, I often say I grew up in a segregated community, a majority black county of Williamsburg County. In 1978, I then moved to Orangeburg, which is predominantly African American majority HBCU campus. And then in June of 1980, I moved to this white island of

Sullivan's. Where Fort Moultrie stands, Fort Sumter is part of the landscape. So, it was a transition.

Michael Allen: As I said, I think as I got to the park, you know, when I was recruited by the National Park Service, there was a young female African American who's still a dear friend of mine, we just spoke recently, from another part of South Carolina with one of the recruiters. Then there was another young white gentleman who came to Orangeburg in 1980 to recruit me.

Michael Allen: The day I got to Fort Moultrie was June the first, was the day she left to transfer to another National Park Service site. So, the person who was so instrumental in bringing me there, she left. So, I had to kind of start from scratch getting to know the individuals, getting to know the supervisors, the leadership team. Not understanding the culture of the National Park Service, you know. Having to read through that. There were a few other African Americans that were there working. There were two, there was one older African American guy. As we would say, he spoke pure Gullah. Because he had been working there since the 1940s, when they were still part of the military. Then there was another African American who was the lead brick mason. He was there. And then there was another African American who was a laborer. If my memory serves me, I think those were the three that were there. I think there was a young lady that worked in like a clerk on the administrative side. And that was it. [glitch]

Cameron Nesmith: For sure. I appreciate the answer. I appreciate it. Now from here, could you talk about your experience at Fort Sumter? And how, I guess from that being the starting point of your career, how it influenced you really going forward?

00:14:52

Michael Allen: Okay. Great. Well, you know, I say this, looking back at it, I was there for the summer of 1980, Christmas of '80, summer of '81 and Christmas of '81 as a coop education student. Not a permanent employee. Ironically, forty years ago this very week, when I was told, "Well, now the training part is over. The preparation part is over. It's time for you to go out to Fort Sumter and do presentations and programs on your own."

Michael Allen: So, as I did that, with all what I had read, what I knew, how I got comfortable, I went forward. We were kind of like throwing out nothing, being given the opportunity to show why you were selected. But what I saw and what I experienced and what I heard is that people, after I gave my presentation, you know, were very impressed with the history and the knowledge I gave. But then some asked, "Why are you out here? What do you have to do with the history of Fort Sumter? And are you sure you're comfortable working in such an environment?" And then some would ask,

"Well, what version of the story of the American Civil War would you perhaps be providing to us?" So, these are the type of questions, ironically, forty years ago this very week, that I was peppered with by people out at Fort Sumter.

Michael Allen: When I began to digest all of this, and began to take it all in, it troubled me initially. I have to acknowledge that. But I didn't tell my supervisor. I didn't tell my coworkers. I didn't even tell my parents this. I just digested it, kept it internalized. But as I heard this, I said, well, maybe I need to look at the way I'm working not from the eyes of as an employee, but from the perspective of a visitor.

Michael Allen: So, what I did, I guess to kind of work through this here in my head, first thing I went to the bookstore. So, I began looking in the bookstore from a different perspective than I had done previously and began looking at the titles and the things that were for sale in the bookstore. I noticed that the bookstore didn't have anything about African American history, cultural experience, to be sold to the traveling public. Usually, a bookstore is a way of undergirding the history that needs to be told. So, I said, well, I guess I'm not in the bookstore.

Michael Allen: So, then I left the bookstore, and I walked through the museum. I just began to look at the museum as I said from the point of a visitor. As I went through it from one end to the other end, one level to the next level, I noticed there was very little about the African American experience. A few phrases and words, and maybe a sentence or two, to be truthful.

Michael Allen: But then the other side of my brain said, well, you have to realize, Mike, this museum has been here since 1961. So, you actually wouldn't find yourself in this museum. But this is what people were seeing when they came to Fort Sumter.

Michael Allen: So then after I left those two physical spaces, I thought well, I should maybe listen to what my coworkers are sharing, interpreting, providing to the public to have them understand and get awareness. As I listened to what they were sharing, I really didn't see myself as a part of their narrative. So, at that very instance, after doing this self, I guess reflection of the park, I said, there's two things at work here. Either I am out of place being here at this space, or maybe the National Park Service perhaps could be out of touch. And I didn't feel that I was out of place. (Cameron Nesmith laughs) So I said, well, maybe the agency's out of touch. So having that type of ah-ha moment, forty years ago, almost this very week, really put me, it placed me, it kept me on the pathway for the various activities, programs, engagements that I would see myself move through for the next thirty-seven and a half years to come. And probably, to be honest if I didn't, if I wasn't peppered, if you will, by those type of

questions or inquiries, maybe my career might have been different. Perhaps.

00:19:51

Cameron Nesmith: The last question I have, just before I turn it over to Lu Ann, very quickly, could you describe actually having your experience, being able to create a site or establish a site for NPS? Just talk about your experience of really having—

Michael Allen: Affecting the landscape.

Cameron Nesmith: Yeah. Just having that power kind of in your hands and being able to really tell your way and your own story.

Michael Allen: Well, you know, it started small. I think as my time continued there, maybe I guess little cracks began to develop. When I began to ask specific questions and began to insert myself into conversations, you know, at that time, as most National Park Service sites, in the month of February they were required to do some type of Black History Month project or exhibit, temporary exhibit or whatever. So, a lot of times if I was not actively involved in developing it, then I was the responsible agent for developing it. So that gave me an opportunity to look at threads that was a part of the narrative of the story that had not really been woven into the story. So, I can remember doing one of those temporary exhibits on Africans and their arrival on Sullivan's Island as a major importation site. No, that's not in the enabling legislation of Fort Moultrie. No. But, Moultrie would not have existed on Sullivan's Island if the African slave trade was not a part of the narrative of the development of colonial South Carolina. That's just one example.

Michael Allen: I can remember on another occasion, doing a temporary exhibit relating to Robert Smalls. Yeah. Again, his story of May of 1862 is a part of the continual journey of understanding the relevancy of Fort Moultrie and Fort Sumter in Charleston's Harbor in the context of the Civil War in American history. These two chapters have been left out of the narrative or seem to be, or utilized or seen as sidebars, where they needed to be elevated to a broader capacity.

Michael Allen: So again, as time progressed in my career, opportunity was afforded to me where I then became the Eastern National coordinator. Eastern National provides the books for the parks. I knew that. I understand that. So, when that day came, when that chapter was open that I could manage the Eastern bookstore, I just then began to insert into the Eastern National stock books and other things that I think would be helpful to give a

broader, more holistic context of the story of the sites, but also making sure the infusion of African American products was on the shelves.

