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Shaping the System: Before the National Park Service

National Parks

The national park idea—the concept of large-scale natural preservation for public enjoyment—has been credited to the artist George Catlin, best known for his paintings of American Indians. On a trip to the Dakota region in 1832, he worried about the destructive effects of America’s westward expansion on Indian civilization, wildlife, and wilderness. They might be preserved, he wrote, “by some great protecting policy of government ... in a magnificent park.... [A] nation’s park, containing man and beast, in all the wild[ness] and freshness of their nature’s beauty!”

Catlin’s vision of perpetuating indigenous cultures in this fashion was surely impractical, and his proposal had no immediate effect. Increasingly, however, romantic portrayals of nature by writers like James Fenimore Cooper and Henry David Thoreau and painters like Thomas Cole and Frederick Edwin Church would compete with older views of wilderness as something to be overcome. As appreciation for unspoiled nature grew and as spectacular natural areas in the American West were publicized, notions of preserving such places began to be taken seriously.

One such place was Yosemite Valley, where the national park idea came to partial fruition in 1864. In response to the desires of “various gentlemen of California, gentlemen of fortune, of taste, and of refinement,” Senator John Conness of California sponsored legislation to transfer the federally owned valley and nearby Mariposa Big Tree Grove to the state so they might “be used and preserved for the benefit of mankind.” The act of Congress, signed by President Abraham Lincoln on June 30, granted California the lands on condition that they would “be held for public use, resort, and recreation ... inalienable for all time.”

The geological wonders of the Yellowstone region, in the Montana and Wyoming territories, remained little known until 1869–71, when successive expeditions led by David E. Folsom, Henry D. Washburn, and Ferdinand V. Hayden traversed the area and publicized their remarkable findings. Several members of these parties suggested reserving Yellowstone for public use rather than allowing it to fall under private control. The park idea received influential support from agents of the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, whose projected main line through Montana stood to benefit from a major tourist destination in the vicinity.

Yosemite was cited as a precedent, but differences in the two situations required different solutions. The primary access to Yellowstone was through Montana, and Montanans



William Jackson took this photograph of California's Yosemite Valley from Artists' Point in 1898. For many Americans the primary purpose of the National Park Service was the preservation and presentation of such iconic western landscapes.

were among the leading park advocates. Most of Yellowstone lay in Wyoming, however, and neither Montana nor Wyoming was yet a state. So the park legislation, introduced in December 1871 by Senate Public Lands Committee Chairman Samuel C. Pomeroy of Kansas, was written to leave Yellowstone in federal custody.

The Yellowstone bill encountered some opposition from congressmen who questioned the propriety of such a large reservation. "The geysers will remain, no matter where the ownership of the land may be, and I do not know why settlers should be excluded from a tract of land forty miles square ... in the Rocky mountains or any other place," complained Senator Cornelius Cole of California. But most were persuaded otherwise. The bill passed Congress, and on March 1, 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed it into law.

The Yellowstone act withdrew more than two million acres of the public domain from settlement, occupancy, or sale to be "dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." It placed the park "under the exclu-

sive control of the Secretary of the Interior” who was charged to “provide for the preservation, from injury or spoliation, of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park, and their retention in their natural condition.” The Secretary was also to prevent the “wanton destruction” and commercial taking of fish and game—problems addressed more firmly by the Lacey Act of 1894, which prohibited hunting outright and set penalties for offenders.

With Yellowstone’s establishment, the precedent was set for other natural reserves under federal jurisdiction. An 1875 act of Congress made most of Mackinac Island in Michigan a national park. Because of the Army’s presence there at Fort Mackinac, the Secretary of War

The inset photograph shows Captain Charles Young (1864–1922), who, in serving as the superintendent of Sequoia National Park during the summer of 1903, became the first African American national park superintendent. Prior to the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, the U.S. Army, including detachments of African American troops known as the Buffalo Soldiers, was tasked with the management, maintenance, and protection of parklands in the western United States. Designated by the Interior Secretary as a national historic landmark in 1974, Young’s home in Wilberforce, Ohio, shown here, was elevated as Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers National Monument in 2013. Library of Congress and NPS photos.



was given responsibility for it. Mackinac National Park would survive only 20 years as such; when the fort was decommissioned in 1895, Congress transferred the federal lands on the island to Michigan for a state park.

The next great scenic national parks—Sequoia, General Grant, and Yosemite, all in California—did not come about until 1890, 18 years after Yellowstone. The initial Sequoia legislation, signed by President Benjamin Harrison on September 25, again followed that for Yellowstone in establishing “a public park, or pleasure ground, for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” Another act approved October 1 set aside General Grant, Yosemite, and a large addition to Sequoia as “reserved forest lands” but directed their management along park lines. Sequoia, General Grant (later incorporated in Kings Canyon National Park), and Yosemite were given their names by the Secretary of the Interior. Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove remained under state administration until 1906, when they were returned to federal control and incorporated in Yosemite National Park.

In the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, Congress authorized U.S. Presidents to proclaim permanent forest reserves on the public domain. Forest reserves were retitled national forests in 1907, to be managed for long-term economic productivity under multiple-use conservation principles. Within 16 years Presidents Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed 159 national forests comprising more than 150 million acres. William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson added another 26 million acres by 1916.

National parks, preserved largely for their aesthetic qualities, demonstrated a greater willingness to forego economic gain. Congress thus maintained direct control over the establishment of parks and frequently had to be assured that the lands in question were worthless for other purposes. Park bills were usually enacted only after long and vigorous campaigns by their supporters. Such campaigns were not driven solely by preservationist ideals: as with Yellowstone, western railroads regularly lobbied for the early parks and built grand rustic hotels in them to boost their passenger business.

