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NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817)
Harpers Ferry Center's 40th Anniversary Oral History Project



David Wright
June 16, 2010

Interview conducted by Michele Hartley

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Interview with: David Wright

Interview by: Michele Hartley, NPS Employee

Interview Date: June 16, 2010

Release form available: No (retired at time of the interview)

Transcript reviewed by interviewee: No

Transcript reviewed against original audio by NPS History Collection staff: Yes

Transcript time stamped: Yes

David Wright:	00:00	You want it to-
M. Hartley:	00:02	We do have a reel to reel down there, yeah. Yeah. So this is eight.
Audio Tech:	00:13	This is actually nine-
M. Hartley:	00:14	Oh because of Mary? Okay, so, yeah. Well Dave, so I'm Michelle Hartley. I am in the AV department now.
David Wright:	00:26	Oh great.
M. Hartley:	00:27	But, I had been for seven years, the EEO counselor here. So I worked with Magaly, she's one of my mentors, and she will often quote the wise words of Dave Wright. So it's a true honor to meet you.
David Wright:	00:44	She kept me out of a lot of trouble, believe me.
M. Hartley:	00:45	Are we going? Okay, so I am here with Dave Wright, and I just want to confirm that you're okay with being recorded?
David Wright:	00:59	Yes, ma'am.
M. Hartley:	01:00	Thank you. If you would mind telling us your name, and your position or positions you held here at Harpers Ferry Center?
David Wright:	01:09	My name is David Wright. I was the associate director for planning and development in Denver, and in the

Washington office, and oversaw the Denver Service Center, and this facility, plus a lot of other jobs that I had down there. When Marc Sagan retired-

- Audio Tech: 01:29 Just give me one second, I'm sorry. This just keeps kind of falling down, so.
- David Wright: 01:30 Oh okay. When Marc Sagan retired, I went to the director and I said, "I've been here eight and a half years, and I'm getting washed out." So I was able to convince him to let me apply for it, and I got the job up here at Harpers Ferry, and that was in 1986, I believe it was. And spend the last 10 years of my career here, great place to work. Great place.
- M. Hartley: 01:55 Why? Give us some reasons.
- David Wright: 01:57 Well in Washington when I was down there, I had, had several jobs. I had been the deputy director in the Denver Service Center, and I was deputy regional director in Atlanta. And in Washington as associate director, and in all of those jobs you were continually worrying about historic preservation aspects of the job, the environmental concerns, and the environmental impact, and that sort of thing. Came up here to Harpers Ferry, we just did the work. Didn't have to worry about all of the other stuff, kind of thing.
- David Wright: 02:30 And the people here were just fabulous people to work with. I mean they were very talented, and very opinionated. They knew what had to be done. They have very, very high standards, and you can see it in its evidence still in the center here. And it was fun to work with 'em, all I did was just direct what we wanted to do, and they did it.
- M. Hartley: 03:00 About how many employees were here when you were?
- David Wright: 03:04 Over 250, and then I also was asked to take over and manage the Williamsport Historic Preservation Training Center, which we did. And we were able to get that spun off as a separate unit. So it's autonomous now, and under training and so forth. I think it was about 37, 40 employees in the training center, too. So the idea be there to train people to do actual hands on historic preservation, but also to train them to be able to supervise contractors, and that sort of thing.

David Wright: 03:43 And our objective was to have 10 trainees in place all the time, and you needed the other support staff to keep them do the training for them, but also to keep the projects going we operated pretty much like a business, except we didn't have to pay taxes. But we had to raise the money, get the projects going, that sort of thing, complete 'em on time, and what would drive you nuts is that you have a snow storm or something like that. And the employees would have to be paid, but they were being paid out of projects.

M. Hartley: 04:20 I think that's-

Audio Tech: 04:22 I'm sorry.

David Wright: 04:22 That's okay, no problem.

Audio Tech: 04:22 Just push it back, it'll probably stop.

David Wright: 04:22 Okay, got it.

Audio Tech: 04:22 Right now, so.

David Wright: 04:22 Forgot my line.

M. Hartley: 04:35 Well the budget is always a big thing.

David Wright: 04:38 Oh yes, uh-huh.

M. Hartley: 04:38 And paying employees under all the unpredictable circumstances.

David Wright: 04:45 Yeah, and well I started to say, we'd have a snow storm or something. And people couldn't go to work, but we still had to pay them in the meantime. We were using project money to pay them. I got a call one time from the manager, Tom McGrath. He says, "Dave, I got a problem." I said, "What's the matter?" And he said, "We had a ditch open up here at Williamsport to do some work, and all of our cables for the power and for the computers were in the ditch." And I said, "What happened?" He said, "We got a lightning strike and knocked out every computer in the center, and everything else."

