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Abstract

D. Scott Hartwig, Supervisory Historian for Gettysburg National Military Park, retired in the fall of 2013. In recognition of his long service to the park and community of Gettysburg, Associate Editor Thomas Nank interviewed Mr. Hartwig concerning his personal experiences gained over three decades working at Gettysburg as well as the future of the National Park Service and the field of public history in general.

Keywords

interview, Hartwig, National Park Service, Gettysburg National Military Park, park ranger, battlefield, Civil War, Battle of Gettysburg, public history, interpretation

D. Scott Hartwig, Supervisory Historian for Gettysburg National Military Park, retired in the fall of 2013. In recognition of his long service to the park and community of Gettysburg, Associate Editor Thomas Nank interviewed Mr. Hartwig concerning his personal experiences gained over three decades working at Gettysburg as well as the future of the National Park Service and the field of public history in general.

How does a Park Ranger successfully communicate events of 150 years ago to today's college generation?

I'd say you do it the same way we've always done it, by making it relevant. If you don't establish relevancy, the events of 150 years ago ultimately are meaningless. We did student these education programs that were curriculum based, and one of the programs was Pickett's Charge. The students were placed in the role of one of Pickett's regiments, they learned something about the men, they learned what brought the war on, and what might motivate the men. They were given identities of the men, so they learned different things about the occupations of the men. During the program, you walk the students across the field, so they get the idea that a lot of guys didn't make it, some were killed or wounded or ended up missing in action. It was a group of juniors from a private school in Washington DC. They were black and white, and they were all guys from an all-boys school, and they were pretty wild. I knew enough that when you're dealing with students like that, that being a disciplinarian is never going to

works, so you have to build respect with them. So they were having fun, goofing around, and we got halfway across the field, and I stopped all of them. I said “Look, guys, quiet down for just a minute. We’re walking across this field, like 13,000 Confederate soldiers did over 100 and some years ago, you’re never going to have to do this, right? Doesn’t mean anything to you, you’re never going to have to do it. People don’t do this, line up and march across a field, face bullets and shells, right?” Now at this point their curiosity was peaked: where’s he going with this thing? So I said “There’s never going to be a cop, that gets called for a domestic dispute, and there’s somebody behind that door who’s armed, and you have to go through it. There’s never going to be a fire, where somebody’s trapped inside that house, and somebody’s got to have the balls to go up that ladder and get that person out. Never going to happen, right? The point is, what these men did, people have to do every day. They have to face the challenge that this might be the last day on earth for that guy, they have to face their fears, they’ve got to go through that veritable wall of bullets and shell fragments, and at the same time you know, we may be in another war again, you never know what’s coming down the pike. You’re not going to have to make Pickett’s Charge again, but you are going to face things in your life, that these men had to face, and find the courage to conquer it. That’s what you can learn today”. And from that point on, those kids listened to every single thing I said. And I knew a lot of them at the end of the program, were really thinking about it. Until I attempted to do something to make it relevant, they

were like, what does this mean to me, why should I care about this? Up to that point, they didn't care. But the same thing is true college students or adults, if you're not making it relevant for them, why does it matter, why should I care? So I come here to Gettysburg, there's a bunch of monuments, some guys did this or that, why should I care, why does it matter? So you have to establish some type of relevancy.

How do you inspire today's high school and college students to pursue the study of history?

I'd say you inspire them to study history by bringing history alive, and encouraging people to pursue things that interest them in history. A lot of times, people have a tendency to say there's only a certain way you can learn history. You study it, you write it, and that's the appropriate way. Some people go out and do living history, why do people do that? People experience history in different ways. That person who likes to get dressed up and portray a Civil War soldier, that may be their conduit for learning a lot more about the Civil War. When the movie "*Gettysburg*" came out, a lot of people at the park, Rangers and guides, they were really down on it, as a movie in some parts it's absolutely ridiculous. But the thing about the movie is that it really reached a huge number of people, and it was a great place to start from with visitors. Okay, so you've seen the movie, you remember such-and-such that happened in the movie, now let's talk about what really happened. People are always interested in that. You can get people charged up about history when you

start talking about people in history, rather than units and tactics and strategy and statistics and those sorts of things, they can be really interesting. But to the average person, it's generally people that draw you in and really get you going. How many people have had a "love affair" with Joshua Chamberlain, and then suddenly started reading and finding out about these other things?

As a historian, how has working for the NPS affected the way in which you approach history?

