

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817)
Harpers Ferry Center's 50th Anniversary Oral History Project



Martin Burke
February 19, 2020

Interview conducted by Nancy J. Russell
Transcribed by Rev.com
Edited by Martin Burke

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Interview Date: February 19, 2020

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Transcription by: Rev.com

Release Form: Yes

Transcript Status: Final

Transcript has been reviewed and edited by the narrator.

START OF RECORDING

- Nancy Russell: 00:00:02 This is Nancy Russell, the archivist for the NPS History Collection. Today's date is February 19, 2020, and I'm here with Martin Burke to talk about his experiences with the division of conservation at Harpers Ferry Center. Martin, could you provide us some background about where you grew up and your education?
- Martin Burke: 00:00:24 Be happy to. I was born in Portsmouth, Ohio in 1947. I was there for 18 years and went off to the University of Detroit in the engineering program. I lasted about a semester and sent back home. I joined the U.S. Navy Reserve and was on active duty with the Navy for two years, 1967-68. Upon discharge went immediately back to college. I graduated from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor with a Bachelor of General Studies in 1972. The university at that time was connected with the Oberlin Conservation program, which was one of the very early graduate programs in conservation. So the museum in Ann Arbor was connected to the Oberlin program but the program focused on paintings. So I made the grand tour of all the graduate programs in conservation, Cooperstown when it was still in Cooperstown, before they moved to Buffalo. I had hoped to design my own program at the Ford Museum in Detroit, but that didn't quite work out.
- Martin Burke: 00:02:39 I remember going to Winterthur, and they were very discouraging, they didn't even think that they would be able to create a program in conservation. I remember meeting Peter Sparks in his lab, and he had his white lab coat on and all the scientific instruments around. But then I was hired

directly by the Smithsonian on a three-year term appointment.

- Nancy Russell: 00:03:23 And what year was this?
- Martin Burke: 00:03:28 February 1974. In the following fall of 1974, that would've been the first class at Winterthur. I missed all of the graduate programs. I remember meeting with Caroline Keck at Cooperstown, I wanted to focus on objects at the time, and she was dismissive of my ultimate goal. Because I had a very strong background in the metals trades, so I went to a blacksmithing course. I took courses at George Washington University. I would've been in there at the same time period as Toby [Raphael] and Al [Levitan]. I may have taken some courses with Al at GW.
- Nancy Russell: 00:04:46 Al Levitan?
- Martin Burke: 00:04:47 Yes that Al Levitan. While working at the Smithsonian, they sent me off for four months, five months in the spring of 1977 to attend the ICCROM program in Rome. It gave me a good overview of the conservation field- I was hired specifically for the 1876 exhibit at the But Smithsonian for that exhibit, and it included a machinery hall, that I worked specifically on all these big engines and--
- Nancy Russell: 00:05:45 Industrial Revolution kind of things?
- Martin Burke: 00:05:47 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 00:05:49 What drew you to conservation?
- Martin Burke: 00:05:54 I think that it was an outgrowth of my--I worked in the Navy on a repair ship, and the ship had many repair shops machine, foundry, pipe fitting electrical etc.--And although my degree from Michigan was in economic and technological history, and I thought that this would be a good marriage of what I learned in the history department with my hand skills. And as I explained, I was in that period when conservation was just ramping up in the United States.
- Nancy Russell: 00:06:50 Moving from that period of all bench training, to starting to get the educational programs going, and the real influx of science.

- Martin Burke: 00:06:59 After about a year of being at the Smithsonian, I applied for an opening as a museum specialist, specifically in the transportation department. But then I was immediately lent back to the 1876 exhibit. I was thinking at the time, the curator that I worked for, a man named Don Burkybile, he was doing kind of the classic restorations. Everything had to be new.
- Nancy Russell: 00:08:05 Shiny and pretty.
- Martin Burke: 00:08:07 Shiny and pretty. I was going, "Wait a minute, we're not respecting the original materials here." There's one carriage that's down there, a dog cart, so I got him to compromise painting one side, and if you went to the other side it was the earlier lettering on the--we divided the carriage, delivery cart, dog cart, whatever it was called, down diagonally so one side reflected one period of use and the other side, a separate period of use. But then I was always interested in that dividing line between saving the original material, and I've always argued for less is more.
- Nancy Russell: 00:09:35 Mm-hmm (affirmative), exactly. So when you were at Smithsonian, did you have any interactions with the Park Service?
- Martin Burke: 00:09:42 No.
- Nancy Russell: 00:09:43 No. When did you become aware of the Park Service as a career opportunity?
- Martin Burke: 00:09:49 Well, I was with the Smithsonian Institution for 17 years. I was aware through the Washington Conservation Guild that there were conservators out here at Harpers Ferry. I didn't realize until I moved out here that there was a--we were living in Kerneysville when this job, the manager of the Division of Conservation--well, it wasn't, I've forgotten what the initial title was.
- Nancy Russell: 00:10:46 There was a point where it's gone from manager to director, center manager.
- Martin Burke: 00:10:53 Yeah.
- Nancy Russell: 00:10:54 Yeah, who was that at the time?
- Martin Burke: 00:10:57 Gary Cummins [Dave Wright].

Nancy Russell: 00:10:58 Okay, it was Gary [Dave].

