Scholar's Reports by Cindy Ott, Laura Watt, and Raymond Rast

of a visit to Joshua Tree National Park

June 10-12, 2008

Sponsored by the National Park Service in Cooperation with the Organization of American Historians
Scholar's Reports by Cindy Ott, Laura Watt, and Raymond Rast
of a visit to Joshua Tree National Park

June 10-12 2008

Joshua Tree National Park
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Organization of American Historians
Bloomington, Indiana
# Table of Contents

Cover

List of Illustrations ........................................................................................................... v

Introduction......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: Joshua Tree National Park History Program Consulting Report,
Cindy Ott........................................................................................................................... 3
  Introduction....................................................................................................................... 3
  Main Recommendations................................................................................................... 3
  Analysis of Current Historical Interpretation in JTNP .................................................. 4
  Recommendations for Developing a History Program .................................................. 7
  Overview of Interpretive Themes and Approaches....................................................... 8
  Critiques and Recommendations for Programming................................................... 11
  Recommendations for Staff Education.......................................................................... 14
  Suggestions for Grant Sources ..................................................................................... 15
  Bibliographical Note...................................................................................................... 15
  Conclusion....................................................................................................................... 15

Chapter Two: Recommendations on the Development of a History Program at Joshua
Tree National Park, Raymond W. Rast ................................................................................ 17
  Conceptual Overview...................................................................................................... 17
  Responses to Specific Questions and Issues................................................................. 34
  Suggested Responsibilities of the Staff Historian........................................................... 39

Chapter Three: Site Review for the Organization of American Historians at Joshua Tree
National Park, June 10-12, 2008, Laura A. Watt................................................................. 43
  Introduction....................................................................................................................... 43
  Integrating Archeological History with Ecological History .......................................... 43
  Early Settlers and Their Stories...................................................................................... 45
  Establishment of the Park and Links to Early Conservation Efforts............................... 46
  Militarization of the Desert............................................................................................ 48
  Recent Connections and Meanings.................................................................................. 49

Appendix A. Questionnaire: Organization of American Historians (OAH) and National
Park Service Site Visit, Joshua Tree National Park, June 9-13, 2008 .............................. 53

Appendix B. Bibliography of the American West, compiled by Cindy Ott......................... 55
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Joshua tree
Figure 2. Gate at Ryan Ranch, 2008
Figure 3. Shed at the Keys Ranch, 2008
Figure 4. Doorstep at the Ryan Ranch, 2008
Figure 5. Climber in the Hidden Valley campground, 2008
Figure 6. Parsons "shrine" with graffiti and offerings, 2008

FIGURE CREDITS

All figures courtesy of photographer Laura A. Watt
INTRODUCTION

During the second week of June, 2008 a group of visiting scholars, hosted by Joshua Tree National Park and the Organization of American Historians, visited Joshua Tree to reflect on scholarly perspectives related to the park’s history and cultural heritage. This series of meetings was the first step in developing a vigorous history program for the park.

The three historians: Cindy Ott, Assistant Professor of American Studies at St. Louis University; Raymond Rast, Assistant Professor of History at California State University, Fullerton and Laura Watt, Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies and Planning at Sonoma State University were tasked with assessing the park’s current program and identifying opportunities to improve interpretation of the area’s resources.

The historians were each asked to consider the park’s historical context in both local and regional terms, including issues related to westward expansion, interpretation of the natural history of the park, and modern perspectives concerning the desert.

The following reports are the result of their visit.
CHAPTER ONE

JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK HISTORY PROGRAM
CONSULTING REPORT

Cindy Ott

INTRODUCTION

I have carefully reviewed the questions raised in the Joshua Tree National Park (JTNP) site visit questionnaire and have integrated my responses to these issues into my report. (For the list of questions posed to the visiting historians, see Appendix A.) This report is organized into eight parts.
1. Statement of main recommendations for the JTNP history program
2. Analysis of current historical interpretation in JTNP
3. Recommendations for developing a history program
4. Overview of interpretive themes and approaches
5. Critiques and recommendations for programming
6. Recommendations for staff education
7. Suggestions for grant sources
8. Bibliographical note
9. Conclusion

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on my on-site visit and discussions, and my review of park literature, collections and interpretation, I recommend that JTNP integrates the cultural and natural history of the park into its interpretative programs so that visitors are educated about the interconnections between people and the natural environment over time, and about the historical changes that belie a sense of the desert landscape's timelessness. I would also recommend making greater connections between the park and larger regional and national issues that have shaped it and its history. I think it would be wise to take the historical

---

1 I think it is a great idea to have consulting historians' advice on how JTNP should develop the history program. I would be prepared, however, for the historian to have strong opinions about how to structure and run the program, and for the possibility that she might be less than desirous of simply following a program that has been developed beforehand. I am sure all of the park staff is cognizant of this already, but I thought it was important to note and to think about how exactly the current staff expects the new historian to use these reports, including identifying which aspects current staff insists on being followed.

I welcome any questions the staff might have after they have read my report.
interpretation up to the present, especially for the history of area American Indians, so they do not appear to be relics of a bygone era.

I advise JTNP to create mission and vision statements for the history program in order to focus and unite collecting and programming activities. I would encourage the park to design public programs with flexible components so that it serves the needs of both local and frequent park visitors, and occasional visitors. These changes will help build the relevance that JTNP seeks for its history program. Joshua Tree National Park has a terrific staff and the collections to make these changes possible.

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION IN JTNP

The current history program focuses on ancient Indian cultures, mining, and homesteading. These are all important and relevant to the park's history, but I think they could be interpreted in greater social and cultural context so that the motivations and influences of the people who lived and worked here are more clearly understood and presented. I also think the program could expand the topics that it presents to visitors, as I will delineate below. I will begin with a list of several recurring themes in the park's historical interpretation that I think JTNP should consider eliminating or changing, and the places where I found them presented.

Use of Antiquated Frontier Themes

A lot of JTNP interpretation perpetuates old frontier myths about the West. These include the ideas that white pioneers were rugged individuals who relied on their own wits to survive and that there was a simple progression from American Indian hunters and gatherers to cattlemen, and miners to homesteaders. Myths such as these belie the role of the federal government, the railroad and other businesses in facilitating migration into the West; the continued presence of American Indians from all walks of life; and the overlapping rather than sequential turn of events that shaped the place.

Frederick Jackson Turner helped make the frontier myth popular in the 1890s and popular literature, art, films and even many exhibitions have helped perpetuate it in the present. Its basic tenets are that the West was settled by Anglo-Saxons from the East, that the place was a barren wilderness until their arrival, and that there was a natural progression from a savage to a civilized state beginning with Indians, moving to miners, farming and ranch communities, and then to settled towns. Historians have refuted this popular narrative, though the ideas it embodies are so tantalizing and the stories of heroic, independent pioneers so alluring that they are difficult to dispel from a popular audience. The problem with presenting JTNP history from this perspective is that it marginalizes American Indians, covers up or ignores the sometimes tragic consequences of nineteenth-century western settlement for the environment and the diverse groups of people who have occupied the West for generations, ignores the many other groups of people who came to the region from other directions, marginalizes women, and misrepresents the role that larger forces, like federal policy, had in shaping settlement.
Focusing on individual stories, as the interpretation at physical sites in the park and
the Web site does, is a good and engaging way to communicate the history of JTNP, but I
think it is very important that an interpretation places the lives of these people in proper
social and cultural context so they do not become two-dimensional tropes that support old
myths. JTNP has to be very conscious of how visitors themselves will fit these stories into
popular ideas about the West. The park needs to work hard to present material in ways that
gets visitors to question the old mythic stories and to see the history of particular families
more critically. (By critically, I mean more balanced, not more negatively.)

Examples of Current Problematic Interpretation Relating to Frontier Themes

The Joshua Tree National Park Web site's History and Culture section and the
interpretive wayside sign at the Cottonwood Springs oasis are two examples of places that
outline this Turnesian progression of events. They both chronicle the site's history by listing
occupation in a trajectory beginning with Indians and stopping with homesteaders in the
1900s, as if the development of the nearby towns, aqueduct, military operations, large-scale
mines, and modern-day Indians are not part of the history. The museum collection brochure,
as another example, lists Indians before and separate from "cattlemen, miners, and
homesteaders."

The Lost Horse Mine section of the Web site describes "hardy adventurers" and
contains fine details about the individuals who worked the mine yet offers no larger
significance statement tying them to broader changes in the West. This approach sounds
more like antiquarian history because it focuses on facts, ignores the bigger picture and offers
little critical perspective on the events.

While I think the park's Keys Ranch interpreters are excellent, they could think
about adding more historical context to their presentations. By historical context, I mean
information relating to larger government policies, economic issues, social conditions, and
perceptions of the desert that informed people's decisions to come and settle in Joshua Tree.
For example, the park could tie the Keys's story to issues of immigration, race relations,
modern technology, and gender roles.

Myth of the Vanished Indians

The Joshua Tree National Park has great collections and provides very good
coverage of the ancient and early history of regional American Indians in its collections, Web
site and brochures, but the interpretation of Indian miners and ranchers as well as modern-
day Indians is less strong. I think visitors could leave with the impression that American
Indians left the area in the nineteenth century upon white arrival, though Indian
communities obviously still live in the park's midst.

Isolated Landscape of the Past Theme

During a bus ride around the park, we heard all kinds of fascinating stories from staff
about the Los Angeles Aqueduct, the Eagle Mountain Land Fill, agricultural projects, the
Eagle Mountain iron mine, and military use of the local desert environment, though most of
these topics are missing from the official interpretation. As popular as the nineteenth century is among visitors, I think they also get bored with the same old stories. I think interpreting more current events will strengthen JTPN’s history program and also enrich visitors’ experiences. Moving beyond frontier and pioneer stories will challenge their expectations of the desert, national parks, and the West. These other topics are also essential facts for understanding the history of Joshua Tree and so should be interpreted more in the park for that reason alone. They also connect JTPN to larger social, political and economic issues in the West instead of portraying it as an isolated oasis.

**Lack of Connections Between Cultural and Environmental History**

Current park interpretation almost completely separates the site’s natural and cultural history, when (as I will discuss more fully below in the recommendations section) one really cannot understand the history of the park unless one looks at the encounters between people and the environment. I found this to be true for the Visitor Center exhibition (which has very little cultural history), the main JTPN brochure, and the interpretative themes.

For example, the “Primary Interpretative Themes” document has a section on the interdependence of natural organisms called “The Ingenuity of Desert Life.” I would recommend that JTPN interpretation include people as part of the equation, too. The “Humans” section is very negative, focusing on pollution and detrimental changes to the desert. I think it is important to discuss these issues, but they also need to be balanced with more positive encounters and also with less value-laden ones, like the date palm and mustard plant story.

While most people do not imagine that the desert is a domesticated and productive landscape, as I learned from park staff, the park was the site of the largest domestic production of dates in the 1920s. The yellow mustard plants may look like a “natural” feature of the desert landscape to visitors, but they are actually tangible evidence of the historical date farming and so offer a great way to interpret the area’s complex natural and cultural ties. The mustard plants “hitchhiked” in the soil of date palms that farmers imported from North Africa. Originally, the date farmers used the mustard as a form of cover to prevent the spread of weeds and they would till the mustard plants under on an annual basis. After the introduction of chemical fertilizers in the 1950s and 1960s, the farmers let the mustard plants go to seed and they now blanket the hillsides. I understand there are strong environmental reasons to remove the plants—they compete with native plants and they are very flammable, but until they are removed, I think they offer an interesting and important lesson about the intertwined worlds of nature and culture. In addition, the China Ranch Date Farm in Death Valley could serve as an interpretative story to unite the parks’ histories and landscapes.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING A HISTORY PROGRAM

I suggest that JTN P creates a vision and a mission statement to guide and unite every phase and aspect of its interpretative programs. Having a strong mission and vision will help unify all the various components of the park’s public programming and provide a conceptual center to pull together the many components of its history programs and collections. The mission statement should state the central goals of the program and the vision statement should state the desired impact.

Suggestion for Mission Statement

The Joshua Tree National Park history program aims to educate visitors about the interconnections between people and the environment that shaped this desert landscape over time, to demonstrate the significance of this landscape to the larger history of the American West, and to document current changes in the park for future generations.

Suggestion for Vision Statement

Joshua Tree National Park visitors will leave the park with a complex vision of the historical encounters among a variety of people and the desert environment over time that enriches their understanding of the history of the American West and JTN P’s role in it, and of desert ecology.

Historical Interpretation Methods

There are two fundamental points to remember regarding interpretation. One is that visitors spend only a few moments at most interpretative displays and the other is that in most cases, whatever information was presented, most visitors leave feeling their own viewpoints have been supported. (These points are based on museum visitor surveys.) In order to encourage more critical thinking about JTN P from visitors, I think it is best to stay on the mission statement’s message in all interpretative forums and to not be too didactic in public programming. The history program will have more impact if materials simply try to get visitors to question common assumptions about the desert, this place, the people who have lived here, and the history of the American West in general than if it tries to force a particular viewpoint on them. I would emphasize the theme of change over time and the related idea that the place is not static or stuck in the past, that its history is not a simple frontier story, and that the cultural history is closely integrated with the natural history.

