

Steve Phan



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Steve T. Phan is a Park Ranger, Civil War historian, and military scholar. He has earned a master's degree in American History, has worked as a park guide at numerous national parks and battlefields, and has written several articles in regard to Asian and Pacific Islander involvement in the Civil War. His career in the national parks system has included being an intern and seasonal volunteer all the way to his current position as Chief of Interpretation at Camp Nelson National Monument in Kentucky. Prior to this, he worked at the Civil War

Defenses of Washington (CWDW).

Hidden History recently had the chance to interview Steve Phan and discussed his views on some of the different aspects surrounding the American Civil War.

HH: *You are a National Park Ranger focusing on the Civil War, were you always interested in history? What was the defining moment of time that you realized you enjoyed history? Was there a specific person involved in this moment?*

SP: Yes, I have had a lifelong interest in history, particularly American Military studies, dating back to my early youth. In regard to the Civil War, the spark was created in the 3rd grade when my teacher took our class to see the 5th graders participate in the Civil War reenactment outside our school. It was a moment I will never forget and one that has inspired much of this journey.

HH: *As a National Park Ranger, you have the ability to interpret the events at the specific site you are at? How many sites do you work at and what is the topic discussed at each? Do you ever take on the role of the person being discussed?*

SP: Simply put, the National Capital Region, recently reorganized as the National Capital Area, is my base of operations. The Civil War Defenses of Washington is a regional program. We work

with three national parks—Rock Creek Park, National Capital Parks-East, and George Washington Memorial Parkway—to manage 17 sites around Washington D.C., Maryland, and Virginia. My work expands beyond this to include historic sites managed by other park service entities, notably the National Mall and Memorial Parks, and partnerships with local county organizations. I generally rely on volunteers to perform first-person roles especially with my role as a historic weapons supervisor. **

HH: *What does the training to be a Park Ranger entail? What is your educational background and who did it prepare you for the job you are in?*

SP: Training depends on the division you work in. As a interpretive park ranger, my training entails official NPS training programs, including Principles of Interpretation and Interpreting the Civil War. Other training related involved learning official policy for website management, social media pages, and safety courses. My education background did prepare me for this position, notably interpreting American and military history. I have a master's degree in history which enhanced my reading, research, and writing skills—all critical for frontline interpretation and visitor services.

HH: *I saw you were recently nominated for the Tilden Award. What other awards or honors have you been nominated for and what is the qualification for each?*



SP: Thank you. I have been awarded work bonuses by my supervisors the past two years. I am not sure what the exact qualifications are necessary to earn one, but performing above expectations on performance evaluations. For the Tilden Award, I was nominated by someone in the region who recognized my work in the field.

HH: *Do you get to work in other areas other than historical interpretation (i.e., panels, research, lectures?) Can you explain what all you have done?*

SP: My work expands far beyond frontline interpretation. The CWDW does not perform traditional visitor services, i.e., we lack a visitor center open to the public. This allows me to focus on developing programs, website and social media management, and cultural resource projects. My priority with the CWDW is enhancing preservation efforts of the historic earthworks. I have worked with National Park Service cultural and natural resource staffs to

conduct site visits, propose work projects, and oversee restoration of the earthworks. I have also assisted with the research, writing, and development of interpretive waysides at Fort Reno. I also deliver lectures for organizations—internal NPS, academic, and private—about the Defenses of Washington and Civil War Washington.

HH: *If you could discuss any era in American history, what would that era be? And whom from that era would you want to talk with and why?*

SP: Simply put, the Civil War Era. I classify this as 1820-1880s. There is a long list of people from that area that I would be thrilled to have a conversation with. The list would be topped with such people as Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Ulysses S. Grant, and John F. Reynolds. I would also be fascinated to



hear from the people lost to history—formerly enslaved African Americans who sought refuge in Federal lines; people of color (Asian and Pacific Islanders) who served in the war; and families at the home front.

HH: *The Civil War is one that is often learned as a brief overview of events mainly because unless one is a true “Civil War buff” one’s knowledge comes from high school/college textbooks and courses. Do you consider this enough of an education to accurately understand the events of the war or do you think more could be done?*

SP: I do not think this is enough of an education to accurately understand the COMPLEX events and the cause and effects of the conflict. Americans continue to debate the meaning of the Civil War. This includes an often deeply personal interpretation of the causes of the war, often omitting the institution of slavery, and the post-war memorialization of the conflict. The Civil War is still current, clearly seen with the struggle over monuments, flags, and other symbols related to the Confederacy. I think public spaces, including battlefields and historic places, can provide visitors a nuanced and complex interpretation of the war.

HH: *As a National Park Ranger and historian, what is your advice to other historians looking to succeed as a historian or a National Park Ranger?*

SP: Embrace the journey. It is long, full of obstacles, and nothing is guaranteed, especially on the National Park Service front. An individual may take all the necessary steps—undergraduate degree, master’s degree, internships, volunteer positions, seasonal positions—and may never gain a permanent position with the service. If one is willing to accept that and understand that much growth and development can be developed during these experiences, then go for it. There are many avenues one can take when approaching a career with history. Historic sites and organizations are managed state, county, and local entities. Look into that. I have seen many who pursue a path of “NPS or Bust.” I think that’s not a productive way to approach a career in public history. The NPS can enhance your skills; if a career in the service is not possible, use those tools in a related organization. I work with many private and public organizations that managed history related sites not overseen by the park service. Stay open to different opportunities and be willing to try something different and new.



HH: *What was your favorite memory, person, etc. that you have experienced during your time as a National Park Ranger?*

SP: That is a good question. I am not sure if I can pinpoint one particular memory, person or experience

during my time as a National Park Service park ranger. I would say experiencing diversity in our public lands, from battlefields to the natural parks our west, have been the most fulfilling moments of my career. I’ve had several people of Asian descent who have approached and expressed their surprise and gratitude that was a personal of their ethnic background in uniform. I also find it special to see diverse groups in our parks. That is a central theme to my career: connecting people of all backgrounds to our public lands.

** At the time of this interview, Phan was working at the CWDW, however, at the time of publication, he joined the team at Camp Nelson.