Martin Burke: 00:10:59 Who I interviewed with him. My career in conservation at the Smithsonian, actually my direct supervisor was a man named Scott Odell, who was the, I don't even remember what his title was, but all of the museum specialists got formed under him as a separate conservation unit. I rose to, because of management, I kind of--I don't know how to-- Well, Scott was not a manager, so I filled the gap. I was still commuting down to work at the Smithsonian--

Nancy Russell: 00:12:12 That's a miserable commute.

Martin Burke: 00:12:13 Yes it was. But had the Smithsonian promised me something, anything, I would've stayed. When I came to Harpers Ferry Center it was just a lateral move in terms of pay grade.

Nancy Russell: 00:12:44 Right.

Martin Burke: 00:12:45 But I wanted to take on more responsibility at the Smithsonian, but they declined my counteroffer. But I had kept them fully informed as to, "I'm applying for this job. I'm being interviewed for this job."

Nancy Russell: 00:13:06 They had an opportunity.

Martin Burke: 00:13:08 Yes, they had an opportunity to make a counteroffer.

Nancy Russell: 00:13:13 So you have an interesting perspective because you were with Smithsonian for so long, and came in at the level that you came in. How would you describe the state of conservation in the National Park Service in general? And then we can talk about HFC in particular. But when you came on board?

Martin Burke: 00:13:37 Well, the only instructions that I received from Dave Wright was, "Professionalize the operation." And to me that meant hiring program graduates. Well, one of the first things that I noticed, that struck me as just kind of--at the Smithsonian everybody was a subject matter specialist. You could find a specialist for anything, and deep knowledge of that specialty. We were organized by museum and I worked originally at the Museum of History and Technology. Then it evolved to the Museum of American History, because originally the collections were

all under the Natural History Museum but then began being separated into individual museums. All of the museums had an original archeology number, or that was traceable back to its roots.

- Martin Burke: 00:15:14 And the 1876, well, the Arts and Industries building was actually built on all for things coming from the 1876 exhibit in Philadelphia. Everyone, any of the professional staff, and the museum specialists all had deep knowledge in their various specialties. And when I came to the Park Service, it was interesting to me that the specialists at the Smithsonian, concentrating on their specialties, they were not loyal to the institution. They could go to universities; they could do their research anywhere. So it struck me that there were equal master's degrees in the Park Service. Most of the superintendents had at least a master's degree if not a PhD in their specialties, but they were loyal to the Park Service. The culture of the various institutions just struck me as being very, very different. Everybody could recite the--
- Nancy Russell: 00:17:05 The Organic Act.
- Martin Burke: 00:17:07 Yes, that's exactly right. I couldn't remember a time at the Smithsonian that that was the case. Also at the Smithsonian, in terms of conservation, I was very engaged with the professionalization of the profession, that the conservators would be on-par with the curators, that we had a specialization also.
- Martin Burke: 00:18:00 Well, I was on the board of the AIC for 10 years, and after I retired--I wasn't allowed to serve as an officer, but I was able to serve as a director while I was still here. And once I retired, I was recruited to go back on the AIC-FAIC board, first as vice president and then as president. So I've been engaged with that kind of professionalization of, and recognition for, the conservators both in the Park Service and nationally.
- Nancy Russell: 00:19:02 So you started, if I have my research correct, you started with the Park Service in November of 1991?
- Martin Burke: 00:19:09 Yes. The day after, I think it was Thanksgiving, I came into the Shipley School and met whoever was there. I think Nancy--

- Nancy Russell: 00:19:26 Hatcher?
- Martin Burke: 00:19:28 Hatcher, she was there.
- Nancy Russell: 00:19:31 The day after Thanksgiving is usually a light staff day.
- Martin Burke: 00:19:34 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 00:19:37 When you came from the Smithsonian to Shipley School, had you seen Shipley School before you started? Were you appalled and horrified by what you found?
- Martin Burke: 00:19:47 I just accepted, "Oh, we get the dregs." And that was usual for any kind of collections management. At the Smithsonian we had our Suitland, Maryland where we had--and all the labs at the Smithsonian, even the conservation analytical lab was in the basement of the American History building. In fact, we worked directly across from--my lab used the same hallway as very early names in conservation.
- Nancy Russell: 00:20:45 When you started, how large was your staff?
- Martin Burke: 00:20:48 Here?
- Nancy Russell: 00:20:49 Yeah, when you started at Shipley School, yeah, mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Martin Burke: 00:20:54 Well, there were two exhibit specialists Paul & ?, Ron [Sheetz] and Al [Levitan]. Fonda Thompson had left by that point. There were two, well they were called technicians at the time. Alice Newton, Debbie Bellman, Dan Riss, Bart Rogers, Charlie, Greg Bryne, Toby Raphael, Barbara Cumberland, Butch McNally, Tom Carter the...
- Nancy Russell: 00:21:31 Paintings conservator.
- Martin Burke: 00:21:34 Paintings conservator. So there were a number of--Nancy Hatcher was the acting registrar, so there were a couple hires that I was able to--there was an opening for a textile conservator. Let's see, was anybody doing paper? No, I think paper was open too. But we were destined to move here [the Willow Springs facility], and we were planning a makeup of this.
- Nancy Russell: 00:22:21 So the planning was in the process when you started?

