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



**Keena Nichelle Graham**  
**July 7, 2020**

Interview conducted by Lu Ann Jones and Cameron Nesmith  
Transcribed by Teresa Bergen  
508 compliant version by Lauren Pash

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KEENA NICHELLE GRAHAM

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TELLING OUR OWN UNTOLD STORIES:  
CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ORA HISTORY PROJECT

WOMEN'S VOICES:  
WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

*This project was made possible in part by a grant from the National Park Foundation.*

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The narrator has reviewed and corrected the transcript.

[START OF TRACK 1]

00:00

Lu Ann Jones: Well, first of all, thank you very much, Keena, for agreeing to do this. I'm going to do a short introduction that we always do. This is Lu Ann Jones. I'm a historian with the Park History Program, National Park Service, Washington, DC. Today is July 7, 2020. This interview is being conducted for a project that we're calling Telling Our Own Untold Stories: Civil Rights in the National Park Service. We're doing this remotely because we are in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. So, I will ask each of you to introduce yourselves. Let's do Cameron first, and then Keena.

Cameron Nesmith: My name is Cameron Nesmith. I am an HBCU intern for the Greening Youth Foundation. I'm serving as an oral history intern under Lu Ann Jones for the summer of 2020.

Lu Ann Jones: Thanks. And Keena.

Keena Graham: My name is Keena Graham. I'm the visitor services manager at the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge with the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

Lu Ann Jones: Excellent. Well, good. And we have worked together in the past. So, Keena and I know each other. So, Cameron, I'll let you get it started.

Cameron Nesmith: Of course. Keena, could you just start by just telling us a little bit about yourself? Your background and where you're from.

Keena Graham: Well, I'm from the great state of Alabama. I grew up in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Born there in 1975 and lived there until a year after I graduated from the University of Alabama in 1998. After that, I moved to Washington, DC, for the big dreams of becoming a public historian.

Cameron Nesmith: Could you maybe go into detail, possibly, on what was growing up specifically in Alabama like? And maybe, you know, some of the challenges that you had to wrestle through, and some of the things that maybe your parents might have taught you growing up in that climate?

Keena Graham: Yeah. So, I grew up in the west side of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, which is predominantly Black. Still remains so to this day, west side of Tuscaloosa. My grandparents came from, my grandmother Lucille, who helped raise me, she came from the big city of Demopolis, Alabama, population eight thousand. Her family was big stuff because they had a horse and buggy. She was one of fourteen children born from Orlean Townsend, who was my great-grandmother.

Keena Graham: My grandfather who helped raise me, his name was Willy Williams, and he came from Greensboro, Alabama. And my dad's family, the Grahams, they came out of Mississippi and a little area in Alabama called Big Sandy. But Tuscaloosa was a place where a lot of people, African Americans from the Black Belt, came so they could find work.

Keena Graham: My mother was one of four children. She was two biological—my mother and my Uncle Bruce—and then my grandparents adopted within the family two other children, my Uncle Derek, and my Uncle Travis. So, my grandparents were very blue collar, hardworking people. My grandmother had to drop out of school at the age of seventeen. Actually, she was sent up to Tuscaloosa from Demopolis because she had to work and help take care of thirteen other siblings and send money back home. My grandfather had to drop out of school when he was in the eighth grade because he had to work on the farm and help the family make money.

Keena Graham: But both of them, I think, because of their experience of having to drop out of school, focused so much on education, and made sure that my uncles and my mother got the education. And so, my mother became a teacher. My Uncle Bruce, he went part time to college. But all of them ended up in the military. After they got out of the military, went back to school. And then I later found out that my grandparents were very much involved in the civil rights movement in Tuscaloosa.

4:15

Cameron Nesmith: Now did your love for history and the environment come from your parents or your grandparents?

Keena Graham: It did. So, my grandparents, I was in a multigenerational situation where my grandparents had the house at the front of the road, the street. Then there was a duplex behind us, where my great-grandmother and some of my other family members lived. So, I was really lucky and blessed to not just know my mother but know my grandparents and know my great-grandmother. So, listening to their stories, especially my great-grandmother, really got me interested in history. Because, you know, at that time, most of, I was an only child—my mother's only child, I should say—so I was raised around a bunch of adults talking about old stuff, in my little kid brain.

Keena Graham: Then when my mother became a teacher, they would have these book fairs so they could sell books to raise money for the classrooms. All the books that weren't sold, she would bring back home. Sadly enough, but lucky for me, most of those books were history books. Because the other kids would buy the Judy Blumes and all those things. So, I got the history books.

Keena Graham: Then another situation happened when I was in kindergarten. I remember it plain as day. Our kindergarten teacher, Miss Gordon, was teaching us about George Washington Carver. And so, for a bunch of five-year-olds, she had us make peanut butter from scratch. And so, we did that. And we had some peanut butter sandwiches and then we took a nap on the blue mats. Now I later found out that George Washington Carver didn't invent peanut butter. But for a little kid, peanut butter, history, it was just like, it was just perfect.

Cameron Nesmith: It's crazy, because I can remember, I just remember, my first project on, my Black history project was on Carver. And so, I can really connect to that. Were you very familiar with the history of University of Alabama before, I guess, before choosing to attend the school?

6:31

Keena Graham: Yes and no. Of course, everybody knew about Paul Bear Bryant and the University of Alabama Crimson Tide football team. In Tuscaloosa, we jokingly call the University of Alabama the university that ate a city. So everywhere you go, there's University of Alabama, University of Alabama. But I did not know the history of the institution, with the exception of George Wallace's stand at the schoolhouse door.

Cameron Nesmith: For me I think that's the incident that people remember the most.

Keena Graham: Yeah. And you know, Stillman College, which was a historically black college and university, is in the west side of Tuscaloosa, so in my neighborhood. But I never thought of going to Stillman. I wanted to go to the University of Alabama.

Cameron Nesmith: Now with the presence of, I guess, women in your life, you know, strong, really hardworking, strong Black women, I guess where did you see, growing up, to find, I guess, your footing? As an African American woman in a society that truly marginalizes Black women.

Keena Graham: This may sound harsh, but my, I call the women in my family she-wolves, and I swear they gave birth to Romulus and Remus. So, there'd be things like your school picture. I would say, "Mom, do I look pretty?" She would say, "Do you think you look pretty?" Because she made the point of you should never base your self-esteem on what others think. So, she wanted to know what I thought before she gave an opinion.

Keena Graham: My great-grandmother and my grandmother were always stressing how a woman needed to have her own, because you never knew what was going to happen. My great-grandma Dear, she had two husbands and both of them died. So, there she was with all of these children that she had to figure out how to take care of. And so that was instilled in me from day one until even today.

8:55

- Cameron Nesmith: Now have you, was there a numerous amount of pressure for yourself in terms of, I guess, breaking those stigmas and breaking that norm that society has really put, just on not only African Americans, but on African American women, specifically?
- Keena Graham: Well, the pressure in my family was more to get an education. And to make sure I got, not just an education, but also gainful employment. And that was the pressure. And also, the pressure of making sure I went to church. And minding my elders. (laughs)
- Cameron Nesmith: Right. So, what made you choose the Park Service?
- Keena Graham: I knew nothing about the National Park Service. So, all I remember is when I was thirteen years old, my mom, she was a teacher in Pickens County, Alabama. Aliceville Middle School. They did their yearly trip to wherever. When I was thirteen, they chose to go to Washington, DC. And there was a slot available, and my mom asked if I wanted to go. So, I went there. When I was in Washington, DC, all I saw were these people outside talking about history. I did not know that they were rangers. I had no idea about the National Park Service. So, the National Park Service itself didn't leave an imprint on my brain, just seeing people outside talking about history. I told my mom that I wanted to be outside talking to people about history.
- Keena Graham: So, when I did graduate from college, my first go-round, I didn't know if I wanted to be a classroom teacher. But I knew for sure I wanted to be outside talking to people about history, and the place where I saw that happening was Washington, DC. So, I packed up and moved to Washington, DC. I started working at a bookstore. And then I started walking around town, taking the Metro to different places. I took the Metro to Arlington National Cemetery. I went up to the top of the hill and it was this house. Still didn't know what it was. I just remember my mentor from college saying that you must always know your enemies. And so, I said, "What is this place?" And the, now I know ranger, said, "This is Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial." And I said, "How can I volunteer here?" (laughs)
- Keena Graham: And so, I started volunteering there. Then I started to slowly learn about the National Park Service, and that those people who were talking about history were park rangers for this agency. That's how I got introduced to the National Park Service.
- Cameron Nesmith: Now when was the first time that you truly, I guess, early on in doing your work for the Park Service, when was the first time I guess you truly felt connected to the history?

