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## A Century of Innovation in NPS Museums

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National parks are said to be America's best idea.<sup>1</sup> For the last one hundred years, park museums have contributed not only to the development of that national park idea, but also to the shaping of museums in the U.S. and abroad. To commemorate the centennial of National Park Service (NPS) museums, we have assembled papers under the title "National Park Service Museums: Innovative Legacy, Innovative Future."<sup>2</sup> The papers present some of the creative ideas from early days of national park museums, recent innovations and strategies, and visions for the future. They also reflect on how these innovations have contributed not only to parks, but also to museums and related professions in general.<sup>2</sup> This introductory paper provides a brief history of NPS museums and sets the stage for the following papers.

The earliest museums in parks were not established by an act of Congress or a central authority, but grew organically from their context in place. Initially, they were rudimentary—a 1904 arboretum in Yosemite, a table of artifacts in the ruins at Casa Grande by 1905, and even a museum in a tent at Sequoia (Figure 1). This strong association with place is a characteristic that continues to distinguish park museums and collections. Stephen T. Mather, the first director, recognized the power of collections that are preserved and presented in their original context when, in 1920, he called for "early establishment of adequate museums in every one of our parks." The world's largest museum system has grown from these early beginnings. More than 350 park units preserve objects, specimens, and archival items to tell the stories of the places where many of the most exciting events of American history, cultural experiences, and natural phenomena have taken place.

Although the first rudimentary NPS museums were often the inspiration of a single park employee, park museums did not sprout in a vacuum. Partnerships were integral to the early establishment of full-fledged museums in national parks. Universities and outside museums conducted research that created some of the earliest botanical, zoological, and archaeological collections from parks. Historical associations often helped to develop exhibits and furnish historic structures. As early as 1914, before the establishment of the National Park Service, the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California–Berkeley began a study of mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians of the Yosemite region.



Figure 1. Museum tent, Sequoia National Park, 1924. The Nature Guide Service established in 1919 shared this tent with the museum in 1924. The park had a nascent museum collection by 1917. Photo Lindley Eddy (concessioner), courtesy of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park.

At the request of Director Mather, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution led an early effort to promote the idea that national parks themselves are “museums of Nature.” Museum exhibits were part of the campaign to build public support for the national park idea. In 1917, Director Mather arranged a special exhibit of park landscapes by painters such as Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, and J. H. Twachtman at the Smithsonian Institution. Many of these paintings are now in park collections.

In partnership with the American Association of Museums (AAM) and with funding from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, NPS developed model park museums in Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and Yellowstone National Parks in the 1920s. Museums in these parks are characteristic of developments in parks established as natural areas.

By 1915, Yosemite had established a museum in its crowded headquarters building with exhibits of mounted birds, mammals, pressed plants, and watercolor sketches. In 1922, the park opened a museum in the former studio of the artist Chris Jorgensen with rooms devoted to thematic exhibits. By 1926, the park had opened a model museum in collaboration with the AAM (Figure 2). It featured exhibits on natural history, ethnology, and park history. In 1926 and 1929, Yosemite opened branch museums at Glacier Point and in the Sierra Club Lodge at Tuolumne Meadows.

Established in 1920, the Yosemite Museum Association became the first of many cooperating associations to assist park-based museum operations throughout the national park system.

By 1922, Yellowstone had opened a museum in the Bachelor Officers’ Quarters at park headquarters in Mammoth Hot Springs. Exhibits illustrated botany, geology, paleontology, and zoology. In partnership with AAM, the park opened model



Figure 2. Interior, Yosemite Museum, ca. 1926. NPS and the American Association of Museums collaborated to establish model museums in parks. Yosemite National Park opened its model museum in 1926. Photo courtesy of National Park Service Historic Photograph Collection, Harpers Ferry Center.

branch museums at Old Faithful, Madison Junction, and Norris Geyser Basin in 1928–1930. In 1931, the Fishing Bridge Museum opened, although it featured more graphics than specimens in its exhibits.

Grand Canyon opened the Yavapai Point Museum as a model museum that included an observation station. Again, with support from AAM and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, John C. Merriam, the president of the Carnegie Institution, developed the museum. He created a museum where the canyon was the exhibit and the museum housed viewing instruments, labels, and guided interpretation. The model was so successful that a generation later it was deemed a classic example of interpretive planning in parks. In 1930, Crater Lake, following this model, received one of the first congressional appropriations to build a new museum and observation station, the Sinnott Memorial.