Well for one thing, as an NPS historian, you're a public historian, and when you're doing interpretation for the public, they can just get up and walk away, they're not paying to listen to you, it's free. You have to be skilled in how you present controversial material. So you're in the National Cemetery and you want to talk about what the war was about, and you've got some people on that program who are neo-Confederates. They don't think it had anything to do with slavery. Now how do you keep those people on the program? You have to make them think, because if you verbally punch them between the eyes, they're leaving because they don't want to hear to what you have to say. So as an NPS historian, you learn the fine art of finessing how you tell people things. As another example: once I was giving a Pickett's Charge walk for adults, it was a two-hour walk. The program focused on the attack, its main purpose was to talk about why did Lee make the attack, why did the attack fail, and what were the consequences of it. When we got half-way across the field, I stopped

everybody and I said “Ok, let’s talk about why these men are coming across this field, trying to kill those men, who are waiting for them, and are going to deal death to them. Why are they doing it? Let’s talk about the individual, why is he doing it? There are a multitude of reasons. They may like the uniform, they got coerced into doing it, their girlfriend wanted them to do it, they believe in what they’re fighting for, there’s all sorts of reasons they’re going in. But what is their government fighting for? If you’re a Confederate soldier, you’re fighting to set up a slave holding republic. That’s what you’re fighting for. If you’re a federal soldier, you’re fighting to preserve the Union, and by this point in the war to destroy slavery. Doesn’t matter whether you care or don’t care about those things, that’s what you’re fighting for. Now let’s move on to the attack...” So all you want to do is make people think. You don’t want to hit them over the head with stuff, because that’s the quickest way to turn them off. All I ever wanted to do in those situations is put a little something in there that got the wheels turning, and maybe cause them to question some of the things that they thought.

What part of your training or education was the most fundamental to your job? Why was it so meaningful and how did it shape your work?

I don’t want to be uncharitable to the Park Service, but it does not have a training program to prepare somebody to work in a Civil War park. In the early years, they did do a pretty good job of training people to be interpreters, training people to interpret: what does interpretation mean, what are

the fundamentals of it? They had these different courses all interpreters were supposed to go through. But I would say for myself, personally, two things in college that prepared me the best for working at Gettysburg. One was that I took three credit courses from E. B. Long, the research editor for Bruce Catton. The last course I took from him, was a course that he designed for me and one other guy, which was an unbelievable experience, and really fantastic. I wish I could have done more with him, but I learned a lot from him about doing good Civil War history. The second thing was we had a professor, at the University of Wyoming named Myron Sutton who was an NPS employee, and the NPS didn't know what to do with him, because he was towards the end of his career. He had been involved in setting up some parks, like Mt. Cook in New Zealand, Tiger Tops in Nepal, and he was an amazing photographer, he and his wife. He did these three screen slide presentations, and taught several courses that talked about the national parks, the NPS, and interpretation. I learned a lot from him about what interpretation really was. Other history courses I took were also very helpful but Long was really good, combined with this strong background in interpretation and how the Park Service worked before I even got to Gettysburg really helped me a lot.

What has been the most significant change in the NPS since you first started?

Probably the most significant change in the NPS since I started is doing more with less. If the Park

Service was a business, its buying power has been severely eroded. In 1980, they were talking about it then, “we’re going to have to do more with less.” But the “more with less” in 1980 and 2014 are like night and day. To give you an example of how that works: In 1991 the Visitor Center at Gettysburg, and we were really impressed, got 465,000 visitors which was a huge number. It gets about 1.2 million visitors a year now. We have no more buying power, no more staff, no more anything. In fact, overall in the park we have less. So think about any business that tripled the amount of customers that doesn’t make itself any bigger, it just asks its people to do more stuff. That’s been a big issue. The second thing I’d say, and this is more specific to the Civil War parks and Gettysburg, is the broadening of interpretation. I wouldn’t say that that’s universal, because what happens at one park doesn’t necessarily happen at another. I always tell people: think of the parks as kind of like a Navy: they all fly the same flag, they all have different captains, and they all have different ways of doing things. Some people don’t like what this park is doing, so they do their own thing. We all know about the “Rally on the High Ground” and the broadening of interpretation, some parks gave it a little bit of lip service but don’t do anything towards it. And some parks have been diminished so much they hardly do any interpretation at all. Gettysburg is lucky, we do a lot of interpretation. Fredericksburg does a lot of interpretation. Some parks just don’t have the people to do it. They’re more traditional: put a Park Ranger behind a desk, he or she smiles and greets people and tells them where the restrooms are and when the film starts and maybe

give a little 5-minute introductory talk. Or they have a guy in a uniform that talks about the Civil War soldier, but doesn't really get into motivations or any of that stuff. Its very uneven but, in general, we are much better off than we were 30 years ago, a lot better off.

