



Letter from Woodstock
Rolf Diamant

Preserved and Enlarged Forever

AFTER A RATHER SOMNOLENT PERIOD OF GROWTH DURING FIRST DECADE OF THE 21ST CENTURY, the national park system in the United States is showing distinct signs of new life. In the waning days of 2014, Congress authorized seven new national parks: Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park, Valles Caldera National Preserve, World War I Memorial, Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument, Coltsville National Historical Park, Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park, and Manhattan Project National Historical Park. For his part, President Obama quickly made two more additions to the system in early 2015, using the Antiquities Act to proclaim Pullman and Honouliuli national monuments. So in less than three months, the total number of parks added to the national park system during the Obama Administration nearly doubled; and it is likely that more additions, thanks to the Antiquities Act, may be in the wings.

This Letter from Woodstock is the second in a three-part series focused on what it means to be part of a system of parks and protected areas. In part one of the series, which appeared in the last issue of *The George Wright Forum*, I explored the inherent advantages derived from collaboration and shared identity. In this tenth Letter from Woodstock, I will focus on the past, present, and future growth of the US national park system and make a few observations about the seemingly never-ending debate over the system's expansion. I will conclude the series in the next issue of the Forum revisiting a handful of proposed national parks that were tantalizingly close calls, but for one reason or another never quite made the cut. While it is always intriguing to speculate about an alternative reality—the “what if” scenarios—per-

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haps we can learn from failure as much as from success about a society's aspirations and limitations when it comes to creating a national system of parks.

The new parks that were established last December reflect the ever-increasing diversity of the US national system. Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument is a paleontological park in the Nevada desert. Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park in New York and Maryland interprets the prodigious work of this remarkable African-American abolitionist. I have written about Manhattan Project National Historical Park in a previous Letter From Woodstock,¹ suggesting that this opportunity for an atomic-era national park shouldn't be passed up, as it might not come around again.

The addition of these new parks was welcomed by many conservation organizations including the National Parks Conservation Association, Coalition of National Park Service Retirees, and National Trust for Historic Preservation. There were a few people, including supporters of national parks, who dissented. One was Harry Butowsky, a former NPS historian, who wrote a guest blog on the website *National Parks Traveler*. Butowsky, upset that the new parks had been included in a defense authorization bill rather than stand-alone park legislation, argued for these parks to be established "in a rational manner . . . not through large and unfunded omnibus bills."²

I am more than a little surprised to hear this coming from a person who has spent as much of his career in Washington as Harry Butowsky has. One has to be an awfully patient person, waiting for Congress to conduct business "in a rational manner." Any close reading of the history of national parks underscores how much their creation, if not survival, depends on politics—the dedication and unflagging perseverance of park advocates, careful coalition building, and a good nose for opportunity. In other words, the ability to engage in the workings of a democracy. There is also, in my opinion, something to be said for a park-making process that is not exclusively controlled by either the legislative or executive branch, mired in bureaucracy, or wholly the domain of a privy council of like-minded "experts." Our system, however imperfect as it may be, has somehow managed to allow enough political space for new parks to emerge from the bottom up, to occasionally test new models and ideas, and to provide just enough flexibility to adapt to changing times and changing values.

In his commentary entitled "Traveler's View: Senate Should Either Fund New Parks In Defense Bill, Or Strip Them Out," National Parks Traveler Editor-in-Chief Kurt Repanshek, echoing Butowsky, argued that adding these parks "will not enhance, but rather degrade the overall system," and contended that the new parks were unaffordable.³ On the issue of affordability, I think you could ask the question: When in its 100-year history has the National Park Service ever been sufficiently funded for all its responsibilities? In his National Park Service Centennial Essay on George Melendez Wright, writer and filmmaker Dayton Duncan points out that "the single-most recurring refrain in our narrative is a reluctant Congress finally being persuaded, after years of struggle on the grassroots level, to create a new park—and then not appropriating adequate money for its management and protection."⁴ Duncan reminds us that the "habit of inadequate funding began in 1872 with the creation of the world's first national park at Yellowstone, with no provisions whatsoever for taking care of it."

Rather than hunker down and patiently wait for appropriations to appear, the National Park Service for most of its history has realized that a larger portfolio of parks would not only protect more of the nation's irreplaceable heritage and serve more of its people, but would also strengthen the agency's public constituencies and build essential political support. The agency has also understood that occasionally stretching itself to be more broadly "useful" to the nation, whether through partnering with the Department of Education and schools across the country or demonstrating sustainable design and climate resiliency, might be a wise investment from many perspectives. This has indeed been the case; as the national park system has grown, so have the agency's visitation, visibility, and budget.

