

## Interview of Dr. Stuart Leibiger

**Interviewer:** Gina Bixler

**Date:** April 1, 2014 at 1:00PM and April 2, 2014 at 10:30AM

**Recorded at:** History Department Chair Office, La Salle University. Office of Dr. Stuart Leibiger, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Olney Hall, 1900 W. Olney Ave, Philadelphia, PA 19144.

**Index created by:** Gina Bixler

**Recording Equipment:** Apple MacBook Pro Laptop using eXtra Voice Recorder application, MP3 format converted to WAV using Audacity software

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### Abstract

Dr. Stuart Eric Leibiger 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. 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.

## **Index of Interview No. 1 (Part 1) – Interviewed April 1, 2015**

0:00:02

Introduction of interviewer and interviewee, brief biographical background on Dr. Leibiger, and information on the interview, including date, location, purpose and where the interview will be deposited, and finally verbal consent to record.

### **Biographical Information**

0:00:47

Dr. Leibiger was born on March 22, 1965 in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. When he was five years old, his father lost his job as an engineer in New Jersey. The family moved to Connecticut so Dr. Leibiger's father could take a job working for the Navy as a civilian in New London (there were many Naval facilities in the area). Dr. Leibiger remembers the drive and move from their old home in West Orange, New Jersey to their new home in East Lyme, Connecticut in August of 1970. He lived in the same house in East Lyme until he left to attend undergraduate school at the University of Virginia in 1983.

0:03:03

Dr. Leibiger describes the East Lyme neighborhood he lived in as somewhere between suburban and rural and upper middle class. His family had a colonial style house on three quarters of an acre; like many of the houses in the neighborhood, it was on a cul-de-sac. The neighborhood kids played together often. Dr. Leibiger describes his upbringing as typical of living in the suburbs in the 1970s.

0:04:45

Dr. Leibiger is the youngest of four children. He has two sisters and one brother: Carol who is nine years older, Marion who is eight years older, and Steven who is four years older. His sisters claim, with some truth, that they raised him. For example, because they were so much older they would give him his baths. Growing up, he was not particularly close to his brother ("We didn't get along that well, ' would be a good way to put it"), but this changed over time.

### **Family History**

0:05:38

Dr. Leibiger's mother, Gisela Wilhelmina (née Barth) Leibiger, was a stay at home mom, like many moms in the neighborhood. She was very meticulous about cleaning the house and cooking dinner every night. His father was Gustave Adolphe Leibiger. Though both were of German descent, Gustave was born in the United States in 1930 during the Great Depression and Gisela was born in Germany in 1929 and was raised there during WWII. (Dr. Leibiger talks about his mother's upbringing some and reflects that his mother would be a great subject for an oral history.)

0:08:47

Dr. Leibiger's paternal grandparents, who were German immigrants, did not teach his father, Gustave, English when he was growing up, even though he went to an American school. Dr. Leibiger's parents met in a German community in New Jersey where Gustave

had grown up. When Gisela came to the United States to visit her aunt for two years, she kept hearing all these stories about Gustave (whom Gisela's aunt had know since he was a little boy). Because Gustave was away in the army during the Korean War, he did not meet Gisela until shortly before she was to return to Germany. Gustave completed his undergraduate degree before he was drafted into military service. Additionally, he did not serve in combat overseas.

00:10:25

Family vacations were always to historic sites. In the summer of 1979, Dr. Leibiger's oldest sister, Carol, started graduate school at the University of Illinois. Dr. Leibiger's father suggested that Stuart find something for the family to do along the way. Dr. Leibiger decided to visit all of the Abraham Lincoln sites in Springfield, Illinois. This sparked his interest in history the summer before he started high school and it grew from there.

00:12:48

Dr. Leibiger's sister Carol has a Ph.D. in German and was also a Fulbright Scholar in Germany prior to attending graduate school. She now lives in South Dakota with her husband, who has a Ph.D. in Hungarian. Because it is difficult for two academics to find jobs together, Carol earned a library degree and is now a librarian at the University of South Dakota.

00:13:45

Dr. Leibiger's other sister, Marion, attended the University of Bridgeport and worked as a dental hygienist for several years before returning to school to earn a master's degree in the same field. She met her husband in graduate school at the University of Missouri at Kansas City. They started a family and she became a stay at home mom. When she became an empty nester, she became certified to teach special education in Florida, where she now resides.

00:14:35

With the family being spread out so far across the country, they are as close as they can be given the circumstances. Every couple years the whole family gets together, for special occasions like milestone birthdays, weddings, and funerals. After her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Dr. Leibiger's mother sold the family home in Connecticut and moved to Florida to be closer to Marion. The whole family does not get together very often, but a couple of them get together more frequently. Dr. Leibiger's brother, Steven, lives in Maine and works as an electrical engineer.

00:15:49

Dr. Leibiger was raised as a Roman Catholic and received the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Communion, and Confirmation).

## **Early Education**

00:16:08

Dr. Leibiger was always interested in history, but did not always know what he would do for a career. In first or second grade he had trouble with reading and spelling, requiring extra instruction in these areas. By third grade those problems were behind him and he always got pretty good grades after that. English and history were always his favorite subjects; he always did the best in them. Math became more difficult once he started algebra around the end of middle school. This was always frustrating for Dr. Leibiger's father who was a mathematician, especially when he would try to help Stuart in trigonometry and calculus during high school. Though Dr. Leibiger was raised a Catholic, he went through the entire public school system in East Lyme, Connecticut, as the family moved from New Jersey the summer before Dr. Leibiger started kindergarten. He did not attend preschool, which was not uncommon at the time.

00:18:22

In grade school, Dr. Leibiger played various levels of intramural soccer. His father was an accomplished footballer before the age of soccer moms and dads. He played Little League baseball and loved baseball more than soccer, even though he was not very good at it. He continued playing soccer all four years of high school (two years junior varsity and two years varsity), but stopped with baseball after Little League. He also played tennis for a year in high school because he was not very successful at it. Additionally, in high school, he was very interested in, and good at, photography. Consequently, he was the photography editor for the high school yearbook. Finally, he was a member of the National Honor Society.