Archaeological parks also developed innovative approaches to preserving and exhibiting artifacts. In 1918, Mesa Verde converted a log cabin ranger station into a museum exhibiting prehistoric artifacts from the park's cliff dwellings and large panoramic photographs donated by the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. By 1925, the park built and opened the first section of a new museum with donated funds. In the 1930s, funding from the Public Works Administration supported an extension to the Mesa Verde museum, and constructed numerous other museums throughout the national park system. In the 1930s and 1940s, Civilian Conservation Corps archaeological projects at Ocmulgee, Yorktown, and Jamestown amassed large collections. In 1938, Colonial National Historical Park erected a museum at Jamestown that included an archaeological laboratory, collections storage, two small exhibit rooms to orient visitors to the site, and windows allowing the public to view the storage room and activities in the laboratory. The "visible" storage and laboratory exhibit must have been one of the earliest such examples in the country.

In 1916, when the National Park Service was created, the system of fourteen national parks, twenty-one national monuments, and the Hot Springs Reservation included only four areas set aside primarily for their historical significance (excluding archaeological parks). These parks were Gran Quivira, Tumacacori, El Morro, and Sitka. Only one historical area had a museum before 1930: Gran Quivira began developing a museum collection in 1925 and by 1929 had opened a modest operation.

In 1933, an executive order transferred to NPS monuments and parks under the jurisdiction of the War Department, including battlefields such as Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania, Kennesaw Mountain, Petersburg, and Shiloh; national monuments under the U.S. Forest Service; as well as parks and monuments in the National Capital Region. In 1935, Congress passed the Historic Sites Act, directing NPS to "restore, reconstruct, rehabilitate, preserve, and maintain historic or prehistoric sites, buildings, objects, and properties of national historical or archaeological significance and ... establish and maintain museums in connection therewith." The number of historic sites in the system, and associated collections, increased rapidly. Today, more than two-thirds of the sites in the national park system were established primarily for their prehistoric and historic resources.

As park museums developed, individually and collectively, they found new ways to solve problems and accomplish their missions. These innovations have become a legacy to the national and international museum community. In 1934, NPS adopted a standard museum development plan, which led to the incorporation of museum functions and facilities into a park's total plan and operations. These plans guided the New Deal public works programs that built many park museums and exhibits in the 1930s through the early 1940s, including Chickamauga and Chattanooga, Guilford Courthouse, Shiloh, Vicksburg, Morristown, Aztec Ruins, Devils Tower, Scotts Bluff, and Tumacacori. A 1939 survey revealed that over the previous four years park museum operations had grown from 36 to 114 and the aggregate exhibit area exceeded that of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum in Washington. Similarly, in 1956, in response to a rapidly growing number of park visitors, NPS launched a ten-year program, dubbed Mission 66, to build museums. The new museums were called "visitor centers" to emphasize the multiple visitor services offered (Figure 3).

Apart from planning and development of museum facilities and exhibits, there was a



Figure 3. Visitor Center, Fort Union National Monument, 1959. From 1956 to 1966, the Mission 66 Program funded the planning and development of approximately 100 new park museums. The program was designed to avert a crisis caused by a rapid increase in numbers of visitors and a lack of facilities and services. Planners promoted the “visitor center” to include not only a museum exhibit, but also other visitor services, such as an information desk, self-service orientation, maps, and an auditorium with audiovisual presentations. Photo by Jack E. Boucher, NPS, courtesy of National Park Service Historic Photograph Collection, Harpers Ferry Center (FOUN 126).

need to standardize and coordinate other aspects of museum operations. Detailed collections management guidance was issued in *Field Manual for Museums* (1941), *Museum Records Handbook* (1957), *National Park Service Museum Handbook* (1950s and 1960s), *Manual for Museums* (1976), and again the *Museum Handbook* (1984–present). To address the need for detailed technical guidance on caring for collections, NPS initiated the *Conserve O Gram* series in 1975. NPS distributed these technical leaflets free of charge in the United States and worldwide and sold them for a brief period through the Government Printing Office. *Conserve O Gram* and *Museum Handbook* are now accessible on the Web at [www.cr.nps.gov/museum/publications/index.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/publications/index.htm).

