

Spring 2015

Interview of Stuart Leibiger, Ph.D.

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FIELD NOTES

Interviewee: Dr. Stuart Leibiger

Interviewer: Gina L. Bixler

Interview date: April 1, 2015 (afternoon) & April 2, 2014 (morning)

Interview location: La Salle University, Olney Hall, Dr. Leibiger's office

Field notes written on April 14, 2015

The Interviewee:

Stuart Eric Leibiger, Ph.D. was born on March 22, 1965 in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, the youngest of four children. He spent all of his life along the northeastern seaboard of the United States. He was raised in Connecticut and graduated from the University of Virginia and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill before settling in the Delaware Valley. He joined the La Salle University history department in 1997 after working at the University of Princeton for a time. Shortly after being hired as assistant professor of history at La Salle, Dr. Leibiger adapted his dissertation into his first book *Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic*. This would become the centerpiece in Dr. Leibiger's anthology of works on the first president of the United States. Just before his fiftieth birthday in 2015, the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Association named Dr. Leibiger as the recipient of its annual award. Given to someone who continues to perpetuate the memory and values of George Washington, this is truly a lifetime achievement award for Dr. Leibiger, as he always wanted to be an academic historian and has devoted his life's work to the study of the founding fathers.

The Interviewer:

I, Gina Lee Bixler, earned my B.A. in history and secondary education with concentrations in American history and social studies, as well as a music history minor, at La Salle University in 2014. Currently, I am enrolled in La Salle's history M.A. program, in the public history track. I am a certified social studies teacher in grades seven through twelve in the state of Pennsylvania. Throughout my undergraduate career, I served as research assistant at the Fleisher Collection. I currently still have professional ties there as a curatorial assistant on a museum exhibition about the collection.

Background:

As a student in La Salle University's History M.A. program, I am required to take a course in oral history methods; however, because I am in the public history track of the program, oral history is, potentially, an incredibly useful tool for me. From the coursework I have done so far, including practice interviews and looking over the criteria for professional interviews, I have come to the conclusion that the best interviews are produced when the interviewer has background knowledge of the topic of the interview. Having been a student in Dr. Leibiger's HIS 650 (American Readings) class my first semester in graduate school, I learned a little bit about him and his area of expertise. When I was told I would be able to interview a La Salle faculty member for this project, I immediately thought of Dr. Leibiger. He graciously agreed to be interviewed.

Though the interview was not conducted until April, at the end of January I sent Dr. Leibiger an email asking if he would participate in the La Salle oral history project. I told him I believed he would be a great interviewee, despite the fact he was a little young to do a life history at only fifty years old. Dr. Leibiger has accomplished a great deal in a shorter amount of time than many of his peers. Further, having been conducted a little over a month after receiving his lifetime achievement award, this interview seemed to come at an opportune moment, allowing Dr. Leibiger to reflect on his many accomplishments in a truly milestone year. This interview discusses Dr. Leibiger's biographical information, his family history, his early education, his time as an undergraduate student at University of Virginia, his time as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, his work at the University of Princeton, his work at La Salle University (including rising from junior faculty member to full professor and history department chair), the current state of his career, and finally, Dr. Stuart Leibiger, the man.

Coming up with this interview format and questions took a great deal of time and background research even though the questions follow a logical order. I believe researching and preparing these questions was one of the things I did best in the interview process. I'm very glad I spent the time doing all this though because it really helped the interview. This was really because of Dr. Leibiger. He asked that I send him the questions in advance. Consequently, I spent a lot of time on the first draft of questions so they would be satisfactory to him. Dr. Leibiger's CV was probably my biggest asset in composing questions as it provided an overall outline of his professional life. Finding details on his personal life was a bit harder, but I did ask around campus about him. A background interview conversation with La Salle history department administrative assistant, Lauren De Angelis, was particularly helpful for some great personal anecdotes. Further the acknowledgement sections of his two books, *Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic* and *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe* were also helpful in learning some personal information about Dr. Leibiger. Of course the books themselves served as a great resource on Dr. Leibiger's work, as well as a number of his published articles and appearances in documentaries. Finally, I used Dr. John Rossi's book *Living the Promise*, which was written to commemorate La Salle University's 150th anniversary, to get a

concept of how much La Salle has grown and evolved since Dr. Leibiger joined the faculty in 1997. I also did consult La Salle's digital archives, but everything I found there was already covered in Dr. Leibiger's CV. La Salle's oral histories with other history professors, however, helped a great deal in structuring my interview.

Dr. Leibiger and I did not meet in person to discuss the interview before we recorded it. I was okay with this because I knew him and I did not think a pre-interview was necessary. Once he approved the questions I sent him around the end of February or the beginning of March, we agreed to meet twice in April to record the interview. Some people do their sessions a few days or even weeks apart. Dr. Leibiger had a very busy schedule this semester and was really only available to be interviewed April 1 and April 2; however, I liked having the session so close to each other. I think it prevented the interview from being repetitive because we remembered what we had discussed the day before. Assigning different topics to different sessions also helped to keep repetition to a minimum. We agreed to meet for 90 minutes both days. I planned to record only 60 minutes each day, but wanted the extra time in case there were any problems. I'm glad I did this because the total interview time from both sessions was approximately 2 hours and 45 minutes. The first hour was done in the first session and the rest during the second session. Consequently, I went over the time I had booked with Dr. Leibiger on the second day. This is why the recording of session No. 2 breaks after 1 hour and 20 minutes. I had to ask him if we could finish that day or if he needed me to come back. I did not use the extra time the first day even though I booked it because we would have had to stop the recording in the middle of a big topic: Dr. Leibiger's time at La Salle. Though the stop the second day does interrupt the flow a little, I think we were able to get back into it very quickly. There is also a recording break halfway through the first recording session because I needed to check the recording equipment. I did not want to stop the flow of the interview, but I thought it better to do that than risk the equipment malfunctioning. Overall, I think both breaks were beneficial because they allowed me and Dr. Leibiger time to get our thoughts together.

Both Dr. Leibiger and I seemed to get more relaxed as the interview progressed. Again, I think going over the questions in advance helped him to open up more and helped me stay on track. Though I did let the interview flow on its own instead of asking the questions in the order I had sent them to him, this also led to a few problems for me. Because I am still new to oral history, it can be a little difficult to listen to the interviewee speak while trying to make sure I had my next questions ready to go so the interview keeps moving. One does not want to repeat things that have already been said or lose the flow by failing to ask a good follow up question. After listening to the recording, I think I did pretty well with follow up questions for the most part, though there were a few times when I thought I should have asked one and I did not. Finally, though I had written the questions before the interview, I did not read them verbatim from a piece of paper because I wanted the interview to sound like a conversation. I fear a few times because of the way I naturally speak, the questions may have sounded leading when I did not intend them to be. Thankfully, this did not affect Dr. Leibiger's answers.

Writing the log of the interview was an interesting process. Because it is not a transcription of exact quotes from the interviewee, I took greater license in my interpretation of Dr. Leibiger's words. Though I do have to say, I tried to remain very true to what he was saying and I think of my log as a hybrid between a transcription and a traditional log. I do not use direct quotes very much because the entire thing is really more of my paraphrasing his words, rather than summarizing them. I am happy with the way the log turned out and how it compares to the original interview recording. Overall, I am very pleased with this interview and most importantly, so is my interviewee.