

Antoinette J. Lee

Exit Interview with Barry Mackintosh

At the end of December 1999, Barry Mackintosh retired from the National Park Service after serving 17 years as bureau historian. He began his NPS career in 1965 when he was hired as a historian at Fort Caroline National Memorial in Florida. In 1968, after two years in the U.S. Army, Mr. Mackintosh began work as a historian at Booker T. Washington National Monument in Virginia. A year later, he was assigned to Fort Frederica National Monument in Georgia. Between 1970 and 1978, he worked for the History Division in Washington, DC. For four years, between 1978 and 1982, he served as regional historian in the National Capital Region of NPS. In 1982, he became bureau historian. The Library of Congress catalogue lists 13 works by Mr. Mackintosh, covering histories of the national park system and administrative histories of national parks and NPS programs. He received his B.A. degree from Tufts University and his M.A. degree from the University of Maryland. Anticipating his retirement as bureau historian, NPS historian Antoinette J. Lee interviewed Mr. Mackintosh in his office on December 20, 1999.

Photo by the author.

L: When did you decide to become a historian?

M: When I was at Tufts University, I started as an economics major. However, I had always been much more interested in history, so I changed my major. In my senior year, quite by accident, I found a brochure that described potential careers in the National Park Service in a variety of disciplines, one of which was history. I followed up on that and visited a historian who was working at Minuteman National Historical Park nearby in Lexington. I discussed with him opportunities in the National Park Service, put in my application, took the exam, and was interviewed by a historian in New York at Federal Hall. Soon after I graduated, I was offered a job at Fort Caroline National Memorial.



L: Tell us about the first few jobs you held as a historian at national park units.

M: I initially was at Fort Caroline for about a year. At the end of that year, during the Vietnam build-up, the U.S. Army summoned me and I spent two years there. The National Park Service had to offer me a job when I returned, but not necessarily at the same location. The job they offered me was at Booker T. Washington National Monument. That is where I went in early 1968.

L: Can you tell me about how you felt at that time at being assigned to an African-American historical site, when there were very few in the national park system? Not every person who studied history back then was all that familiar with African-American history.

M: I went into my assignment at Booker T. Washington National Monument with a good deal of interest and enthusiasm. I honestly did not know much about Booker T. Washington. I of course quickly read up on him and what he had done, went there, and found it a fascinating experience. While I was there, I wrote *Booker T. Washington: An Appreciation of the Man and His Times*. This was part of the National Park Service's program to produce handbooks for most parks, giving more detailed information than the free park folder.

L: At that time, did you get involved in the discussion about Washington as the leader of African Americans versus W. E. B. Du Bois?

M: That was very much a part of the interpretive program there and still is. We present Booker T. Washington for what he was and what he stood for and show why Washington took positions that he did with respect to industrial education versus more academic studies as advocated by Du Bois.

L: At the time you worked at Booker T. Washington, it was clear that most of the resources there were reconstructions. How did you feel about interpreting the site with reconstructions as the primary resources?

M: Interestingly enough, that was also true of Fort Caroline National Memorial, my first park, where the primary resource was a reconstructed fort because the original fort was presumed to have been washed away by the St. John's River centuries earlier. When I came to Booker T. Washington, I found the same thing. I was unenthusiastic about having to deal with primary features that were our creations rather than creations remaining from history. When I went to my introductory National Park Service training course in the fall of 1965, while I was at Fort Caroline, and I had to give presentations on my park's resources and history, I remember being a little embarrassed and suffering some teasing from my classmates about the fact that I was dealing with a reconstructed resource rather than a genuine one. So, there was a fairly widespread sense in the National Park Service even then that reconstructions were inferior resources. At Booker T. Washington, the primary resource was a reconstructed cabin in which Washington had allegedly been born. I acquired the prejudice and have retained this opinion since then that reconstructions are not a good approach to interpreting American history in our parks.