- Martin Burke: 00:22:24 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 00:22:25 So did you have any involvement of how the labs were setup and how the space was setup?
- Martin Burke: 00:22:32 Yes. I did. And got to participate in actual moving, and what was left, and what was left behind.
- Nancy Russell: 00:22:50 So both Alice [Newton] and Al [Levitan] have done oral histories, and they have both talked about how they expected that there would be movers hired to do the move. But that's not what happened.
- Martin Burke: 00:23:02 No. Maybe they used it all on the building or something, I don't know.
- Nancy Russell: 00:23:11 But you all had to move yourself into this building?
- Martin Burke: 00:23:16 Yeah, actually I'm pretty sure we did. So I got to act as buildings manager and do all those--I was actually the safety officer down for the Museum of American History, I was the designated, so I'm intimately familiar with this building. But I remember sitting in my office at the Shipley School building, and a giant piece of concrete came off the roof and flew by my office window and hit an oil tank right below it.
- Nancy Russell: 00:24:11 "It's time to go."
- Martin Burke: 00:24:14 And I've heard that it isn't much better. But the GSA rented that building through the Jefferson County Schools, so our landlord, if we had any complaints we went to the GSA, and we were kind of separated from the school system. But once we moved out the Park Service, I think purchased the building from the school system to use it as storage or whatever.
- Nancy Russell: 00:24:49 So at the time was your program called Division of Conservation?
- Martin Burke: 00:24:53 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 00:24:54 Okay, and were you part of the leadership team for Harpers Ferry Center as a division chief?
- Martin Burke: 00:25:01 Yes.

- Nancy Russell: 00:25:01 What were some of the other programs? Were they arranged by subject matter specialists at that point versus geographical areas? Right now they're organized--they did a reorganization and so the areas are organized by regions instead of by--well, Publications is still Publications because they have their own money source. But Exhibits and all of those other program areas got reorganized at some point into regional areas. So Historic Furnishings got separated, was that all during your time?
- Martin Burke: 00:25:41 No.
- Nancy Russell: 00:25:41 No, after your time.
- Martin Burke: 00:25:42 Yeah.
- Nancy Russell: 00:25:42 Okay.
- Martin Burke: 00:25:45 When I left there was still AV. When I left, I was the manager for Media Assets, which because they were in the building. They used to run a repair program for the outdated projectors--
- Nancy Russell: 00:26:15 That the parks had.
- Martin Burke: 00:26:19 That the parks had. And because we were in that transition from film-based stuff to digital, and that was just bizarre. You couldn't get out too far ahead of what the parks were able to maintain. I mean, it's night and day. I was able to hire--well, I think I hired Theresa [Voellinger]. We planned the lab spaces around--well, we had archeology, we had essentially the objects lab, wooden objects lab, all of those--
- Nancy Russell: 00:27:23 Textiles, paper.
- Martin Burke: 00:27:25 Textiles, paper, ethnographic materials, objects.
- Nancy Russell: 00:27:36 And you had a mounts lab?
- Martin Burke: 00:27:38 Yes. Well, originally when Harpers Ferry was down on the Mall, they built all of the exhibits. Designed, built, and installed all of the exhibits. So our mount making lab was-- Let's see, what were their names? I inherited two mount makers, which were exhibit specialists, and they would actually go out and install exhibits.

- Nancy Russell: 00:28:24 At that point, was most of the work that conservation was getting still coming in from these large exhibit projects coming through the Center? Or was it starting to become more smaller park contacts, "I need this survey of my collection. I got these objects that need treatment," that's not necessarily tied into the other work the Center was doing? Or was it still coming largely from the exhibit component?
- Martin Burke: 00:28:52 Initially it came from the exhibit component. Then as the funding streams changed, so we were working on more--well, I'm not sure that we ever did actually a collections management plan out of here. I know that I had declared that this building would not ever be sprayed, so we ran an aggressive pest management program here. Barbara [Cumberland] got assigned that, and ultimately, she was requested to create integrated pest management plans for the parks. The park paid her travel. Conservation labs were heavily base-funded.
- Nancy Russell: 00:30:10 And how did that compare with the rest of the Center initially?
- Martin Burke: 00:30:13 Well, I think I arrived just at the height of the Center's expansion. It declined in number of employees over the entire period I was here. Now, maybe it's just physical separation, but we were not hit as much as other divisions in the Center. It was a constant stream of reorganization. I don't think that in the time I was here that we weren't going through a reorganization and how the base money was spent.
- Nancy Russell: 00:31:14 I have heard that. And then were you here when they did the business plan?
- Martin Burke: 00:31:20 That was just starting when I left.
- Nancy Russell: 00:31:21 Okay.
- Martin Burke: 00:31:24 I was in on the fact that we had to rationalize and justify our existence, and why we were special.
- Nancy Russell: 00:31:45 My understanding is the initial justification for your existence, as many of us had to deal with in the Park Service at the time, was that A76 process, whether jobs

would be outsourced to private contractors. So you were part of that?

