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The Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project and Oral History in the National Park Service

J. Todd Moye

In 1998 President Bill Clinton signed into law a bill directing the National Park Service (NPS) to create a national historic site at Moton Field in Tuskegee, Alabama. The site will honor the Tuskegee Airmen, as the first African American military aviators—men who trained to fly airplanes at segregated facilities in Tuskegee during World War II—were later called. When Congress appropriated funds for the creation of the site, it authorized the NPS to conduct an oral history of surviving Tuskegee-trained pilots and the thousands of people who supported them during World War II. The resulting Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project is but one of the hundreds of ways that the National Park Service has embraced the possibilities of oral history.

About a third of the 384 units in the National Park System report that they have undertaken oral history projects.¹ Park Service historians, anthropologists, ethnographers, and natural resource specialists have long understood that oral history can help them document important American experiences in rich detail. They have then shared those stories with park visitors. Consequently, the NPS has been responsible for a significant portion of all the oral history conducted in the United States.

The National Park Service is likely to expand its oral history program in the future. In 2001 the National Park System Advisory Board, chaired by the eminent historian John Hope Franklin, suggested that the Park Service's first priority for the twenty-first century should be accepting "its mission, as educator, to become a more significant part of America's educational system." The board proposed that the NPS should "encourage the study of the American past, developing programs based on current scholarship, linking specific places to the narrative of our history, and encour-

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If you know of a participant in the Tuskegee Airmen experience who should be considered for an interview, or if you would like more information on the Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project, please call the project's toll-free number, 1-866-294-2914.

¹ Of the 384 units in the National Park System, 147 responded to a 2001 questionnaire from the Office of the Chief Historian of the National Park Service. Of those 147 respondents, 118 reported that their parks had conducted oral histories. See Office of the Chief Historian of the National Park Service, *Oral History in the National Park Service, January 2002* (Washington, 2002).

aging a public exploration and discussion of the American experience.”² Oral history is unique in its ability to fulfill those missions.

Yet there is great variety in the condition and size of the oral history collections produced by NPS employees. Some collections contain only field notes for a handful of untranscribed, even unrecorded, interviews. Others have hundreds of impressively cataloged interviews and finding aids. For example, the oral history collection at San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park dates back to the 1940s and is one of the nation’s longest-running oral history programs. Its more than 600 interviews are cataloged and available to researchers. With close to 2,000 interviews, the oral history collection at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum at Ellis Island National Monument is among the nation’s largest and most important. The collection is impressively cataloged and widely accessible to park visitors. Thousands of New York City schoolchildren, scholars, curious visitors, and descendants of interviewees have listened to the collection’s recordings in the site’s research library. The archive of the National Prisoner of War Museum at Andersonville National Historic Site in Georgia includes video histories of more than 900 American POWs, veterans of every American conflict since World War I.³

Unfortunately, oral history in the NPS has not always reached its full potential. A recent survey concluded that “oral history efforts [in the National Park Service] are often loosely structured, sporadic, and project-driven, and implemented in a piecemeal fashion.”⁴ For every Ellis Island Immigration Museum, which employs full-time oral historians, archivists, and audio technicians and has a state-of-the-art, on-site recording facility, there are several sites with untrained, though dedicated, park rangers and volunteers who record interviews on outdated equipment and store the recordings in uncontrolled environments. Few of the interviews are ever transcribed or made available to researchers. Some serve little historical purpose. But hundreds of other interviews undoubtedly shed light on unstudied corners of American social history and will prove valuable if they are processed according to professional standards and made available to the public.

Historians and cultural resource managers within the NPS are responding to those needs, acting on the advisory board’s recommendation that “budgets, policies, and organizational structure should reflect this commitment [to education].”⁵ Their efforts should spark new partnerships with university oral history and public history programs that share the Park Service’s mission. The backlog of uncataloged, unused interviews already in park collections could keep student interns from academic oral history, public history, and museum studies programs busy for the next several years—to the mutual benefit of individual parks, the students, park visitors, and the researchers who will use the interviews in the future.

² National Park System Advisory Board, “Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century,” Aug. 9, 2001 <<http://www.nps.gov/policy/report.htm>> (April 15, 2002).

³ For more information on these parks and projects, see <<http://www.nps.gov/saft/index.htm>>; <<http://www.nps.gov/elis/index.htm>>; and <<http://www.nps.gov/ande/index.htm>> (April 15, 2002). The Andersonville site offers research grants to promote use of the prisoner of war video history collection.

