

Planned Obsolescence: Maintenance of the National Park Service's History Infrastructure

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ALMOST EVERYTHING—especially most of the products we purchase these days—has an expiration date: from the milk in your refrigerator, the mattress on your bed, the ink in your computer printer, to the batteries in your flashlight. Remarkably, even Twinkies have a shelf-life. The personnel who manage the physical infrastructure of the national park system understand the concept of product life-cycle all too well. The maintenance backlog, now famously estimated at some \$12 billion, is essentially a list of products—such as water pipes, road surfaces, roof shingles, and HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) systems—that have reached the end of their utility and need either substantial repair or outright replacement. The National Park Service (NPS) annually maintains a detailed accounting of almost every aspect of these physical requirements, but what about the state of the agency's intellectual infrastructure? When does the relevancy of its various products of research and programs of interpretation become stale, out-of-date, or expired? Studies such as *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* have documented the decline in historical practice over the last generation and the great divide between history and interpretation within the agency. This “almost willful detachment” has been “perpetuated and enforced” by the agency's bureaucratic framework since the mid-1960s.¹ Frequently studied, and often found wanting, the National Park Service's conservation mantra (“*protection through appreciation, appreciation through understanding, and understanding through interpretation*”) remains an essential component of its mission, but one that requires periodic revitalization if it is to retain its freshness and relevancy.²

The dual goals expressed in the agency's 1916 legislative mandate established a Janus-like binary conflict (enjoyment of the people vs. impairment of the resources) that has perplexed NPS leadership over the last century.³ In the aftermath of World War II, NPS Director Newton Drury articulated a long list of challenges that sound quite familiar today.⁴ Existing parks were overcrowded and understaffed, with crumbling infrastructure and insufficient funding to address a plethora of pressing needs. Drury thought that larger, modern facilities were required to meet the demand of ever-increasing numbers of tourists. The de-

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cade-long Mission 66 program addressed the diverse crises through a billion-dollar expansion of infrastructure and a revitalization of moribund programs where the agency embraced modernism.⁵

On Founder's Day, August 25, 1966, when the National Park Service celebrated its 50th anniversary, there were 231 units (grouped in 16 distinct categories) in the system that encompassed nearly 27 million acres spread across the United States and its territories.⁶ In the early 1960s the Park Service retained the same fundamental mission and character as in 1916: it was a (mostly western) land management agency dedicated to the stewardship of nationally significant historical, natural, and recreational resources. All this was about to change as the "new conservation" merged with the emerging environmental movement to transform the mandate of the National Park Service, adding major roles and responsibilities that focused attention beyond the boundaries of its traditional activities. Adjustment within the mandates and missions of the National Park Service over the last 50 years highlighted a constellation of continuing administrative dilemmas as the institution awkwardly approached its second century.

Maintenance and other backlogs

Since 1916, while acknowledging the pragmatically unattainable goal of completing the system, each generation has added fiscal and administrative burdens to the challenge of maintaining an ever-growing collection of protected areas. The rapidly growing NPS maintenance backlog is frequently cited by the agency's leadership, park boosters, and politicians as evidence that park facilities are fundamentally underfunded.⁷ Because of the size of these estimates, parallel concerns about the overall state of American infrastructure, and its potential public relations and political impact, the agency takes its calculations seriously. The Park Facilities Management Division (PFMD) annually calculates deferred maintenance (DM) statistics for almost 76,000 "constructed assets" located within parks. Employees use a Facilities Management Software System (FMSS) to track changes in the Facility Condition Index (FCI) and especially Critical Systems Deferred Maintenance (CSDM). The high status of this issue among the administrators is highlighted by the adoption of two standardized maintenance backlog reports within the agency's Project Management Information System (PMIS). Efforts to identify and estimate the infrastructure backlog have withstood congressional scrutiny, and the figures are considered fairly precise.⁸

