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An Enlightened Beginning: The National Park Service and the American Latino Heritage

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IT IS A TRUISM THAT THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) serves as a major cultural institution where Americans come to see themselves, sometimes for the first time since high school. Since its inception, NPS has striven to showcase our national story, and, more recently, its diversity. In that regard, the National Park Service is a trend-setter in the telling of our national story from the point of view of historical processes that have shaped America's past through the lenses of diversity, inclusion, accessibility, relevancy, and fairness. Still, our educational system has not provided the type of teaching that would be conducive to learning about the diversity that forms our national story, particularly that of the American Latino experience. This failure has ramifications for how NPS interprets current national park units that are related to Latino heritage, how it might in the future add sites to the national park system that would fill gaps in the story of that heritage, and how it might reach out to current and future Latino Americans.

In American history textbooks, examples abound that deny the Latino heritage, past and present. Beyond a few paragraphs in Chapter One, traditional history books tend to leave out the Latino participation in our national story. Without acknowledging that the people of North and South America have a common history, most early chapters are devoted to English settlement of North America, while Latino history is dealt with as a “pass through” history featuring explorers in Florida, New Mexico, and California. Latino settlement patterns are ignored, just as are its institutions of governance. Born from the Greco-Roman tradition, for example, the House of Burgesses in Virginia (1619) and New England town hall (1620) are hailed as the basic units of democracy and are venerated because they were the first and oldest signs of governance and evolving democracy in what came to be the United States.

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Yet, the much older models of the town hall, known as the *cabildo*, similarly with elected and appointed members, were established, among other places in the Americas, in Caparra, present Puerto Rico, before the end of the 15th century; San Agustín, Florida, by 1571; San Juan de los Caballeros, New Mexico, in 1598; Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1610; San Antonio, Texas, in 1716; Monterey, California, in 1773; and Tucson, Arizona, in 1776—to name a few. In New Mexico, the continuity of the *cabildo* is evident from 1598 to the present state legislature. Indeed, when the founders of Jamestown arrived at their settlement site, the Indians came out speaking to them in Spanish. Jesuit missionaries had been there in the 1570s. Too, the early settlers of Jamestown arrived in the New World via the Canary Islands to islands off Puerto Rico. The route they followed to the Caribbean was the traditional one established by Columbus. By studying United States history in a more global way, the common history thesis is demonstrated to be more inclusive and relevant.

It is said that every generation writes its own history. That is also true about how and to what end Latino history has been portrayed historiographically by others. Well into the 20th century, Spanish colonial history was misunderstood and suffered under two streams of historiographical thought. One is the Spanish Black Legend—in its harshest terms, the depiction of Spaniards “as depraved and cowardly people” and as “*uniquely* evil, cruel, bigoted … [and] violent.”¹ Stereotypically, it was common to assume that Spanish colonials came to kill Indians and destroy cultures. The second is American exceptionalism, which has been defined as “the belief that the United States is an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; a nation that is not only unique but also *superior*.”² Both tenets tended to exclude the positive role of Spain and its people in the history of the development of North America.

Negative notions about Spain and its people who settled the Americas evolved from the 16th-century Spanish–English rivalry, which ended with England winning the war of propaganda, resulting in the furtherance of the Spanish Black Legend. The stereotypes against Spain prevailed and were embedded in US history textbooks. Indeed, very little in textbooks revealed much about Spanish colonial enterprises, settlement, and governance other than exploration and conquest as part of our national story. Spanish Black Legend stereotypes crept into elements of the Latino story. US exceptionalism gained in influence, with its view that Englishmen came to do good in a world that does evil; from there began the long road to the American Revolution and the US Constitution. Thus, a dichotomy emerged, with England as the good empire while Spain was viewed as the “citadel of darkness.” Thus, the history of Spanish colonialism has long been tied to Spanish Black Legend stereotypes that have influenced how that history and its associated sites would be interpreted. In the teaching of US history, for example, there was no room for Spanish colonial, much less Latino, heritage in textbooks or the classroom. In many ways, history books prompted a resurgence of the 16th-century propaganda by negatively narrating the histories of the Battle of the Alamo (1836), the Mexican War (1846–1848), and the Spanish–American War (1898). Such biases are reflected in issues dealing with immigration from Mexico or Latin America. Today, such stereotypes are visible in Hollywood versions of historic events, history books, and other media.

