

National Park Service (NPS) History Collection

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



Linda Blaser
October 18, 2019

Interview conducted by Nancy J. Russell
Transcribed by Rev.com
Edited by Linda Blaser

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The release form for this interview is on file at the NPS History Collection.

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START OF RECORDING

Nancy Russell: 00:03 This is Nancy Russell, archivist for the National Park Service History Collection. Today's date is October 18th, 2019. And I'm here with Linda Blaser to talk about her experiences with the National Park Service and Harpers Ferry Center.

Nancy Russell: 00:21 Linda, before we talk about that, could you provide us some background about where you grew up and your education.

Linda Blaser: 00:27 Sure. Hi. Well, I grew up all over the place. I was born in Syracuse, New York, and lived there until I was eight, and then we moved to Chicago for two years, and then we moved to Maryland in 1960. So I've been living in the same county in Maryland ever since then, but even there, I moved houses quite a bit. My father worked for the government, and he just got transferred a lot, and we moved around.

Linda Blaser: 00:57 My education, initially I went to college at the University of Maryland, and majored in crafts. And then I went back to college when my children were in college and got a degree in business from University of Maryland University College (now known as University of Maryland Global Campus). As far as my education for conservation, I was hired at the Library of Congress when they had a training program in 1973. And in that program, there were three men from England, Peter Waters, Christopher Clarkson and Don Etherington, who were brought over to start the first conservation lab at the Library of Congress. And they hired

trainees. As part of our training, we had to take chemistry classes, art classes, history classes. A lot of the classes were taught by professors from George Washington University. The training program was five years long. And that's how I became a conservator.

Nancy Russell: 01:55 Okay. When you were a kid, did your family visit national parks?

Linda Blaser: 02:03 Yes, actually, we did visit parks. My dad loved a weekend drive, so we would visit all kinds of parks, state parks, local parks, any park at all. I remember going out to parks to do things like harvest mushrooms and going out to parks to just take a Sunday drive. It was always something we did. Swimming in the lakes in New York, going to Niagara Falls. And even in Chicago, we would go out to the lakes and go out to the countryside. And here in Maryland, the first thing my family did was go to every battlefield around here, because my brother and father were history buffs, and they really liked the Civil War. We also went to all the historic sites around Washington, Arlington House being one of our family favorites, because you can look down on the city of D.C. and see such a grand view. And of course, Arlington House has the Civil War tie, too, and it was a beautiful home.

Nancy Russell: 03:04 Great. Just to circle back around. You got into the training at the Library of Congress. And then what was your position after that. Was it a book conservator?

Linda Blaser: 03:17 Yes, I was a book conservator at the Library of Congress. And after I left there, and I ran my own business for 14 years. As part of that business, I taught classes in conservation and book binding at the Smithsonian for 17 years. Then I went to work at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC in 1992, and stayed there until 2003. When I left there to work at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), where I was the National Preservation Officer for Regional Records, and I stayed there for five years.

Linda Blaser: 03:59 I traveled 27 weeks every year in that NARA job, and I got rather burnt out on the travel. Although I liked the job, I was just tired of traveling. And I found this job here at Harpers Ferry Center and applied for it.

- Nancy Russell: 04:15 And can you tell us what that job title actually was, and when you started?
- Linda Blaser: 04:21 When I started here, it was Associate Manager for Conservation and Collections. And I started in 2008. March 17th, 2008, Saint Patrick's Day. And at the time I was hired, I was told I was to turn this operation from an overhead-funded unit into a unit that actually charges for their work and their service.
- Nancy Russell: 04:55 So the business plan that identified this key change in how the work was funded, that was actually created before you came on board, and you were just to implement it, or were you involved in the development of the plan?
- Linda Blaser: 05:08 I was involved in the development of the plan. The idea to do it began two associate managers before me, with Martin Burke, who suggested that this would be a key organization to turn into a profit center for the National Park Service. And I did call him and ask him how he envisioned that, but he said he didn't know, but he thought that conservation was such a popular thing that it would be easy to convert it.
- Linda Blaser: 05:40 So the process was done during an A76 initiative, where Harpers Ferry Center was asked to choose three units to go through an A76 study that would identify business changes for those units. And those three units were the IT office, publications, and of course, conservation and collections. So we went through the initial A76 study, which determined that we could go forward with a new business plan. After the A76 study, two contractors were hired to come in and help us develop that business plan.
- Linda Blaser: 06:34 So I was there from the beginning of the change process, but not during the time when the idea for new business plan was hatched. The entire staff was included in the A76 study and the business plan development. Each individual was interviewed separately a number of times. They were also brought together for group meetings, and then we'd take the information we got from the staff, go through their data and determine how to best work with that data.
- Linda Blaser: 07:00 The contractors also went independently and talked with the budget offices here in Harpers Ferry Center, and in Washington to determine where the budget stood now and how staffing would unfold under a new business plan and

how to move forward with implementation. They did some calculations of our current costs and used that information to determine how we could move towards making a profit. Their idea was to implement the new business plan slowly with a small overhead charge that would grow over time. The contractors found a way to move single-year funds across into the new fiscal year, setting up a revolving fund. During my tenure, the business plan as written by the contractors was not fully implemented.

