

GORDON “GORDIE” WILSON
Castillo de San Marcos & Fort Matanzas National Monuments
St. Augustine, FL

Interviewer: Anna Hamilton

Date: 8/29/16

Location: Castillo de San Marcos National Park Service office

Length: 55:40

[Begin interview]

Anna Hamilton: [00:00:04] I'll get us started first. This is Anna Hamilton. Today is Monday, August 29th. It's a little after 1:00 and I am at the National Park Service headquarters with Gordon Wilson to talk about his life and his work at the Castillo de San Marcos and the fort in general in St. Augustine.

Gordon Wilson: [00:00:28] My name is Gordie Wilson. I'm the superintendent for the Castillo de San Marcos and Fort Matanzas national monuments in St. Augustine.

AH: [00:00:38] And can you tell me when you were born, please?

GW: [00:00:38] I was born in 1954.

AH: [00:00:43] And what was the date and month also?

GW: [00:00:43] October 20th.

AH: [00:00:47] Great. Thank you. Where were you born?

GW: [00:00:47] In Cortland, New York.

AH: [00:00:51] How did you get down here?

GW: [00:00:51] Well I went to college and majored in Parks and Recreation and did an internship with the National Park Service when I was in college. And one thing led to another and thirty-nine years later I'm still working for the National Park Service.

AH: [00:01:05] How did you get interested in working for the National Park Service?

GW: [00:01:08] When I was young I spent a lot of time outdoors hiking and walking in the woods and the mission of the National Park Service appealed to me and being active appealed to me so it was a really good fit.

AH: [00:01:27] So was that something that you parents sort of instilled in you also? Was that something they supported?

GW: [00:01:31] Not really. It was kind of my own idea.

AH: [00:01:36] Really?

GW: [00:01:37] Yeah.

AH: [00:01:41] Can you tell me about your parents, who they were?

GW: [00:01:41] Well my father was a plumber. My mother worked in a sewing factory and we'd never visited national parks when I was growing up. The first national park site I ever visited in was probably when I went to do an internship when I was in college.

AH: [00:02:04] So college was the first time you were in a national park.

GW: [00:02:05] Well yeah. And it may have been during a spring break that I'd visited one but I'm not really even sure. It probably was when I did my internship.

AH: [00:02:19] And what was that national park?

GW: [00:02:19] It was the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park. It's a historic site—park that runs from Washington D.C. to Cumberland, Maryland. It's 185 miles long and it's it's a hiking venue. Bicyclists use it. So it's an interesting site. It's somewhat unique. But we have a lot of unique sites in the Park Service.

AH: [00:02:51] Did you chose that site? Or were you assigned as per your internship?

GW: [00:02:51] As a student intern. The superintendent from that park had come to our college and recruited for student interns. So I thought it sounded like a good idea. So that's where I went.

AH: [00:03:08] What was your first thought when you got there?

[00:03:08] I for—I guess as a student intern, it was just a fascinating operation to watch because one of the first things that happened when I got there was we had a flood and the park had campgrounds and the way the canal worked was the source of water for the canal itself was from the Potomac River. So we were fairly low in elevation. And this was in 1976. And we had a pretty significant flood and we had to go out and evacuate campgrounds and it was just really kind of fun to go out and do things that real rangers did. And also I did some interpretive programs and presented some programs and did some programs for kids and that sort of thing. And the agency itself really appealed to me just because there was such a diversity in what happened in a park.

AH: [00:04:13] And did you have a mentor when you first got there?

GW: [00:04:13] Yeah I did. There was a district ranger who lived down the road from the house where I was staying and he was my supervisor and just kind of helped me understand what the Park Service was all about.

AH: [00:04:28] How long did your internship run?

GW: [00:04:28] I was there for two months.

AH: [00:04:33] So that's a good long taste for a college student.

GW: [00:04:33] It was. It was great. Full time. I mean I lived in the park and worked in a park and so it was a great experience.

AH: [00:04:49] Were you hooked at that point or was there still some thought about doing something else or did you know that that's what you wanted to do from then on?

GW: [00:04:49] That was pretty much it. I knew what I wanted to do.

AH: [00:04:52] And what surprised you about the work of Park Service that you might not have known about?

GW: [00:04:59] Well even in that park I think it was the the range of things that happened. There were—again we evacuated campgrounds. We we did interpretive programs. There was the intricacies of the masonry work that was required for the locks were the canal was in historic structures and just the different things that we did. The other operation that they had in that park and still have to this day was a reconstructed canal barge where they actually pull it by a mule and do tours and programs and they go up and down through the locks. And so it was just really interesting and the other allure that you have in a situation like that is you have at that time we had over 350 areas that that had a lot of different types of environments. The mother park, Yellowstone National Park, or places in Alaska, or Virgin Islands, and historic sites all over the country and just such an interesting diversity of things that have national significance and have a significant amount of meaning. And the other thing that was really appealing about the National Park Service was the commitment and the passion that people had about what they did.

