

Tribute to Kathleen Schamel, VA's Federal Preservation Officer

by Darlene Richardson, Historian, Veterans Health Administration, June 19, 2017

Archaeologist Kathleen M. Schamel, VA's Federal Preservation Officer, passed away this Saturday on June 17th, 2017, after a long illness, at the age of 57. Each federal agency is required by the National Historic Preservation Act to have a Federal Preservation Officer on staff to ensure that the federal government's historic buildings, structures, and sites are preserved and protected. Why? Because the architecture, landscapes, and even the lot sizes, of each federal property represents the ideals and philosophy of a nation at a particular moment in history. Historic preservation connects places and buildings with individuals and events from the past. By doing so, the evolution of our agency, the U.S. government, and even our nation is made known and available to everyone.

Ms. Schamel was born and raised in New York, the youngest daughter of Gene and Celestine Schamel, and graduated from George Washington University in 1985 with an M.A. in Anthropology. Prior to coming to VA, she worked at CEHP Incorporated, a government relations and policy analysis firm that represented the Society for Historical Archaeology, the USDA's National Resources Conservation Service, and she served as Federal Preservation Officer for USDA's Farm Service Agency from 2000-2006. Her tenure as VA's Federal Preservation Officer began in November 2006.

She was a no-nonsense professional who practiced the "One VA" approach in her work with colleagues, even before she was acquainted with that term. During her first month at VA she met with NCA and VHA historians to "take a pulse" on historic preservation activities and formulate her plans. She was one of VA's top advocates for preserving and sharing the agency's history.



Before Ms. Schamel's arrival at VA, little was known or understood about VA's earliest facilities. She oversaw the National Historic Landmark study that documented the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers as well as the Second and Third Generation Veterans Hospital MPS studies which resulted in over 50 VA hospitals being listed on the National Register of Historic Places or as National Historic Landmarks. She updated VA's policies and guidance on historic preservation and enabled VA to become a voting member of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation for the first time. She spearheaded a book project on Pershing Hall, a VA property in Paris, France, that had a long, convoluted history, helped restore a significant painting from Pershing Hall, and was working to save its other collections.

While her job was primarily concerned with compliance of the National Historic Preservation Act, she was actively engaged in public outreach and promoting VA's heritage. She played an essential role in development of a project tentatively known as the VA History Center by funding studies to determine appropriate sites, then served as Co-Chair of the VA History and Archives Working Group.

Her most ground-breaking work, building on her affection for teamwork and partnerships, was the collaboration between the National Park Service, NCA History Program, and VHA History Office, to produce informative pages about VA's historic properties as part of the National Park Service's Travel Itineraries' website. Since 2009 VA's presence on the [NPS Travel Itineraries](#) has served as a conduit for providing early VHA history to the public, students, and professionals, alike, that is otherwise not available at VA. In 2011, [VA's national cemeteries](#) were added to the NPS Travel Itineraries site.

Kathleen Schamel preferred to stay out of the limelight, but effected great changes behind the scenes. She will be sorely missed by her VA history and work colleagues and all who otherwise worked with her. VA history was transformed and made known to a wider audience because of her, showing, once again, how one person can make a difference in the world.

Photo credit: June 1, 2007, Kathleen Schamel, VA Federal Preservation Officer, preparing for ride in "Reclaiming Our Heritage" parade and event at Milwaukee VA Medical Center.