During the 1960s, the Chicano Movement struck at the heart of the Black Legend stereotypes and American exceptionalism that seemed to pervade American historiography. Historians such as Rudolfo Acuña, Juan Gomes Quiñones, Ricardo Romo, Félix D. Almaráz, Jr., Manuel Servín, and Richard Griswold del Castillo, among others, devoted their careers to fighting for social justice and correcting the omissions and falsehoods about the Latino experience in the United States. The importance of such awareness engendered by the Chicano Movement is critical to understanding the significance of the meanings of diversity, relevancy, inclusion, accessibility, and fairness within the context of America's past. As Joseph P. Sánchez has noted, "If your history is not respected, neither will you be in education, employment, the workplace, housing, justice, law, medicine, banking, the arts or any other institution in our society."

Nevertheless, biases and negative stereotypes about Latinos prevail. To help remedy this situation, in the summer of 2011 Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar unveiled the American Latino Heritage Initiative at a meeting in La Paz, California. Secretary Salazar spoke of America's forgotten pathways that had led Hispanic frontiersmen to explore North America from the Caribbean to Alaska and from Maine to San Diego. Clearly, Latino heritage is greatly visible in the American landscape and people, whose ancestors settled places and established institutions, governance, language, and a legal system as early as the 16th century. Indeed, many settlements and their jurisdictions later became part of the Union and formed states with great American cities. At the La Paz meeting, Secretary Salazar proposed that a Latino Theme Study analysis be done by NPS, appointing the lead author of this essay to chair the task force in order to determine a direction for integrating the American Latino heritage story into our national history in a way that makes it relevant to all Americans and the world. In recommending that a Latino Theme Study be created, the analysis sought to define a National Park Service that is balanced and complete in its representation of the nation's Latino heritage.

Later in 2011, at the White House Forum on American Latino Heritage, Secretary Salazar introduced the country to the American Latino Heritage Initiative and the National Park Service's commitment to "connecting and amplifying American Latino stories throughout national parks and communities across the United States." Soon after, the National Park System Advisory Board formed the American Latino Scholars Panel. Tasked with developing the theme study, they would address the many experiences and contributions of American Latinos to our national story. Under the direction of the advisory board, National Park Service subject-matter experts, including Joseph P. Sánchez, Dennis Vásquez, David Vela, and Robert Arzola, worked with a panel of scholars who prepared 17 essays that would form the basis of the theme study. The resulting *American Latinos and the Making of the United States: A Theme Study* addresses the role of Latinos in our national story from the 1840s to the present. The theme study, approved by the National Park System Advisory Board on February 28, 2013, serves as a resource for NPS as it moves forward in identifying and designating national historic landmarks and other sites relevant to exploring and sharing the nation's important Latino heritage. The American Latino Theme Study emphasizes such topics as "Making the Nation," "Making a Life," "Making a Living," and "Making a Democracy."

The new National Park Service theme study traces its origins to two earlier incarnations: the 1972 servicewide plan for history, which was a mix of chronological and thematic topics, and its 1994 update, which created the present-day conceptual approach. In creating the American Latino Theme Study, NPS turned to the 1994 thematic framework to rethink approaches to its themes in order to reflect new scholarship. Chiefly, NPS took into account changes that had taken place in society in the previous decades. The evolving historical process since the 1960s had, indeed, produced a prime theme, supported with new scholarship that has further defined who we are as a nation. In the new schemata, historical topics would not be enumerated to fit an outline, nor would they follow a chronological sequence. Instead, topics would fit into a framework of broad, open-ended themes that would not only reflect great men, women, and events but also ordinary people and everyday American life. The flexibility of the new framework facilitates the development of individual theme studies that could be applied to eligible sites with similar themes. Still, the basic story of America must be aligned with the watchwords of diversity, inclusiveness, relevancy, accessibility, and fairness.