For example, an interpretive sign could include a vignette (and a photograph capturing it) about how the site in view has changed over time instead of simply describing what the visitors see before them. The sign should invite the visitors to think critically about the landscape before them instead of passively taking it in. One tack that I have used in exhibitions is to have display labels that ask questions so the visitors engage with the artifacts, and then I provide a covered tablet with additional information and photographs in case the visitor wants more explanation. This system is designed to get visitors to actively engage with
what is before them instead of passively absorbing what they see. The park could try this
approach in its exhibitions and wayside stations.

**Use of Historical Evidence (and Missing Evidence)**

As we discussed in the on-site meetings, even though the actual chain of events of the
JTNF regional history may be uncertain, some interpretative signs currently present
historical events as uncontested facts. Legends blur with actual documented events. Instead
of trying to compensate for uncertainties by filling in the blanks, I would use conflicting or
incomplete evidence as an opportunity to talk about the many ways of looking at the desert
and the past, and how park historians have determined what actually happened and what
they have not been able to determine. Be clear about what is known and what is not known
and explain what is legend, what is documented fact, and the difference between them.

In this regard, I would use the Keys Ranch as an opportunity to interpret American
Indians’ presence in the park area instead of using it just to tell the story of white settlers. I
would have the interpreters explain why the Keys Ranch survived and why many of the
American Indian dwellings did not. Park historians can make the absences, uncertainties, and
conflicting viewpoints a part of the story.

**Local Community as Source**

I would try to take full advantage of the many people in the community who have
lived and worked in and around the park to document the past as well as the present. I think
the park already does so; I would just encourage the staff to continue these activities. I would
think of JTNF facilities as an on-going, open-ended project that seeks to serve not only as a
repository of the past but as a cultural center that continues to document events and changes
in the park for future generations. I think it is important to continue building the oral history
program, and archival and museum collections.

**OVERVIEW OF INTERPRETIVE THEMES AND APPROACHES**

My answer to the question “What does history mean to this park?” raised in the on-
site visit questionnaire, is that one cannot fully interpret the park without it. Cultural history
should be a vital component of the exploration and interpretation of this seemingly natural
landscape. Human history is indelibly a part of it. Emphasizing human and environmental
encounters over time in the park not only explains why the landscape looks the way it does
today, but also highlights change in the future so that visitors become more aware of how
they themselves are part of the history of this place and how their presence impacts this
landscape. In other words, talking about the historical actors who shaped this place in the
past provides a great platform to discuss current environmental issues today. I suggest a
number of major historical themes and approaches for JTNF in the following paragraphs.

**Interconnections Between People and the Environment**

This desert has a deep human history that might not be easy to detect on the surface.
The desert can seem unchanging and unmarked by people, but the natural history of the park
is deeply tied to how people have used and thought about the place. This perspective does
not detract from the idea that the natural environment has its own intrinsic worth rather it simply shows the connections over time that helped create the landscape that people see today. This theme could be useful to conservation programming, which focuses on what people can do to improve the health of the desert environment. One can help foster healthier relationships with, and ideas about, the desert by discussing good and bad ways of interacting with it.

Two of the many interesting stories park historians can tell that communicate this theme are the history of the ravens and the mustard plant in the park. Visitors look out across the desert landscape and probably think they are seeing an unchanging natural environment but the mustard plant and raven stories demonstrate how the landscape is tied to human history. These kinds of stories about the desert are unexpected and vibrant. They give new meaning to the desert and help explain the natural history as well as the cultural history of JTNP. My point is that you cannot understand one without the other.

Interconnections Among Cultures

Instead of narrating JTNP’s history in terms of isolated stages of development, I think the interpretation should look at how different cultures and ways of life overlap and interrelate. Materials could focus on the shared histories of Indians and Euro-Americans through contemporary times. For example, I would continue the interpretation of the Indian communities and the Keys family members through the present day, and perhaps discuss how, throughout their tenure here, they lived and worked in the area in ways that might be more similar than different. I would describe Indians’ unique history and presence in the area, but I would avoid isolating Indians from the mainstream history.

Interpretation up to the Present

Do not stop the collections and interpretation in the early twentieth century. I would bring them up to the present and therefore make connections with what people read and hear about the area in the daily news. This tack is important because the park can help educate visitors about local events in ways that it thinks are most responsible instead of leaving it to other sources.

Asking the “So What?” Question

The park is filled with a rich history and great stories of fascinating people, but JTNP needs to think about what ideas and impressions it wants visitors to go away with when they leave the park. Why do they need to care about the characters that shaped this place? What larger meanings do these stories, events, and people have that can help visitors think about JTNP’s past and present? I believe it is important to think of the local history in terms of how it can help inform visitors about larger issues, such as immigration, race relations, gender roles, the meaning of work, and ideas about nature.

It is also important to keep in mind that there does not have to be one answer, but that different people could answer these questions differently. Do not feel like interpretive
materials have to present one concise story; they can offer a variety of perspectives. Just make sure to keep a major theme in mind in the interpretation, though, so it does not lose focus.

Specific Historical Topics to Emphasize

To reiterate, I would be sure the specific topics of study and interpretation are united by common themes or takeaway messages that the park wants visitors to leave with. They might forget the details of the life of the Keys family or others, but, hopefully, they will come away with a deeper understanding of how the environment and people together shaped the history of this place. I would choose specific topics based on JTNP collections and overall mission. Park exhibits and materials do not have to cover everything. Listed below are some suggestions for focused topics of study and presentation.

Farming the Desert

I think JTNP has a very good early Indian collection in the area of farming the desert as well as on date farming, jojoba farming, and Keys Ranch, so I think this is a strong theme. The Los Angeles Aqueduct could be placed under this heading or a separate one on water. I think the topic of farming in the desert is also good because it shows the desert as a place of production, not desolation, thereby breaking up a common stereotype.

Mining

I would continue to focus on this topic because the park has such rich source material. Yet I would not confine discussion to the hermit and small mining operations stories. Instead I would bring the topic up to the present by including the Eagle Mountain mine. And it seems there are still old claims in existence, which I think would be an interesting and surprising aspect of JTNP's history to tell visitors.

Living in the Desert or Making a Home in the Desert

I would try to reframe the homesteading theme to become less value-laden. I think the term "homesteading" evokes frontier themes that I believe the park should move away from. "Homesteading" seems to exclude Indians, for example, because they don't fit that particular trope of inhabiting the West. I think park literature could replace it with the concept of home and what "home" has meant to people, plants, and animals at different time periods here in the desert.

Desert of the Imagination

The larger idea behind this theme is how people have made the desert meaningful and how the desert has shaped their ideas and perceptions. I would keep collecting in this area, so that the park can continue to document what this desert environment has meant to different people over time. I would include all forms of popular culture, including music, movies, photographs, art, and literature, in this topic category. I would also think about the ways romantic views of the desert correlate to pragmatic views: for example, look at how perceptions of the desert as an isolated wilderness has drawn developers (like those supporting the Eagle Mountain Land Fill) and nature lovers alike.
In general, think about how social and cultural issues interweave with the broader themes JTNP selects for its mission. For instance, if mining continues to be a concentration then interpret it not just in terms of the particulars of individual miners but also in terms of nature/culture relationships, race relations, gender, the meaning of work, and/or ideas about nature. Remember, the park does not have to incorporate all possible topics into its history program and should not try to do so. As I have stated, I think it is more practical and useful to hone a focus.

CRITIQUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

In this section, I will evaluate and offer suggestions regarding museum collections, exhibitions, interpretative wayside stations, living history, and the video.

Audiences and Interpretation Design

As I mentioned during the on-site visit, park staff needs to think about the local audience that comes to the park many times a year (or that the park hopes to draw in on a regular basis) and the occasional tourists. One way to accommodate the needs of both is to design public programming that is flexible. The park could have a permanent exhibition centered on a major theme and then design it so that there are exhibit rooms, or pods, that could be changed out every six months to give the local population a reason to keep coming back.

Park administrators might consider using the park road circuit as the main design feature of the exhibition with small “turn-offs” that interpret a particular issue or topic that corresponds to a particular spot in the park. For example, there might be an exhibit on date farming at the “site” in the park exhibition where there is a lot of the mustard growing. Visitors could learn about the issue in the visitor center and then see evidence of it once they go into the park. This is on-site/off-site design approach. To reiterate, the framework of the show could stay in place for several years, but the park could mount smaller exhibits within it.

Collections

The museum collections have great resources to document and interpret the history of JTNP. The park also has superb facilities for storing them, even if administrators are concerned that they are a bit small to allow the collection to grow. I would recommend that the JTNP collects artifacts relating to the park all the way to the present instead of stopping in the early twentieth century. I would also try to hone the collections so that they tie into the park’s mission. A common mistake in small community museums is to collect any and everything that someone drops off at your doors. I think it is much more useful as an historical source and more practical in terms of storage space to hone the collection foci to a few distinct themes that match the overall historical themes and topics you decide on.

I think it is a great idea to have open collection viewing, but I would post a small interpretative sign that briefly explains the collection policy so visitors know why certain things are there and others are not. I would be conscious of what messages the collection is
inadvertently communicating. For example, if the only American Indian artifacts presented are from the nineteenth century or earlier, then the collection will perpetuate the idea that Indians have vanished.

I would make much greater use of JTNP's wonderful art and photograph collection throughout the park. These images can be used to document the history of the desert and people's changing attitudes towards it over time. In other words, they serve both as documentary evidence of the place and as constructed cultural artifacts that embody particular views of the desert. I would incorporate them as much as possible in all signage.

Exhibitions

The exhibition at the current main Visitor Center is good from a natural history perspective, yet it addresses the natural history of the park without giving any sense of how people have been a part of the landscape for many generations. Instead of thinking about developing a separate cultural center, I advise creating exhibits and programming that combine the park's natural and cultural components and that focus on the connections between them. How can you talk about the changing presence of Joshua trees in the park without talking about global warming, for example? Or mining without talking about local geology? Following are some temporary exhibition ideas.

Dates in the Desert

I think the history of date farming is important as a globalization topic uniting East and West. There is a history of date farming in Death Valley, so the topic has regional significance as well. As I previously noted, the topic of agriculture in the desert is fascinating because it shows the desert as a place of production, when it is commonly interpreted and represented as a place beyond the bounds of such human activity.

Oasis

I think it would be great to have an exhibition on the scientific as well as popular meaning of an oasis. The exhibit could integrate pop culture materials with scientific ones and talk about the relationships between them.

Water in the Desert

There are so many things the park could do with the topic of water in the desert such as tell dramatic stories of the survival of plants, people, and animals, and/or take a regional approach and connect JTNP to Los Angeles, California, with the aqueduct. In other words, show how both the natural world and politics are moving water through the desert.

American Indian Communities up to the Present

I think it is vital to represent Indian perspectives and equally important to explain to visitors that they still live in the area. One might consider tracing a couple of family histories and connecting them to Indian policies within and outside the national park system. I would highly recommend that park historians consult with members of the local Indian community about what they would like to see exhibited.
Keys Ranch (Including Both Exhibition and On-Site Interpretation)

I think it is important to have a small permanent display explaining Keys Ranch and other cultural sites in the park. I would move away from the "homesteading" theme and language and maybe frame the story in terms of entrepreneurialism. The park is very lucky to have the guides that it has for the docent interpretation. The guide at Keys Ranch did an excellent job of communicating the stories of the place and talking about the lives of the people still associated with it.

In the interpretative guidebook, I would be sure to be clear what the park wants its takeaway message to be and see that it matches JTNP's mission. Although visitors might think the ranch is quaint and represents a look back in time, I think it is important to note how many westerners have imagined themselves as very modern and as a part of the larger cosmopolitan world, not outcasts from it.

Palm Springs and JTNP

I think it would be good to do an exhibition looking at how and why the desert developed in two very different ways at JTNP and Palm Springs, California. Since the places are in the same vicinity, I think it would be smart and useful to raise the topic with visitors and explain the differences and connections between them.

The Desert in the Imagination

This exhibition could have a lot of fun exploring the topic of how people have found meaning in the desert. The park could organize the exhibit by different themes, such as home, escape, salvation, recreation, and wilderness. It could exhibit pop culture materials. As with other programs, there would have to be a main message that the history staff wants visitors to leave with about the way people have imagined Joshua Tree instead of just presenting a bunch of different perspectives.

Interpretative Wayside Stations

I would take advantage of JTNP's wonderful photograph and art collection and incorporate as much of it as possible into the signage. I think it is always interesting to show the same place at different points in time and then explain the differences.

Living History

I think living history can be a valuable form of education, if it is done right. Unfortunately, the tendency is to create cozy and nostalgic images of the past that actually communicate more about what present-day visitors and interpreters want the past to be or how they want to envision their ancestors, instead of its harsh realities.

