

A Cultural Resource Challenge for the National Park Service



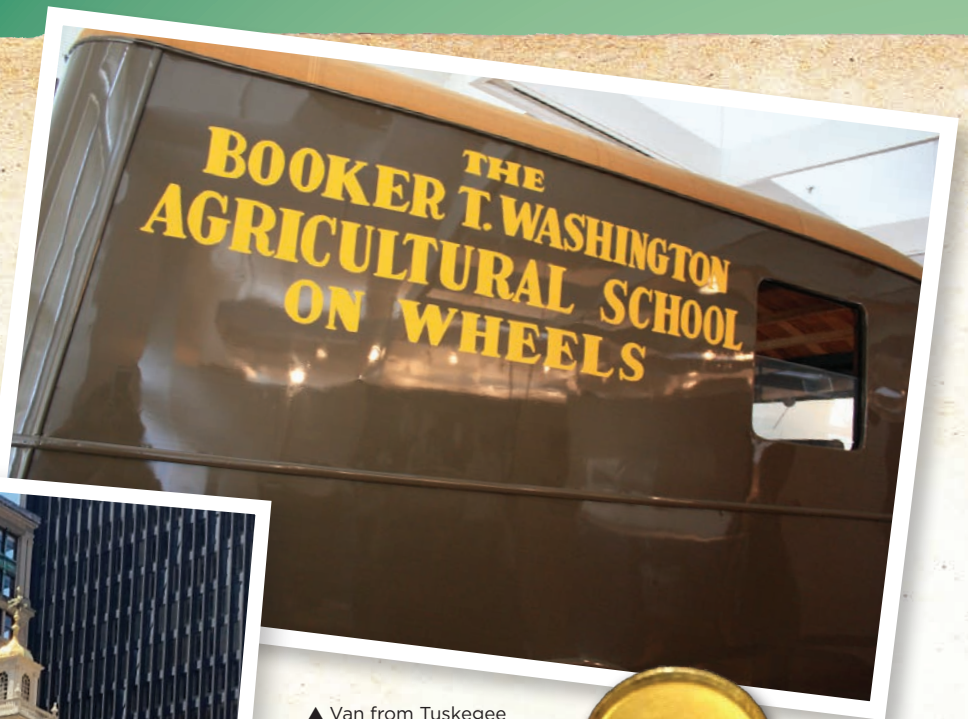
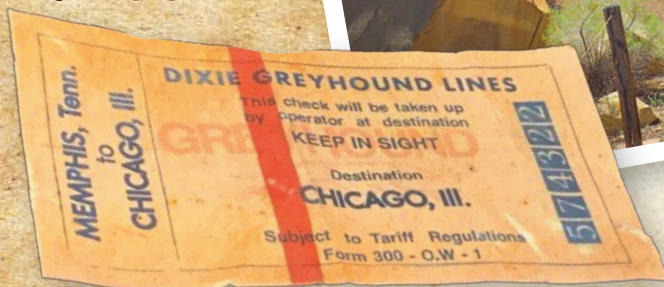
Ensuring our national parks are ready for the
250th anniversary
of America's independence and beyond



Old South Meeting House—Boston African American National Historical Park [MA]. ▼



Greyhound lines ticket —from a display at the Tunica Blues Museum in the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area [MS]. ▼



▲ Van from Tuskegee Institute National Historical Park [AL].



▲ Pullman Porters uniform button— from Pullman National Historical Park [IL].



▲ Chaco Culture National Historical Park [NM].



◀ Baby's Moccasins—Moccasins with geometric design. Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site [ND].