The Latino Theme Study analysis stated that the American Latino heritage experience should be considered as an integral part, rather than a special or specific theme, of NPS's interpretive efforts. In the identification of "gaps" within our national story, it should be noted that despite the percentage of national parks that carry themes related to Latino Heritage in the United States, no theme or subtheme can be well represented so long as prime sites remain outside the National Park Service—meaning outside of either (1) the national park system or (2) the historic preservation programs NPS administers that affect other sites (e.g., the National Register of Historic Places). For example, San Pascual, a battle of the Mexican War near San Diego, California, would complement the story told at Palo Alto National Battlefield near Brownsville, Texas. This does not imply that the federal government should acquire such properties, but researching and sharing their history would provide support and flexibility in the event that present owners or other entities with an interest in them should ever become unable to assure continuing their proper preservation. Currently, such sites outside the National Park Service could add context and perspective to existing national parks, national historic trails, national historic landmarks, and national heritage areas that carry or potentially could carry Latino Heritage themes.

Within NPS, opportunities to expand upon the American Latino experience abound. At *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site, for example, threads of court cases leading to the Supreme Court's 1954 decision could include Latino efforts in their struggle for civil rights. One example is a California case, *Mendez v. Westminister* (1947), that attacked the separate-but-equal doctrine enshrined in the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision (1896), which supported open discrimination practices in America's institutions. Following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which ended the Mexican War of 1846, a great number of cases show how Hispanics in the territories sought to affirm their civil rights through the courts. Many of their arguments, some of which reached the Supreme Court, were based on first, fourth, and fourteenth amendment rights. At Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, which is largely dedicated to interpreting the Westward Expansion, the Latino heritage experience theme can easily be included, for the histories of Spain and

the United States were inextricable, before and after the Louisiana Purchase, as was the cultural history that followed.

Of the 400-plus national parks, those that support Spanish colonial themes or facets identified in the Latino Theme Study are the most promising targets for integration of the Latino experience, in addition to certain national historic trails, a considerable number of national historic landmarks, and some national heritage areas. Additionally, a significant number of sites that share themes beyond the historical boundaries of Spanish colonialism and that exist within private, state, and local ownership that commemorate Latino heritage themes can benefit from efforts of NPS to integrate Latino heritage sites and their attendant stories into our national patrimony.

In many ways, it is the land that brings Americans together in such a way that historical processes, which have shaped the American experience, are revealed. Today, the clarion call for diversity, inclusion, relevancy, accessibility, and fairness forms a vision of a truly American heritage forged from a mosaic of people, cultures, historical events, and geography that make America what it is: a pluralistic society. In 1983, under the Treaty of Friendship between Spain and the United States, Joseph P. Sánchez directed a research project in eight archives in Madrid, Sevilla, and Simancas, demonstrating that much of our national story lies buried in Spanish as well as in Mexican and Latin American archives. To that end, the creation of the Spanish Colonial Research Center by NPS in 1985 signaled a new beginning point for the agency. The center is a partnership between NPS and the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. The mission of the center—to create and maintain a documentary database from domestic and foreign archives and depositories, specifically for 40 Spanish colonial heritage sites in the national park system—soon proved its value. Under the direction of Sánchez, the center created a renewed consciousness in the National Park Service about Latino history and culture.

In 1990, with the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' first voyage at hand, both negative and positive voices began to be heard. The National Park Service responded positively by preparing for the event and encouraging the Spanish Colonial Research Center's continuing efforts to conduct research in international archives; develop a database of archival materials; produce publications; establish Spanish-language translation services for NPS parks, sister agencies, and local entities; and carry out training courses for interpreters, teachers, and public audiences across the country. During the commemoration of the 500th anniversary, the center increased its efforts to provide Spanish-language translations to assure that parks would be more welcoming, relevant, and accessible in their efforts to encourage visitors to learn more about America's heritage in all of its manifestations.