I think that it is essential that interpreters provide historical context for the individual historical characters they present to the public, that they are clear on what message they want visitors to take away, and that they make the stories of the historical actors relevant by tying them to the present so that visitors learn why they need to care about them and so that they do not fit them into ahistorical yet popular stereotypes.
There is an amazing collection of objects at Keys Ranch. One way to interpret them is in terms of ingenuity, meaning they represent how people make do in an isolated desert environment. Yet most of the objects are manufactured, so interpreters could use the object to talk about how this seemingly isolated desert site is really connected to the larger world. Making this later point, I think, does not detract from the Keys family’s accomplishments but does break down the iconic homesteader theme.

**Video**

I realize another film is already in production, but I wanted to provide my comments on the current one as a way to stress what kinds of themes I think should be emphasized and avoided in public programming. Overall, I think the film casts a negative and not very productive view of people’s encounters with the desert environment. For example, there is a lot of attention given to habitat destruction caused by four-wheel-drive, off-road vehicles. (This negative slant was also presented in the “Interpretative Themes,” as noted.) Conversely, the film ends with the wilderness idea that the desert is best left alone and that the desert offers spiritual renewal.

While we can all recount many environmental abuses, the trend in environmental public education now is to focus on positive relationships, especially because it is going to take people’s involvement in the environment—not their withdrawal from it—to solve today’s environmental problems. This kind of negative portrayal can simply turn people off and create a greater sense of apathy. It also misrepresents how Joshua Tree is very connected to places like Los Angeles and not isolated from it. My other major point with the film is that it depicts American Indians as historical actors who have disappeared, a problem that I have discussed above.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAFF EDUCATION**

I know JTNP has an online docent training program and a reading seminar in place, both of which provide excellent training. I would also recommend inviting historians to come in and give workshops on particular subjects or have a docent—or the historian—attend the annual Western History Association conference and report back on recent topics of study and books being published. I realize there are budgetary issues that might make these activities prohibitive, but there are also so many great resources nearby JTNP that would not be very costly.

I would highly recommend that history staff visit the Autry National Center of the American West in Los Angeles. The museum exhibitions are superb and it also hosts a great seminar series they could attend. Stephen A. Aron, executive director of the Institute for the Study of the American West at the Autry and professor of western history at the University of California, Los Angeles, is a good contact person. For contact information, go to: www.autry-museum.org/.
SUGGESTIONS FOR GRANT SOURCES

I have suggestions for two very good sources of grants for museum collections, educational programming, and exhibitions and I would recommend JTNHP apply for funding. The first is the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). (For information, see www.imls.gov.) It offers all kinds of grants to digitize collections, create online exhibitions, and organize collections.

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) also has an excellent grant program for exhibitions. It offers a series of grants, including consulting grants for $10,000 to bring in experts to help plan an exhibition, planning grants for up to $40,000, I think, and implementation grants for 100,000s of dollars to produce an exhibition, catalog, and public programming. An NEH grant can be used to create or re-design a temporary or permanent exhibit. I highly advise contacting the grant reviewers at both institutions before submitting a grant. They can review a grant and project before park historians submit it, which can make all the difference in getting the grant accepted.

The Autry National Center also offers fellowships and grants.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

I have compiled a list of books and journals that I would recommend having in the JTNHP library. (See Appendix B for the bibliography.) This is in no way a comprehensive list, but a select group of titles that I recommend. They are both excellent scholarly works and accessible to a wider public audience. I put an asterisk next to books that I recommend for sale in the bookstore, if possible. I think the books are an important part of the education program and reflect the mission and scientific rigor of the institution.

CONCLUSION

The JTNHP could greatly enrich visitors’ experiences in the park and expand its reach beyond the park borders by building a strong history program. I recommend that it develop flexible exhibitions, make greater use of its archival and museum collections in all aspects of public programming, and make it its mission to document and interpret the present as well as the past so that JTNHP will serve as an important cultural center for years to come.

I think park staff should see cultural history not as a separate division within park interpretation but rather as intricately tied to the natural history of the park. I think the staff should present the park as a part of a much larger social, economic, cultural and natural landscape instead of simply focusing on what has happened within its (changing) borders. I suggest focusing interpretation on the connections among a variety of different peoples who lived, worked, played, and thought about the desert over time. And I think JTNHP should concentrate on ways to debunk romantic and inaccurate myths about the West by interpreting historical and present-day events that disrupt stereotypes and expectations about human-environment relationships, national park management, and cultural
relationships. As I have previously noted, I think the Joshua Tree National Park has an excellent and very thoughtful staff and great collections with which to achieve these goals and to create a vibrant and relevant history program.
CHAPTER TWO

RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A HISTORY PROGRAM
AT JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK

Raymond W. Rast

During the week of June 9, 2008, I joined two other scholars, Cindy Ott and Laura Watt, on a visit to Joshua Tree National Park. We were asked to consider issues related to the development of a history program at the park and to offer recommendations in the form of a follow-up report. I am pleased to submit this as my report.

In general, I think that the mission of Joshua Tree National Park would be greatly enhanced by the development of a robust, coherent history program supervised by a staff historian. Fortunately, many components of a history program are already in place in the park; in developing a history program, the staff historian and other staff members will be building on strengths.

My broadest recommendations at the outset of this process are these: the park’s history should be recognized as that of the ongoing interaction between people and place, it should be brought forward to the twenty-first century, and it should be made relevant to the lives of visitors and the future of the nation.

I have divided my report into three sections. The first section (the longest by far) offers a conceptual overview intended to frame the park’s history program. The second section addresses some of the specific questions put in front of the scholars during our site visit. The third section briefly suggests responsibilities of the staff historian. I hope that this report will find an audience among park staff and other interested individuals, but I have written it primarily with this new staff historian in mind.

CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

In this section I offer a broad conceptual overview: thoughts and ideas that emerged during the course of my site visit and subsequent preparation of this report. They can be taken as my stab at what might be considered “ground rules” for launching a history program at Joshua Tree.

What Do Historians Do?

Specific responsibilities of the staff historian will be suggested in the final section of this report, but some preliminary discussion of what professional historians generally see as their own proper roles and responsibilities will frame the reflections and recommendations presented throughout the report. Professional historians do not simply study “what
happened in the past,” although that is a starting point. The work of the professional historian can be better defined as engagement in “historical thinking,” a mode of thought that can be explained with reference to seven concepts—the “seven C’s of historical thinking.”

The first concept is chronology. Historians stress the importance of understanding the sequence in which events occurred, be it over the course of several minutes (as in the case of Bill Keys’s gunfight with Worth Bagley) or several centuries (as in the case of Spanish, Mexican, and then U.S. control over Alta California).

The second concept is change over time. Historians seek to understand how economic conditions, social relations, cultural values, political institutions, and so on have changed over time or, in some cases, remained fairly stable or constant (e.g., to recognize that the Joshua Tree area has drawn humans for centuries is to recognize a constant, but to examine why different groups of people have come to the area during different periods is to examine change over time).

A third concept is causality. Historians can document how the Joshua Tree area has changed over time, but to make this information meaningful, historians try to understand why the area has changed over time. They do so by examining individuals (e.g., Minerva Hoyt), groups (homesteaders), institutions (the National Park Service), events (World War II), short-term trends (the growing popularity of rock climbing), and long-term developments (urban growth). Historians try to weigh the relative influence of these potential agents of change and, as far as possible, the motives that drove them. Ultimately, historians emphasize multi-causality: the notion that change over time most often should be attributed to multiple actors and influences.

Fourth, historians pay attention to context—temporal but also, in some cases, geographical. Thus historians might study population growth in the Joshua Tree area during the 1930s (examining who moved to the area, the land they homesteaded, and/or the businesses they developed, for example), but historians recognize that such growth cannot be fully understood without some recognition of a larger temporal context (in this case, the Great Depression) and some effort to assess the relationship between simultaneous developments. (Did the Joshua Tree area become a place to start over during the 1930s? Why? For whom? Did the Great Depression made newcomers desperate? Did local conditions inspire optimism or further desperation? How did reactions to larger developments and local conditions together shape the area’s population as a whole? Did local residents feel insulated from the Depression? Were they?)

In studying the history of a place, attention to geographical context is equally important. Most historians would agree that the present-day boundaries of Joshua Tree National Park should not be a starting point for studying the park’s history, in large part

---

because the park’s boundaries themselves are historical—they have changed over time. The park’s boundaries have also proven permeable over time. Imagining the park’s boundaries as invisible lines on the landscape, historians will recognize that humans and larger historical forces (e.g., capitalist development) have crossed over these lines for centuries, that these lines are unknown (though not necessarily meaningless) to flora and fauna, and that these lines in and of themselves provide no barrier against air, light, and noise pollution. To acknowledge that the park’s boundaries have proven to be weak in certain ways is not to say that these boundaries are unimportant. The federal government has exercised an influence within park boundaries that it has not exercised immediately beyond the boundaries. Likewise, commercial and industrial developments have shaped the area beyond park boundaries in ways that they have not within the boundaries. The boundaries are important, moreover, because they enable consideration of the contrast between management philosophies that have shaped the park and less-restrained forces that have shaped the subregion as a whole. That said, historians sensitive to geographical context would agree that the historical developments that connect Joshua Tree National Park to the surrounding area, the larger subregion, the region, the nation, and beyond are in many ways more important than the developments that set the park apart. (Indeed, some would argue that the preservation efforts that set the park apart are important because they help visitors reflect on the broader impact of urbanization, air pollution, global warming, and other developments originating beyond the park but now encroaching upon it.)

A fifth concept that defines historical thinking is contingency. Historians recognize that all historical outcomes are contingent upon unique combinations of prior conditions, each of which were shaped by other unique combinations of prior conditions; change a single prior condition (e.g., the outcome of the 2000 presidential election), and an entire chain of events might have turned out quite differently. Historians studying Joshua Tree National Park will recognize contingencies, for example, in the history of the park’s creation. Minerva Hoyt possessed the right combination of willpower and personal resources to bring protection to California’s deserts in the 1920s, but she lacked necessary political support at the federal level until the Great Depression ushered Franklin Roosevelt into office (and even then Hoyt could not fully overcome other factors, including opposition from NPS employee Roger Toll). Yet despite Hoyt’s accomplishment—establishment of the original monument in 1936—the park’s boundaries were not set in stone; new combinations of conditions shaped the park in 1950 and again in 1994.

One thing that sets the discipline of history apart from the hard sciences is the recognition that historians have no laboratory in which to test different combinations of conditions in order to see different outcomes. (If Toll had not weighed in, for example, the original monument might have encompassed the area Hoyt desired, but we have no way of “testing” that scenario.) Thus despite the popular belief that those who fail to study history are bound to repeat it, most historians are reluctant to predict the future based solely on the study of past events, because we never know the exact combination of conditions necessary to produce a particular outcome until that outcome has occurred. Yet those engaged in
historical thinking can still draw valuable lessons from studying the contingencies in, for example, the history of the park's creation as well as its boundary and status changes. Most important, historians studying Joshua Tree National Park could highlight the fact that the future is always subject to change; for better or worse, it is always up for grabs. And, though we never truly know if our actions will produce outcomes that we will celebrate, we also never know if our failure to act will contribute to outcomes that we will regret.

Sixth, historians think about consequences—intended and unintended. Historians seek to understand how and why things have changed over time, and they look for answers not only locally but also within the relationship between their subject and its larger contexts. In a further effort to make their research meaningful, historians also trace chains of events forward in order to answer a deceptively simple question: so what? In answering this question, historians always keep in mind that the consequences of human actions can be intended and unintended, and that unintended consequences themselves can contribute to chains of events that sometimes overwhelm the intended consequences. With the establishment of the original monument in 1936, for example, Minerva Hoyt produced an intended consequence. In doing so, however, she contributed to a new combination of conditions that eventually led to an influx of middle-class tourists and a wave of commercial development in the Joshua Tree area. This growth in the tourist economy has provided local and regional bases of support for continued protection of the park, to be sure, but tourism also created new pressures on the Southern California deserts that earlier generations of preservationists could not have anticipated (e.g., the phenomenal growth of the raven population that now threatens the survival of the desert tortoise).

Finally, historians embrace complexity. Fundamentally, historians are storytellers, but critical analysis of the past is at the core of our professional responsibilities. We seek to provoke and enlighten more than comfort or entertain. More often than not, this is where historians diverge from non-historians in their respective approaches to (and uses of) the past: whereas non-historians are often drawn to history by a nostalgic yearning for simpler times and simple answers, historians start with the assumption that the past was just as complicated as the present, and they are likely to reject simple answers. The hunt for Willie Boy, for example, provided an appealing story for an earlier generation; here was, seemingly, a clear-cut case of a "savage Indian" who tried to evade justice but paid with his life, thanks to a posse of brave white men who knew right from wrong. Historians approaching this episode today, however, are more likely to consider Willie Boy's point of view, to question every aspect of the accepted chain of events, to examine the relationship between these events and their larger contexts, and to accept the probability that many questions have no easy answers. (Was Mike Boniface's death accidental? If so, how much confidence would Willie Boy have had in the justice system? Why would Willie Boy have killed the girl he loved—and risked his

own life to be with—as the vigilantes alleged? Why would he have taken his own life? Did the remaining Indians at the Oasis of Mara leave the area of their own accord or were they “persuaded” to leave? Who called for and benefited from Clara True’s subsequent resignation? Ultimately, historians will stress the importance of asking difficult questions, even those that cannot be answered.