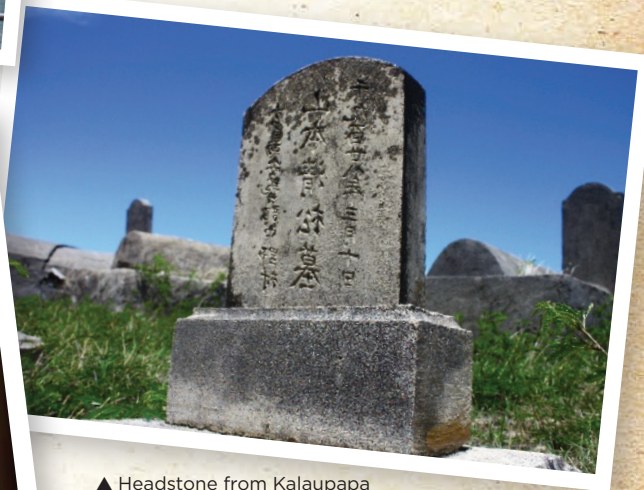
▲ USS Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor [HI].



▲ Pillows that read "Two's company, three's a crowd" from the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site [DC].



▲ Cesar Chavez National Monument [CA].



▲ Headstone from Kalaupapa National Historical Park [HI].

We Can Do It!





Introduction

History is at the heart of our national parks. They preserve stories of battles, turning points, triumphs and tragedies.

Parks take us back to moments that were integral to our country's founding. Minute Man National Historical Park commemorates the "shot heard round the world" at Concord Bridge that started the Revolutionary War. At Independence Hall where the Declaration of Independence was signed, John Hancock wanted his name to be large enough for the King of England to easily read. These are places in the care of the National Park Service to protect in perpetuity and tell stories that will live on for generations. Or will they?

With just 138 historians out of 20,000 National Park Service Staff, and federal funding stretched too thin to catalog, care for, display and share all the artifacts and stories that tell the history of America, what our children and grandchildren will see at our parks is increasingly coming into question.

The National Park Service has been asked to do more with less for years, and the wear is starting to show ... at the worst possible time.

On July 4, 2026, the United States will commemorate the 250th anniversary of our independence from Great Britain. America's hundreds of national parks will be at the center of our celebration, with rangers teaching visitors of all generations the rich and complex history that made us the nation we are today. Our parks can inspire our ongoing efforts to create and sustain a more perfect union.

The issue isn't whether people will flock to our national parks for the semiquincentennial. Rather, it's what kind of experience we want them to have when they get there.

The cultural resource stewardship workforce of the National Park Service has identified the pressing need to hire an additional 450 staff (archaeologists, archivists, curators, ethnographers, historians, interpretive rangers, specialists and technicians) to fully meet their needs even as the budget for this program has been cut by 11.5% between 2011 and 2022. And the absence of an inventory and monitoring program for cultural resources prevents National Park Service staff from understanding the trends, opportunities and threats facing our historic and cultural resources, especially those posed by our ongoing climate emergency.



These shortfalls have led to a quiet crisis that is undermining the ability of the National Park Service to protect our historic and cultural legacy. This stems not from a callous disregard by agency personnel, nor is it the result of poor management. Throughout the National Park System, diligent staff are working hard every day to protect our shared heritage. They deserve our respect and admiration.

Over the last 100 years, however, the National Park Service has prioritized the preservation of natural resources over that of their historic and cultural assets. Sparse budgets handed down from Congress have exacerbated this problem, adding to the woes of cultural resource managers and historic preservation staff within the agency.

Congress and the public can work together to fix this problem.

NPCA is calling for a Cultural Resource Challenge for the national parks. Our parks need at least \$250 million in appropriations over five successive fiscal years to ensure the National Park Service has the cultural resource professionals (archaeologists, archivists, curators, ethnographers, historians, interpretive rangers, specialists and technicians) to interpret, manage and preserve our shared historic and cultural legacies for the 250th anniversary commemoration and beyond.

More than 100 years ago, our country made a commitment to protect and preserve our national parks — the shared touchstones of our experience. On the cusp of the 250th anniversary of American independence, we have much to celebrate and commemorate, and potentially much to lose. Congress must act now to ensure that the agency tasked with the preservation of our cultural and historic resources is fully empowered to do great work on behalf of a grateful nation.



DOING MORE

11%

increase in new park units since 2001, mostly cultural/historic sites. Designated by Republican and Democratic administrations and Congresses, this increase allows NPS to tell broader American stories.

