An Interview with Justin P. Ebersole

Justin P. Ebersole is an archeological technician with the National Park Service (NPS) in the Washington, DC, capital area. He graduated from Boston University and worked as an archeologist in the private sector before his service in the U.S. military from 2005 to 2011. He then joined the NPS, worked at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park until 2014, and later obtained his current position at the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park. He has steadily expanded his project skills, working at excavation, the writing of historic structures reports, production of land surveys, interpretation of data, the drawing of plans and maps, and the cataloging of thousands of artifacts. He has also contributed articles and reports on these projects to several journals.

Interview by Benjamin Guterman

Justin P. Ebersole

What do you think originally drew you to archeological work, and how did you first get started in the field?

My interest in archeology began in my youth and was encouraged and inspired by several experiences. Among them was the fact that, being a resident of Maryland, I was able to visit many historical sites as well as museums. I also benefited from reading many books on world archeology. As I explored ancient cultures described in those volumes I realized that the Mayan civilization fascinated me the most. This drove me towards applying to universities that had archeology programs with a focus on the Maya. My first real field experience was in 1999 when I went to Belize as part of a semester-long field school through Boston University.

What were some of your first work assignments at NPS park projects, and some of the skills required?

My first, and perhaps most significant, NPS project was the Lower Armory Grounds street excavation at Harpers Ferry NHP. During that project I assisted the park archeologist, Darlene Hassler, with investigating both the historic street associated with the second national armory for the United States, which operated from 1799 to 1861, and the prehistoric layers beneath it. We excavated two 10- by 10-foot trenches down to 10 feet. So basic excavation skills, such as interpreting soil stratigraphy as one digs with shovels and trowels, were integral. These skills were further augmented with drafting and photography. I also quickly became familiar with federal regulations and National Park Service policies and computer programs as they relate to archeology and cultural resource stewardship, a facet of archeology that I had little experience with prior to my employment at Harpers Ferry. I learned this by being heavily involved with minor archeological clearance work required by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended.

What do you feel were your most important contributions at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park?

Harpers Ferry NHP has an impressive history of archeological excellence spanning nearly sixty years, and so having an impact there was important to me especially since I was the junior member of the program. Fortunately, my drafting skills proved to be one key way to assist the park. The plan and profile views that I produced of one of the historic armory’s tailrace tunnels are a prime example. Those drawings represent original documentation and they are accurate and lasting data that the park can use for research, management, and interpretation. Similarly, I produced detailed drawings of a historic cistern discovered by accident in the park and, on a smaller scale, many drawings of artifacts for publications.

I also coauthored two reports on archeology at the park with Darlene Hassler, the park’s archeologist. One report focuses on the Lower Armory Grounds project, the other on a phase I survey of the Murphy Farm at Harpers Ferry.

You’ve written that excavation at the Harpers Ferry armory has taught us much about that site’s technological evolution over time in the antebellum period. How is that so?

The Armory was the subject of two separate archeological projects. The first series of excavations uncovered portions of two buildings: the Smith and Forging Shop and Warehouse. The second project focused on the Armory street since it was thought that it could reveal buried utilities associated with the facility’s operation and potentially have acted as a protective cover for what were hoped to be undisturbed strata beneath it.

Between the two, investigators were able to track some of the evolving construction at the Armory and uncover portions of the innovative infrastructure. Perhaps the most exciting discovery was the unique downdraft system used at the Smith and Forging Shop. It enabled many forges to operate simultaneously by drawing the exhaust down below the floor and over to a single, massive 90-ft.-tall smokestack. Elsewhere, an investigation within a tailrace tunnel below the Armory led to a better understanding of how the entire facility evolved. Tailraces are essentially channels, either open or enclosed, that direct water away from waterwheels, which were used to power the machinery that the Armory relied upon. While tailraces in and of themselves are neither unique nor rare, the one at Harpers Ferry proved enlightening because it revealed eight separate construction phases. These phases indicate the staggering extent of growth the facility experienced as its superintendents reorganized it to meet the demands of the U.S. government for small arms production and technological advances from flintlock muskets to percussion models. More importantly, mapping and recognizing the phases within the tunnel gave investigators a way to actually document changes to the facility that were either not recorded historically or were, in fact, documented but lacked known physical proof on the ground.
Beyond the armory, has NPS work in the Harpers Ferry region advanced our knowledge of other historical events and figures there, such as John Brown?

Many private researchers utilize the park annually as they investigate the various aspects of the park. So the park benefits from external interests. Internally, NPS employees have continued to research Harpers Ferry with regards to John Brown and the town’s role during the Civil War. For example, the agency’s regional historian, Dean Herrin, investigated the cupola and bell associated with the original Armory’s Guard and Fire Engine House, better known as John Brown’s Fort, and whether those features were present the day of the raid. The park also continues to pursue an interest in improving our understanding of Storer College, an African American school started in 1867. It played a significant role during the Niagara Movement. This movement was a precursor to the NAACP. Lastly, archeological work has long been conducted on Virginius Island. Located on the Shenandoah River side of town, the island was the site of Hall’s Rifle Works. John Hall was an innovator and key figure in the creation of interchangeable parts, which he exemplified in his breechloading rifle.

At the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park, what are the preservation needs and goals?

At 184.5 miles in length and containing approximately 1,300 structures across 20,000 acres of land, the C&O Canal has many responsibilities and preservation needs. Our goals are always to preserve and protect the resource while enabling the public to visit and enjoy the historical and natural heritage contained within our boundaries. Currently, the park is engaged in preparing for a diverse number of major projects. These include a rebuild of Lock 3 in Georgetown, a rehabilitation of the Conococheague Aqueduct in Williamsport, MD, to be the only watered aqueduct in the United States, and a rehabilitation of Swains Lockhouse (#21) near Potomac, MD. The latter project is important because it will be included as part of a program called the Canal Quarters, which enables visitors to experience life in a lockhouse by renting it for overnight stays. This program is operated by the C&O Canal Trust, our nonprofit partner. Lastly, we face a perpetual need of maintaining the park’s historic culverts. Without them, minor tributaries passing beneath the canal can generate catastrophic breeches when culverts clog or fail.