How Should Historical Thinking Inform the History Program at Joshua Tree National Park?

Professional historians engage in historical thinking wherever they work. Within the context of National Park Service employment, however, historians assume an array of professional responsibilities: they document aspects of American history that fall under their purview, they interpret those aspects of American history, they help preserve associated properties and resources, and they endeavor to convey the historical significance of those properties and resources to park managers and to the general public. At Joshua Tree National Park, historical thinking perhaps most obviously will inform the staff historian’s efforts to interpret relevant aspects of American history, but historical thinking should infuse all components of the park’s history program. Thus the staff historian should develop a history program that serves as a vehicle through which park visitors and fellow staff members can learn about the park’s past and that of the surrounding area. But the staff historian also should be prepared to explain and demonstrate why a professional historian’s work encompasses much more than simply the study of “what happened in the past”—the history program at Joshua Tree National Park should help park visitors and staff understand why changes in the park area occurred, how these changes related to larger contexts, how they were contingent upon prior conditions, how they produced intended and unintended consequences, and how they can enrich our appreciation of the complexities of the past.

Conceptualized and developed along these lines, the park’s history program will help park visitors and staff think more deeply about the present and prepare more carefully for the future. The park’s history program will help present-day visitors and staff see the park and all of the people associated with it, including themselves, in the flow of time. The past might be behind us, but history never stops. Those who visit and work in the park today step into the park’s history and become as much a part of it as those who visited and staffed the park fifty years ago, and we should not wait fifty years to recognize as much. For non-historians, the notion that we are all carried forward by the flow of time can feel somewhat disempowering, but only until they realize that we are always in a position to direct the course of change over time through our actions and inactions, in intended but also unintended ways. (Thus the importance, for example, of heeding park regulations regarding

---

4 Much of the historic resource management work conducted by the National Park Service is guided by the “fifty-year rule”—a criterion originally shaped by a desire to minimize potentially politicized preservation decisions. Unfortunately, this rule has reinforced the impression that most events (and associated properties) only become “historic” fifty years after the fact. For discussion of this issue see John H. Sprinkle, Jr., “Of Exceptional Importance: The Origins of the ‘Fifty-Year Rule’ in Historic Preservation,” The Public Historian 29 (Spring 2007): 81-103.
use of the backcountry in order to avoid contributing to chains of events that might produce unintended consequences for future generations.)

If the park’s history program is developed with historical thinking in mind—with attention paid not only to “what happened in the past” but also causality, contexts, contingencies, consequences, and complexities—it will also help staff members make informed decisions about management issues that will impact the park’s future. Someone who simply investigated “what happened” in the park during the 1970s and 1980s, for example, could document the fact that rock climbing grew in popularity. Someone engaged in historical thinking, however, would seek to understand what caused this growing popularity and thus would consider larger contexts (e.g., the new appeal of “free climbing,” the publication of guidebooks, and regional population growth), as well as specific contingencies, including park managers’ apparent failure to develop a coherent set of rock climbing regulations during these decades. This historian also would consider unintended consequences of park managers’ decades of inaction (or maybe ad hoc regulation), including, hypothetically, the development of a sense of entitlement among rock climbers who saw their use of the park’s natural resources as more respectful, and thus less in need of regulation, than other visitors’ uses of the park. The historian who embraces complexity would consider the possibility that these rock climbers would have had a valid point, but the historian also would consider the probability that, while climbers’ individual impact on the park’s resources might have been small in the 1970s and 1980s, their collective impact grew pronounced by the 1990s. Recognizing climbers’ lingering sense of entitlement and ignorance of their collective impact, the historian could support park managers’ efforts to devise and enforce climbing regulations but also lead a parallel effort to educate climbers about the history of rock climbing (in Joshua Tree National Park and elsewhere), the ethics of “traditionalist” rock climbers (who opposed the use of bolts and battery-powered drills), the community’s collective impact on the park over time (both positive and negative), and the ongoing need for regulations that err on the side of caution.5

**What Trends in Scholarship Should the Staff Historian be Familiar With?**

Professional historians retain a command of the latest research and scholarship relevant to their own areas of work. The staff historian at Joshua Tree National Park should be conversant with at least two broad areas of scholarship: that related to the study of western American history and that related to the study of cultural landscapes.

For most of the twentieth century, the work of Frederick Jackson Turner framed the study of western American history. First presented in 1893, Turner’s “frontier thesis” argued that the region stretching from the Appalachian Mountains to the Pacific Coast was the arena in which a unique American identity was forged. Turner’s thesis emphasized—and celebrated—the process that produced this identity. As successive waves of European

---

5This point is informed by Thomas Allen Broxson, “Wilderness Use: Recreation vs. Preservation; The Case of Rock Climbing in Wilderness Areas Within Joshua Tree National Monument,” (master’s thesis, California State University, Fullerton, 1994).
Americans pushed westward across the continent, each encountered an environment that overwhelmed them at first, forcing them to “accept the conditions which it furnish[ed], or perish.” Those who successfully adapted to the frontier environment and then transformed it did so because they developed the traits that, for Turner, defined American identity: “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness,” a “practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients,” a “masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends,” a “restless, nervous energy,” a “dominant individualism,” and a “buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.” These were the traits “called out because of the existence of the frontier,” and they enabled European Americans to conquer the wilderness (and, by implication, the Native Americans who inhabited it), and then to construct mines and railroads, establish ranches, cultivate farms, build towns, and spread the institutions of democracy.6

In Turner’s rendering, western American history played out through a series of chronological chapters defined by frontier “types,” most of which were captured in one of his most compelling images. “Stand at the Cumberland Gap,” he wrote, “and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo, following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by. Stand at South Pass in the Rockies a century later, and see the same procession with wider intervals between.”7 Scholars who followed in Turner’s footsteps spread his ideas through specialized monographs but also college and high school textbooks. Ray Allen Billington’s popular textbook, Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier, for example, appeared in five editions between 1949 and 1982 and exposed countless Americans to the notion that Indians occupied the stage of western history until the arrival of fur traders, who gave way, in turn, to miners, followed by railroad builders, ranchers, farmers, and, finally, the town builders who inherited the legacies of the frontier.8 Given the enduring appeal of Billington’s textbook, it is perhaps not surprising to see echoes of Turner’s thesis in Art Kidwell’s biography of Bill Keys, Ambush: The Story of Bill Keys, in works such as Linda W. Greene’s Historic Resource Study: A History of Land Use in Joshua Tree National Monument, and even in the current slate of “stories” on the Joshua Tree National Park Web site, which treats Native Americans, ranchers, miners, and homesteaders separately and successively (before offering the unique stories associated with John Samuelson, the Oasis of Mara, Minerva Hoyt, and the park itself).

Turner’s thesis framed the study of western American history for most of the twentieth century, but it did not go unchallenged. As early as the 1930s, Walter Prescott Webb departed from Turner by emphasizing the extent to which the environment of the

---


7 Ibid., 67.

western frontier was not a temporary obstacle that served only to distill American greatness but rather an agent of permanent change; specifically, Webb argued, semi-desert conditions (flat terrain, aridity, and a lack of timber) fundamentally reshaped the modes of economic production, the political institutions, and the culture of those who tried to live in a particular western subregion, the Great Plains.² Twenty years later, Earl Pomeroy attacked Turner’s thesis from the opposite direction. In his groundbreaking essay, “Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment,” Pomeroy argued that the history of the western frontier revealed far more imitation than innovation; those who settled the West carried eastern political institutions and culture with them and, rather than shed these in the face of environmental adversity, they held to them more tightly than before. Thus where Turner and Webb emphasized settlers’ willingness to redefine themselves in the face of a hostile environment (and to become better men as a result), Pomeroy stressed settlers’ efforts to reshape the environment to fit their heightened needs. Because settlers’ efforts to do so were dependent upon eastern capital, governed by eastern political institutions, and motivated by eastern values, Pomeroy argued, this was a process not so easily celebrated.¹⁰

Within another twenty years, a new generation of historians had begun to assail Turner’s thesis from multiple directions, pointing out that Turner and his followers generally ignored not only the colonial relationship between East and West that Pomeroy emphasized but also the consequences of westward movement for Native Americans and Mexicans, the roles played by women, the marginalization of Asian immigrants and African Americans, the environmental costs of western economic development, the growth of cities, the growth of working-class populations, the enduring influence of the federal government, and the growth of power in the hands of those who controlled the West’s scarce resource: water. Although scholarship addressing these issues appeared in the 1970s and early 1980s, the fullest expression of the “New Western History” came with the publication of Patricia Nelson Limerick’s book, The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West, in 1987.¹¹ If the story of Turner’s West was a simple story of a frontier line that moved westward and left a superior American identity in its wake, the story of Limerick’s West was a complex story of an entire region shaped by a process of conquest and bound, still, to reckon with the consequences. Though accused of holding an excessively negative view of American history, Limerick and other “New Western Historians” saw themselves as striving for historical accuracy. “New Western Historians break free of the old model of progress and improvement and face up to the possibility that some roads of western development led directly to failure and to injury,” Limerick explained. “This reappraisal is not meant to make white Americans ‘look bad.’ The intention is, on the contrary, simply to make clear that heroism and villainy, virtue and vice, and nobility and shoddiness appear in roughly the same

---

¹⁰ Earl Pomeroy, “Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review 41 (March 1955): 579-600.
proportions as they appear in any other subject of human history." Given this premise, the staff historian at Joshua Tree National Park should consider whether the history of the park area and the histories of the people who have lived within it reflect the benefits of Turner's frontier, the murky legacies of Limerick's conquest, or something else altogether.

A key insight that western historians from Turner to Limerick have shared is that throughout the West, humans have interacted with the natural environment over time to produce unique places; geographers, cultural anthropologists, landscape architects, and growing numbers of historians recognize these places as "cultural landscapes." For most of the twentieth century, the study of cultural landscapes was the domain of geographers, but the cultural landscape concept itself is built upon a recognition of change over time—the domain of historians. In his groundbreaking essay, "The Morphology of Landscape," geographer Carl Sauer argued that "the cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent [of change], the natural area is the medium, [and] the cultural landscape is the result." For Sauer and his students, the study of cultural landscapes was the study of the historical process whereby a natural landscape becomes a cultural landscape. A later generation of geographers, however, would recognize that this process of change was not one in which humans simply acted upon a passive landscape, turning it from one thing into another. The influence was reciprocal. Humans acted upon the environment, but the environment also acted upon humans; thus, over time, the local landscape reflected the influence of culture, but local culture reflected the influence of the landscape (or, as some western historians would have it, regional or subregional landscapes reflected and shaped regional or subregional cultures).

During the second half of the twentieth century, John Brinckerhoff Jackson emerged as the central figure promoting the study of cultural landscapes and the processes that produced them. Jackson was drawn to the study of cultural landscapes for their own sake, but he also hoped that the study of cultural landscapes might offer insights into the common aspirations that, he thought, united the people who shaped a given landscape. Writing about the ordinary landscapes created in the course of daily living, for example, Jackson suggested almost poetically that "the beauty that we see in the vernacular landscape is the image of our common humanity: hard work, stubborn hope, and mutual forbearance striving to be love." For Jackson, ordinary landscapes (such as that of a place like Keys Ranch) always held a

---


certain beauty, and he grew convinced that his appreciation of this beauty sprang from his recognition of the humble, well-meaning interactions (between people themselves and between humans and their environment) that quietly created these landscapes.

As historians became more conversant with cultural landscape studies toward the end of the twentieth century, western historians such as Elliot West and environmental historians such as William Cronon (both considered “New Western Historians”) helped move this body of scholarship in new directions. In his book, The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado, West rejected Jackson’s assumption that people who shaped a landscape shared a culture. For West, the recognition that competing aspirations as well as common aspirations shaped subregional landscapes reflected his own appreciation of the complexities of human history, especially in a region shaped by generations of conflict. In a different vein, Cronon’s controversial essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” suggested that even “wilderness” areas have been shaped by interactions between humans and nature and thus can be considered cultural landscapes. Within wilderness areas, the human imprint is seemingly non-existent, but Cronon pointed out that wilderness areas are places designated as such by human laws, managed by human regulations, esteemed because of particular human values, and traversed by humans whose enjoyment of such areas often relies upon the products of urban industrialization. The trouble with “wilderness,” Cronon concluded, is that it confirms the belief that humans are no longer a part of the natural world and it enables the more ominous belief that nature no longer needs to be a part of the human world.