- Martin Burke: 00:32:00 I was at the very beginning of that process.
- Nancy Russell: 00:32:05 Okay.
- Martin Burke: 00:32:05 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 00:32:11 And then subsequent to that, they also then developed--they "won" A-76, and got to keep the jobs here, but then they also had to go into a business plan after that.
- Martin Burke: 00:32:20 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 00:32:20 Okay, but most of that happened after you left?
- Martin Burke: 00:32:25 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Nancy Russell: 00:32:28 Okay. I know that there are many accomplishments during your tenure here that moved the program forward in a lot of different ways that I wanted to touch base on. One of them was the development of the science lab, can we talk about that a little bit?
- Martin Burke: 00:32:50 Well, this had to do with the scientific underpinning for conservation, and that you had to look at the deterioration of materials, or understanding the process of deterioration. When I first started, I was working in collections rehousing at the Smithsonian, so understanding that interventive treatments are rare, or should be rare, and that stabilization of the environmental conditions, the constant argument around two degrees--plus or minus two degrees. But to make determinations about what materials to use in treatment comes from my scientific--so yes, I was responsible for the science lab.
- Nancy Russell: 00:34:16 That was really the first time the Park Service ever had anything like that.
- Martin Burke: 00:34:19 Well, if you went back to the 1930s.
- Nancy Russell: 00:34:22 Okay.
- Martin Burke: 00:34:30 I believe that the Park Service was actually responsible for a scientific process of conservation, that it originated in the

Park Service and it was championed by the historic preservation people. And somehow, we didn't keep up with the times, and somewhere between the '30s and the '40s it got lost. But I would credit the Park Service with being the originator of a scientific approach to conservation.

- Nancy Russell: 00:35:23 And is there an example or a place where you--
- Martin Burke: 00:35:27 It came out of Washington Office, and it was really--I found references to [Harold] Plenderleith, that was one of the only books in conservation when I first started. He had interactions with I think with the Park Service.
- Nancy Russell: 00:36:00 Well certainly when Carl Russell was--the early days--well, actually for a much longer period than one would think, so much of the museum collections were done through interpretation in the Park Service as part of that whole exhibit approach. And Ansel Hall out at Yosemite, and that kind of stuff. And then when we got the New Deal funding for projects that were suddenly going to add a lot more exhibits and visitors centers and things into parks, through the CCC and the WPA, that kind of stuff, there was more money than Ansel Hall could deal with in his western lab. So Carl Russell peeled off from him and sort of started that museum branch in the Washington Office.
- Nancy Russell: 00:36:52 That had been sort of Hermon Bumpas, and some of those other folks who had been kind of spearheading that we needed to get away from this concept of, "It's just objects for exhibit." "We really need to start some on the preservation of the objects," and thinking about it more from that perspective. I'm certainly very much aware of that kind of history of how that evolved. And even though it's shocking to me that the Park Service as a whole didn't develop a cultural resource management program until the '70s, which is why conservation and collections was in interpretation and its various forms over time, and we didn't hire the first official chief curator, although Peterson had that title, for a while until 1980. I know there's that history there. What I was wondering is, I mean there's that interest in it, but was there really this science behind it? I mean, there's a recognition that we need to be doing the preservation work.
- Martin Burke: 00:37:54 I think it actually came up in relationship with fumigation.

Nancy Russell: 00:38:01 Okay.

Martin Burke: 00:38:02 That was the--

Nancy Russell: 00:38:04 That makes sense.

Martin Burke: 00:38:05 One of the--I'd have to look back over my notes.

Nancy Russell: 00:38:17 No, that makes sense, the fumigation issue. Yeah.

Martin Burke: 00:38:17 Yeah. That was what was driving the interest in science. There're so many wooden artifacts I guess, and health issues, but they weren't discussed quite as health issues at the time.

Nancy Russell: 00:38:38 Till people started dropping.

Martin Burke: 00:38:39 Yes.

Nancy Russell: 00:38:42 Certainly for Harpers Ferry Center it was the first time a science lab had been developed here, and you hired a conservation scientist?

Martin Burke: 00:38:50 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy Russell: 00:38:51 And that was?

Martin Burke: 00:38:52 Judy Bischoff.

Nancy Russell: 00:38:57 And I think at one point you had two? An assistant?

Martin Burke: 00:38:59 Yes. We did hire an assistant, but he only lasted six months. He was not a good fit.

Nancy Russell: 00:39:11 Right.

Martin Burke: 00:39:11 But he looked good on paper.

Nancy Russell: 00:39:12 Right. But that was sort of your vision I think, was to have a senior and junior conservator in each of the labs. Is that a reflection of what you were going for?

Martin Burke: 00:39:24 Yes. For example, with the two exhibit mount makers, we had Bradley Sanders just up the road, who was just a marvel at mount making, so we didn't. Then that was the process of the transition between us going out to install, or-

-I've forgotten their names, but we had two mount makers here who were the survivors of when exhibits were produced at Harpers Ferry Center. And they somehow got-- I guess because they had hand skills, they were shuffled over into the Division of Conservation.

- Nancy Russell: 00:40:31 I mean, I think another project that was done, and presumably sort of brought in some of that science lab stuff, was when Toby Raphael was working on the exhibit standards. Can you talk about that a little bit?
- Martin Burke: 00:40:48 Well, the exhibit standards actually started at the Smithsonian.
- Nancy Russell: 00:40:52 Okay.
- Martin Burke: 00:40:57 We got worried, or I got worried about the effect of being on long-term exhibit. Even being on short-term exhibit, because at the Smithsonian we had these long-term exhibits, short-term exhibits that had deleterious effect on the objects. You could actually see dramatic differences in fading of colors. So this was sort of the beginning of preventive conservation, which I'm down with that. Let's see, what was her name? I had an employee at the Smithsonian, we began looking into preventive conservation, which was the storage conditions, the display conditions, and everything that surrounded the object getting to Harpers Ferry for treatment, getting back to the park for installation, the kind of mounts that it would be on, the design of the display cases, the lighting in the display cases. And Toby became interested in that also, and I got funding for his projects, and he was the ambassador for exhibit conservation.
- Nancy Russell: 00:43:13 Was it Park Service funding you got? Or was it funding from somewhere else?
- Martin Burke: 00:43:20 I rationalized it as part of his job, so most of it was internal. I think at that time we were still base funded. Project funding came maybe--I was here 13 years, we got money from the exhibits. We got a portion of the pie that came to the Harpers Ferry Center to do treatments specifically for exhibit objects.
- Nancy Russell: 00:44:00 Okay. One of the other things that I think evolved in your time here was an improvement in the process of how

materials came in, registered, tracked, in terms of developing the barcoding system.

