

Courier

The National Park Service Newsletter

Vol. 3, No. 10

Washington, D.C.

September 1980

Harpers Ferry Center: shaping the visitor experience



Main building at Harpers Ferry Center, W. Va.

By Clare Ralston
Office of Public Affairs, WASO

The Harpers Ferry Center is situated in a small town rich in history and scenic beauty—Harpers Ferry, W. Va. Here nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers, 70 miles from Washington, D.C., publications, exhibits, audiovisual programs and museum curatorial services are planned, designed and developed for all units of the National Park System.

The Harpers Ferry Center (HFC) is involved in giving essential information in the most interesting way possible to visitors. Telling the story . . . whetting the appetite for more knowledge . . . this is the goal of those specialists who conceive the ideas and develop them for use in visitor centers throughout the System.

Until 1970, the functions that are now performed at Harpers Ferry were scattered—and limited. In establishing the Center, two essential objectives were met. According to Alumnus Bill Everhart, an NPS philosopher and interpretive enthusiast, "One of our objectives was to bring in some really professional 'talents' to head up and staff the media

division of publications, museum services and audiovisual production; the other was to bring all these men and women together so that they might share their creative energy at a specially designed plant in an esthetic environment."

Under the leadership of Center Director Marc Sagan, the HFC staff works with the parks to plan and produce interpretive developments and materials for each park. The 225 employees of the Center are responsible for the enhancement of the visitor's experience in a park, as are park historians and naturalists.

The 10-year-old Harpers Ferry Center functions are organized into seven divisions to provide program materials for park interpretive programs. They are: Interpretive Planning, Exhibits, Publications, Audiovisual, Reference Services, Museum Services, and Administration.

In a way, the Harpers Ferry Center is a publishing house, a museum conservation laboratory, a film production outfit, an exhibit production company and a consulting firm—all in the same location under unified management. The National Park Service is its only client.

A stunning variety of talented experts is found here: sculptors, cabinetmakers, curators, historians, mapmakers, motion



HFC Director Marc Sagan.

picture producers, exhibit planners, museum conservators, secretaries, graphic designers, sound specialists, and others.

The main building—there are 13 in the plant—is one of particular note. Designer Ulrich Franzen makes the most of a spectacular view of the Shenandoah River winding its way through the mountain. Three large skylights on the second floor offer energy saving light for the designers and artists.

(Continued on page 2.)

Interpretive planning

Through the creative talents of staff members who are masters of the media, park information is synthesized into the interpretive planning process. A plan is carefully developed for each project by a special team headed by an interpretive planner who often has had former experience as a park interpreter. A planning team includes the park exchange that goes on between the park and the interpretive specialists during study and evaluation for each project. A planning team includes the park interpreter or superintendent, and an interpretive planner, an exhibit planner, a publications specialist, an AV producer, and other specialists, as needed, go to the park for on-site research and inspiration.

Interpretive planners confer at length with the park staff, make observations, and consult with HFC media specialists. After considering all available information, the interpretive planner writes an interpretive prospectus, which is a "recipe" for a well organized, balanced, interpretive program for that specific area. This document spells out detailed plans for interpreting various facets of the park story, and provides a basic concept so that the story fits together as a unified theme.

Audiovisual

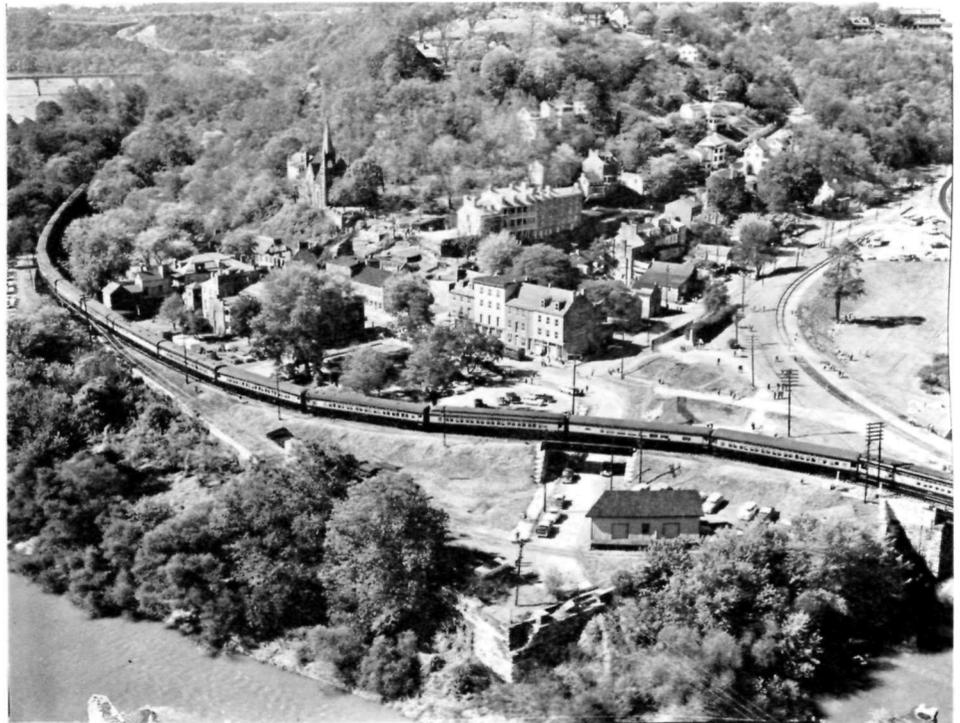
National parks are scenic, beautiful, even majestic. The parks also are visually exciting. Try to imagine a better place to film a motion picture!