AH: [00:06:30] That's really interesting. It seems to me a really unique charge to have to balance specifically localized history and environments as part of the Park Service mission. Can you talk a little bit about that?

GW: [00:06:33] Well the big balancing act that we struggle with with the National Park Service is conservation versus enjoyment. The mission of the National Park Service which was—became official on August 25th, 1916 said that we were to conserve the natural and historical objects and wildlife in the parks and to provide enjoyment for those areas in such manner and by such means as would leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. So on the one hand conservation and preservation and protection of these resources was important. The second thing that in some cases counteracts that but certainly challenges it is the requirement to provide enjoyment and giving people access to experience the parks and then that experience can't be at expense where the resources will be impaired so that they won't be around for future generations. So we can use the parks but we can't use them up. So that's the most delicate balancing act that we have—that is the delicate balancing act that we've struggled with the National Park Service for 100 years and five days.

AH: [00:08:12] That's right, we did just celebrate the Centennial. I'm going to skip ahead since I have some questions I'd like to ask you, but since we're talking about it, how does that play out at the Castillo?

GW: [00:08:13] When we greet our visitors—we have over 800,000 visitors a year at the Castillo. We need to make sure that they understand that the coquina itself is relatively fragile stone and it's quarried out of the ground and it's kind of wet and it's really made of millions of little seashells that are stuck together so when they dry out it's pretty easy for a little shells to flake off. And the loss of historic fabric is an impairment. So we have to ask visitors not to stand, sit, walk on the walls. That sort of thing. And be careful not to rub up against them. And so that's part of it. And part of it is just making sure that they understand the significance and why it's important, why it's unique. The fort was built 100 years before there was a United States of America. Construction started in 1672 so—and a lot of people don't realize that the Spanish were here for 235 years before this became a territory of the United States. So if you tack on 235 years to when we became a U.S. territory it adds up to the year 2056. So in 2056 the Florida territory, the Florida peninsula, what's now the state of Florida, will have been part of America as long as it was part of Spain.

AH: [00:09:51] Wow. That's interesting. Have you seen—what kind of wear and tear have you seen from the visitors?

GW: [00:09:52] Well you see little chunks of coquina. It's not all from visitors. Part of it is just natural erosion and weather and weathering of the stone. Our visitors are very respectful and when they sit on the walls and maybe a little bit flakes off you can't really see it. We do see vandalism on a rare basis. Not very often do we have vandalism. But sometimes people will,

inside some of the casemates, they'll carve something in there. But generally that's not been a problem.

AH: [00:10:41] What kind of—as you said, the Castillo's been there a really long time and weathered all kinds of natural disasters. Or not disasters, but hurricanes and storms and—

GW: [00:10:42] Well when you have a stone structure to sixteen or seventeen feet thick at the base and five or six feet thick at the top, 100 mile an hour wind isn't really going to have much effect on it. And storm surge—I'm not really sure what the most storm surge we've ever had here is but it was built to withstand water and a moat around it. So do we get nor'easters or winds that bring a lot of surf in and pound a seawall? Yeah. And eventually maybe over 100 years that might take its toll. But storms really don't have much of an impact on the structure itself.

AH: [00:11:34] You can see it's still standing there, obviously solid as a rock. When was the first time you saw the Castillo? What is your first memory of the fort?

GW: [00:11:39] I came to Castillo on November 4th, I think it was, in 1978. Early November. I had gotten a job here as a ranger and I drove into town probably about 1:00 or 2:00 in the afternoon and I just—it was an amazing structure. I just remember looking at it and thinking it's incongruous in the city because obviously the city has a wonderful historic structures, but it was clearly a whole different design concept and it was surrounded by a nice green lawn. And it was it was formidable. It was it was a powerful structure. That was my first recollection of it.

AH: [00:12:26] Where did you come from when you came to work here?

GW: [00:12:27] I was working for the Army Corps of Engineers in Hartwell, Georgia. I was a ranger at Hartwell Lake there.

AH: [00:12:36] Why did you decide to move on from there?

