

Introduction

When did the National Park System begin? The usual response is 1872, when an act of Congress created Yellowstone National Park, the first place so titled. Like a river formed from several branches, however, the System cannot be traced to a single source. Other components—the parks of the nation’s capital, Hot Springs, parts of Yosemite—preceded Yellowstone as parklands reserved or established by the federal government. And there was no real “system” of national parks until Congress created a federal bureau, the National Park Service (NPS), in 1916 to manage those areas assigned to the U.S. Department of the Interior.

The systematic park administration within Interior paved the way for annexation of comparable areas from other federal agencies. In a 1933 government reorganization, the National Park Service acquired the War Department’s national military parks and monuments, the Agriculture Department’s national monuments, and the national capital parks. Thereafter the NPS would be the primary federal agency preserving and providing for public enjoyment of America’s most significant natural and cultural properties in a fully comprehensive National Park System.

The nomenclature of National Park System areas is often confusing. System units now bear some 30 titles besides *national park*, which commonly identifies the largest, most spectacular natural areas. Other designations such as *national seashore*, *national lakeshore*, *national river*, and *national scenic trail* are usefully descriptive. In contrast, the *national monument* title—applied impartially to large natural areas like Dinosaur and small cultural sites like the Statue of Liberty—says little about a place. For no obvious reason, some historic forts are national monuments and others are national historic sites, while battlefields are variously titled *national military parks*, *national battlefields*, and *national battlefield parks*, among other things.

All these designations are rooted in the System’s legislative and administrative history. Where distinctions in title denote no real differences in character or management policy, the differing designations usually reflect changes in fashion over time. Historical areas that once would have been named national monuments, for example, more recently have been titled *national historic sites*, if small, or *national historical parks*, if larger. Regardless of their titles, all System units are referred to generically as “parks,” a practice followed in this book.

The dates used here for parks are usually those of the earliest laws, presidential proclamations, or departmental orders authorizing or establishing them. In some cases these actions occurred before the areas were placed under NPS administration and thus in the National Park System. In 1970 Congress defined the System as including “any area of land and

water now or hereafter administered by the Secretary of the Interior, through the National Park Service, for park, monument, historic, parkway, recreational, or other purposes.” This legal definition excludes a number of national historic sites, memorials, trails, and other areas assisted or coordinated, but not administered, by the NPS.

Ronald F. Lee’s *Family Tree of the National Park System*, published by the Eastern National Park and Monument Association in 1972, chronicled the System’s evolution to that date. With its chronological listing of park additions and concise discussion of significant examples, developments, and trends, Lee’s family tree was a valuable orientation and reference tool for NPS personnel and others tracking the System’s growth to Yellowstone’s centennial year. Following in his footsteps, this essay expands upon the story of the evolution of the U.S. National Park System.