What do you see as the NPS's greatest challenge?

Getting quality people. Its a challenge, a real challenge. In the government today, particularly in the Park Service, the process for applying is really difficult, complicated and confusing. Our personnel office that has to rate and rank applications when they come in are really overworked, those places took a lot of hits in personnel. They contract out a lot of that stuff. If you want to take care of the parks, you gotta get the best people. You really want to work with the best people. A lot of the best people get demoralized by the process and they get a job somewhere else. Sometimes its people who simply can't get a job anywhere else, or its someone who just stays at it for so long they end up getting the job, but they're not the best person. For managers, I would say, its continuing to find resources to continue to do your job, and protect, preserve and interpret your park. That is going to be a really big challenge. We're lucky here at Gettysburg because we have the Gettysburg Foundation. If we didn't have that, it would be Little Big Horn time, or at least we'd be on the road there! [laughter].

What are your thoughts about the relationship between GNMP, CWI and history students at Gettysburg College? Are there ways you think those relationships could be improved?

I think they've been really good. We've had great luck with our work study students, every single person we've had from the College has been fantastic. One of them is a permanent Ranger now, Chris Gwinn. What I think makes [the relationships] the best is when there's open communications between the Institute and whoever happens to be in the position as the Chief of Interpretation at Gettysburg, that they're both working together to find things that will benefit students. At the same time, the park is making people aware of things that are going on at the Institute that will benefit people who work at the park, and also visitors that come to the park. We've had a number of people who were work study students or were volunteers for us or interns in the summertime who have been associated with the Civil War Institute. In fact, I'll say that one of the best things that's happened between the park and the Institute is Pete Carmichael. When Pete got here, and he is, among the academics I've known over the years, he is unusual to me in how hard he works for his students, to try to give them real-world experiences that will make them more competitive for jobs. One of the things he set up is the intern interview process, where all these people from Appomattox and Fredericksburg and Manassas and almost all the other parks come here to interview interns, and I'll tell you what, its a fantastic thing that

he did. Previous to that, we didn't get a lot of interns from Gettysburg College, they just didn't apply for internships.

What is one thing about the battle here that still puzzles you?

There's a lot of things you'd love to know the answer to. Did Captain Johnson really get on to Little Round Top? Just where did Captain Johnson go? What did Lee tell him, and what did Lee tell General Longstreet when Johnson was going to accompany Longstreet's march? As I like to point out to people, think about this: he tells Longstreet that Captain Johnson will be your guide. Johnson is not there. He tells Johnson that I want you to accompany Longstreet's command. Those are two entirely different things! Particularly in the Army of Northern Virginia they did things like that all the time. Of course you'd love to know all the things that went back and forth between Sickles and Meade. I think its fairly well established that Sickles, if orders had any meaning, did in fact have orders [to stay where he was]. The Confederate army, because they lose the battle, is actually far less well documented than the Union army is. So where is Lee throughout much of July 2nd? Why does Lee think that a reconaissance that was performed at 5:00 am is still viable almost 12 hours later, that nothing has changed? That seems kind of unusual to me. I'd certainly love to know what Lee was thinking, and I have a lot of speculations, but I'd like to know what was he thinking when he thought Pickett's Charge was a good idea. What was running

through his head? What was his thought process that caused him to arrive at that decision.

If you had one career “do-over”, what would you do differently?

There’s probably a lot of things I’d do differently! [laughter]. At Gettysburg it was pretty great, it was the ideal situation. I had a boss [recently retired park Superintendent Bob Kirby] who worked to get you the resources you needed to get the work done, and gave you the freedom to be creative, and trusted you, put implicit trust in what you did. And that is rare, really rare, to find somebody who will do that. We had this opportunity to do all these really cool things at the park. Maybe I would have done some of them earlier, I don’t know. I honestly can’t think of anything at this point that I would say I’m definitely going to do that differently.

What are you most proud of accomplishing in your career?

