

‘I’ve always had a plan’

**Ranger Rebecca Harriett:
An interview with Lu Ann Jones**

A native of eastern North Carolina, Rebecca Harriett discovered early on that she was a “green blood.” Between 1978 and 2009, she moved through a series of National Park Service positions, from seasonal ranger to superintendent, by planning methodically and taking advantage of unanticipated opportunities. During interviews for the ANPR Oral History Project, Harriett described how she acquired a variety of skills, negotiated the challenges of dual careers, built relationships with staff and community members, and wrestled with interpretive issues. Along the way she developed a talent for resilience.

HARRIETT: As early as fourth or fifth grade, [my parents] would say, “What do you want for your birthday?” and I’d want to go to a historic site. I loved to go to places that I hadn’t been before. When I would go to places like Colonial [National Park], I’d see the people in the green and gray and I thought, man, they have a really cool job! They get to be outdoors, they get to do history. So I wanted to be a ranger from a very early age.

I was a park ranger groupie. I’d go on the tours, hang around them, ask them lots of questions. After everybody left, I’d go, “How did you get your job?”

Most of the ones I had talked to were

always very encouraging. I remember in one particular case, there was a ranger at the visitor center at Big Meadows in Shenandoah. I went up to him and said, “I want to be a park ranger.”

He looked at me, and he told me, “You can’t be a park ranger because you’re a girl.”

I remember thinking, I’ll show you! (laughter) You’re a ranger, and if you can do it, I know I can be a ranger. How dare you! But I wasn’t discouraged. In fact, if anything, it made me want it even more — because I didn’t think in terms of male/female. I just knew that it looked like a job that I wanted to do.

Harriett joined the Park Service in 1978 as a seasonal ranger at Cape Lookout National Seashore in North Carolina, a place where she felt a deep sense of belonging. Nonetheless, she knew that one way to move up was to move around. Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Site in Alaska was the location of her next seasonal position. She also visited Klondike’s Seattle Unit and learned that there was a permanent park guide opening there. “This was that opening I’d been looking for,” she said. Two-and-a-half years later, Harriett returned to Cape Lookout as a backcountry ranger. While there she earned a law enforcement commission and married Rob Lamar, a fellow ranger.

JONES: At some point did you begin to have a plan about what you were going to be working toward?

HARRIETT: I can’t remember the exact moment because the first thing was to get in the uniform as a seasonal. (laughs) Second was to get on permanent. Then it was to get as broad a skill base as I could. Every place that I went, you just learn something new. One big thing I learned is you just need to be open to those opportunities and take advantage of them

when they present themselves. Sometime at Cape Lookout I made a conscious decision that I wanted to be a chief ranger, chief of interpretation, and eventually a superintendent. In my mind that seemed to be the natural progression.

I've always had a plan. I've always had multiple plans. I had plans A, B, C, D, all the way to Z. If this doesn't work, then I go here.

For about five years Harriett served as lead ranger and chief ranger at George Washington Carver National Monument in Missouri. Her husband worked at a park nearby. When they decided to seek jobs in the eastern United States, Harriett accepted a position as site manager at Friendship Hill National Historic Site in Pennsylvania, and her husband declined a Park Service job in order to complete graduate school. A new unit, Friendship Hill gave Harriett a chance to "build something from the ground up."

JONES: What do you think your strengths were at that point?

HARRIETT: I felt that I was grounded in a lot of the technical aspects of the different jobs. I felt very confident about operations; I can run a park. I can provide excellent services to the visitors. I can protect the resources. I tried to always be a supportive supervisor. A lot of people had provided me with a lot of opportunities; I wanted to pay that forward to others. I always wanted to be a team player.

After I'd been at Friendship Hill four years, I thought, okay, I'm ready to make that next leap.

Harriett's first superintendency was at Booker T. Washington National Monument in western Virginia.

JONES: What were some of the management challenges that you had there?

HARRIETT: It was a small park. It had gone through about 16 superintendents in a very short period of time. It was a demoralized staff. They felt like they were that stepping-stone park. I don't think it was until I bought land and we built a house that they realized maybe she is going to stay longer than one year.

Interpreting slavery was a challenge. You can't talk about Booker T. Washington's childhood without talking about slavery. However, it's an uncomfortable topic, and



April 12, 1986: Wedding day for Rebecca Harriett and Rob Lamar at Cape Lookout National Seashore in North Carolina.

there was reluctance on the part of the interpretive staff to deal with slavery, especially in an area that still is fighting the Civil War. It's easier to talk about making a basket than it is to talk about being enslaved. I said, "We can still do those arts and crafts things, but you can't not mention that Booker T. Washington was born a slave and it affected his philosophy of education." There were still concerns from the staff about interpreting slavery and being controversial.

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I understood where they were coming from. I was going on a home tour sponsored by the local historical association. I'll never forget a woman who was taking tickets at one of the plantation homes. She says, "You're the new superintendent over at Booker T., aren't you?"

"Yes, I am." I said, "I'm real happy to be here."

"Oh," she says, "I thought you'd be black."

"Well," I said, "this is American history."

She says, "Why do you all harp about him being a slave?"

"Well," I said, "because he was."

So that just showed me that the interpreters who were from the area were going to need some support and training to feel more confident about interpreting the topic of slavery.

Training was key. We sent staff to Williamsburg because they had a wonderful program on interpreting slavery. There are certainly folks — both black and white — that would start these tours and would leave because of the content. I would tell the interpreters, "That's okay. That's their choice. We still have a responsibility to tell the story. You just can't say, 'Booker was a slave,' and go on from that. Because it was at the very core of why he did what he did when he became an educator."

As superintendent of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in West Virginia since in 2009, Harriett has commemorated two important anniversaries: the Civil War Sesquicentennial and the Park Service Centennial. When she thinks about the Centennial theme, she sees her career as a full circle.

HARRIETT: "Find Your Park." Cape Lookout, that's my national park, my first park. My husband and I met there and we got married there. When I was a seasonal there, I remember riding up the beach with two rangers in this old rickety pickup truck. I remember looking into the marsh and seeing the church steeple on Portsmouth Island. I just felt like I was home, like this is where I'm supposed to be. I thought, if I ever get married, I'm getting married in that church. Six years later it turned out that I did do that. I still go back and feel that that's where I belong.

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