00:19:39

Throughout high school, Dr. Leibiger was still mostly interested in the Civil War and Lincoln, though he does remember reading about all centuries of American history. As long as it was political history and presidents, he was interested. When he began to look at colleges, he decided he wanted to study history, as opposed to his father's wish that he study engineering. Being an engineer never appealed to Dr. Leibiger and though his father warned him he would never get a job or make any money, he decided to pursue a degree in history anyway. Once his father saw his mind was made up, he was supportive of Dr. Leibiger.

00:20:50

Around Dr. Leibiger's junior year of high school, his family took a vacation to Thomas Jefferson's home, Monticello, in Charlottesville, Virginia. As part of that trip, the Leibigers went to see the University of Virginia, which was designed by Jefferson. Young Dr. Leibiger was captivated by the campus and decided he wanted to apply there and go to school there if he was accepted. He applied to other colleges like Princeton, Brown, Yale, and the University of Connecticut, but decided to attend UVA.

## **Undergraduate School at the University of Virginia**

00:22:07

Dr. Leibiger went much farther from home than any of his siblings to attend undergraduate school (it was about an eight hour drive); however, it was not that difficult of a transition for him in terms of being away from home. What he did have some difficulty with was not having anyone from his high school attend with him. Because UVA is a state university, many students attended high school together or were from the same towns and knew each other. He knew no one when he arrived as a freshman.

00:23:08

Dr. Leibiger was not involved with many extra-curricular activities as an undergraduate because his studies kept him pretty busy; however, he was able to find his niche when he became a guide at Monticello during his junior year. As tourist numbers rise at the site in the summer, a lot of seasonal help is hired. Many were undergraduate or graduate students at UVA and even some of the other local college kids who were home for the summer were hired. This created a wonderful community of young people. They even had their own softball league and would socialize in the evenings. Dr. Leibiger worked as a tour guide for three summers – '86, '87, and '88 – and would also do it on weekends during the school year. He reflects that this was a very interesting time in historical interpretation of Jefferson because not only were scholars interpreting the house, but the whole plantation; meaning not only interpreting the Jefferson family, but the entire slave community.

00:25:16

Dr. Leibiger's time at Monticello shifted his interest back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, though his undergraduate honors thesis was on a Civil War topic: the relationship between Abraham Lincoln and Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune. Dr. Leibiger then explains that when one applies to graduate school, he or she is really applying to work with the person who is going to be his or her advisor versus just the institution. For graduate school he applied to Princeton, Brown, Michigan, North Carolina, and Virginia. At each school he applied to, what field he was going to study depended on who was at the school. Dr. Leibiger attended graduate school at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and studied under Revolutionary War historian Don Higgenbotham. This is how Dr. Leibiger ended up studying the Revolutionary period versus the Civil War period as a graduate student.

00:26:34

In terms of faculty with whom Dr. Leibiger worked with at UVA, he cites Civil War historian Michael Holt, who guided his undergraduate thesis, as an influence. Dr. Leibiger recalls that Holt was very demanding as an advisor. When Dr. Leibiger submitted a draft of his thesis to Holt, Holt gave it back after reading only a few pages and said it was not worth his time. This ultimately made Dr. Leibiger's transition to graduate school much easier.

00:27:21

Additionally, as an undergraduate student at UVA, Dr. Leibiger took some graduate classes. One of these classes was in documentary editing and the editors of the Papers of George Washington taught it. This was his introduction into graduate work and George Washington. When entering UVA, Dr. Leibiger knew he wanted to be an academic historian and that is what he always wanted to be. His first real job was as a cook at a fast food seafood place on the beach. After that his father got him a job as a technical editor at a government contracting company and that lasted through his first few summers as an undergraduate. The only other field he could conceivably see himself going into is photography because he did have experience with it and dark room work, but he really never saw himself going into any other field than history.

### **Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**

00:30:20

Dr. Leibiger begins to discuss graduate school again. He believes everything depends on one's advisor in graduate school. If a student has a good advisor with whom they click, his or her graduate career will probably be a success. Dr. Leibiger has seen many graduate careers crash and burn when the student did not get along with their advisor or the advisor was incompetent. Dr. Leibiger's advisor was really good and recruited him to come to North Carolina. He was a good advisor because he was always very positive and encouraging. Dr. Leibiger responded best to advisors like that rather than ones who were more negative in their feedback. Additionally, North Carolina was the only place he applied to that gave him a scholarship.

### **Brief Equipment Check Break (00:32:03)**

### **Index of Interview No. 1 (Part 2) – Interviewed April 1, 2015**

00:00:10

Dr. Leibiger's master's thesis was about James Madison and his changing position on the Bill of Rights from 1787 to 1789. There is a whole literature about Madison being a political flip-flopper: opposing states' rights and supporting a stronger federal government in the 1780s and championing states' rights and decreasing the power of the federal government in the 1790s. He opposed the Bill of Rights and then became the father of the Bill of Rights. As far as the Bill of Rights goes, the scholarship says the only reason Madison supported a bill of rights was to quiet the anti-federalists. In his thesis, Dr. Leibiger argues that Madison was trying to get anti-federalist support for the constitution, but he did genuinely come to see a bill of rights as a worthwhile addition to the constitution in its own right. It could do some of the things he tried to do at the Constitutional Convention, but had not succeed in doing, in terms of protecting minority rights. Consequently, Madison's conversion to a bill of rights was principled, as well as practical. Dr. Leibiger's master's thesis was published in the Journal of Southern History in 1993, alongside an article by distinguished historian C. Vann Woodward. This was Dr. Leibiger's first serious work of history to be published and the article's placement made it even more exciting.

00:02:52

Dr. Leibiger was a teaching assistant throughout graduate school. The way it worked at a big university like North Carolina was that the professors gave two lectures a week and for the third class of the week smaller groups of students would meet with the T.A. to discuss the material. The T.A.'s also did all of the grading. Dr. Leibiger was also a research assistant for various professors and projects. One, Charles Capper, wrote a biography of Margaret Fuller. Dr. Leibiger remembers tracking down a lot of information for this book. Later on in his graduate career, Dr. Leibiger taught his own classes to about forty students. It was the first half of the United States survey. This was his first teaching experience. The classes Dr. Leibiger taught as a T.A. were always American history, but not necessarily always early American history.

