

NCPH Working Group
After the Administrative History: What Next?

“Who are our participants?”

Gib Backlund

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Bio: Have worked with the National Park Service since 1975, wandered from coast to coast, left to right, and back toward the middle. Started out with an undergrad degree in English and Humanities, worked interpretation at a historic site, historical park, national park, then moved into resource management and law enforcement, before returning to a generalist position in a relatively small park. Attended grad school here, and wrote a thesis about Mission 66 at Stones River.

Cameron Binkley

US Army, Defense Language Institute

I would like to participate in the working group panel on National Park Service Administrative History. I can offer unique insight into several questions posed by this group, and a couple that are not. I spent seven years writing NPS administrative histories as an NPS research historian and successfully completed six book-length administrative historical projects, three as sole author, two as principal investigator and author and one as editor and manager. As an Army historian since 2007, I have continued institutional historical writing and have completed several command histories of the organization I now work for—the Defense Language Institute, as well as a popular pictorial history of foreign language education within the U.S. Armed Forces, a work currently being used to craft a national level museum display in the Pentagon. Please see my resume for specific titles. I can thus make credible observations comparing similarities and differences between these two agencies in their approach to the structure and use of institutional historical writing. As to what makes such work useful, what tends to give it insight, and what may make it controversial I have found often to be the same. I would say off-hand that the key to successful institutional historical writing is the willingness to investigate problems found (using a variety of resources that I can detail and that yes are transitioning and that yes I do have thoughts about), judiciousness in balancing the sensitivities of park or other local administrators and staff with their need to have objective review of past performance, doggedness in the quest for answers, and determined zeal to defend the principles of historical practice in the face of bureaucratic resistance, inertia, or incompetence, which many historians will likely encounter over the course of a career writing about the institutions that have probably funded their work. My own work has led me to some observations on the effective

deployment and management of institutional history and historians, which I would be happy to further develop. I will probably present a case statement focused upon two of my published NPS reports, one which details the history of NPS archeology in the southeast and which was drafted during a period when NPS archeology was under a grave threat. The other is a history of Cape Hatteras National Seashore conceptualized as a story of park origins and early development and that dates from the Great Depression into the park service historical period called Mission 66. Both of these studies offer plentiful ideas for teasing out from individual administrative histories useful findings to help grasp a more complete understanding of NPS history and the trends and ideas that characterize it through the various decades.

Ann McCleary

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Case statement: This working group developed out of multiple conversations that I had been having with Bethany Serafine, with whom I worked for the CARL administrative history. I felt pretty much all alone in the process, except for some VERY useful conversations with Anne Whisnant about what an administrative history should be and should do. I wish I had participated in a working group like this before I wrote that history, or even early in the cycle of writing it! But also, I was inspired by a conversation that I had with Don Wollenhaupt at SERO who commented to me that he would love to develop a plan for how to effectively use administrative histories in developing interpretive programs at the park. And then as an academic historian, I am also interested in how all of these administrative histories can be viewed together to tell a larger story of the NPS. I am eager to talk more about these topics with all of you.

Bio: I teach public history at the University of West Georgia, where I also direct the Museum Studies program. I've been involved in the public history field in some way for 40 years now, but it was just in the last five years that I began to work more closely with the NPS, especially through the Southeast Regional Office. I became interested in administrative histories when I began work on one for the Carl Sandburg Home NHS. The park was created in 1968, and I enjoyed exploring how the park developed through a period of years which I had personally experienced in the museum/public history field. But also, I became concerned about how to make the administrative histories useful, so they would not just sit on a shelf and never be utilized. I learned a lot through this first experience, and am eager to talk more about how this field has evolved.

Janet McDonnell

Bio: Independent Historian. I have written and published administrative history for four very different federal agencies. During my years as NPS bureau historian I reviewed both scopes of work for a number of park administrative histories and reviewed a number of park administrative histories in final draft and provided input. I also conducted a major revision of the NPS guidelines for administrative history and used a number of agency and park administrative histories in my own research.

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Ed Roach

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Case Statement: After many years of unsuccessfully competing, Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park has finally gained funding to conduct an administrative history. The two-year project is scheduled to be funded in fiscal years 2016 and 2017. I wish to use this working group to raise issues connected with many of the bullet points listed in the call for discussants – just what makes a good administrative history, and how can Dayton ensure that its final product is one? How can we make it more accessible to the public? How can I best collaborate with the contract historian hired for the project? Are there any servicewide trends in the production of administrative histories that we should follow? Are there lessons learned from previous administrative history projects and from how other parks and entities have used their histories that Dayton would be wise to follow – or to ignore?