Michael Allen: Opportunities would then be afforded to me to be a part of the development team or the planning team for the reimagining, if you will, of the Fort Sumter Museum, which had been in place since 1961. So having an opportunity to be a part of that team, opportunities was afforded to me because of my longevity. To be a part of the development of Liberty Square and exhibits and displays that would go into that physical space, which didn't exist in the early part of my career. So, people were not providing any type of background to the Civil War, or to the experience of Fort Sumter. They just bought their ticket, got on a boat, and they ended up at Fort Sumter. So, that type of situation.

Michael Allen: Or, in the mid to late '90s, when the National Park Service began the development of the Charles Pinckney National Historic Site in Mount Pleasant, I was hired, transferred, to be a part of that development from the ground up. Looking at the legislation which created the framework of the site, which basically said that we will interpret the lives of all of the residents, inhabitants of the Charles Pinckney National Historic Site, 28 acres. So, there was no escaping interfacing, interconnecting the life of Charles Pinckney, a signer of the Constitution, and the impact and the influence of Gullah Geechee African people had on him as a governor, as a senator, as a congressman, as an ambassador of the state.

Michael Allen: So, I would say the things that I had to grapple with early on in my career, fate and opportunity allowed me to be a part of the shifting of the narrative as I continued in my career. And others, too, but that's enough right now.

00:25:05

Cameron Nesmith: Thank you, thank you. Now I'll turn it over to Lu Ann now, because she has a plethora of questions, she would like to ask you.

Michael Allen: Okay.

Cameron Nesmith: No problem.

Lu Ann Jones: Would you mind if I just stayed as a voice so I can just see the two of you there on the screen, instead of looking at me?

Michael Allen: Okay.

Cameron Nesmith: For sure.

Lu Ann Jones: Is that okay? Yes. Great job, Cameron. One of the notes that I took during our previous conversation, Michael, is that you said that you fought to stay in the NPS, that the NPS that you first encountered was not particularly welcoming to African American employees. Did I hear that correctly? And, if so, could you elaborate?

Michael Allen: Yes, I would. I think that the cooperative education program is an excellent program of transitioning African Americans into the National Park Service. I would never run away from that, because I believe it. But I think the undercurrent was--sometimes I don't think that the staff understood what the undertaking that was being put in place to bring a level of diversity and awareness to the agency. I'll just be transparent about it--you know, there were a number of other African Americans after me who had been recruited to work at Fort Sumter National Monument whose life was challenged in terms of being at the park by employees who did not respect them. Or perhaps they didn't even want them to be there or didn't see the relevancy of them being a part of this new landscape. Sometime that devolved into bad situations in terms of work, the work environment, the work opportunity, and people became frustrated and just didn't want to continue to be there.

Michael Allen: So, I experienced that, I might as well be honest, in many respects. But maybe I think from my background and from my experience, I knew how to experience it, I knew how to stand up to it and I knew how to be able to speak in order to navigate or plow through it. That wasn't maybe everyone's opportunity. So again, and I shared that, you know, with folks within the agency. That there needed to be an understanding and awareness to all staff members why this was so important. I guess it's--I'm just being transparent--it's almost like what we can say now, Black Lives Matter. Because it's having an African American voice along with the voice of a white woman from Nebraska or a white man from Ohio would make us better as an institution, as an agency and as a park.

Michael Allen: Because, as I stayed there longer, I then began to see demographic shifts in terms of those who were coming to the park. Through my work, as I shared earlier, I had an opportunity to interface with folks in the community. I asked them why you haven't been visiting these sites. And their answer was, well, we didn't feel welcome. We didn't feel that we got an invitation. We didn't see ourselves there if we went there, and we felt that we were not wanted. So, you know, they said to me the same thing I had to see and experience when I walked around Fort Sumter.

Michael Allen: But then how do you tell your supervisor that certain fundamental things that you all may be doing, or your program that you may have, or lack thereof, can be a hindrance to you having more people come and visiting your site?

00:29:40

Lu Ann Jones: Well, how did you figure out how to begin to, how did you begin to convey that message and to navigate those slights that you felt personally? What was the—

Michael Allen: The strength, I think it was done in multiple levels, if I will. As I shared earlier with Cameron, having the opportunity to be in the room when decisions were being made or planning was underway, or given the responsibility of leadership. I mean, being the Eastern National coordinator, besides having to count the inventory and making the bank deposits and making sure Philadelphia was satisfied and was happy, was also a challenge to ensure that you had a cadre of books and titles that could help to convey a diverse message for the park that you were responsible for.

Michael Allen: Or, realizing that you need to have allies beyond the boundaries of the National Park Service site. I'll give you an example. When I was sharing with Cameron about being a part of the team to develop the Charles Pinckney National Historic Site in Mount Pleasant, that probably was one of the engagements where we really had to leave the property to engage others in order to ensure we could meet the whole legislative ask that Congress gave us in establishing the park. Especially in the context of interpreting all of the inhabitants that lived at the site—free, slave, black and white. And within half a mile of where the Charles Pinckney site was located was a historic African American community that was established in 1866, known as [Canal?]. And individuals living in that historic African American community, their ancestors worked at Snee Farm. In a normal situation, that probably would not have been investigated or ascertained as a part of understanding the development of that site. But I knew better. So, things were orchestrated, and opportunities were afforded where I could remember previous interns and so forth were able to do research relating and connecting the African American communities in and around the Pinckney site to the park and its history. I remember Dr. Antoinette Jackson did a wonderful, excellent research project in bringing that awareness. I can see now, without that type of dialog and introduction and connectivity to the community, and acknowledging the importance of Gullah culture, the lives of sea grass basket makers that are part of our American experience, I don't think today we would have the Gullah Geechee culture here in this corridor. Because the corridor's real genesis and birth was also a part of the growing pain and birth pain of the Charles Pinckney National Historic Site. I knew that. So, I ensured that Gullah people were involved in the development of that site, had a face at that site and we recognized them at that site.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, do you think that your understanding of the full history of that site came from your formal training? I guess that you probably got a lot of African American history as part of an HBCU education and just your family. So formal training, but also just having grown up listening to the ancestors? I mean, where did that orientation to history come from?

00:33:53

Michael Allen: I think it is a combination. You know, growing up in a rural Gullah community in Kingstree, South Carolina. Not maybe fully understanding the Africanisms that was around me, you know, not understanding why rice was a normal staple in my home. But that's what was cooked, so that's what we ate. Not fully understanding African burial practices that I saw when I went to funerals with my grandmother. One of them in particular was called passing, where one person would stand on one side of the gravesite and one would stand on the other side of the gravesite and they would pass over the casket, as it's being lowered into the ground, the youngest member of that person's family, which was an Africanism. Those are just two examples that I knew, and I participated, or I saw, but not understanding the full ramification, understanding of that, until really I got to college and began to study it there.