The Audiovisual Division of the Center does this and lots more! They produce, photograph and record sound for movies as well as slide-tape shows, videotape programs, television programs and other audiovisual programs. These are shown in visitor centers and are sometimes circulated to schools, libraries and elsewhere for education and entertainment.

Under the direction of AV chief, Bernie Seabrooks, there are five "producers" one of whom will participate in interpretative planning efforts. The AV division provides visual production both still and motion pictures; audio production for recording, editing, mixing and producing all sound for the division; equipment services designs, installation and maintenance on equipment used to show AV productions throughout the field.

Publications

The Publication Division work is significant; often visitors to national parks see these pamphlets and folders before they see the parks. As the oldest element of the interpretative effort, this



Harpers Ferry village, W. Va. (ca. 1959)



(On left) Motion Picture Producer Tom Kleiman with Tom Gray, chief, Visual Production, at Sequoia-Kings Canyon NPs, Calif.



(On right) Chief of Audio Production Blair Hubbard recording a musician/visitor in the High Sierra, Calif.



Tom Gray, chief, Branch of Visual Production, prepares for a day of photographing at Sequoia-Kings Canyon NPs, Calif.



An array of NPS publications are produced at the Harpers Ferry Center, W. Va.

Charlie Shepherd, a natural history conservator, on the job.



Dave Nathanson, chief, Branch of Reference Services.



office has been functioning since 1911.

Folders contain the basic park information serving as a general guide to the park. Handbooks are designed to provide more detail to the park story.

There has been a concerted effort in recent years to design all folders, maps, and other printed material into a design format that is readily identifiable as belonging to the National Park Service—giving a continuity throughout all publications with an established “family resemblance.”

Reference services

The three branches of Reference Services provide a variety of services to the Center and to the field. Library and Archival Services are a reference support to the Center and the Park Service as a whole. The Library focuses its collections on the National Park Service, its history and its parks. Information is available to the media and for planning divisions of the Center. The archives contains books, original manuscripts, correspondence and oral history tapes and artifacts associated with national parks and its people since its early beginning.

The Branch of Graphics Research searches and acquires photographs for exhibits, publications and AV presentations, and maintains a picture library.

The Historic Furnishing Branch researches, plans and writes reports and documented papers on furnishings for historic structures in the Park System. Furnishing plans for houses, schools, ships, churches, frontier forts, shops, taverns, public buildings and more—all based on documented data. They include floor coverings, window-hangings, eating and cooking utensils, tools, books, pictures and lighting fixtures—every detail to conform to the appropriate period.

Museum services

This division of HFC has highly specialized expertise in caring for historical artifacts, paintings, paper, artillery, guns, cloth, textiles, furniture—innumerable types of priceless items in the NPS exhibit collection.

The staff preserves, advises and consults park staffs. They write and distribute “conserve-o-grams.” These are reminders to check collections for insect damage, mildew, surface soil and other damages. A two-part curatorial course for NPS personnel is offered by Museum Services. It is the training and education center for NPS.

The Branch of Conservation Laboratories holds a unique array of talented conservation experts. These

(Continued on page 4.)

specialists have laboratories set up at the Center to restore historic items that have been damaged or neglected. There are conservators trained in repairing and preserving oil paintings, paper (old photos, documents, wallpaper), ceramics, textiles (historical clothing), furniture, metals and excavated materials. Each specialty has a lab with its own tools and needs. Many visitors to HFC find this an especially fascinating part of their tour.

Exhibits

Exhibits in the National Park Service visitor centers are an important part of the educational experience of any park. Planning, designing and producing these exhibits (both indoor and outdoor) are the work of this division. Their domain covers one of the most extensive arrays of exhibits in existence. This group has the responsibility for maintaining exhibits, as well as planning and building them throughout the System.

The Division of Exhibits includes three branches: exhibit planning and design, exhibit production and wayside exhibits.

The Branch of Planning and Design is responsible for the concepts and ideas that result in detailed plans for the indoor exhibits. They produce blueprints and models which determine exactly how the exhibit will be constructed. They work with the architects so that exhibits are an integral part of the buildings that house them. They design the exhibits so that the audiovisual production units are a part of the museum experience.

The Branch of Exhibit Production takes the exhibit plans and makes them come alive. To a visitor at Harpers Ferry Center, Exhibit Production might well be the most popular spot. There, one could find silkscreening, woodcarving, plexiglass sculpting, painting, and many other artistic renderings in the production area.

The Branch of Wayside Exhibits provides outdoor exhibits that give visitors information that they might not have the opportunity to know otherwise. Most of us have benefited from their exhibits at overlooks, pull-offs, on trails and in shelters. These are located at areas of historical interest or at natural features.

Summing up

Harpers Ferry Center settled in an area of quiet and scenic beauty is a place where artists and organizers can settle down to work with ideas that have been born in the parks. They can turn the creative energy that starts in the parks into reality. Many of these realities are things we see every day.

Bill Von Allmen, a visual information specialist.



Susan Munro, a conservator who specializes in restoring paper.



Ronnie Dunmire, an exhibit specialist.



Dave McClean, an exhibit planner.



Visitors at a wayside exhibit in Harpers Ferry NHP, W. Va.