Several things, one would be the museum. That was a huge amount of work and I think that it came out fantastically. I think the building works really, really well. The interpretive program we developed I think is outstanding. It really reaches a lot of different aspects of the war, there’s a lot of variety to it. Economically, I have no doubt at all, it has benefited this community a great deal because there’s a reason to come here to the park. There are these public programs you can go on. Think about the anniversary battle walks that we did, when you have

400-500 people show up: they all have to go eat somewhere. They stay at hotels. Now imagine we don't do that. Imagine we never started it, never did it and nobody shows up. Those are the sorts of intangible benefits; everybody loves to bitch about the government, but hey, you know what? The government working with private industry can be a real catalyst. I'm proud of all the seminars that we did, and the books that we published from those seminars, they were a lot of work but they were definitely worth all the work we put into them. My point always was, you can give the greatest talk in the world but it's like building this really cool campfire: everybody sits around it and later has great memories of the campfire, but they can't put everything back together the way it was again. But when you write something, you've got it. It's there. You can go back to it over and over again. I can't tell you how many times, when I've wrote something for one of our seminars, and now it's about 6 or 7 years later, and I'm thinking such-and-such happened, it went this way or that way, and I go back to the seminar paper that I wrote, and I'm like "I'm completely wrong" because I've just forgotten! But the ability to go back to some resource that you or somebody else has created, it really is pretty neat, I'm really proud of that. I'm proud of all the work that everyone at the park did, but I'm also proud of the little contribution I made to the landscape rehabilitation of the battlefield.

If you had one more year left before you retired, what would you try to accomplish at GNMP?

I think probably what I would have done if I had not retired is I would have tried to become Chief of Interpretation at Gettysburg. I would have used my time there to allow some of our really creative people to build upon what we have already done. Because, what I'd be looking for is, you're going to retire, this isn't about you, it's about the park and those people that come after you. Helping those people build the foundation for taking the park further into the 21st century, building that solid foundation for the park and empowering those people who are the creative ones and the hard workers. I would have done collaborations with the Gettysburg Foundation. I would have tried to redo a thing we had done before, where we brought Dr. Carmichael in to do a workshop with people from all the Civil War parks in the North Atlantic region. I'd do something like that again with academics, because I think that academics can learn some things from public historians, but public historians can learn a lot from academics because the difference between the two of us is we are doing research for the next program coming up, but academics are on the cutting edge of research. So that we can learn from the research they are doing and apply it to our public history. I would have tried to build a greater bridge between those two worlds, the academic world and the public history world because I think there's a lot to be gained by doing that. I would have used the Gettysburg Foundation however it could be used to help facilitate that. The other thing I would have

definitely done would be to work with the Foundation to see if we could get research grants. Years ago when Eastern National used to run our bookstore, they had a program where you could apply for research grants. We got a few of them, and we sent researchers out to state and county historical societies, college repositories, and we got some unbelievable Gettysburg primary source material, just phenomenal stuff. In some places we just scratched the surface because there's a ton of it out there that you've got to have time and money to go and get, and you have to look at it, you just can't write them to send you such-and-such. That would have been another thing to work on. The reality would have been I wouldn't have gotten any of that done in a year! [laughter]. In five years maybe I would have gotten some of it done...

What is your most vivid memory of the Gettysburg 150th commemoration events at the park this summer?

Three things just stick in my mind. One is the Last March of the Iron Brigade. The whole event was an incredible experience unlike anything I've ever had at the park, and I've had some really cool experiences at the park. When we got up near the North Carolina monument, I was at the very front of the column and I looked back and the tail end of the marchers was still at the Emmitsburg Road. It was amazing, and how fantastic the visitors were in keeping together and forming up. It was really pretty magical. The living history group that we had [the Liberty Rifles], that's a great example. Take the

Liberty Rifles out: not the same program. I don't care how good Dan Welch and I could have been, it would not have been the same program. Those guys *made* that program, they gave it an energy it wouldn't have been there otherwise. The second thing is of course would have been Pickett's Charge. It was a giant risk and a gamble. We did a lot of planning on it to organize the visitors so that the visitors would maneuver to the operational plan I drew up for everybody. We were following the same tactical plan that the Confederates did in the attack. Fry's brigade is the unit of direction, so that Garnett guided on that, Kemper guided on Garnett, and Armistead stayed 200 yards behind Kemper. And everything worked out, it was amazing. I expected we might get about 10,000 people on it, we ended up with about 40,000. I had a lot of worries about it. I was concerned that (1) it could get out of control, and (2) it could become a Confederate love fest, which I did not want it to be. But I was willing to run the risk that there would be a lot of Confederate battle flags out there, and I know that's controversial for the NPS to be holding an event, with all these Confederate flags flying around and celebrating the Confederacy 150 years afterwards. That's not really what we should be doing. The other part of me was, I'm trusting that people are going to be respectful. We tried to set up an event where you could walk across that field with a Confederate flag if you want, you have a right to fly any flag you want really out there, but there were a lot of people I knew who had ancestors, or they were from states that these men had come from, and all they wanted to do was to walk across that ground at that time. They didn't