GW: [00:12:36] Well when I did my internship with the National Park Service I knew that I wanted to work for the National Park Service and I had a seasonal job with the National Parks Service after I got out of college and I worked at the C & O Canal where I did my internship for about nine months after I got out of college. And then I got a job offer at Lake Mead National Recreation Area and I was there for just a few weeks and got the permanent job offer with the Corps of Engineers, permanent meaning that once you get permanent status as a federal employee then you can apply for other permanent jobs and you're in. It was very difficult to get in at the time. So I took the permanent job with the Corps of Engineers and I was there for five months and then I got the job here. So it was really important to me to get back to the National

Park Service. And I got very fortunate when that happened because I was working as a ranger with the Corps of Engineers and a friend of mine that I had worked with when I was a seasonal employee at the C & O Canal had just gotten married and he was a graduate of Clemson and he was going back through the Clemson area near where I was living on his honeymoon and we talked and caught up a little bit and he was he was working here at the Castillo at the time. And he said that there would be an opening coming up fairly soon and was I interested? And I said absolutely. And it was a law enforcement position and that was something I was interested in. And this was in October and was 1978 and we were just about to go into a hiring freeze which happened a lot back in those days. Federal hiring freeze. And I was not in Hartwell, Georgia. I had gone back to Washington D.C. to visit some friends up there and I was staying at the National Park Service dormitory that I used to live at for just a couple of days and I walked down the stairs and I walked by the pay phone that was in the hallway in this dormitory and I answered it just by chance that I happened to be there. And it was the chief ranger from the Castillo calling to offer me a job. It was about 5:00 on Friday night and Monday morning the job freeze was going to go into effect. So he said we have a job here, would you be interested in it. And I said yes. And so then the journey began. And so about a month later I was again back with the National Park Service.

AH: [00:15:22] That's such a serendipitous story [laughs].

GW: [00:15:22] It is unbelievable. I've had some really good luck over the years.

AH: [00:15:29] [Laughs] Had you been to St. Augustine before?

GW: [00:15:30] Never.

AH: [00:15:30] And what did you think of the town when you first came?

GW: [00:15:33] Oh I was captivated by it. It's just—it was then and still is just a beautiful quaint, unique place.

AH: [00:15:42] And you mentioned you were a ranger for the Army Corps of Engineers before you became a ranger at the Castillo for the Park Service. What's the difference between those two entities, being a ranger for them?

GW: [00:15:55] Well one difference is the types of work that you do with the Army Corps of Engineers is they—what they do is they build dams and they generate power. And then when they when they build dams these great big lakes are created. So then there are—in that particular lake had 968 miles of shoreline. That's a lot of shoreline. And it's of course—it's

doesn't—geographically it's not as big as an ocean or anything but because of the jagged nature of the shoreline there are a lot of permits that have to be issued for docks. So a lot of what we did was check permits for docks and make sure they met specifications and we had a lot of campgrounds. So we collected campground fees and things like that. So it was similar to what national park rangers do, but one big difference is in the law enforcement arena the authority that the Corps of Engineers rangers had was very limited. They had no arrest authority. They had what was known as citation authority. So you could write tickets for littering and things like that. Whereas in a National Park Service you're a federal law enforcement officer with the power to make arrests or execute search warrants and conduct investigations. And so it's a much more complex sort of a position than the Army Corps of Engineers.

AH: [00:17:32] A little more powerful, too.

GW: [00:17:32] Absolutely.

AH: [00:17:37] Tell me about your first day on the job at the Castillo.

GW: [00:17:37] Well the first day is just an orientation. They give you a great big box of books with research material to start to read. So you spend the next few weeks just trying to read and learn and just walk around and try to get a sense of what it's going to be like to work there.

AH: [00:17:56] And what was it like to work there at that time?

GW: [00:17:56] Well it was interesting because at that time we had eight or nine rangers that were doing interpretive programs and then we would have I think it was two or three rangers that were doing the law enforcement programs. But we—even the law enforcement rangers did some interpretive program. So it was a real variety of things that we did. So it was fun. We had a lot of people that were similar in age that had just gotten out of college. And we—a lot of us did things together and socially after work. So it was a good place to be.

AH: [00:18:41] Tell me a little more about the work culture and being friends with the people you work with.

GW: [00:18:41] We played on a basketball team that—several of us were basketball players so we played in a league here in St. Augustine. And then we also—some of us played in a soccer league that we had here. And I was never a surfer but several of the guys were surfing. And so it was just a really nice social experience.

AH: [00:19:16] How well did your sports teams do?

GW: [00:19:16] I don't think we ever won a championship but we had fun.

AH: [00:19:27] Nice. So you started as a ranger. Walk me through the steps it takes to become Superintendent.

GW: [00:19:27] Well I had a sort of a unique path. I worked here at St. Augustine as a ranger. I was here for two years and then I went to a park in Pennsylvania, another site that has two parks. It was Allegheny Portage Railroad and the Johnstown Flood sites and I was in an administrative support job there but I also performed law enforcement duties there. And that was interesting because that was a park in central Pennsylvania and in a relatively rural area with a lot of snow. So we had cross-country skiing that went on and we had poaching that went on so there was a lot of different things that we did there. And I learned a lot in that job about the administrative aspects of what the National Park Service does and how we buy things and how human resources works and how budgets work and how the contracting and purchasing and acquisition—a lot of the nuts and bolts and the business side of things. So it was a really interesting and diverse job and I was there for about three years.