The accomplishments of the center cut across federal, state, and local agencies on a nationwide as well as an international basis. Throughout its existence, the center has undertaken congressionally mandated studies leading to the designation of the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail, Old Spanish Trail National Historic Trail, and the Camino Real de los Texas National Historic Trail, among others. Such designations have added relevancy to the notion that Latinos are a part of our national story, heritage, and patrimony. Other undertakings by the center include the publication of the *Colonial Latin American*

Historical Review, a scholarly, peer-reviewed, quarterly journal that enjoys an international distribution, and hundreds of Spanish–English translations on a servicewide basis of NPS brochures, film scripts, exhibit labels, scientific studies, correspondence, etc. The center’s Spanish-language translation program assists NPS in enhancing visitor understanding of US history as interpreted by the parks, as well as increasing understanding of safety measures. The translations enhance the connection, relevancy, and accessibility of our nation’s diverse communities to parks servicewide. Additionally, more than 20 book-length studies have been published on Spanish colonial/Latino heritage themes, along with over 100 scholarly articles, resources studies, national historic trail studies, and administrative histories of specific parks. The center’s staff also has made hundreds of presentations before public and academic audiences, both nationally and internationally.

Recently, the Spanish Colonial Research Center was absorbed into the newly established National Park Service Latino History Research and Training Center. It is aimed at sustaining the American Latino Heritage Initiative’s goals and values, and assuring that NPS interpreters and resources managers are better prepared to work with Latino themes. The new center will continue to carry out research and training objectives for NPS, sister agencies, state and local entities, and the Latino community. The center will assist in carrying out the NPS mandate to introduce new audiences to the national park system so that future generations can learn more about our national story.

As NPS prepares for a second century of stewardship and engagement, it is committed to engaging underrepresented groups such as Latinos as stakeholders in the preservation and conservation of a shared national story as told through the history of national parks. Demographically, economically, and politically speaking, Latinos are an ever-growing important group in the United States, yet their contributions to the history of the US continues to be ignored or diminished. In order to appeal to the Latino community, NPS must go beyond Spanish-language translations of visitor materials and integration of Latino heritage themes in certain established parks. The effort required involves looking at current national sites and identifying Latino themes that should be incorporated into their interpretive story as part of our national history and patronage. It involves identifying and nominating personages, stories, and new sites as national landmarks that exemplify the modern history of Latinos. It involves educating NPS personnel, both Latino and non-Latino, about the important roles that Latinos have played—and continue to play—in the evolution of our nation. More importantly, this effort involves engaging NPS leaders, interpreters, and resources managers in a national dialogue that will result in an environment that will inspire future generations to visit or work in our national parks and see themselves reflected in the telling of our national story.³

To that end, the Latino History Research and Training Center aims to open new doors in research, interpretation, and preservation of the historical and contemporary Latino heritage in NPS. The center will partner with NPS workforce initiatives that aim to make diversity not just an equal opportunity objective but rather an agency value by educating and training NPS employees at all levels. Additionally, the center will form part of NPS educational outreach efforts that include the Heritage Education Services Program and Preserve America as well as the development of curriculum materials and professional development workshops for teachers.⁴ Through public speaking, community engagement, publications, and research,

the center will continue to develop and share new data regarding Latino heritage which binds our national story with that of Spain, Mexico, and the rest of Latin America, with whom we share a common history. Importantly, the center will serve as a model for Native Americans as well as Asians, African Americans, and other minorities who seek inclusion in a diverse workforce.

