

From Citizen Action to Citizen Soldier—The partnership between The National Park Service, the National Guard, The River Alliance, The Richland County Legislative Delegation and Richland County that designed and built the Harry R.E. Hampton Visitor Center and Entrance Road at the Congaree Swamp National Monument (now Congaree National Park) in Columbia, South Carolina. A gift to the People of the United States.

From Citizen Action to Citizen Soldier was the motto used by the local leaders of the Partnership to convey what we were going to do in the design and construction of a new entrance road, parking lots, and a new visitor center in the Congaree Swamp National Monument. The new facilities were to be worthy of the citizen action efforts of Harry R.E. Hampton, a newspaperman who first raised in the late fifties the issue of preservation of the incredible venue known to locals as the Congaree Swamp, and the powerful grassroots citizens effort that led the United States Congress to create the Congaree Swamp National Monument in 1976.

The new facilities were to be built by the citizen soldiers of the National Guard who would come from units from more than twenty states. Each unit would spend two weeks on the project, complete their portion of the mission and hand off the project to the next unit. The project began with road construction in the summer of 1998 and culminated with the dedication of the new Harry R.E. Hampton Visitor Center in early 2001. The mission was accomplished with only two people from the South Carolina Air National Guard on site from the beginning of construction to the final inspections for occupancy!

With what will soon be ten years of reflection on this project, my admiration for what the partnership accomplished grows by the day. The remarkable cooperation between all the partners, first to the vision and then to the mission, sets a standard for all agencies and organizations whether federal, state or local in joining together for the best interests of all concerned. As in all good partnerships, each party gave a little, compromised a little, contributed a little, and in this case, risked a lot.

The partnership paid off as all well executed ones do, with a synergy that created much more than any partner ever imagined. To support the new facilities, the South Carolina Department of Transportation replaced the aging bridge on the secondary road leading to the site (enabling school and tour buses to use the most direct route to the site). The South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism and local governments increased the public promotion efforts, which prompted more local and national media coverage of the Congaree Swamp National Monument. The new facilities and the increased visibility of our priceless site allowed the National Park Service to pay full tribute to Harry Hampton's original vision by designation of the site as Congaree National Park, the first National Park in South Carolina. Subsequent land acquisitions have added both to the size of the Park and its potential missions. Visitation numbers now rank Congaree National Park as one of the top ten destination sites in the state. The new facilities and the renovated and remodeled former headquarters, now allow education efforts that serve K-12 populations, the general public and higher education, both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Visitation, exploration and education have contributed greatly to the local economy and local interest and concern for the ecosystem and Congaree National Park is at an all time high.

We told each person who came to the project, to work, to visit, to contribute to the thank you parties for the Guard units, or who in any way became connected with the effort, that they were participating in the creation of a gift to the people of the United States. I believe that more now than ever.

Background for the Project Partnership

With the formation in 1995 of the River Alliance, a local non-profit agency to promote the utilization of the three rivers that flow through Columbia, South Carolina, the Congaree Swamp National Monument became a key piece of the strategy to connect rural Richland County to downtown Columbia, South Carolina, by developing new historical and cultural destinations. The CSNM was seen by many as an underutilized and underdeveloped resource but nonetheless a potential lead element in the long term eco-tourism strategy.

There were several major obstacles to the CSNM becoming a focal point for the river related economic and tourism strategy. The first and most serious was access to the CNM. The only way into the CSNM was a privately owned dirt road. The family who owned the road had agreed to allow access upon the creation of the Monument because they were told that there would be a new entrance road "soon". Twenty years later they were still waiting for the road. Fortunately for them, the Congaree National Monument didn't generate much traffic because of limited facilities at the site. The visitor center was small and cramped and had no bathroom capability for group visits. The bridge on the small secondary road that served as the quickest access to the site was judged not capable of supporting loaded school buses. The conditions in 1996 were hardly conducive to Congaree National Monument becoming the centerpiece for any kind of economic, educational or recreational strategy related to the Rivers.

Fortunately for all of us, the discussions and strategy sessions and afternoon and evening sessions over cocktail napkins led to the enlistment of the four most important people in the partnership that was later to be formalized. These four people not only were crucial in the formation of the initial steps of the plan, but were also to become the chief advocates within their respective organizations and were responsible for bringing their agencies and organizations into the fold.