AH: [00:20:46] Wow. And you mentioned poaching: of, like, endangered species? Or artifacts? Or—?

GW: [00:20:47] Deer mostly. That was a deer hunting area and this was a relatively new park. When I got there the park had been established in the 1960s. And this was the early 1980s. So the culture had been—these people had been hunting on this private land for generations. So—and there were a lot of deer there, a lot of wildlife there. So during hunting season we would have a lot of people that still thought that it would be okay to hunt there. We were in the land acquisition mode there because we were still purchasing parcels of land that were adding to the park. So it was a pretty dynamic place. We had several hundred acres. And then the Johnstown Flood site was also relatively new. So there were still a lot of growth that was going on there. And we had a Congressman, John Murtha, who's passed away now but who was on the—I believe he was on the House Appropriations Committee for the Department of Interior and he would call us up early in the budget cycle and say, 'How much money do you guys need this year for us to put in the budget?' And he could—he would add money to the budget. And so he helped the park grow, which doesn't happen quite that way anymore because of some of the spending limitations that Congress now deals with and the pork barrel politics isn't quite as prevalent as it used to be. But it was an interesting time to be there and to learn and to get involved with some of the congressional interactions that we had.

AH: [00:22:32] That seems like an interesting park of having a new park is sort of the growing pains you go through. How do you deal with, you know, adjusting the local community to this new entity they've never had to deal with before?

GW: [00:22:39] When a new park gets established, typically there is a little bit of interaction with the communities ahead of time because—most of the time there's two ways that parks get established. Number one is an act of Congress. So if a congressman is going to create a park then they're certainly going to be sensitive to the local politics and the ramifications of establishing a park. In most cases it's a pretty popular thing to do because it's great for tourism and the local economy. In the case of Allegheny Portage more than Johnstown Flood, but Allegheny Portage, because there was so much land and such good deer hunting, it may not have been 100 percent popular because the people who wanted to hunt in that particular area that they couldn't hunt anymore was maybe 1 percent of the population or less. However that groundwork has really laid a lot of times before anything is introduced in Congress. And it's not just one congressman or senator who can get something passed. It takes a lot of votes. So the way legislation gets passed—you'd have to conduct an interview with somebody else to understand that fully. I just know that in the world of politics that there are a lot of things that go into establishment of sites. But the most important thing is to meet the criteria to be part of a National Park Service Unit, there has to be some something of national significance. And certainly the Johnstown flood disaster and the lessons learned there and the resilience of the people in Johnstown who fought back to get their town back after that flood—that's a significant story. And in Allegheny Portage Railroad, it was a unique transportation system that actually started with a railroad and up the face of this huge mountain, where on the top of this mountain was where the park headquarters was, there was a series of incline planes where these train cars were actually put on this pulley system and they went from station to station to get them up over this mountain because no train could get up over it. So it was an engineering marvel of its day. And Altoona—it's right outside Altoona, Pennsylvania and Altoona's a railroad town anyway so that was probably a pretty popular park when it was established in the 1960s. And Altoona was a place that struggled economically. So anything that boosted tourism was going to be a plus.

AH: [00:25:16] That makes sense. And will you tell me the story of the Johnstown flood?

GW: [00:25:22] In about 1890 there was a major flood and there was a clubhouse that some of the more well-to-do residents of that part of Pennsylvania had created. It was a place where they hunted and fished and and went and they'd built a dam and had a little lake where they had boats on it. And during a significant amount of rain the dam broke. And when the dam broke the flood went down the valley right into the city of Johnstown which was in a fairly low lying area. So I don't remember the number of fatalities but it was a tremendous amount of fatalities where people lost their lives after that flood. And the lesson learned there was the dam itself was not

engineered to withstand the type of rains that they got. So—and then gritty determination of the residents of the city of Johnstown to build back up even though there was such a significant loss of life that it speaks well to the determined nature of people in that part of the country.

AH: [00:26:31] What was the national park that was created there?

GW: [00:26:31] It was a national memorial and it just told a story about the flood.

AH: [00:26:40] I see. So it wasn't necessarily a huge nature preserve or something like that. It was a memorial itself.

GW: [00:26:40] Correct.

AH: [00:26:44] From there you came back to St. Augustine?

GW: [00:26:44] No. I went to from St. Augustine to Pennsylvania and then I went to Colonial National Historical Park where I worked in a similar position for about five years. I did some administrative support work and also some law enforcement and ranger type work there.

AH: [00:27:05] From there did you go anywhere else?

[00:27:06] Yes I did. After Colonial I went to my first superintendency. That was a superintendent at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site in Greenville, Tennessee.

AH: [00:27:22] Can you tell me—what is a superintendent? For people who aren't familiar with that position, what does that mean?