⁴ Office of the Chief Historian, *Oral History in the National Park Service, January 2002*, 4.

⁵ National Park System Advisory Board, “Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century.”

The National Park Service generally conducts oral history projects with three uses in mind. Oral histories most commonly document the administrative histories of individual parks and park structures. The archives of many national parks and national historic sites contain interviews with past park superintendents and influential local citizens and, in some cases, with local people who once lived within or near the park. Those oral histories seek to document the histories of the national park units themselves. Ideally, park superintendents and planners use the information from the interviews to inform their decisions about resource protection.

Related oral history projects document the experiences that the parks and historic sites commemorate or the ethnographic impact parks have had on local communities. Ongoing oral history programs at Cane River Creole National Historical Park, New River Gorge National River, Lowell National Historical Park, the National Park of American Samoa, Keweenaw National Historical Park, the *U.S.S. Arizona* Memorial, and hundreds of other NPS units attest to the rich diversity of experiences that oral history documents for the Park Service.

Finally, the NPS uses oral history in museum interpretation. At sites such as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, Park Service personnel use interview recordings to allow visitors to learn history from the people who made it. Visitors to Ellis Island are invariably moved by the stories they hear from immigrants to the United States in the museum's exhibits and in *Island of Hope, Island of Tears*, the award-winning documentary film shown at the historic site.⁶ Oral history allows a historical figure to speak to a museum visitor across time, as one living human being to another.

The recordings from the Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project will be put to each of those three uses. The project is an example of the National Park Service's growing commitment to systematic, adequately funded, and professionally administered oral history research. In addition to the project director (myself), the Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project employs four experienced, full-time historians who arrange, conduct, and edit the oral history interviews. This team of historians—Lisa Bratton, Judith Brown, Worth Long, and Bill Mansfield—has made the project one of the most active in the nation and is responsible for its success to date. Based in the Park Service's Southeast Regional Office in Atlanta, Georgia, we had recorded 450 interviews in thirty-two states and the District of Columbia as of April 2002.

The project centers on the pilots who graduated from Moton Field, a primary flight-training facility operated by Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) under contract with the United States Army Air Corps/Army Air Forces between 1941 and 1945, and went on to basic and advanced training at the nearby Tuskegee Army Air Field.⁷ Many of the 996 who completed that training to earn their wings as officer-pilots in the Army Air Forces served overseas with great distinction as mem-

⁶ *Island of Hope, Island of Tears*, dir. Charles Guggenheim (Guggenheim Productions, 1990) (Videotape, 1 tape; Guggenheim Productions).

⁷ The Army Air Forces razed Tuskegee Army Air Field soon after the war. Tuskegee University donated the historic Moton Field site to the National Park Service in 2000, and stabilization of historic structures began soon thereafter. In addition to preparing the Moton Field historic complex for visitation, the National Park Service plans the eventual construction of the Tuskegee Airmen National Center, a multimillion-dollar public-private museum and conference facility.



Pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group discuss a combat mission alongside a “red-tail” P-51 Mustang, August 1944. Left to right: Lt. Dempsey W. Morgan, Lt. Carroll S. Woods, Lt. Robert H. Nelson, Capt. Andrew W. Turner, and Lt. Clarence D. “Lucky” Lester. *Courtesy Air Force Historical Research Agency Photo Collection (USAF Negative Number 53690 AC).*

bers of the 332nd Fighter Group. Among other assignments, the fighter pilots of the 332nd escorted Allied bombers on hundreds of missions in the European theater. They have been credited with having never lost a bomber under their protection to enemy planes. No other unit in the war could make such a claim. It is important to commemorate the Tuskegee Airmen for that reason alone, but the story of the airmen involves much more than the pilots' excellent record in combat.⁸

The story of the Tuskegee Airmen involved thousands of people besides the pilots who have justly begun to win fame for their wartime service. To keep a single pilot flying during the war required about a dozen support personnel on the ground.

⁸ On the creation of the Tuskegee Institute aviation program, see Robert J. Jakeman, *The Divided Skies: Establishing Segregated Flight Training at Tuskegee, Alabama, 1934–1942* (Tuscaloosa, 1992). For the history of the 332nd, see Benjamin O. Davis, *Benjamin O. Davis Jr., American: An Autobiography* (Washington, 1991); Charles W. Dryden, *A-Train: Memoirs of a Tuskegee Airman* (Tuscaloosa, 1997); and Stanley Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons of World War II* (Washington, 1992). For the recognition the fighter pilots of the 332nd have received from the all-white bomber crews of the 15th Air Force, see Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Wild Blue: The Men and Boys Who Flew the B-24s over Germany* (New York, 2001). On racism and discrimination in the Army Air Corps, see Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack Sr., *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle of the Tuskegee Airmen* (East Lansing, 1994); Alan L. Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945–1964* (Washington, 1998); and Morris J. MacGregor Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940–1965* (Washington, 1981).