12:00

Keena Graham: For me, I was always connected to the history of that site, the Robert E. Lee Memorial, because they had existing slave quarters. They were working very hard with George Washington University to change their interpretation to be more honest about it, instead of the moonlight and magnolias type of thing that was happening there before I got there. So that really intrigued me. And the fact that the site was working closely with the family. Not just the Lee family and the Custis family, but also the Syphaxes, who were African American descendants from the Custis line. So that, I was hooked on the history first off. And then when I found out that the National Park Service itself was over the heritage and the history and the cultural resources, then I bought in with the National Park Service on that mission.

Cameron Nesmith: I'd like to turn it over to Lu Ann now, because I know she has a ton of questions she would love to ask you.

13:10

Lu Ann Jones: We'll come back to you, too, Cameron. Going back to your childhood, you said that some of your older relatives participated in the civil rights movement there in Tuscaloosa.

Keena Graham: Mm hmm.

Lu Ann Jones: Can you talk about that a little bit more?

Keena Graham: Yes. So, when the bus boycotts were happening, in solidarity, some of the African Americans in Tuscaloosa decided that they would support what was happening in Montgomery. So, when my grandmother and my grandfather's employers found out about that, they were fired. But they still held fast. And my grandmother and my grandfather would walk door to door to pick up work doing all sorts of stuff. But my grandmother continued to go to political meetings. My grandfather, who was a great singer, he, and his brothers, would sing to raise money for the political activism that was going on.

Keena Graham: My grandmother, on the way to a political meeting, was picked up by the cops who were KKK members. They pulled her, tried to pull her in the car. And she told me that in her head she said, if I get in this car, I'm going to be dead. So, I'm going to go out swinging. So, she started hitting and kicking and doing whatever she could and raising such a fuss that a crowd came around and they threw her out of the cop car.

Lu Ann Jones: Wow. Well, I thought Cameron's question about the University of Alabama and kind of your knowledge. But I mean, how would you describe that campus in '93? I mean, that's thirty years after Wallace's, when you went there in the '90s, I

mean, this is thirty years after Wallace's stand in the schoolhouse door. So how would you describe being a student on that campus?

15:07

Keena Graham: It was pretty tense. Because once I got over, I found out that at that time, Alabama had roughly 30 percent African American population, and University of Alabama only had 11 percent African Americans in the student body. Some people know about the Machine. The Machine is that's the nickname for the white Greek society. So, all of those fraternities and sororities--they pretty much run everything. And so, they had their fraternity and sorority houses were these big Antebellum homes. And they would have these Antebellum balls and do blackface. So, on the campus, that's when that became very conscious to me.

Lu Ann Jones: So that was still happening in the '90s.

Keena Graham: Oh, yeah! It's happening in the 2000s. (laughs)

Lu Ann Jones: Oh, man. Well, was there like a Black student movement, though? Yeah, Black culture, Black consciousness on the campus at all?

Keena Graham: Not that I'm aware of. Now what some people, a lot of African Americans in Alabama, instead of going to Alabama, they will choose to go to an HBCU or Auburn. And that's how they protested.

Lu Ann Jones: Oh. And Auburn is considered more liberal?

Keena Graham: Yes. Well, open to African Americans. Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: Interesting. Why do you think that is?

Keena Graham: Well, I think the history of the schools. You know, University of Alabama was created in 1832 to be the incubator for the sons of the plantation owners.

Lu Ann Jones: Right.

Keena Graham: And Auburn came later, for the farmers' kids.

Lu Ann Jones: Right. Of course. It's the land grant.

Keena Graham: Mm hmm.

17:04

Lu Ann Jones: Right. Yeah. Yeah. Interesting. Well, I did not know that your initial connection to the Park Service was here in Washington, Keena. So, once you began to

volunteer, yeah, so at the time you get to Arlington House, at what stage was there reinterpretation incorporating the history of enslaved people there? Where was that in the process?

Keena Graham: Right at the beginning stages of it. Because I was hearing the conversations that were going on where some of the staff felt like George Washington University was a little bit harsh on them. It was the American Studies Department that conducted it, and it was under, oh my gosh, I feel so bad.

Lu Ann Jones: Is that James Horton? James Horton and his wife?

Keena Graham: Yeah. Yeah. Yup, yup. So, they were over the project. Some of the staff felt like they were being treated unfairly in that there was no distinction between the staff and the volunteers. Which the volunteers there at Arlington for the most part really bought into the whole, what they called the Leeites (laughs) where it was almost like a cult type of thing. And so, yeah. They were still chafing on that. But still willing to incorporate some of the suggestions from George Washington [University].

Lu Ann Jones: So, what exactly did you do as a volunteer there? And did those duties change over time?

Keena Graham: So, as a volunteer at Arlington, you could not work what they called the center hall. So that center hall is the first thing that people come into. That's the way you come into the house. So only uniformed people could be there. As a volunteer, I could work in other parts of the house. I worked in the north wing as well as the second floor. And I was not given a script. However, I was given training on what took place in each of the rooms so that I could interpret that. So, their whole philosophy under Frank Cucurullo was work on the method of interpretation. But as long as it's based in scholarly truth, in fact, say what you need to say.

19:29

Lu Ann Jones: So, were you giving interpretive talks?

Keena Graham: Oh, yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: And what were you saying?

Keena Graham: Well, I was, I remember distinctly where I would say—which was the truth—that Robert E. Lee did not own the house, that his wife, it belonged to his wife and his son. I talked about how different states had different laws for ownership. You know that women could own property and what have you. And even interpreted the back stairs, saying that these are the stairs that the children would have used, as well as the enslaved people. I remember distinctly saying “enslaved” rather than “slave” and people challenging me on that word.

Lu Ann Jones: Well probably at that time, using that word was pretty new, wasn't it? In many settings.

Keena Graham: Right. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Well, how long did you volunteer there before you decided to go to graduate school? At what point did you commit, I'm going to try to become a public historian with the National Park Service?

Keena Graham: Well actually, it was when I went to the National Mall. So worked at Arlington House for about, volunteered, including my work there as an employee, for about three years.

Lu Ann Jones: At what point did you become an employee?

Keena Graham: It was 2000. So, I started volunteering in 1999. I got a seasonal position in 2000, and then later a term in a permanent position. Then a full performance ranger position opened up at the National Mall. So, I started working on the National Mall in 2002, '03, something like that. And just all the stories around there. And so many avenues you could go down and wanting to explore more. I just decided that I really wanted to go to grad school so I could jump into it much deeper. But that was after I went and did Lewis and Clark, though. (laughter)

21:36

Lu Ann Jones: Well, okay, let's stay on the Mall for a minute then. I mean, that is such a high-visibility place. I mean, few place, well, I won't say few places, but it is. It's not Yosemite, and yet it's, in terms of scenery, but in terms of landscape, the Mall, the monuments, and just in terms of proximity to people who are watching you. So, what was that—I sort of put, this is a leading question. (laughs) But what was it like to work on the Mall? Particularly early on in your career.