For all of the debate that it sparked among environmentalists and environmental historians, Cronon’s essay raised valid questions for historic preservationists, especially those working for the National Park Service. If wilderness areas and other cultural landscapes are indeed the products of ongoing human interactions with nature, how can those landscapes be preserved? Put somewhat differently: Can the human influence on a cultural landscape be removed without undermining the ongoing process that produced the landscape? Likewise, works such as West’s The Contested Plains raised important questions for historic preservationists who recognize cultural conflict as a historical fact. Should cultural landscapes be preserved in ways that recognize the contributions of competing cultures? If not, how do we decide whose influences on the landscape to preserve and whose to remove? Scholarship that tackles such questions, including Cultural Landscapes: Balancing Nature and Heritage in Preservation Practice, edited by architectural historian Richard Longstreth,

---


should inform the staff historian's efforts to understand the history (and help shape the future) of Joshua Tree National Park.\textsuperscript{18}

**How Might the History of Joshua Tree National Park be Conceptualized?**

The key insight that emerges from a consideration of scholarship related to western history and cultural landscapes is that the history of Joshua Tree National Park can be understood as the development of a unique cultural landscape that has been created by the centuries-long interaction between people engaged in nationally significant historical processes (the Native American settlement and the European American conquest, settlement, and ongoing development of the American West), on the one hand, and a distinct regional environment (the desert lands of Southern California), on the other.

There are many ways to conceptualize this history—the park's central story—and convey it to visitors. The current approach to historical interpretation, it seems, starts with the historic resources within the park's boundaries and archives. This approach is informed by the *Historic Resource Study* completed by Linda Greene, who noted that "the historical resources of the [park] are connected primarily with ranching, cattle raising, and mining activities."\textsuperscript{19} This observation is not objectionable, but it suggests an understanding of "historical" resources that is worth reconsidering. There is no question that resources associated with mining activities, for example, are historical, but "historical" resources are not simply resources that reflect "what happened" fifty years or more in the past. Historical resources might be better understood as resources that reflect change over time—because the resources themselves have changed with the passage of time, because the resources have been preserved as the world around them has changed, or some of both. (The older a resource is, of course, the more likely it is to reflect change over time, but we should remember that resources created in the recent past might already reflect change over time and might do so even more clearly for future generations.)\textsuperscript{20}

An approach to historical interpretation that starts with historic resources, while understandable within the context of park management, reflects an adherence to discipline-specific methodologies that is also worth reconsidering. Generally speaking, cultural anthropologists, archaeologists, landscape architects, and cultural geographers privilege research that can be conducted using material culture found in or collected from the field—buildings, structures, tools, baskets, beads, and so on. Historians, however, generally utilize any research methods that enable them to tell accurate, complete, and meaningful stories.


\textsuperscript{20} Beyond the question of what constitutes a "historical" resource is the larger question of what makes a resource historically significant (at the local, state, or national level). Older resources are more likely to be considered historically significant (e.g., because of scarcity), but I would not automatically expect resources dating from the 1940s to be more significant than resources dating from the 1970s.
Historians often start with written sources, but they use oral histories, visual culture, and material culture as well. Consequently, historians enjoy the freedom to interpret—to tell stories—beyond what can be informed by evidence found in or collected from the field. Thus if a chapter of the park’s central story cannot be grounded in any of the resources within the park’s boundaries or archives, a historian will find other means of constructing and conveying that chapter (e.g., relying more heavily on written primary sources, oral histories, or secondary sources) in order to ensure that the story as a whole is complete.

One alternative to an interpretive approach that starts with pre-existing groupings and collections of historic resources would be to treat the park as a whole as a cultural landscape and to focus on its emergence and evolution over time. In other words, the staff historian could emphasize that the park’s history is essentially the biography of a place. Such a biography might answer several questions: How has this place supported flora and fauna? How and why has it attracted humans? How and why has it repelled humans? How has it changed humans who have occupied it? How has it incited conflict among humans? How has it inspired cooperation? How has this place changed as a consequence of human activity? How has it endured despite human activity? What connects this place to the larger subregion, region, nation, and beyond? What sets it apart? Such questions suggest that the place is the focus and people are of secondary importance, an approach that would appeal to some visitors more than others.

A second alternative would emphasize that the park’s history is the story of different groups of people: those associated with Pinto culture, Serranos, Cahuillas, Chemehuevis, Spaniards, Mexicans, a multi-ethnic array of Americans, and, in recent decades, visitors from around the world. This alternative would allow a comparative approach: When did different groups come to the park area? How did they get here? What drew them here? What led them to stay? What led them to leave? How did different groups interact with each other? How did they shape the park area? How did it shape them? An advantage of this approach is that it would acknowledge cultural diversity, conflict, and cooperation, and might better enable many park visitors to see themselves as part of the park’s history. This approach, however, also would present the danger of essentialism (e.g., the message that all Native Americans lived in harmony with the desert) and the danger of reinforcing a perhaps superficial sense that the Joshua Tree area has been a place where Asian Americans and African Americans (and even Mexican Americans) have not felt welcomed.

A third alternative would present the park’s history as the story of different groups of people defined not by cultural background but rather by the activities they pursued within the Joshua Tree area: subsistence living, exploration and surveying, mining, ranching, homesteading, health seeking, wage work, town building, preservation advocacy, park management, construction, scientific research, military service, literary and artistic production, UFO searching, countercultural experimentation, tourism industry entrepreneurship, and myriad forms of recreation. Like the second alternative, this alternative would allow a comparative approach, prompting a series of questions relating to the origins and impact of different activities. Likewise, this approach might better enable
park visitors to see themselves as part of the park’s long history and to reflect on the impact of their own use of the park. But in many ways an emphasis on groups defined by different activities would obscure the fact that many people throughout the area’s history fit into several of these groups as they tried to adapt to the demands of the desert. In the model proposed by Frederick Jackson Turner, Native Americans moved across the stage, and then groups defined by their activities did the same: miners, ranchers, and homesteaders. This might remain a compelling image for many Americans, but it is a poor representation of a place like the Joshua Tree area, where, for example, Native Americans engaged in various activities over time and where men like Bill Keys worked as miners, ranchers, and homesteaders simultaneously.

The interpretive approach that I suggest below would blend aspects of all three of these alternatives, it would utilize the park’s historic resources but not be limited by them, and it would allow park visitors to trace the park’s central story—the interactions between people and place that created a unique cultural landscape—as it unfolded over time. If the selection of nine “stories” on the Joshua Tree National Park Web site (Pinto Culture, Indians, Cowboys, Miners, Homesteaders, Samuelson’s Rocks, Oasis of Mara, Minerva Hoyt, and Park History) can be taken as a reference point, the approach I would recommend does not differ dramatically—but it does offer a reconceptualization worth considering. The history of Joshua Tree National Park could be divided into the following ten units or “chapters.” For most of them I suggest specific individuals who could provide focal points.

1. Early Inhabitants (ca. 6000–2000 BC)

The first chapter would focus on Pinto culture and desert environments, but it also could include “creation stories” of the Serrano, Cahuilla, Chemehuevi, and Mojave.21

2. Meeting Grounds, Battlegrounds, and Borderlands (1590s–1840s)

The second chapter would cover the sweep of time from Spanish settlement of the Rio Grande Valley to the U.S.–Mexican War. It would focus on the Serrano, Cahuilla, Chemehuevi, and Mojave presence in and adaptations to the Joshua Tree area and larger subregion.22 It would focus on Spanish colonization efforts in the Rio Grande Valley (which introduced guns and horses into the Southwest, producing a ripple effect felt by Navajos but also presumably Mojaves and Chemehuevis) and along the California coast (which never reached the Joshua Tree area directly but did produce a ripple effect in the form of refugees,

---

21 For creation stories see Lowell John Bean and Sylvia Brakke Vane, The Native American Ethnography and Ethnohistory of Joshua Tree National Park: An Overview (Menlo Park, Calif.: Cultural Systems Research, 2002).

diminished trade, and disease). The chapter would include the relatively brief period during which the Joshua Tree area belonged to Mexico, and it would explain why Americans prized California and how they acquired it—turning the subregion from a meeting ground into a battleground and then into a borderland.

3. The Assertion of an American Presence (1820s–1910s)

This chapter would begin to explain how the Joshua Tree area became an American place during a period that began with the arrival of American fur traders in the subregion and ended with imposition of the reservation system on the Serranos and Chemehuevis still living at the Oasis of Mara. It would focus on the actions of the federal government (surveying lands and transportation routes, building forts and deploying soldiers, distributing lands and mining claims, creating Indian reservations and appointing Indian agents, and establishing a justice system), but it also would suggest how Indians, Mexicans, and Americans responded to these actions. Key individuals might include John C. Fremont, William P. Blake (a geologist and mineralogist who accompanied the Williamson survey of 1853), Clara D. True, and “Willie Boy.”

4. Drawing Wealth from the Desert: Cattlemen and Prospectors (1860s–1930s)

This chapter would show why participants in the gold rush saw the desert lands of Southern California as places to avoid, but it would focus on how and why some entrepreneurs began to see these lands as places to exploit (in order for this to happen, the developments covered in the preceding chapter had to have begun to take place). Cattlemen and prospectors exhibited qualities that might be admired as Turnarian (and might, in their ruthlessness, evoke the “Wild West”), but this chapter would emphasize how men engaged in the ranching and mining industries shaped the landscape of the Joshua Tree area, and it would suggest that they did so, in part, because they were responsive to larger conditions (e.g., monetary policy and industrial advances that influenced the value of minerals, or the growth of urban markets that influenced the price of beef), because they were engaged in capitalist competition (leading cattlemen to take advantage of grazing on public lands but also to cut off access to watering holes), and because they were developing a society in which dependence on wage work was common (thus cowboys employed by cattlemen would “rustle” unbranded cattle in order to replenish those lost on their watch, and Mexican and Indian laborers would seek work cutting the juniper, cedar, and pinyon pine trees used for fuel—belying the Turnarian focus on ruggedly independent frontiersmen but shaping the

---


natural environment in the process). Key individuals might include William and Jim McHaney, Johnny Lang, J. D. and Thomas Ryan, and Bill Keys.

5. Railroads, Homesteaders, and Regional Development (1880s–1940s)

The fifth chapter would explain the role of railroads and land agents (especially the Southern Pacific and its subsidiary, the Southern Pacific Land Company) in the development of the subregion, and it would highlight the connections between the growth of cities such as Los Angeles, the growth of towns such as Banning, and the development of rural areas such as that surrounding the Keys Ranch. As in the preceding chapter, this chapter would emphasize how men and women engaged in homesteading shaped the landscape of the Joshua Tree area, and it would consider the meaning of their efforts to connect themselves to—and distance themselves from—urban populations to the west. The chapter also would consider how homesteaders related to one another. Bill and Frances Keys would be at the center of this chapter, but other key individuals might include Worth and Isabelle Bagley, Clovis and Mary Benito, and John Samuelson.

6. Desert Travelers, Health Seekers, and Town Builders (1890s–1950s)

This chapter would focus on the emergence of new attitudes toward the desert lands of Southern California at the beginning of the twentieth century. For travelers such as John C. Van Dyke and George Wharton James, deserts were not places to avoid or places to exploit but places to appreciate. Through their writing, many Americans began to understand that deserts were places that sustained myriad forms of life; many began to think that deserts restored human health. Thus a new wave of homesteaders arrived in the Joshua Tree area, and they carried cultural baggage with them—including the desire to belong to a community. The town that they built at Twentynine Palms attracted another wave of homesteaders seeking refuge from the hardships of the Great Depression. Key individuals might include

---

25 This interpretation would be informed by Hine and Faragher, American West; and White, “It’s Your Misfortune.” On the possibility that “rustlers” were not greedy scoundrels as portrayed by Art Kidwell in the “Desert Queen Ranch” pamphlet (and similarly portrayed in Owen Wister’s classic 1902 novel, The Virginian) but rather working-class cowboys trying to save their jobs, see Greene, Historic Resource Study, 64. The reference to a crew of “Mexicans and Indians” comes from a Chester Pinkham interview quoted in Patricia Parker Hickman, Country Nodes: An Anthropological Evaluation of William Keys’ Desert Queen Ranch, Joshua Tree National Monument, California (Washington, D.C., Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Cultural Resources Management Division, 1977), http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/jott/7/index.htm (accessed June 25, 2008).


George Wharton James, Dr. James B. Luckie, William and Elizabeth Campbell, and Frank and Helen Bagley.

7. The Urban Shadow, Federal Protection, and New Pressures (1920s–1960s)

The seventh chapter would again emphasize the importance of the relationship between the Joshua Tree area and the larger contexts in which it exists, and it would encourage consideration of how and why national priorities change. The chapter would explain how Los Angeles cast a growing shadow during the 1920s, and it would focus on Minerva Hoyt's efforts to respond to that growth. Hoyt's efforts should be understood in the context of other women conservationists; see Madelyn Holmes, *American Women Conservationists: Twelve Profiles* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland Press, 2004); and Polly Welts Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice: A History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997).