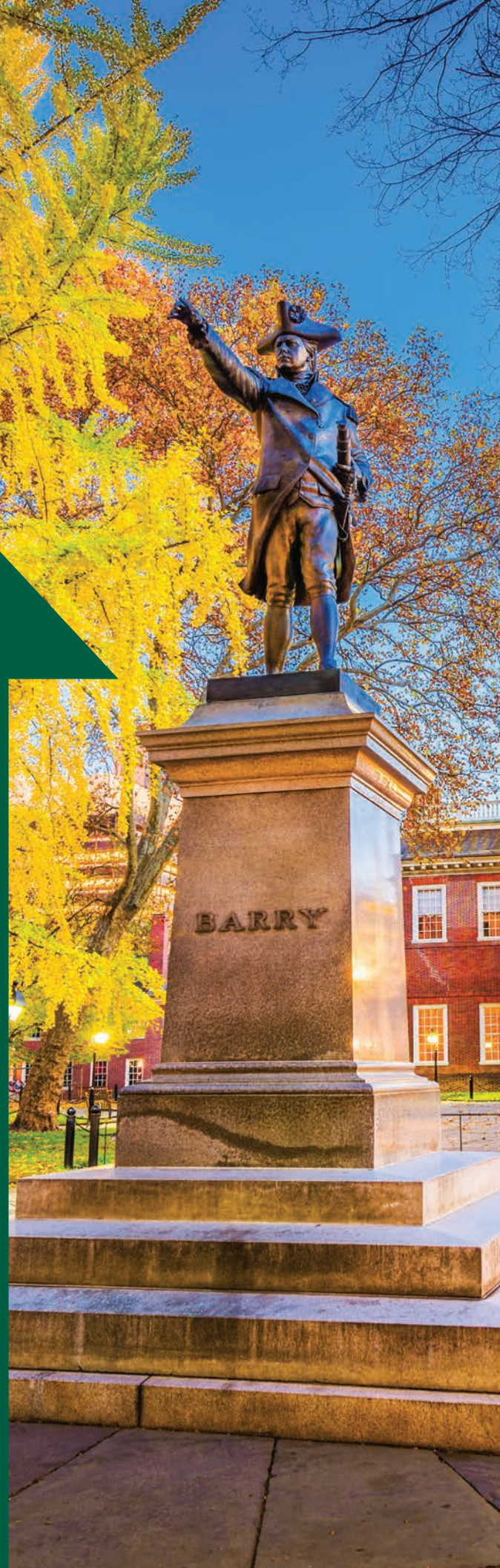
184.9
MILLION

objects, artifacts and documents in growing National Park Service museum and archival collections.

26,000

NPS-managed historic structures, from Casa Grande Ruins (AZ) to the Maggie Walker Home (VA).

Old South Meeting House, the site of the March 5, 1770 Boston Massacre on the Freedom Trail in Boston, MA. Joseph Sohm/Shutterstock®





NPS reports the need
for an additional

450

cultural resource staff to ensure
interpretive, management and
planning needs in parks and
regions are met.

11.5%

decrease in the cultural
resource stewardship budget
between 2011 and 2022.

25%

decrease in NPS historians
from 2011 to 2022.

WITH
LESS

The National Park Service's Historic Preservation Responsibilities

The National Park Service has been in the historic preservation and cultural resource management business since Congress established the agency in 1916. The National Park Service's Organic Act, its founding charter, states that,

*"The Service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations... which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and **historic objects** and the wildlife therein..."*

In 1933, the Reorganization Act established a National Park System by conveying responsibility to the National Park Service for the management of all national military sites, national monuments, national cemeteries and parks located in the District of Columbia. The Reorganization Act significantly expanded the National Park Service's role in interpreting, managing and preserving our historic and cultural resources.

Then, in 1966, passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) launched the modern preservation movement in the United States. The landmark legislation established the National Park Service as the federal agency that would bear the responsibility for much of the nation's legislative preservation mandates. The Historic Preservation Fund (HPF) and the National Register of Historic Places were both created by the NHPA. The National Park Service was tasked with coordinating both these efforts and for working in close collaboration with state historic preservation offices (the entities that identify and plan historic resource preservation at the state level) and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (which advises the president and Congress on national historic preservation policy). Both were established by the 1966 law.