- Martin Burke: 00:44:24 I saw that on here, I couldn't remember if we had a barcoding system. I think Alice Newton introduced that.
- Nancy Russell: 00:44:36 She did, I believe while you were here. What she told me was you had tasked her to going to a detail in the registrar's office.
- Martin Burke: 00:44:55 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 00:44:56 And that's the point at which she kind of realized how things were being done and suddenly understanding why it was taking so long to get objects out of registration for treatment in the labs. She tells the story about how she was visiting somebody in the hospital and saw the barcoding on the blood vials and had that eureka moment.
- Martin Burke: 00:45:19 Well, if she claims that I--it must have been.
- Nancy Russell: 00:45:26 Okay.
- Martin Burke: 00:45:29 I was just appalled at the record keeping here when I took over. I realized that we had recidivist objects that came back in again and again. And they couldn't associate the two treatment reports--
- Nancy Russell: 00:46:00 For the same object.
- Martin Burke: 00:46:02 For the same object. And you're going, "Wait a minute, we've treated this here before."
- Nancy Russell: 00:46:07 And then to be able to find the treatment report.
- Martin Burke: 00:46:13 And we had an employee at that time--I don't want to say that conservation was the dumping ground for problem employees, but I remember getting a call from some superintendent somewhere, and it was a quid pro quo. It was, "Take this person off my hands." There were a number of personnel projects here that took up a lot of my time.
- Nancy Russell: 00:46:51 The joys of supervision.

- Martin Burke: 00:46:52 Yes. And I wasn't even informed that this was a special employee. I had two lawyers come to visit me to say, "You can't assign Butch McNally these projects because he is under a special--why wasn't I told?" There were some problem employees here when I arrived.
- Nancy Russell: 00:47:32 Well it certainly seems that the process that you allowed Alice to implement, or supported, or developed, certainly that was something that wasn't happening elsewhere in the Park Service in terms of implementing the barcoding system. And although REGGAR, as the system is called, is reaching the end of its life now and we're looking to create the next generation of it just because the software and hardware has changed so much, it certainly has served Harpers Ferry Center well for a very long time.
- Martin Burke: 00:48:04 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Nancy Russell: 00:48:05 In terms of that accountability piece.
- Martin Burke: 00:48:08 Great. I'll take credit for it.
- Nancy Russell: 00:48:18 During your tenure, was Harpers Ferry Center Conservation, were you guys working collaboratively or developing professional relationships with the other labs in the Park Service like WACC in the Northeast? Did you all work together much?
- Martin Burke: 00:48:36 No, not much. We had specializations that they didn't, but there wasn't much overlap. We were certainly aware of WACC, and I was certainly a supporter of the centralization of collections if they could not be managed on-site.
- Nancy Russell: 00:49:14 What about the cultural resources program in Washington, the Museum Management Program? Were you working with them in terms of developing training or other ways that you were working with them?
- Martin Burke: 00:49:31 Yes, actually we worked collaboratively with Ann Hitchcock's staff. We wrote Conserve O Grams. I don't know whether they are still-
- Nancy Russell: 00:49:44 They do.
- Martin Burke: 00:49:45 Are they still being updated?

- Nancy Russell: 00:49:47 Yes, not as quickly as we would like, but they are. I think Theresa [Voellinger] has a couple of the conservators tasked this year with working on getting a couple of them updated. I think there was a lull in that for a while, but it's being picked back up again.
- Martin Burke: 00:49:59 Yeah. Well, my sense is that certainly the specialist expertise has been stripped out of the Park Service, certainly at the Washington office. I believe the Park Service may regret that at some point. But that's the way--
- Nancy Russell: 00:50:32 If not already. Let's see. Were you contracting for any conservation services at that time? Or was everything, you were sort of limited to what your staff could do, and you were just turning work away if you couldn't do it?
- Martin Burke: 00:50:55 Well, we did contract out, and it was usually for some specializations that we didn't have in-house. Tom Carter retired, and we contracted out paper and paintings, before we had the paper lab, so we would work the Northeast Document Conservation Center and various private paintings conservators. If some park came to us with a painting, we just didn't have the expertise to do it. We would contract it out.
- Nancy Russell: 00:51:54 Right. We still are using NEDCC for paper just because there's way more paper than we can handle through here.
- Martin Burke: 00:52:03 I suspect so.
- Nancy Russell: 00:52:10 Somewhere along the line somebody told me, and so I want you to confirm or deny, somebody told me that under your tenure you started thinking about this idea of the conservators being able to--they had been predominantly base funded, that this was an area where we could gain back--this was a service that could be essentially charged out to the parks. Is that something that you came up with?
- Martin Burke: 00:52:46 Maybe indirectly. "We can shift this cost over to the park." The problem came up when we would get a request directly from the park that was non-exhibit related and we had capacity to take that project on. For example, the Fort Sumter flag I think was--well, no, that was project funded. Yeah, we were open to taking in work that would be paid for by the park directly that had nothing to do with exhibits. I think some of the paper treatments were like that.

