

## The Civilian Conservation Corps at Chiricahua National Monument: A Cultural Landscape for Interpretation

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### The challenge

NATIONAL PARKS AND MONUMENTS ARE AMALGAMS OF CULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCES. They are places where human history was and still is dependent on natural resources and where those natural resources have been modified by generations of inhabitants. As such, they are cultural landscapes. Under the ongoing protection of the National Park Service (NPS), these cultural landscapes are some of the best preserved representations of our American history and collective experiences.

Park employees must protect these landscapes but must also develop interpretation and educate the visiting public about them.<sup>1</sup> Freeman Tilden recognized the critical importance of communicating that knowledge to others almost 60 years ago. Interpreters are the lynchpin in that communication. In 1957 Tilden wrote in his seminal work, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, “The primary need for interpretation is to inspire a desire to protect and preserve our resources.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet, as cultural resource specialists, managers, landscape architects, and historians, we still struggle to translate the unfamiliar concept of a cultural landscape into usable language for park interpreters and for the visiting public. Without that conceptual understanding, cultural landscapes and the component features that comprise those human-derived places remain unrecognized and unknown. It is my belief that understanding a landscape and its associated values comes from close physical exposure to that landscape, combined with a connection to its history and its people. You can’t achieve that “aha” moment until you put both together. By learning to “read” our historic landscapes, by engaging people in those landscapes with stories and past experiences, we strengthen bonds between residents and their community, and inspire visitors to become committed to preservation.

From my experience as a landscape historian, I am convinced that teaching through a landscape format is still the best way to educate the public about the integrated resources within and around each park.<sup>3</sup> I have been researching the landscape of Chiricahua National Monument in Southeast Arizona for over a decade. Using the historic, designed landscape in this small and compact park, I will illustrate what interpretation might accomplish with a nationally recognized storyline, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the hundreds of heritage features present in Chiricahua’s landscape.

### Chiricahua’s cultural landscape

Chiricahua National Monument (CNM) is a small, enclosed area set within one of the basin and

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range mountain systems in Southeastern Arizona. Ranging from 5100 to 7300 feet in elevation, its geological features derive from wind- and water-carved ash depositions from volcanic eruptions 25 million years ago. Within the park boundaries CNM ecosystems extend from high desert grasslands to ponderosa pine forests, and support a highly diverse biota. Two steep canyons converge into a flat valley whose creek is fed by summer monsoon and winter precipitation. That valley with its surrounding environment sustains a cultural landscape significant for a number of historic themes, its archeology, ethnography, and historic design.

Chiricahua's landscape is an enormous onion, deep with overlying and interwoven layers of history. Bonita Canyon holds evidence of Archaic period settlement and was an important component of the Chiricahua Apache homelands. The Buffalo Soldiers' tenth cavalry occupied the valley during the Indian Wars. Two families claimed homesteads in the canyon for farming and cattle ranching. The landscape has since supported a Forest Service ranger station, an early Arizona guest ranch, a CCC campsite and its constructed park facilities, and, finally, 80 years of NPS stewardship.

Hidden in recesses beyond Bonita Canyon, at the heart of CNM is a mind-boggling landscape, a phantasmagorical collection of spires and pinnacles that remained undiscovered until the early 1920s. It is this landscape around which the monument was established.

Ed Riggs, stockman and owner of Faraway guest ranch, was an inveterate explorer and tinkerer. He climbed over and dove deeply into the geological landscape of CNM in early 1920s. Riggs led early tours into the heart of that wilderness, and was instrumental in generating the public enthusiasm necessary to establish the monument. Ed cut the first horse trails, and later became the trail foreman at the CCC camp. He knew that landscape more intimately than any man.