As for Repanshek's concern that the new parks will degrade the system, this argument has been heard many times before. Adding historic sites; running the Civilian Conservation Corps; building parkways, recreation areas, and long-distance trails; creating seashores, lakeshores, urban national parks, and national heritage areas—assuming all of these additional responsibilities and many more on behalf of the nation has always had its share of critics who predicted the changes would result in inevitable degradation, erosion of standards, and "thinning the blood." Dire warnings about the expansion of the national park system are about as old as the National Park Service itself. In the 1920s, Robert Sterling Yard, a former national park publicist and subsequent founder of the National Park Association, alarmed by the prospect of a Shenandoah National Park, warned against "the fatal belief that different standards can be maintained in the same system without the destruction of all standards." In the later part of the 20th century, former NPS Director Jim Ridenour, who, quite fond of metaphors, repeatedly referred to "thinning the blood" and "blurring the lines," in his memoir *The National Parks Compromised*.⁵

By contrast, Dayton Duncan describes how George Melendez Wright, as far back as the 1930s, intrinsically understood how essential it was for the national park system never to become finite or static:

At a moment in history when some of the park idea's biggest supporters were opposing an expansion of the system, on the grounds that too many proposed additions were not up to 'national park standards,' Wright saw the danger of doing nothing. Adding a 'substandard area ... would not be calamitous,' he warned. 'The failure to save Mount Olympus' forests, the Kings River Canyon ... and a host of others just as valuable would be the real calamity.... The logical answer is more not less park area.'

I've always found the expression "thinning the blood," besides being rather ghoulish, to be an arbitrary way of dismissing and devaluing ideas that are new or unfamiliar. In a *George Wright Forum* article almost 15 years ago, I wrote on the "making and re-making" of the national park system, I agreed that the system needed its gatekeepers, but gatekeepers with imagination and an open mind. Standards were also useful but require frequent reassessment. "The challenge now, as it always has been," I concluded, "is to take the national park

system in new directions relevant and responsive to our social and environmental condition and, in doing so, build ever-greater support and appreciation for the system as a whole.”⁶

I remember when I had joined the fledgling staff of Golden Gate National Recreation Area in the mid-1970s, a senior Department of Interior official came out to San Francisco and announced in a speech that the national park system had been finally and for all time “rounded out”—or in other words completed! In retrospect, I’m sure this had less to do with any comprehensive system planning or analysis than with a burst of budget-cutting zeal in Washington. My colleagues and I were in the process of setting up Golden Gate and we believed we were on the cusp of an exciting new era of urban national parks that would bring the many benefits of the national park system directly to city populations. Several of us were also looking forward to working on proposed new parks in Alaska—so you can imagine how dumbfounded we were by this sudden announcement that the national park system had added its last park. Of course this was not to be—not by a long shot. Far from being “rounded out,” since that day in San Francisco almost 40 years ago, by my rough count, there have been more than 100 additions to national park system. Included in this great expansion were the magnificent protected lands of Alaska that doubled the size of national park and refuge systems and tripled the amount of land previously designated as wilderness. During the breadth of my NPS career, first as a park planner, later as a superintendent, I would work with many of these additions to the system: Santa Monica Mountains, Frederick Law Olmsted, Boston African American, Lowell, Blackstone, Weir Farm, and Marsh–Billings–Rockefeller.

Describing New Mexico’s Valles Caldera, one of the newly authorized national parks, Roger Kennedy, former NPS director, wrote that “the centerpiece of the Jemez Massif, is worthy of national park status for its astonishing natural beauty, for its geological and archaeological wonders, for its wildlife, for the history that was played out upon it or near it, and for the military and geopolitical saga inherent in its title deeds.”⁷ He went on to urge that Valles Caldera “be revalued as a national asset, which, like all national parks, cannot be expected to pay for itself. The Preserve can be as ‘self-supporting’ as Independence Hall or Yellowstone Park, with their money costs balanced by their educational benefits.” That is indeed the cost/benefit calculation at the heart of the social compact the American people struck when they began, almost 150 years ago, building themselves a system of national parks—that “their money costs” are “balanced by their educational benefits.”

My father, Lincoln Diamant, a stamp collector in his youth and historian in his later years, wrote



Courtesy of Charles Davidson

a series of short essays paired with notable American postage stamps for the book *Stamping Our History: The Story of the United States Portrayed on its Postage Stamps*.⁸ Opposite a full-page engraving of Yosemite's El Capitan, part of a 1934 series of national park stamps, he concluded his essay on America's national park system, with the simple but prescient words: "May it be preserved and enlarged forever."



Endnotes

1. Rolf Diamant, "Letter From Woodstock: Keeping on the Path," *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2012, pp. 201–203.
2. Harry Butowsky, "The National Park System: Some Thoughts in 2015," *National Parks Traveler*, January 5, 2015. Online at www.nationalparkstraveler.com.
3. Kurt Repanshek, "Traveler's View: Senate Should Either Fund New Parks in Defense Bill, or Strip Them Out," *National Parks Traveler*, December 9, 2014. Online at www.nationalparkstraveler.com.
4. Dayton Duncan, "George Melendez Wright and the National Park Idea," *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2009, pp. 4–13.
5. James Ridenour, *The National Parks Compromised: Pork Barrel Politics and America's Treasures* (Merrillville, IN: ICS Books, 1994).
6. Rolf Diamant, "Management to Stewardship: The Making and Remaking of the U.S. National Park System," *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2000, pp. 31–45.
7. Roger Kennedy, "Towards a Valles Caldera National Park as a Landscape for Learning," unpublished memorandum, 2009.
8. Charles Davidson and Lincoln Diamant, *Stamping Our History: The Story of the United States Portrayed on its Postage Stamps* (New York, NY: Carol Publishing Group, 1990), p. 2.