Nancy Russell: 07:56

So when you say making a profit, do you mean actually making a profit, or just recovering costs?

Linda Blaser: 08:03

There was a recovering cost piece to it, as well as additional funds for development of the unit, equipment and staff development. In other words, if you needed to buy new equipment, you needed to send someone out to do research about new techniques. Those costs were to be included, as well, but those costs were speculated, because we didn't know for sure what those costs would be. So it wasn't really developing a profit center but sustaining an efficient and cost effective program to benefit the NPS. An important piece of the plan was its potential ability to take in money through a revolving fund and move it across fiscal years. And that revolving fund was never implemented. And that was the big problem, because if there was a deadline for the funding, then we couldn't take projects that were too long, and we needed to make sure that we could take in only enough work and to complete it within each fiscal year. Which sometimes, also left us in a quandary, because at the beginning of the fiscal year, there's no funding for conservation work, and we would sit idle. We often waited many months until a budget was passed and there was funding for conservation in the parks. And once they got the money in the park, then they'd have to spend time developing the project with us. So every year, we spent months that were not funded.

Nancy Russell: 09:25

So is that why a portion of the conservator's salaries are base-funded, is that how that evolved? Or was the intention they would always be a portion base-funded?

Linda Blaser: 09:36

The intention was that eventually, there would not be any base-funding for the conservation unit, but because of lack of a revolving fund, there was a need for conservation base funding. Technically, the base funding was 30% for each

conservator. In the beginning of each fiscal year, the budget office here at Harpers Ferry Center would decide how much of the base funding could be recovered during that fiscal year, and then reduce our base funding by that predetermined amount.

- Nancy Russell: 10:11 When you started, how many conservators did you have on staff?
- Linda Blaser: 10:23 Six.
- Nancy Russell: 10:24 Six?
- Linda Blaser: 10:24 Six, yeah. I had two conservators who were term conservators. So six plus the two. Now, their terms were dependent on specific funded projects. And once those projects were done, their terms were up. The main project was Gettysburg. Once that project was done, they were supposed to leave, but there was enough funding for additional projects beyond what the permanent staff could accomplish, so I was allowed to keep them a bit longer. And the first person to leave was Eric Schindelholz, he found another job and left us. Antje Neuman, she was able to stay with us through several projects and keep us afloat, because we had more work than we could ever manage. Once her four-year term was up, she had to leave, but I was able to back-fill her position with a lower graded conservator.
- Nancy Russell: 11:14 And so do you have a sense of what the staff, at that time, thought about this financial transition?
- Linda Blaser: 11:24 The staff wasn't gung ho, because they were afraid the parks would not like paying us money over and above their salary and benefits. That was a little bit of a problem, but not that much of a problem. The parks were actually, they understood the position we were in and what our position was because there was a lack of funding to keep this operation going, and that one way to keep us available to them, was to pay us this extra fee. The fee is known as the SERV Fund. And it wasn't a significant portion of money, honestly. In a good year, we would make \$200,000, which is a very small part of our actual base funding.
- Linda Blaser: 12:15 But I'm not sure the staff ever thought the business plan was a great idea. And maybe they do today, but I am not

here today. But the parks were accepting it. I didn't find it was a big issue with the parks.

- Nancy Russell: 12:28 Well, I think as an employee, it can be scary to go, "Oh, I'm 100% base-funded," to, "Now, I'm 30% base-funded," and what does that mean?
- Linda Blaser: 12:36 I think so. And also it meant tracking your hours, so you knew how much to charge to each specific project. And that takes time out of your day to track your hours, and it's just an annoyance. It doesn't take that long, but it is an annoyance. I think that eventually, they got over that annoyance. It was just still probably a basic fear of, am I going to make my ends meet? And it wasn't that strict, honestly. Everybody pretty much made ends meet, so it wasn't a problem. We always made our goal, every year.
- Nancy Russell: 13:13 Great. When you were here there were a couple of sort of big projects, service-wide projects that were working from a conservation standpoint. And right now, I'm sort of focusing on the conservation end, and then we can talk about the collections end.
- Linda Blaser: 13:32 Okay.
- Nancy Russell: 13:32 So your responsibilities, too. So I know one of the projects was the cold storage project.
- Linda Blaser: 13:39 Right.
- Nancy Russell: 13:40 Can you talk a little bit about what that project was and HFC's role?
- Linda Blaser: 13:45 All right. Harpers Ferry Center was awarded the opportunity to run this project that was a Washington-based project. It was funded, I think Lynn--
- Nancy Russell: 14:00 Black?
- Linda Blaser: 14:00 Yes, Lynn Black. She was the person who got the funding for that project and was very much involved the whole time. The project didn't come directly to conservation. It went to the project management staff, and Winnie Frost, who is now retired, was the project manager for that project. And there was also a project specialist, Sherry