Michael Allen: Probably one of the, I guess books that opened my eyes was titled *Black Majority* by Dr. Peter Wood. Many, many, many years later at one of our Gullah Geechee cultural heritage corridor meetings in Wilmington, I was able to meet Dr. Peter Wood. I told Peter in a public setting, if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be in this room, because you allowed me to see me for who I was. From the perspective of reading your book, having the understanding of the connectivity to West Africa. Understanding that the tenets of African life in America and understanding that's a part of understanding who we are as a people, as a community, and why the National Park Service should really work hard to engage that in the development of any site relating to the early history of America in our state and in our community.

Michael Allen: So definitely having partners on the outside, having an awareness of the history in the inside, but also having the boldness to be able to stand. Above all, stand with others around you perhaps who are uncomfortable in standing. I was the only person there of color for many years in the interpretive division. The burden rested with me, in some respects. But I was comfortable. And each step, whether it's bookstores, whether it's exhibit design text, whether it was development of the Charles Pinckney site, whether it was part of the Gullah Geechee process to bring the national heritage area, whether it was being a part of the process to develop Reconstruction Era National Monument, the core was having an understanding of the history, understanding the legacy that these places

and opportunities brought to our American experience, and the need to have that as a part of the voice of what the Park Service was sharing.

00:37:08

Lu Ann Jones: Wow. That's great. Well, Michael, was there a point where you began to connect with other African American interpreters or NPS employees, that you began to try to find a variety of allies within the Park Service but beyond your immediate community?

Michael Allen: Well, you know, ironically, how do I—as opposed to today, Lu Ann, our training mechanism and training process was a lot different.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes.

Michael Allen: I can remember having to attend Interpretive Skills 1 and 2 up at, I think it was a lodge or a campground in Clemson. Recently I had a chance to talk to John Beck. John's retired now. But John was, he and Dave Dahlen were the two leads for Interpretive Skills 1 and 2 at Clemson. I had a chance to kind of thank him for things I thought was boring and mundane Interpretive Skills 1 and 2 back in 1983 and '84, but they became relevant as I continued along in my career.

Michael Allen: So, I was able to then meet other African Americans that are in the agency. One of my dearest friends that I gained from that experience that's still with me now, a dear friend, is Judy Forte, who is current superintendent at MLK in Atlanta. Or Gail Hazelwood, who has since retired from the National Park Service. And Barbara Tagger, and others. So, I think some of my training, it allowed me to interface with other African Americans.

Michael Allen: But I would say this. On a larger scale, I think it was in the summer of, I think of 1999, the National Park Service hosted a conference in New Orleans. I think it was called Africans in America, or African Americans in America, something of that nature. John Tucker, who was superintendent at the time, Emory Campbell, who was the executive director of the Penn Center, and Joe Opala, who was an anthropologist and myself, we all journeyed down to New Orleans to be a part of the training and of the conversation of the conference.

Michael Allen: At that conference, in a very large, public room, I think we were in the Embassy Suite or wherever we were, we talked about the history of Gullah culture. Its impact, its legacy. We brought up a subject--I did, and Joe did, and Emory did, and John did, that there needed to be some sort of mechanism or opportunity that could bring Gullah people together across the cultural area, that the Park Service could be involved with and that

could bring a greater awareness, appreciation and understanding. And I can say this now as I've always said publicly, many in the room that looked like me when we said that were somewhat shocked that we would say that this needed to happen and that the Park Service should be involved with it. I think that was said because they were unsure whether or not the Park Service had the fortitude to even do it.

Michael Allen: Some folks, who I still know in the agency, came to me and were kind of upset that I was quote "a part of such a conversation." I should have known better. So, I had to take that in stride, Lu Ann. I did. I really did. But I believed in what I said. And the rest is history as to where we're now in 2020. But you know, I didn't hold that against them. Because I realized that you know, maybe people didn't always feel comfortable with the voice that they had. I did. So, I spoke it.

Lu Ann Jones: So, they were afraid that you were stepping out too far, or--?

00:41:26

Michael Allen: Well, the combination of, well, first of all, they thought that the Park Service didn't have the right to be involved in such a thing. That's what was said to me. Or they thought that that could turn out to be disastrous. Or that you perhaps could find yourself in a very awkward place in doing that. You know, I just took it in stride. I was happy for the opportunity to be in New Orleans. I got a chance to meet a lot of great people. African Americans from--that probably was my really, well, second taste of being out and about with other African Americans within the Park Service. Prior to that, I was involved with the creation of the Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, and special resource study. So, I had some dealing with them. But that conference in New Orleans was a whole different ballgame.

Michael Allen: But be that as it may, the next year we began the journey. Six years later, the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor legislation passed the US Congress. And this is 2020, and it's still there.

Lu Ann Jones: (laughs) I'm going to join you visually now so I can be there. Hello there. Hi.

Michael Allen: Okay.

Lu Ann Jones: It strikes me, Michael, I mean, when people cautioned you, I mean, the same risk that they were concerned about, it seems like you could run those risks whether you're timid or you're bold. I mean, you're always running risk.

Michael Allen: Yeah. Well, you know, I think, as a person of faith, I believe in time and season. There's a season for everything. I just believe that the time and the season was right. That these things need to be addressed, need to be tackled and needed to be dealt with. You know, probably one of the things that gave me some type of solace to this is that I think in that same year, 1999, is when we erected the African Importation Market, which you see outside of Fort Moultrie. Which I was very instrumental in. On that July day in 1999, there was probably five hundred people in the fields of Fort Moultrie. Even though the historic marker is not on Park Service property, the physical program was held on Park Service property. So now the park's got to deal with this. So, whether it wanted to or not, it had to.

Michael Allen: So, on that day—and let me tell you how faith ties things—on that day, Emory Campbell spoke, who was executive director at Penn. On that day, Mayor Joseph P. Riley, the mayor of Charleston, spoke. On that day, Ed Ball, who wrote *Slaves in the Family,* he spoke. On that day, the ambassador from Sierra Leone, he spoke. And on that day, I spoke. The emcee of that event was a man by the name of Nelson Rivers. At that time, he was a part of the NAACP.

Michael Allen: Now let me fast forward to this June, if I'm not mistaken, is the fifth anniversary of [the mass shooting by Dylann Roof] Mother Emanuel [African Methodist Episcopal Church]. Within the next couple of days. I'll show you how faith works. From a public program in 1999 to what happened at Mother Emanuel tragedy. A couple of days after that event, there was a memorial service, and at that memorial service, Nelson was the emcee again. Also, Mayor Riley spoke. And as I sat there, both men said the same thing without coordinating what they were saying. And they both said, "We stand here today in commemoration of Mother Emanuel, the building of an African American museum, and the need to have a better awareness of African American experience because," this is what Nelson said, "because of my experience being the emcee in 1999 on Sullivan's Island." Mayor Riley said, "The following year I propose that we build a museum here because of my experience speaking the previous year on Sullivan's Island."