L: How well would the Booker T. Washington story have been interpreted at that place with nothing on the ground?

M: It could have been interpreted through more extensive museum exhibits. There was a small visitors center and museum. It could have been interpreted on the ground itself by outlining the locations of the various buildings rather than trying to recreate them. Fundamentally, it was not an ideal site for interpreting Booker T.

Washington. The National Park Service had opposed acquisition of this site back in the 1950s on the grounds that there were not sufficient remains and that it lacked the integrity that a national park system area should have. We advocated then that if there was going to be a site in the national park system commemorating Booker T. Washington, it ought to be Tuskegee Institute where he did his great life's work and where he achieved the fame that he is known for. Later, of course, we did acquire a site at Tuskegee.

L: How do you think African Americans who visit the site feel about it? Do they worry about the fact that the cabin is not authentic or do you think they are more concerned about the ideas that the site represents?

M: I suspect that the public generally is less concerned about these issues of authenticity and accuracy than are cultural resource professionals. The public does not necessarily mind or object to reconstructions as such.

L: How did you come to work at the History Division in 1970?

M: After Booker T. Washington, I went for a year to Fort Frederica National Monument in Georgia. This was the only one of the three parks I was assigned to that had genuine historic remains rather than reconstructions. I was pleased to be there, but after only a year there I was asked to come to the History Division in Washington, DC. The invitation was based largely on the research and writing I had done at Booker T. Washington, which had come to the attention of the historians in the History Division. Bob Utley was the chief historian. Russell Mortensen was then chief of the branch of park history under Bob. I was immediately under Russ. At that time, the History Division was divided into two branches—the branch of park history and the branch of historical surveys, which dealt with the National Historic Landmarks Program.

L: What was your job in the History Division?

M: The focus was on the review of National Park Service policies, the development of policies, the monitoring of parks' compliance with policies, overseeing the research activities in parks, and helping to determine what kinds of research studies the parks needed. I also responded to Congressional and public requests

for studies of potential park areas and helped to formulate NPS recommendations on proposed parks.

L: Tell us about your work at the National Capital Region for four years. Why did you move there?

M: An opportunity came up to become the regional historian at the National Capital Region. I spent a good deal of time there on helping to upgrade the National Register documentation of historic resources in the region, Section 106 compliance matters, and interpretive programs.

L: You became the bureau historian in 1982. Were you the first bureau historian?

M: I was the first person to take the title. John Luzader, who had been with the Denver Service Center, had briefly assumed this role in 1981. He was working on a project relating to the history of the Denver Service Center. He did not want to come to Washington, which the job required. So, at that point, the job was advertised and I applied and was accepted for it.

L: Who conceived of the bureau historian position?

M: I assume that Ed Bearss, who was then chief historian, had a role. Ross Holland, who was then the associate director for cultural resources management, had a role. They persuaded upper management that they needed someone who could focus on the history of the National Park Service as a bureau and the parks as parks.

L: Who invented the NPS administrative history?

M: I recall that there was an early one done as a prototype by Pete Shedd of Shiloh National Military Park in the 1950s. Instead of being a history of the Civil War battle, it was a history of how the park was created and came into being; how it was managed, developed, and interpreted. Another 1950s prototype was on the Statue of Liberty National Monument. I used that as my guide when I was asked to do an administrative history of Booker T. Washington National Monument, another project of mine while I was there.

L: Was your role as bureau historian to create standards for administrative histories and to encourage them to be written?

M: Certainly to encourage more of them to be prepared. I prepared several of my own as additional prototypes or examples or models. I contacted colleges and universities where students might have an interest in the history of the National Park Service and encouraged them to steer their research in the direction of administrative histories. I made a point of compiling a bibliography that I expanded regularly of all the histories that had been done, not just complete histories but also articles on national parks and programs.