Sturman, also assigned to the project. So the funding for the project wasn't managed here in our unit, just the staff.

- Linda Blaser: 14:29 We had two full time employees working on the project, Theresa Voellinger, who was moved out of her paper conservation lab, became the head conservator on the Cold Storage Project. And Jenny Barton, a museum technician, was also working on the project. And in addition to that staff, Harpers Ferry Center went out to the National Archives and hired Sarah Wagner, who was a photo conservator, as part time help on the project. Sarah, Theresa, and Jenny sat together and developed standards for building cold storage units for deteriorating acetate film. Acetate film develops a problem called vinegar syndrome, where the acetate film begins to leach acetic acid, causing the film to deteriorate. So our goal was to put everything in cold storage which would halt that deterioration process and make sure that the film material was still usable in the future.
- Linda Blaser: 15:32 Now, that meant building some vaults for collections that were quite large, like at the WACC in Tucson. Another one was at Springfield Armory. One in Washington, D.C. for-- I'm forgetting the names of--
- Nancy Russell: 15:53 MRCE?
- Linda Blaser: 15:54 MRCE, and then MWAC in Nebraska. And then other park units that were smaller would get freezers. Harpers Ferry Center, for instance, got freezers for their film collection. The other piece of this, besides building the unit was developing the standards for storing everything before it was put into the freezers or vaults. Which included buying boxes, folders, sleeves, etc. The team went out to the parks to teach the staff how to rehouse the film before placing it in cold storage. Wrapping the film correctly was important to prevent condensation from forming on the packaged film when you pulled those items out of the freezer to warm them up, in order for a researcher to review those films.
- Linda Blaser: 16:40 Finally, there was a little bit of a component with nitrate film, because although all the parks were asked to get rid of their nitrate film, not everyone did. And so we did some development by looking into buying freezers that could withstand an explosive fire if the nitrate film decided to

spontaneously combust. And we helped parks with issue, as well.

- Nancy Russell: 17:14 So I guess I hadn't realized that that went through project management instead of directly coming here, through you. Is that how all the projects worked at that time; they went through a project manager at IDC?
- Linda Blaser: 17:31 Well, that was how all exhibit projects happened; it went first to a project manager there, and then to us. They would do all the estimating for what the project was going to cost, how many hours you're supposed to spend on it, which was problematic, because conservators take much longer than people think they're going to take. It's much easier to build something from scratch than it is to repair or renovate something. So it was problematic for us, although not on the cold storage project or the digital imaging project, because there was just salaries and supplies and equipment for an entire year, which made it easier for us.
- Linda Blaser: 18:17 But yes, that's how funding was managed for everything that was an exhibit project--but there were small conservation only (not an exhibit) projects that would come to us directly from the park to conservation, and we could bid on those ourselves.
- Nancy Russell: 18:28 Okay. You mentioned the digital imaging project. Can you talk a little bit about that?
- Linda Blaser: 18:33 Yeah, the digital imaging project, that was ongoing when I got here. At that time, there were two photographers and one assistant who were going out to parks and taking photographs of the top 300 treasures of each park. Not, every park wasn't eligible; it was just parks that--I don't know, had a different kind of funding.
- Nancy Russell: 19:00 20% recreational fee?
- Linda Blaser: 19:01 Yeah, yeah. So if you were eligible for the 20% fee, you were eligible for this project. And the project grew when I was here. So we hired an additional photographer, an additional assistant, someone to process the images, and another person to manage the photography workflow.
- Linda Blaser: 19:34 Alice Newton was in charge of the digital imaging project staff for us. And again, Winnie Frost was the project

manager and her project specialist, Sherry Sturman tracked the money. The staff here, included Alice Newton who worked on the project from an overall standpoint, coordinating with the Project management team and hiring project staff. There was Jim Stayton, who did the processing. There was Randy Sullivan, who was managing the photography workflow and quality, so that we could get the right kind of image that would also survive over time. And then there were two photographers and two assistants.