Mount Rainier National Park in Washington was the next of its kind, reserved in 1899. Nine more parks were established through 1916, including such scenic gems as Crater Lake in Oregon, Glacier in Montana, Rocky Mountain in Colorado, and Hawaii in the Hawaiian Islands. There were as yet no clear standards for national parks, however, and a few suffered by comparison. Among them was Sullys Hill, an undistinguished tract in North Dakota that was later transferred to the Agriculture Department as a game preserve.

The Secretary of the Interior was supposed to preserve and protect the parks, but early depredations by poachers and vandals at Yellowstone revealed the difficulties to be faced in managing these remote areas. In 1883 Congress authorized him to call on the Secretary of War for assistance, and three years later he did so, obtaining a cavalry detail to enforce Yellowstone’s regulations and army engineers to develop park roads and buildings. Although the military presence was extended to Sequoia, General Grant, and Yosemite in 1891, the later parks received civilian superintendents and rangers.

National Monuments

While the early national parks were being established, a separate movement arose to protect

the remains of cliff dwellings, pueblos, and early missions found on the vast public lands of the Southwest and which were being publicized by cowboys, army officers, ethnologists, and other explorers. Efforts to secure protective legislation began among historically minded scientists and civic leaders in Boston and spread to similar circles in other cities during the 1880s and 1890s.

Congress took a first step in this direction in 1889 by authorizing the President to reserve from settlement or sale the land in Arizona containing the massive Casa Grande site. President Benjamin Harrison ordered the Casa Grande Ruin Reservation three years later. In 1904, at the request of the Interior Department's General Land Office, archeologist Edgar Lee Hewett reviewed prehistoric features on federal lands in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah and recommended specific sites for protection. The following year he drafted general legislation for the purpose. Strongly supported by Representative John F. Lacey of Iowa, chairman of the House Public Lands Committee, it passed Congress and received President Theodore Roosevelt's signature on June 8, 1906.

Comparable to the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, the Antiquities Act of 1906 was a blanket authority for Presidents to proclaim and reserve "historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest" on lands owned or controlled by the United States as "national monuments." It also prohibited the excavation or appropriation of antiquities on federal lands without permission from the department having jurisdiction.

Separate legislation to protect the spectacular cliff dwellings of southwestern Colorado moved through Congress simultaneously, resulting in the creation of Mesa Verde National Park three weeks later. Thereafter the Antiquities Act was widely used to reserve such cultural features—and natural features as well. Roosevelt proclaimed 18 national monuments before leaving office in March 1909, 12 of which fell in the latter category. The first was Devils Tower in northeastern Wyoming, a massive stone shaft of volcanic origin, proclaimed September 24, 1906. The next three monuments followed that December: El Morro in New Mexico, site of prehistoric petroglyphs and historic inscriptions left by Spanish explorers and American pioneers; Montezuma Castle in Arizona, a well-preserved cliff dwelling; and Petrified Forest in Arizona.

National monuments were proclaimed on lands administered by the Agriculture and War departments as well as Interior. Proclamations before 1933 entailed no change of administration; a monument reserved under Agriculture or War would normally remain there unless Congress later made it or included it in a national park. In 1908, broadly construing the Antiquities Act's provision for "objects of scientific interest," Roosevelt proclaimed part of Arizona's Grand Canyon a national monument. Because the monument lay within a national forest, the Agriculture Department's Forest Service retained jurisdiction until 1919, when Congress established a larger Grand Canyon National Park in its place and assigned management responsibility to Interior's National Park Service. Similarly, Lassen Peak and Cinder Cone national monuments in California, proclaimed in 1907 under Forest Service jurisdiction, moved to Interior in 1916 when Lassen Volcanic National Park was established and encompassed both areas.



Inscriptions at El Morro National Monument, New Mexico. NPS photo.

By the beginning of the 21st century, U.S. Presidents had proclaimed more than 100 national monuments. Although many were later incorporated in national parks or otherwise redesignated, and several were abolished, it may be said that nearly a quarter of the units of today's System sprang in whole or part from the Antiquities Act.

Mineral Springs

Two mineral spring reservations also contributed to the emerging National Park System. The first preceded all other components of the System outside the Nation's Capital.

"Taking the cure" at mineral spring resorts became highly fashionable in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, when thousands visited such famous spas as Bath, Aix-les-Bains, Aachen, Baden-Baden, and Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary). As mineral springs were found in America, they too attracted attention. Places like Saratoga Springs in New York and White Sulphur Springs in Virginia (now West Virginia) were developed privately, but Congress acted to maintain federal control of two springs west of the Mississippi.

Hot Springs in Arkansas Territory comprised 47 springs of salubrious repute emerging from a fault at the base of a mountain. In 1832 Congress reserved four sections of land containing Hot Springs "for the future disposal of the United States." After the Civil War the In-

terior Department permitted private entrepreneurs to build and operate bathhouses to which the spring waters were piped, and the Hot Springs Reservation became a popular resort.

In 1902 the Federal Government purchased 32 mineral springs near Sulphur, Oklahoma Territory, from the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations to create the Sulphur Springs Reservation, also under Interior's jurisdiction. The reservation was enlarged in 1904, and two years later Congress renamed it Platt National Park after the recently deceased Senator Orville Platt of Connecticut, who had been active in Indian affairs.

Congress redesignated Hot Springs Reservation a national park in 1921. Although the park encompassed some natural terrain, it remained more an urbanized spa than a natural area. Platt, an equally anomalous national park, lost that designation in 1976 when it was incorporated in the new Chickasaw National Recreation Area.