Keena Graham: It was madness. But the beautiful thing about the Mall is that we, I guess the unofficial mission of the National Mall as we saw it, as interpreters, was we were a First Amendment site. We were there to make sure that everybody could exercise their First Amendment rights. We wouldn't blink an eye with what political background they had. And it was great. Because the National Mall was filled with a bunch of people who had different opinions about things. So, we were allowed to interpret that. And again, the National Mall is filled with monuments, one monument, and memorials to very flawed human beings, which is beautiful, and we were able to talk about that. And even flawed movements, like the Vietnam War, and the Korean War Memorial. So even though it was madness as far as visitation and some of the other stuff that happened, you know, with all the special events and demonstrations we had to be a part of, and even internally, as far as interpretation goes, it was extremely dynamic.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, is there, you know, early on, is there somebody or people who you could point to as something of a mentor in the Park Service? Or people who were giving you guidance, encouragement, some direction in terms of being part of the National Park Service?

23:47

Keena Graham: Yeah. That mainly came out of Arlington House. So even when I left Arlington House, I was still in communication with everybody there. Frank Cucurullo was my first supervisor, and he was the one where he approached me and said, "Hey, you want to work for the Park Service?" That's how I ended up working for the Park Service. But his thing was, he always said that he was just a historian who worked for the National Park Service. So, he saw himself as that, a historian first. And he was saying that my point of view, as well as others who worked there, like Joy Kinnard and Delphine Gross, all of us African American women, needed to be heard and needed to be in the National Park Service. So as far as the history part of it, it was Frank who was the big pusher for that. He passed away some years ago. But if it weren't for him, I never would have thought of myself as being a historian within the National Park Service.

Keena Graham: There were others, like Mary Troy, who was the curator up there, who was pushing me to stay, and how to navigate my way through the Service on the practical side of things.

Lu Ann Jones: Wow. Boy, what a team you had there, that you found yourself in the midst of early on.

Keena Graham: I blame them. Because it was my first experience. And they're the ones that got me into it all. (laughter)

Lu Ann Jones: Well, tell Cameron what the Corps of Discovery was, Lewis and Clark. That is such a, how you got there. That's such an interesting gig.

Keena Graham: Mm hmm. So, the Corps of Discovery 2 was this big old celebratory—at first, that's what the National Park Service called it, celebration of Lewis and Clark's mission out to the Pacific Northwest from 1804 to 1806. So, it was the two hundredth anniversary and they wanted to celebrate it.

Keena Graham: And then, a lot of the tribes said, that's not a celebration for us. (laughs) And they changed it to a commemoration. Then the focus changed from instead of following the direct path of Lewis and Clark, they would go to where those native tribes were now in present day that Lewis and Clark encountered. That would take us off the official trail. So, there's that part of it.

Keena Graham: What ended up happening is a lot of rangers would apply to be on the trail for three to six months. Sometimes, I mean, I think there was one person there for two years' stint. But we went from tribal nation to tribal nation. We would set up the Tent of Many Voices, the TOMV, as they called it. So that we would interpret it more from a Native American perspective than from Lewis and Clark's perspective.

26:47

Lu Ann Jones: Well had you done—go ahead, Cameron.

Cameron Nesmith: I'm sorry, I just have a quick follow-up. Was that kind of an engine, or maybe a spark, to a lot of maybe your diversity work that you have done up until now in the Park Service?

Keena Graham: You know, it did, it did affect me in a way where, coming from the Southeast, yes, I know the Five Civilized Tribes. But I had never worked closely with them until Lewis and Clark. And seeing a different perspective, like using the word "homestead" and with the tribes out there saying, "that's not a good word for us. This is what homesteading means for us." And just realizing that even the things that I said had a history behind it and I needed to be more conscious of that. Even though race relations out there, when I was in Idaho, we were with the Nez Perce, the Nimiipuu. A woman came up to me and she goes, "Oh, I want to know what you think about Idaho, what you thought about Idaho." I'm a pretty blunt person. I've learned to temper that. But at that time, I was super blunt. I said, "Oh, I thought you would all kill me." And she says, "Why?" I said, "Because, you know, you hear about militias in Idaho. You know, white militias." She goes, "Oh, we're not concerned about you. It's the spics and the Indians we don't like." She says, "There're not enough of you out here for us to be concerned about."

Cameron Nesmith: Wow.

Keena Graham: Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, she's blunt, too.

28:22

Keena Graham: She's blunt, too. You know. (laughs)

Cameron Nesmith: Now when you were in Idaho, did you find yourself gravitating towards African American community, if there was any for you to, if there was any visible for you at the time?

Keena Graham: In Idaho I encountered a couple of African American men who married into the Nimiipuu, the Nez Perce. And then in Boise, there was a rather sizable

community of people from Africa. So, Boise was a receiver city. Outside of Idaho, aside from the Nez Perce, as well as Boise, I did not encounter many African American people at all.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, did you ever feel threatened there in any way, given that that was your assumption? Or uncomfortable?

Keena Graham: I did. And I made sure that I was with my fellow rangers all the time. So, I did not venture out by myself. My white counterparts felt very comfortable with going out there by themselves to go on a trail or what have you. I did not while I was out in the Pacific Northwest. I mean, Oregon was okay. But then I realized that I had ideas about Portland, Oregon. Then once I got there, I thought wow, hmm. This is kind of one note, you know? It may be progressive, but it's very, very white.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, do you think that's a common experience among people of color who work for the National Park Service? To not feel safe in a host of situations?

30:25

Keena Graham: I do. Yeah. So, when I became the founder of the African American Employees Resource Group, I was, we were talking about stories from other parks. We even talked about having our own unofficial Green Book. About people experiencing things at parks like Big Thicket or, you know, somebody experienced something at a park in Arkansas. So, yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: Can you give examples of situations?

Keena Graham: Well, you know, the thing that I heard about Big Thicket at one point, I don't know if it is today, but at least five, six years ago, people were saying that Big Thicket is Klukked up, meaning that there's a strong KK presence around the park, in the park. And a feeling that the staff there wasn't very understanding of that.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, if there's this kind of grapevine of knowledge about different parks, or reputations of different parks, do African American employees use that to make decisions about where they may or may not go in terms of taking jobs?

Keena Graham: I certainly do, and some people that I know factor that in as well. You know, at first, I thought oh, gosh, I'm going to be the trailblazer. Because you know, you hear about that. If it weren't for the Buffalo Soldiers out at Yosemite, then they never would have had that experience and we never would have seen African Americans out in these parks out west. However, that can be very exhausting. And it can be lonely. I've experienced that myself being at Gila Cliff Dwelling, being at Lewis and Clark. And yes, it's great to be a trailblazer. But it's also nice to have somebody who understands you.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Yeah. You always need that. Well, maybe we'll come back to this issue a little later, too. I'm interested in how you got to Western Michigan State for your master's degree.

32:44

Keena Graham: Mm hmm. So, I was looking for public history programs. I saw that there was one in Santa Barbara, there was one of University of Victoria in Canada, and then Western Michigan University, which focused more on American memory and ethnohistory and that sort of thing. So, I applied to all three. And I got in. Then you know, I was thinking to myself, wow, that would be great to be out in Santa Barbara. But I ended up getting a Thurgood Marshall Fellowship from Western Michigan University. So that's where I landed, and I'm glad I did.

Lu Ann Jones: Why's that?

Keena Graham: Because I met professors like Mitch Kachun as well as Jose Brandão. Mitch Kachun is involved in American memory, especially American memory as it concerns African Americans. Jose Brandão is so big into ethnohistory, New France and the tribal nations that inhabited New France. Well, I should say, that was their homeland, what we call New France. And those were two particular subjects that I was totally interested in.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, what did you do when, I think you went to France, right? To do some research?

Keena Graham: Mm hmm. Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: What research were you doing there?

