Geographies of Wonder

Origin Stories of America’s National Parks, 1872-1933

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Library, West Hall
The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
For more than a century and a half, national parks have been woven into the fabric of our national life. Writer and environmentalist Wallace Stegner has described them as “America’s best idea.” To ensure the successful management of these unique resources, Congress passed the National Park Service Organic Act, signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson on Aug. 25, 1916. In commemorating the centennial of this milestone, “Geographies of Wonder: Origin Stories of America’s National Parks, 1872-1933” explores how the forces of natural beauty and national pride propelled the evolution of America’s parks, from the establishment of the first national park through to the Great Depression. It features some 100 items drawn from The Huntington’s collections of rare books, manuscripts, photographs, prints, and related materials.

Long before the establishment of the first national park, the Euro-American inhabitants of the fledgling United States believed that natural wonders—such as New Hampshire’s Mount Washington, Kentucky’s Mammoth Cave and, above all, Niagara Falls in western New York State—represented scenic magnificence without equal in the world. Routinely described as uniquely beautiful, these landscapes assured Americans that they resided in a country possessed of an exceptional character and destiny. One particular publication, the multi-part Picturesque America, produced by New York publisher D. Appleton and Sons between 1872 and 1874, epitomized such scenic nationalism with its impressive array of richly illustrated depictions of landscapes in every corner of the country. Unprecedented in its scale and scope, Picturesque America also helped to cultivate an audience that would sympathize with later efforts to preserve leading natural treasures.

Preservation of certain American natural treasures had already begun, however, a decade before the publication of Picturesque America. In 1851, a contingent of Euro-American militiamen pursued the Ahwaneechee band of
California Indians into a deep canyon on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada where they lived. Dubbed the “Yosemite Valley” by these early visitors, it soon attracted travelers seeking to immerse themselves in its sublme beauty. Transferred by the federal government in 1864 to the State of California as a grant dedicated to the purposes of “public use, resort, and recreation,” the valley inspired growing interest in and visitation to its astonishing landscapes.

Elsewhere in the trans-Mississippi West, the geysers, mud pots, hot springs, and dramatic vistas of the Yellowstone Plateau in Wyoming Territory also aroused public fascination soon after Euro-Americans first explored them in 1869 and 1870. Descriptions of them circulated widely in the periodicals of the day, while photographs and paintings captured their otherworldly character. Building upon precedents established by the Yosemite grant of 1864, the United States Congress passed legislation in 1872 establishing Yellowstone National Park under the direct control of the federal government as “a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”

At the same time that the national park concept began to take root, steady expansion of railroad networks throughout the Far West opened the region to recreational travelers. Seizing this new business opportunity, the Boston-based firm Raymond-Whitcomb began organizing all-expenses-paid guided excursions by rail in the early 1880s, following the model of the British company Thomas Cook & Son. Soon middle-class families found travel to marvels such as Yosemite Valley and Yellowstone National Park well within their grasp. In less than a decade, thousands of people had made the arduous trek to see these wonderlands for themselves.
As tourists flocked to national parks and other scenic wonders from the 1870s into the 1900s, Euro-Americans celebrated the parks in particular as reserves of unspoiled wilderness. Rarely did they consider, however, that Native Americans often had inhabited those regions for centuries. Generally hostile toward and contemptuous of any and all Indians, Euro-American settlers and government officials typically evicted them from the parks or at least pushed them out of sight of white visitors. Only in the promotional advertising conducted by railroads and park concessionaires were Indians resurrected as symbols of the exotic past of the Old West.

The proliferation of advertising on behalf of the national parks established them ever more firmly in the public consciousness, even as it relegated the continent’s first peoples to the status of historical relics. With improvements in railroads and the dissemination of the automobile after the turn of the 20th century, many Americans succumbed to the allure of the national parks. Some sought an escape from the confines of an increasingly urban society. Numerous others heeded the call to “See America First,” especially after the outbreak of World War I forestalled sightseeing excursions to Europe. Thousands of Americans set forth each summer to the national parks and monuments in search of inspiration, enlightenment, and recreation.