00:04:28

When Dr. Leibiger applied to North Carolina, and the other graduate schools he applied to, he was really applying to a Ph.D. program right out of undergraduate school. In this graduate program, one would first earn their master's degree in the first two years and if he or she was viewed as being the right caliber, they would continue on to complete a Ph.D. If not, one earns a terminal M.A. He started the American history Ph.D. program with seventeen other students and only a handful of the other students started the program right after undergraduate school, like Dr. Leibiger; the others had been out in the real world for a few years. This surprised him. He thought more people would be in the same situation he was. No more than five or six of the eighteen students completed their Ph.D. and ended up working in the field. The average time at North Carolina to complete an M.A. and Ph.D. was eight years. That is exactly how long it took Dr. Leibiger: 1987-1995.

00:07:18

Dr. Leibiger had the same advisor for his dissertation as he did for his master's thesis. It was while he was working on this M.A. thesis on James Madison and the Bill of Rights that he really discovered his topic for his dissertation, *Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic*. During his research on Madison, Dr. Leibiger stumbled upon a friendship that existed between Madison and Washington from 1787 to 1789. He had never read anything in the secondary literature about this collaboration. He was curious to figure out how the friendship started and he knew from his study of history that they wound up political enemies: Washington a federalist and Madison a Republican.

00:08:37

Dr. Leibiger describes Washington as the most important founding father. There is a whole literature about the founding friendships and collaborations, but none of them include Washington. He thinks it might be because Washington was so high above the others, like [Thomas] Jefferson, [Alexander] Hamilton, [John] Adams, and [James] Madison, in terms of prestige and stature, that somehow historians overlooked his collaborations. Also he thinks Washington has been misunderstood by scholars: seen as a figurehead who reigned, but did not rule; who was not too bright, but did have prestige and influence, and surrounded himself with a bunch of brilliant people who ran the show.

Dr. Leibiger is part of a group of scholars who have challenged that whole idea of Washington and have presented him as a leader who had the clearest vision out of all the founders of where the United States was going and what it could be.

00:10:40

Dr. Leibiger remembers his dissertation defense quite well. The defense was in '95, but he had left Chapel Hill in '93 to work at Princeton and finished the second half of the dissertation out of town, discussing its progress with his advisor over mailings. The last six months of finishing the dissertation was particularly grueling because he was working fulltime in Princeton at the Papers of Thomas Jefferson. He traveled down to Chapel Hill one last time in '95 for the defense and still remembers the five members on the committee. The dissertation was two volumes and seven hundred pages total. One committee member told him if he did not shorten it, it would "sink like a stone" because one of the things discussed in the defense is what the next step is: How does this become a book?

00:12:23

Refining and revising the dissertation is typical of what many assistant professors do to publish their first book. It is a long process. It took ten years from the start of the dissertation for the book to be published. One revises the dissertation as much as he or she can and then sends it out to publishers. From there it is sent out to anonymous reviewers in the field who give feedback for further revision before finally getting a book contract. Then production of the book is another long process: checking the page proof against the original manuscript, gathering illustrations, writing the index, etc.

00:14:23

Once the book was published, there were not any devastating critiques of the book, though there were some cranky reviews. By and large, Dr. Leibiger had discovered something new and looking at this collaboration allowed for new insights into both Washington and Madison. Overall the reviews were pretty positive.

### **Time at Princeton**

00:15:02

While Dr. Leibiger was at Chapel Hill, he was dating another graduate student in the sociology department. She was hired into a tenure track assistant professor position at Princeton and asked if they had anything for her boyfriend, Dr. Leibiger, in the history department. He was given a course to T.A., and once they saw he was competent, he was hired fulltime as a "lecturer," which is essentially a T.A. who does everything but lecture. Princeton has the money to outsource these positions to other graduate students, rather than having them filled by their own graduate students. During his time at Princeton, Dr. Leibiger worked with renowned historians like James McPherson and John Murinn as their T.A., or preceptor. The Papers of Thomas Jefferson are located at Princeton University and they had a fulltime opening while Dr. Leibiger was at Princeton and he ended up working there for about a year and a half. So when he was on the academic job market looking for a permanent position, he was fortunate enough to be employed



fulltime at Princeton. He applied for at least one hundred jobs over a four-year period before finally being hired by La Salle University.

00:18:35

While on the job market for this period he got some convention interviews through the American Historical Association Conference, one year in Chicago and another in New York. In a way, these kinds of interviews are unfair to the candidates because the financially struggling graduate students have to pay to go to the convention to get interviewed and their chance of getting the job at that point is still pretty slim. Typically universities will interview between ten and fifteen people at the convention and then only invite three or four of them to campus. That is why in his time at La Salle, Dr. Leibiger has opposed convention interviews. La Salle goes straight to the campus interview. These convention interviews are usually held in big hotel ballrooms and different universities interview candidates right next to each other. The person next to you can hear your interview, which can be distracting, and it is not a pleasant interview environment.

00:21:01

Princeton has an amazing summer softball league. The departments are big enough that each can field its own team. For at least four years Dr. Leibiger played softball for the Princeton history department softball team, the Revolting Masses. One year he even managed the team. Many professors played, so he did more socializing this way than any other. Once at Princeton Dr. Leibiger taught his own course, Comparative Revolution, which was essentially a senior seminar; however, for the most part, he was a T.A.