- Nancy Russell: 00:53:47 Right. Really then during that period in the 90s, that might have been some of that transition period for--because now it seems like the work here is predominantly not exhibit related, right? They're going out and they're doing surveys, or IPM plans, or whatever, or objects are coming in as a result of those surveys to be treated. We do of course still get projects like Arlington House or something that's part of a larger exhibit project. But it seems like the balance has shifted to those park-generated projects that aren't necessarily part of a big exhibit project that has come through the Center, is that period in the '90s there that tipping point? Or was it still predominantly exhibits when you left?
- Martin Burke: 00:54:35 It was shifting, definitely. It would've been the late '90s, early 2000s that that shift began to occur.
- Nancy Russell: 00:54:47 Okay. And so this idea, these projects where we could shift some of those costs to the park, how did that fit into overall HFC goals at the time? Was there pressure from management to--
- Martin Burke: 00:55:03 I don't remember much pressure from the management, but it was trying to balance the base funding against, "Well, what do we really need to base fund here?" And being embarrassed about how much we would charge at the park for this treatment. "That doesn't seem reasonable." Part of it had to do with the cost of services. I believe that it's an obligation to assist the parks, unless the curator there was kind of, "Eh, we really want to get this done." But I'm not sure how it's evolved since my departure.
- Nancy Russell: 00:56:07 Okay. During your time here, of course you worked with a lot of different conservators over time. Do you have any anecdotes about just working with some of these names that we know well in the Park Service? Whether they're work-related, or humorous, or things that sort of convey some of the personalities that you worked with?
- Martin Burke: 00:56:31 I wouldn't want to even go there.
- Nancy Russell: 00:56:31 Okay.
- Martin Burke: 00:56:40 That's the manager in me. I will not speak evil of--
- Nancy Russell: 00:56:42 Doesn't have to be evil.

Martin Burke: 00:56:43 Well, I mean--I'm not sure, in your research, do you remember who hired me?

Nancy Russell: 00:57:03 You said earlier that it was Gary Cummins.

Martin Burke: 00:57:06 I think he actually came--I was hired by his predecessor.

Nancy Russell: 00:57:15 So Cummins interviewed you but you weren't--

Martin Burke: 00:57:18 No, he didn't interview me.

Nancy Russell: 00:57:21 Oh, okay.

Martin Burke: 00:57:22 But he came--I was hired by Gary--

Nancy Russell: 00:57:28 Candelaria?

Martin Burke: 00:57:28 No. He came later.

Nancy Russell: 00:57:30 Okay.

Martin Burke: 00:57:33 He came about a year, maybe two years before I left, and came down from Alaska. Anyway.

Nancy Russell: 00:57:44 Another re-org.

Martin Burke: 00:57:45 Another re-org, or, "Get him out of here, send him to Harpers Ferry Center." Gary Cummins was probably the longest manager that I worked for, but I was hired by his predecessor.

Nancy Russell: 00:58:08 Dave Wright?

Martin Burke: 00:58:09 Dave Wright.

Nancy Russell: 00:58:10 Okay.

Martin Burke: 00:58:11 That's the name. I was hired by Dave Wright.

Nancy Russell: 00:58:15 Okay, so Dave Wright's the one who interviewed you?

Martin Burke: 00:58:17 Yes.

Nancy Russell: 00:58:17 Okay.

- Martin Burke: 00:58:20 And Cummins came after Dave Wright when Dave retired. I was hired by Dave Wright, so that goes way back. There was some question in here [referring to the questions sent before the interview], who did I replace? And I think I replaced--well, there had been a long period of time where the job was just not filled. I think I replaced John Demer, who has shifted over to Historic Furnishings, and the job was just open. Let's see, I know that Sue Monroe was one of the applicants, but she had been here before I think. And Fonda Thompson was here at some point and went off to create her own business.
- Nancy Russell: 00:59:52 That's right, because I think after Demer left they just sort of did actings. Different conservators went through an acting period. I wasn't sure how long that gap was, but it sounds like it had been a while.
- Martin Burke: 01:00:04 It was a while, because I think that the labs were in disarray and the morale was very low.
- Nancy Russell: 01:00:26 So are there specific things that you think that you did that improved morale?
- Martin Burke: 01:00:32 Moving into a new facility, regardless of whether we had to move ourselves.
- Nancy Russell: 01:00:38 Right.
- Martin Burke: 01:00:41 I remember going into the men's restroom in the basement of Shipley, and the urinals were all for children. You had to sort of get down on your knees to--and you're going, "This is not my impression of a lab."
- Nancy Russell: 01:01:06 That's not something you normally have to think about, but I guess if you're in a school building.
- Martin Burke: 01:01:12 Yeah.
- Nancy Russell: 01:01:12 And the idea that nobody had ever fixed that in all the years they were in the building. You can raise that up.
- Martin Burke: 01:01:22 Well, no, they were built into the concrete.
- Nancy Russell: 01:01:26 Oh, okay.
- Martin Burke: 01:01:29 They weren't free-standing.