GW: [00:27:22] Well we have 412 units now in the National Park System. And for the most part every one has a superintendent but there are a lot of sites like Castillo and Fort Matanzas where one superintendent oversees two sites so I'm not sure what the number would be but we have probably 350 superintendents or something like that. And the superintendent is responsible for the overall management of the park site whether it's Yellowstone National Park or Morris Creek National Battlefield in North Carolina that has nine or ten employees. The superintendent is basically the person in charge of all aspects of the park operation.

AH: [00:28:03] You're running the show.

GW: [00:28:03] Right.

GW: [00:28:04] So what is the difficult side of being a superintendent for you? What is the hardest part of your job?

GW: [00:28:10] Well sometimes you have to make difficult decisions that affect people's lives, whether it's a human resource decision or a resource decision itself. I know when we were at Allegheny Portage and Johnstown Flood the land acquisition processes that we went through—and we were still doing some of that at Colonial as well—that you would have inholders or people whose land had been purchased and they sold their land to the Park Service and they might be given a certain number of years before they would have to vacate the property. So in some cases you might have to be off your property in five years. So you have to really reorganize your life and in many cases, in some of the parks, when that acquisition took place, people had been in the same house for generations and there were connections that were very personal and very powerful with people. I had a high school friend who was—his parents were born in Ireland and he inherited a family farm back in Ireland. And when he was probably in his mid thirties he took his family and went back there. And I went to visit him there and he took me into the old house and he showed me—we stood in a room where his father and his grandfather were born. So those are the kind of connections that—I mean we can buy a property for a fair market value and we can make it look fair on paper but the personal impact that those kinds of acquisitions can have on people's lives is really hard to describe. And over the last probably twenty years the Park Service and probably the government in general is taking a little bit softer approach to land acquisition that typically—the trend is more toward willing seller, willing buyer, rather than a condemnation where the court just says, 'You're going to sell this land to the United States or to a state or whatever it is. And that's just the way it's going to be.' So unlike when you're building a highway and you really have to go a certain location and route and people don't have a choice, sometimes we can have choices in parks and we don't have to take land because we have to build this interchange here. We can take the land and then we can let somebody stay in it for five or ten years or as long as they live, in some cases. So they might have what we call a 'life estate,' that they can stay there as long as they live. And so that's a little bit more—easier to take approach, I guess you could say, than condemnation where you go in and just, 'You've got thirty days to get out.' We don't do that much anymore.

AH: [00:31:05] Can you tell me about a time where you had to deal with that directly?

GW: [00:31:05] Well we had longterm tenants on some properties at Colonial when I was there that—there were never—I never was involved in any terribly difficult evictions or anything there. So I really haven't had much experience in the parks that I've been in where we've done that because since I've been involved at this level of management we've taken a more soft approach to the land acquisition. But I know that there are a lot of hard feelings in some areas where that did take place.

AH: [00:31:42] Still today?

GW: [00:31:42] And one of my assignments several years ago—I went to the Natchez Trace Parkway and I served as acting superintendent there for eight months and we were doing some land acquisition there. That park—it's a 444 mile long Parkway and it's not just a strip of land because along that land there are significant cultural sites, one of which was a place called Emerald Mound which was a 16th century Indian burial mound. And we were still in the land acquisition phase for that land there. And so we did go through some condemnation proceedings then and in the name of public domain people are told you know, 'You're going to sell this and here's your price.' So we actually—we did sit in a hearing with the city of Natchez, I believe it was, where people came in and we actually listened to what they had to say about the prices that they were given for their land and that sort of thing so you could see the very personal stories that people had there.

AH: [00:32:53] And that makes your decision all that much harder.

GW: [00:32:53] Well the decision is already made by that point because those plans are basically made by the congressional mandates that say, 'This is how big the park is going to be and this is the land you're going to acquire.' So it's not like a superintendent comes in and says, 'We want that parcel of land.' The boundaries are pretty much done when the legislation is crafted. And so one way to look at that is the Congress is the legislative branch. They legislate. They create the law. We execute. So they tell us what to do and we do it, is essentially how that works.

AH: [00:33:30] You're the messenger.

GW: [00:33:30] Right.

[00:33:37] But I imagine things get really personal when people are talking about their lives and their land or—

AH: [00:33:37] Well if you're a land acquisition officer with the National Park Service and you're the face that goes to someone's house and says, 'I'm sorry, you're going to have to leave.' Then yeah that that gets real personal because that's the only person that that person who's being told that they have to leave can talk to.

AH: [00:33:56] It reminds me of a lot of local fights that happened here about driving on the beach at Fort Matanzas. I interviewed somebody for this project who still had a lot to say about that. Will you tell me about what happened?

