
Editor's Preface

This special issue is above all a collaborative effort. The idea for its content grew out of a spirited discussion with fellow NPS historians in Baltimore during the spring of 1994. At that time, many of us expressed grave concerns about the future of our profession as the specter of a servicewide reorganization loomed inevitable. As we considered various approaches to personal and professional survival, the notion to establish closer ties with our academic brethren seemed a practical as well as expedient way by which to enhance public recognition and acceptance of our in-house scholarship.

While the *Vail Agenda* (1992) championed the call for heightened professionalism within the Park Service, it essentially failed to provide the road map necessary to make such lofty ideals attainable. Thus the Baltimore gathering, in part a follow-up response to the deficiencies of the Vail Conference, provided NPS historians with a rare opportunity to chart their own course for the future. Enthusiasm ran high; creative thinking and coherent articulation were the standards as we painfully dissected the strengths and weaknesses of our profession.

Among the myriad topics discussed, we unanimously concluded that although work produced within the National Park Service meets the highest standard, it is generally speaking either unknown to or judged inferior by our academic colleagues. In our effort to address issues germane to cultural resources management within the insular world of the National Park System, we have—perhaps unconsciously, perhaps not—drifted increasingly distant from the larger corpus of historical scholarship. This issue, then, represents a compilation of thoughts that a handful of key scholars of the American West presented at a workshop held last fall in Denver. The objective of the meeting, which was linked to the 1995 Western History Association Conference, was to acquaint NPS professionals with contemporary themes of the so-called “New Western” history and to discuss their applicability to national park interpretation programs.

Michael E. Welsh, professor of western history at the University of Northern Colorado and author of numerous administrative histories for the National Park Service and the Army Corps of Engineers, leads the list of writers. It is perhaps appropriate that as facilitator for the NPS workshop, Welsh's well-crafted essay provides the backdrop for all subsequent contributions. Essentially historiographic, Welsh's commentary not only defines the meaning of the term “New Western” history, but provides the reader with some of its more outstanding examples. As he methodically establishes the relationship between

new trends in western scholarship and the interpretive demands of a better informed public, Welsh rightfully challenges National Park Service personnel to be prepared to address a more mobile and highly diversified constituency in the immediate future.

Professor **Richard White**, winner of the coveted MacArthur Fellowship and author of several award-winning books on western history, focuses on the natural setting of national parks to underscore his appeal for more meaningful interpretation. According to White, recent historical scholarship on the American West—which by default includes many of the nation’s premier national parks—is not so much “new” as it is a more balanced and less exclusive analysis of the past. America’s love affair with the preservation of “pristine” landscapes, argues White, is for all intents and purposes a fantasy. Most of what we prefer to view as wilderness, in fact, has a long and complex history of human inhabitation and alteration to the natural landscape. Visitors to these federal preserves deserve a more objective interpretation of their origin than traditional historical narrative has offered in the past. The National Park Service has an unprecedented opportunity to assume the lead in revising the heretofore ethnocentric explanation of our national heritage.

Duane A. Smith, scion of the mining frontier in the American West and author of twenty-five books on the subject, offers us a contrasting view to Richard White’s essay. Urbanization, writes Smith, not rugged individualism, was the principal agent for the settlement of the West. Although the rough-and-tumble image of the Rocky Mountain mining camp may have appeared chaotic and haphazardly conceived, Smith convincingly argues they were the precursors to what is unquestionably the highly urbanized West of today. Smith challenges National Park professionals not to conveniently establish the parameters of western history from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The urban West—aided at every turn by the National Park Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, and a litany of other federal agencies—is an ongoing frontier. Evidence of this remarkable growth during the twentieth century, and especially since 1945, is clearly evident in the hinterland communities of the region. National Park Service personnel must strive to keep their visitors informed of these most recent historical episodes as well.

Southwest System Support Office Superintendent **Jerry L. Rogers**, whose thirty-plus-year NPS career ranges from park historian to keeper of the National Register in Washington, D.C., gives readers an eyewitness summary of the recent reorganization and restructuring. This thought-provoking analysis is useful to all NPS employees because it offers a refreshing departure from the typical “doom and gloom” prediction of the future of this agency. Although not without personal criticism of the process, much of which Rogers cogently justifies, he reminds NPS personnel that the integrity of the Service—in large measure because of dedication of its employees—remains essentially intact. Rogers

cautions, however, that effective leadership is required to enable us to weather the storm that will eventually direct us toward calmer seas.

NPS Chief Historian **Dwight T. Pitcaithley** not only enlightens us about the origins of the agency's history program, but more importantly reveals the direction in which he hopes to guide that program into the twenty-first century. In effect, Pitcaithley's essay is a response to Welsh's earlier challenge to the National Park Service to satisfy future public demands. Pitcaithley details the one-time bifurcation of the history program into two separate entities: education (interpretation) and compliance. The effectiveness of the NPS history program in the future requires not only internal reunification with the interpretation program, but also external partnerships with scholars in academia as well as public history.

In closing, I wish to gratefully acknowledge those who made this issue possible. To Intermountain Field Director John Cook and to Jerry Rogers, my thanks for your support and sanctioning of the NPS Historian/Interpreter Workshop in Denver. To Dwight Pitcaithley, a man of his word, who through his able and enthusiastic staff provided the financial support and advisory assistance required to bring the seed of an idea proposed in Baltimore to full flower. To Bob Spude and the staff of the Rocky Mountain System Support Office, who assisted with local arrangements and the numerous daily details of the workshop. To each contributor for his time and sincere concern about the future of the National Park Service. To Jane Harvey, wordsmith extraordinaire, who helped me fine-tune the essays. To the fifty-six participants who showed an interest in the workshop and exhausted time and money to attend. And, of course, to Dave Harmon and the staff of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM for offering to share highlights of the workshop with a broader reading audience. I hope all of you find this special issue worthwhile reading.



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