### **Hobbies**

00:23:06

Though he no longer plays, Dr. Leibiger is still a big baseball fan. This goes back to his youth in Connecticut. He became a Boston Red Sox fan in 1973 and because the town he lived in was halfway between New York Yankees territory and Boston Red Sox territory, he experienced the very intense rivalry. He supported the Red Sox through their rough period (lamenting the [1986] World Series that Bill Buckner let slip through his glove) and even made it on the cover of Sports Illustrated after attending a game at Fenway Park in the summer of 1975. He also is a North Carolina Tar Heels basketball fan, though he never played and was never interested in the sport until he was in the contagious environment in graduate school, eventually becoming a college basketball fan. Though he has an interest in sports, he does not really have a desire to branch out and do a sports history. He has, however, been tempted to teach a course on the history of the automobile in America. He owns two antique cars that have been in the family since their purchase: a 1966 Chevrolet Corvair and a 1977 Buick [Le Sabre].

00:29:23

Closing comments and thanking Dr. Leibiger.

**End of First Interview Session and Recording**

**00:29:45 (part 2) 01:01:48 (total)**

## **Index of Interview No. 2 (Part 1) – Interviewed April 2, 2015**

00:00:01

Introduction of interview number two and what will be discussed [time at La Salle University and present career]. Summary of what was discussed in the first interview [his birth up to earning his Ph.D.]. Date, time, and location of interview. Verbal consent to record.

### **Time at La Salle University**

00:00:33

Dr. Leibiger was drawn to La Salle by an advertisement for a job in the history department that was in his field and in a great geographic area: Philadelphia. It is a great place for an Early American historian because of all the archives and historic sites. Further it suited Dr. Leibiger well because it is not a far drive from Virginia and Washington D.C., where he does a lot of work with research and programs. Finally, it was close to where he was living when he was at Princeton and it was in driving distance of his family home in Connecticut.

00:01:57

Dr. Leibiger had heard of La Salle, but had never been to campus before his job interview. He had a wonderful first impression of the school in terms of the academics, people, and campus. La Salle's urban environment was new to him compared to what he had experienced growing up, attending school, and even teaching in smaller suburban towns. He started at La Salle in 1997 and now is accustomed to the urban campus, though he still lives in the suburbs [North Wales, PA]. He recognizes that a city campus provides many opportunities for faculty and students.

00:03:29

Theo Fair and George Stow of the La Salle history department initially interviewed Dr. Leibiger for his position at La Salle at an American Historical Association conference in New York City. Dr. Leibiger explains that at these conventions, it is an unwritten rule to not be early, just on time; however, he almost missed the interview because he was at the wrong location. He ran to a pay phone and told the La Salle faculty he would be late. They were understanding and this ended up being a blessing in disguise because the relief he felt in just making it to the interview made him more relaxed. Consequently, he feels he gave a better interview.

00:05:03

The next step in the hiring process was Dr. Leibiger's campus interview, which he described as a very grueling day. Candidates must interview with the department, dean, provost, and teach a mock class. Dr. Leibiger was assigned a mock class about the background of the American Revolution. Before teaching the lesson, he asked the students about the status of La Salle's basketball team as an icebreaker and everyone turned to the Christian Brother sitting in the back of the classroom. This, of course, was

Br. Ed Sheehy, who has served as the men's basketball team moderator since 1992 and is currently an associate professor of history at La Salle.

00:06:18

When Dr. Leibiger first came to La Salle, Dr. John Rossi, currently professor emeritus of history at La Salle, served as his mentor. Dr. Rossi gave Dr. Leibiger a lot of advice on many different issues. For example, he told him to not date any of the students and to make sure he took attendance every class. The attendance policy lesson was particularly helpful to Dr. Leibiger because all of this previous experience had been with larger universities and classes where students would sink or swim solely on their mastery of material.

00:07:59

When Dr. Leibiger was a junior faculty member at La Salle, he was the only one in the history department; this was good in some ways and bad in others. Dr. Leibiger came up for tenure and promotion in two different years: first promotion, then tenure. One puts together a dossier containing things like publications, course evaluations, and his or her analysis of their teaching, scholarship, and service when he or she is up for promotion or tenure. Consequently, Dr. Leibiger had to compile his dossier twice. This is a lot of work to do twice; however, coming up for promotion and tenure separately made each process a little less stressful.

00:09:41

Coming up separately for tenure and promotion is not the custom anymore; however, the essential requirements for tenure and promotion have not changed since 2002/2003 when Dr. Leibiger came up for them. The number one thing La Salle faculty are judged on is their teaching, largely dependent upon student course evaluations. The second thing they are judged on is their scholarship. When starting at La Salle, Dr. Leibiger was told the scholarship requirements would either be one book or three peer-reviewed journal articles. This is still the standard today. Finally, service to the university and department is required. Typically this is serving on various committees that run the university [like the faculty senate] and handle department business [like searching for new faculty].

00:11:03

At La Salle, when coming up for tenure and promotion, the candidate's teaching is the most important factor. This is particular to La Salle being a smaller university where the emphasis is on the students. At a big research university, scholarship would be the top priority. For example, when Dr. Leibiger first taught a course in graduate school at North Carolina, he was told by one of his professors to not put too much effort into the course because it was more important to focus on his research. Dr. Leibiger did not follow this advice. He has always felt that his teaching is just as important, if not more important, than his scholarship, even though he did not get into the study of history to become a teacher. Partly because of ending up at La Salle, he has become a teacher first and a scholar second.

00:12:48

Dr. Leibiger joined the La Salle faculty shortly before Br. Michael McGuiness became the university's president in 1999. Throughout his fifteen years as president, Br. Mike made many beneficial changes to La Salle that allowed the university to grow and evolve. When reflecting on changes he has seen at La Salle since he joined the faculty, Dr. Leibiger remembers the ending of the football program in terms of big developments in the university as a whole; however, the changes that immediately come to his mind are changes in the history department itself.

00:14:29

Since Dr. Leibiger has been at La Salle, two of the history faculty have retired: Theo[polis] Fair and Joseph O'Grady. Additionally, the demographics of the history department have changed dramatically in Dr. Leibiger's time at La Salle. Today there is much more youth in the department. Dr. Barbara Allen, Dr. Lisa Jarvinen, Dr. H. Lyman Stebbins, Dr. George Boudreau, Dr. Baba Jallow, Dr. Michael McInneshein, Dr. Milen Petrov, and Dr. Kelly Shannon have all been hired in Dr. Leibiger's time at La Salle. This community of junior faculty did not exist when Dr. Leibiger was junior faculty. Another big change in the history department during Dr. Leibiger's time is the starting of the history M.A. program (now in its tenth year.)