GW: [00:33:57] When—we had started our general management planning process a number of years ago. Probably more than fifteen years ago now. We had to determine what was going to happen in the parks over the next ten to twenty years. What's the general theme going to be? What are our visitor experience going to be? And what or how are we going to protect the condition of the resource? And as we were doing that we did a boundary survey. And when I worked here as a ranger the boundary of the park was always considered to be the toe of the dunes. So everything beyond the toe of the dunes was outside of our jurisdiction and outside of our boundary. And that's where the driving on the beach went—was. And during the course of our management planning process we had a survey done and technically the boundary of the park is mean high water and mean high water means it's an average of where the high tide is over a ten or fifteen year period. So it meanders, it moves. Much to our surprise when we had that survey—boundary survey done, it wasn't the toe of the dunes. It was maybe half or two-thirds or a third the way down the beach. It depends on where you are because it's not only a meandering line, it wiggles as it goes along. So we learned that the boundary of the park was in a certain place and that inside the boundary there were vehicles that were driving. And our regulations prohibit driving within the boundaries of a national monument, period. And the Park Service has about thirteen different types of designations. We have National Parks, National Monuments, National Memorials, National Recreation Areas, National Seashores, Lakeshores, Parkways, Preserves. There are a number of designations. The only designations that can have driving off designated roads are National Seashores, National Lakeshores, National Recreation Areas and National Preserves. So when we found out where our boundary was and we recognized that we are not enforcing the law that we're supposed to be enforcing, basically that's when we shut down the driving on the beach. It wasn't a decision that we had much choice in. We don't get to select what laws we enforce and what laws we don't.

AH: [00:36:56] Right. But you had local hearings and everything.

GW: [00:36:57] A hearing would imply that you hear both sides of a story and then you make a decision. The decision whether or not to enforce a law is not a decision I get to make. So what we did was we notified the public what we were going to do and why we were going to have to do it.

AH: [00:37:19] I see. And what year was that?

GW: [00:37:20] 2009 is when we started the process and it became effective January 1st, 2010.

AH: [00:37:37] Does that mean that in the future you could have a new boundary survey and that could change? Is that a possibility?

GW: [00:37:37] Well the boundary changes because it's a meandering line. But until the law changes then nothing really changes.

AH: [00:37:46] I see. And when did you become superintendent for Fort Matanzas also?

GW: [00:37:46] January to 1992.

AH: [00:37:57] And that's not when you became superintendent for the Castillo?

GW: [00:37:57] Yes. That same time.

AH: [00:37:58] It was the same time. So you have both monuments.

GW: [00:37:59] Right.

AH: [00:38:07] Can you tell me a little bit about the difference between the two?

GW: [00:38:07] Well Castillo is twenty acres downtown St. Augustine and it's very visitor intensive experience and it's an urban experience. And Fort Matanzas is 300 acres. About 100 acres of it is on Anastasia Island. About 200 acres where the fort itself is on Rattlesnake Island. And we have a ferry service that runs visitors from the mainland or the southern tip of Anastasia Island over to the fort itself. And so it's a little less urban, I guess you could say, at Fort Matanzas.

AH: [00:38:47] So the Castillo is probably a little more popular?

[00:38:47] Well only because of the numbers. The parking lot at Fort Matanzas is so much smaller if if you could fit more cars in there we'd probably get more visitors. The other limiting factor at Fort Matanzas itself is the ferry boat can only take twenty-five people at a time and the the fort down there is just a watch tower. It's relatively small so we can't take big groups, whereas the Castillo, you could have 600 or 700 people in there at one time and it would be crowded but there's room for them. And Matanzas is just a little watch tower so—the other thing is with 300 acres, there are other options in terms of getting out walking around. There's a boardwalk at Fort Matanzas and you can see birds and you can walk down the beach and you can go fishing. And so there's a lot of different options at Fort Matanzas for recreational use.

AH: [00:40:00] That's a good point. Can you tell me a little bit about tourism in St. Augustine in general, for people who aren't familiar with St. Augustine?

[00:40:00] St. Augustine has a lot of appeal to people for a variety of reasons. Since it's the oldest continuously occupied European settlement in North America or as many people call it 'The Oldest City.' It has a unique character because the architecture has been so well preserved and there are cobblestone streets. There are just really rare and beautiful buildings here. So there's a real appeal there and certainly the fort is one of the attractions that people flock to. And the fort is considered to be kind of the cornerstone of the tourism trade here and it has been since the 19th century when people came to see different Indian tribes that were imprisoned here. So the sea itself is unique but you also have beautiful beaches and you have other recreational opportunities for people who, if they want to surf. It's become somewhat of a shopping mecca, I guess. We have outlet malls. We, a number of years ago, built the World Golf Hall of Fame here. So there is a lot of things that make St. Augustine a very interesting place to go for a diverse array of opportunities to take a vacation.

AH: [00:41:25] Has the fort's—the Castillo's place in St. Augustine tourism changed over the years?