But landscape needed more than one man to open it up. The Great Depression with all of its associated misery created that opportunity. The CCC work program was a signature program of President Roosevelt's New Deal—the largest social experiment, designed to lift the country out of the Great Depression. The CCC hired unemployed young men, taught them skills and a work ethic, and, with respect to park lands, developed recreational facilities across the country (Figure 1). In Arizona, because of New Deal work programs like the CCC, the 1930s saw more coordinated federal and state-led development than at any other decade in the history of the state.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1.** Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees were unemployed, young men aged 17 to 25. Working under experienced foremen, they gained valuable trade skills and a work ethic. In this image, these enrollees display an evident pride in their abilities as they enlarge Chiricahua's original two-room ranger station into a more efficient interpretation center, administrative building, and museum in 1937.

## The role of CCC and the NPS

While CCC enrollees provided the labor to construct the park elements, NPS employees developed master plans to guide the design and layout of each park. NPS engineers, landscape architects, planners, and naturalists were responsible for overseeing construction at over 1,000 municipal, county, state and national parks across the country.<sup>5</sup> Almost every park and monument in Arizona extant in the 1930s had major development created by CCC enrollees and NPS engineers. Even today, more than 75% of parks in the southwest still support CCC historic resources.<sup>6</sup> The ubiquity of those historic resources and landscapes throughout our federal parks gives weight to the importance of their identification and interpretation to the public.

The CCC camp NM2A at Chiricahua existed for six years between 1934 and 1940. In that short span of time, enrollees and the foremen who directed them built an entire recreational site and associated NPS management district, including 17 miles of trails, eight miles of reconstructed roadway, a campground, administrative center, and housing and maintenance facilities. Chiricahua's landscape is dense with CCC accomplishments; there are few places in the park where visitors will not experience a constructed feature of that era.

The NPS design of roads, trails, and buildings was directly influenced by issues of topography, aspect, geology, vegetation, and other natural resources, such as stone for building. Development was laid out according principles of naturalistic landscape design and rustic architecture. Related structures were clustered together to minimize impact on the land, and the trail and roadway systems were linked to coordinate circulation patterns.

Natural resource planning was organized jointly with Coronado National Forest. A fifth, and northernmost, in a series of fire lookouts along the Chiricahua Mountain Range was constructed on Sugarloaf Mountain to complete the visual coverage for fire spotting and prevention. A primitively constructed road was finished when the CCC enrollees arrived in 1934. The road needed much improvement, including better drainage, slope stabilization, blasting back overhanging ledges, and rebuilding culverts.

Chiricahua supports 16 CCC buildings—most within a short walking distance of prime visitor locations. CCC buildings are low structures, showing few external straight lines or right angles. All were assembled from locally quarried rhyolite stone cut with hand tools in order to blend more effectively with the natural environment. The sloped walls suggest structures emerging from soil. Vegetation was carefully retained during construction and later enhanced to provide screening and further embed the buildings visually into landscape (Figure 2).

The numerous trails constructed under the watchful eye of foreman Ed Riggs were specifically designed to meander; at each turn they present a new and dramatic view (Figure 3). Evidence of CCC drill marks and the enrollees' hand work is visible on every trail. This trail system in Chiricahua is unique; it is the only historic designed landscape that has subsequently been designated as part a wilderness—a relationship that only further confirms the inseparability of cultural and natural resources and values.<sup>7</sup>

The layout of trails was intended to educate visitors about Chiricahua's remarkable geological resources, and to give them intimate access to those features. Today's visitors become viscerally and emotionally attached to those formations. In many locations within the park, hikers can walk among and touch enormous spires on both sides of the trail. Yet those same visitors receive little information about the planning or construction that created these trails, Chiricahua's other structures, or their connection to national historic events.