Linda Blaser: 20:21 The photographers and assistants, they were split into teams, and each team would go out to the parks, take their images and then come back, download the images and pass them off to be processed. And this process went on for five years, as well. We tried to get an extension on this project, but we were unable to do so. Unfortunately, we took more images than could be processed. However, the processor taught the staff in the Cultural Resource Washington Office, how to process the final images. Each park got two copies of the images. Each regional office also got two copies of the images from their region, and the Washington office got two copies of everything. We did not keep a copy, here, everything went out to the parks and offices. I think it was a pretty successful project. People liked it. I wish it could've been extended, because there were parks we weren't able to get to, and I think everyone wishes it would've been extended.

Linda Blaser: 21:23 I think the problem with digital imaging is everybody thinks they can do it, but they don't know, necessarily how high the image resolution has to be for it become archival, and they lack the ability to store many images that are that size. And those are issues, if you're storing an image, information begins to drop out because digital images do degrade over time. And when they degrade, you lose information, and now your image is no longer complete. I like to describe it this way, if you're ever watching a DVD and you see little fuzzy squares come up in the picture on the screen, that's a spot where information has dropped out. So I think this explanation makes it's a little bit easier to understand what happens when information drops out of an image.

Nancy Russell: 22:00 Are there any other projects from a conservation standpoint that were going on while you were here that you want to highlight?

- Linda Blaser: 22:09 One that was always special to me is Pearl Harbor. That was a big deal for us, because we had to develop cases that were going to be installed outside, rather than inside a building. And being in the outdoors, some of the material that was going into those cases was extremely fragile and would deteriorate once subjected to the outdoor environment. So we had to develop environmentally controlled cases. Antje Neuman and of course, project management at Harpers Ferry Center were our leads on this project. The cases came from England, and Antje helped put it all together, by working with the contractor to design and test the cases. I think that was a special project, just because it's so unique in the NPS to have outdoor exhibit cases and that was one of the few exhibits that I got to visit myself. I didn't get to travel very often. And I paid the bill for that visit because, my husband and I went on vacation and saw it.
- Nancy Russell: 23:04 Okay.
- Linda Blaser: 23:05 Yeah. So we just felt lucky that we got to see the exhibit at Pearl Harbor.
- Nancy Russell: 23:08 So you didn't travel much in your official position?
- Linda Blaser: 23:12 No, compared to my last job where I traveled all the time, I only traveled a couple times a year in this job.
- Nancy Russell: 23:20 And presumably, part of that was for responsibilities related to the MMPC?
- Linda Blaser: 23:25 Right, I traveled to meet with the Museum Management Program Council, every year. And once in a blue moon, I'd get to go to a park for a project. I went out to Wilson's Creek. They were having some issues with their donors, and the park asked me to give a talk on conservation, what it involved, and how it was impacting their collection, because we were out there actively helping them with new exhibits and restoring some of their objects. So I traveled to parks for issues like that, or sometimes I would fill in when our capacity was down, and there was a project that had been promised for years and years, and it finally got funding. If such a project was presented at a time when we didn't have capacity, I would try to find time to go out and do the project myself. I went to Petersburg NB for instance and surveyed their guns. And I'm not a gun person in any

way whatsoever, but I learned a lot about the subject in a short time, and went down with the survey forms, did the survey, and eventually brought the conservation work here. So I tried to do whatever I could to help out with projects that were funded at the last minute.

- Nancy Russell: 24:32 One of the things that I think was a challenge when you were here, as a manager, as well, is enough admin support, budget support. I mean, the actual bodies to help. So you were, with all of these accounts to track--
- Linda Blaser: 24:46 Right, we had approximately 100 projects every year. And just to give you an example, each project management team and their project specialist in Harpers Ferry Center has about a dozen projects a year. So I tracked these 100 projects without the help of a project specialist, although I did have a project specialist in the past. At HFC, they also had a separate estimator, which we lacked so I also did the estimating once the project specialist left. Do you have a new person, yet? No?
- Nancy Russell: 25:10 Nope.
- Linda Blaser: 25:14 Our project specialist got promoted and transferred out to the project management unit of the center, which meant that I had to take over all of the budget information, too. So not only was I managing the projects, I was going through and determining which part of the money goes for salaries and benefits, and which part of the money should be going into the overhead and calculating that, and then actually charging the parks, transferring the money, and talking to our budget office about what I was doing and where that money was going, and making sure we met our goals every year. So it became--yeah, that was an extra burden on me. I was doing two full-time jobs at that point. I wasn't able to get any help from project management or the project specialists, because they felt they were busy enough. And then I didn't get any extra help from the budget office, either, until I announced my retirement, and they decided they would take over and do the work of our budget portion.
- Nancy Russell: 26:21 Right.
- Linda Blaser: 26:21 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