Approximately fifteen thousand men and women, the overwhelming majority of them African American, worked or trained at Moton Field and Tuskegee Army Air Field during the war years. The men and women who worked and sacrificed to keep the Tuskegee pilots in the air receive as much attention in this oral history project as the pilots themselves. (Many of the pilots interviewed for the project demanded that the support personnel receive more attention than they have in the past.)

A major goal of the project is to document the Double V campaign (victory over fascism overseas coupled with victory over racism and discrimination at home) as it was lived by millions of African Americans during the war. That theme is particularly relevant to the experience of the Tuskegee Airmen. At the beginning of World War II, U.S. War Department policy held that blacks as a race were inherently incapable of flying or maintaining airplanes. That policy was still guided by "The Use of Negro Manpower in War," a 1925 Army War College study, which concluded that "The negro . . . is by nature subservient and believes himself to be inferior to the white man. . . . He can not control himself in the face of danger to the extent the white man can. He has not the initiative and resourcefulness of the white man. He is mentally inferior to the white man." Army Air Corps planners shared those prejudices and used them to exclude African Americans from aviation training at the outset of World War II.⁹ The corps began training African American pilots in 1941 only after intense lobbying from civil rights groups and the black press. Many contend that the experiment was designed to fail: whites high in the Army Air Corps command clearly expected Tuskegee's training program to confirm their belief that African Americans could not fly airplanes. Rumors spread that qualified black pilots were "washed out" of the program to keep the number of graduates low. Historians and the airmen themselves disagree over whether such a quota system existed. Yet the fact remains that at the outset of the war, the Army Air Corps intended to create only one flight squadron of 33 black pilots—out of a population of more than 12 million African Americans.¹⁰

The airmen trained in the heart of the segregated South. To avoid conflict with local whites, the aviation cadets, instructors, and support personnel stayed on the campus of Tuskegee Institute or on their base as much as possible. Pilots were segregated in training, but once they became officers in the Army Air Forces, and especially after hundreds of them had risked their lives in combat, they demanded equal treatment. Tuskegee Airmen staged sit-ins on buses and trains and at Army Air Forces bases during the war in an effort to desegregate facilities. The airmen were among the first activists in the modern American civil rights movement.¹¹

⁹ U.S. Army War College, "The Use of Negro Manpower in War," carbon copy of typescript, 1925 (library, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, Pa.).

¹⁰ Following continued pressure from civil rights groups and the black press, the Army Air Corps authorized the creation of three other black fighter squadrons, the 100th, 301st, and 302nd, in addition to the original 99th Pursuit Squadron. Together the four squadrons composed the 332nd Fighter Group. Training for African American pilots at Tuskegee expanded again with the creation of the all-black 477th Bombardment Group. The war ended soon before the 477th was to begin its service in the Pacific theater of operations.

¹¹ The most heralded civil rights incident involving Tuskegee airmen occurred at Freeman Field in Indiana. After disobeying a base regulation that segregated officers' clubs, 101 airmen were arrested in April 1945. See James C. Warren, *Tuskegee Airmen Mutiny at Freeman Field* (Vacaville, 1997); and Gropman, *Air Force Integrates*.



James E. "Muscles" Wright, a civilian flight instructor of the Tuskegee Airmen, photographed outside his home in Savannah, Georgia, following a February 2001 oral history interview. *Photograph by Bill Mansfield, Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Project. Courtesy National Park Service.*

The National Park Service will commemorate those experiences at the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site. As part of the effort, the oral history project is locating and interviewing people who were at Moton Field or Tuskegee Army Air Field during the war, along with other black members of the Air Force who never set foot in Tuskegee. In addition to the original Tuskegee Airmen, we have interviewed Chauncey Spencer, a remarkable man who with another pilot flew a broken-down jalopy of an airplane from Chicago, Illinois, to Washington, D.C., in 1939 to lobby members of Congress for the inclusion of African Americans in flight training. The

project has also interviewed Frank Bolden, a reporter for the *Pittsburgh Courier* who covered the airmen in combat. We hope to locate other pioneer African American aviators, members of the black press, and members of civil rights organizations who lobbied for the inclusion of African Americans in the Army Air Corps. We have also interviewed members of the all-white bomber crews of the 15th U.S. Air Force who flew alongside the pilots of the 332nd in combat.