What have been your roles and most difficult tasks on these projects?

My role at C&O Canal NHP is typically to offer archeological assistance when projects involve ground disturbance. I ensure that no culturally sensitive contexts, such as buried foundations, will be harmed by our efforts. Additionally, I provide guidance to the park for ensuring that our projects are compliant with the National Historic Preservation Act and associated policies. This is often a dynamic process that can drastically effect the course of projects as we try to find ways to best preserve and protect the unique heritage within the park. Really, the most difficult part of the job is trying to responsibly manage my portion of these multiple projects simultaneously while still performing my regular duties, such as managing the park’s museum program.

Thinking about the work of NPS historians, how do your duties and efforts intersect with theirs?

At the most basic level, the work of previous historians has established the baseline understanding of the history of our park. Most of that work was conducted in the 1960s through 1970s. While not infallible, it is solid work that we strive to continually update and correct as new research and resources emerge. I use that data to inform my efforts at interpreting the archeological record at the canal. It has also been the case, however, that archeology informs and even corrects what was historically thought to be accurate. So we are in a constant dialogue. We benefit from the fact that we interact with National Park Service regional historians, citizen researchers who take an interest in the park, and C&O Canal NHP staff who are subject-matter experts on various attributes of the park. The end goal of these efforts is to arrive at the most accurate understanding of the past, which we can then present to the public.

Generally, what two or three archeological duties do you enjoy the most?

One of my favorite duties is engaging the public, whether it be via a formal presentation or a casual chat with a curious visitor who stops to see what task I am working on. Not only is it our responsibility to interact with the public, but it is the best way to educate people about archeology, history, and the importance of protecting our shared heritage through proper stewardship and public involvement. The other pleasurable aspect of my job is being able to conduct annual inspections of archeological sites to ensure that they are stable and have not been effected by natural or human threats. I am responsible for monitoring nearly 300 known sites. These inspections inform management decisions about the appropriate level of care for these finite resources.
Could you explain the general requirements under Section 106 and a bit about how you’ve been involved fulfilling those requirements?

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, is a way of formalizing how federal agencies’ undertakings are evaluated and how the effects of those undertakings are mitigated when such actions involve cultural resources contained within their legislative boundaries. It acts in conjunction many other laws, regulations, and policies, but basically is a means of determining if an action will effect a cultural resource, such as a historic building or landscape, that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places or eligible to be listed. It also allows the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the State Historic Preservation Officer, the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, and other groups with vested interests the opportunity to comment and provide guidance. It is this dialogue that moves projects in the right direction such that all interests are entertained and an appropriate course of action is carried out. We use it for each project at the park level to ensure compliance that moves projects in the right direction such that all interests are entertained and an appropriate course of action is carried out. My role as a 106 Coordinator is to advise park management on how with regulations and to allow for transparency of our actions. My role as a 106 Coordinator is to advise park management on how to proceed for their actions to be compliant. As an archeologist, I am also a member of the interdisciplinary team that

In your work of excavating, cataloging, and caring for artifacts, what range of objects have you seen?

I have been fortunate to experience everything from ceremonial ceramic vessels in Guatemala to school children’s slate pencils recovered from buried historic streets in Harpers Ferry. There really is no end to the possibilities for what one might encounter. In addition, I am fortunate to be responsible for museum collections that contain both excavated and donated objects. At the C&O Canal, for example, our collections contain everything from original theolodites used by the Canal Company, to gold specimens associated with the Maryland Gold Mine at Great Falls, to prehistoric lithics and ceramics. We basically have at least 9,000 years of history represented in our collection.

How has technology changed your work in recent years?

As technology continues to advance and innovations abound, I find that my ability to research, document, and archive materials becomes easier. For example, our park project involving the documentation of five historic structures was made exponentially easier by the fact that many deeds and property plats have been digitized and made searchable online thereby eliminating time-consuming travel. It is amazing to locate deeds from the 1700s without venturing to a courthouse or archive. Similarly, digital photography, Global Positioning Systems, and Geographic Information Systems have enabled fast and accurate documentation of cultural resources in the field. This is very beneficial for conducting inspections of resources for mandated annual NPS reports or when recording damage that could be associated with criminal acts within park boundaries. Lastly, we utilize a number of computer programs and online databases that are specific to the NPS and have become an integral way that we conduct business and manage our nation’s cultural and natural heritage.

You have also volunteered at several non-NPS archaeological projects. What have you gained from those experiences?

The non-NPS projects really established the foundation for my knowledge and skill set and have enabled me to excel at my current work. By participating in archeological investigations involving large-scale architecture and spatially distant sites, I am better capable of handling my duties, such as mapping, excavating, and interpreting complex stratigraphy, in the National Park Service. For example, my experience mapping caves in Belize was directly applicable to the tailrace tunnel project at Harpers Ferry. Similarly, in Guatemala I learned to delineate construction phases within Mayan temple mounds. This, again, was applied to the tailrace project. That same project in Guatemala taught me to use GPS to locate new sites. I still rely on GPS to locate and document sites within the park for monitoring. Ultimately, all of these projects have enhanced my leadership skills, my ability to effectively work with teams, and my fortitude when it comes to enduring diverse environmental conditions in the course of getting the job done properly.

Includes historical architects, historians, landscape architects, and many others who jointly review and provide guidance to ensure proper stewardship of the resource.