- Nancy Russell: 26:26 Just thinking about the conservation piece, was there anything else you wanted to add about the conservation program while you were here?
- Linda Blaser: 26:35 The conservation program while I was here did dwindle. I mean, we started out with a number of conservators. Some retired, and we were not able to replace them. Those retirements impacted the registrar's office, and particularly the wood shop. I promoted Theresa Voellinger into the senior paper conservator, and that took her out of the cold storage project. And again, it was difficult to replace her in that Cold Storage position, and she had to go back to that position, so I still didn't have a paper person.
- Linda Blaser: 27:16 We ended up having two large IDIQ, indefinite quantity, indefinite time period contracts that were used to get a lot of our paper conservation work done, because there was no one here to do it.
- Linda Blaser: 27:34 I think one of the things I forgot to mention early on, I knew about Harpers Ferry Center since my early career. There was a book conservator who had a contract out here, her name was Ellen McCrady. She was also the author and editor of the Abbey Newsletter. And she was telling me about the projects she'd have out here, because there was no book conservator here and she felt there was a need for such a conservator. So my goal, as a book conservator myself, was to eventually hire a book conservator for the Park Service, because we were letting all this work go to the contractors, when I knew we could do it in-house. So I did indeed hire the first book conservator for the National Park Service here at Harpers Ferry Center.
- Nancy Russell: 28:16 And that was a term position.
- Linda Blaser: 28:18 It was a term position. Is it still term?
- Nancy Russell: 28:22 Allison has been converted into the paper conservator.
- Linda Blaser: 28:26 Okay.
- Nancy Russell: 28:26 After Theresa got promoted to supervisory conservator.
- Linda Blaser: 28:30 Okay. And book conservators, by the way, can do paper conservation. Because remember, there is paper in books, and we know how to repair that, as well.

- Nancy Russell: 28:39 Yeah. And of course, she can still treat books.
- Linda Blaser: 28:41 Right, she can do both.
- Nancy Russell: 28:43 Exactly.
- Nancy Russell: 28:46 Great! So you also were the Associate Manager for Conservation and Collections.
- Linda Blaser: 28:52 And collections.
- Nancy Russell: 28:55 And so there's sort of two permanent collections here, the Commissioned Art Collection for Harpers Ferry Center and the NPS History Collection. When you came onboard, were they separate programs, and they were brought together?
- Linda Blaser: 29:11 No, when I got to Harpers Ferry Center both the Commissioned Art and the NPS History Collection were one program under the Associate Manager until the business plan was implemented. The business plan separated collections from conservation and put John Brucksch in charge of collections, and he reported directly to Don Kodak, not to me. So collections and conservation were separate for a number of years. And the reason behind that was that conservation was such a complex business operation that the business plan contractors felt one person was needed to do that job and devote their time to it. The conservation operation needed someone to solicit projects from the parks, manage the workflow and consider all the budget implications for conservation, that collections didn't have. Collections seemed to be a little more straightforward, with overhead funding and the routine of answering research requests and cataloging, et cetera.
- Nancy Russell: 30:12 So then...
- Linda Blaser: 30:13 So then John Brucksch retired, and when he retired, collections came back to me.
- Nancy Russell: 30:20 And that was, what? January 2015 he retired?
- Linda Blaser: 30:23 Yes.
- Nancy Russell: 30:23 But then the position was vacant for a year, or just about.

- Linda Blaser: 30:28 Well, his position was converted into a GS-12 archivist. Collections, when I came, had two people full-time, plus John Brucksch and a part time librarian. There was a person who worked directly with the NPS History Collection, and a person who worked with the Commissioned Art Collection. We lost the person who worked directly with the collection, and that was a GS-12 museum specialist position and we lost the part time librarian who was also a librarian for Harpers Ferry National Park. And John was never able to backfill either position. However, he did hire three students, at one point, who helped him with a collections move. We moved the library from a building on the main campus at Harpers Ferry Center to our building. And those three student positions were not backfilled when each of those people left their positions. So collections was eventually left, with just John Brucksch and Wade Myers, who was assigned to the Commissioned Art Collection.
- Linda Blaser: 31:28 So after John left, I was given one GS-12 position and that is filled with you, Nancy Russell, which has been a great hire, thanks.
- Nancy Russell: 31:40 Thank you. So I know prior to my arrival, there was an OIG audit for the collections. What was your involvement in the audit?
- Linda Blaser: 31:52 That audit happened the week I arrived.
- Nancy Russell: 31:55 Oh!
- Linda Blaser: 31:55 So I was called the day I started, and I was told the OIG is coming, surprise, tomorrow. So I didn't know why it was happening or what was going on with that. And I couldn't get any answers from the director. But I thought, "That's fine." You know what? Because every time you go through an OIG audit, you get funding to help you make improvements. And that's one of the reasons that the library moved from the main campus to this building. And at that time, a lot of materials that we consider archival were considered library material. And so they were being stored in a substandard building on the campus that had mice and mold and was difficult to condition, because it was a stone building that was very porous. And keeping the temperature and relative humidity at a constant was impossible there.