GW: [00:41:25] Well I think it's percentage of reason for destination might have changed because maybe seventy-five years ago it was one of maybe ten or fifteen things to do. You know, the St. Augustine Alligator Farm been here a long time so that's always been a mainstay of tourism and as other attractions have been added there's just more to do. So I think we get a lot of repeat visitors because it's such a quaint experience for people and just a pleasant town and then there are more things to do. So maybe when your kids were small and you came here you did something and now you can do something else and still do some of the things you did, you can just do other things in addition to that. So it can kind of grow with a family, the opportunity to do different things on a vacation.

AH: [00:42:22] What kind of—who are the visitors who are coming to the Castillo? Are they families? Are they from certain countries? Why—who are the people that are coming?

GW: [00:42:24] First and foremost I would say somewhere between 30 and 40 percent of our visitors are Latinos who feel a personal connection to this story. If you walk around the fort, 30 to 40 percent of the people you hear will be speaking Spanish and that's their first language. So the Latino roots that this place has is very important to people because of those connections. And you will see military aficionados who will come because of the military history here and there are people who just like architecture and so that not only would it be the fort, but the architecture

of the buildings in town—the churches and some of the other structures here that have been around for so long. And so the we do get a lot of international visitors. We get a lot of visitors from all over the world.

AH: [00:43:38] That's really interesting. That seems like it would be the case. And recently St. Augustine turned 450, and I understand you were on the steering committee for the 450th.

GW: [00:43:39] Well we had a lot of people doing a lot of different things to make that happen. And the federal commission that was established for the 450th anniversary, I was a member of that.

AH: [00:43:55] And what did that entail for you?

GW: [00:43:55] Well that's a real interesting story because the legislation that created that federal commission was patterned after Jamestown which turned 400 in 2007. And I also spent, as I said, five years at Colonial National Historical Park which includes Jamestown. So I'm very familiar with the Jamestown story and the Jamestown had their 400th anniversary. They had a similar—their legislation was, again—ours was patterned after theirs. And they had \$400,000 annual appropriation to give grants and put on educational programs and really do some things that they were able to do to celebrate bring people in. Big educational component to that event. And so we thought that would be a great idea. And so the legislation was supposed to allow for appropriation for the St. Augustine 450th of \$500,000 a year. But we never got a dime from Congress. So what the commission had envisioned and what we had talked about doing patterned in many ways after the Jamestown 400th never came to pass. The other thing that happened in the Virginia Jamestown Virginia process was the state of Virginia also geared up and they had money that they contributed and they partnered with the National Park Service to to fund different activities and seminars and things like that. And it really was a well carried out program. They had funding to hire an executive director and they leveraged programs with the Department of Defense. So they had a \$400,000 appropriation, they had a partnership with the state who was expending funds and they had the Department of Defense that was kicking in money for different activities and events. So they had a pretty lucrative war chest there to fund things. And we never got a dime appropriated from Congress.

AH: [00:46:03] Why?

GW: [00:46:03] Things were different in the years leading up to 2007 than they were leading up to the year 2015. A lot of things had happened in Congress that tightened up spending. We had in 2013 sequestration where we basically had to, in the middle of the fiscal year, cut federal budgets. Federal workers went on unpaid furloughs because the money wasn't there. Federal

appropriations were a lot tighter then. And the other reason I think that it was a tougher road to hoe would be that Jamestown—it was the English settlement. Who won North America? The English did. The Spanish left in 1821 when they left the Florida territory and it became part of the United States. So if you fast forward almost 200 years you'll see that most of the population is going to study history of the English and the other Europeans who ended up being here. The Spanish—we weren't speaking Spanish in the United States. So there was just much more awareness and unless you grew up in Florida you didn't really study a lot about Florida history and so the appeal of this Latino heritage here, even though the largest growing segment of our population is Latino and Hispanic now, that wasn't really catching on in Congress and there's just not that much awareness in the other forty-nine states of the significance that St. Augustine's in Florida's history played. So I think that's another factor in why we didn't fare well but things were a lot different in Congress in that eight year span.

AH: [00:47:50] So what were some of the visions that you all had imagining that you were going to have \$500,000 coming your way?

GW: [00:47:50] The legislation authorized us to give grants to different entities who would put on events so you could have some sort of event if you got the grant that you could put on an event that would celebrate the 450th and the other thing that we wanted to do that Jamestown did was they had educational symposia that they put on and they would bring in scholars and they would talk about different aspects of the history and the colonization and you could sponsor archaeological digs, educational programs where you could bring kids in and do hands-on living history stuff. There would have been a lot of things that could have happened if there had been any funding.

AH: [00:48:44] And what was the Plan B? What ended up happening?

