

# THE BICENTENNIAL AND THE NATIONAL PARKS



## The Story of America

white man's whisky. Sickened by the waste, George Catlin climbed a nearby bluff and looked down at the prairie below. Soon all the buffalo would be gone, he thought. Then the Indians would go. If only some land could be set aside by the government as a permanent wilderness! What he had in mind was "a *nation's Park*, containing man and beast, in all the wild[ness] and freshness of their nature's beauty."

Forty years later, in 1872 (just nine months before George Catlin died), President Ulysses S. Grant signed an act which set aside 3,400 square miles of wilderness in Wyoming Territory. Known as Yellowstone National Park, this was the first national park in the world. Today the National Park Service operates nearly 300 sites, displaying every kind of natural beauty we can find in our land. Deserts, canyons, glaciers, volcanoes, prehistoric trees—some of our most treasured landscapes have been preserved "for the benefit and enjoyment of the People." You can, for instance, go to Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky and walk for miles through cold, underground passages, under arches covered with crystal flowers, past cascades of water, around pools where the fish you see are blind and colorless. At Pipestone National Monument in Minnesota you can, just as George Catlin did, watch Indians make pipes out of the special stone quarried there. No matter what part of America you visit you will find national parks dedicated to the idea that people need wild places in their lives.

People also need places which will remind them of their country's past. One of the best ways to appreciate the story of America is to visit the sites of historic events. Over one-third of our national parks are historic landmarks; of these more than a dozen are associated with the American Revolution and are of special interest to us in our Bicentennial celebration.

Perhaps the best place to begin a Bicentennial tour is at the Minute Man park in Concord, Massachusetts. This is as peaceful a scene today as it was on April 18, 1775—the day before the first shots of the war were fired. Many of the same houses are still standing and in one of them is a bullet hole from a British musket. And near the bridge, presided over now by the famous statue of the Minute Man, there are graves of two British soldiers killed in battle.



It was more than a year later that 56 men, delegates to the Continental Congress, finally signed the Declaration of Independence. For this we go to Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. The room where the signing took place looks much as it did in 1776. The silver inkwell in which John Hancock dipped his pen is still there. Thomas Jefferson's walking stick leans against a table as if it were expecting him back at any moment.

In the National Park System there are six Revolutionary War battlefields, including the famous one at Saratoga, New York, the scene of America's first important victory (September 1777). Today we call this battle the turning point of the war, but at the time no one was sure that the war had really turned. Certainly the soldiers camping in Morristown, New Jersey, through the "hard winter" of 1779-80 (the coldest in anyone's memory) must have wondered if they could even survive, let alone win the war. The men, one officer reported, often had to work without shoes and stockings "half leg deep in snow." Today in the Morristown National Park the memory of snow still seems to cling to that hillside where Washington's army struggled to build its "log house city." You can go into a reproduction of a log house (14 by 16 feet) built to accommodate 12 men in 4 sets of 3-tiered bunks. And when you hear the present-day drummer in his colonial-style uniform beating "the long roll" in the valley below, it will seem a brave sound indeed.

The army had one more winter to endure before the British surrendered at Yorktown, Virginia, in October 1781. At Colonial National Park in Yorktown you can visit Mr. Moore's house where the negotiations were actually made. You can see British cannon and also the sleeping tent that General Washington used through much of the war.

And if you wish to take further steps into our history as a nation, you can move forward eight years in time (1789) and go to the Federal Hall National Memorial in New York City. Here you will see a large stone on which these words are carved:

"Standing on this stone . . . George Washington took the oath as the first president of the United States of America."

## Men to Match the Mountains

America has had many men, as the poet Edwin Markham put it, to match its mountains. Men of all races, all backgrounds are celebrated in national parks: Indians, Eskimos, Polynesians of Hawaii, Spanish Americans of the Southwest, Russian fur traders of Alaska, immigrants from many countries who have taken part in the American story. Some national parks are dedicated to the memory of special men: a famous educator (Booker T. Washington National Monument in Virginia); a Spanish explorer (DeSoto National Memorial in Florida); a poet (the Carl Sandburg home in North Carolina); a beloved president (the boyhood home of Abraham Lincoln in Indiana); a naturalist (the John Muir house in California). From the Revolutionary War years we have John Adams' home in Quincy, Massachusetts, and George Washington's birthplace at Pope's Creek, Virginia, a reconstructed plantation operated today much as it was when Washington was a boy.



## “From Sea to Shining Sea”

Visitors to the National Park System can go in every direction “from sea to shining sea” and find the varied splendor of American landscape. They can travel back in time to discover the whole range of America’s history, going back for centuries before Columbus thought of crossing the ocean. Yet less than 500 years ago America was not only the “new world” to Europeans, it was *brand* new. And the nation itself is still so new that many people sixty years old today can say that their grandfather’s grandfather was alive when George Washington was. The Bicentennial in the national parks is an on-the-spot celebration of our old, our new, our ever-changing America.

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## 1776—Settlements and Wilderness

In 1776 when the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed in Philadelphia, the thirteen colonies consisted of a narrow strip of land lying between the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian mountains. Most of the continent was wilderness—over 2 million square miles of unmapped country. At one time millions of buffalo roamed this wilderness and blankets of birds flew over it. The forests were so wide and thick that a squirrel, if he’d wanted, could have run a thousand miles through treetops without touching ground. On parts of the prairie a man on a horse could not have been seen over the tall grass around him. This wilderness was the hunting ground of Indians who liked the wilderness just the way it was. They had no desire to change it. It was the white man in the settled part of America who thought of the wilderness as something to be moved back, fought over, tamed, sold, mined, cut down, and plowed.

Indeed, ever since he had arrived in America, the white man had battled and exploited the wilderness. At scattered posts throughout the west he traded with Indians for buffalo hides and meat, especially the tongues, one of his favorite foods. And he traded for furs of all kinds. In one year alone 200 tons of beaver hides were shipped out of one trading area. And now in 1776 as independence was being declared, the axes were ringing and the frontier was being pushed back one step further. Daniel Boone and his friends were setting up the first town in what would be known later as Kentucky.

## “Let us keep the New World new”

In 1831, fifty years after independence had been won, one-third of all Americans were living west of the Appalachian mountains. There were eleven new states; the wilderness had shrunk and there were fewer buffalo. The Indians too, influenced by white men, were changing their ways. It seemed that it was only a matter of time before the wilderness would be gone altogether.

Fortunately, some people appreciated the wilderness for itself. After all, what other civilized country had such primitive, unspoiled areas? In Massachusetts a young nature lover, Henry David Thoreau, was exploring the wild places near his home. Later he would write about how important it was to protect such places. “Let us keep the New World *new*,” he said. In Pennsylvania an artist, George Catlin, became so distressed by the idea of civilization creeping across the continent that he went out west to paint Indians before they changed too much. During his lifetime he made over 1000 paintings and sketches, but these, of course, preserved only the likeness of the wilderness, not the wilderness itself. Sometimes this did not seem enough to Catlin. One day he learned that some Indians had killed a herd of 1,400 buffalo just so they could trade the tongues for the

