

Steve T. Phan received an **M.A. in History with a concentration in Public History** in 2017. His degree opened doors which led him to his current position as Chief of Interpretation at **Camp Nelson National Monument**. Read on to learn about Park Rangers and Steve's fond memories of MTSU.

How does a day in the life of a Park Ranger look?

The Day in the Life of a Park Ranger is both challenging and fulfilling. I serve as the Chief of Interpretation at Camp Nelson National Monument—one of the newest units of the National Park Service. The NPS preserves and interprets the historic and archeological resources of a U.S. Army supply depot that became one of the largest Civil War-era recruitment and training centers for United States Colored Troops and an African American refugee camp. The monument is a testament to the courage, resiliency, and perseverance of those seeking freedom from slavery and pursuing self-determination during and after the Civil War.

Our dedicated team is the first permanent staff on site, and we are tasked with developing every aspect of the park. It's a privilege to serve in this position—my first supervisory role. I spent 10 years serving as front-line park ranger and interpreter. As the Chief of Interpretation, I've taken a step away from the front-line to focus on all major projects related to interpretation, education, visitor services, and community outreach.

What inspired you to become a Ranger?

My passion and interest in the American Civil War and history inspired me to become a park ranger. The NPS administers historic sites across the country, including Civil War battlefields, homes, and related units, and I desired to find a career where I could work in the field of history, engage with visitors, and preserve our public lands.

What is your favorite part of your profession?

There are many. I cannot help but reiterate my gratitude for the opportunity and privilege to work in the National Park Service—an agency funded by the American people for the American people and for visitors across the globe. I'm fortunate to work with talented and thoughtful colleagues who share similar passions with natural and cultural resources; engaging the public on the national significance of the sites we managed, especially people of color and underserved communities; and preserving and protecting these sites for current and future generations.

What takeaways have you been able to bring to your career from your graduate program at MTSU?

The graduate program at MTSU, especially working with Dr. Robert Hunt, was instrumental to my development as a historian, both in academia and public history. He challenged my research, writing, and very approach to the field of history—the way I read and interpreted primary resources, forged and supported arguments, and developed my prose. It's tools and skills I use daily, and I'm incredibly grateful for the experience. It was challenging and unrelenting, both worth every minute.

What is your favorite memory from your time at MTSU?

The people. The relationships. The mentors. My favorite memories at MTSU revolve around people. From mentors to support staff and colleagues, it was special. I maintain close relationships with many of these people a half decade after graduation. We support and collaborate with each other on work projects; visit and spend time with each other at locations around the country; and provide hope, support, and love. That's what it's all about.

Do you have any advice for current or future grad students?

Challenge Yourself

Take The Road Less Traveled

Understand that this a long, winding road and that you may have to find a different route to discover your destination.

Forge and Maintain Relationships

Be Open to all opportunities that may not be part of your conceived plans

Adapt to new surroundings, people, and work environment

Never stop growing