Paul Sadin

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Case Statement: When I began using administrative histories for background research I quickly learned that they varied widely in what they offered historians. The lesser ones were nuts-and-bolts accountings of the operations at each park (or USACE district) over time. The better ones, I found, were useful not only in helping me grasp the inner workings of a particular park, but also in understanding what makes the National Park Service “tick.” These well contextualized histories served as case studies of a sort, revealing the broader issues NPS officials faced throughout the park system during the time periods of the park’s existence. When I gained the opportunity to write or collaborate on writing administrative histories (for the NPS and the U.S. Army), I approached the projects with an eye to that type of complexity. I will be interested in discussing why there continues to be such great variance in the approaches to writing administrative histories (“just the facts” vs. contextualized narratives), how NPS, USFS, USACE or other

agency administrators make use these histories today, and whether administrative histories will continue to serve the same purpose (or be replaced by another type of historical writing?) in the future.

Bio:

For the past 12 years I have worked as a consulting/public historian at the Seattle office of Historical Research Associates, Inc. (HRA). My particular areas of expertise here include oral history, litigation support, and writing historical narratives for federal agencies. I've authored *Managing a Land in Motion: An Administrative History of Point Reyes National Seashore* (2007) and co-authored "An Administrative History of Lava Beds National Monument," both completed under contract for the NPS. I'm co-author of an administrative history written under contract for the U.S. Corps of Engineers: *Privatizing Military Family Housing: A History of the US Army's Residential Communities Initiative, 1995–2010* (2012), which won the National Council on Public History's 2014 Excellence in Consulting Award. I've also served as co-author or contributing author for several other historical studies for the National Park Service and US Army Corps of Engineers. I have an MA in history (University of Idaho), an MSW, and also spent eleven summers serving as a NPS seasonal interpretive ranger.

Liz Sargeant

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Case statement: As landscape history gains recognition for supporting a holistic understanding of the evolution of place, increasing attention is being paid to the role of this emerging field in park studies. Although at first glance the administrative history does not appear to require the services of a landscape historian, in fact the degree to which park management and maintenance involves the treatment of historic cultural landscape resources suggests that a great deal of the focus of park administration involves landscape issues. I would be interested in working with a group to discuss ideas about improving the usefulness of these documents, and the important role that I believe landscape historians might be able to play in these documents in the future.

Bio: Since 1991, I have worked as a historical landscape architect on cultural landscape projects for a range of private and public clients around the United States. Because I hold degrees in both Landscape Architecture and American history, I sometimes play a dual role as historical landscape architect and landscape historian. Although my work tends to focus around Cultural Landscape Reports, Cultural Landscape Inventories, and Preservation Master Plans, I have enjoyed working more recently on several Administrative History, Historic Resource Study, and National Register and National Historic Landmark nomination projects. Because I have benefited several times from the availability of a thorough and detailed Administrative History when

preparing Cultural Landscape Reports, I remain mindful of what I found useful while developing my own administrative history projects.

Bethany Serafine
Historian, NPS Southeast Regional Office

Case Statement: During my time as a staff historian at the Southeast Regional Office, I have served as the project manager for 5 Administrative Histories. Each project is/was very different from the last in ways both good and bad. One project, which for now shall remain nameless, was not published. The park superintendent (who has since retired) did not want to include any information about bad relationships between the NPS and the park's neighbors. This park was created in the early 20th century when NPS was, at times, being rather forceful with its acquisition of property for parks. In other projects, the park staff had a clear idea of what kind of history they wanted for their park, which did not always allow for thoughtful analysis on the part of the author. This issue goes back to the idea of "what makes an administrative history useful?," and how do we reconcile that between parks and the public historians who are writing them (in the Southeast Region all Admin Histories are currently being completed through contract or cooperative agreement). Also, how can an Administrative History be of interest to the public if they are so focused only on events and not linking NPS to the overall history of the US? In SER we have proposed the idea of creating an "Interpretive Guide" that would include a compelling story from the Administrative History that parks could have available to the public as a rack card or part of their website.

Bio: Since 2006 I have worked in the Southeast Regional Office of the NPS as a Historian. My work involves a wide variety of Cultural Resource Management documents including Administrative Histories. During my time in this office I have been the project manager for five Administrative Histories. Each of those projects has had very different issues and/or obstacles to work through to meet both the park's needs as well as public history best practices. I also work with National Register of Historic Places nominations, Historic Resource Studies, and the Heritage Documentation Program.

