



## National Park Service A History

National parks have been called “the best idea America ever had.” The idea of preserving special natural and cultural places in public ownership ran contrary to the prevailing national mood during the 19th century, when most Americans saw nature as something to be subdued and history as what happened in the Old World. But as the wilderness receded and remnants of prehistoric civilization and revolutionary landmarks were lost, some saw the need to protect outstanding examples of the nation’s heritage.

### The Concept



Yellowstone Falls 1871  
Yellowstone National Park collection by  
William H. Jackson

The national park idea—the concept of large-scale natural preservation for public enjoyment—has been credited to the artist George Catlin, best known for his paintings of American Indians. On a trip to the Dakota region in 1832, he worried about the destructive effects of America’s westward expansion on Indian civilization, wildlife, and wilderness. They might be preserved, he wrote, “by some great protecting policy of government . . . in a magnificent park. . . a nation’s park, containing man and beast, in all the wildness and freshness of their nature’s beauty!”

Increasingly, romantic portrayals of nature by writers like James Fenimore Cooper and Henry David Thoreau and painters like Thomas Cole and Frederick Edwin Church would compete with older views of wilderness as something to be overcome. As appreciation for unspoiled nature grew and as spectacular natural areas in the American West were publicized, notions of preserving such places began to be taken seriously.

### In the Beginning



Gen. Sherman tree, Sequoia National Park  
NPS Photo by Alexandra Picavet

In 1864 the Federal Government first moved to protect a grand natural landscape when it granted Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove to the State of California to be “held for public use, resort, and recreation . . . inalienable for all time.” Eight years later, following exploration of the Yellowstone region in the Montana and Montana territories, Congress reserved that spectacular area as “a public park or pleasure-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” Had those territories then been states, the park might have been turned over to them for administration, like Yosemite. Instead, it remained under the Department of the Interior as Yellowstone National Park—the world’s first area so titled. With Yellowstone’s establishment, the precedent was set for other natural reserves under federal jurisdiction. Four more national parks were created in the 1890s: Sequoia, General Grant (forerunner of Kings Canyon), Yosemite (to which California later returned Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove), and Mount Rainier.

Concern about looting and destruction

of Indian ruins and artifacts in the Southwest inspired a new category of protected areas after the turns of the century. In the Antiquities Act of 1906, Congress authorized the president to proclaim and reserve “historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest” on lands owned or controlled by the United States as “national monuments.” President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed the first on September 24, 1906—Devils Tower National Monument, a massive stone shaft of volcanic origin in northeastern Wyoming. Later national monuments ranged from cliff dwellings like Montezuma Castle, Arizona, and historic features like the Statue of Liberty, to large natural areas like Death Valley. Some areas initially protected as national monuments, like Petrified Forest and the Grand Canyon, were later made national parks by Congress. By the beginning of the 21st century, U.S. Presidents had proclaimed more than 100 national monuments. Nearly a quarter of the units of today’s National Park System sprang in whole or in part from the Antiquities Act.

### A New Agency



Woodrow Wilson  
National Archives

By August 1916 the Department of the Interior oversaw 14 national parks and 21 national monuments—but without effective, coordinated administration. In that year, Congress created a new bureau within Interior. On August 25, President Woodrow Wilson affixed his

signature to the bill creating the National Park Service. In managing these and future “national parks and reservations of like character,” the NPS was directed “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the



Cannon demonstration, Ft. McHenry National Monument  
NPS photo

enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Stephen T. Mather, its first director, and Horace M. Albright, his assistant and successor, inaugurated the uniformed ranger force, interpretive programs, and a range of policies and practices aimed at protecting the parks while promoting public use and enjoyment. The young National Park Service dealt mostly with natural areas west of the Mississippi River. Beginning in the 1890s, a number of historic battlefields and forts in the East had become national military parks and monuments, but under War Department supervision. Other national monuments proclaimed

in national forests fell under the Department of Agriculture, while the memorials and park lands of the nation’s capital came under a separate office there. In a 1933 government reorganization, all of these areas were united under National Park Service administration, thus forming a single national park system truly national in scope. Fort McHenry National Monument, Gettysburg National Military Park, the Washington Monument, and other such inheritances paved the way for later cultural acquisitions as far-flung as Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia and War in the Pacific National Historical Park on the island of Guam.

## Expansion



Missouri National Recreational River from the Mulberry Bend Overlook  
NPS photo by Linda Gordon Rokosz

A third variety of national park lands further enlarged the system in the 1930s—areas intended to serve mass recreation at least as much as to preserve natural or cultural features. The Blue Ridge Parkway and Natchez Trace Parkway, begun as Depression-era public works projects, were carefully landscaped for “recreational motoring” over scenic and historic terrain. The National Park Service began to build and administer recreational facilities on several major water impoundments, as at Lake Mead National Recreation Area behind Hoover Dam. Cape Hatteras National Seashore, authorized by Congress in 1937, was the first of several national seashores and lakeshores. More recently, beginning in 1972 with Gateway National Recreation Area in and around New York City and Golden Gate National Recreation Area in the San Francisco vicinity, a number of parks, intended for large urban populations, joined the system. The first of the national rivers and scenic

riverways was Ozark National Scenic Riverways in Missouri, authorized by Congress in 1964. The Ozark legislation foreshadowed the comprehensive Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of October 2, 1968. Ten years later, Congress amended this act to add Missouri National Recreational River, thereby adding the park to the nation’s Wild and Scenic Rivers System and to the National Park System.

Although new parks still arrive from time to time, the last major expansion of the system came in 1980 when Congress directed additions in Alaska totaling some 47 million acres. These spectacular national park lands more than doubled the extent of the system. Still largely remote and unspoiled, with a vast array of mountains, glaciers, wildlife, archeological sites, and other features, the Alaska parks constitute America’s greatest promise of a wilderness legacy “unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

## Your National Parks— A World Standard



Statue of Liberty National Monument  
NPS photo by P. Banks

By 2008, the National Park System had grown to 391 areas, covering more than 84 million acres in every state (except Delaware), the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. But these are not the only manifestations of the national park idea. In a movement promoted by Stephen Mather during the early years of the National Park Service and aided materially by the Service during the 1930s, the states developed their own park systems. Internationally, Yellowstone National Park served as a precedent for some 1,200 national parks and comparable preserves now maintained by more than 100 nations around the world.

Concern for natural and cultural resources has also found expression in National Park Service programs directed

beyond parks. The Service’s National Register of Historic Places is America’s official list of cultural properties worthy of preservation, and its programs for designating and aiding national natural landmarks and national historic landmarks encourage the preservation of nationally significant lands and features in both private and public ownership.

In preserving America’s special places for public enjoyment, national parks help maintain America’s special identity for her citizens and for visitors from around the world. Not every park is a Yellowstone, not every historic site boasts an Independence Hall. Yet each one is nationally significant. “The best idea America ever had” may not be too far from the mark.