

Harpers Ferry Center

A Brief History of the Unigrid



From atomic bombs to zooplankton, from Ice Age migrations to 21st century immigration, Unigrids are on the frontlines of storytelling in the NPS.

For almost as long as there have been national parks, there have been park brochures. As the National Park System grew, so did the need for publications. The wide variety of formats, fonts, and folding methods made it increasingly difficult to keep up with demand.

In 1977, Publications Chief Vincent Gleason sought a more efficient and cost-effective approach. He enlisted the expertise of modernist designer Massimo Vignelli, who had recently won acclaim for New York subway signage and maps. The Unigrid was born.

The Unigrid is not just another template. It is a comprehensive graphic design system that standardizes formatting and production. It allows designers, writers, and cartographers to focus on content and creativity while conveying a strong visual identity for the agency.

The Unigrid has been an agency institution for so long that we forget it was the disruptor of its time. In 1985, the Unigrid Program received one of the first Presidential Design Awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, which noted, “The program fulfills the primary objective of a design system, reducing routine decisions so that effort can be concentrated on quality. The implementation of the program demonstrates sensitivity to the wide variety of subject matter and attention to the finest detail. It is an example to others and has already achieved international recognition.” In more recent times, digital technology has transformed the way the Publications Office works and has revolutionized the printing industry.

Once a new Unigrid is developed, it is generally reprinted every year or two with changes as needed. Over the decades-long lifespan of a typical brochure, individual copies average just 6½ cents per copy. The Publications Office at Harpers Ferry Center prints up to 28 million copies per year. Laid end-to-end, they would stretch across the continental United States, passing many of the 400-plus national parks that distribute them.

Unigrid Fun Facts

- A Unigrid’s basic building blocks are 4” by 8¼” panels (sections created by fold lines).
- Pages can be one or two panels wide (“A” or “B” formats) and up to six panels long, allowing for a variety of shapes and sizes. These measurements are calculated to get the most out of a standard-size 25” by 38” press sheet, minimizing waste.
- Paper, ink, and printing are all standard for the industry, allowing the government to buy in bulk from a single contract printer.
- The original typefaces were Helvetica and Times Roman. Today’s standard faces are Frutiger and NPS Rawlinson.
- The NPS arrowhead first appeared in the black band in 1999.
- The imprint shows the year of the printing and the year of origin or most recent major updates.
- The 1978 brochure for Clara Barton National Historic Site was the first Unigrid designed for a park in the Vignelli design.
- The underlying grid sets physical boundaries for individual elements yet allows for a great deal of flexibility. Two brochures of the same size and shape, even if they are designed by the same person, will usually look completely different.

Early Unigrid designs stressed the “grid.” The program has evolved into designs that favor the “Uni” part of “Unigrid”—unifying images, text, and maps into cohesive stories.



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Once a new Unigrid is developed, it is generally reprinted every year or two with changes as needed. Over the 10- to 20-year lifespan of a typical brochure, individual copies average just a few cents each. The Publications office at Harpers Ferry Center prints 24 to 28 million copies a year. Laid end-to-end, they would stretch across the continental United States, passing by many of the 400-plus national park areas that distribute them.