Angela R. Sirna
Provost Dissertation Writing Fellow
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Department of History
Ph.D. Candidate in Public History

Case statement: The NPS does a much better job at looking its own history compared to other agencies. However, from my vantage point, I don't think that administrative histories have been well funded the past few years. In fact, none were funded in the National Capital Region last year. While talking to historians in that region, they intimated that superintendents were not interested in them because they were expensive and not widely used. I was surprised by their comments. As a graduate student that studies the history of the NPS, park histories are useful lenses to interrogate larger historical issues. As someone that worked for the agency, I also see them as critical to understanding current park issues in relevancy, diversity, citizenships, broadening narratives, more inclusive storytelling, and answering compliance questions. After that conversation, I began thinking of ways to make administrative histories more relevant, accessible, or even approachable to park managers, non-historians, and academics. If selected for this working group, I'd like the group to challenge the traditional medium of the administrative history and brainstorm ways to rebrand it as a critical guide for engaging the public.

Bio: Angela Sirna is a doctoral candidate in public history at Middle Tennessee State University. She has previously worked as a cultural resource specialist at C&O Canal National Historical Park (2009-2011) and Catocin Mountain Park (2012). Last year, she completed her doctoral residency at Catocin and wrote a special resource study on human conservation programs at the park during the twentieth century. She now has a dissertation writing fellowship for her project, "Re-Creating Appalachia: Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, 1922-1974." After graduation in May 2015, she has a postdoctoral fellowship to write the administrative history of Stones River National Battlefield with Dr. Rebecca Conard. Angela currently serves on NCPH's New Professional and Graduate Student committee and the Society for History in the Federal Government's membership committee.

John Sprinkle
Historian, NPS Washington Office

Case statement: As the current NPS Bureau Historian, I responsible for the agency's administrative history program. We are presently reviewing the guidance for conducting these studies and look forward to incorporating the results of this working group in the final document.

Bio: Ph.D. in Colonial American history from the College of William and Mary. Spent 10 years as a private sector consultant with a couple of environmental and historic preservation firms. Has served for 16 years with the National Park Service: first as the head of the National Historic Landmark program; then as the Deputy Director of the Federal Preservation Institute, and

currently as the Bureau Historian. Author of: *Crafting Preservation Criteria: The National Register of Historic Places and American Historic Preservation*.

Anne Whisnant

Anne Mitchell Whisnant, Ph.D.

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Statement: As the chair of the team that wrote *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* and a co-author of the 2007 De Soto National Memorial Administrative History, I have been impressed with both the great potential value of administrative histories and with the National Park Service's almost willful insistence upon ignoring their insights. Indeed, these thoughts formed the core of Finding #9 of *Imperiled Promise* (Stewardship and Interpretation of Agency History), which enjoined NPS to become a more energetic steward and interpreter of its own past.

Well-crafted, up-to-date, analytical administrative histories can, I believe, be lynchpins in such an undertaking. They are tools for improved management AND bridges to the more self-reflexive interpretive posture that many within the public history community (the *Imperiled Promise* team included) have been urging parks and historic sites to adopt. Yet NPS sites (with a few exceptions) seem to relish their role as (apparently) transparent containers for *other* histories and have resisted the impulse to incorporate agency or site histories into interpretation. Intra-agency barriers between cultural resources and interpretation, meanwhile, have conspired to leave quality administrative histories rotting on shelves. I have personally experienced the "check-the-box" mentality that can greet the completion of the administrative history -- which is seen as the end of a process rather than the beginning of a conversation.

But at a time of dwindling public support for the beleaguered parks, a crisis of relevancy at many, and changing audiences and visitor needs, greater attention to agency and site culture and history may be a matter of survival for the parks. To face its second century, NPS can no longer afford to be a transparent box. It cannot -- and should not -- claim to be free of the social forces and power politics that are always at work in the rest of society, and it should face the fact that some of the forces that created and supported the system (uncritical American patriotism, "great white men" meta-narratives of history, auto tourism) were very much relics of the 20th century.

More attention to crafting high-quality, up-to-date administrative histories written with an eye to informing both management and interpretation can help the parks in at least three ways, I think.