David Wright: 05:21 And he says, "I don't have the money to pay for it." And I said, "Well, we'll figure it out some way." So we were able to get him taken care of, reimbursed, and that sort of thing.

But money's always a problem, but you have to budget for it, and you have to plan for it, and you try to allow contingencies, and determine what you can do, and what you can't do, and what's liable to happen, you never know. Something like that.

- M. Hartley: 05:48 So if I can just get my time frames right. So you were the director here from?
- David Wright: 05:53 1986 'til 1997.
- M. Hartley: 06:00 Okay, and-
- David Wright: 06:01 '86, yeah.
- M. Hartley: 06:02 And so when you were here at the center, not talking about the preservation center, there were 250 employees?
- David Wright: 06:11 About 250 employees, but that center was also under this, so.
- M. Hartley: 06:14 Okay, so how many people do you think were at the center when?
- David Wright: 06:18 In total, probably 300.
- M. Hartley: 06:21 Wow. That's a lot of people.
- David Wright: 06:26 Oh yeah. As I said before, everyone one of 'em is opinionated. They know what they have to do, and they know how to do it, and that sort of thing. And you really don't tell them what to do. You make sure that they've got the projects, and make sure they got the money, and make sure they got the time, and that sort of thing. And the material, and the equipment to do that job.
- M. Hartley: 06:44 Now, did you go out to any parks for exhibit openings or visitor center openings or were you mostly just kind of manning the fort, so to speak?
- David Wright: 06:55 Well I was very fortunate in my career in the parks service. The jobs that I had was planning, design, construction, mostly. I have visited and worked in over 250 units in the National Park System. At any one time we would have 1,100 projects here in the Harpers Ferry Center. And I made it my mission to know the people in the field who we

were doing the work for, to know the regional directors, the superintendents, the chiefs of interpretation and this sort of thing. And also to make sure that the jobs were being done the way I thought that they should be.

- David Wright: 07:36 So I did a lot of visiting to a lot of the parks, and that sort of thing. And as I said, when I was working as associate director, the projects and the Harpers Ferry Center and the Denver Service Center said we had over 5,000 projects at any one time that were ongoing. And I read a book recently on chief executives, and it said that, "You have to be domain smart, and you have to know your business."
- David Wright: 08:12 And I made it my point to know what our business was. I had been a magazine editor. I had been a writer. I had worked with photographers, and that sort of thing, making movies. And so I knew the business up here, but the thing that you can't do is, you can't second guess the people who are doing the work. You've got to rely on them, 'cause you can't do it.
- M. Hartley: 08:43 Well doing your tenure here, are there any notable, I'm sure there are, but can you talk about some notable projects that the Harpers Ferry Center produced and put out there?
- David Wright: 08:55 Oh yeah, I was just looking at some of the stuff that we did the other day. We did the National Visitor's Center down in Washington for the White House. We did the Jaggar Museum out in Hawaii. We did the exhibits for the Steamtown. And those are just a few of them that we did, and plus a lot of rehabilitation of a lot of things. We did work in Yosemite, Yellowstone, Hawaii. And I had this particular job, was to celebrate, help get ready for the celebration for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and we did quite a bit of work in that job, and those jobs, that sort of thing. But there was so many of 'em, it's hard to really recall of 'em. It was fun.
- M. Hartley: 09:51 Do you have a favorite media type?
- David Wright: 09:54 Favorite media? I'm a reader, an avid reader. And I guess maybe the print medium is really what I enjoy about as much as anything. As I said outside, I get copies of the brochures every time they reprint anything, and I sit down before those go into my file, I read most of 'em. Or at least if I pull the old one out, and put the new one in the file, I'll

set the old one aside and read it when I get a chance, and that sort of thing. So yeah, I like the print medium, and it changed considerably. When I was editing a magazine, it was all cold type. When I left here, it was all electronic, digital transmission, right straight to the printer. And yeah, a completely different way of doing business, but it was fun.