- Linda Blaser: 32:56 So we did move the library and archival collections to this building. In the process, we boxed everything and froze it, temporarily, to eradicate any mold that might be on it, and any pests that might have gotten into the boxes. After freezing, everything was brought back to this building and reconditioned it and integrated it into the collections.
- Linda Blaser: 33:16 During this move, we separated anything that was cataloged as archival and put it into its own room, and got that room conditioned 24/7 and separated the books into a different room. So that was one good thing that happened due to the OIG audit. Not only were the collections transferred here into better conditions, that building on the HFC campus was renovated, and turned into offices for the main campus staff.
- Nancy Russell: 33:46 Do you know what triggered the OIG audit?
- Linda Blaser: 33:51 I do. It was the missing badges. There were historic badges, Park Service badges, in the National Park Service History Collection, and they were missing. The LE Rangers had gone out to a home to look for some other National Park Service equipment, and during that search, they also came upon our missing badges. Not every badge that we were missing was found there, but a number of them were. And so after that happened, the LE Ranger who was investigating that incident this asked for the OIG audit. I found that out about a year after our OIG audit, that's how it-
- Nancy Russell: 34:42 That's how it began?
- Linda Blaser: 34:43 Began, yeah.
- Nancy Russell: 34:45 And so that, presumably led to a new inventory of the badges and material like that, here.
- Linda Blaser: 34:55 Yes, exactly. John Brucksch did an inventory of the badges to figure out what was missing. Sometimes it was just miscataloged, I want to say. But other times, they were actually missing. We found out that there had been some trading done that wasn't documented, and that's apparently what was going on with the person who had the badges, that the person had made a trade in good faith, and it was never documented correctly. Even so, that person, technically, according to the Museum Handbook, should

not have had those badges and should not have been an eligible person to do the trading with. But in the long run, we got the badges back, and everything worked out for us.

- Nancy Russell: 36:08 Because that OIG audit and everything happened your first week.
- Linda Blaser: 36:19 Mm-hmm (affirmative). But you know, they take forever.
- Nancy Russell: 36:22 Right. Right, right.
- Linda Blaser: 36:22 So it happened the first week, and it wasn't resolved for probably two years.
- Nancy Russell: 36:27 Okay.
- Linda Blaser: 36:27 Yeah. So it takes a long time to address the findings in an OIG report and have your responses approved. You need to complete different tasks, send reports about those tasks, be re-audited and eventually have the initial findings cleared of whatever problem(s) were identified. And also, you are provided with some funding to address the problems. So we did get some funding for the collection move and the building renovations.
- Nancy Russell: 36:52 Was the funding just to move the collection, or was there additional staff funding, or anything like that?
- Linda Blaser: 36:56 Well, there was the funding to hire the students who helped us with the move, and to do some inventories of the materials that were moved. But that was all the funding that we got. The rest of the funding went to renovating that building.
- Nancy Russell: 37:11 Oh. Which no longer had collections in it.
- Linda Blaser: 37:14 Correct.
- Nancy Russell: 37:15 Interesting. So speaking of building renovations, certainly moving over here was a big improvement. But this facility has had some challenges, it's a leased building. Do you have any background that you can provide us on some of the challenges with the building, or things like issues with the floor and those types of things?

- Linda Blaser: 37:39 Well, the building has a number of issues. Starting with the HVAC units and whether or not we can maintain the correct environment. We do have some very strict environmental standards for the building, which is great. And we're able to maintain those most of the time, but the equipment breaks down a lot. So that's part of the issues with the building - when equipment breaks down, what happens and how long does it take to address that breakdown? Another part of the problem is that this building is slab on grade, which means there is a concrete slab directly on top of dirt. Now, under that slab should be a vapor barrier, and there's not. Consequently, that causes some moisture issues. And also the drainage from the parking lot flows under the building, causing moisture issues. And rumor has it that there may be some springs under the building. There are rumors for all kinds of things. But in the collection spaces where it's colder, what was happening is that water was seeping up through the floor tile. There was floor tile in there at the time, although there isn't any now. Visible around the edges of the tiles was some black substance that was coming up, whether it was adhesive or mold; it certainly looked like mold. And sometimes, it would be purple. It wasn't always black. So sometimes it's purple. Just like mold, which comes in a variety of colors.
- Linda Blaser: 39:00 Now, none of this black and purple substance was airborne, which means there was no issue for the staff. However, that's not a good sign to see something that is potentially mold growing on the floor. So we did have the landlord come in and reseal the floors. They took up all that tile, resealed the floors, and they're no longer tiled at all. It's just concrete.
- Nancy Russell: 39:23 In?
- Linda Blaser: 39:24 In the collection spaces.
- Nancy Russell: 39:25 In the main NPS History Collection space?
- Linda Blaser: 39:29 Right.
- Nancy Russell: 39:29 That was sort of the test space.
- Linda Blaser: 39:31 That was the test space. It hasn't gone beyond that yet? No? Okay. There was at least renewal just before I retired, and I

thought they were going to follow through and complete the next space.