00:15:58

Dr. Leibiger contrasted the role of adjunct and fulltime faculty at the university and in the history department as follows: The only responsibility of adjunct faculty is their teaching. They are hired semester by semester and course by course. They are only required to have an M.A. degree in history, where fulltime faculty must have a Ph.D. The hiring process for adjuncts is much more informal. Adjunct faculty are not judged on their scholarship, though many do it anyway for their own professional benefit. Finally, adjuncts are not asked to do service to the university. Consequently, adjuncts typically do not serve on university or department committees, participate in department meetings, or vote on tenure and promotion of faculty (incidentally, only tenured faculty may vote on this).

00:17:39

Dr. Leibiger did not really participate in preparing the proposal for the history M.A. program. He credits Dr. George Stow, Dr. Charles Desnoyers, and Dr. Francis Ryan with launching the program. Once the program began, however, he became more involved. He has taught HIS 610 [American Readings] at least once every year since the program started. He is the only one to have taught that course and some years he taught it twice. He has taught the HIS 700 research seminar three or four times on a variety of different topics including: James Madison and the Constitution, Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, and the U.S. Constitution in times of crisis. In the research seminar, students are required to write their own piece of original historical work around a common theme. Dr. Leibiger has the students do a lot of background reading so everyone is at the same level on the topic. At the end of the seminar, the whole class reads everyone's papers and a chief critic leads his or her fellow students in discussion, to which the author responds. The author of each paper uses the feedback from these discussions to finish the final draft

of their paper. Two papers from the Constitution in Crisis seminar were published in *Delaware History*. One was by Andrew Zellers Frederick the other was by John Schropp.

00:20:40

One of Dr. Leibiger's most important roles in the graduate program is to supervise students master's theses. He estimates that he has supervised somewhere between one quarter to one third of the students who have gone through La Salle's history M.A. program. As the early-Americanist, he gets a lot of traffic and as of this recording he is supervising his twenty-third thesis. Many students choose topics on the founders or the Civil War for their thesis. Though it is a lot of work, Dr. Leibiger enjoys watching the theses unfold, as they become a labor of love for the students. All of the works are supposed to be cataloged and entered into La Salle's library system. Consequently, they are sometimes borrowed on interlibrary loan. In some cases, these theses are the most that have been written on a particular topic. Dr. Leibiger cites one of his most recent students, Paula Gidjunis' thesis on the regimental history of the 128<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Regiment from Montgomery, Bucks, and Berks counties in the Civil War as an example.

00:23:34

In the undergraduate program, Dr. Leibiger typically teaches two upper level electives: the American Revolution and the Civil War. Because there is a small enough faculty at La Salle, both of these courses fall into his domain. At many universities, he would teach one or the other and he enjoys teaching both. He sees this as one of the best things about La Salle. He taught both of these courses as travel studies in addition to teaching them as a traditional class. For example, the Civil War class visited numerous historic sites in Maryland, Washington D.C. Virginia, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania during spring break and the American Revolution class visited the founders' homes in Virginia. The Dean of Arts and Sciences recruited Dr. Leibiger to teach these travel studies in order to get the program off the ground. In the beginning, Dr. Leibiger would make the arrangements on his own in terms of things like finances, transportation, meals and lodging, and reserving spots at tourist attractions. Over the years, planning travel studies has become a more formal process. Today one needs to apply and write up a proposal that goes before a committee. Only so many travel studies get approved each year, but there is more support from the university to organize and run the trip.

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Dr. Leibiger did the Civil War travel study twice and was going to do the American Revolution twice, but encountered a problem. In October [2002] there were a series of sniper attacks in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington D.C. [Beltway sniper attacks]. One of the attacks happened a day or two before the class was supposed to leave on the trip. A concerned parent called the university and said it was irresponsible to let the trip go on with a sniper on the loose, so the university pulled the plug. Many of the students still wanted to go on the trip. When they found out which parent had called, it created some tension in the class for the rest of the semester. Also because reservations had already been made for hotels and historic sites, it was a big hassle to get the money back, first into a university account, and then back to the individual students. This was one of the reasons why Dr. Leibiger stopped doing travel studies at that point; however, his travel

studies were some of the only domestic ones at La Salle. He would like to see more of that.

00:29:52

When Dr. Leibiger plans a course, he will look at the academic calendar before he designs a syllabus to determine how many times the class will meet. If the class meets on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday (the format Dr. Leibiger usually teaches in) the class will meet forty to forty-five times depending on the semester. Next he looks at the course material to see how he can divide it into forty-odd-some subtopics, almost like separate chapters in a book. He tries to use a combination of lecture with an attached reading assignment discussion as much as possible to put together an interesting class. He also tries to bring in DVD clips when possible. One successful technique he has used is to have students read about a particular historical event and once they have mastered the material, have them watch a Hollywood version of the same event and critique its historical accuracy, as well as creative licenses taken by the filmmakers. For example, students will read about the Boston Massacre and John Adam's defense of the soldiers who fired and will then watch an excerpt from the HBO series *John Adams* that covers the same topic. Students have responded well to that sort of pedagogy. Over the years, Dr. Leibiger has brought more technology into the classroom and this is a change that has been reflected in the university as a whole. When Dr. Leibiger started here in 1997, there were no smart classrooms. Now most of the classrooms are "smart" and this has increased the efficacy of lessons and made them more engaging for students. In the twentieth century, students need to be engaged more with YouTube and other websites because that's what they've grown up with.

00:34:11

When Dr. Leibiger was an undergrad, there were no movie clips or illustrations with the lectures in his classes. The professor would write an outline on the board and just lecture the whole time; even discussion was rare. Dr. Leibiger has never taken any courses in how to teach. The graduate program that he was in was just history content courses. So, when he first started teaching, he had no experience. What he always tried to do was to imitate the professors he thought were really good and avoid the pitfalls and mistakes of those he thought were really bad. He said he just got in there and tried experimenting with lots of different things: seeing what worked and seeing what did not. He still does that today, especially with assigning readings.