When in 1996, the Secretary of the Interior established Tribal historic preservation offices, the National Park Service began working with representatives from that program to address preservation needs on Tribal lands.

Revolutionary War artillery on display at Yorktown Battlefield. Wikimedia Commons.









What Is a Cultural Resource?

Every national park has a historic or cultural story to tell. And each one has resources — personal letters, military dispatches, cartoons, clothing, signage, photographs and video that help to tell those stories. In fact, the National Park Service manages one of the largest museum collections in North America. The more than 184 million artifacts include Revolutionary and Civil War cannons, Frederick Douglass’ dumbbells, a three-masted sailing ship named the *Balclutha*, historic structures at Casa Grande Ruins, the San Antonio Missions, Appomattox Courthouse, women’s suffrage protest banners, and Carl Sandburg’s NPCA membership card. These are the historic and cultural resources that form our shared heritage, and managing their interpretation and preservation is a core responsibility of the National Park Service.

Archaeological site, Historic Jamestowne, Colonial National Historical Park, Jamestown, Virginia. Wikimedia Commons.

Cultural Resources and NPS Staffing

To provide some sense of how inadequate staffing levels are inhibiting the National Park Service from fully performing its preservation and interpretation duties, the following national park units provide insight

Ocmulgee National Historical Park

The woodlands of southeastern Georgia are regarded by the Muscogee Creek as the area where their ancestors “first sat down.” Since its establishment in 1934, the park has preserved and interpreted the rich heritage of the First Nations that settled the region thousands of years before there was a United States of America.

Archaeological research in the 1930s and '40s revealed a vast array of artifacts and material culture related to the Muscogee and Mississippian peoples. Two thousand of those treasures are displayed in the park’s museum. But 3 million more remain in storage — just .00067% of what was uncovered. What remains unstudied and out of view could change the history of this area and its people as we know it. But in 2021, Oc-

mulgee’s lone cultural resource specialist retired, and their position has remained vacant ever since.

Colonial National Historical Park

This park includes several important sites telling the history of pre-colonial and colonial Virginia (1607 to 1781).] In 2011, Fort Monroe National Monument was added to Colonial’s portfolio of sites, representing the place where African people first arrived in 1619, among other significant events. As of this writing, Colonial has just one person assigned to assess and manage more than 2 million artifacts and museum collection pieces, including those damaged by storms and other climate-related events. Centuries of important history rests on the shoulders of just one staff member.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

One industrious park ranger, conducting cultural resource work in addition to his primary duties, launched a program designed to highlight the African American experience in the region. He uncovered park records, well-preserved but long forgotten, that revealed a fascinating story of Black families who lived and worked near and in the park. This story may have been lost to time had it not been for one staff person who went well beyond his job function to share with America this important story. What other stories lie in this and other parks, yet to be revealed?

NPCA Recommendation: Congress must provide \$80,000,000 to fully staff the National Park Service’s cultural resource stewardship workforce so that parks such as Ocmulgee and Colonial can manage their museum and archival collections, determine their condition, and plan for their interpretation and long-term care.



Photo of tour in Great Smoky Mountains National Park courtesy of NPCA

Who are the cultural resource professionals?



Archaeologists

study the tangible remains of historic and pre-historic people and events, including architectural remains, features and artifacts.



Curators

document and preserve one of the world's largest museum collections and facilitate exhibits and research.



Archivists

organize and preserve collections of park-related documents, records, photos, films and other materials.



Ethnographers

focus on groups of people linked to parks by religion, legend, deep historical attachment, subsistence and use.



Cultural Anthropologists

harness the power of research and communication to connect cultural communities with places in the parks that are considered essential to their identity.



Historians

support the interpretation and preservation of historic buildings, sites and intangible information resources in the park system.



Cultural Interpreters

help visitors understand and gain an appreciation for the parks' cultural resources, supporting the agency's mission of protection.



Landscape Architects

craft land area plans and designs that support the preservation, rehabilitation and stewardship of outdoor park spaces and land.