- Linda Blaser: 39:43 But along with taking up the tile, they found that any place where there was an expansion joint, the expansion material had deteriorated and was gone, so they filled that empty space back in, which was great. Because now, that sealed the floor better. And then every crack was also sealed with a silicone material. Hopefully, so the sealed floor can keep that collection space drier. And I never saw any new evidence of water seepage when I was here. Do you see it now?
- Nancy Russell: 40:16 January 2018 [corrected by Russell], I went in collection storage, and these little wet areas had started popping up. And they actually had an oily feel to them.
- Linda Blaser: 40:30 Oh.
- Nancy Russell: 40:31 So we're still investigating. It seemed like this last year, they didn't get worse.
- Linda Blaser: 40:37 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Nancy Russell: 40:39 And some of the other issues we had with water in the scanning room and things like that didn't get worse this year. The previous year, they were much, much worse. So, yeah. It's an ongoing mystery with the floor.
- Linda Blaser: 40:52 When the lease was up, we toured several buildings in the area. When a GSA lease expires, you're not allowed to move outside of a 50-mile radius, because staff would have to all be paid to move. But Harpers Ferry Center decided to even narrow that distance down further so that we were still within the proximity that we are now, which is Charles Town, West Virginia. We looked at about five buildings. Some of them were horrendous. Some of them would've been a shared space with moving companies or other businesses. And then there was another building that was in pretty good condition, would not have been a shared space, was high up off the ground and would not have had the water seepage problems, but somehow this original landlord was given a lease renewal.
- Nancy Russell: 41:45 Right. And so here we are.

- Linda Blaser: 41:47 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Nancy Russell: 41:54 Is there anything else that you want to talk about, in terms of collections?
- Linda Blaser: 42:00 I'm really happy I hired Nancy Russell.
- Nancy Russell: 42:03 I paid her to say that.
- Linda Blaser: 42:07 I don't think you did. I know you didn't. But I keep seeing things about progress that's being made here and I'm so pleased it is happening, because for a number of years, when I didn't have collections, I didn't see much progress. And I see that now, and I'm really pleased to see things moving along.
- Nancy Russell: 42:26 Thanks.
- Linda Blaser: 42:26 Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Nancy Russell: 42:29 Was there anything else you want to tell us about your experience at Harpers Ferry Center? We've talked about some of the challenges you faced as a manager here at HFC. Is there anything else you wanted to add to that?
- Linda Blaser: 42:51 Oh, as part of my job here at Harpers Ferry Center, I was also a member of the leadership team for Harpers Ferry Center. So I was an integral part of center-wide initiatives. I was part of a process that is now beginning a new reorganization for Harpers Ferry Center. And I've stayed in touch with that a little bit, through other managers that are still here. They've kept me informed, asked me some questions, and I've been following it along and adding some of my input, but hopefully not intruding. But I think that that was a good part of my job, because I helped set policy; but also, it integrates the unit better into the entire center so that there isn't a great divide. The two buildings are eight miles apart, which is a large chasm when you think about day-to-day operations. And many times, conservation and collections are forgotten. So it was important for me to be over there and keep us as an integral working piece of the center.
- Nancy Russell: 44:00 So when you talk about that earlier reorganization that you were involved in, can you kind of give us some specifics of

what the Center's organization was, and then how it changed?