## Interpreting a CCC landscape

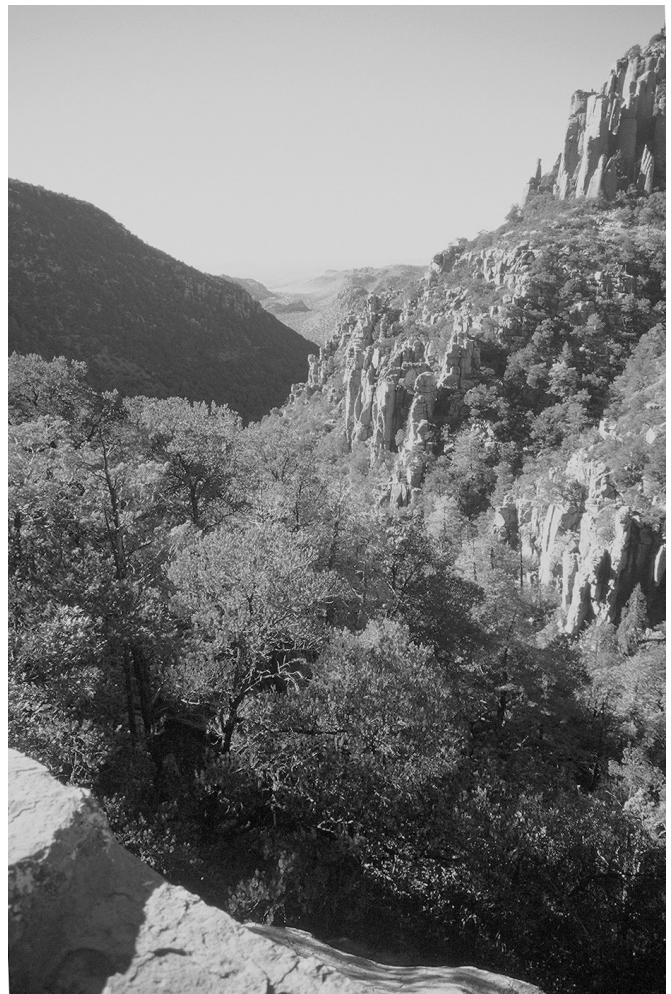
It is not my purpose in this paper to critique interpretation at this park in particular; CNM is a small park and now labors under continuing personnel and funding cutbacks. Rather, I wish to





**Figure 2.** Chiricahua’s administration building and museum were constructed by CCC enrollees using carefully quarried stone and assembled following NPS design principles of rustic architecture. Hundreds of visitors walk past this building to enter the Mission 66 visitor center addition yet there is no interpretation about its origins.

**Figure 3.** After close encounters with stone pinnacles, the historic designed and CCC-constructed Echo Canyon Trail offers a hiker a refreshing long-distance view of weather-carved columns, Lower Rhyolite Canyon, and the grazing lands of the Sulphur Springs Valley beyond.



use this opportunity to suggest what might be accomplished in interpretation by park units that still contain CCC designed landscapes, and to encourage park employees and visitors to think in terms of landscape imbued with history and defined by imprints of earlier generations.

An informal survey of some southwestern parks yielded useful examples of interpretation of the CCC and park history at a landscape scale. In 2007, Grand Canyon National Park funded a year-long project to plumb its own archives for the history of the CCC and its early development. With that information, park historians produced a remarkable exhibit that now travels to museums throughout the state and shares that story to an even wider audience. A paper pamphlet available at the visitor center, and now a digital version on the park website, directs visitors on a self-guided tour of CCC accomplishments along the rim trail. In addition, the park website offers more detailed historical information, and connections to sources and websites for those interested in exploring the subject in greater depth.

Bandelier National Monument contains a wealth of CCC buildings and structures in the vicinity of the visitor center. Park interpreters have designed a self-guided walking tour of the area, which is downloadable from the park's website. The tour contains photographs of all of the structures, and relates information about the history of the Depression and the CCC, and the construction, historic use, and adaptive reuse of the buildings. A park volunteer gives a fire-side talk about the lives of the enrollees who worked at the park, and the importance of the CCC program in the development of the cultural landscape of Bandelier.<sup>8</sup>

At Petrified Forest National Park the story of the Painted Desert Inn highlights the importance of visitor connection and personal investment in park resources. CCC enrollees reconstructed and expanded the inn in 1938, but it was later abandoned due to severe structural problems. Because of public attachment to the historic structure, Petrified Forest chose not to demolish the building, but restore it instead.<sup>9</sup> In era of declining budgets, we must continue to educate the public on the value of park cultural resources and the ongoing need to preserve them. Chief of Interpretation Sarah Herve affirms that visitors are hungry to learn about the origins of the park and the history of the CCC.<sup>10</sup> The park now showcases the CCC in permanent exhibits at the inn. Park interpreters take visitors along the CCC Blue Forest Trail, and relate the role of the CCC in the early development of Petrified Forest.