Indeed, even as the monument was established, far-flung centers of economic and political power were triggering new pressures: Los Angeles's construction of the Colorado River Aqueduct, the U.S. Army's creation of the Desert Training Center (or California-Arizona Maneuver Area), the Kaiser Corporation's decision to acquire mining lands within the monument from the Southern Pacific Land Company, and the U.S. Marine Corps decision to develop a new training center north of Twentynine Palms. Minerva Hoyt would be at the center of this chapter, but other key individuals might include Frank E. Weymouth (chief engineer of the Metropolitan Water District during the 1930s), General George Patton, and Henry Kaiser.

8. A Laboratory and a Refuge (1920s–present)

This chapter would explore what the Joshua Tree area has meant for scientific researchers (botanists, zoologists, climatologists, geologists, astronomers, archaeologists, anthropologists, historians), cultural producers (writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers), and perhaps other "searchers" (those seeking spiritual fulfillment, extraterrestrial life, altered states of consciousness) since the early-twentieth century. Members of these groups have valued the park as a storehouse of information, a source of inspiration, and a refuge from modern urban life and thus have helped amplify the park's significance, especially during periods of heightened turmoil in American society. The chapter would not intentionally legitimize all views and uses of the park, but the risk of doing so would be offset by the opportunity to help park visitors understand why certain behaviors are detrimental to park...
resources (e.g., Gram Parsons's and Keith Richards's installation of a barbershop chair atop one of the mountains). Key individuals might include Erle Stanley Gardner, Edwin John Dingle (founder of "The Science of Mentalphysics"), Gram Parsons, and a representative scientist (if not Elizabeth Campbell).

9. A New Wave of Visitors (1950s–present)

The ninth chapter would explore the appeal of the park for tourists and the impact of tourism on the park's landscape since the middle of the twentieth century. The chapter would examine promotion of the park and the typical visitor's experience, but it also would survey the construction of roads, trails, campgrounds, visitor centers, and other additions to the landscape (which in many ways changed how the park can be seen and experienced). The evolution of rock climbing in the park would be an important focus of the chapter, and rock climbers' use of the park could be compared to that of contemporary tourists and that of earlier visitors and inhabitants. The chapter could examine how various forms of international recognition (from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], rock band U2, and rock climbing magazines) have drawn tourists from around the world as well. Key individuals might include a superintendent from the 1960s, John Wolfe (author of the first climbers' guidebook), and Lynn Hill (world-class climber who first visited Joshua Tree in 1975).

10. The Future of a National Park (1990s–present)

The final chapter would show how issues intertwined with the park's history pose ongoing challenges and how new challenges are always on the horizon. The chapter would focus on the Desert Protection Act of 1994, but it would also put contemporary issues squarely in front of the visitor: pressures on desert tortoises, problems caused by invasive species, regional population growth, air and light pollution, the proposed landfill, lukewarm support and insufficient funding, global warming, and growing demands for a diminishing water supply—all of which provide opportunities to prompt visitors to think about how they would respond if they were park managers.

Admittedly, the approach suggested by this sketch might be more appropriate for a monograph than an interpretive program. This approach could translate onto the park Web site and take-away literature, but it might produce a narrative that would be too much for most visitors to digest on site. It might be too dependent upon chronology (or, sequential

---


reading), when most visitors might only have time to take in one or two chapters. And it might not translate easily to younger age groups. Still, the exercise of thinking through the park’s history is one that the staff historian should undertake as he or she reconsiders themes and the best uses of historic resources.

RESPONSES TO SPECIFIC QUESTIONS AND ISSUES

In this section I offer brief responses to some of the specific questions and issues put in front of the scholars participating in the site visit. (For the list of questions posed to the visiting historians, see Appendix A.) My responses here echo points I made in the previous section, but I have tried to omit responses that would be too redundant.

What is the Historical Significance of Joshua Tree National Park?

The “Long-Range Interpretive Plan” for Joshua Tree National Park includes thirteen statements regarding the park’s significance. Establishment of the park was justified through recognition of the national significance of the park’s ecological, geological, and archaeological features, but three of the statements—those related to gold processing, desert ranching and homesteading, and desert conservation—recognize that some of the park’s historic resources possess national significance as well.

The need to hang a park’s historical significance on the historic resources within its boundaries and archives is understandable, but historic resources themselves should enrich our understanding of a park’s historical significance, not limit it. A narrow focus on two or three resource-rich chapters from the history of the Joshua Tree area can just as easily create the impression that the park’s history is significant at the local, state, and even regional levels but perhaps not at the national level. Linda Greene, for example, concluded that the importance of Keys Ranch comes from “its association with Keys and its status as an uncommon twentieth-century desert homestead and ranch. Significance of the site can easily be justified on the local level, but hardly beyond that.” A consideration of the full history of the Joshua Tree area, however, shows that the park that exists today is—in its entirety—the product of the centuries-long interaction between people engaged in nationally significant historical processes, on the one hand, and a distinct regional environment, on the other. Humans left imprints on the desert environment, the desert left imprints on human cultures, and the unique landscape that emerged over time reflects this interaction. In short, if we understand the park as a whole to be the most valuable historic resource, we can more easily see that the park retains historical significance at the national level.

What is the Appropriate Mix and Range of Interpretive Themes?

The “Long-Range Interpretive Plan” for Joshua Tree National Park includes nine primary interpretive themes, three (or perhaps four) of which relate to historical interpretation: human adaptations to the desert (pre-historic and modern) represented by cultural resources, the human impact on the desert (especially in recent decades), and desert

lands management. These themes seem appropriate, and they resonate with a suggested focus on the creation of a unique cultural landscape (though "human adaptations to the desert" might be turned around and re-phrased as "the impact of the desert on human cultures," referring either way to adaptations that the desert forced humans to make if they were going to stay).

The distillation represented by these themes is necessary, given the goal of communicating key messages to as many visitors as possible. A danger, however, is that the story of human interaction with the Joshua Tree area might become simplified in visitors' minds as: 1) Indians adapted to and lived in harmony with the desert environment, 2) homesteaders also lived in harmony with the desert environment, but they were more industrious and resourceful and thus lived more comfortably than Indians, 3) modern society then began to steamroll over the desert and increasingly threatens to destroy its fragile balance, thus 4) desert conservationists were spurred to action, and park managers today continue to fight against human influence on the environment. Even this crude formulation would convey lessons that are important from a management standpoint, but I would encourage any efforts to capture some (if not all) of the complexity suggested in the previous section. Surely, not all Indians in the area lived in harmony with the desert (or wanted to, or did so after the introduction of capitalism and wage labor); many homesteaders failed to adapt to the desert (and their failures might tell us more about the desert environment than the Keys family's success); modern society has exerted unprecedented pressures on the desert, but the desert is resilient (the desert's slow reclamation of the Salton Sink might be a good example); and land managers' efforts to "preserve" nature sometimes shape the environment in new ways. A history program built upon historical thinking would bring such complexities to the surface and communicate them to visitors who have the ability to pursue a deeper understanding of human interaction with the park area.

**How should Park Staff Manage Access to and Interpretation of Keys Ranch?**

I endorse plans to direct significant resources toward restoration, maintenance, and expanded interpretive programming at Keys Ranch. Writing during the depths of the Reagan recession, Linda Greene recommended that Keys Ranch be allowed to "deteriorate and [thus] be restored to its natural condition" because "in harsh economic times it is difficult to justify . . . expenditures of government money on professional preservation of flimsy structures of only local significance."[^38] Unlike Greene, someone like J. B. Jackson would have found much to admire in the vernacular landscape of Keys Ranch and would have argued that the buildings and other resources expressed something important not just about the local experience (or even the regional or national experience) but about the human experience. I think that the case can be made against the larger significance of the buildings and other resources at Keys Ranch, but only if these resources are taken out of context (or, understood only in the narrow context of desert ranching and homesteading) and not recognized as an important manifestation of the centuries-long interaction between people

[^38]: Ibid., 447.
engaged in nationally significant historical processes and a distinct regional environment. Thus I am glad to look back and see that Greene’s recommendation was not adopted. Today, Keys Ranch seems to offer some of the best opportunities for historical interpretation in Joshua Tree National Park.

That said, I think that interpretation of Keys Ranch would be enriched by a less celebratory view of Bill Keys and an enlarged view that encompasses the world in which he lived. My own views of Keys Ranch fall in between those expressed by Linda Greene in her Historic Resource Study and those expressed by Patricia Parker Hickman in Country Nodes: An Anthropological Evaluation of William Keys’ Desert Queen Ranch, Joshua Tree National Monument, California. For Hickman, Keys Ranch was important not because of anything particularly unique about Bill Keys but because the ranch itself was a “node” in a regional network. For Greene, conversely, Bill Keys was a remarkable individual who thrived despite his ranch’s isolation from the larger region, but the importance of his ranch hardly extended beyond its ability to provide a comfortable life for the Keys family. Based on my own preliminary readings, I think that Keys was a strong-willed man who left his mark on the Joshua Tree area, but he also was connected to the larger region; these are not mutually exclusive conclusions. I also think that it is appropriate (and historically accurate) to recognize Keys as an individual who achieved a relatively high degree of success in desert ranching and homesteading—but that simply answers the “what happened in the past” question. Historical thinking prompts the follow-up question: why did Keys succeed? The accepted answer seems to be that Keys possessed necessary character traits. In Greene’s view, Keys was “ambitious, independent, self-reliant, a hard worker, and a man quick to take advantage of any opportunity presented.” He was able “to eke an existence from the desert unaided by pension or welfare checks, by working with it, realizing its potential for adversity, yet appreciating its natural beauty and assets.” According to biographer Art Kidwell, Keys’s “patience, ingenuity, and hard work” allowed him to succeed as a desert rancher and homesteader.

Yet even a cursory look at Keys’s biography suggests that less admirable character traits served Keys as well: he deliberately cut off rival cattlemen from Barker dam (by circumventing the intent of the Homestead Act and filing claims in his family members’ names); he threatened to kill men who trespassed on his land; he exhibited a hypocritical hostility toward the federal government, which gave him land at below-market cost (as it did for all homesteaders) and would have granted him a wartime monopoly on grazing rights within the monument (had he not been imprisoned); he refused to respect the property

39 I did not have time to take a proper guided tour of Keys Ranch, so my impressions of how Keys Ranch is interpreted might rely too heavily on the impressions I gathered from conversations with park staff and my reading of take-away literature.

40 Hickman, Country Nodes.


42 Kidwell, Ambush! 10. These words are used in the “Desert Queen Ranch” pamphlet and Joshua Tree Visitor Center as well.
rights of his neighbor, Worth Bagley; and he trespassed on Bagley's property when he knew
that doing so might lead to one or the other's death. Contrary to the predominant
interpretive thrust, Keys was not proven innocent by Erle Stanley Gardner's Court of Last
Resort. Keys did receive a pardon; the pardon was granted, however, on the grounds of good
behavior, not wrongful conviction. Kidwell himself quoted the decision: "Through the years
Keys had maintained his innocence. His present plea was based on this claim. However, the
records fail to fully substantiate clemency upon this ground. The Adult Authority does feel that
his social adjustment is such to make him worthy of clemency upon the grounds of
rehabilitation." Keys might have been patient and hard-working, but he also possessed
character traits that enabled him to shoot his neighbor three times (once fatally) before his
neighbor could shoot at him twice. Although such traits might have been celebrated by
generations of men and women enamored with Turner's frontier, the fact that Keys
possessed these traits—and acted upon them at a time when millions of Americans were
pulling together to fight World War II—might not be seen so favorably by current and future
generations of park visitors. If nothing else, visitors could be invited to question what Keys's
life (especially this brutal chapter of it) tells us about life in the desert. Rather than being told
to admire Keys for his "patience, ingenuity, and hard work," visitors could be introduced to
the full nature of the man and allowed to decide for themselves whether they think that he is
someone to be admired—if success as a desert rancher and homesteader was worth the price
that Bagley, Keys, and Keys's family paid. If not, visitors might conclude, then perhaps the
desert changed Keys more than Keys changed the desert.

While the Keys biography could be presented in all of its richness and complexity,
Bill Keys could be de-centered so that the lives of other individuals who lived alongside him
could be further explored. Frances Keys is the most obvious person to highlight—her
transition from Los Angeles to the Joshua Tree area, her relationship with Bill, her
responsibilities on the ranch, her relationship with neighbors, her influence on her children,
her influence on the landscape, and her life while Bill was in prison for five years—but the
trio of Frances Keys, Isabelle Bagley, and Della Dudley also seems to offer opportunities for
comparative analysis (Isabelle's life with Worth, in particular, seems to offer a contrast to
Frances's life with Bill). The Keys children offer another obvious avenue for interpretation,
but a perhaps less obvious tack would be to focus on labor at the ranch, which would allow
consideration of parent-child relationships, gender roles, paid and unpaid labor, and the
enduring presence of Native Americans (at his trial, Keys mentioned that he had "a couple of
Indian boys from Mission Creek up there to help . . . with the cattle," one named Steve
Kitchen). An interpretive approach that tries to understand Worth Bagley, and maybe takes
him as more representative of desert homesteaders than Bill Keys, might open up new
avenues as well.