Michael Allen: I went to both of them, man, and I said, "Did you all coordinate this?" They said, "No. Because you called, we came, and we were a part of it, it affected us."
So, you never know, you never know when something is planned and orchestrated and come to pass, what kind of long-lasting effect it may have, and also help to change the course of history. Here I may have had some challenges in New Orleans, but what I said publicly. We often say the proof is in the pudding. Because it is. And hopefully next year, the International African American Museum, it will open. That historic marker on Sullivan's Island, I've been concerned in most recent days that

bad people would vandalize it. That has not happened. Prior to the massacre at Mother Emanuel, Dylann Roof visited that marker. We have photographic proof of that.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Well, when he visited that, well you can't, you don't know what was in his—well, I'm not even going to ask you what you think was in his head. When that marker was dedicated, so you said it was—

00:47:32

Michael Allen: In July of 1999.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes. So clearly it made a great impact on these public officials. But what difference do you think it made for the folks of the community? The folks who showed up there or just were able to see that marker, and what does it represent to them?

Michael Allen: Okay. Well, I think it's had an effect in multiple levels. Let's start with the Park Service. I think having that marker there opened a door for the Park Service to begin to address things that it had not addressed. So, when I go back now and think about the questions, I was asked of why are you doing a black history temporary exhibit on pest houses, and lazarettos and Africans coming on this island, the marker now justifies why I did this. But I had to do a temporary exhibit before we can get the marker. And then now with the marker's there, and with the Pinckney site open, Pinckney as a signer and drafter of the United States Constitution and the fundamental things that he inserted into that document. Namely, three-fifth compromise, that marker tells you why he did that. That's the influence on a signer of the constitution. So, when we as an agency began to look at the interpretation of Fort Moultrie, the interpretation of Fort Sumter, the African, African American experience now cannot be absent. When we were challenged as a Park Service, I think in the late, in the mid to early '90s, when the movie *Glory* came out, which that historic event happened three-fourths of a mile from Fort Sumter. But when a white man came to Fort Sumter, asked a Park Service employee where was Morris Island, where was Battery Wagner, the significance of that, and the employee was unable to answer that. And we receive a congressional [inquiry] because of that. There's an impact.

Michael Allen: And so, moving forward now there's an integration of the story in all of our stories in telling at Fort Sumter National Monument and Charles Pinckney National Historic Site. The fact that the park has been actively involved in commemorative events on the island. In fact, when there was the move by developers to purchase the property of Morris Island, where Battery Wagner once stood, that the park was at the forefront of lobbying, having conversations with Charleston County, Mount Pleasant, with the

city of Charleston, with the town of Folly, that passed resolutions to decry the selling of any portion of Morris that could be turned into a condominium. These are the things that the park integrated. And maybe I might have been at the forefront of that as well, and I accept that, too. But we knew that that was a part of our landscape. And we just couldn't retreat. It was off our boundary, it was beyond our property, that's not our concern.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, there's so many questions. You know, so often in the National Park Service, Park Service personnel move from site to site. You have remained at home.

00:51:22

Michael Allen: Yes.

Lu Ann Jones: Could you imagine being a Park Service person in another place? Or what difference does the fact that you have been kind of faithful to that place, what difference does that make?

Michael Allen: Well, you know, again, as a person of faith, I believe that this was the narrative, and this was the journey that I was destined for. It's not, Lu Ann, that I did not apply to other places; it just didn't materialize. And that's fine. I hold no regrets to the agency because of it. I just know for the calling that was afforded to me that perhaps I needed to be there.

Michael Allen: I would say that I think that the agency benefited greatly because of it. The opportunities that were afforded me, I think they were long-lasting. They have changed the landscape. I had gone back after I retired to, I think, a public event of some sort. And one of the former managers of the Park Service who was still in the agency came and gave me a hug and said, "Mike, you are still here." Even though you have left, you are still here." Whether it's that importation marker that's still there, whether it's the bench by the road, working with Dr. Toni Morrison, it's still there. Whether it's African Passages, the exhibits that are inside of Fort Moultrie, it's still there.

Michael Allen: In fact, some of it goes back to 1999. The evening of 1999, we dedicated that marker, the superintendent and I, John Tucker, we had a conversation with Ed Ball. We told Ed that we hoped that someday in the future there could be something inside of the park building that could help to tell a complete story beyond the marker. That's 1999. That didn't happen till 2009. And Ed was one of the benefactors which helped pay for it. [Eatston?] helped pay for it. And other philanthropic groups supported it. So sometime you have to have longevity along with connectivity.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, is it okay for us to talk a little while longer?

Michael Allen: Yes, I'm fine. Yes, ma'am.

Lu Ann Jones: Well certainly, and maybe you could explain for Cameron and for me, too, what a national heritage area is, and why that was the mechanism for preserving, promoting, etcetera, Gullah Geechee culture. And the skills that it took for you to do what you did on behalf of that heritage site.

00:54:31

Michael Allen: Great. A national heritage area at its core definition is a mechanism or an organism or an entity that's really managed from the ground up. Well, let me back up. In 2000, okay, Congressman James Clyburn through the appropriation mechanism provided funds to the National Park Service to do what's called a special resource study. You're familiar with those. That special resource study was basically a mechanism to understand the importance, the history and the legacy of Gullah culture from a national perspective. Then in it would have to be some type of model or some type of options of how we could put that into effect. So, if we look at it, it was in May of 2000. Let me back up. In January of 2000, Jerry Belson came to me and said, "You will be a part of this." I worked with Rich Sussman, in the planning office in Atlanta, and Stuart Johnson, and a number of other individuals as a part of the planning of this. So, my task was, I was on the ground, and there in the community to try to set goals, objectives. But also, how we can engage the public to come.

Michael Allen: So, what I did is at the first actual meeting for our special resource conversation was in the basement of Mother Emanuel in May of 2000. So, when I began thinking about the essence and the importance and the history of this, I said, we need to start from a safe place. Little did I know what fourteen years later, what that space would mean. But that afternoon in May of 2000, that's where we gathered. In the very space of the basement of Mother Emanuel.

Michael Allen: So, working with that, we knew it was history. And so, we employed a court reporter to be able to capture the information. We had it videoed so we'd have a photographic record of what we had done.

Michael Allen: Here's a funny story. I can say to Rich Sussman now, he's retired, I can talk about him. The court reporter came to me a couple of minutes before the meeting began. And she said, "Mike, will people speak in Gullah at the meeting?"

