

TRIBUTE

Remembering Brian Lambert, a special natural resource specialist

NPS PHOTOS (2)



NPS PHOTO BY BRIAN LAMBERT

By Betsie Blumberg

Brian Lambert was the first natural resource specialist to work at Valley Forge National Historical Park, a small and very popular cultural park in the highly urbanized Philadelphia metropolitan area. He served in that position from 1986 until November 2003 when, after a short illness, he died at age 62. Valley Forge has lost an unusually insightful, quietly determined advocate, extraordinarily devoted to managing the park's resources both to enhance the cultural landscape and to serve the hundreds of thousands of visitors annually who use the park for recreation in a region where Valley Forge is one of the largest open spaces.

Brian was fascinated by, and a dedicated steward of, the natural resources he found in the midst of this intensely developed landscape. He saw the city as a resource for the park and encouraged interested scientists from the nearby universities to do research there. The neighbors, likewise, see the park as an important resource and have always been very concerned about whatever goes on there. Kristina Heister, now inventory and monitoring coordinator of the Mojave Network, worked as a biological technician under Brian for several years. She recalls that "everything you do at Valley Forge starts with a public relations campaign." Brian was the right man for a park in that situation and the right person in the right place can get a lot done.

The restoration of Valley Creek is a case in point. The park is at the bottom of the Valley Creek watershed. When Brian came to the park, intensive development upstream was creating excessive stormwater flooding,

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(Left) Brian Lambert pauses in a cave entrance following an enjoyable and productive survey at Valley Forge in 1987. (Middle) Brian as integrated pest manager. (Right) Valley Creek at flood stage.

sending so much sediment down the creek that aquatic life was being degraded, the stream banks were eroding, and archeological resources were being lost. The problem required mitigation throughout the watershed.

To become the creek's advocate in this larger community, Brian devoted himself to learning all about stormwater management, consulting experts and relevant authorities, and attracting a coalition of concerned local environmental groups. As Superintendent Arthur Stewart put it, "We had '100-year floods' a couple of times a year and Brian did more than any single person to make that fact known and to encourage a plan to do something about it." With his expertise, his contacts, his eloquence as a grant writer, and his quiet power of persuasion as a speaker, Brian became an effective presenter for Valley Creek's case.

Years of organizing by the coalition and innumerable meetings with five different townships and two counties finally succeeded in persuading the state, in 1993, to change its designation of Valley Creek to an "Exceptional Value Stream," thereby requiring municipalities to permit development only if there will be no degradation to the creek. This triumph was followed by a successful appeal for post-construction regulation requiring that runoff be no greater than it would have

been if the site were an undisturbed meadow. Largely for his efforts to protect Valley Creek, Brian won the National Park Service's annual Trish Patterson-Student Conservation Association Award for Natural Resource Management in a Small Park in 2002.



He loved his park, arriving at dawn and staying late. In 1999, when Hurricane Floyd washed over Valley Forge, the staff took cover, but Brian was missing. He was finally spotted up on Mt. Joy. He had wanted to see how the hurricane affected Valley Creek. This was a 500-year flood and Brian was out there taking pictures as the storm raged. The park now has rare photos of Valley Creek at hurricane flood stage (see photo on right, page 49).

Creating tallgrass meadows from the lawns was another of Brian's big projects. When Brian came to Valley Forge, all the grounds, except for the forested area, were mowed. He had a different vision for the park. Brian argued that tallgrass meadows would be more like the landscape that George Washington found when he chose Valley Forge for the 1777–1778 winter encampment, and that borders mowed around the meadows could define the boundaries of the original farms, adding interpretive value. The meadows would also invite wildlife. This time, instead of finding many allies in the community, Brian had to convince the community, and the park staff as well, that eliminating some of the lawn would not make the park look neglected. He started with a small area, and when that was accepted, more lawn became meadow. Now there are 925 acres (375 ha) of meadow and such diversity of habitat that the National Audubon Society is considering part of the park for designation as an “Important Birding Area.” The number of birds, especially raptors and ground-nesters, and the populations of herpetofauna and other wildlife have all greatly increased.

The scourge of many parks, exotic invasive plants, is rampant at Valley Forge. Brian knew that they can never be completely removed, but he worked tirelessly to control them. Kristina Heister remembers him very often bent under a pesticide backpack (middle photo, page 49) spraying the mile-a-minute weed, a seemingly endless job.

Brian Lambert understood that history happens in a place because of the attributes of that place. At Valley Forge those attributes were in the landscape. His advocacy for the resources within that landscape has broadened the park's natural and cultural resources management goals. Brian's knowledgeable and supportive presence is missed by very many friends and colleagues in the park and in the community, who have proposed naming a tributary of Valley Creek after him and informally renaming the stretch of Valley Creek that runs through the park “Lambert's Reach.” His monuments survive: a clear and serene creek; tall grass meadows busy with wildlife; a community cadre of concerned, active advocates for Valley Creek; and the rich legacy of the many projects he initiated and accomplished at Valley Forge.

About the author

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