- M. Hartley: 10:50 Well you and Marc both mention Vince Gleason, and it would be nice, would you mind talking a little bit about his impact that he had at the center, with regards to publications?
- David Wright: 11:08 Vince was a very, very interesting man. He was a very complex man. He was fully dedicated to design, and it was his idea to take all of the various people who were doing design, and particularly in terms of the stuff for interpretation. We did video, audiovisual, graphics and all this. And to combine them into one location where you could get a synergistic effect of using the capability of all these people together. And he was actually able to pull a lot of people, a lot of regional offices, and he set up an office in Washington DC.
- David Wright: 11:49 And I think he was probably the person who envisioned what could happen at a center like this, and he worked on Bill Everhart who worked for him. Nobody worked for Vince. I mean Vince didn't work for anybody, but he worked on Bill Everhart and Director Hartzog, and kept pushing him to try to get this kind of a facility built. And he was very instrumental in the concept, and getting it done.
- David Wright: 12:24 And then after we got here, then he was the person who put together what they call the unigrid format. Which, it's a real interesting combination of things. First of all, everyone of the brochures is laid out on a grid. The paper is all standard sized paper. It doesn't have to be precut or post cut. The Helvetica type is the standard type face, and the banners and that sort of thing, were developed in conjunction with the designer that we had contracted with. I can't remember his name right offhand.
- David Wright: 13:03 But they setup this system whereby the designers for the graphics didn't spend their time worrying about what size the page was going to be, how it was going to be laid out, and this sort of thing. We had the formats that you could do

this with, and within those formats, then they could work on what they wanted to do in terms of the graphics, how they wanted to present that, and the story that they wanted to present and that sort of thing.

- David Wright: 13:35 And that system saved the park service millions, and millions of dollars. People will never realize just how much it did save because of the standardized type, the standardized paper size, and this sort of thing. I did some figuring one time. We printed about 25 million a year, we were up sized. I understand they went up to high as 30 after I left here. I figured out how many brochures would go in a box, how many boxes go in a semi trailer, and how many semi trailers it would take.
- David Wright: 14:09 And we would have lined up semi trailers nose to tail, all the way from the Lincoln Monument to the Capitol. It's that many brochures that we printed, and of course these got distributed out to the parks. 25 million brochures is nothing compared to 300, or 400, about 350 million people visiting the parks in a years time. But the impact that he had in putting that together, and a design concept, and a system that has lasted for 30 years and is as fresh today as it was when he did it. That's amazing. Just amazing.
- M. Hartley: 14:45 Yeah I was going to, when did he actually develop the unigrid system?
- David Wright: 14:49 I think it was about 1975, if I'm not mistaken. About four years after the center was opened here. Prior to that, we had green ones, we had yellow ones, and we had brown ones. And there were three by fives, and it was a mess.
- M. Hartley: 15:12 Do you think people initially felt restricted creatively by it?
- David Wright: 15:12 Oh yeah, sure. It was very threatening. Because, I'm a designer, I can select the paper type, and I can select the color, and I can select the size and everything else. No, you can't. Here's the format. Work within the format. Do the creativity there. And the writing in these things is just absolutely phenomenal when you stop and think that you have to tell this story in a page and a half of printed material.
- David Wright: 15:40 Now somebody was asking me today, "What do you think? This will go out of style?" I don't know if it will or not, I

mean I could see the print media going into an application for iPod. I could see everyone one of our brochures as an app. You punch up Yellowstone, hey, there it is. Have it on Kindle. The people here that could work on it, and could update it, and send it in. So, who knows which way it's going. There's a lot of different technology that's out there.

M. Hartley: 16:18

Yeah. Well, before we close, could you from your perspective, were you officially the director or manager-

David Wright: 16:27

Manager-

M. Hartley: 16:28

Okay they've the titles back and forth a couple of times.

David Wright: 16:31

Hey, I don't care what they call it, just give me the money.

M. Hartley: 16:35

Well actually, I do have one question about that, before I have my closing question. I'm seeing a theme, well I talked to Marc, and talking to you. Of course their current director came from a planning side of the house. Did you see that as a theme here in the center of who's, there seemed to have been a number of directors, or managers who come from that.

David Wright: 16:58

Well Gary Cummins used to work for me when I was in Washington. And Gary was, I think he was an archeologist. And he came from a background of assistant superintendent at, I think it was Grand Canyon, that he was hired after I left. My philosophy on that is that when I was working in Denver, and when I was in the Washington office, I was convinced then that we should only have landscape architects, architects or engineers be the head of the Denver Service Center.

David Wright: 17:32

We had a gentleman out there who was probably one of the best project managers that we had. He was not an architect, and not a landscape architect. I don't think he was even an engineer, but he was a land acquisition person among other things. And he was really brilliant. He had a shot at being the director of that center. We didn't hire him, we hired an engineer. Or it was a landscape architect. That gentleman went on to become the director of National Capital Parks.

David Wright: 18:10

So he had all of the talent that was necessary to manager a facility, and that's what it takes. It doesn't take a particular skill set. It's nice to know what the people are doing that are

working for you, and you should make that your business. But it's not necessary to be in that business, is what I'm trying to say. So in answering your question, no, I don't see somebody coming out of the design profession heading up the center here.