Michael Allen: So, I said, "Well, ma'am, I think some probably might. Because this is about Gullah history and culture."

Michael Allen: So, she said, "Well, you know, we do that, that happens, I'm going to have to figure out how do I capture that from a transcription perspective."
I said, "Well, we'll work that out. We're videotaping this as well."
So, I went, and I told Rick Sussman. I said, "The young lady is here. She's the court reporter. We've contracted with her. She's going to capture all what was said and done here. But she asked, will anyone speak in Gullah at the meeting?"

Michael Allen: He said, okay. So, we got up and began the normal Park Service you know, public meeting and welcome. In the midst of preparing to ask questions and dialog with the community, he said, "Oh, by the way, you can't speak in Gullah because the court person will have a problem with that."

Michael Allen: So, it got very quiet. And so, I thought about New Orleans. What have we got ourselves into? Are we mentally prepared to do what needs to be done? So, I said, "Well, you know, ladies and gentlemen, we're at the first meeting of the Gullah Geechee Lowcountry Special Resource Study. In whatever manner, whatever language you desire to speak, we would welcome you to do that. And this is why we're doing this, because of what just happened."

Michael Allen: People got up and said two things. This was our concern. But then one older gentleman came back and said, "But we're here, not because of you," he pointed at Rick Sussman. "But we're here because of him. Michael. And if he wasn't here, we wouldn't be here. So, we want to make sure what just happened never happens again."

Michael Allen: Unfortunately, Associated Press was there. Because I knew the Associated Press writer for Charleston, Bruce Smith. So here now the next morning, across our nation, National Park Service holds special resource study looking at Gullah history and culture. But Park Service employee asked the public not to speak in Gullah.

Michael Allen: So subsequent meetings, people asked, "Can we speak?"
I just said, "Forget what you read. Do what you need to do." So having relationships—the people could have walked out. And we would have lost it right there.
The folks then in New Orleans who came after me were the same way. "I told you so."

Lu Ann Jones: What was Rick Sussman's title?

Michael Allen: He was, I think he was a planning officer for the Southeast Region back then. Yeah, I think he was. Yeah. Yeah. And you know, I hold no malice toward—

1:00:00

[END OF TRACK 1]

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Michael Allen: We laugh about this; I haven't seen him in years. You know, again, I think in his mind he just wanted to make sure that we did everything right. That's his job. That's his responsibility. But then the cultural nuances that need to be in play cannot be interrupted by a Park Service policy or process. And these are things that the Park Service learned from me and from them. Where we plan our public meetings. What week of the night we planned our public meetings. How we got the meeting information out. Making sure there may have been food or refreshments at these meetings. These might have not been normal processes of the National Park Service. But in this endeavor, in this journey, it was a part of what we did.

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. Well, you were on the road a lot during that process, weren't you? In a typical month, what was your schedule like, and what were you doing where?

Michael Allen: Well, in that year, we did, I think we did a number of meetings. Because now I have to get out of my comfort zone because I just wasn't dealing with people in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. You know, my reach really was from Wilmington, North Carolina, all the way down to Jacksonville, Florida. So, I met people who I did not know. I interfaced with entities in groups I was not familiar with. I went into communities I may have passed along the interstate, but I never got off to go in there. So as a result, I think my horizon was expanded. So, I got to know more people and got to develop more friends and more allies that was needed. Because we knew to get whatever was coming at the end across the finish line, we had to have the support of everyone from one end to the other end. The corridor, by geographic size, is about the size of Maryland. And it's probably about 500 miles from the north to the south. So, a lot of traveling, a lot of phone calls and connectivity had to be undertaken in order to pull this off. And a learning curve by the National Park Service.

Lu Ann Jones: So are you saying with that that you were teaching, well, you were learning, and other people in the National Park Service were learning from the Gullah Geechee folks and supporters.

00:02:45

Michael Allen: Yes. Yes. I would say that it was a learning experience all around. Because the Gullah community now was learning the Park Service and seeing the Park Service in a whole different light than they probably were accustomed to. Yeah. Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: I still have some questions. But Cameron, do you have questions that you want—now I know we have some big questions at the end. Anything you want to ask at this point?

Cameron Nesmith: I just have one more question in particular. It's like what from, specifically, the Gullah culture and that history did you really want to show to the public? Like aspects about that culture that were relevant in your life, or that could be relevant to the people?

Lu Ann Jones: That's a great question.

Michael Allen: Well, you know, that's a good question. It depends how I look at it. Like I could use the table that we eat from as an example. When I look at my Sunday dinner, that [unclear] 3:59 And saw rice, yam, collard greens, chicken and other types of vegetables and fruits. Knowing the African connection that came from that to our dinner table across America today. So, I definitely wanted to respect that and honor that. But also, the Park Service will have a way to help educate the traveling public about that connectivity.

Michael Allen: Also, I wanted the Park Service to know that everything regarding African or Gullah Geechee people is not locked up in a book. And that you have to respect the internal book through people's wisdom, people's experience, what was handed down generationally. Because that comes, that comes front and center in some of our process. As Lu Ann can attest, maybe not as much today as it was in the past, when you came forth to bring a National Register nomination or a National Historic Landmark nomination, the Park Service, from the chief historian on down wanted you to cite every book available about the information that you were presenting for nomination. Well in some of the things that we are learning is not in the book; it's in grandmother's head. And it happened.

00:05:29

Cameron Nesmith: Right.

Michael Allen: So, the Park Service had to, I think it has, come to terms with the fact that some of the research reflecting the African American experience will be only in the head and the hearts and minds of those who are sharing it, not in a book. But it has to be trusted and believed. Not dismissed.

Lu Ann Jones: That was an excellent question, Cameron. About the time that you finally got some better interpretive materials there at Fort Moultrie, you began the National Heritage Corridor organizing, is I believe when the Park Service begins a conversation that again takes about ten years about a Reconstruction Era site.

Michael Allen: Right. All this was simultaneous.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes. So, were you part of those very early conversations that Eric Foner and some other folks were beginning to prime the pump in terms of thinking about Beaufort, for example? Was that part of something that was in your consciousness there?

Michael Allen: Yes. In December of 2000, when Eric came to Beaufort, I was there. So not only am I engaged with this conversation of Gullah culture, simultaneously I'm engaged with this conversation of Reconstruction where there's this interlock with both. Yes. Because in some respects, I'm dealing with the same set of people.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, I think one of the hard lessons that it takes for those of us who've been with the Park Service for a long time to learn, and I think this would be sort of an important point to make with Cameron, is that it takes a long time for things to happen sometime.

00:07:30

Michael Allen: Yeah. Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: As they put it, it's not a ship that turns quickly.