Cultural Resource Managers

ensure the parks' cultural resources are preserved, protected and interpreted for the public through research and planning.



Specialists & Technicians

perform technical and specialized work necessary to care for the agency's millions of cultural artifacts, natural history specimens and archives for the American people.

Cultural Resources and Climate

At Fort Pulaski the National Park Service has attempted to enhance a trench surrounding an 18th century lighthouse built on an eroding shoreline to protect it from rising sea levels. At Acadia National Park and at Vicksburg National Military Park, the National Park Service is reengineering major roadways to repair and better prepare them for the adverse climate impacts that are sure to come.

NPCA's research has shown the National Park Service's own planning process must focus more on how climate threats damage cultural and historic resources. In 2022, the National Park Service issued 91 climate vulnerability reports, 71 for natural resources but just 14 for cultural resources. Without proper funding and personnel, the Park Service has to make tough judgment calls. In time, these decisions will mean choosing what we can save and what will be lost forever.

Harpers Ferry National Historical

In May 2018, two days of unusually heavy rain caused a landslide that closed a portion of the Appalachian Trail and access to Civil War era fortifications. The same storm brought flooding to Harpers Ferry's historic district, and a resulting black mold infestation closed several structures to visitors. Because Harpers Ferry sits at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers, the town has not been a stranger to floods. But the increasing frequency and severity of storms has led to flooding in the Upper Town, well away from the rivers.

The structures damaged and closed at Harpers Ferry could be repaired and reopened to the public, but not until the National Park Service has a plan to save those structures from future flooding caused by increasingly intense and severe storms. Until that happens, hundreds of thousands of Harpers Ferry visitors will continue to miss out on some of America's most critical history.

Fire damage at Paramount Ranch after the 2018 Woosley Fire destroyed most of the property. The ranch served as the location for some of Hollywood's biggest Golden Age hits and was acquired by the National Park Service in 1980. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area

In November 2018, the Woolsey Fire jumped the Ventura Highway and spread into the Santa Monica Mountains. There, the fire burned nearly 21,000 acres of land belonging to the National Park Service. Much of the historic Paramount Ranch, a restored production studio from Hollywood's Golden Age managed by NPS, was razed, as were the Peter Strauss Ranch, a ranger residence at Rocky Oaks and a museum structure.

The buildings lost at Paramount Ranch in the Woolsey fire are gone for good.

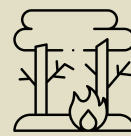
That two cultural resource parks on opposite coasts were impacted by climate change in the same year demonstrates climate threats to our National Park System and the cultural, historic and natural resources they protect are real.

NPCA Recommendation: Congress must provide \$50,000,000 to the National Park Service to facilitate the development of an inventory and monitoring program for the agency's cultural resources. A cultural resource focused inventory and monitoring program, would allow the Park Service to begin collecting data on the status of its historic and cultural resources and base preservation strategies on science and data, especially climate-related challenges.

Threats include:



Flooding



Wildfires



Humidity and HVAC strain



Freeze and Thaw cycles





Cultural Resources and the NPS Budget

Unfortunately, it's clear that while the National Park Service suffers from inadequate funding, the cultural resources side of NPS operations remains woefully underfunded. In inflation-adjusted dollars, the National Park Service's cultural resource stewardship budget declined by 11.5% between 2012 and 2022. On top of the decreases cited in the 2008 National Academy of Public Administration's report "Saving Our History," which showed funding for NPS cultural resource programs down 19% between 1995 and 2008, it's clear that the agency's cultural resources operations have been underfunded for decades.



National Park Service personnel have struggled for decades to "do more with less." The agency's cultural resources managers and their programs have faced particularly adverse impacts as bad budgets and the staffing shortfalls they generate have undermined their operational capacity to interpret, manage and protect our heritage.

NPCA Recommendation: Congress must act now to implement a Cultural Resource Challenge for the National Park Service that will provide at least \$250 million in new money to stabilize and enhance NPS cultural resource management and historic preservation programs.



From top: Big Bend (NPCA); Ford Model T - Serial No. 220, Built December 1908, General Washington Yorktown, VA. All photos courtesy of Wikimedia Commons unless otherwise indicated.

