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Parks & Revolution — A Special Section

Bunker Hill Hero
by Dorian Fox

Battlefields & Beyond
by Nicolas Brulliard and Katherine DeGroff

The First American Revolution?
by Nicolas Brulliard

To Tell the Truth
by Alan Spears

YORKTOWN VICTORY MONUMENT, now part of Colonial National Historical Park, commemorates the last major land battle of the American Revolution (see story p. 34).

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COVER: ©JOHN MAVROUDIS/WWW.ZENPOP.COM

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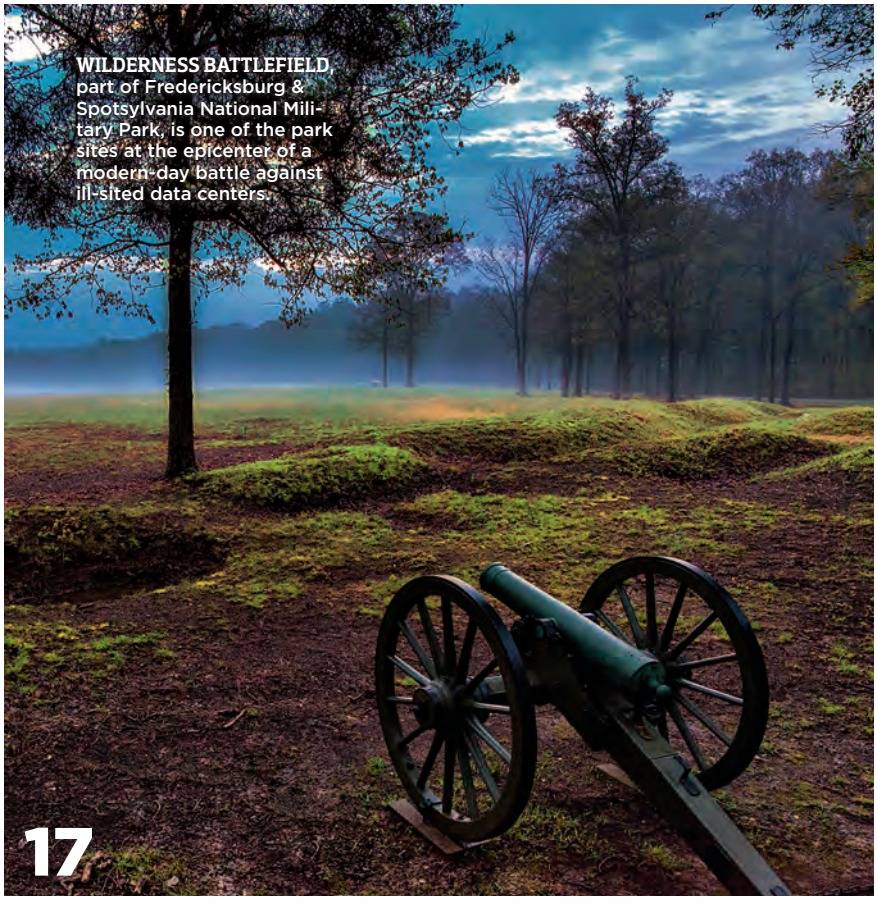

WILDERNESS BATTLEFIELD, part of Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park, is one of the park sites at the epicenter of a modern-day battle against ill-sited data centers.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ©BUDDY SECOR/NINJA PIX, ©GABRIELLA CANAL; COURTESY OF MILD TO WILD RAFTING, ©NPCA.

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Farewell for Now

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After 21 years at NPCA and more than a decade serving as the first woman to lead this century-old organization, the time has come to say goodbye. But how do you bid farewell to a place, to a cause and to the people who mean so much to you?

I must admit that I was struggling a bit to find the right words before help arrived in the form of a letter from a member — quite fittingly named Hope — whose message touched my heart.

"Over the years I have read and reread your President's Outlook. Your words are passionate, truthful, articulate, respectful and inspiring. They are evidence of your deep love of our national parks," she wrote. "I want to express my heartfelt thanks to you for your leadership and to wish you Godspeed in whatever is next for you."

If I measured my time here only by the numbers, I might consider how much NPCA has grown in both size and influence. The organization's budget has increased by one-third, and our combined members and supporters now number 1.9 million. I know that I will be leaving an NPCA that stands on solid ground and is poised for further success in the years to come.