The unease regarding an expanding infrastructure maintenance backlog has a long history within the agency. President Franklin Roosevelt's incorporation of dozens of historic properties into the park system during the 1930s forever shifted the balance of parks within the agency's portfolio.⁹ Since then, historic units, with their seemingly maintenance-needy above-ground resources, have dominated the system in terms of numbers of designated units. Drury argued that the "development backlog" totaled almost \$500 million in 1949.¹⁰ In 1954, Charles Porter thought that it would be difficult to justify the cost of securing properties that would protect the view into Maryland across the Potomac River from George Washington's Mount Vernon when the restoration and maintenance of nearby Fort Washington was so underfunded.¹¹ A decade later, Ronald Lee noted that the agency was having "great

difficulty keeping up” with needed restoration work, a situation that was only exacerbated with the addition of new stewardship responsibilities each year.¹² To some, the solution for dealing with the infrastructure maintenance backlog, both physical and intellectual, was obvious: stop creating new parks and programs until the agency had met its stewardship and educational goals. However, according to one study, new parks and programs were not the problem: 80% of operating increases were directed toward older parks (those created before 1981), a cohort that collectively accounted for well over 90% of the agency’s total budget.¹³

Hidden within the estimates for the NPS’s maintenance backlog is a calculation for the restoration and rehabilitation of the physical infrastructure that helps interpret the natural, historic, and recreational public spaces. While some data is available through the PMIS system, the agency’s leadership can only extrapolate the overall need for its museum, interpretive, and conservation programs.¹⁴ The Organization of American Historians’ *Imperiled Promise* report recalled recommendations that NPS needed to address museum backlogs and archival access to its collections, as well as improving the agency’s administrative history program.¹⁵ Under the slogan “Putting Education Front and Center,” the Second Century Commission recommended in 2001 that as a first step the agency had to invest in replacing “broken, dilapidated, out-of-date, inaccurate, and irrelevant media, including exhibits, signs, films, and other technology delivered information.”¹⁶ Such concerns are magnified where the interpretive device is an entire building, such as the reconstructed McLean House at Appomattox Courthouse National Historical Park, which is seated within a cultural landscape that attempts to replicate village life at the close of the Civil War.¹⁷ The agency has exhaustive estimates regarding the life-cycle maintenance for HVAC systems within its visitor centers, but what about the replacement costs associated with interpretive exhibits and other media?

And what about the stories we tell our visitors? Should every product of historical inquiry and interpretation the agency produces come with a “best used by” date? Compared with the robust procedures used to identify and compile the physical infrastructure maintenance backlog, NPS spends relatively little on identifying and estimating backlogs in our research and interpretation programs. In fact, the agency has always had a difficult relationship with scientific and historical research. During Mission 66 the National Park System Advisory Board commended the “constructive attitude” among the agency’s leadership and asserted that “an expanding research program” was “a wise and advantageous investment” of agency funds.¹⁸ Dealing with the interpretation backlog has often resulted in charges of revisionism as the focus of commemoration at various parks has changed in the past.¹⁹ And yet, there have been ongoing calls to revisit, revise, and replace old and outdated interpretation within the multiple media through which the Park Service portrays American history and culture.²⁰ As noted by the Organization of American Historians:

History in the NPS has been under resourced for decades. Chronic underfunding and understaffing have severely undermined the agency’s ability to meet basic responsibilities, let alone take on new and bolder initiatives, nurture and sustain public engagement, foster a culture of research and discovery, and facilitate

connectivity and professional growth among NPS staff. Reducing inefficiencies and forming productive partnerships can help address these gaps, but after decades of deferred maintenance, the history infrastructure seriously needs repair.²¹

Planned obsolescence

One of the fundamental and frequently noted dualities of the national park system is the contrast between the static, congressionally established legislative mandates and the continually shifting currents of historical inquiry and interpretation. This presents a variety of challenges to an agency dedicated to preserving resources unimpaired for the future. As the articles in this issue of *The George Wright Forum* ably and substantively demonstrate, one of the values best enabled within the parklands is the “dynamic process ... considered in the light of ongoing research framed by new questions and multiple viewpoints.”²² As recent controversies surrounding Confederate statues have tragically demonstrated, civic engagement, shared authority, and intellectual courage are this generation’s contribution to a constantly evolving national dialogue that frames the American experiment.²³

Accepting the cyclical and generational nature of historical inquiry and interpretation, the National Park Service might consider seriously embracing the concept of planned obsolescence for the products of its historical research and interpretive programs. The Office of Management and Budget puts expiration dates on all federal agency forms; why not on our reports and lesson plans? After a while, even the most finely crafted interpretive plan, historic resource study, or national historic landmark nomination becomes stale and out-of-date. But, unlike for the various components of our physical plant, there is no administrative system that requires and enforces the periodic maintenance and replacement of our intellectual infrastructure. Perhaps every NPS product, like milk from the grocery, should have a “best if used by” date.