In past National Park Service efforts, Spanish colonial history has been the main vehicle to convey the Latino heritage story, albeit without mention of significant historical Latino settlements and governance in North America. Instead, the Latino heritage story was anchored by a number of small parks across the country that emphasized exploration and missionization of native groups by Franciscan friars. The first National Park Service area with a Spanish colonial theme was El Morro National Monument (proclaimed 1906), which emphasized exploration while inadvertently failing to recognize that in the 16th century the permanent settlement of North America was the major Spanish enterprise in Florida (1565) and New Mexico (1598). Similarly, Salinas Pueblo Culture National Monument (proclaimed 1909) focused on the missionization of pueblos in that area emanating from the Spanish colonial settlement at Santa Fe, New Mexico, which had been established in 1610. Much of the theme of exploration as it relates to the Latino heritage is largely subsumed by three expeditions that, in the Age of Discovery, loomed large in the history of North America. Cabrillo National Monument (proclaimed 1913), Coronado National Memorial (authorized 1941), and De Soto National Monument (authorized 1948) centered on exploration and war between explorers and Indian tribes. Still, the diaspora and settlement patterns of Spanish North America went untold. The evolution of the American Latino heritage experience must evolve beyond the telling of the Spanish colonial legacy.

That heritage experience is not monolithic. For NPS, interpreting the American Latino heritage story is ever more challenging when one considers that Latino culture has many faces. It basically comprises five heritages, some of which are linked genealogically as well as culturally: Spanish, Indian, African, Asian, and Anglo-American. Thus, in order to make parks accessible, relevant, and inclusive, the interpretation of the Latino heritage at NPS and national historic landmark sites requires much understanding of differences in Latino identity among the diverse ethnic and geographical sections of the United States. In choosing the term “Latino,” the contributors to *American Latinos and the Making of the United States* recognize that, despite these differences, “the term punctuates the experience of peoples living in the Americas rather than Europe.”⁵ As the population of people of Latin American descent in the US continues to grow, these shared experiences unite Latino communities without implying the loss of their individual identities.

NPS is poised to explore and emphasize the complete story of the American Latino heritage, representing the historical and present participation of Latinos in our national story. In order to sustain the goals of Secretary Salazar’s Latino Initiative, NPS is committed to further educating not only the public but its own employees about important Latino contributions to our nation’s past, present, and future. Through its research, community outreach, educational, and training objectives, the newly established Latino History Research and Training Center will work towards meeting—and implementing—these expectations for the National Park Service, sister agencies, and state and local entities. Tied to nationally significant historical

people and places, the National Park Service stands on the threshold of unlocking history's door in expanding the wider world of our national story.

Endnotes

1. Joseph P. Sánchez, *Comparative Colonialism, the Spanish Black Legend, and Spain's Legacy in the United States: Perspectives on American Latino Heritage and Our National Story* (Denver: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013), 19.
2. *Encyclopedia of the New American Nation*. Online at www.americanforeignrelations.com/E-N/Exceptionalism.html (accessed November 5, 2013).
3. In 2012, Joseph P. Sánchez wrote the key essays for the American Latino Heritage Discover Our Shared Heritage Travel Itinerary for the National Park Service's Heritage Education Services. See "The National Park Service and American Latino Heritage," online at www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/American_Latino_Heritage/The_National_Park_Service_and_American_Latino_Heritage.html.
4. For more information about these and other NPS American Latino Heritage projects, please visit www.nps.gov/latino/.
5. *American Latinos and the Making of the United States: A Theme Study* (Washington, D.C.: National Park System Advisory Board, 2013), 5.

Dr. Joseph P. Sánchez is superintendent of Petroglyph National Monument and the National Park Service's Latino History Research and Training Center, formerly the Spanish Colonial Research Center, at the University of New Mexico. Aside from his many publications, Dr. Sánchez is also founder and editor of the *Colonial Latin American Historical Review (CLAHR)*. Before his career with the National Park Service, Dr. Sánchez was a professor of Colonial Latin American history at the University of Arizona, Tucson. In May 2000 he was awarded the Medalla de Acero al Mérito Histórico Capitán Alonso de León by the Sociedad Nuevoleonesa de Historia, Geografía y Estadística, Monterrey, Mexico, for his lifelong work in Colonial Mexican history. In April 2005, he was inducted into the prestigious knighthood order of the Orden de Isabel la Católica by King don Juan Carlos of Spain.

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