When NPS developed the Automated National Catalog System (ANCS) for park museums, many small-to-mid-size non-NPS museums adopted it as well. Today, ANCS+ is commercially available to other museums as the “National Park Service” version of Re:discovery Software. With the advent of the internet, websites featuring park collections developed in the 1990s and NPS established a “Web Catalog” in 2002 where parks can make their collections records and images widely accessible at [www.museum.nps.gov](http://www.museum.nps.gov). *Exhibit Conservation Guideline*, a CD-ROM, with over 1,500 copies distributed, is an idea that took hold quickly in the 1990s and remains popular. The “visitor center” concept, pioneered by NPS in the 1950s, is now widespread in parks at local, state, and national levels. NPS has exported ideas abroad, including interpretive planning concepts, the park brochure grid format, and the

integration of exhibits and interpretive media in a visitor center. The parks, and park museum collections, have been a testing ground for museum management and interpretive ideas and strategies for one hundred years (Figure 4).

The papers presented under “National Park Service Museums: Innovative Legacy, Innovative Future” cover a wide array of museum functions and innovations over the last century. Kathleen Byrne’s paper, “Documentation Equals Access,” demonstrates that both parks and the museum profession have benefited from the procedures, guidelines, and automated systems that NPS has developed. The *NPS Museum Handbook* has been adapted for use by other museums, cited by the AAM in its reference services, and used in museology programs. An in-house automated cataloguing system evolved into a customized off-the-shelf system used by parks as well as many other museums. The recently introduced “Web Catalog” allows a new level of public access.

In “Notable Conservation Solutions,” Brigid Sullivan Lopez reviews the development of the conservation profession and early NPS involvement. From the treatment of Sitka National Historical Park’s totem poles in 1918, to the 353-foot cyclorama at Gettysburg National Military Park in 1959, and the Shaw Memorial from Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in 1997, NPS conservators have preserved unique objects in challenging environments. NPS has created procedural manuals and technical guidance for parks that have been used by a much wider audience. The parks have been a test bed for preservation ideas and strategies.

Figure 4. Community-curated exhibit, Manzanar National Historic Site, 2004. Individuals from the Japanese-American community helped to determine the content of exhibits at Manzanar, telling the story of life in this World War II relocation center in the Owens Valley of eastern California. Community participation in exhibit development reinforces the NPS Civic Engagement initiative, forming meaningful partnerships with the very people most invested in the parks. Photo credit: Jim Simmons. Photo courtesy of Krister Olmon, Inc.



Sarah Allaback's paper, "Rustic Trailside Museums and Modern Visitor Centers: America's Most Popular Museums," chronicles the history of a museum building type that originated with NPS. In 1926, the Yosemite Museum, in the rustic architectural style, became a prototype for park museums. The "visitor center" concept, pioneered by NPS in the 1950s is now widespread in parks at local, state, and national levels.

In "An Interpretive Media Perspective," Neil Mackay discusses the many design and development innovations that originated with NPS museum exhibits and publications. NPS has exported ideas abroad, including interpretive planning concepts, the park brochure grid format, and the integration of exhibits and interpretive media in a visitor center. NPS way-sides, interpretive trails, and historic furnished interiors, with high standards for historical integrity, have been models. Innovative cartography and web technology are new approaches that enrich the viewing of museum objects in their original contexts—the idea that makes park museums different.

Dwight Pitcaithley, in "National Parks and the Interpretive Message Since 1990," presents a commentary on recent changes in interpreting history. He highlights the interpretation of contentious or controversial subjects such as slavery and the coming of the American Civil War with thoughts on how these issues can be approached methodically and intellectually, and examines the connections between museum interpretive content and its role in the broader education program in this country.

Virginia Salazar-Halfmoon offers a commentary, entitled "Changing Ideas and Perceptions," focusing on the process of change and how new ideas are introduced and take hold in NPS. Using the Native American community and park museums as an example, she offers illustrations of how NPS has changed to respond to the diverse ideas, worldviews, and expectations of its employees and the public.

Together, these papers highlight and document the creativity of staff and the resulting innovations that are not only a National Park Service legacy to the museum profession, but also harbingers of future innovations. The challenges of acquiring, documenting, preserving, interpreting, and providing access to 109 million items throughout the national park system have called for big-scale solutions to local problems. New developments in National Park Service museums, the world's largest system of museums, have often had a ripple effect in the greater museum world.

## Endnotes

1. Attributed to Viscount James Bryce, author of *The American Commonwealth* (1888) and British Ambassador to the United States (1907–1913).
2. For additional information about NPS museums and the centennial see [www.cr.nps.gov/museum](http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum). In addition to her own firsthand experience and records of the NPS Museum Management Program, the author credits the following source for information on the NPS museum program: Ralph H. Lewis, *Museum Curatorship in the National Park Service 1904–1982* (Washington: National Park Service, Curatorial Services Division, 1993). It is available online at [www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/curatorship/index.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/curatorship/index.htm).