want to celebrate the Confederate cause, they just wanted to remember their ancestors and what they had gone through, and I wanted those people to have that opportunity just as I wanted people on Cemetery Ridge to have the opportunity to be present and an active participant, so that everyone involved was a participant rather than an onlooker. And that worked, it ended up working out. We had some little incidents with some folks who thought the Civil War was still going on [laughter]. And the last thing is, I don't know why this sticks in my mind: Todd Bolton was in charge of all the interpretive programs out in the field. Ernie Price was my deputy, because Ernie is going to be doing the 150th anniversary at Appomattox Court House. So the three of us on July 2nd are trying to get out and visit all of the key moment stations. It was almost impossible, there were people everywhere, all over the place. But the great thing was, everywhere you went everybody was in such a good mood, and it was humid as hell and threatening rain, but everybody was having such a good time. I think part of it was we tried to plan so that there was always stuff for people to be doing, something coming up or something happening. You weren't just wandering around, you had to get to the next station or the next hike or there was something you wanted to get to. And we got up to Little Round Top finally, I took us about an hour and a half to get up there, and we pulled up in the car, and I see Jim Flook, one of our seasonal Rangers, and he's just drenched in sweat with the biggest smile on his face, he's just beaming. He said "Allison did the first talk, and she had 200 people." That was 9:00 in the morning! Just the look of excitement on Jim's face

and all the visitors we ran into, it was just an amazing event. So those things always leap into my mind when I think of the 150th.

When the Civil War sesquicentennial celebrations are over in 2015, what comes next for Civil War historians?

I think if we've done our job the events that we had should get another generation excited about visiting Civil War battlefields, and understanding how the Civil War relates to their life. They become the next generation, that then brings their kids. So that in a way, you always have to have something for a generation that energizes people and reconnects them with their history. We are clearly a country that just keeps moving on, we march on and we don't look back, generally, and we often times don't like to be reminded of where we came from because of assorted parts of our past. Past 2015, what you have to do is to stay creative. You have to continue to do some of the traditional things you've always done that have connected with the visiting public, but you also have to find ways that connect with a public that maybe doesn't see the relevancy in a battle walk, but they would like to know what happened on the 2nd day of the battle. To me, the future is (and I know the Park Service is looking at wayside exhibits and things like that) for the Park Service to recruit a new batch of interpreters who can do the interpretation on the field, but have the skills to carry the battlefield out through blogs, through Facebook, through apps, that enable people anywhere in the world to connect with us, because that's the way you're going to get

people really energized about wanting to come here one day. You're always having to go back and make history interesting and relevant. When we started our blog at the park, some people said it's got to be really short, like a paragraph. I said that's absolutely wrong. For some blogs, you're right. But for this kind of blog if it doesn't have something of substance, they're not going to read it. The person that's going to come to this blog is interested, not just cruising around looking at stuff, and it's got to be worth their time. You have to tell the stories about this park that are the stories you couldn't tell on an interpretive program, or stories that move people to say "you know what? We need to go back down to Gettysburg this summer." That's what you're trying to do through social media, those sorts of things. Some people who think in traditional terms, look at a Ranger sitting at a computer and say, get that guy out behind the desk. So you get that well-trained Ranger out at a desk (which a volunteer could do), and he sees maybe 30, 40, 60 people on a two-hour shift. However, if they stayed at that computer, and completed that blog post or Facebook post, that just reached 25,000 people. Which was the more efficient use of their time? That's how I think you have to look at it.

What is next for Scott Hartwig?

Working on volume two of the Antietam campaign. I have a couple of ideas for other books after that once I finish it. I'd like to be able to do some writing. I love writing, I like the research, and it was getting to the point in my later years at the park

where I didn't have time to write.

Any advice for the next generation of historians?

Don't get so mired down in the academia, or the bureaucracy if you're in the public history world, where you forget why we're doing this. Why are we interested in history? Why do we want to learn about history, why do we want to share what we know with people? It comes back again to making it relevant and telling those stories that move people. There are all sorts of academics that have criticized Bruce Catton and Stephen Ambrose and James McPherson over the years because they reach a broad audience, but I would say: how do you do really good history and reach a broad audience? That's your challenge. If you're only preaching to a tiny group of people, it really doesn't matter anymore, they won't find any value in it. If people don't visit the parks and find value in the parks, we're failing. Do academic history, but also make history relevant for the broader masses out there that don't really understand it.