00:35:41

In terms of selecting course materials, Dr. Leibiger says he is always searching for something that will work in the classroom and it is a guess. Even this semester he is using a new book, *Engines of Change* [by Paul Ingrassia], about the fifteen automobiles that changed America. He read it himself and first thought he might use a chapter or two, but as he kept reading, eventually decided to assign most of the book. So far, it is working out well. This is a way he typically discovers class materials, reading for his own research or pleasure. Other times he will be searching for things specifically for a particular topic. Sometimes he will go through a number of articles before he finds

something that he thinks will work in the classroom with students. It is trial and error and experimentation, particularly with the readings.

00:37:04

When comparing his teaching style with other instructors at La Salle and other universities, Dr. Leibiger thinks his teaching technique is similar to other professors in the La Salle history department. He does not lecture the entire class, but he does not divide students into groups for the entire class either. He tries to find a happy medium in between discussion and lecture. Part of the time he is the professor providing the content and part of the time he wants students to talk about the content among themselves, to him, and to answer questions. Ideally, he tries to do this in every class. This is why he likes DVD clips so much. Often he will ask the students, "How do you interpret this interpretation?" It is similar to an article in that it is an interpretation of a historical event, but in a visual format instead of in words. He will also ask how students interpret different paintings of the same historical event. He tries to be sensitive to the fact that different students learn in different ways. So if he approaches a topic in a variety of ways, different students can draw upon their own particular strengths and learning abilities.

00:39:40

In terms of a general change in students over the years, Dr. Leibiger says he believes students today are less receptive to lecture, their skills at note taking are not as good, and they do not spend as much time studying for exams. He would attribute this change to the rise of technology. He also thinks today's students need to be entertained a bit more in the classroom and their attention spans are a bit shorter. Having said that, he believes students are just as bright as they always have been, but today's students are raised in a different culture.

00:40:49

When comparing the caliber of students at La Salle with those he has taught as a T.A. at Princeton and North Carolina, as well as those he was classmates with at UVA, Dr. Leibiger believes the really good students at La Salle are just as good as the really good students anywhere. The students at La Salle, however, are a different demographic than you would find at Princeton, for example. La Salle students are much more blue collar, more first generation college, and come out of a more lower middle class background. Where at somewhere like Princeton, or even UVA, students are often coming out of an upper class background.

00:42:59

Spring 2015 will mark Dr. Leibiger's eighth year as chair of La Salle's undergraduate history program. Some of his responsibilities include managing the department budget and rostering all classes. Rostering is a very big job. He probably does it five or six times a year. Rostering the fall and spring semesters requires the most work because the department offers thirty or more classes every fall and spring. Many are lower level core classes, but a third are upper level electives and senior seminars. He has to first roster all the classes and then slot faculty members into the classes, while trying to accommodate what everyone wants in terms of a schedule and preference for teaching courses. He must

also recruit adjuncts to fill remaining spaces, usually between six and eight. Often a course will get canceled last minute, and if it belonged to a full time faculty member, an adjunct gets kicked out of their slot. Also sometimes a faculty member will get sick and it is the department chair's responsibility to find replacements to teach their course load, either by hiring an adjunct or taking an extra class himself or herself. Dr. Leibiger is also responsible for writing the history department's annual report, which includes a list of the department's, as well as individual faculty's accomplishments, and discusses department goals moving forward. Additionally, there are a lot of day-to-day bureaucratic responsibilities including: solving student and faculty member problems, resolving conflicts between students and faculty, and plagiarism issues, among many others.

00:47:06

Dr. Leibiger feels his biggest responsibility as chair, and what he would consider his biggest achievement as chair, is to hire faculty. Though the department uses search committees to hire faculty, Dr. Leibiger is the point person and does a lot of the work. Also it is largely Dr. Leibiger's responsibility to mentor the new hire while they are junior faculty. He monitors their teaching and reads their course evaluations. As chair, it is his responsibility to read the student course evaluations for the entire department. He then writes up an analysis for each faculty member saying what he feels they are doing well and what they need to improve.

00:48:25

Dr. Leibiger's other service to the university includes moderating student activities like the Historical Society and La Salle's student-run history journal, *The Histories*. When he first started at La Salle in 1997, revitalizing the defunct student historical society became his project. He, along with a group of students, got it running again and he served as moderator for close to ten years. It continues to offer historical activities and trips to the student body. *The Histories* includes a variety of articles and book reviews by students. He was also responsible for getting that up and running again.

00:50:29

Dr. Leibiger was promoted to full professor in 2014. He wanted to apply a year earlier; however, he became very sick with pneumonia in spring 2012 and had to use the summer to catch up on his work rather than preparing his dossier. Consequently, he applied in fall 2013 and this was a tricky year to apply because twelve people applied for tenure and promotion across the university that year. Three were in the history department, so all the historians were being judged against each other. For Dr. Leibiger this meant that he was applying to this committee for promotion for himself, but he also had to appear before it to represent two other members of his department. It was an unusual circumstance that this all came together in one semester; however, Dr. Leibiger dealt with it by treating applying and appearing before the committee as separate issues.

00:52:53

Once Dr. Leibiger had published his edited book *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe*, he felt he had reached the threshold in terms of requirements for promotion. Applying for associate professor is very different than applying for full



professor. Assistant professors have a set period of time and then they automatically come up for promotion. Once someone is tenured and promoted to associate professor, it is up to him or her to decide if and when they want to apply for full professor. When his edited companion came out, Dr. Leibiger felt he had gone over the bar in terms of scholarship, he felt his teaching was good, and he had served the university in multiple ways; so, it was time to come up. He does not have to face that again and has gone as high as one can go in this field.