Such increasing popular enthusiasm among Americans for the experience of visiting national parks encouraged the designation of additional parks as well as national monuments in the early 20th century. Civic organizations, community groups, and concerned individuals lent their weight to proposals advanced by politicians on local, state, and national levels, while others supported the extension of existing parks or monuments. At the same time, public support mounted for the formation of a federal agency to ensure more effective management and over-
sight of these national treasures. Passage by the Congress in 1916 of the National Park Service Organic Act laid the foundation for such efforts with its mandate “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

Upholding the mandate embedded in its founding legislation to ensure both present-day use and unimpaired conservation for the future proved a persistent challenge for the National Park Service. However great their popularity, national parks were never completely insulated from various threats to the landscapes encompassed within them. Having lost a lengthy and acrimonious battle to prevent the city of San Francisco from building the Hetch Hetchy dam in Yosemite, conservationists learned the need for unceasing vigilance in opposing future attempts to seize park resources for exploitation. External organizations such as the National Parks Association, following the example of pioneering naturalist John Muir and others, stood ready to organize public outrage against any menace they perceived to the sanctity of park lands or the national park idea.

Building a national park system with the twin goals of preservation and use firmly in mind had been the justification of nearly all of the national parks and monuments by the 1920s. Envisioning the parks as “field laboratories for the study of nature,” however, scientists in many fields found many questions to explore in these protected landscapes. Meanwhile, as this research unfolded, the National Park Service also introduced programs to inform visitors about the environments that they would encounter. Within a decade of the Service’s creation, specialists known as “naturalists” offered evening campfire talks, conducted guided tours, and produced publications such as Yosemite’s “Nature Notes” in hopes of transforming awe into understanding.
The establishment of interpretive services such as naturalist talks and guided tours represented only one of many steps taken to meet the challenge of popularity. The 1920s saw unprecedented growth in national park visitation, driven in large measure by the explosive growth in automobile ownership and use across the United States. Calls for better automobile access to the national parks grew in number and volume, supported by lobbyists such as the National Park-to-Park Highway Association. To accommodate this rising tide of auto-borne tourists, many national parks and monuments had to start building campgrounds and parking lots. During the same years, National Park Service leadership relied upon the impressive escalation in the numbers of visitors to justify adding more parks and monuments to the system. Even the onset of the Great Depression in the early 1930s could only check public visitation temporarily. In its efforts to foster economic recovery, however, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs would unleash changes that would alter the evolution of America’s national parks forever. That growth period, through the present, will be examined in the second national parks exhibition at The Huntington, “Geographies of Wonder: Evolution of the National Park Idea, 1933–2016,” which will be on view Oct. 22, 2016–Feb. 13, 2017.

Peter Blodgett, H. Russell Smith Foundation Curator, Western American Manuscripts

This exhibition is made possible by the Robert F. Erburu Exhibition Endowment.
RELATED EVENTS

Curator Tour: Geographies of Wonder
June 9 (Thursday) 4:30-6 p.m.
Join curator Peter Blodgett for a private tour of the exhibition and explore the origins and evolution of the national park idea. Members: $15. Non-Members: $20. Registration: Huntington.org/calendar

A Taste of Art: Camping in America
June 25 (Saturday) 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
Explore the evolving role of national parks in America with Maite Gomez-Rejon of ArtBites. After a tour of the exhibition, prepare a group meal inspired by camping cookery and the foods served on the railroads that transported visitors to America’s monumental vistas. Members: $85. Non Members: $100. Registration: Huntington.org/calendar.

Children’s Workshop: Picnics of Wonder
June 28 (Saturday) 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
Learn about the development of the picnic in America. Classic picnic items of the era covered in the exhibition (1920s-1930s) will be made and enjoyed in this workshop led by chef Ernest Miller. Ages 7–12. Fee includes one accompanying adult. Members: $35. Non-Members: $45.

RELATED EXHIBITION

Geographies of Wonder: Evolution of the National Park Idea, 1933–2016
Library, West Hall
The Huntington Library continues to celebrate the centennial of the US National Park Service in this second of two consecutive exhibitions that focus on the critical role that national parks have played in American history. “Geographies of Wonder: Evolution of the National Park Idea, 1933–2016” will depict the unceasing public enthusiasm for national park spaces and the steady pace of changes in the concept of a “national park” that grew to include national lakeshores and seashores, wild and scenic rivers, battlefields, industrial sites, parkways, and trails. It will illuminate the paradox established by the National Park Service’s founding legislation—how to make the lands under its management available for public enjoyment while at the same time ensuring their preservation. Drawing upon nearly 100 items from the Huntington’s holdings, as well as from various private and public collections, “Geographies of Wonder: Evolution of the National Park Idea” will include maps, photographs, advertisements, illustrated guide books, travel narratives, promotional brochures, scientific surveys, reports, and correspondence to highlight the experiences of visitors to the parks and the many (sometimes conflicting) visions of national parks that have taken shape over the past 80 years.