Some of the tools listed here can be labor- or time-intensive for park personnel. Yet personal contact with interpreters always creates the most memorable experiences for visitors. Permanent exhibits can be expensive and space-intensive for small visitor centers. Wayside information outside of buildings or at trail heads might provide a useful alternative. Other options might include interpreter podcasts, recordings of oral histories with enrollees, updates about CCC resources on Facebook or Twitter pages, and links to publications of park research, such as administrative histories, cultural landscape reports, or national register nominations, all on the park website. It should be noted that while the three examples above illuminate the role of the CCC and construction of the individual park's features, none cover the contributions of NPS employees who designed those buildings and landscapes and oversaw their development.

### **Interpretation and park history**

A landscape-scale perspective provides a valuable framework with which to interpret natural and cultural resources together. CNM, like most parks, is rich in both. Its cultural history is thoroughly interwoven with—indeed inseparable from—the natural resources. One cannot successfully interpret its history without including the natural resource values that led people to settle in and use that landscape. If one speaks of those natural resources without the accompanying cultural history, the story is thin and one-dimensional.



The accomplishments of CCC enrollees along with NPS designers and engineers are a prime example of that connection. They combined constructed facilities with wilderness resources to develop what we now appreciate as the park experience. The CCC was a “bootstrap” response to a great adversity afflicting our country; that response yielded some of the greatest cultural resources in our national parks. Eighty years later, those constructed landscapes still provide aesthetic, educational, health, and economic benefits to visitors and surrounding communities.

The 80th anniversary of the Historic Sites Act and the 50th anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act are two reasons to highlight National Register-eligible park resources. Indeed, our upcoming centennial is a time when we should celebrate not only what the parks have to offer but also what they have accomplished in the past, and how they preserve our history for us today. The NPS is the premier repository of American history and heritage; yet it does *not* tell its own story very well.<sup>11</sup> The widespread occurrence of CCC structures, buildings, and landscapes in parks across the country provides interpreters a ready opportunity to communicate the importance of our heritage resource values, their connection to natural resources, and the critical need for their protection and preservation.

### Endnotes

1. Historic Sites Act of 1935, 16 U.S.C. §§ 461–467 (1935); National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998. Pub. L. No. 105–391.
2. F. Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957).
3. A.M. Whisnant, M. R. Miller, G. B. Nash, and D. Thelan, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (Bloomington, IN: Organization of American Historians, 2011), 27, [www.oah.org/programs/the-oah-national-park-service-collaboration/imperiled-promise-the-state-of-history-in-the-national-park-service/](http://www.oah.org/programs/the-oah-national-park-service-collaboration/imperiled-promise-the-state-of-history-in-the-national-park-service/).
4. W.S. Collins, *The New Deal in Arizona* (Phoenix: Arizona State Parks Board, 1999) 387–395.
5. J. Paige, *The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Park Service, 1933–1942: An Administrative History* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1985), 38–46.
6. Jill Cowley (historical landscape architect, Cultural Landscapes Program, Intermountain Region, NPS), in discussion with author, September 24, 2015.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Joanie Budzileni (chief of interpretation, Bandelier National Monument, NPS), in discussion with author, September 27, 2014.
9. A. Zeman, and K. Beppler-Dorn. “Preserving the Painted Desert Inn in Petrified Forest National Park,” in *Protecting Our Diverse Heritage: The Role of Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*, ed. David Harmon, Bruce M. Kilgore, and Gay E. Vietzke (Hancock, MI: The George Wright Society, 2004), [www.georgewright.org/0347zeman.pdf](http://www.georgewright.org/0347zeman.pdf).
10. Sarah Herve (chief of interpretation, Petrified Forest National Park, NPS), in discussion with the author, September 25, 2014.
11. Whisnant et al., 28.