00:54:34

Dr. Leibiger believes La Salle faces a challenging future, like all colleges and universities, because higher education is in a time of transition. There are a lot of people questioning the value and cost of a university education. "Is it worth it anymore?" It is La Salle's job as a university, and La Salle's new president, Dr. Colleen Hanycz [the first lay and woman president in La Salle's history], to say, "Yes, a college education is still worth it." Dr. Leibiger believes the university has to do what it can to make higher education affordable to students. This is a particular challenge for La Salle because its demographic, lower middle class families, is suffering in the current economy. He imagines fundraising will be a huge priority for La Salle's new president. College is so expensive these days, and for some very good reasons. The amount of technology that needs to be provided on campus, in classrooms and in the dormitories, is very expensive, but necessary. La Salle has faced and will continue to face this challenge.

00:56:36

Dr. Leibiger is happy at La Salle and does not plan on leaving. He says the higher one gets in this profession, the less lateral mobility there is. Very few universities will hire a full professor to replace a full professor. Usually they will hire someone to start as an assistant professor. This is how universities save money. When he first came to La Salle he did apply for some jobs at other universities. If he had gotten them, he would have faced a difficult decision: whether or not to stay at La Salle. He ended up getting married, buying a house, and putting down roots here, so he does not see himself leaving La Salle. He has considered applying for jobs at institutions like museums or foundations, but it is very hard to give up a tenured position for one without such job security.

00:58:49

One of the biggest contributions Dr. Leibiger feels he has made to the field is teaching history content to junior and senior high school teachers at professional development workshops, most of them run by private foundations at various locations around the country. Over the years, he has done about seventy-five teacher workshops in seventeen states, plus Washington D.C. These workshops can run from one day to a whole week. These teachers come from all over the country to venues, often times historic sites like Mount Vernon. He has taught thousands of teachers in these workshops, who then take the material they learned from him to their hundreds of students. There is a big ripple effect there and it is a great way to get La Salle's name out there. It also gives Dr. Leibiger a bit of insight on what to expect when students come to university. He really admires these teachers because they attend these workshops on their own time to become better teachers. He sees that it is challenging for these teachers to take the content they

learned from him at a college level and adapt it for junior and senior high school students, who do not have as much background knowledge, and make it interesting and meaningful. This is one of the most professionally rewarding things he does: to teach a class about George Washington at Mount Vernon to a group of teachers, many have never been there before and they are tremendously enthusiastic.

### **Current Career**

01:03:34

Dr. Leibiger has served as a historical consultant for many public history initiatives and projects. He has appeared on camera for a handful of documentaries, with a number of prestigious historians, on George Washington and on the ratification Constitution, for example. For many years, he has also read scripts and appeared on camera for a PBS show called *A Taste of History*, a cooking show that visits a particular historical time, rather than a particular place on earth. The episode Dr. Leibiger appeared on was taped at Washington's Crossing and he talked about what happened there while a chef prepared an eighteenth century meal.

01:05:39

The academic publisher Blackwell approached Dr. Leibiger to edit *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe*. It is part of series on the American presidents. Each book is a collection of essays comprising the latest historiographical scholarship on that president. Dr. Leibiger told the publisher he was really more of a Madison scholar and just wanted to do it on Madison, but Blackwell felt that there was not enough material on Monroe for him to have his own volume. Dr. Leibiger's first task was to design a table of contents to figure out how many chapters for Madison and Monroe and what the chapters would be. He came up with thirty-two chapters total: nineteen for Madison and thirteen for Monroe, and they are partly chronological (e.g. Madison's youth) and topical (Monroe's political philosophy) in nature. The publisher then sent the proposed table of contents out to reviewers for suggestions. Then he had to recruit thirty-two authors to write the chapters (Dr. Leibiger wrote one on James Madison and George Washington). His strategy was to recruit five or six more renowned historians, like Jack Rakove and Catherine Allgor, to attract the other authors to participate. La Salle gave him a leave from teaching to edit the companion: making comments about the article's content, revisions, and suggestions, as well as editing the writing. He also had to search for and get permission for the book's illustrations, write an introduction for the volume, and put everything together in a uniform fashion, like collating thirty-two separate bibliographies and indexing the book. Dr. Leibiger says editing a book like that is just as much work as writing a book from scratch.

01:15:54

The Liberty Fund Colloquium, founded by Indiana philanthropist Pierre Goodrich, who was interested in literature and intellectual discussion and ideas, holds a number of conferences each year in various places around the globe inviting scholarly people from the business world and academia. About twenty-five are invited to each conference and each person does pre-assigned readings about some historical or literary topic. The ones Dr. Leibiger has been invited to were on Thomas Jefferson's, James Madison's, or

George Washington's writings. He got together with a group of scholars and spent a long weekend in a series of discussions on the readings. The Fund pays for travel and lodging expenses and gives thousand dollars to everyone who participates. Dr. Leibiger has been invited to five, six, or seven and it is a professionally rewarding and intellectual experience to attend.

### **Brief Time Check Break (01:18:39)**

### **Index of Interview No. 2 (Part 2) – Interviewed April 2, 2015**

00:00:33

Dr. Leibiger's chapter in *A Companion to James Madison and James Monroe* is essentially an abridged version of his dissertation and first book *Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic*. This has been a centerpiece of his life's work. As stated earlier in the interview, the idea for this grew out of his master's thesis on James Madison. Before his contributions, there really was no scholarship on the collaboration of Madison and Washington and it was clear to Dr. Leibiger this was an important topic that needed to be researched. He traces the origin of the friendship in the 1780s, to its peak in 1789/1790 when George Washington becomes president. When Washington first became president, the cabinet had not been created yet. Washington knew as the first president he was setting a precedent, so he wanted to get things right. Without cabinet members to advise him, Washington relied very heavily on James Madison to advise him on policy, appointments, and even ghost writing. Washington was very intelligent, but not college educated and needed Madison in this capacity, while Madison need Washington for his prestige. Madison was like a prime minister to Washington during his early presidency. As the cabinet became established, Madison's role began to recede and with the rise of political parties, Washington and Madison began to diverge ideologically, ending up political enemies. Dr. Leibiger keeps revisiting this topic throughout his career because there is demand for him to continue to go back to it. The book was first published in 1999 and he is still asked to give lectures on the book and even do book signings. The way publishing is today, the book can stay in print forever.