Mike Dawson has served as the Executive Director of the River Alliance since its inception in 1995. As a retired US Army officer, he was fully aware of the capabilities of the military and the National Guard in particular. He also was cognizant of the fact that the National Guard had authorization to work on federal properties and knew all about the mechanics of making that happen. Mike is an engineer with a wide range of projects to his military credit and his knowledge of the construction process proved valuable in his recruitment of the second member of the team, Mike Stroble, a retired South Carolina Air National Guardsman who had served for many years in the civil engineering squadron.

Chief Stroble, one of those rare individuals who spent his entire career looking out for the organization he loved, the South Carolina Air National Guard, and the people in it, knew everything about not only the SC National Guard, but also the workings of the National Guard Bureau. That Chief could pick up the phone and talk to anyone up the chain of command and be known and respected was of immense help in gaining the commitment of the National Guard to the project. Mike Stroble believed in the National Guard system and especially in his own South Carolina Air National Guard. His faith in his fellow guardsmen and his belief that they could handle the construction project mission inspired all of us to continue to map out the project proposal for presentation and official endorsement by all of the Partners.

When Dawson and Stroble had convinced each other that the project was a possibility, they began collaborations with the third key member of the team, Martha Bogle, the Superintendent at the Congaree Swamp National Monument. Martha, vetting the project so thoroughly and asking a thousand questions, saw the possibility. She was an advocate for the site, her people, and the National Park Service mission from the start. Fully aware of any career implications, she became a leader in the formation of the partnership and brought with her a staff ally with boundless energy and local standing that became important. Fran Rametta had served as a National Park Ranger at CSNM from the early years and had become a known and well liked and respected member of the community. His boundless and enthusiastic support of the project, both in concept and later after approval, could not be praised enough. Fran and Martha were glue that held the staff together during any bumps in the process and there were some for sure.

The initial project concept was brilliant. Get the partners to agree that we can replace the current privately owned dirt road access with a road on the National Park Service property. The construction would be done by the National Guard. When the road project is successful, we propose the construction of the new Harry R.E. Hampton Visitor Center with the same process.

The road project was such a success that the private dirt road was replaced with a paved road and three wonderfully scaled parking lots at a minimal cost to the National Park Service. That set the stage for the most important discussion of the construction project and the rest is history.

While I was only involved in this project from a local perspective, I must say that our National Park Service is to be commended for being a valuable and vital partner in this story. While I do not know the names and titles of everyone in the NPS who was involved beyond Martha Bogle and the incredible staff assigned to Congaree, I do know that the project would not have happened without support all the way up the chain of command. I also know that there were plenty of junctures where support could have been withheld or delays created. There was never anything but support for the mission and the NPS staff displayed a wonderfully cooperative attitude all the way to project completion. As a nation, we are to be grateful to the National Park Service that they ventured down this unusual path to provide this gift to the American People.

There are two more projects in Columbia, South Carolina that are near and dear to my heart, and the only way they will ever be completed is through some type of partnership similar to the one I have described. The National Park Service was the first phone call the River Alliance made.

As an illustration of the National Park Service attitude that permeated the Congaree Swamp Partnership, I want to pass on one story that was very important to me.

During the construction project, one of the original citizen action group members, the President of Congaree Action Now, Jim Elder, a science teacher in Virginia, visited the project, one of the few times he had returned to the Swamp since the citizen rallies in the 1970's. He was so proud that the Congaree Swamp was to get facilities that would now do it justice, he was in tears.

I asked Jim what he would put in the exhibits that would convey to visitors, Congaree the place. Without hesitation, he said, "I would put a big Cypress tree in there, big enough that people could walk into it. Then I would have the sounds of the forest inside so that little ones could hear and feel the forest. The tree trunk should go all the way to the ceiling (30 feet high) so that rangers could tell them that in the forest outside that tree would go another 100 feet or more high". That's what people should take away from the building.

Today, if you visit the Harry R.E. Hampton Visitor Center, Jim Elder's vision is the focal point of the main exhibit hall. Executed perfectly. You only have to watch the children to understand.