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Supervisor Is Forced Out At Historic Site

By JOEL KELLER (NYT) 912 words

MORRISTOWN -- WASHINGTON only slept here. The battle came more than 200 years later.

These days, when Michael D. Henderson begins talking about the Morristown National Historical Park -- where Washington and his troops spent two crucial winters during the Revolutionary War -- it is difficult to stop him. His enthusiasm can be seen in the grand gestures he uses while describing his plans to upgrade and renovate the 67-year-old park, the nation's first such historical area.

But ask the 40-year-old Mr. Henderson about his future with the National Park Service, and his mannerisms change sharply. He leans his elbow on a table, forehead in hand, and his speech becomes more deliberate.

"I just no longer feel I have the ability to make a difference in this organization," he said.

Mr. Henderson, who was superintendent of the park for about 5 of the 18 years that he has been with the National Park Service, was reassigned last month to curate a new exhibition in Manhattan after disagreeing with a local preservation organization that helps the federal agency oversee the historical attraction here. When the smoke cleared, three members of the association board had resigned in protest.

He said the trouble began after the president of the Washington Association of New Jersey, Barbara Mitnick, disagreed with parts of his plan, approved by the Park Service, concerning a renovation of a museum at the Ford Mansion, Washington's headquarters during the winters of 1777, 1779 and 1780.

The original plan, approved by the design advisory board of the Park Service in April, called for most of a \$3 million to \$4 million federal grant to go toward rehabilitating the building, which was opened to visitors in 1937 and has fallen into some disrepair. Walls have been damaged by water, toxic mold has to be removed in the library, and the roof and electrical wiring have to be replaced.

But the association, which was founded in 1837, wanted most of the money to go toward increasing the amount of exhibit space, which it said was important to help raise money for other phases of a renovation that could cost as much \$9 million.

Soon afterward, Representative Rodney P. Frelinghuysen, who had helped secure the federal grant, said the plans had to be reconciled or the money would be in jeopardy. In response, Ms. Mitnick presented an alternative proposal that added space while addressing some of Mr. Henderson's concerns, and that plan was subsequently approved by the association board and the Park Service.

"It's far easier for people to give money to something new and visionary than to dry out moldy documents," Mr. Frelinghuysen, a Republican from Morristown, said later in an interview.

But the association did not stop there. During a meeting in May, members of the association expressed displeasure with Mr. Henderson's renovation plan and with Mr. Henderson himself. According to Ms. Mitnick, he had become unresponsive to phone calls and e-mail messages -- especially since the dismissal of the association's executive director, Sharon Reider, who had worked closely with Mr. Henderson at the mansion.

"She was not living up to what we expected," Ms. Mitnick said.

Though she declined to provide any details, she said, "There were problems with her work."

Then, last month, two weeks after the new plan was announced, Mr. Henderson said he was informed by the deputy regional director of the Park Service, Chrysandra Walter, that the Morristown job was "not going to work out anymore," and he was asked to list his preferences for a new position.

For her part, Ms. Walter says that Mr. Henderson "misunderstood" the purpose of the conversation and that he was being reassigned only temporarily. But days later, the Park Service said in a news release that Mr. Henderson was being reassigned.

In trying to explain the conflicting signals coming from an agency that Mr. Frelinghuysen described as "very dysfunctional," Ms. Walter said, "We were still in the process of trying to figure out who would be the best person to take on these jobs in New York."

To Mr. Henderson, the association's dissatisfaction with his work was "a catalyst" in having him reassigned. "Certainly, Barbara's going to Philadelphia made it happen, but there had been something going on before that," he said.

In response, Ms. Mitnick said, "He's blaming me, and he's blaming the Washington Association for his own failings."

Trying to put the best face on the situation, Ms. Walter of the Park Service said that Mr. Henderson's new assignment would allow his career to grow -- an assertion he challenged. "Why didn't they offer me something of equivalent rank and responsibility?" he asked.

But Ms. Walter dismissed his concern, saying: "It's very rare that a superintendent will stay at a national park for a long period of time, and he's been there for nearly four years. A lot of employees want to make a career out of one particular park, and it's not good for the Park Service."

CAPTIONS: Photos: The buildings at Morristown National Historical Park, where Washington spent two winters during the Revolution, are in need of repair.; Michael D. Henderson, above, supervisor of the historic site, was forced out after disagreeing with a local preservationist group over repairs and new construction. (Photographs by Frank C. Dougherty for The New York Times)

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