The project has contracted with Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., a national nonprofit organization, to acquire biographical data and contact information on its members. This agreement will take the project a long way toward its goal of recording 1,500 interviews, but the larger objective is to find and interview a wide swath of people who can tell us about what happened at Tuskegee and help place that story in the broader contexts of American and African American history. If the oral history project reaches that goal, the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site will be able to present the kind of complex and nuanced story that this experience deserves.

The interviews will be useful in other ways. Historical architects are mining interviews that the project has recorded with people such as Booker Conley, who helped draft the original drawings for structures at Moton Field as a work-study student in the Tuskegee Institute architecture department in the early 1940s. Archival evidence and materials analysis are valuable tools in the effort to treat historic structures at Moton Field, but they cannot tell the whole story. Information gleaned from the oral histories suggests that human memory is a better source than one might have expected for reconstructing material surroundings.

The interview recordings and transcripts will be stored in the archives of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site and will be made available to researchers and the public.¹² This will quickly make the site the starting point for research into the Tuskegee Airmen and Jim Crow in World War II, and the archive will also become a major resource for historians of African Americans in the military and historians of air power. Because we ask each interviewee to talk about his or her family background, the archive will also constitute an important source on African American life during the Great Depression.

Interview recordings will form the centerpiece of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site's museum program. Visitors will have the opportunity to walk into the site's museum and learn about the experiences of the Tuskegee Airmen, *in the airmen's own words*. They will hear pilots talk about their childhood desire to fly, a dream that was virtually impossible for African Americans to realize before 1939. They will hear the stories of mechanics who had to teach themselves how to service and repair aircraft because racist policy makers in the Army Air Corps believed that blacks could not learn to maintain complicated machines such as airplanes.

Visitors will hear about German POWs who had free range of the military bases where they were incarcerated while the Tuskegee Airmen were segregated into inferior quarters on the same bases. They will hear about the courtship of Herbert Carter and Mildred Hemmons, a pilot cadet and a civilian employee of the Quartermaster

¹² The Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site is scheduled to open in 2005.

Corps at Tuskegee Army Air Field, respectively, who dated over nearby Martin Lake in separate airplanes because cadets in training had little free time for socializing. (Miss Hemmons had graduated from Tuskegee Institute's Civilian Pilot Training program before the war and was one of a handful of African American women in the early 1940s to have earned a pilot's license. In August 2002 she and Colonel Carter celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary.)

In short, the oral histories will allow visitors to connect on an innately human level with the men and women of Tuskegee who were simultaneously so ordinary and so remarkable. At a time when schoolchildren find it difficult to believe that the United States ever sanctioned racial segregation, we are hopeful that our recordings will provide a powerful educational experience for generations to come. The knowledge that our interviews will be put to this use makes participation in the project especially meaningful to our team.

Projects of similar scope and importance abound in the National Park System, but few of them have the resources necessary for professional-quality oral history. For example, the Rosie the Riveter World War II Homefront National Historical Park in Richmond, California, has been directed to document the experience of war workers on the American home front. A modest grant has allowed the park to begin this work in partnership with the Regional Oral History Office of the University of California, Berkeley, but a comprehensive oral history program will require additional funding. Researchers at Manzanar National Historic Site in Independence, California, would like to interview the surviving Japanese Americans who were confined there and at other internment centers during the war. But they too lack the resources to record, transcribe, edit, and archive dozens of broadcast-quality oral history interviews. Many other NPS projects face similar problems.

Historians employed by the National Park Service and other federal agencies risk portraying only what can be dismissed as "official" history: state-sanctioned, consensus history (or myth) that avoids controversial topics. Increased use of oral history can help lead us away from presenting oversimplified—and ultimately less interesting—history to our visitors. Oral history helps us document the past, adds texture to the stories we relate to park visitors, and allows us to expand our understanding of who we are as a people. In the case of oral history in the National Park Service, medium and message are one: the most democratic mode of inquiry historians have yet invented helps the NPS portray the experiences we as Americans hold in common. Oral history is central to the Park Service's public history program and should become even more vital to its mission in the future.