But as my time here winds down, it's the faces and places — not figures — that I keep returning to. I am feeling grateful for and proud of everything we've done together for the parks and for the people who love them. With great conviction, we fought, and won, so many battles — in communities, courtrooms and the halls of Congress — to defend wildlife and wild spaces. We led the charge to create new park sites that help tell a more complete American story, that don't shy away from difficult chapters of our past, and that serve as essential places of learning and healing. And we ensured that the energy and passion of young people will continue to fuel this organization and the national parks movement for generations to come.

Just days before writing this note, I had the opportunity to gather one last time with NPCA's staff. Together, we listened and learned and laughed — and I realized that perhaps the greatest thing I leave behind is a community of people who are deeply committed to our mission, our core values and each other. The work this organization does may be more difficult now than ever, but we were built for moments like these. It has been the honor of my professional life to have shared this stretch of trail, through the many ups and downs, with all of you.

With gratitude,
Theresa Pierno

Marking the 250th

When the magazine staff started to discuss how to cover the country's 250th birthday, we faced some daunting questions. How do we reflect on the founding of the U.S., a multilayered story that dozens of park sites endeavor to illuminate, while also acknowledging the people, nations and cultures that had flourished on these lands long before Europeans arrived? How do we balance well-known tales of battlefields and triumphs with narratives about unsung heroes and places? And how do we mark a significant milestone at a time when many Americans harbor fears about the erosion of the country's founding principles and also about the existential threats that loom over the very park sites that protect places where historic events unfolded?

The package of stories that begins on p. 30 contains our answers to these knotty questions. In "Bunker Hill Hero" (p. 31), Dorian Fox tells the story of Salem Poor, a Black soldier who was honored for his bravery in the famed 1775 battle. "Battlefields and Beyond" (p. 34) highlights NPCA staff recommendations for parks to visit to learn about the country's genesis and ideals. Senior Editor Nicolas Brulliard jumps back to 1680 in his story about a Pueblo uprising that some historians describe as the "first American Revolution" (p. 44). And in "To Tell the Truth" (p. 46), NPCA's Alan Spears argues for advancing a nuanced version of the country's origin story that includes (among others) women, enslaved people and Native Americans — and doesn't whitewash or shy away from unsettling stories about our past.

One other question we grappled with concerned finding a cover image that would establish the right tone and hint at the content of these stories. After looking far and wide for inspiration, Art Director Nicole Yin asked John Mavroudis, an artist she has long admired, to create an illustration that would somehow speak to the array of topics in the package. It was a tall order, but we couldn't be more pleased with the result. John's brilliant cover touches on relevant characters and places, while relaying some of the feelings in play from fortitude and patriotism to resolve, solemnity and hope. As we know — or should know by now — history is complex, and sometimes art trumps words in adeptly conveying the most complex emotions and ideas. Thanks to John for bringing that home in red, white and blue.

Rona Marech
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Established in 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association is America's only private, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated solely to protecting, preserving and enhancing the U.S. National Park System.

WHAT WE DO
NPCA protects and enhances America's national parks for present and future generations by identifying problems and generating support to resolve them.

EDITORIAL MISSION
National Parks magazine fosters an appreciation for the natural and historic treasures found in the parks, educates readers about the need to preserve those resources, and illustrates how member contributions drive our organization's park-protection efforts. The magazine uses the power of imagery and language to forge a lasting bond between NPCA and its members, while inspiring new readers to join the cause. National Parks magazine is among a member's chief benefits. Of the $25 membership dues, $6 covers a one-year subscription to the magazine.

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Members can help defend America's natural and cultural heritage. Activists alert Congress and the administration to park threats, comment on park planning and adjacent land-use decisions, assist NPCA in developing partnerships, and educate the public and the media. Sign up to receive Park Notes, our monthly email newsletter at npca.org/join.

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STANDING UP FOR PARKS

Like all of your readers, I am a huge fan of our national parks and am heartbroken by what is going on. But there are things we can do.

This past weekend, my small, rural Midwest town held a rally for the national parks. Seventy passionate individuals showed up, including some who'd driven over 40 miles just to attend. Although our numbers were small, we made an impact. We gathered along a busy street and received an outpouring of support from passing cars.