00:05:05

Dr. Leibiger finds George Washington to be an endlessly fascinating individual for a variety of reasons. He has always admired that Washington was skilled in so many areas, but was self-taught in almost every one of them (e.g. architecture and landscape design). He was even self-taught as a general and the reality of war served as his college. Though his brothers were educated overseas, Washington's father died and with him so did George's chance for a traditional education. There was no money, so Washington decided to support himself by becoming a surveyor. Consequently, he needed to teach himself calculus. Washington had tremendous leadership skills and political instincts that served him well in the many difficult situations he faced.

00:07:13

It was a real honor for Dr. Leibiger to win a lifetime achievement award from the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Association on his work because of the organization that gives it out. Washington was a member of the Masonic Lodge in Alexandria, Virginia and that lodge has dedicated itself to perpetuating Washington's memory. The most exciting thing about the award for Dr. Leibiger is its previous recipients: some very high caliber, well-known Washington scholars, including the current editor of the Papers of George Washington [Edward G. Lengel] and the late executive director of Mount Vernon [James C. Rees], have won this award and it is an honor for Dr. Leibiger to be counted among them.

00:09:05

Because he has written about two founders, Dr. Leibiger has entered the historiography on James Madison and George Washington. Dr. Leibiger is a part of a group of Washington scholars who view him as a man who was really running the show as the central politician of his age and was the key figure of the revolution, as opposed to just a figurehead. There are a group of scholars who see Madison, Hamilton, and Jefferson as the leading stars, but they viewed Washington as the key man of their age. What this historiography is trying to do is to bring Washington back to center stage as a true leader, but one who did lead at times in subtle or hidden hand kinds of ways. The scholarship on Madison has always been that he was a political flip-flopper who pursued a very erratic course through early American history: first he supported a strong federal government in the 1780s, then he became a states' righter in the 1790s; he opposed a bill of rights, and then became the father of the Bill of Rights; he opposed a national bank, then he signed it into law. Dr. Leibiger is with a group of historians who argue that Madison was actually quite consistent overtime, if his fundamental principles are isolated: designing a government where the majority rules, but the rights of the minority are protected. Madison is always consistent to that. When the states were too strong, he wanted a stronger federal government and when the balance tipped the other way, he changed his position. What Madison was searching for was a true federalism: a true balance between state and federal government. This is very elusive and difficult to find. The battle between the two becomes the story of American history because we are still fighting it with issues today.

00:13:22

When asked what distinguishes him from other scholars in the field, Dr. Leibiger says he tries to write for an academic audience as well as a non-academic audience, which is not an easy task. He has also tried to target all his work beyond the academy and that is why he believes the teacher development workshops are so important. Many historians only talk and write to each other, reaching only a narrow audience. If one finds a way around that to the general public, he or she will have a much bigger audience, but it is challenging to present serious history to a non-academic audience. Which audience to cater to has been an ongoing debate in the field for a long time: Does writing to a non-academic audience cheapen the work? As a historian, Dr. Leibiger does political history, which is sometimes considered old fashioned, though he tries to not do it in an old fashioned way. Because we live in a politically correct and multicultural world, in some

academic circles, people who study the founders and political history are looked down upon as being pedestrian historians. Dr. Leibiger has tried to argue the importance of political history in the current politically correct and multicultural world. He does not want to turn the founders into saints or statues, but he feels they can still be viewed favorably in a modern context.

00:16:05

In terms of his philosophy of history, Dr. Leibiger does not believe in the inevitability of history. He believes history is a story of contingency and people, decisions, and chance occurrences can change history. There are a lot of clichés as to why people should study history; he does not agree with all of them. For example, he believes sometimes people who study history still repeat it and sometimes people who ignore history do not repeat it. Dr. Leibiger does think that people cannot understand contemporary issues of the world without understanding the history of the issue. For example, one cannot understand race in America without understanding slavery, segregation, and civil rights. One cannot understand a society without knowing its past history. This is why people study history. Plus he says its just fun. He does not get tired of studying history and does not envision himself in a different career. He believes he has things pretty good. He would read history anyway and he gets paid to read history books.

00:18:07

Currently, Dr. Leibiger is not working on any big projects. He would love to be able to start a couple, but it is hard to do as department chair. He does have some smaller projects he has been working on. He recently completed two encyclopedia articles for a digital online encyclopedia, *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*. One entry was on the Princeton campaign of 1776 and 1777 during the Revolutionary War and he wrote another on the Constitutional Convention of 1787. This encyclopedia is a pioneering project in digital history. The screening process is very rigorous, more than any other encyclopedia he has written for. The articles are sent out to multiple reviewers in the field and the author makes revisions based on their critiques before publishing it online. When the article is put online, other resources like photographs and links to other websites accompany it. He plans to write another on George Washington's presidency this summer.

00:20:37

Dr. Leibiger would have liked to have written another big book by now; however, fate had other plans. Starting a family was a serendipitous delay to this endeavor. Dr. Leibiger married his wife Jennifer in 2000 after having met on a blind date set up by a La Salle adjunct faculty member. Jennifer grew up in Northeast Philly and went to Holy Family University. She was an accountant for a time; however, once they had children, she became a stay at home mom. Their son Ethan was born in 2003 and their daughter Laura was born in 2005. Once his children are older, or when he is no longer chair, he would like to write a book or start another big project. Dr. Leibiger does not regret waiting until he completed graduate school to settle down. Though he is a little bit older than many parents who have children the same age as Ethan and Laura, Dr. Leibiger took the time to get into a better place professionally and personally.

00:22:31

Professionally, Dr. Leibiger believes some of his most significant accomplishments are the publication of his books, the teacher development workshops, and the twenty-three M.A. students he has trained. He believes his year-in year-out teaching is important too. It is a big impact to have at least one hundred students a year, sometimes a semester, and he has been teaching college for nearly thirty years.

00:26:32

Closing comments and thanking Dr. Leibiger for a great interview.

**End of Second Interview Session and Recording**

**00:26:57 (part 2) 01:45:34 (total)**