43 Ibid., 178 (emphasis added).
44 Ibid., 41, 126.
Given my limited time at the site, I am less inclined to offer extensive comment on questions regarding resource management at Keys Ranch. I agree that the ranch is a valuable asset; it is a significant resource but also a potential "hook" for visitors. The policy of limited access is justified—the ranch is essentially an outdoor museum and should be open to the public only when it can be sufficiently staffed. But access to the ranch should be increased and diversified through a mix of topical ranger-led tours (perhaps put into a well-publicized rotation), on-site first-person interpretation, and "open" periods during which visitors can wander through the grounds as rangers circulate, monitor, and answer questions (immediately following tours and presentations, if not at other times).

**How Should Historical Interpretation Incorporate Prehistoric Cultures, Militarization of the Joshua Tree Area, Fluctuations in Federal Support for Park Management, and Developments Associated with the Recent Past?**

Several questions put in front of the visiting scholars seem to be united by concern about a gap between a given chapter in the park’s history (or prehistoric past), on the one hand, and available (or accessible) historic resources, on the other. Given the park’s primary responsibility to “protect and preserve” resources—and the secondary nature of its responsibility to interpret those resources—this concern is understandable. The stories that historians tell, however, are not limited to any particular type or collection of resources, so I am inclined to conclude that the park’s central story should be constructed and communicated to visitors regardless of gaps in resources. Wherever the park’s resources match the history that the park as a whole embodies (or the various chapters of that history), there are, of course, more opportunities for interpretation. But no aspects of the park’s history should be ignored or downplayed simply because resources that would be useful in conveying that history do not exist or are not accessible to the public. Exhibit panels, wayside signs, and take-away literature illustrated with photographs and maps might seem less engaging than actual visits to Patton Camps, for example, but the availability of resources should not influence determinations of a given story’s significance.

Other concerns seem tied to the meaning of the park’s boundaries. Given the park’s sole responsibility for resources within its boundaries, these concerns, again, are understandable. Yet historical developments (except those tied to management of the park itself) have not always clearly stopped or started at the park’s boundaries. More important, the park’s boundaries themselves have changed over time. From a historian’s standpoint, it would make little sense to interpret the history of the Eagle Mountain mine area prior to the 1940s, ignore its history in subsequent decades, and if the land should ever be incorporated into the park again, maintain this gap in the story. The history of this area is a story that is coherent and connected to the park regardless of whether the area has or has not always been a part of the park itself; the fact that the park’s boundaries were changed to exclude this area at a specific point in time is part of the story. So too is the more recent landfill initiative (which would have, in some ways, shown the permeability of the park’s boundaries once again).
Still other concerns seem tied to the question of whether a history program should encompass developments in the recent past. As indicated in my chapter outline, I think that the park’s story would be incomplete without some effort to bring it up to the present. We might not have the perspective on recent developments that we have for developments that unfolded fifty years ago or more, but compromises in perspective might be offset by relevancy: incorporating recent history (and acknowledging the place of the park in popular culture) will help park visitors (especially younger visitors) make connections that they otherwise might not care to make.

**What Should be the Interpretive Scope of the Oasis Cultural Center?**

I am excited by plans for the new Oasis Cultural Center. I think the center should take as its starting point the idea that the Joshua Tree area has been shaped by the centuries-long interactions between humans and this distinct regional environment. Exhibits in the center could then trace these interactions and their impact through any or all of the ten chapters outlined in the previous section; or, exhibots might instead focus on the three (or four) interpretive themes recognized above. Either way, visitors could be pointed toward lessons that are relevant to their lives and to the future of the region and nation (lessons related to human interactions with the desert environment, sustainability, environmental change, urban growth, and pollution, for example).

A means of providing visual access to museum collections (their storage but also their conservation) would be an asset to the center and to the park as a whole. Whereas earlier generations thought it more appropriate to keep maintenance practices hidden (in order to create the illusion of pure preservation), it is more likely today that honest recognition of the work that conservationists do would be appreciated by a savvy public.

**Suggested Responsibilities of the Staff Historian**

In this final section I suggest specific responsibilities of the staff historian at Joshua Tree National Park. Generally speaking, I would encourage the staff historian to adopt four missions: first, to ensure that the history program at Joshua Tree National Park is infused with a sense of professionalism; second, to ensure that the history program embraces diversity and thus fosters respect for different perspectives and interpretations of the past; third, to advocate for the value of historically informed, long-term thinking in the formulation and implementation of management policies; and, fourth, to interpret history in ways that will make Joshua Tree National Park more relevant to the lives of people living in Southern California (and beyond) in the twenty-first century.

I would also encourage the staff historian to take the time necessary to familiarize himself or herself with the history of the Joshua Tree area, to conduct his or her own audit of pre-existing components that might become part of a history program, and to begin developing his or her own ideas about the appropriate scope and focus for a history program at Joshua Tree National Park.
Highest Priorities

1. Provide training and support for rangers who conduct history-related programs.
   Provide seasonal training in historical interpretation. Conduct regular workshops
   around the interpretation specific themes or resources. Circulate recommended readings
   and develop recommended reading lists. Lobby to ensure that rangers have sufficient
   preparation time to develop their programs.
2. Support the development of the Oasis Cultural Center.
   Advocate for the completion of a modern museum with the highest standards for
   collections protection and exhibition, multimedia technology (e.g., computer kiosks with
   access to park information as well as digitized programming and resources), visitor comfort,
   and accessibility.
3. Produce literature related to the history of the Joshua Tree area.
   Support the completion of an administrative history. Update the park’s historic
   resources study. Produce a new array of take-away literature and make this available via the
   park’s Web site. Produce (or commission) a history of the park written for the general public.
4. Work with the park curator to build the park’s archival collections and make them
   accessible via the park’s Web site.
   Ensure that the park’s archives contain a well-developed collection of primary
   sources related to the Joshua Tree area’s history and secondary sources related to the history
   of the American West, including relevant sub-themes (mining, ranching, homesteading,
   desert life, lands management, tourism, to name a few). Develop a program to digitize
   photographs and other primary sources for storage and selected posting on the park’s Web
   site.
5. Develop a robust oral history project.
   Work with park staff and local volunteers (and possibly partner with a regional
   institution) to launch an oral history project. Assist preparation for, and supervise the
   completion of, oral interviews. Oversee transcription and editing, proper storage of media,
   and accessibility for staff members, researchers, and community members.

Secondary Priorities

1. Make Joshua Tree National Park a center for the study of the inland Southern California
   subregion.
   Network with regional institutions and state organizations. Pursue grants from state
   and federal agencies for conducting symposia or lecture series. Prepare to maximize
   opportunities associated with the 75th anniversary of the creation of Joshua Tree National
   Monument (in 2011) and the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service.
2. Supervise an update and expansion of history-related interpretive programming at Keys
   Ranch.
3. Work with area teachers to make the park more relevant to K-12 education.
4. Maintain outreach efforts among local historians and other community members.
5. Produce updated wayside signs related to historical interpretation.
6. Produce self-guided tours that can be downloaded as podcasts.
7. Work with an education specialist to devise a means of assessment for new historical programming.
CHAPTER THREE

SITE REVIEW FOR THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS AT JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK, JUNE 10-12, 2008

Laura A. Watt

INTRODUCTION

On June 10-12, 2008, the National Park Service (NPS) and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) conducted a site review of Joshua Tree National Park (JTNP) in Twentynine Palms, California. As an environmental historian, my role is to suggest ways that the park might improve its history program and interpretation of historic resources, particularly with regard to the relationship between the local environment and its human inhabitants over time. This report will explore some of the key themes of the area’s environmental history and make suggestions as to how they could be better highlighted.

Environmental history as a discipline is based on the recognition that people are constantly interacting with their environments—sometimes adapting themselves to the conditions around them, sometimes re-shaping those conditions to better meet their needs and desires. People also perceive and/or impose meaning onto their local landscapes, and the environment in turn shapes its inhabitants, or changes in response to human actions. It is essential to recognize that the environment is not just a blank slate or passive backdrop to human action; nor is it an island, somehow cut off from the human realm. Viewing history through this lens of constantly changing connections with the environment can reveal a far more complex and interesting set of stories and meanings.

INTEGRATING ARCHEOLOGICAL HISTORY WITH ECOLOGICAL HISTORY

The starting point for all environmental history is, of course, the environment itself. Joshua Tree National Park (JTNP) sits on an ecotone, or ecological transition zone, between the Mojave and Colorado/Sonoran desert ecosystems and supports a wide variety of species and habitats. Many of the interpretive exhibits and materials in the park focus on the “ingenuity of desert life,” highlighting the numerous adaptations of desert species to extremes of heat and aridity. The park also has an impressive collection of archeological artifacts and exhibits of the several Native American tribes who similarly adapted to the desert environment and found ways to survive for thousands of years.

It seems to me that there is a wonderful opportunity here to draw more explicit connections between natural and cultural adaptations to the desert—to emphasize that Native Americans were (and still are) an integral part of the ecosystems they lived in. Too
often “natural history” is surprisingly ahistorical, treating ecosystems as if they are set qualities of a region existing in a constant state of equilibrium, rather than changing through time to accommodate varying climatic conditions, shifts in species composition, and other transformations. Similarly, humans are often treated as invaders of the “pristine” desert, causing damage everywhere they step.

The detrimental effect of humans on nature was overwhelmingly the message I got from watching the Mojave desert video in the Oasis of Mara Visitor Center, reinforced by repeated mentions of “the balance of nature,” and a litany of ways that humans cause environmental destruction (off-highway vehicles or OHVs, domestic livestock eroding soil and outcompeting native species, mining leaving scars on the landscape, and suburban development forcing nature to adapt to its presence). The only mention of Native Americans was a brief reference near the beginning of the program when they were described as having “vanished into prehistory.”

This is exactly the kind of dualistic approach to history (humans in one corner, nature in the other, as distinct and separate entities), that I believe JTCP could begin to challenge by showing Native American history in parallel with natural history. How have both humans and other species adapted to not only the challenges of heat and aridity, but also to the variation found in desert climates: extreme heat and cold, long droughts followed by flash floods, and lush springtime abundance of food followed by seasons with far lower resource availability? How do archeological artifacts illustrate the early Pinto culture’s evolution as the climate got progressively hotter and drier, and how are those changes mirrored by shifts in desert species population distributions? In what ways have the Cahuilla, Chemehuevi, and Serrano tribes manipulated the desert landscape in order to increase their chances of survival, and how have desert species responded to those actions in the landscape? By positing human cultures as part of the desert ecosystem’s diversity, rather than an overlay on top of it, JTCP could play an important role in increasing public understanding of the commonalities involved with surviving in the desert by emphasizing connections between the human and natural worlds instead of separation and opposition.

In addition, I would recommend working with the local tribes to improve their involvement and representation in the park and to make it clear to visitors that they are not simply a figment of the long-ago past. Even if the tribes end up building a casino on their small neighboring reservation, the park could include a discussion of how they ended up with such a small allocation of land, and how it could not possibly sustain the tribes in any way other than being used as a casino or resort of some kind. How did the policies and practices of the United States (including, perhaps, establishment of the national park) contribute to Native Americans’ more distant relationship with their traditional lands, and in what ways have they maintained some of those traditional connections? There are some wonderful books published recently regarding the relationships between national parks and
Native Americans; perhaps a new historical research project could be started at JTNP along similar lines.  

EARLY SETTLERS AND THEIR STORIES

Similarly, history of the past 150-plus years of settlement and development in JTNP could be bolstered with more direct connections between these people and their environment, and how they each have shaped the other. The area’s disappearing pinyon pines, overcut in support of mining ventures’ needs for charcoal and lumber, are a good example of the ecosystem changing under the pressure of these new demands. A more recent example is the proliferation of ravens, apparently in response to increased development and better scavenging, and their impact on desert tortoise populations. The web of interactions between people and the desert environment is often incredibly complex, and stories from history can be used as an avenue into exploring that complexity with the public.

The park’s current emphasis on history seems to revolve primarily around charismatic individuals or families, such as the Keys family or the Ryan brothers. While these stories offer a unique and personal view into the past, I believe the history program could be augmented by a somewhat wider view, placing these individuals into a broader context as exemplars of particular historical trends. Why did they come to Joshua Tree, and where did they come from? There must have been powerful lures in the landscape to inspire them to try surviving in such a harsh environment. Mining, homesteading, cattle grazing, and land speculation all played important roles in shaping the desert landscape over time; placing the JTNP characters into this context prevents them from being misunderstood as isolated, quirky eccentrics, and rather casts them as exemplars of trends happening all over the desert southwest.