That same weekend, we raised funds at a local art fair to support local, national and international organizations, including NPCA. Standing up in your local community, calling your congressional representatives and getting involved with national organizations are all powerful ways to push back against the current attacks. NPCA members have always supported our parks, and these places need us now, more than ever.

ALICE CICCU
Mount Pleasant, MI

EYES WIDE OPEN

Thank you to Ernie Atencio for sharing his heartfelt, beautifully written story "Life & Death in Bears Ears." We had the distinct privilege of being guided by him on an NPCA trip to the Four Corners in 2021. His passion opened our eyes to the important work of NPCA. We learned about his deep commitment to protecting parks, the surrounding land and local communities. Now we better understand the origins of his life's journey and commitment to national parks.

JANE AND TERRY HONIKMAN
Santa Barbara, CA

BREATHTAKING

"Cave Doctor" was a wonderful and enlightening article about the efforts of Michael Mansur and other volunteers to restore and preserve New Mexico's amazing caverns, particularly Carlsbad. It is so easy to damage what has taken centuries for nature to create. I want to extend my thanks to all of the Michael Mansurs of this world.

I grew up in southern Indiana, home to a host of caves open to the public. I have been through most of them. I've also made several trips to Mammoth Cave National Park. All left me in awe of the beauty to be found below ground, despite the damage that visitors have caused. Carlsbad remained on my wish list until this past spring when I finally made it there at age 70. From the moment I stepped in, I remained in a state of shock at the beauty and enormity of the cavern. I spoke with a young fellow from Germany who has toured caves throughout the world. He said he was unprepared for what he saw: It was the most magnificent cavern he'd visited.

If you've not yet been to Carlsbad Caverns, go! It is breathtaking!

FRANK BERRY
Savannah, GA

THE GREAT ONE

Having just returned from a standard bus trip through Denali, it was an honor to read Robert Annis' story about the park ("My Own Private Denali"). Our guide skirted the naming issue by calling the mountain, which was covered in clouds on the day I visited, "The Great One." I saw beautiful meadows full of fall color being grazed on by grizzlies and moose. The bus was indeed able to stand still as all traffic halted for people to take photos. I cherish the beautiful photos in all the issues of National Parks, but I especially appreciated the Denali photos.

SUE KIRKLAND
Buffalo, NY

Clarification: Several readers, including a wildlife biologist at Denali National Park and Preserve, pointed out that the tour group in the opening scene of "My Own Private Denali" didn't follow best practices for bear-viewing. Park staff advise visitors to maintain a distance of 300 yards from bears and provide guidance about what to do if a bear approaches. You can find more details about bear safety and park rules on the Denali website.

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"This order is so atrocious, it's nearly unbelievable. Our resolve is only strengthened to continue to fight the Ambler mining road."

Alaska Senior Regional Director Jim Adams, as quoted in The New York Times, in response to President Trump's directive to fast-track a $2 billion industrial mining road through the country's largest roadless national park landscape. NPCA and area Tribes have long decried the proposed 211-mile thoroughfare, citing its potential to wreak environmental and cultural devastation.

"Since their founding more than a hundred years ago, national parks have never faced a more dire and existential threat than climate change."

Todd Martin, NPCA's Northeast senior program manager, describing to the Bangor Daily News why the removal of signs that mention climate change at Acadia National Park is concerning. This September, in response to an executive order, national park staff began scrubbing signs system-wide, removing information related to science, slavery, civil rights and more. Around 30 signs have disappeared from the Maine park.

"Coal mines near Zion, Bryce Canyon or Capitol Reef? It's absurd."

NPCA's Southwest campaign director, Cory MacNulty, expressing disbelief to the Utah News Dispatch that an additional 13 million acres of federal land have been opened to speculative coal mining thanks to July's One Big Beautiful Bill Act. Leases are available on lands near many national park sites, including thousands of acres adjacent to prized Utah parks. Coal mining not only extends the country's reliance on climate-warming fossil fuels, it also contaminates the water and air of parks and nearby communities.

PHOTO: THE AMBLER ROAD THREATENS THE WESTERN ARCTIC CARIBOU HERD, PICTURED HERE IN ALASKA'S KOBUK RIVER VALLEY.