How much would the rehabilitation of the agency’s history infrastructure cost? Calculating an estimate of the agency’s intellectual backlog—especially the creation of statistics designed to shock park promoters, the general public, and politicians—only illustrates the conversion of an “ideological debate into a technical one” that would focus on the “problems of data collection” as a means to delay any real action to address the issue at hand.²⁴ As NPS Director Jonathan Jarvis noted early in his tenure, “I don’t need another study to tell me what the agency needs.”²⁵ So let us agree, for the sake of argument, that the cost of updating the National Park Service’s history infrastructure would be the same as was allocated for implementing Mission 66.

Rather than creating a new program to confirm this estimate, the agency should instead consider providing nationwide leadership by investing in the revitalization of its history infrastructure. After fully funding the long-neglected Historic Preservation Fund that supports tribal, state, and local governments, how should NPS spend any additional appropriations?²⁶ One place to start would be a five-year commitment to substantively and significantly support the work of historically minded associations, such as the George Wright Society, the Organization of American Historians, and the National Council on Public History that would

incorporate the mission of the History Leadership Council and the History Advisory Board proposed in *Imperiled Promise*. This collaboration among historians, interpreters, and a whole host of other disciplines, both within and outside the agency, would survey the state of historical inquiry and interpretation, tossing out old and expired products, all with an eye towards revitalizing the agency's history infrastructure in time for the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution in 2026.

Unfortunately, despite the many lights along the path illuminating this volume, it seems that the declension so clearly elucidated in 2011 by the *Imperiled Promise* report has continued in recent years due to administrative distractions, ethical blunders, and other factors. That said, while some of our documentation programs, such as the Historic American Buildings Survey, are meant for the ages, many of our products require, just like the thousands of shingles covering the roof at Hampton National Historic Site, maintenance of the intellectual variety. Within the ever-expanding shopping center of ideas and interpretations of American history, the continuing challenge for the National Park Service and other stewards of protected areas across the country is how to ensure that the products on our shelves are timely, rigorous, and relevant, not stale, expired, and obsolete.

The views and conclusions in this essay are those of the author and should not be interpreted as representing the opinions or policies of the National Park Service or the United States government.

Endnotes

1. Anne Whisnant, Marla Miller, Gary Nash, and David Thelen, "The State of History in the National Park: A Conversation and Reflections," *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2012), 254. Ronald Lee (1905–1972) played an important role in linking research and interpretation. As NPS chief historian (1938–1941 and 1946–1951), Lee helped to operationalize the historic property survey mandates of the Historic Sites Act of 1935 both before and after World War II. In 1951 he was appointed as assistant director for Research and Interpretation, one of three high-level administrative silos that also included "Operations" and "Administration." During Lee's tenure, research and interpretation remained tied together. By 1965, an Interpretation and Visitor Services Division was created under the Operations directorate.
2. Conrad Wirth, "Securing Protection and Conservation Objectives through Interpretation," April, 23, 1953. NPS Park History Program Files.
3. See Donald Hellmann, "The National Park Service at 100," *Akron Law Review* vol. 50 (June 2017): 5–76; and Lary M. Dilsaver, ed., *America's National Park System: The Critical Documents*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). The binary mission (visitor use vs. resource protection) is a component of the feasibility criteria for adding a new park. Carol Hardy Vincent, *National Park System: Establishing New Units* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 26, 2014).
4. Newton Drury, "The Dilemma of Our Parks," *American Forests* vol. 55, no. 6, (June 1949), 6–11, 38–39. His recognition of a post-war crisis in the management and use

of the parks was echoed in a variety of publications, most notably, Bernard de Voto, "Let's Close the National Parks," *Harper's Magazine* vol. 207, no. 1241 (October 1953), 49–52.