- Nancy Russell: 01:01:31 Okay. So adult-size urinals was an improvement, big morale booster.
- Martin Burke: 01:01:44 Yes. I don't know how long the management position had been open. But now that you reminded me that there was a series of actings after John Demer. That's when the lab was much more tied with curatorial services in the Washington Office. It was sort of out here as--I think the distance from the Center actually was a benefit, being over in Charles Town, I had the pleasure of being the building's manager, the guy that got called in the middle of the night when the sprinkler system failed, meeting the state trooper out front. Anyway.
- Nancy Russell: 01:02:53 The joys of management.
- Martin Burke: 01:02:54 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 01:03:02 You were here for 13 years?
- Martin Burke: 01:03:03 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 01:03:04 So you retired in 2004?
- Martin Burke: 01:03:06 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 01:03:07 Yeah.
- Martin Burke: 01:03:07 October 1, 2004.
- Nancy Russell: 01:03:10 How would you describe the state of conservation in the Park Service when you left compared to when you arrived?
- Martin Burke: 01:03:23 Vastly improved. I think my first assignment by [Dave] Wright was to professionalize the conservation operations, and that meant waiting out the two exhibit specialists retirement they were employed. Talking up the--I have a personal commitment to education, so we started running--we saved a yearlong temporary position specifically for pre-program persons.
- Nancy Russell: 01:04:15 Wow.
- Martin Burke: 01:04:17 So they knew they were going to be here a year. I could guarantee them that we would assist them to getting into graduate school, and we kind of rotated them around the

labs exposing them to the kind of work that would be done in a conservation lab. Then hiring program trained people, that was the baseline. You had to bring your, ink drying on your certificate. And then we re-established the paper lab and got it up to two people. And then the museum specialist technicians, we sorted all of that out and got them pay raises, got them full-time positions.

- Nancy Russell: 01:05:33 So in addition to the conservator and the junior conservator, for lack of a better term, I've always wanted the title junior curator and that just doesn't exist.
- Martin Burke: 01:05:42 Yeah. Assistant.
- Nancy Russell: 01:05:45 Assistant, yes, there you go. Assistant conservator, they would probably prefer that. You also had technicians in the labs?
- Martin Burke: 01:05:52 Yeah.
- Nancy Russell: 01:05:53 Which is also something else that we've sort of lost.
- Martin Burke: 01:05:57 Yeah. And that had to do with pay grade. The technician--well, we were still tied, in my tenure, to the OPM standards. I've spent I don't know how much time on trying to convince people that the conservator was qualitatively different from the museum specialist and technician series, which topped out.
- Nancy Russell: 01:06:38 Right.
- Martin Burke: 01:06:39 There was a maximum level that you could achieve there. I made some headway with that at the Smithsonian, so I was a proponent of the conservator series, which probably still hasn't been established, but was more like the curator, given the educational background that is now, I hope, accepted.
- Nancy Russell: 01:07:16 Mm-hmm (affirmative), right. Was Nancy Purinton the person you hired for the senior paper conservator?
- Martin Burke: 01:07:26 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Nancy Russell: 01:07:26 Okay.

Martin Burke: 01:07:31 And yes, is the answer to the question. And I hired Jane Merritt too. When I arrived there was only Alice and Debby in the textiles lab, and they were all museum technicians. So getting the pay grades up was--

Nancy Russell: 01:07:58 I'm sure an improvement for morale.

Martin Burke: 01:08:01 Yes.

Nancy Russell: 01:08:01 So you hired Jane Merritt into the textile lab, Nancy Purinton into paper.

Martin Burke: 01:08:11 Paper. Yeah, and we were in this building when she came.

Nancy Russell: 01:08:14 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Martin Burke: 01:08:18 I think I hired Theresa with--

Nancy Russell: 01:08:21 Right. As the assistant paper conservator?

Martin Burke: 01:08:26 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy Russell: 01:08:26 And Al Levitan was in the wood lab?

Martin Burke: 01:08:29 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy Russell: 01:08:31 Was there somebody else? Was Ron still here?

Martin Burke: 01:08:33 Ron was still here.

Nancy Russell: 01:08:34 Ron Sheetz. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Martin Burke: 01:08:38 I think Larry Bowers was still here.

Nancy Russell: 01:08:40 Larry, that's one I forgot, Larry, yeah.

Martin Burke: 01:08:43 And then we had the two mount makers, so when they retired we just changed those positions over to conservation.

Nancy Russell: 01:08:56 Right. Then Barbara Cumberland was in objects?

Martin Burke: 01:08:59 Ethnographic objects.

Nancy Russell: 01:09:00 Ethnographic objects, yes.

Martin Burke: 01:09:02 With Toby [Raphael].

Nancy Russell: 01:09:04 With Toby. And then was Bart Rogers still in metals?

Martin Burke: 01:09:08 Bart Rogers was here with Dan Riis.

Nancy Russell: 01:09:16 Okay.

Martin Burke: 01:09:17 And then we began to diversify, or re-establish the labs as textiles, paper, ethnographic objects. Then we began--also, there was another guy here.

Nancy Russell: 01:09:46 In metals?

Martin Burke: 01:09:47 He was ceramics.

Nancy Russell: 01:09:49 Oh, ceramics.

Martin Burke: 01:09:54 And he was one of the actings actually at one point prior to my tenure. But he was--in fact, he is married now to one of our interns. We took a lot of interns, and that really--it was a cross-fertilization of--we took summer students directly from the programs, we offered internships.