Keena Graham: First, I wanted to see how the French presented *their* history to the public. Like what did France want the public to know about them? And then a side project that I stumbled into were the lives of African American soldiers in France during World War One and World War Two? And so, what I found out in places like Chinone, where there was segregated housing. Even though the French didn't want it to be segregated, the American Army said they had to be segregated. So, the houses of the American, the white American soldiers, are still standing. The ones for African Americans were torn down, but the footprint is still there. You can see traces of that. And how some of those soldiers stayed there after the wars, even after World War One and after World War Two because they felt like they were better treated there in France and didn't want to go back home to face the racism back home.

Keena Graham: On the flipside of that as far as how the French present their history to the public, or what they want the public to know about them, it's very funny. Because the French Revolution looms large, right? But instead of heralding Robespierre and

those people, it's more on the side of the monarch. So, I guess they felt like they were getting more money that way? I don't know. Maybe the French Revolution was too extreme. So, you get a lot of Napoleon, you get a lot of Louis, and you get a lot of Marie Antoinette. But not a lot of, you know, égalité, fraternité, you know, that sort of thing. (laughs)

Keena Graham: And then they had something called écomusées where it was these little farms to teach people what it meant to be really French. How real France was. I felt that was kind of racist, because there were all these little white farmers and the goats and the sheep and what have you. Some of my French friends were like, "Yeah, you're dead on the money about that. That's a total reaction to the Africans coming from Francophone nations."

Lu Ann Jones: Oh, fascinating.

36:20

Cameron Nesmith: How prevalent was women's history?

Keena Graham: In France?

Cameron Nesmith: Yes.

Keena Graham: Not so much. Not so much at all. So, my view of France changed when I lived there. Because I wanted to be like Harlem Renaissance, and I was totally planning on living there for the rest of my days. I was treated well. And it was, because France's history, that history with African Americans, that was a long time ago. So, in a sense, they could talk about how badly we're treated by America. However, their history with the Francophone nations is very recent, and that's something that they did not want to face. They said they could tell the difference between an African American versus an African.

Lu Ann Jones: Last week, Cameron and I interviewed this former Park Service person, Bill Gwaltney, who worked—

Keena Graham: Oh, yeah!

37:23

Lu Ann Jones: You know him. And worked for the American Battlefield Monuments program. And Cameron had questions about how he was talking about African American soldiers and bringing out that history there.

Keena Graham: Mm hmm.

- Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. It was very interesting. Yeah. Well, when you went to graduate school, was it with the idea that you would return to the National Park Service? Or did you begin to think you might go in other directions when you returned to the workforce?
- Keena Graham: I thought I was going to go in different directions. Because I kind of felt—well, not kind of. I felt that my experience outside of Arlington House, where I felt like it was just like a little research site, and it was great in that they were facing history head on. Even though I had a great experience on the National Mall, sometimes trying, but that wasn't necessarily the main focus, I felt like everything else was lukewarm. That it was really not about delving so deeply into the history and presenting it. Even with the Corps of Discovery 2. So, I just thought wow, I want to be in a place where I can just let it all hang out. Not just let it all hang out but learn and be able to express that to the public. And learn from them, and they learn from us. Sort of like what happened in Berlin with their public commemorations. You know, Berlin doesn't bat an eye. They pull no punches. It's the Third Amendment, no quartering act whatsoever when it comes to the history of World War Two. And that's what I wanted in America.
- Lu Ann Jones: Where did you think you would find that?
- 39:10
- Keena Graham: I didn't know. I just thought I'd just bebop around and see what happened. (laughter)
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, so what ended up, what happened that you returned to the Park Service?
- Keena Graham: All of my colleagues trying so desperately with master's and PhDs trying to land something. And not landing something. If they did land something, it was, I remember it was a PhD, one of the doctoral visiting professors. Well, not visiting, he was an adjunct. He was so happy that he got a position in Virginia. He was going to start off making \$48,000 a year. And I was like, congratulation! I thought to myself, I left the Park Service making \$48,000 a year. (laughs) So it was more the practical side of things.
- Lu Ann Jones: It is eye opening, isn't it? (laughter)
- Keena Graham: Yeah.
- Lu Ann Jones: So, is that when you went to Jean Lafitte?
- Keena Graham: Yes. Yeah.
- Lu Ann Jones: Tell us about that. Describe that site to us. I've been to southwest Louisiana. But just describe that site for us.

Keena Graham: Well, Jean Lafitte is made up of six different sites. There's Chalmette, and then Decatur Street, you know, the main office down at Decatur. There's Barataria, where I worked, and that's the wetlands outside of New Orleans. Then there's Thibodaux, Lafayette, and then Eunice way at the end. That's Cajun country. I loved the history. And I think that was one of the situations where I wished that I would have been a historian there rather than a park ranger. Because I could have rolled around in that and just like swam in that mucky stuff forever. (laughs)

41:07

Lu Ann Jones: So, what kind of programs were you giving there?

Keena Graham: So, even though, so Barataria was the one site they said would talk about natural history. You know, my philosophy is it's all the same, natural, and cultural, you can't separate the two. So, I fought very hard to talk about something other than just swamp and this plant this, and that plant there. Because there were middens out there. So those middens meant that people were out there, Native people, throwing their shells and other detritus and piling up, so we need to talk about that. And then there was some evidence from, I think it was LSU, that those swamps out there, those wetlands, were places where people escaped slavery. They were no man's lands for white people because that's the place where you get sick. They didn't know why they got sick, but we're not going there. So that was a safe place, if you will, a safer place, for African Americans to run to as well as Native Americans, as well as those soldiers who were conscripted into fighting for the Spanish and the French and what have you, and they running away from that. So, here you go. You've got this dynamic culture going on around there. So, I talk about that in relation to the land and how the land was used. So, yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, you know, even as you are learning about the history of a place that you're there to interpret, you're also learning about the National Park Service.

Keena Graham: Yes.

Lu Ann Jones: So, at what point do you go to Fundamentals, for example? Yeah. I'll just ask you that. At what point. And maybe tell Cameron what Fundamentals is.

43:01

Keena Graham: So, Fundamentals is where you go for two weeks to Grand Canyon and you learn about the mission of the National Park Service, the history, you know, all of that good stuff. The different jobs that you do with in the National Park Service. I went there when I was at Arlington House. And that's where I met Jo [Urion Holt]. And learned all this mission stuff. And yeah. (laughs)

- Lu Ann Jones: Well, what did you think of the Park Service as an agency? Yeah, how did you begin to think about the Park Service as an agency itself?
- Keena Graham: So, for me, coming from my family, I already was suspicious of institutions, period. (laughs) You know? So, when I heard stuff about the mission of the National Park Service, and this is what we do, and this is what we're about, in my head, because of how I was raised, but also my background in history, I kept asking, "Who was in the room when this happened? Who was in the room when this mission statement was created when these parks were created?" And so, I was a bit of a gnat in the room about that.
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, did you begin to meet other people who were gnats in the room, too? Because I mean, there have been kind of, how to put it, you know, institutional insurgents who tried to change the agency from within. Did you begin to meet other people who might be trying to ask more critical questions about the agency's history, and how it was trying to change its workforce, etcetera?
- Keena Graham: Right. That was Jo. And in fact, she was, we're still friends to this day. But those other people in my class, I don't, I can't even remember them. And mainly because, I don't know they made that much of an impression on me. (laughs)
- Lu Ann Jones: And we're talking about Jo Urion Holt who's a historian at Keweenaw National Historical Park. Well, one of the questions, Cameron here has asked this of just about everybody, is how did you begin to learn how to do things that National Park Service people do--like again, dealing with the bureaucracy as well, and kind of building those skills that you need that are not necessarily the skills of the historian, but they are the skills of an employee that can get resources, operate effectively within the organization? So how did you go about learning those skills?
- 46:02
- Keena Graham: I have to give the National Mall credit for that part of my career. Because we were told that you can do whatever you want, as long as you're doing your job that you're paid to do. And if you don't tax anybody else. Right? So those of us who really wanted to do more, we would think about projects that we wanted to get done, and we would say, we would think about who would be responsible for that? And just made sure that nobody else had to be troubled with working on the projects that we wanted to work on. And the time commitment, and even writing out grants. So, I got my grant writing in there as well. My chief of interpretation would sign off on it if we could not involve them too much in it, and if we were somehow hitting the initiatives for the Park Service at that time, and we could still do our jobs.
- Lu Ann Jones: Interesting. Interesting. Well, did you begin to accumulate other mentors along the way, or people who encouraged you?