Michael Allen: No.

Lu Ann Jones: But if you persist, you can turn the ship. So certainly, the notion of the Reconstruction era site was a big ship that took a while to turn. I was thinking, certainly to create, well, any kind of entity in the National Park Service, it's at root a political process as well as a historical process.

Michael Allen: Right.

Lu Ann Jones: So, when did you, I guess, begin to know Representative Clyburn, for example, who's been so important with sites in South Carolina, and begin to see and understand that political world in which the National Park Service operates?

Michael Allen: Well, let me be transparent. He was elected in November of 1992. In the winter of 1993, I was in Washington for a research project looking at the

background of Charles Pinckney's life prior to the opening of the park. While I was there, I availed myself to have a conversation with one of the staff and him. From that point forward, we have always had conversations in different place. I think that's where I got to know him, that's where he got to know me, and that's where our working, so there's been countless public events that we've been together since I had that first conversation with him back in 1993. I'm grateful for our relationship then as I am now. I'm grateful that he has, that he trusted me in these various twists and turns, that we have experienced from then to now. I would say—and this is not being prideful—probably without him, some fundamental things probably would not have existed. Whether what he asked us to do with Gullah Geechee, what he helped us to do with Reconstruction, the first board meeting that was held I think in 2000, 2001, with international African American Museum, I was there, he was chair of the board. So, we've been walking and talking for a long time. Yeah.

00:10:16

Lu Ann Jones: Now he and his late wife, were they South Carolina State graduates, also?

Michael Allen: Yes. Yes. In fact, this is what he says, if it wasn't for his wife, he would not have been supportive of the Gullah initiative. His wife is from Moncks Corner, which is closer to Charleston. He grew up more in the interior. So, he may have had less of the Gullah influence than his wife. He said when he brought this to his wife as an option, she told him that he needed to do it. Then he realized when he began to think when his wife would call her mother or other relatives, and the cadence of the language that he heard on the phone that he didn't know what they were talking about, that it gave him an appreciation for something that he didn't often know about.

Lu Ann Jones: Huh. Interesting.

Michael Allen: Right. So, he said, you know, Emily told me that we needed to do this. He said this on multiple occasions. (Lu Ann Jones laughs) I got to know Emily in my travels with Jim at different public events and activities that we were on together. Sometimes she would be there. Sometimes she, probably my fondest memory with them together, I think in 2009, through his relationship and his leadership, we were able to do a panel at the Congressional Black Caucus. I think I remember telling you about that. I think you might have; I don't know if you came or not. But anyhow, we did it. That night there was a gospel gathering, as there always is at the CBC. I was sitting with him, with them at that gathering. So again, he has been instrumental in my journey. I have to give him credit for that. Yes.

00:12:16

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. I mean that's just, well, when did you meet Director Stanton? I mean, he's the director there about the turn of the century, right?

Michael Allen: Yeah. Yeah. I think I met him; it was some type of Underground Railroad gathering in Charleston. I met him then. And then I was involved in the Underground Railroad Special Resource Study. So, I met him in DC. And then I was there at another transitional point in our Park Service journey when we all gathered at Ford's Theater. When then-Director Bob Stanton, Secretary Bruce Babbitt, Congressman Jesse Jackson, Junior, and others said that you all would do better in the telling of the Civil War and its contacts and connectivity to African American history, culture and inclusion. So, again, being at another public event gave me another entrée to all of these characters, so to speak. (Lu Ann Jones laughs) So that's how Bob and I met in those early journeys in the late 1990s.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, what difference did it make having the director of the National Park Service be African American? Did that make a difference to you?

Michael Allen: I think it did. Not only from the visual, but it was someone with whom you could have a conversation with that he understood. Or someone, even when he came back as assistant secretary, we still had deep conversations. That if he tasked you with something, he knew it would be carried out. And I was even beyond Bob, I had conversations, probably with, my mind's going blank now, the director, not the one we have now. Two directors back.

Lu Ann Jones: Before Jarvis?

00:14:36

Michael Allen: Jarvis. Yes. Yeah. Probably, I had a great bond and relationship with Director Jarvis. Almost likened to what I had with Bob. And he was there as we were going through the last stages of Reconstruction. And probably one of our most, and I can go public now, challenging moments that I had in terms of dealing with Jarvis was after Mother Emanuel. Because I was the one that alerted him to the fact of what Dylann Roof did by going to Sullivan's Island. And I told him, I said, "He may have gone to the bathroom at Fort Moultrie. He may have parked in a parking lot at Moultrie. He may have watched a movie. He may have bought a book. He may have gone into the fort. I don't know all that. But what I do know is he stood by this historic marker, by one of your National Park Service sites."

Michael Allen: If you remember, Lu Ann, shortly thereafter, he sent a letter to every employee of the National Park Service about this situation and

circumstance. He directed superintendents to look at their bookstore. I'm just being open. I shared that thought. I said, "You need to send a letter to every Park Service employee, because the Park Service is in this conversation now." And this may be a time that we began to examine what we were selling to the public. So, if I ever take credit for that, I don't have a problem with that.

Michael Allen: Again, it was early in the morning on a Sunday when I learned this. I sent an email to him directly. No, I didn't send it to the office on Sullivan's Island. I didn't send it to the office in Atlanta. I sent it to him. Because I knew this is one of these spaces where that burden was on me. Actually, I sent him pictures from 1999, which I had in my computer. I said, "Here are the people who was at the dedication of this marker that Dylann wanted to corrupt." These people were here. I said, "This is Dylann now by the same marker at one of your National Park Service sites. Less than a half a mile from one of your Park Service sites where Mother Emanuel stands." And you know that we went through some challenges with the flag at Fort Sumter.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes.

Michael Allen: And other things across the nation. I'm proud of what I did. And I'll say it.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, so, you have been such a diplomat. I feel sure Cameron in some of our background research read about how Michael reached across the table to the Sons of Confederate Veterans about the sesquicentennial and flag. And you've talked some about your faith. But I mean, where do you get the stamina, I guess I would call it, to continue to be this diplomat?

00:18:08

Michael Allen: You know, I have always tried to be a peacemaker. But I try to do it in a way that people could see themselves in the midst of the conversation. And if I use that episode of bringing, and I really didn't tell all the participants who was coming. But Cameron, what I did one day during the, you may remember when the sesquicentennial began in 2011, here in Charleston there was a Confederate ball that the Sons of the Confederates held at one of the local establishments. And that got very testy about it. The NAACP got angry about it. You know, the Sons of Confederate Veterans felt enraged that they were being challenged about it. I knew all the people who were participants on both sides. Because again, because of the work that I was engaged in and involved with at Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie, I got to know the Sons. I called them the Sons. I got to know them.