Nancy Russell: 01:10:36 So very much contributing back to the field?

Martin Burke: 01:10:39 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nancy Russell: 01:10:41 Exposing conservators to the Park Service, future conservators to the Park Service, but also contributing to their education.

Martin Burke: 01:10:51 Yes. So one of the questions was why did I leave?

Nancy Russell: 01:10:58 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Martin Burke: 01:10:59 I had spent 35 years in government service and--

Nancy Russell: 01:11:04 It was time.

Martin Burke: 01:11:04 It was time. And immediately I went on the AIC-FAIC board as a vice president and then graduated to president. But I went back to art school and got another degree in art sculpture and have been working for the last 12 years in the Jefferson Country Historic Landmarks Commission. So I just traded my--now I get to manage another program.

Nancy Russell: 01:11:49 Keeping your hand in.

Martin Burke: 01:11:50 Yeah.

Nancy Russell: 01:11:50 In the preservation field.

Martin Burke: 01:11:53 Yes.

Nancy Russell: 01:11:55 Well great. Was there anything else that we didn't cover that you wanted to mention?

Martin Burke: 01:11:59 Well, you've revived a lot of memories here for me.

Nancy Russell: 01:12:05 Hopefully that's a good thing.

Martin Burke: 01:12:07 Well, I was sorry to see that under the Jane Merritt administration that most of my accomplishments were deconstructed. I'm most disturbed about Toby's treatment and his departure that he was--I think that led to his early death.

Nancy Russell: 01:12:44 I realize that's a sensitive issue, is there any details of that situation you want to provide, or do you just want to leave it at that?

Martin Burke: 01:12:54 I thought he was falsely accused.

Nancy Russell: 01:12:58 As did many.

Martin Burke: 01:13:00 I said that at the grand jury hearing. Had I been here, that wouldn't have occurred. I mean, anyway. I guess I made the wrong decision about who to recommend as my follow-on. Although I did notice that Theresa had management in her future. There was something about her demeanor, "She's management material," where I couldn't say that of her boss Nancy. That was not a--she wouldn't have been good as a--but I thought Jane was, but I was wrong.

Nancy Russell: 01:14:16 Okay.

Martin Burke: 01:14:22 To see a program built to the place it was and then--I don't know whether it could ever have been gone through the A-76, and now the business plans, would it have survived without being definitely reduced.

Nancy Russell: 01:14:50 But reduced versus gutted, it's not really the same thing.

- Martin Burke: 01:14:55 Yes. Well, but gutted could--you could say that of all the Park Service. I'm quite disturbed that the fact-based individuals are no longer with us. Everyone's a contract manager now. But that's true of all the government, I guess.
- Nancy Russell: 01:15:33 Well that's a downer. We got to end on a more positive note than that Martin.
- Martin Burke: 01:15:38 No, no. You get around to regrets, you know? Well, what do you think the state of the Park Service is?
- Nancy Russell: 01:16:01 Suffering. I think individuals and some programs persevere in spite of it in the hope of a brighter day. Yeah, I mean I would say we here in collections and conservation, I feel like we're in a rebuilding phase. I don't feel the poor morale, the negativity. I think we're realistic about where we are, but I think we've got some good things going for us and we've got some management support at the Center for filling positions. Like when Barb [Cumberland] retired, we got to fill in the position. Curtis [Sullivan] is now permanent in the wood lab. So there's definitely been support to at least continue, and then we're building out some base funds again for things like some internships and things like that. With Wade [Myers] retiring this month we're refilling his position and actually bringing in somebody to overlap with him, which never happens. We're finally refilling the registrar position, which had been vacant for a couple of years.
- Nancy Russell: 01:17:19 In the four years that I have been here, I came to rebuild the NPS History Collection after a long period of neglect. And then Linda [Blaser] left, and the registrar left, and Theresa and I were kind of trying to hold everybody's head above water. So for me I feel like we're at least locally, in this particular program, in a positive rebuilding phase. Which has sort of been my career experience, is to go somewhere and build it, and then have to go somewhere and build it again.
- Martin Burke: 01:17:57 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 01:17:58 But yeah.
- Martin Burke: 01:18:01 I remembered the name of the other conservator that was here.

Nancy Russell: 01:18:05 Oh good.

Martin Burke: 01:18:05 Greg Byrne.

Nancy Russell: 01:18:07 Oh, Greg. Yes.

Martin Burke: 01:18:09 So when Bart left, Bart Rogers, we changed that into the paper position, or the assistant paper position. So we had the two exhibit specialists, when they retired those were all filled by conservators, and Bart's position was also--and Tom's position, Tom Carter. But I always felt that there weren't enough paint--well, there are enough paintings to keep a conservator at someplace busy, but that seemed easier to contract out. You could get bids on it and evaluate the proposals, the pre-treatment proposals. But that seemed right for contracting.

Nancy Russell: 01:19:30 Right.

Martin Burke: 01:19:32 But I think that the parks were always paying for that.

Nancy Russell: 01:19:35 Okay. I'm actually doing an oral history with Bart in April.

Martin Burke: 01:19:39 Ah. Well, he's still out there.

Nancy Russell: 01:19:44 Yep. Exactly. Okay, anything else we want to cover?

Martin Burke: 01:19:51 I'm ready to go to the break room.

Nancy Russell: 01:19:53 Okay, well thank you.

Martin Burke: 01:19:55 You're welcome.

END OF RECORDING