5. Ethan Carr, *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007). Mission 66 provided increased funding for historical research and revitalized both the Historic Sites Survey and the Historical American Buildings Survey.
6. In 2015, as it approached its centenary, the national park system contained 408 units, comprising 84 million acres, which supports 292 million annual visits, as managed by 22,000 employees with an annual appropriation of \$3 billion.
7. Kurt Repanshek, "National Park Service Maintenance Backlog Approaching \$11.5 Billion," *National Parks Traveler*, March 23, 2015. Approximately half of the deferred maintenance is related to road construction issues. See <http://www.nps.gov/subjects/plandesignconstruct/defermain.htm>.
8. See General Accounting Office, *National Park Service: Efforts to Identify and Manage the Maintenance Backlog* (Washington, DC: GAO, May 1998).
9. See Harlan D. Unrau and G. Frank Williss, *Administrative History: Expansion of the National Park Service in the 1930s* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, September 1983).
10. Carr, *Mission 66*, 34.
11. Charles Porter (chief, Preservation Services) to chief of interpretation (Ronald Lee), "Mockley Point, near Fort Washington, Maryland," March 11, 1954, NPS Park History Files.
12. (Northeast Regional Director) Ronald Lee, "Statement on Historic Preservation Opportunities and Problems for the National Park Service," Regional Directors' Meeting, Philadelphia, PA, July 16, 1964, NPS Harpers Ferry Center, Ronald Lee Collection, Box 1.
13. National Park System Advisory Board, Committee on Standards and Criteria Final Report, June 10, 1997; National Park System Advisory Board, Minutes of the June 10, 1997 Meeting, 9–10; and National Park System Advisory Board Resolution 116-3, "Standards and Criteria for Additions to the National Park System," prepared by Warren Brown, the agency's chief of planning, all NPS Park History Files.
14. For example, based on estimates from the Intermountain Region, the national Museum Management Program extrapolated the artifact conservation backlog at \$144 million in 2015. Figures generated from the PMIS system are somewhat biased in that generally only projects that have some chance of receiving funding within a tightly competitive fiscal environment are entered into the database.
15. *Imperiled Promise*, 83, 97. This study cites an earlier report by the National Academy of Public Administration that "identified serious problems and backlogs with the NPS's archival and curatorial efforts," and noted that the annual Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) goals for completing park administrative histories and historic resource studies (the only goals for the NPS History Program and key studies for

understanding parks' histories) were "dropped in 2006 and never restored."

16. *Advancing the National Park Idea: National Parks Second Century Commission Report* (Washington, DC: National Parks Conservation Association, 2009), 24.
17. National Parks Conservation Association, "Appomattox Court House National Historical Park: A Resource Assessment," 2008.
18. National Park System Advisory Board Minutes, 39th Meeting, October 20–22, 1958, National Historic Landmark Program Files.
19. For example, see Ari Kelman's account of the long struggle to identify, acquire, establish, and interpret the site of the 1864 massacre of Native Americans by the United States Army at Sand Creek, Colorado: *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
20. See Robert K. Sutton, "Holding the High Ground: Interpreting the Civil War in National Parks," *The George Wright Forum* 25, no. 3 (2008): 47–57.
21. *Imperiled Promise*, 80.
22. Lisa Mighetto, "A Sobering Report—Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service," *The George Wright Forum* vol. 29, no. 2 (2012): 265.
23. See Timothy Good, "The Need for Intellectual Courage, the History Leadership Council, and the History Advisory Board," *The George Wright Forum* vol. 29, no. 2 (2012): 268–271.
24. See, for example, Tim Lehman's discussion of how the issue of accurately calculating the loss of prime farmland during the 1970s delayed the introduction of effective preservation programs for a decade. "Public Values, Private Lands: Origins & Ironies of Farmland Preservation in Congress," *Agricultural History* vol. 66, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 257–272.
25. See Director Jarvis' signature program: *A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement*, National Park Service, August 25, 2014. Online at <https://www.nps.gov/calltoaction/>.
26. Operations of Tribal and State Historic Preservation Offices are partially funded through the distribution of matching grants from the Historic Preservation Fund, which comes not from federal taxes but from the revenue generated by offshore oil and gas leases. Authorized at a level of \$150 million annually, since 1976 the actual annual appropriation has averaged less than \$50 million.

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