Michael Allen: This is late in December. I called the two leaders of the Sons. And I called the two leaders of the NAACP. I said, "I need to see you all at the Charles Pinckney site." I said, "I need to see you all right away."

Michael Allen: And so all four of them, because they knew me and they trusted me and they had worked with me, they all came. And then they learned the four people that were in the room. Because I really didn't tell them. I probably should have, but I didn't.

Michael Allen: So, I said, "Hey, guys," I said, "the next four years our community, our city, our state, our nation, we will be commemorating the sesquicentennial of the Civil War." I said, "Unfortunately, we have kind of gotten off to a rocky start by this Confederate ball, fellows, that you all had." And I said, "Ladies and gentlemen on the right," I said, "you all got angry about this. I said, "The four of you all began talking about each other in the paper, on the press. But I don't think you all really know each other. But you all were talking about each other. Now you got the public confused." I said, "If we are going to have a successful sesquicentennial for the next four years, depending on how the four of you all act will determine whether it will be successful or unsuccessful." I said, "The bottom line, whatever we do over the next four years, it cannot look like 1961." So, I said, "We will have a conversation in my office today." That's what we did. So, I gave them a chance to talk.

Michael Allen: The Sons were angry. They were mad. They didn't appreciate what was said about them. The NAACP, they were angry. They didn't appreciate what was said about them. So now we got it all on the table. But we all got to work together. You all got to communicate with each other. Because people are looking at you all for direction. I said, "I'm putting my neck on the line without any authorization to even do this. But I think it's the right thing to do."

Michael Allen: There was some camaraderie that came out of that. Some awareness that came out of it. I reached out to our educational network for the state of South Carolina. And I was able to orchestrate an even larger narrative where I had on the stage, I was standing on the stage. The head of the Sons of the Confederate Veterans for the state was on the stage. The Daughters of the Confederacy was on the stage. The Department of Archives and History director was on the stage. And the head of our statewide African American preservation organization was on the stage. That interview, that dialog was beamed to all citizens across South Carolina.

Michael Allen: So again, it's the faith that you have to believe that you are on the right path and on the right side of history. And sometime, Lu Ann, it's all about a risk. Because again, some of those same people who talked to me in New Orleans in 1999, came to me and said, "Mike, this could have blown

up. What you did." I said, "You're correct. But I didn't believe that it would." And the rest is history.

00:22:46

Lu Ann Jones: (laughs) I have one last question before I hand off to Cameron. You know, even to this day, the percentage of the Park Service workforce that is African American and other people of color is abysmally low. When people ask you how to remedy that, what do you say to them?

Michael Allen: Honesty and integrity. Again, I think a lot of this stuff comes from the top. There has to be strong language from the leadership—and what I'm saying to you is what I said to Jon Jarvis and his predecessors. It has to come from the top, and we have to value all employees. And opportunities need to be afforded for people to be employed with the Park Service because we're drawing from a field of people from all across our nation. When people go to a place, they would like to see people that looks like them.

Lu Ann Jones: Michael, I'm going to cut my video off because I'm getting a little breakup here. So, I'm going to kind of make it a little less—

Michael Allen: Okay.

Lu Ann Jones: Oh, this is better. I'm so sorry. Could you say that again? I don't know if you heard, Cameron, it got really distorted there.

Cameron Nesmith: Okay. No problem.

00:24:22

Lu Ann Jones: So, you talked about honesty and integrity.

Michael Allen: Yeah. I think it's honesty, integrity. And it comes from the leadership of the agency. Where he or she as the leader really has to say that all lives matter in terms of those who could work for the National Park Service. And this is an opportunity to tell America's history by Americans of all background and races. I think when that can be said, but believed and enforced—I'd use enforced—infused into the culture, you know, again, I'm just being transparent, we know from research that some of the DNA of the birth of the Park Service, I think in August of what, 1916, if my memory serves me, were people who had dubious backgrounds. That's a reality. Someone with racist background. That's a reality. So somewhat within the DNA of this agency, that type of blood is flowing. So, we first have to call that out. We have to disinfect that. We have to inoculate ourselves against that if we are going to move to the better angels. Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. Yeah, I mean, as you can imagine and probably know, I mean, that conversation has heated up in the past couple of weeks. And I think, I hope it's going to make a difference.

Michael Allen: Yeah. Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Cameron, can I hand the baton back to you for some final questions?

0026:07

Cameron Nesmith: Of course. I just have really one final question that will kind of just pertain to what you were really sort of talking about. I guess to what degree of ownership and involvement, if any, might African American descendants have at a historical site of memory, I guess that was primarily built and inhabited by their ancestors? I guess is this the first step in maybe addressing reparations and reconciliation?

Michael Allen: Well, let me give you a scenario that will answer your question, Cameron. One of the many hats that I wore—and you've heard about a lot of hats since we were on this call here—I was responsible for the YCC group. Youth Conservation Corps. I made sure we had funding to have those kids here. I put the information out so people could apply. I was a part of the selection process. I also was a part of the management process.

Michael Allen: Well, one summer, we had a group of diverse YCC employees working with us. I got a call from one of my coworkers who said that the YCC guys and girls are over at the Charles Pinckney site, but they don't want to work. I said, okay. So, in my natural mind, I said well, maybe it's too hot or they didn't understand the task or perhaps we didn't provide them with the tools or they didn't have enough water or Gatorade. Those are the normal things that came to my head.

Michael Allen: So, I got them all together. I said, "It's my understanding is that you all are having a problem working out here. Did we not give you good instructions or provide you the tools to work?"

Michael Allen: One of the YCC persons said, "It has nothing to do with that, Mike. Just the fact that we were on a plantation. Just the fact that we were in a place that people suffered, potentially died, in a bonded situation, we have to work here."

Michael Allen: I said, okay, so then I missed the mark, because that was not in my head at that point. (laughs) So I said, "Okay. I understand that." I said, "How do you think I felt? I came here in 1992 to help put this place together. I knew that, too." I said, "But here's the reality." I said, "This house that we're

standing in now was built in 1828. Lumber didn't come from Lowe's. It didn't come from Home Depot. They didn't have any Caterpillar tractors out here or any type of mechanism that we would have today. They couldn't even rent scaffolding. But guess what? The building is still here. Since 1828." I said, "All we're asking, all I'm asking, is that you honor their legacy and their presence by acknowledging their contributions. Because the bottom line, when anyone comes to this building, comes to this site and see this house, they see the labor, the legacy, the knowledge, the experience of African Americans. And all we're doing is asking that we give credit to what they have done."

Michael Allen: I said, "I'll go a little bit further than that. I understand that this can be challenging to do this. But it's about history and being culturally aware." I said, "I'm going to ask a friend of mine to come and have a conversation with you all about history, legacy, contribution and recognition."