I would be fascinated to know in particular how the development of the railroads contributed to settlement and development of the Joshua Tree region, particularly given the railroad industry’s close historical ties with the development of national parks. Did development of the Southern Pacific line through the area in the 1870s contribute to opening the desert up to greater exploration by miners and homesteaders? Did it lead to any land

---


speculation in the region, or was the desert deemed too inhospitable to invest in? What role did railroad-owned lands later play in establishing the national monument?47

One challenge the park is likely to encounter as it works to expand its history program is possible divergence between cherished versions of local history and the broader view. Local historical characters are often conceived of in simplified roles, such as the hero or villain of particular episodes in the area’s history, and learning more about these people from different perspectives can be threatening to the local sense of identity and meaning. As more information becomes available, this may require the NPS to focus less on “getting the story right,” than on allowing multiple versions of the same story to co-exist, and asking questions about what those multiple versions tell us about ourselves: Why might a particular folkloric story have emerged? How does it reveal or obscure other aspects of the area’s history?

This leads to a similar question as to how to deal with ephemerality: not all historical events or trends leave tangible evidence behind, and even describing an absent resource (such as the pinyon pines or early adobe buildings that have long since disappeared) can be a challenge. Yet the traditional approach to historic preservation and interpretation has been focused on artifacts and structures. In particular, this tendency seems to have led to the dominance of the Keys family in JTNP historical interpretation; because there are such wonderfully rich remnants at the Keys Ranch, it seems natural for the narrative to focus on their stories. Finding novel ways to address the changing and sometimes fleeting nature of the desert landscape in JTNP interpretation could help to address the gap between history and physical artifacts—showing the public that what they see in today’s landscape does not necessarily tell the entire story, that some layers of history may have faded from view but still had important impacts on the place’s development over time. On the flip side, the specific artifacts of the Keys Ranch could be drawn upon to illustrate some of the broader historical trends for the area, rather than telling only one family’s story.

**Establishment of the Park and Links to Early Conservation Efforts**

While administrative histories have not always been the most scintillating reading, understanding the role of the NPS in creating and managing this vast protected area is a key component of an environmental history of Joshua Tree. I believe that we tend to underestimate the public’s interest in park establishment, and telling the story in a compelling way can reveal a great deal about the relationship between protected lands, like the national park, and it’s surrounding, increasingly urbanized landscape. While her research focuses on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service, not the NPS, Nancy Langston’s books serve as a wonderful model of how a discussion of an agency’s landscape management can illustrate complex dynamics between public and private lands, the

---

47 For more on the railroads’ relationship with land protection, see Alfred Runte, *Allies of the Earth: Railroads and the Soul of Preservation* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2006).
ecological impacts of government management, and the cultural meaning of protected lands.\textsuperscript{48}

Telling the story of how Minerva Hoyt raised public awareness about the importance of desert landscapes is an essential part of this park history. There is a growing historical literature on the central role of women in many conservation efforts, particularly in land protection.\textsuperscript{49} For instance, in my "native landscape" the San Francisco Bay Area, almost every major land conservation group that I can think of was originally established by women, from Laura Lyon White working for the Sempervirens Club in the early 1900s to Phyllis Faber and Ellen Strauss co-founding the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, the first of its kind in the nation, in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{50} Connecting Hoyt's story to these larger national trends elevates the park's history beyond that of a particular, unique individual and her passion for desert plants and helps to illustrate the crucial role that women play in conservation, especially in an agency that has too often focused only on the Muirs and Mathers of its history.

Once Joshua Tree was formally established as a national monument, however, it was not uniformly supported by NPS administrators as a valuable addition to the system. I believe this history gets at one of the paradoxes of desert lands: while some see them as precious and beautiful, others consider them wastelands, too harsh or remote to really be of value to an agency that has developed to a large part around tourism.\textsuperscript{51} While it may not necessarily be fascinating to visitors, developing the stories of NPS detractors seems important for the agency staff to understand their own role in shaping the desert—to become more aware of the consequences of their own management decisions. A complete history of the area's management, both during the times when it has been celebrated and when it has been neglected, helps to "historicize" the NPS itself and to make it clear that the area's history did not end when it was designated a national monument in 1936.

The boundary change of 1950, slicing off the eastern portions of the park with significant iron deposits, similarly parallels other controversies over the balance of resource protection versus utilitarian use in parks. From the early battles over Hetch Hetchy Dam in Yosemite, to disputes over the Colorado River and the successful fight over the Echo Park Dam after World War II, to current-day arguments over gold mining near Yellowstone, the sanctity of national park protection has often been questioned in the name of resource


\textsuperscript{50} Richard Walker, \textit{The Country in the City: The Greening of the San Francisco Bay Area} (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), has an excellent discussion of the role of women in leading conservation efforts.

\textsuperscript{51} A must-read on this subject is Hal Rothman, \textit{Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West} (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998).
extration and use.** How do we make sense of the presence of the Eagle Mountain iron mine, adjacent to thousands of acres of designated wilderness since 1976? Or the contrast of the 1994 Desert Protection Act elevating Joshua Tree to national park status and the proposed landfill on its southeastern border?

I believe that this kind of environmental-administrative history of the park would be an enormous contribution to the new General Management Planning process slated to begin in 2009. When working as a private environmental consultant at EDAW, Inc., in 2002, I contracted with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to help write their twenty-year resource management plan (RMP) for the King Range National Conservation Area on the northern California coast. Although the BLM is not required to include environmental history in its analysis of existing conditions on its lands, we included one anyway out of the firm belief that one must understand an area's history if one is to effectively plan for its future. Rather than only focusing on tangible cultural resources, like archeological remains and homesteaders' cabins, we wrote a settlement history of the area, a legislative history of its federal protection, and a synopsis of the current-day social context of surrounding communities and residents. In the feedback we received on the plan, many members of the public cited the environmental and social history section as their favorite part of the plan and commented that it put all the other resources into an interconnected context. Indeed, the head of the BLM's Social Sciences division told me he was using the King Range plan in his training classes as an example of how to do social sections of plans "right." I think the King Range RMP serves as a model for the power of environmental history in planning efforts.**

**MILITARIZATION OF THE DESERT**

The California desert has a long history of being utilized by the U.S. military for training camps and bases. What are we to make of the irony of having a national park squeezed in between the Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center and the Chocolate Mountain Aerial Gunnery Range? Again, this relationship raises the contradictory meanings of "desert" as expendable wasteland versus precious resource. While most of the military uses occurred off-site from the present-day park, they form a powerful "neighborhood" around it: from Patton's camps in World War II through post-9/11 desert-based training, JTPN has constantly been surrounded on all sides by militarized landscapes. While I am not well-versed in the academic literature of military history, the major competing uses of the Mojave for resource extraction, recreation, and urbanization are made even more complex by the presence of the military. JTPN historians might ask why one section of desert is considered valuable enough to set aside as a park, while another one

---


becomes a bombing range. What are the ecological and/or historical characteristics, if any, that contribute to these different management directions, and different cultural meanings?

RECENT CONNECTIONS AND MEANINGS

Key to rounding out a complete environmental history of JTNP is attention to more recent history, not just hundred-year-old artifacts. Even when recent trends present management challenges to the NPS, such as the unofficial shrine created and maintained by fans to memorialize rocker Gram Parsons, or balancing the climbing community’s needs with those of other recreation users, they are important to acknowledge because they represent new meanings of this place that have developed over time, regardless of how much the NPS may wish to control public interpretation of the park.

I am particularly fascinated by the controversy over the Gram Parsons shrine and the varying ways that the NPS has responded to it. To me, Parsons’s relationship to the park represents an outgrowth of 1960s–70s environmentalism, an example of one creative individual finding such a powerful connection with the natural world in Joshua Tree that he wished to become part of it in his death. Parsons’s connection with this place, regardless of the rather dramatic circumstances of his death, has inspired other artists in music, photography, and other arts to explore JTNP themselves, and to find a similar deep connection with the desert (such as the rock band U2 in more recent years).

The NPS need not “interpret” the Parsons story in a way that suggests condoning (or condemning) his individual actions (involvement with drugs, the strange circumstances after his death)—but by acknowledging the significance of Parsons’s relationship with this place, the NPS can help to put it in the context of other individuals who have found their “home” in the Joshua Tree landscape. Minerva Hoyt in the 1930s represents one avenue for appreciation of the desert landscape; in some ways, Gram Parsons is an interesting parallel from the 1960s, taking a completely different approach to appreciating the desert, but having similar consequences in inspiring others to appreciate it as well. Even the graffiti that his fans sometimes leave on the rocks can be seen as part of a continuum going back to early Native American petroglyphs and pictographs, humans leaving their mark on the environment to commemorate some special connection to place.

As JTNP seeks to keep its historical program and other interpretive efforts relevant to its neighbors in nearby communities, it will need to continue asking questions about the park’s significance to an ever-changing population of visitors. How has the explosion in recent years of rock climbing as a recreational activity affected the relationship between JTNP and the urban population in Los Angeles? Given that national parks were traditionally designed with the family station wagon or traveling Winnebago in mind, how might JTNP need to evolve its management to keep up with new uses? What are we to make of the contrast between the austere desert ecosystems within the park and the proliferating golf courses below in Palm Springs? It seems to me that the park’s history program will be well-poised to contribute to making these connections between present and past more visible,
positioning itself as a conservation leader within its unique historical contexts, and drawing lessons from the park’s history to help guide future direction.

Figure 1. Joshua tree. Courtesy of photographer Laura A. Watt.

Figure 2. Gate at Ryan Ranch. Courtesy of photographer Laura A. Watt.

Figure 3. Shed at the Keys Ranch. Courtesy of photographer Laura A. Watt.
Figure 4. Doorstep at the Ryan Ranch. Courtesy of photographer Laura A. Watt.

Figure 5. Climber in the Hidden Valley campground. Courtesy of photographer Laura A. Watt.

Figure 6. Parsons "shrine" with graffiti and offerings. Courtesy of photographer Laura A. Watt.
APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS (OAH) AND NATIONAL PARK SERVICE SITE VISIT

JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK

JUNE 9-13, 2008

QUESTIONS AND ISSUES FOR OAH TEAM TO CONSIDER

1. What is the significance of Joshua Tree National Park in terms of state and regional history?

2. What is the significance of the establishment of the monument during the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration?

3. What is the significance/context of the major boundary modifications that have occurred over time?

4. What is the proper balance in the park’s interpretive program between the Native American stories and the settlement-era themes of ranching, mining, and homesteading? Are there major historical themes that have been overlooked and that should be emphasized? If so, what steps could be taken to appropriately implement integrating additional historical themes?

5. What are the significant post-park establishment stories that should be emphasized in park interpretive programs and media?


7. Evaluate the Keys Ranch Management Plan from a professional historian’s perspective. Is the current “full public closure” of the site justifiable from a historical significance standpoint? If not, recommend alternative public use and interpretation strategies for the site. How might the management plan be improved by incorporating public history components into the plan’s implementation?

8. What focus should the military use of the desert have in the park’s interpretive themes and interpretation? Patton Camps, Marine Base, modern aerial overflight routes, Desert Storm and post 9-11 military training?

9. How does the park handle interpretation of the periodic lack of enthusiasm/support by the National Park Service for Joshua Tree (Albright, Toll, Keys Ranch, Eagle Mountain)?

10. To what extent is a history program at Joshua Tree National Park deemed valuable for management of the park’s resources and improvement of visitor experiences?
11. The park will be initiating a new General Management Planning process in 2009, with an expected final General Management Plan in 2012. In what ways should new historical research be used to better inform both park managers and the public about how the park should be managed for the next twenty years?

**Future Development**

1. What is the proper approach to historic preservation/restoration at Keys Ranch relative to the need to interpret and provide public access at the site? The park attempts to balance between the engaging personality of Bill Keys and the “generalized” experience of homesteading and mining in arid lands—does the park’s approach “work”? Are there more appropriate approaches to take with this site?

2. What is the proper place for interpretation of popular culture at Joshua Tree: i.e. Erle Stanley Gardner, Disney, Gram Parsons, US and ‘the Joshua Tree’, films and advertising?

3. Is it appropriate for the Oasis Cultural Center to include current and future sociological, political, and economic themes (sustainability, future desert lifestyles, future development, etc.) as well as a traditional focus on history, archaeology, and anthropology? Evaluate the proposal to establish a publicly viewable museum collection at the Oasis Cultural Center.  

4. How do you effectively interpret ancient peoples when access to (and even discussion of) archaeological sites is restricted by law?

5. What role should historical themes play in the future development of other park visitor centers if the Oasis Cultural Center is fully developed as envisioned?

6. What interpretive media do you recommend for future development of historical themes as a consequence of your site visit?

7. Are there historical themes or places outside of the park that, in your professional opinion, belong within the scope of the NPS park management direction? What are these themes or resources?

8. If you could design a history program at Joshua Tree for the next 5-10 years, what would it look like with minimal funding, adequate funding and sufficient funding levels?

---

54 The 1996 General Management Plan discussed a more focused interpretive direction for the Oasis Visitor Center (and change of name to Oasis Cultural Center) but it had not occurred as of April 2010.
APPENDIX B

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE AMERICAN WEST

Compiled by Cindy Ott

BOOKS


Appendix B


* Asterisks indicate books recommended for sale in the bookstore.
Appendix B

JOURNALS