First, such studies can identify opportunities to invite park and site visitors to look "behind the curtain" of sites (as a recent History@Work post series has discussed) to see how history is done and how and why interpretations change over time -- a more active form of engaging visitors. Second, such studies can identify biases and exclusivity that may inhere in a site's history and turn up new stories that may not have been well told, assisting with the process of re-imagining sites for more diverse 21st century audiences. And finally, intentional reflection upon sites' histories and conflicts in the past can invite visitors to understand the management challenges that sites and the NPS as a whole face now. Understanding these challenges can, I hope, induce visitors to embrace more actively their own role (including their political role) in shaping the park system of the future.

As my co-authors and I argued in *Imperiled Promise* Finding #9 (Stewardship and Interpretation of Agency History), the NPS will "be a better steward and interpreter of the nation's historic resources and a better partner with the public when it can more effectively steward and interpret its own past." A concerted effort to improve on this front could easily begin with a more energetic focus on the NPS's administrative history program. Such a focus, we noted, could be especially appropriate as NPS approaches its 100th birthday in 2016.

Bio: Anne Mitchell Whisnant is Deputy Secretary of the Faculty and Adjunct Associate Professor of History and American Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill. Since finishing her Ph.D. in history at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1997, she has pursued an "Alt-Ac" (short for "alternate academic") career in academic administration, first at Duke and since 2006 at UNC. For a decade, she has frequently written and spoken about non-faculty career paths for Ph.D.s. Presently, with a colleague, she is [co-convenor of two groups](#) on campus focused on building community and improving the integration of UNC's "alt-ac" professionals into the campus's scholarly workforce.

Meanwhile, Anne's ongoing history teaching, research, consulting, and writing focus on public history, digital history, and the history of the U.S. National Parks. In 2006, UNC Press published her book, *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History*. Anne has also been the co-principal historian (with David Whisnant) on several National Park Service projects including [an administrative history of De Soto National Memorial](#) (FL) and a Historic Resource Study of Cape Lookout National Seashore (NC). Most recently, Anne chaired a task force commissioned by the Organization of American Historians and the National Park Service to study the state of historical practice within the Park Service. Its award-winning report, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*, is catalyzing change in the NPS. At UNC, Anne teaches Introduction to Public History and serves as adviser for [Driving Through Time: The Digital Blue Ridge Parkway](#), a digital history collection being developed collaboratively with the UNC Libraries. She's on Twitter @amwhisnant.

Joan Zenzen
Independent Historian

Case statement: I have been grappling with each of the questions raised in the description for this working group. I have written four admin histories for the National Park Service, plus I have written admin histories for specific programs for the Department of Energy and National Institute for Standards and Technology. I am working on an admin history and a special history study for two more parks now. Admin histories as a form have shifted back and forth over time, with NPS wanting sometimes a critical review of a park's history (my Manassas book does that), to a history that puts any critiques in a separate section outside the narrative (as I did in my Fredericksburg history) to a history that is simply a compendium of "facts" (what I am grappling with now with my Voyageurs history). Some park superintendents desperately want these histories done (as in Fort Stanwix) and some see the histories as obligatory to get what they really want, usually to have a General Management Plan funded (what happened with my Minute Man history). I wish that all of my park histories (and the ones for DOE and NIST) were used for what I think they should be used for--as management tools for the park, region, and national offices. That is how I want to write them, and I try to write them that way unless a park makes clear that approach is not acceptable.

Bio: I have a PhD in American Studies from U of Maryland College Park. My dissertation looked at promotional images of national parks 1864-1972. I have written books/manuscripts of the above parks, plus I helped write a history of Production Reactors with Rodney Carlisle (Johns Hopkins Press) and the NIST history was about the Automated Manufacturing Research Facility. I wrote for DOE histories of nuclear waste disposal at Hanford and Los Alamos. I have worked as an independent public historian since 1998, mainly writing admin histories for NPS. I attend every NCPH conference, usually giving a talk or chairing a session. I also attend various other conferences and give presentations--most recently at the American West Center's 50th anniversary conference at U of Utah last month. I am also copyeditor for H@W and chair of the NCPH Nominating Committee. joanz10@verizon.net

Martha E. Wiley
Historian, Cumberland Gap NHP

Bio: I have an undergraduate degree in History from Emory University and a Masters in Historic Preservation from the University of Georgia. I've worked as the park historian here at Cumberland Gap since 2008 and before that I worked at Historic Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta and the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum in Tennessee. I am a big proponent of making history accessible and user-friendly, and recently published an Images of America book on our park that uses historic photos to tell our stories, and am active on our social media pages as well.