The best administrative histories are fascinating accounts of how parks were envisioned and how they were brought into being, how they were developed, and how they have been managed. Their primary audience is park superintendents and staffs, although many others find them valuable as well. For a new superintendent, having a good history of what has gone on there is a wonderful asset because it can bring him or her up to speed in a hurry.

L: How many national park units were there before you began your employment?

M: As of January 1, 1965, there were 232 units in the national park system.

L: Today, we have 379 park units. What do the additional units during that period say about American society?

M: They reflect interests and concerns of various constituencies and interest groups. The majority are cultural or historical areas. They reflect a broadening concern for aspects of history that were not well represented in the national park system earlier on. We have more areas today that deal with African-American history, industrial history, and other topics beyond presidents and battlefields and political and military history.

L: Have most of the additions since 1966 met the standard of national significance?

M: I would say that most of them have. Some have not. This has always been a concern of mine—the criteria for additions to the national park system—since I first came to Washington.

L: Given the criteria for national significance, do you see the national park system expanding as much in the next 25 years as it has in the last 25 years?

M: The growth of the park system has always had as much to do with public and political sentiment for proposed areas as with their intrinsic merit. Some very worthy sites, like Mount Vernon, are very well cared for by others, so there is no sentiment to add these.

L: How has the work of the NPS historian changed over time from 1965 when you first entered the National Park Service to now?

M: There were more historians in the field back then who actually bore the title "historian." Many of those positions were later converted into interpretation jobs emphasizing communication more than history. That may have swung back some. There are many jobs today in parks that deal with academic-based history. I don't know that I can cite a change in direction from then. We still have historians today involved in the same range of activities that National Park Service historians were involved in then. Some deal more directly with the public; others are involved in research; some are more involved in cultural resource management activities.

L: As you anticipate leaving the NPS, do you have any advice for historians still with NPS and those who plan to enter the NPS?

M: I would hope that historians would be encouraged to continue to insist on high standards for additions to the national park system. The national park system ought to be composed of the best historic places that illustrate the topics they represent. A visit to a national park unit ought to be a superb experience for the American public. A national park unit ought to be something worth going well out of one's way to visit.

L: There are many NPS historians who are involved with our partnership programs and who feel left out of the inner circle of NPS decision-making and park culture. You've even written about these external programs.

M: I think that has always been something of a concern. I am optimistic because there is a lot more integration between partnership and internal programs than there used to be. There is much more awareness of the National Register programs in the parks and there is much less of a

gap between the natural and historical programs. All of the partnership programs are part of today's National Park Service and today's NPS goes well beyond the bounds of the national park system units.

L: You have written histories of the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Historic Landmarks Program. How did those come into your regular bureau historian role?

M: As bureau historian, I was concerned with the history of the National Park Service. It's not just the history of parks. It also includes the history of these other programs that NPS administers. I never got around to it, but the history of the external recreation programs would also fall within this realm of bureau history. That is perhaps something my successor might look into.

L: What plans do you have for your post-NPS career?

M: I recently updated the booklet called *The National Parks: Shaping the System*, which is a summary history of the growth of the national park system, but I am sure it will require additional work before it goes to press. I will be working with the Harpers Ferry staff on that. Beyond this, I have not made any firm plans at this point. I may well do something quite different. We'll have to see.

Antoinette J. Lee is a historian with the National Park Service, Office of the Assistant Director, Cultural Resources Stewardship and Partnership Programs.

The third edition of *Shaping the System* is now on the Park History web site at <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/history>>. In Part 1, Barry Mackintosh discusses the origins of the national park system and describes the complexity of the system's designations. In Part 2 he chronicles the step-by-step growth of the system from its beginnings to its 379 areas at the end of 1999. Part 3 contains maps showing the extent of the system, a listing of areas outside but affiliated with the system, a list of all National Park Service directors with their tenures, and a suggested reading list should you wish to learn more about the National Park Service's history. This third, revised edition of *Shaping the System* is currently only available on the web.

*Harry Butowsky
Historian*