Lost History

The preservation of this nation's cultural heritage requires an integrated approach by National Park Service staff. This means the agency needs well-trained, engaged and innovative experts who can document stories, bring life to historic and cultural resources, plan for the long-term preservation of those resources, and inspire the public to care about the all the common touchstones of our shared past. We are fortunate as a nation to have some of the best storytellers on the planet working for the National Park Service. We need to ensure that they are backed up by a cadre of archaeologists, archivists, cultural anthropologists, cultural interpreters, cultural resource managers, curators, ethnographers, historians, landscape preservation architects, specialists and technicians, who will ensure that the research, transmission of knowledge, planning, education, preservation, maintenance, and protection of cultural resource, and partnerships are in place and thriving.

Archaeologist recovering ancient pottery with hand trowel. Microgen/Shutterstock

Family looking at museum artifacts in glass case. Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock



When cultural resource positions are left empty, a trained professional isn't the only thing that's missing.



The history they would have discovered, preserved, researched and shared with the public can be missing too.

	Amount	Result	Account
Fully staff Cultural Resource Stewardship Workforce	\$80,000,000	This funding will increase the number of cultural resources staff available in National Park Service regions and reduce the number of lapsed positions (450) throughout the agency.	Operations of the National Park Service (ONPS)
Historical Research	\$40,000,000	Funding would aid the National Park Service in continuing to develop the interdisciplinary and geographically diverse research that makes NPS interpretation and preservation cutting edge, accurate and inspiring.	ONPS
Cultural Resource Inventory and Monitoring Program	\$50,000,000	Within five years of the program implementation the Cultural Resources inventory and monitoring program would offer a comprehensive, integrated plan for the management of historic and cultural resources managed by NPS, including a system-wide plan for protecting cultural resources from climate-based threats.	ONPS
Cultural Resource Project Budget	\$32,000,000	This funding will specifically help the National Park Service to meet their obligations under Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act for research, inventory and documentation. This funding stream helps national park units to work with diverse racial and ethnic groups to document their history. The Cultural Resource Project Budget regularly receives over \$50 million in requests for assistance.	ONPS
Preservation Planning and Support	\$10,000,000	Within five years of implementation, 50% percent of national parks will have produced baseline reports outlining the condition of their historic and cultural resources.	National Recreation & Preservation (NR&P)
Collections Management	\$7,000,000	This support would reduce the number of artifacts (over 40%) in the National Park Service's Museum collection that have not been catalogued.	ONPS
Museum Collections Digitization	\$7,000,000	This money will allow the agency to develop and implement a service-wide program for the digitization of its museum collections, a way to make those artifacts more accessible to the public and a key tactic to ensure that even if items are lost to climate threats, some documentation of their existence remains.	ONPS
National Register Digitization	\$500,000	Will allow the National Park Service to continue its partnership with the National Archives and Records Administration in digitizing and improving public access to National Register and National Historic Landmarks documentation.	NR&P
Support for Tribal Historic Preservation Offices	\$23,500,000	To support the retention of Native languages.	ONPS
Total	\$250,000,000		

A Cultural Resource Challenge for the National Park Service

For decades, the National Park Service's cultural resource preservation efforts have been underfunded and overstretched. Staff have done their best to do more with less, but that approach has led to a quiet crisis that threatens the ability of the agency to fully interpret, manage and protect our shared national heritage.

As our country speeds toward the 250th anniversary of its independence from Great Britain, now is the time to eliminate the imbalance between cultural and natural resources by ensuring that all National Park Service programs are adequately funded and well-staffed. That's why NPCA recommends the implementation of a Cultural Resource Challenge for the National Park Service — one that would add at least \$250 million in new appropriations to meet the critical needs of the agency's historic and cultural resource preservation mandates.

We urge Congress to act now to ensure that America's national parks are ready for the 250th and beyond! Help us ensure that national parks and America's history remain a draw for generations to come.

For additional information on the Cultural Resource Challenge campaign, please visit our website at npca.org/challenge.



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