Michael Allen: I got on the phone, Cameron, and I called someone who I'd met in 1999, Ed Ball. I said, "Ed, I need your help." See, when you have relationships with people that are genuine and honest, no matter how much time has passed, they still will work with you. So, I said, "Ed, I need your help." So, I didn't tell them anything. I said, so when Ed said, "I'm coming this day, I'll meet you all," so forth and so on.

Michael Allen: So, I told the guys and girls, I said, "I need you all to come back to the classroom. I got a special presentation for you all." I said, "Well, you all asked me the other day about history, and the pain and the challenge of working here. So, I got someone who perhaps can talk to you about pain and challenge." They didn't know who he was. "This is Ed Ball. Here's his book, *Slave in the Family".* I said, "This book is an Oprah book." (laughter) First time I saw Ed Ball; I saw him on Oprah. And I said, one day I'm going to meet Ed and I'm going to know Ed, and I'm going to interface and work with Ed. That's what I said when I saw him the first time. So, when I told him--some knew who he was, and some didn't know. And so, he said, "I'm a white man understanding the story that you all are challenged with here." He said, "I've been ostracized by my family because what I have done." The Ball family were a major slave-owning family along the east branch of the Cooper River. That's the lineage that Ed came from. Slavery brought money to his family. But he was willing to step beyond that to tell the truth of it. So, he said, "When you do what you do here, you're truth tellers. So, we allow this building to fall into the ground, the narrative of those who did it would be lost to history."

Michael Allen: That's when they said, "Okay. We didn't think about it like that." And so that's how you deal with that. Take a painful situation, that I can respect and understand, but then cloak it in humanity that people can see themselves in why they're doing what they're doing. That's why I'm in

historic preservation, because it's a fingerprint that I'm helping to preserve when you save a historic building. Even though it may have been built by slave labor, it's the fingerprint that I'm saving.

Cameron Nesmith: Man. That's crazy. Because I wanted to follow up just by finally asking you with all of this in mind, and like in heart, what is it that you look forward to, I guess your family in the next generation of people in your family to kind of take away from your life and to carry over into the next generation?

00:33:12

Michael Allen: That's a good question. My wife and I talk about it all the time. I have three kids. The oldest one, he lives in Birmingham. He works for T-Mobile, in a manager's situation. The middle one, she finished college a couple of years ago, she works for the Department of Veterans Affairs, the VA. Then the younger one, he'll be a senior at SC State in the fall, and he's into broadcast journalism. I don't know, I suspect one of the three might travel as I traveled. They have always been with me at public events. They see me. They've gone with me to training courses, conferences that I've spoken at. They've been with me. When I receive different awards and accolades, they have been with me. So, they know what I'm all about. When I'm on television, they see me. They saw me this past Sunday when I spoke at a Black Lives Matter event, part of a march here in Charleston and Mount Pleasant. A couple thousand people came out to that. I just talked about history and culture for about three and a half, four minutes. My daughter, unbeknownst to me, put it up on Facebook Live. So, it was there. (laughs) People saw me. So again, my hope is that one of them would. But it's their choice.

Cameron Nesmith: Right.

Michael Allen: They know who I am. They know what I have done. They know what I've been engaged with. When President Obama was inaugurated, my entire family, we were there. At his second inaugural, my wife and I were there. Because we were in the inaugural parade in a float, with the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. So, they know who I am and what I do.

00:35:14

Cameron Nesmith: Right.

Michael Allen: Yeah.

Cameron Nesmith: That's all that matters.

Michael Allen: Yeah.

Cameron Nesmith: I'd like to thank you for your time, Michael. And I'll turn it back over to Lu Ann.

Lu Ann Jones: Cameron, I was going to ask, what is the Gullah African concept that you were going to ask Michael about?

Cameron Nesmith: Oh, Sankofa.

Lu Ann Jones: Right.

Cameron Nesmith: And really how has, it's like the mission of Sankofa really, I guess, shaped your mindset and your direction, moving forward. Is Sankofa something that you kind of inherit and take on?

Michael Allen: Well, you know, I belong to a statewide African American organization the last twenty-seven years. That's a whole other story for another conversation. Recently, I think I may have sent it to you, Lu Ann, we embarked on a public web-based program. It's called Black Carolinians Speak, Pandemic 2020.

Lu Ann Jones: Yes.

Michael Allen: So, I've been in my head basically developing a web portal that African Americans can share their experience in Covid-19. I arrived at that kind of in a unique way, standing in line in Sam's. With my gloves on, with my mask on. And seeing the faces of African Americans standing in line to go into Sam's Wholesale. And wondering how are they feeling? How are they dealing with this? And how they hope to make it through this. And then realizing that when the 1918/1919 pandemic occurred in our country and in our state, there was very little, there is very little information about African Americans in that endeavor. I wanted to create a narrative that when people look back a hundred years, looking back a hundred years now, they will know what happened in South Carolina. Like I have to guess and wonder what happened in 1918. They won't have to guess and wonder what happened in 2020.

Michael Allen: So, again, in the work that I've been involved with and been engaged with, yeah, it is always looking back. Because looking back affords you the opportunity to set a benchmark to look forward. And I guess it was late in my life that I realized it in that type of context. I had to look back to understand that in order to understand how I can move forward.

00:38:06

Cameron Nesmith: Like I say, being young, it's crazy just having that charge, a little bit. Because a lot of those things when you're young, and some of those mistakes, it's like you'd rather not look back at.

Michael Allen: Yeah.

Cameron Nesmith: But you realize those are the things that really mold you and shape you into being a better person. So, I appreciate that message.

Michael Allen: Yeah. Yeah. No problem. Not at all. Not at all.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, thank you so much, Michael. And great job, Cameron. Thank you. Michael, we're going to send you, I'm sure you know, a release form.

Michael Allen: Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: It's a little different than your journalistic interviews. A release form that will ask you, kind of the situation I'm in now, I'm going to have to ask you to print it out and fill it out and sign it and send it to me at my home, because I don't have access to office equipment. I don't even know when I'm going to be headed back to the office to pick up mail there. Before we go, I was going to ask you, did you have a chance to be in touch with J.T. Reynolds or the Joneses, by chance?

Michael Allen: Yeah. I talked to Cathy Sunday night. I sent her the information that you got that you sent to me, so I'm waiting to hear back from her.

Lu Ann Jones: Okay.

Michael Allen: I sent a text to J.T. And I'll probably try calling this afternoon or tonight. Yes, I did.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. We're also, do you know Bill Gwaltney? Is that a name that rings a bell? He was in the—

Michael Allen: I remember Bill. I—

39:36

[END OF TRACK 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]