

FIRST WORD

A Perfect Vision

| BY MARY A. BOMAR |

I CAN RECALL THAT MY VERY FIRST PUBLIC ACT as the new superintendent of Independence National Historical Park was on a cold February morning, with piles of new-fallen snow on the ground. In the cold, crisp air, I attended a blessing of the archeological dig at the James Dexter site located on the third block of Independence Mall. The blessing was performed by the pastor and senior members of the African Episcopal Church of Saint Thomas in Philadelphia, a church that James Dexter had helped found in the 18th century as one of the earliest free African churches. With the site of his home destined to lie beneath the new National Constitution Center, the National Park Service, after a prolonged period of public discussion, had agreed to excavate the site before it was paved over for a bus drop-off. **LATER, I REFLECTED ABOUT THE EVENT—**modest in scope but meaningful to the congregation—and recalled that in 2001, the National Park System Advisory Board developed “Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century.” The group was chaired by John Hope Franklin—a great thinker and most humble man despite his many accomplishments. And while the report was the work of many, I like to think that it was he who penned these words: “The public looks upon national parks almost as a metaphor for America itself. But there is another image emerging here, a picture of the National Park Service as a sleeping giant—beloved and respected, yes; but perhaps too cautious, too resistant to change, too reluctant to engage the challenges that must be addressed in the 21st century.” Later, that thread continues . . . “The Park Service must ensure that the American story is told faithfully, completely and accurately. The story is often noble, but sometimes shameful and sad. In an age of growing cultural diversity, the Service must continually ask whether the way in which it tells these stories has meaning for all our citizens.” **IF YOU LOOK AT THE HEADLINES** you still see there are groups who do feel that the Park Service is not telling the full story of our history. So in January of 2006, during a joint meeting of the National Leadership Council and the National Park System Advisory Board, we convened a forum to hear top scholars in the nation tell the leadership of the Park Service what we had done right—and where we still had room for improvement. During my confirmation hearings before the

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, I was asked about my goals as director. I replied: re-engage the American public with our national parks, increase the capacity of the National Park System, and develop a new generation of leaders for the Service. **WHEN I READ THE WORDS OF** “Rethinking the National Parks,” and listened during the scholars’ forum, I was struck by a recurring theme. In order to achieve that re-engagement, we must be relevant to the American public—both to those who visit our parks and those who do not. The 1991 Vail Agenda also advised that the Service more accurately reflect the breadth of American culture. It recommended that individual units publicize their unique purpose to their employees, to the local population, and visitors. The agenda also suggested that new studies by the Service include the need for cultural diversity throughout the National Park System. **IN 2007, WE MUST HEED THOSE WORDS AGAIN AS** we prepare

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for the National Park Service Centennial in 2016 and keep our special places vibrant for the next 100 years. **ONE AFTERNOON AT INDEPENDENCE,** I left the office after a long day and walked through the park. As I arrived at Independence Hall, I saw my perfect vision of what a park could be. Our staff was busy keeping the grounds looking good, a group of school children was listening to one of our rangers give an Underground Railroad tour, and all around me I heard languages from visitors who traveled from all corners of the globe. Our parks are not just special places for all Americans, but special places for the entire world! **AND THAT IS MY VISION** for our vibrant national parks—not for just one day, but for every day. Not for just one park, but for all our parks. That is the true challenge for our centennial—to make the “best idea America ever had” the best it can possibly be.

Mary A. Bomar was sworn in as the 17th Director of the National Park Service on October 17, 2006.