- Keena Graham: Mm hmm. They were mainly my coworkers, like Dan Dressler and LaTrisha Chappin, who now works for, she used to work for FEMA. Now she works for USAID. Sonya Popelka, all those people. So, at the Mall, it was more of your fellow rangers. And we would have our group and our little clique inspiring us to do more and to do better and to challenge things and shake the bushes a little bit.
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, did you also see issues of race and gender, and/or both throw up any barriers to you? I mean, what was your sense of what the working atmosphere was for women and people of color in the Park Service? Did you begin to notice anything?
- Keena Graham: Not really. I can't say anything that stood out for me on the National Mall. You know, there were some chauvinistic attitudes about things in rangers. I didn't necessarily see that in my supervisors. So, yeah, there was some of that within the ranger ranks of what to talk about and who could talk about what.
- Lu Ann Jones: What's an example of that?
- Keena Graham: Well, you know, you had some of the men on the Mall who were very strong about military history and all of those things. So, when you talked about the complexities of like the Vietnam War or the Korean War, it really rubbed them the wrong way. That was more of like, "you guys are talking like Jane Fonda" type of thing. (laughter)
- 49:14
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, how would you deal with something like that? What was kind of the way you would respond to that?
- Keena Graham: Well, I mean, and I jokingly say that Mall rangers ate rocks for breakfast. Because there you could easily say, you know, go kick rocks with an open-toe shoe. Shut up. (laughs) So it wasn't necessarily warm and fuzzy there. You could be very vocal about your feelings and about what somebody said to you. And it was a good situation in a sense where, because the way the National Mall is set up, every one of you got your marching orders where you were going to be. So, if you had an issue with a person that morning before you went out to whatever, then you're gone. You're like at the Lincoln Memorial and that person could be at the Thomas Jefferson Memorial. So, whatever.
- Lu Ann Jones: Got you. Got you. Well, when you, so compared to the Mall and living in Washington, DC, what was it like to be in Louisiana? One of the themes I'm trying to get at, and I think we've talked about a little bit, is I think sometimes the Park Service presents a challenge because you might have kind of a good job somewhere, but it might not be in a place that you necessarily want to live. You see what I'm saying?

Keena Graham: Right. Oh, yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: So, what was being in southwest Louisiana like?

Keena Graham: Well, I lived actually in New Orleans. And then I worked at Barataria, which is about a thirty-minute drive outside of New Orleans. To me, I had grown up, living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, our culture was more tied to New Orleans than it was to Atlanta, which is actually a little bit closer to us than New Orleans is. Atlanta's about thirty minutes closer to us. But we identified more with the Delta culture. So, our holidays, all that kind of stuff, people would be going down to New Orleans. So, I did have this vision of New Orleans. Me being a Francophile, I wanted to speak French. I loved blues and jazz. The history. I just wanted to roll myself up in that and live there.

Keena Graham: However, New Orleans is one of those places, and Louisiana is one of those places where if you're not from there, it is hard to navigate those spaces. Because it's who you know, what you know, all those things. Whereas in Washington, DC, I felt like it wasn't so much about that. That you could really shine. Show your talents and be accepted for you and what you bring to the table. So, New Orleans was tough for me to live there rather than to just vacation there or go there every now and again for shopping and concerts and what have you. But actually, living in New Orleans and living in Louisiana was extremely tough. The attitude that I faced as far as with the staff was mainly like this is New Orleans, this is the way it is. You know?

52:33

Lu Ann Jones: Well, so, at what point, you've made a commitment to the Park Service. How do you begin to think about your career and how you're going to build your career? Did you think about that consciously of how you would move up? Or did you kind of say well, I'll see what happens? A little bit of both?

Keena Graham: Well, after my experience in grad school, which I just, I loved grad school far more than I loved undergrad. I was committed to being a public historian somehow. But I also was committed to making sure I was the type of historian that dealt with the public, that really interfaced with the public. Instead of what the public history program was, was more behind the scenes. Like creating the exhibits and nominations and that sort of thing, which is very valuable. But I wanted to be that person who was in your face in designing the interpretation and all of that. I realized in the National Park Service that historians don't necessarily do that in the National Park Service. That you do that from the interp and ed side of things. So, in my head I thought if I couldn't be a park historian, which would have been great, but I saw that those positions were being cut like left and right. Like every time a park historian left, done. That I would somehow try to be like a

divisional lead for interpretation and education at a historic site, or no matter where I was, to make sure that culture and that history was front and center.

Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. So, and again, how would you describe the culture of interp and ed and the kind of, I guess kind of immersion in the training of interpretation and education as practiced by the Park Service? Kind of what was going in that direction? What did that mean?

54:32

Keena Graham: This is the time where they're really getting out of the traditional Freeman Tilden standing up in front of an audience and talking at them and making sure everybody feels good about it. I decided for myself, as well as I saw that the Park Service was going in that direction as far as interp and ed, is that it doesn't matter if somebody leaves you happy or sad; they need to leave you thinking. You know? That happy, sadness, all of that stuff is on them. How can you make topics like Japanese internment happy? You know? (laughs) That shouldn't be the end goal, of people clapping and saying, "You're great and I had a good time." At a Japanese internment camp. Yep? So, it was going to facilitated dialog and making sure that the audience felt like they were part of the experience as well, instead of us playing teacher and talking at you and you're going to hear what I say. There was a lot of resistance to that. There's still resistance to that to this day. Because I truly think that it is a heady experience when you're in front of an audience and you've got the floor. And you're in control of everything, so you think. (laughs)

Lu Ann Jones: Well, so at some point you become very involved with the Employee Resource Group, the African American Employee Resource Group. So, what drew you in that direction? And it probably is about that time that I met you. Because when I came to the Park Service in 2010, around that time or soon after was when the, I believe, when the employee resource groups began to get started. Allies for Inclusion. And there was renewed conversations about a more diverse workforce, etcetera. So why were you drawn to that?

56:37

Keena Graham: I was drawn to it because at that time I had left Jean Lafitte. And now I was at Russell Cave National Monument. Russell Cave is in northeast Alabama, which is gorgeous. And my grandmother who helped raise me who was in the civil rights movement, she was terminally ill with cancer. So, in my head I thought this would get me about an hour closer to her. Alabama is Alabama. In the sense that I grew up in west Alabama. How different could west Alabama and northeast Alabama be?

Keena Graham: So, I took the job there. And northeast Alabama is something like 96 percent white, whereas west Alabama, that's not it at all, it's way more diverse and there's way more community. So here I am there. I see signs against Barack

Obama, and I see big Confederate flags after big Confederate flags. Which oddly enough was not the case in Tuscaloosa. I think because it was a university town, it tempered some of that a little bit. So, everywhere you turned, that's what it was. That's what I faced. And it just made me super uncomfortable; I felt unwelcome. Every day I had to drive over this mountain called Sand Mountain where people said, that's where the Klan moved to, that's the last foothold in Alabama is on Sand Mountain. I had to drive over that every day in order to get to work at Bridgeport, at Russell Cave. Then while I'm driving in this beautiful area to get to my park, I see more gigantic Confederate flags.

Keena Graham: Talking to my coworkers there is something that it never came up to them that they realized or bothered them. But you know, I had a coworker, one of the rangers that I was supervising, he's African American, and he grew up in the area and he totally got it. But because he's from that area, they kind of left him alone. I wasn't from there. So even being from Alabama wasn't enough. (laughs) You know, it was just like, if you're not from there, then you're just not welcome. Then the fact that I'm somebody not from there who is also Black, it just didn't set well with a lot of locals.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, how would that manifest itself? In comments, or—

Keena Graham: Yes. There was a park neighbor who said that the only reason why I got the job there was because I'm a quote "nigger bitch." So, yeah. Vocal; didn't try to hide it. (laughs)

Lu Ann Jones: Oh my God.