GW: [00:48:45] Well what happened was the city of St. Augustine picked up the ball and ran with it. And they did the best they could with their limited appropriations from their city coffers. And and they put together a pretty impressive series of special events and activities, federal appropriations notwithstanding. The King and Queen of Spain came here and a lot of other entertainment venues were packed and so there was a lot of effort that the city and their staff and their commissioners put forth to make that happen. A tremendous amount of pride in St. Augustine about their heritage. So they did the best they could with what they had left to work with that we had envisioned a really strong partnership with the city, if that funding ever came through but it never did.

AH: [00:49:40] What did the Castillo do? Did you have special events or anything?

GW: [00:49:40] We did a number of 450th type events, mostly just talk about the significance in the founding of St. Augustine. It's related to our story but 1565 to 1672 when construction started, there were a lot of other things going on. So we always—to put things in perspective and to put it in context we would always talk about how St. Augustine was founded and even the factors that came up to them this being established. So we did interpretive programs and talks and things that related to that. But it was—the 1565 period is not one of our main topics of interpretation because that was 100 years before the structure that we're here to talk about was built. So we did some some programming but we didn't focus a lot on it.

AH: [00:50:42] Right, right. That makes sense. I told you I was going to keep this under an hour so I'm going to start winding down but I just have a few more questions, if that's okay.

GW: [00:50:42] Okay.

AH: [00:50:47] What's a favorite part of your job today?

GW: [00:50:47] It's hard to pick a favorite part because every day is different. And the best part of the job is you can walk over to the fort at any day you want and you can see a little kid get a junior ranger badge, you can see one of our rangers helping somebody who fell down and skinned their knee, you can see a smile on the face of somebody who came here seventy years ago when they were a little kid and they always wanted to come back. You can see them looking inside these rooms and start to imagine what it was like to be a member of the Apaches that were imprisoned here and see their carvings on the walls and you see a little Apache kid or a Seminole kid whose ancestors were imprisoned here and they understand the significance of what that meant to their culture. And you hear an elder from one of those tribes talk about their personal experience. There's a lot of things that just make this—and I still have the same feeling that I did when I was walking up and down the C & O Canal thirty-eight years ago. I can't believe I get paid to do this some days.

AH: [00:52:06] That's great. What's the hardest part of your job?

GW: [00:52:06] Well the hardest part I think is the decisions you have to make when you can't hire everybody that you want to hire and people who want to work longer in a year but they can't because we don't have the money or we have to go to see a visitor get a serious injury or something along those lines, or one of our employees get sick. We've had employees pass away. And those are the kinds of things that really affect you because we become a family in this organization particularly because we're so passionate about what we do and we work together well and we care about each other. And so we we deal with those things just like we would with our own family.

AH: [00:52:58] How many employees do you have between the two forts?

GW: [00:52:58] What about fifty right now.

AH: [00:53:08] And do they—do you just have a Castillo group and then a Matanzas group or do they do interchanging—?

GW: [00:53:08] For the most part it's an interchanging responsibility. Our interpretive people rotate. The people who collect fees here at Castillo, they're pretty much here. We might get them down to Matanzas to do things. But our interpreters rotate to some extent. Our maintenance people rotate because we don't have that many of them anyway so they have to really be multitasking. Our law enforcement people rotate. Our natural resource management—we have one person who does that and he has a seasonal person in the summer. Most of the natural resource stuff is down there but—so our cultural resource people that have to do with the historic structures and that we have obviously crossover there for both places. So for the most part what we try to do is share and interact and integrate as much as possible between the two sites.

AH: [00:54:04] That makes sense. Do you have a favorite fort?

GW: [00:54:04] No I don't.

AH: [00:54:16] Maybe you're not allowed to say that [laughs]. The last question I have is what is something that people don't know about being superintendent? What is something you would say?

GW: [00:54:16] Well I think it's like any leadership position that sometimes—that the challenge to make the best decision is to get the best input and to get the best input you really need to communicate with people who have the knowledge. So whether it's our partners in the community or our park staff or our visitors, when we're making decisions where we have the latitude to change something, we want to make sure we make the best decision possible. So we need to consult and the buck does stop with the superintendent. And so we want to make sure a decision that we make is the right one. So we also have a pretty good support structure with other superintendents around the country who have been doing this for a long time and probably have had similar situations. So we network and we talk to each other and then in our regional office we have regional directors and deputy regional directors and other professionals who can help us make the best decisions. But it's a wonderful opportunity and you just have to make sure that what I always do is just try to do the right thing and the right thing is not always real clear

because sometimes there are a lot of different options that you might have but that's why you consult me you talk to people and you try to do the right thing.

AH: [00:55:31] Everyone needs help.

GW: [00:55:35] Yep.

AH: [00:55:35] Thank you. Is there anything else you want to add before I turn this off?

GW: [00:55:36] Can't think of a thing.

AH: [00:55:40] Thank you so much.

[End interview]