The History Professional

An Interview with Kris Kirby

Kris Kirby is the Superintendent of Manhattan Project National Historical Park, which was established in November 2015, and she has served in that position since October 16, 2016. Kirby previously worked as the Chief of Commercial Services at Lake Mead National Recreation Area, and the Chief of Business & Revenue Management at Yosemite National Park. She obtained her B.A. in Political Science from the Metropolitan State University of Denver, and her Masters of Public Administration from the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

Interview by Thomas Faith

How did you get your start at the National Park Service, and what were your initial assignments?

My first position in the National Park Service (NPS) was as a Concessions Management Assistant at Lake Mead National Recreation Area (Lake Mead NRA) about a year after graduating from college. In this role, I provided administrative support to the Lake Mead NRA concessions management team responsible for oversight of a $40 million concession program focused mostly on marina operations providing hospitality and recreation services to the park’s 7 million annual visitors.

What are your current duties?

My current duties as Superintendent of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park (Manhattan Project NHP) are somewhat unique from other NPS units as the park is managed in partnership with the Department of Energy (DOE) and is located in three very geographically dispersed locations: Hanford, Washington; Los Alamos, New Mexico; and Oak Ridge, Tennessee. My duties include responsibility for fostering and maintaining the NPS relationship with DOE and to begin to implement the park’s first Strategic Plan, scheduled for completion in the next few months. Since the park is relatively new, we are also in the early stages of developing funding, programming, and staffing strategies in order to build a more robust presence at each location.

How have you been able to apply your experiences as chief of Business & Revenue Management at Yosemite National Park to your current assignment?

My previous position managing the Business and Revenue program at Yosemite National Park, as well as my role in concessions management at Lake Mead NRA and Glacier National Park, required me to foster and maintain effective relationships with many external entities. To be successful I had to collaborate with numerous stakeholders, other federal agencies, and local communities. This experience serves me well in my new position as part of the success of the Manhattan Project NHP has been the incredible support of the communities, who all have deep connections to the story based on their modern origins in the Manhattan Project. Our visitor centers and associated activities are located within these communities and the park’s success is dependent on a healthy dialogue and good relationship with them.

What are some challenges you face as superintendent that are unique to Manhattan Project National Historical Park?

As previously noted, much of the uniqueness of this park is that it’s located in three states and the NPS is partnered with DOE in the administration and management of the park. While the geography definitely creates logistical challenges, working with another federal agency is a privilege and is one of the reasons I was interested in the job. I’m a student of political science and public administration and I’ve always had an interest in government and its responsibility and subsequent benefits to our society. This position allows me to further explore that connection and provides great opportunities to learn about and build a relationship with another federal agency and to partner with local governments in each community.

Manhattan Project NHP is comprised of three sites distributed across three different states: Hanford, WA; Los Alamos, NM; and Oak Ridge, TN. Are there other historical parks in the National Park System with similar geographic spread?

There are a number of other historical parks in the National Park System that are geographically dispersed, a few examples include Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park with units in Alaska and Washington, Nez Perce National Historical Park with locations in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington, and World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument with units in Alaska, California and Hawaii. In addition, many of the national trails managed by the NPS travel through multiple states, extend hundreds of miles and cross many jurisdictional boundaries.

How does your park’s partnership with the Department of Energy operate in practice?

The park’s legislation spells out the different responsibilities for the NPS and the DOE in the management of the park. In addition, a Memorandum of Agreement executed on November 10, 2015 provides further guidance in the park’s management. Essentially, both documents assign responsibility for the physical assets to DOE and responsibility for interpretation to NPS. In
addition, the NPS is responsible for playing an advisory role in preserving the park’s historic resources. Upon my arrival, a significant amount of groundwork was already completed in the development of the partnership between the two agencies, including the establishment of a Joint Park Management Team responsible for facilitating operational issues.

**Given that portions of the Oak Ridge reserve are in the process of being reindustrialized, what historic structures at the Oak Ridge site can be preserved?**

While the former K-25 site at Oak Ridge is being redeveloped, many of the other Manhattan Project structures, including the X-10 Graphite Reactor and buildings 9204-3 (Beta 3) and 9731 are still standing. Currently bus tours are available to the X-10 Graphite Reactor and all three facilities are in the process of being evaluated for preservation and visitor access.

**Manhattan Project NHP is a relatively young park, what are some things you hope to accomplish there in the next few years?**

Over the next few years, I plan on hiring site managers for each location, establishing formal agreements with Friends’ Groups from the local communities, and identify Cooperating Associations to sell books and other educational materials at our visitor centers. In addition, we will start the process for an Interpretive Plan and a Visitor Access Plan next year. These documents will provide significant guidance for growing and enhancing the visitor experience at Manhattan Project NHP.

**What role does youth education and outreach play at your park?**

Youth education and outreach at the park plays a large role and our incredibly talented park staff have developed some stellar educational programs. A number of school groups are already participating in these programs. The programs will continue to play large roles in the visitor experience provided by the park as one of our main interpretive themes focuses on the revolutionary science, engineering and technological innovations of the Manhattan Project and how they relate to developments in modern Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programs.

**What is your favorite aspect of your duties at Manhattan Project NHP?**

It’s hard to really pinpoint my favorite aspect of the job since so much of it is fascinating. Along with the amazing opportunity to have NPS staff tell this story while working with another federal agency and the local communities, I also really enjoy the fact that this park will require the NPS to bring a number of diverse and sensitive topics to the table for discussion. These aspects are not only historically important, they still play a critical role in today’s geopolitics, environmental responsibilities, and social constructs.

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**Call for Papers for the 10th Blount Postal History Symposium: World War I and its Immediate Aftermath**

Smithsonian National Postal Museum, Washington, DC, November 1–2, 2018

On Monday, November 11, 1918, World War I came to an end. Wrought from militarism, nationalistic and imperialist wars, the Great War broke empires, challenged established gender and race relations, and destroyed millions of lives. Mail became the critical link for the families separated and desperate for news. Governments responded to these developments and the disruption of communication networks, and struggled to determine who should be able to communicate with whom and about what.

**Deadlines for one-page proposal and CV:** June 15, 2017.

In addition to a one-page proposal, each individual should submit a one-page curriculum vitae with contact information (e-mail, phone, address).

**Notification of acceptance will be mailed on or about August 1, 2017.**

Papers are due by September 1, 2018. Accepted proposals must result in papers of 4500–5500 words, including bibliographic material, citations, and image titles. The articles must be formatted according to the guidelines of the Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press. Images should be placed and discussed within the text and image permissions must be acquired. Writers will have the opportunity to revise their papers after the symposium and before the papers are considered for publication.

**Possible Topics Include:**

- Disruptions and shifts in mail transportation systems
- Communication alternatives to the mail
- Censorship of and by postal systems
- War-saving and thrift-saving stamp programs
- War propaganda and the mail
- War-time supply issues (inks, papers, etc.)
- Changing demographics and policies towards postal employees
- Postal systems in occupied territories
- Rise of airmail
- Stamps of the new countries

For more information on formatting and permissions, please see the call for papers for 2018 at: [http://postalmuseum.si.edu/research/symposiums-and-lectures/](http://postalmuseum.si.edu/research/symposiums-and-lectures/)