Keena Graham: Yeah.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, how did your coworker convey that comment to you?

Keena Graham: Well, he didn't tell me about it. It was actually one of the trail crew from Blue Ridge Mountain who came down to help remove invasive species for us. And they were out there on the border of his property with ours, and he was railing against—

[END OF TRACK 1]

[START OF TRACK 2]

00:00

Keena Graham: --Asian Americans, Latinx, and then that nigger bitch that only got the job, and how we should die. (laughs)

Lu Ann Jones: Did you have recourse when you found that out? What could you do?

- Keena Graham: I told park management about it. The response that I got was that these are just good old boys, good Christian good old boys, they're not going to do anything to anybody. It's just talk. I mean, I don't know about you, but if your park neighbor is saying that and people just saying those words to you, it's more than sticks and stones. If people just say they're good Christian, and I said, "You know what? The Klan is a Christian organization." It was pretty much--I felt crazy, like I was making too much of it or something.
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, what did you do anything to, just protect yourself? I mean, how—tell friends, allies?
- 01:11
- Keena Graham: I did. I did. I did. You know, I was speaking to a friend of mine who happened to be in employee relations. I didn't intend to do anything about it. This friend of mine told me that I should elevate it, because I was working, you know, staff was working there alone. So even if it wasn't a racial thing, the fact that we're working on a site alone is dangerous. But that site has no cellphone reception. If it's a hard rain, the hard line of the phone goes out frequently. So, if anything were to happen, there's no way that anybody could help us, because we didn't have law enforcement at that site. We had the MOU [memorandum of understanding] with the local PD, but I mean, sorry to say it, but local PDs don't care about the things that we care about, like artifacts being stolen and that sort of things. And definitely, if Bubba, which was his name, (laughter) said these things, I mean, to them, they just grew up with Bubba and that's just the way Bubba is.
- Lu Ann Jones: Were you able to tell anybody like at the regional office? Was there recourse there?
- Keena Graham: No. Because they were looking at if a crime was committed or not. So, to them, being that it was just talk, no crime was committed. For me, I was looking at it as you have an employee in an unsafe environment. I'm not asking for anybody to be arrested. But you've got to consider these things that employees got to feel safe where they're working. Not just safe but supported as well.
- Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Yeah. Well, so when you became involved with the ERG, what was that group doing at that point? And were they able to help you in some way?
- Keena Graham: They helped me in the sense of I found community. You know, if nothing else, it was a group of people who got it. I didn't even have to explain it too much. So, for once in my life, I mean, in years, I didn't feel like I was the crazy, like I was making too much of anything. Everybody who was part of the group, that core part of the group, could see right through it without me even saying like two sentences. (Snaps fingers) Like got it immediately. So that was great. Our group, because the Park Service was concerned that we were a union, which we weren't

a union. None of us talked about filing grievances or anything like that. But we wanted to be a place where people could find community and where we could help each other out. So, if somebody was at a site that they didn't feel comfortable in, we would talk amongst each other and see if there was a way a person could get a lateral to some other place where they felt comfortable. So those are the types of things that we focused on.

04:12

Lu Ann Jones: Well, you know, we had talked about this a little bit before. And you know, you don't have to name names of parks or whatever, but I mean what, and I don't want to just make this about painful stuff, but I think it's a revelation for those of us who are not African American that this kind of threatening environment is so pervasive. I sound naïve saying that. But I guess I am naïve. What are some other examples of people truly feeling endangered and/or, you know, just tense all the time?

Keena Graham: Yeah. Well, there was a situation where one of our members was working out at a park out west. It was a park that encompasses portions of Utah and Colorado. His supervisor was very, very understanding. However, the community around him was toxic. So, wherever he went, people were staring at him. He couldn't find community. He went out to eat with his supervisor, who happened to be a white woman. She's happily married, so no funny business going on there. People would just stare at them the whole time they were at the restaurant. He just felt so lonely. In fact, his supervisor was the one who contacted me saying, "Can you please help him? He's depressed. He's not eating. I'm worried about him."

Keena Graham: We talked to this person, this young man. We were able to get him placed out east where he could have community. But that was one of those situations where even though internally he felt supported, externally, where you live your life and those things, it was horrible for him. It was completely devastating to him.

Lu Ann Jones: Do you think that, well, so the ERG could be a place where you could find community. Were you trying to, or were you able to, get the ear of people higher up that could change awareness or policy or anything like that?

Keena Graham: Yeah. I will say this, I'll name names on this one. Mike Reynolds was so supportive and so understanding. And if it weren't for him, the training at Charleston wouldn't have happened. The workshop at Charleston wouldn't have happened. He really opened himself up to hear from all of us, not just our ERG, but all the rest of the other ERGs. And his approach was, I'm not African American, or I'm not Native American. Tell me what you need. And tell me how I can help.

07:30

- Lu Ann Jones: Remind me what Mike Reynolds' position was at that time, and also, describe when you reference Charleston what you're talking about there, please.
- Keena Graham: He was the deputy director at the time. The training at Charleston, after what happened at Mother Emmanuel [church site of 2015 mass shooting], I was contacted by some of the members of the group who actually worked at Fort Sumter. One of those people happened to be one of the gentlemen that I supervised at Russell Cave. The African American gentleman who helped me out tremendously while I was at Russell Cave. We were talking. He goes, "This is shaking me up. Because it turns out that Dylann Roof visited Fort Moultrie when I was working that day." It turns out that, Michael Allen who worked there, he was a part of the group, was friends with some of the people at Mother Emmanuel. So here it is, our group members contacting saying, "My gosh, this has really shaken me up." Not just them living in Charleston, being from Charleston, shaking them up. Other members were just terrified because, you know, church is your sanctuary. And that's part of the African American experience. They tell you at the end of each church service, that the doors of the church are open. So, you don't want to lock the doors. You don't want to do those things. So, it was such a violation.
- Keena Graham: On top of that, when I was walking the streets of Philadelphia, people were stopping me because I had on my Park Service shirt. And I guess to the public, Park Service, park rangers, approachable. And it was mainly white people approaching me going, "What do we do?" And I'm going, wow. Wow. This is deeper than what anyone could imagine.
- Keena Graham: I happened to be talking to the group from the Relevancy, Diversity and Inclusion Office and the person said to me, "Wow, this sounds like we could do some work around this." So said, "Okay, draw up some ideas of how this could look."
- Keena Graham: My experience at my training with Gilder Lehrman, it was the Stony the Road We Trod: The Modern Civil Rights Movement. I went to that training while I was a ranger on the National Mall. It was a weeklong training where we went down to Birmingham, Montgomery, Atlanta, all these sites. We were with the foot soldiers. We had historians to ground us in to putting context with it. I thought to myself, that was the best training I ever had in my life, and I would like to model Charleston after that training that I got from Gilder Lehrman. So that's the way I put it together. I sent it to the RDI Office. They sent it to Mike Reynolds, and he put money behind it.
- 10:35
- Lu Ann Jones: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. And what was the training like when it happened? What was it like?