- Linda Blaser: 44:11 Okay. Yeah, I talked about it as far as collections and conservation. But the important piece to note is that the entire Center did go through a change at that time. When I first arrived, each particular discipline had its own unit. For instance, Audiovisual; they were their own unit. And Waysides, they were their own unit. People who wrote exhibit text, were in their own division. And then, of course, the project managers were on their own. And what was happening is there weren't enough people to go around from every unit to satisfy every project. So I think project management decided that they would split their teams into regional pods. Each regional pod would have its one audio visual person, one exhibit designer, one exhibit planner, one project specialist, one project manager, etc. and be specifically working for just one region. And they would not borrow people back and forth.
- Linda Blaser: 45:36 That hasn't really worked really well, because people leave and you never know exactly how many projects a particular region's going to get. Sometimes a region doesn't really have much, and then other times, another region is completely inundated with new exhibits. And so HFC found that everyone's splintered and working for every region, no matter what; even the project managers have not been able to stay true to their assigned region. I spoke to one project manager last week who was now working in three regions. So I think that that's probably along the lines of what's going to happen in the next redevelopment, is working with those units and probably separating them again by discipline. Not sure, but I that's where I see it going.
- Nancy Russell: 46:26 So when you started at Harpers Ferry Center, do you have an estimate of how many staff, overall, were at the center?
- Linda Blaser: 46:33 I think there was approximately 130 staff members at that time. Last week, again, I was talking to another person who said at one point there were 200 staff members here. This week, there are 70. So the Center itself has really declined in staffing, as has conservation and collections. It's not unique to this unit, it's the entire Center. It has really shrunk. And that means the capacity has shrunk.

- Linda Blaser: 47:01 Part of that initial shrinkage is due to everyone thinking information's now available digitally. I can design my own exhibits, I can design my own brochures. But of course, what happens, again, is a lack of professionalism that comes from people who actually know what they're doing; like the publications staff and cartographers that work here at the unit. You can't really replicate what they do out in the park, nor can you replicate a design team who's coming in to do an exhibit who has studied what's available out there, including trends that are going on, and how best to create a video.
- Linda Blaser: 47:44 Just hiring somebody as a contractor to do it, you may not know all of the things you need to add as specifications to make sure you get the product that you want. But we have that expertise at the Center, and I think that people are recognizing that, because they see that the quality projects that we can provide from the Center are very different from park-driven projects.
- Nancy Russell: 48:09 So a trend going from a high of 200 employees down to 70, that's a significant reduction in capacity. While you were here, did you have a sense of what was driving those declines? Is it just they weren't filling positions when people retired, or was it a deliberate reduction in size, for some reason?
- Linda Blaser: 48:36 It was a deliberate reduction in size by the Washington Office because they know we're going to go through another reorganization. And they wanted to reduce the size of the staff and then once the reorganization is complete, they'll increase staffing again.
- Nancy Russell: 48:57 Okay.
- Linda Blaser: 48:59 As far as collections and conservation, the conservation is driven by how much money we can bring in to pay the base funding. Collections--
- Nancy Russell: 49:11 It's a tough one.
- Linda Blaser: 49:12 It's a tough one. It's a tough one because there's little acknowledgement about how the collections benefit Harpers Ferry Center. But believe me, the collections are part of every single exhibit that goes up throughout the

Park Service, and they're vital. They're vital to Harpers Ferry Center, as well as the Park Service.

- Linda Blaser: 49:33 This is also the most highly used collection, I believe, in the whole Park Service.
- Nancy Russell: 49:40 We get a lot of, particularly, the historic photograph collections, and the art collection, too, with requests for media and publications and those types of things. This year, our numbers have been low because we were closed for the renovation that didn't happen.
- Linda Blaser: 49:58 Well, that's easy to understand, and quite easily explained away. But other than that, I believe this is still the most heavily used collection in the Park Service, yeah.
- Nancy Russell: 50:10 Well, so what are some of the things you're most proud of from your time working for the Park Service?
- Linda Blaser: 50:18 One of the things I am proud of doing just impacts conservation. When I came here, people doing the exact same work were under different job descriptions and earning different salaries. I could see the unfairness of that. And that's something that I've always believed in, is being fair across the board. So I gathered together position descriptions from the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian, the National Archives and proved that these people working under a variety of job descriptions, should all be under one. I was able to put them on a promotional ladder. So again, I could raise them up from their lower positions to actual conservator positions with the same pay as their colleagues who were doing the same work. That's one of the things that I'm proud of.
- Nancy Russell: 51:14 That's great.
- Linda Blaser: 51:15 Yeah. And hiring you. Yeah, and I think I was also a good member of the leadership team and bringing some sanity to it, and a different perspective. Because I wasn't involved in the project management division, I could look at that division with a detached eye and offer suggestions.
- Nancy Russell: 51:41 And with your background before you came to the National Park Service.

Linda Blaser: 51:45 Right. There was that. My background, it's varied a lot because I worked privately, for instance, and worked for many museums in the Washington/Baltimore area. But beyond that, my degree is also in human resource management. So when a leadership team is talking about change management, I had a lot to offer that you don't see in the other managers here who worked their way up from within the Park Service.

Nancy Russell: 52:15 Great. Great. Well, is there anything else you want to add? Okay.

Linda Blaser: 52:21 I don't think so. Thank you.

Nancy Russell: 52:22 All right. Thank you for your time.

END OF RECORDING