

Nation's parks offer chance for service

By William C. Kashatus

During college I worked as a historical interpreter at Independence National Historical Park. It was the early 1980s, an exciting time in Philadelphia. The city had already been in the national spotlight during the 1976 bicentennial and was gearing up for the 200th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution in 1987.

It was also a transitional period between the closing years of the Cold War and the beginning of anti-U.S. attacks from Islamist groups abroad. The United States was part of a multinational peacekeeping force in the Lebanese civil war. On April 18, 1983, a suicide bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut killed 63 people, 17 of whom were Americans. It was the deadliest attack on a U.S. diplomatic mission to that date, and it had a profound impact on me.

Until that point, I was planning to go on to graduate school to study early American history. But the Beirut bombing forced me to reconsider.

Since members of my family had served in the military in every major American war in the 20th century, I felt an obligation to enlist. At the same time, my Quaker faith — and conscience — would not allow any involvement with the military.

How could I serve my country without betraying my religious convictions?

I did a lot of soul-searching that summer. I

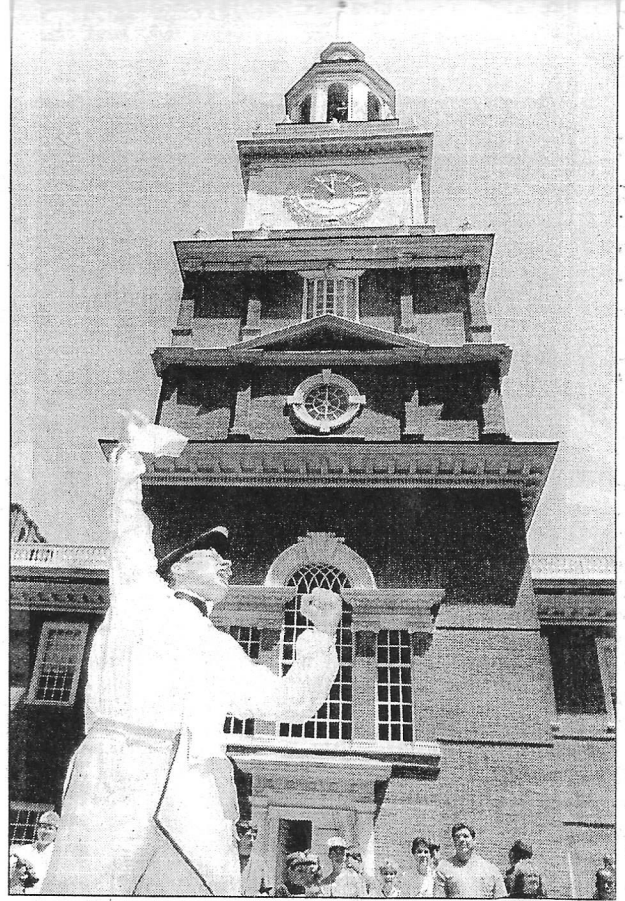
erty Bell; recreated for visitors the debates of the Second Continental Congress in the same room where the Founding Fathers voted to become a new nation; and performed a living history impersonation of revolutionary Tom Paine, stirring the enthusiasm of the crowd during a public reading of the Declaration of Independence.

Many visitors, both American and foreign, expressed their appreciation for my efforts. But it was the words of a group of combat-scarred World War II veterans who, after listening to one of my presentations, thanked me for “providing such a wonderful service to our nation,” that made me realize that I was better suited to serve my country as a National Park Service ranger than as a member of the U.S. military.

Such “alternative service” would greatly help the NPS today.

The NPS, a bureau of the U.S. Department of the Interior, is our nation's greatest asset in terms of promoting a positive view of the United States among Americans and foreign visitors. Although the park service generates \$32 billion each year, its \$3.4 billion annual budget is among the lowest for federal agencies.

In addition, our national parks are confronted with a serious aging problem. According to the National Parks Conservation Association, half of the employees in park service leadership positions have retired over the last three years.



The author, as Tom Paine, rallies a crowd for American independence. Photo by Tina Markoe.

employees near retirement age. Seventy-five percent of them are at least 40 years old and only 7 percent are 29 or younger.

The NPS is also severely understaffed. Of the 22,000 individuals employed by the agency, there is only one park guide for every 100,000 visitors.

That's a heavy burden considering the system includes 412 national monuments, battlefields, military parks, historical parks, historic sites, lakeshores, seashores, recreation areas, scenic rivers and trails, and the White House.

Those sites are experiencing record-breaking visitation, with more than 300 million visitors last year alone. This year, visitation is already up by four million in year-to-date comparisons, likely because of the NPS centennial.

At a time when our nation is divided on U.S. mili-

who are undecided about a career, should consider joining the NPS. Because the agency is the steward of our nation's cultural, historic, and environmental sites, it offers a range of opportunities for young people with a variety of interests and backgrounds. Some may even find a career path.

Although I eventually left the NPS to become an educator, my initial experiences with writing for publication, public speaking, and living-history impersonations all came during my years as a park ranger at Independence National Historical Park. It was one of the best experiences of my life and one I will always treasure.

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