- Keena Graham: So, we had a facilitator. And I thought that we would be able to do that just fine until my core group of people got together. It was myself and it was Lavell Merritt, and it was Nichole McHenry and Donna Stevens and Colette Carmouche. Colette, who's really good at this stuff, she goes, when we started planning, she goes, "I think we need a professional to come in." I was like oh, no, no, no, no.
- Keena Graham: So, before we even had the training, we had Dushaw [Hockett] come in and walk us through like the planning. Because it was so emotional, just planning it itself. And I realize it's like, I don't have the skills that this man has to take us out of the emotion at the right times so that we can focus. So, we got him to be the facilitator for the whole thing, which was great. But we also contacted local historians that grounded us in context. And Mother Emmanuel, Michael Allen reached out to them, and they were a part of it as well. So, it was more of coming to terms with that history of Charleston and what got us to this point today.
- Keena Graham: And so, the other people who were invited were the people who worked at the places where Dylann [Roof, the assassin] visited. So, those county parks and state parks that are in South Carolina that are being bold in interpreting slavery. Yeah, he went to those places. And so, they all came to it as well.
- Keena Graham: So, the first day, we had a historian who talked to us about the history of Charleston. And then we had dialog after that, which Dushaw led. The second day was somebody who grounded us in the slavery in Charleston. And then we had dialog around that.
- Keena Graham: One of the things that we did at the end of it is that we went to Mother Emmanuel. They invited us there. We were in the congregation part of it, you know. And we talked. Then they invited us to come downstairs where there was a local Gullah Geechee chef who made a Gullah Geechee meal for us. We ate in the basement where there were still gunshots in the wall. And they wanted us to be there.
- Lu Ann Jones: I'm getting chills just thinking about that.
- 13:15
- Keena Graham: Yeah.
- Lu Ann Jones: I mean, what an amazing event.
- Keena Graham: Mm hmm.
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, what's the follow-up question for that? Well, let's do a fast forward to what do you think the Park Service could be doing now, given the moment we're in now is kind of like, I don't know, it's kind of like in Mother Emmanuel all over the country, in a way.

Keena Graham: Mm hmm. The thing about, well, the good thing about the Park Service, even though they're not living up to it, the Park Service is supposed to be over the cultural resources and the history and the heritage. Unlike US Fish & Wildlife Service, where there are hardly any people who work for this agency that have this background. Park Service has historians. It has the power of place. It could be doing, like you said, many Charleston workshops, wherever they are, to have dialog in that particular community about something. Because we know, yes, Black lives matter, but all stuff is bubbling up now as well. It's like the history of the Catholic Church in the Southwest. You know that history. What's going on with indigenous people on Mount Rushmore? We have the stories, and we have the professionals to have like 101 dialogs going on right now.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So, is that ERG still going? I mean, has the ERG been an ongoing effort? Or has it waned?

15:19

Keena Graham: I know that it kept going after I left, but I'm not sure how active it is now.

Lu Ann Jones: Yeah. Well, at one point, going back just to your kind of career development, you went to Natchez on a detail. Was that on a detail, as the acting chief of interp and ed? So, what, how did you, I think in part because it's an important part of your career development, but also for Cameron's edification, in the Park Service what we call details or short-term assignments, are often very important to people's professional development. So, what did that detail encompass, and why did you take it?

Keena Graham: I took the detail because, you know, it's a moth to a flame. You know, Natchez and all the history, I just wanted to roll around in it. It's some very complicated stuff. Especially the story about William Johnson. They say he was a Black slave owner. And then my experience in grad school and learning about identity and how that's all constructed. So, I wanted to be a part of that and challenge some of the words and phrases and terminology that we use for things, right? And so, I was super excited about that.

Keena Graham: When I got there, Kathleen Bond took me to something called like the pilgrimage, or the pageant, or something. (Lu Ann Jones laughs) Yeah. Which is extremely bizarre to me. (laughs) Oh my God! And then, there's the pilgrimage itself, where it's a [time period?] where all of these mainly white people will spend gobs of money, like twenty dollars per antebellum house to hear stories about the, I guess to them the good old days. And the hoops and the magnolia trees and all that business. I don't like it whatsoever. And unfortunately, the Park Service is in this agreement with the city of Natchez where the site has to be part of the pilgrimage as well.

Keena Graham: I was hoping that we could do something like some of the plantations out, what I told you about with Mother Emmanuel, where they started to do interpretation behind the big house. Like not even starting from the front door, but starting in the back, where the enslaved people were. Making it about that, and then finally making their way inside. But you know, Natchez is not that place to do that.

Keena Graham: However, Kathleen Bond was trying in other arenas, like working with the local churches who are on the National Register to interpret the history of like the A&E and their involvement in the anti-slavery movement. And also, there's a, Forks of the Road, where the slave market was located. And even there's a site, Fort Rosalie, where the Natchez Indians were almost pretty much wiped out during a battle. So those things, she was really, really focusing on. It's that sticky business with the pilgrimage, though. Oh! (laughs)

Lu Ann Jones: So, at what point, I mean, so you're at Russell Cave, right, and you want to go somewhere else ultimately, right?

19:02

Keena Graham: Mm hmm.

Lu Ann Jones: And what was that effort like to try to make a move?

Keena Graham: It took me two and a half years to finally land something someplace else. You know, at one situation where I almost got the supervisory park ranger at Natchez Trace. But then we had the sequestering, you know. So, they're just like, "What jobs can be cut?" And that was one of the jobs. So that was that. Then other jobs didn't pan out. That's been my experience with Park Service is that I have a good resume, I think. But then somebody would say, "Oh, well, you don't have enough natural history experience on there." "Oh, you don't have enough this, you don't have enough that." And so, it was like one hoop after another, and it's like geez, Louise.

Keena Graham: And so, I kept applying. I kept applying everywhere. And US Fish & Wildlife was the only non-National Park Service site that I applied for. And I took it with US Fish & Wildlife Service because it was the chance to be a divisional lead, whereas the other positions with Park Service were supervisory park ranger. And it seemed like it would be more logistics and making schedules, instead of doing what I want to do, which is being a sneaky public historian. (laughs)

Lu Ann Jones: Well, when you're divisional lead, are you still supervising people? Is that part of the job, too?

20:30

- Keena Graham: Yes. It's still part of the job. Now, the difference, though, with US Fish & Wildlife Service and the National Park Service is that US Fish & Wildlife Service just realized maybe ten or fifteen years ago that it would be good to like talk to the public. (laughter) So, my division, and my profession, is not necessarily huge in this agency.
- Lu Ann Jones: And what is your division, exactly?
- Keena Graham: They call it Visitor Services Management. So, whereas I think it's something different than when I say interpretation and education, to them, visitor services management is just that. And it truly is management. So, you have a lot of volunteers. You have friends groups. You have those things. So not much interpretation goes on in this agency.
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, I mean as part of your goal, though, to get managerial skills, or get supervisory skills. So, you're in line for higher GS jobs in the future. Yeah.
- Keena Graham: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.
- Lu Ann Jones: And being strategic about that.
- Keena Graham: Being strategic about that. And I have been able to bring history to my site, which I think has been well received from the public.
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, do you feel like you have developed kind of a leadership style or a supervisory style that you would be able to describe to somebody?
- Keena Graham: (laughs) It's weird because anytime somebody asks me that, I tell them I'm like jazz. So, in jazz, the musicians know, they know what the song is. But in jazz, you get to freestyle. You just bebop. You still know what the song is. And then you come back to it, if you need to. You come back to the main melody. And so, I like to be like jazz. I like to freestyle. And so, my staff will say that. And even people that I've supervised in the past, they end up saying it, too. It's like yeah, freestyle. (laughter) And it scares the hell out of my supervisors. Because they think freestyle means like you just do whatever. It's like, no. I know the song. I know the melody. I just want to improvise a bit and see how it goes.
- 22:55
- Lu Ann Jones: (laughs) Well, I wanted to ask you, I know you've had a long day, but why do you think the National Park Service still has issues with diversity and inclusion in terms of its workforce? I mean, if you just look at the raw data, it doesn't really go in a particularly positive direction. So why do you think that is?
- Keena Graham: I think it's the people they choose to be in management positions. I mean, case in point, I loved working at Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial. Who

could have thunk it? Who could have thunk the Robert E. Lee Memorial? But Frank was just wonderful! And Kendall was great as well. He was the site manager. Frank being the supervisor, and Frank having an attitude of I want to bring in different perspectives. I don't want to keep seeing white guys talking about the Civil War over and over again. I'm tired of troop movement. You know, there's so much more to this than just you know, General Grant should have done this on day two of Cold Harbor. He had that commitment to it. And so, sure enough, he recruited me, this Black woman who was volunteering that didn't know anything about the National Park Service. And so, he saw that I had the other skills needed to be a good interpreter. Sometimes we focus so much on the hard skills that can be taught. They can be taught. Most of the work that I do, most of this stuff you can teach somebody else how to do. Now being a historian? Yeah, you've got to spend some years to do that. However, I also have the soft skills that some people may not have when dealing with the public. And the method and being able to connect to people. So, if you're only looking at hard skills that are familiar and comfortable with you, you're going to miss out on people all the time. Also, you've got to be comfortable with somebody else's way of doing something.