- David Wright: 18:39 What's probably is important now is you get somebody that understands the business, that understands the budget, that understands the politics, and has a knowledge of the system of the national parks itself, including the people who are doing the managing, and know the units of the system. I mean that's important, I think. And so it's not the particular individual qualifications in terms of education, that sort of thing. It's more talent. If I were to do it, that's what I'd look for. I'd look for the talent. You can always train people to do things, but you can't always give them the talent they need to do it.
- M. Hartley: 19:20 Would you have any advice for the center for the next 40 years?
- David Wright: 19:26 Sure, but what's it worth? My thing that I tried to do here before I left, was to wire this whole center with fiber optics, and convert us from an analog to a digital base. I believe that, that base has served this center well, and I think it will serve the center well into the next 30 or 40 years, come to think, who knows where the technology is going. But whichever way it should go, I mean we should have people who were knowledgeable about it, ready for it, and not afraid of it like I am.
- M. Hartley: 20:09 Well just one last question.
- David Wright: 20:10 Yes, ma'am.
- M. Hartley: 20:12 Could you just talk about what you think the value, or the relevance of this center is within the Park Service?
- David Wright: 20:22 Yeah, as I said, you have 300,000 plus or minus visitors, to the units of the National Park System. I used to have a clock in my office, and it was one of these things that had the ball bearings on it. And every minute a ball bearing would drop down, and every five minutes some more of 'em would drop down, and every hour they'd all recycle back and start up again.

- David Wright: 20:45 And I'm sitting there one day figuring out how many minutes in a day, how many hours in a year, and this sort of thing. And it translates to roughly 500 visitors to a park some place in the United States, every minute. 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Now, when you've got that kind of people that are visiting your parks and so forth, you've got to have some way to reach them, because you can't do it with rangers, and that sort of thing.
- David Wright: 21:24 There's not enough money available, there are too many people on the road. There's too many other things that are happening. And so you've got to use the kinds of capabilities that exist, or are being developed in technology to be able to reach people. I thought great things were really great when we used to push a button, when we had, gosh I can't even remember the name of it. It was a recirculating tape that would give you a message, in an audiovisual station.
- David Wright: 21:54 That technology went out with the Ford Mustang, way back when. 8-Track, and we used to use 'em in here. We would take 8-Tracks and we'd manipulate 'em and this sort of thing. And when I was working here, I couldn't rate for the Blu-ray digital video to come out, because I knew that, that time that if they were able to use that technology they could encode more information on a disk than we were able to get with the regular encoding information we have now.
- David Wright: 22:30 And so those are the kinds of things that the center, I think, can really work on, and can get before the public the thing. Exhibits, you do an exhibit. It's good for 10 or 20 years. You got to redo it again on the thing, but you've got to be continually thinking about how the people think today. My granddaughter who's 15, is completely digitally oriented.
- David Wright: 22:57 And I was on a river one day with her, with a GPS, and I was trying to figure out how too soon to get off the river, 'cause we were going to meet my son. And she picked up the GPS after we got in the car, and she's playing with the thing, and she laid it down. And I said, "Shelby, that's not the Shenandoah River. That's San Diego. You got it there right now." "Oh, okay, no problem!" And she had it right back to where it was before.
- David Wright: 23:25 And the kids today, that come up with this digital orientation. This orientation of dealing with the technology,

they're not afraid of it. And so what the center needs to do is to have people that can stay on board with it, can get the information, and present it in such a way that it's meaningful to the people. It is important however, to remember that the parks themselves are the most important unit. You could put all kinds of information, all kinds of interpretation and everything else out there. But there's nothing that can substitute for the experience of being in that park itself.

David Wright:	24:09	We had more people hiking, camping, and riding through the woods, looking through the windshield. Whatever people do in the parks and so forth. And I love to go to places like Great Smokys, down to the shore at Hatteras, and that sort of thing. And I love to be there just to experience what's going on, and I love to watch the other people experience what's going on. And they couldn't care less whether they had a brochure, or whether it was a wayside exhibit, or it's that sort of thing. I mean, they're down there fishing, or hiking. They're doing something, so yeah the center plays a very important role, but that role is changing I think. And I think whoever's here needs to recognize that, and change with it.
M. Hartley:	24:59	Thank you so much. It's such a pleasure to meet you.
David Wright:	25:01	Thank you.
M. Hartley:	25:02	Really it is.
David Wright:	25:05	Appreciate that. Did I do okay?
Audio Tech:	25:05	Did great.
David Wright:	25:05	All right.
M. Hartley:	25:07	Now, I mean you're in the Park Serv- [END OF TAPE]