Keena Graham:

And so, you know, I had that conversation with my current supervisor now. We're pretty open about things. But you know, I tell him, I say, "You know, I had to," I said, "I know everything about you. I know all about your presidents. I know all about your musicians. I know all about your poets." I said, "I even know two of your languages aside from English." I said, "I know that. All of those things." And I said, "And you're still my supervisor. Because you don't have to know anything about me in order to get to the level you are. But I have to know everything about you." I think if that also changes in the National Park Service, where what do you deem the skills needed for a job? And that should be included, that to me, constantly looking at the west and saying, working out at Yosemite, working out at Yellowstone, working out at Grand Canyon, that's the real Park Service experience. If you're going to be a leader in the National Park Service, you'd better have a Tuskegee, an MLK, or a Natchez, something like that under your belt as well. Because if you truly want to deal with diverse stories, diversity of people, perspectives, that's where you get it. You can close yourself off at Grand Canyon. You can close yourself off at Zion. You cannot do that at Tuskegee.

27:00

Lu Ann Jones:

Yeah, I've heard people who work at like a Grand Canyon or Yosemite or Yellowstone. I mean, right, they're worlds unto themselves. They're like little principalities. I mean, as somebody told me, "We create our own weather systems." I mean, you really operate very autonomously, as opposed to being engaged with larger stories, communities, social implications, etcetera. Yeah. Yeah.

- Keena Graham: I mean, just think about that. To be the director of the National Park Service, they're coming out of some big western park. Fine. But also include those places like, you know, a Native American-centered site where you do have to deal with tribes constantly. Or deal with the Latinx community. Or how do you navigate Selma to Montgomery in the friends group and all the issues that come along with that? I think most people don't have those skills to do it. And not just the six-month or four-month detail. I'm talking about a couple of years.
- Lu Ann Jones: Right. Yeah. Cameron, are you, do you have questions? You've been a patient listener there.
- Cameron Nesmith: No, for sure. I just had a few really more questions. And I guess following up with what you just said, why is it so difficult for people not to see the obvious, you know?
- 28:45
- Keena Graham: I like to think that people are delusional. I mean, one of the things that I love about American memory. Like right now, all this debate about memorials and all this other good stuff.
- Cameron Nesmith: Right.
- Keena Graham: I'm sitting in two worlds. One of them is like taking an academic eye at it, and the other is just as far as trying to understand the emotion behind white people wanting to protect these things so much. (laughs) And I think when you build your self-esteem off of a lie, really. Or incomplete truth. In a sense, that's what public history is about as well. It's somehow, they connected themselves personally—personally—to a statue of Robert E. Lee. And in the case of the National Park Service, this mission of the National Park Service and the way it's always been. And people's identities are wrapped up in that. And they don't know what to do when that's challenged. Because if you challenge that, you challenge them.
- Cameron Nesmith: And as acting chief of interp at one point at Natchez, how much particular control do you felt like you had on the narrative?
- Keena Graham: I didn't feel like I had a lot, because of that incestuous relationship with the city. If we could just cut the city off. I mean, those sites are just freaking fantastic. I mean, there could have been so much innovation going on there. But that partnership with the city is the thing that hamstringing Natchez.
- Cameron Nesmith: No, that was definitely my final question. And I just would like to thank you for your time. A lot of this stuff is very informative for myself, because I'm figuring out a career path. And this just gives me a lot more confidence and assurance that the Park Service might be the way to go. So, I appreciate your time.

- Keena Graham: Oh, you're welcome. I didn't scare you? (laughs)
- Cameron Nesmith: No, no. Absolutely not. I was very informed and it's good to keep, I don't know, a lot of this stuff, you know, especially, you would understand as a historian, this stuff can seem like the obvious, you know. And read things that it's like, why can't people just understand, these are basic human rights and needs. But then I love how you just, you're still centered on educating people and education and still having that sympathy and creating space for people to have those conversations. So that's always important.
- Keena Graham: Well, understand that as far as an African American, I hate to use this terminology, when you're on the bottom and you have to navigate so much in order to be in the space that you're in, and me being in the space that I'm in, we know so much about everybody else. (Lu Ann Jones laughs) When you're on top, you get in a comfortable position where you feel like you don't have to know much about anybody else.
- Cameron Nesmith: Right.
- Keena Graham: And so, what we're dealing with are people who have been in comfortable positions for a very long time who don't know how to look in those creeps and crevices and under the rugs and what have you, to know what we know.
- Cameron Nesmith: Well, thank you for that. I really appreciate that.
- Keena Graham: You're welcome.
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, Keena, this has just been fantastic. As I said, a lot of the people that we're talking to, like Bill Gwaltney, sort of long careers in the Park Service. But we really wanted to talk to people who are mid-career, like you are, and who right now aren't calling the Park Service their professional home, and have things to say about it, but did for a long time. So, I can't thank you enough for doing this. It's really been insightful. Really, really good. We're going to send you a release form, you know that that in order to put this in the archives, we'll need your permission to do that. I meant to ask you right off the bat, do we have your permission to record this?
- Keena Graham: Yes. (laughs)
- Lu Ann Jones: I guess we did. So that's good. That's very good. And I'll send this away to get it transcribed. And we did talk to Michael Allen also about three weeks ago. So, we're building a nice network there. If you think of other folks, both people who might have retired, like Michael's age or older, or people who might still be in the Park Service who you think would be good for us to interview, feel free to suggest names to us. Because we're building our list of people to talk to.

34:02

- Keena Graham: Okay. I'll put it out there. I still talk to people who were part of the group who left. So, they might be interested. They're with new agencies, though.
- Lu Ann Jones: Oh, well that's interesting. I think that Park Service needs to, I mean, certainly it's not a secret that the Park Service not only has difficulty hiring a diverse workforce but retaining a diverse workforce. And I think those issues of retention are important to talk about.
- Keena Graham: Mm hmm. I mean, for me, I don't know if this is still recording, the way I see it is I'm so in love with history. That's the way that I view the world, and that's where I go to when I need my questions answered. And I feel like the Park Service out of the federal agencies do it better, even though it's flawed. But the opportunity with the places and spaces is just endless. And whether or not I work for the National Park Service again, I still want to support them in doing that, and hope they live up to that part of the mission. And stop firing historians and cutting their positions. (laughter)
- Lu Ann Jones: Well, I think that's a sentiment for all of us these days. We all need to live up to the promise, just as our country needs to live up to the promise. And I think that's part of our challenge these days. Yeah. Well, thank you so much, Keena.
- Keena Graham: You're welcome.
- Lu Ann Jones: It's just been a pleasure. And a good history lesson for us. So, thank you so much.
- Keena Graham: (laughs) You're welcome.
- Lu Ann Jones: We will be in touch. I'm going to ask Cameron to stay on, because we haven't touched base in a couple of days, so I'm going to ask—do you have a moment, Cameron, to stay on, just a couple of minutes?
- Keena Graham: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.
- Lu Ann Jones: Okay. That sounds great.
- Keena Graham: Nice to meet you, Cameron.
- Cameron Nesmith: No, thank you so much.
- Keena Graham: Bye bye.
- Lu Ann Jones: Bye, Keena. Okay. Hello there. Hey, Cameron.

Cameron Nesmith: Hey, hey, hey, how's it going today?

36:22

[END OF TRACK 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]