©KATIE ORLINSKY

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BIDDY MASON helped secure her freedom, and that of 13 others, by testifying in a Los Angeles judge's private chambers. Opposite: Kevin Waite and Angela Wilkinson at what was once Jumuba Ranch, the California property where Mason and Hannah Embers were enslaved. "I think sometimes California gives itself a free pass when it comes to some of these darker chapters in American history, and it shouldn't," Waite said.

Justice Served

A new designation for Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area celebrates two remarkable women and the landmark suit that emancipated them.

On Jan. 19, 1856, Bridget "Biddy" Mason and Hannah Embers waited anxiously as Los Angeles District Court Judge Benjamin Hayes determined their fate. The women had been living in San Bernardino for about five years at that point. They were mothers, ranch hands, and sought-after nurses and midwives. They were also the property of Robert Smith, the largest slaveholder in the "free" state of California.

Some weeks prior, Mason and Embers had learned of Smith's intention to uproot his household and farming operation and move to Texas. The women were no strangers to difficult and perilous journeys. They had, in fact, already traveled some 2,500 miles — mostly on foot — from Mississippi to Utah to California on the orders of Smith, who was himself following the westward migration of the Mormon church. But they were done. Working clandestinely, they'd alerted abolitionist allies and friends in the free Black community to their plight. One or more of those confidants had then petitioned Judge Hayes on their behalf.

While the original request for legal intervention was never recorded, or was subsequently misplaced or destroyed, the crux of the complaint appears to have hinged on an accusation of kidnapping — that is, Smith was holding Embers, Mason and their families against their wills and planned to transport them across state lines. In early January, Hayes deployed a party of men, including the sheriffs of Los Angeles and San Bernardino, to track down Smith, who'd moved his workforce into a remote canyon in the Santa Monica Mountains in preparation for departure. The officers took Mason and Embers and their kin into protective custody and demanded Smith appear in court to defend himself. Because Black people could not testify against white people, the judge — who came from a slaveholding family himself — "sort of fudged the law," said Kevin Waite, a history professor at the University of Texas at Dallas. Hayes brought Mason into his private chambers to hear her testimony before coming to his decision. Whatever she said must have been convincing, as the judge emancipated all 14 of Smith's enslaved workers, including Mason and her three children and Embers and her eight children and one grandchild.

The state constitution outlawed slavery, but Hayes' decision was unexpected nonetheless. "If you were an

African American in California and you wanted to adjudicate your freedom in a court of law, chances are you were not going to win that suit," Waite said. Indeed, in dozens of similar cases, the opposite outcome had prevailed, with freedom-seekers being returned to their owners. In his book "West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire," Waite describes the multi-pronged efforts of slaveholders and their sympathizers to extend the influence of this "peculiar institution" throughout the West, effectively creating what he calls the "Continental South" with California as its "linchpin." This 1856 ruling, he told me, "marked one of the first real blows against slavery in the Far West." Not only did it break up Smith's operation, but it also likely set in motion the self-emancipation of San Bernardino's remaining enslaved population.

This pivotal moment in California history has languished in relative obscurity for nearly 170 years, but that's begun to change. This February, the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program, a Park Service initiative, designated two new sites to help commemorate this freedom-seeking saga. The first, at Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, memorializes the approximate location in the eponymous coastal range where the women and their families were rescued prior to the court hearing, and the second marks the location in San Bernardino (now Colton) where the women lived and worked in the years leading up to their emancipation. These designations are particularly noteworthy given the relative paucity of Network to Freedom sites in the region: Of the more than 800 locations listed, only about 15 lie west of El Paso.

The path to designation started in 2022, when the Park Service organized a panel of experts to explore the history of freedom-seeking in the West. The relationships established at that event eventually inspired a collaboration between Waite, Network to Freedom staff, Santa Monica Mountains leadership and two park interns. (The Park Service declined an interview with National Parks.)

> "She was still a Black woman in a deeply racist and inhospitable landscape."

The story preserved by these two sites is one of resilience and resourcefulness on the part of Mason and Embers. It is also one of community — of unnamed individuals banding together to thwart Smith's plans. "The fact that we don't know who precisely was involved in this freedom suit, or bringing it about, is actually a testament to the ingenuity and the skill of Biddy and Hannah and whoever they were working with to bring about their emancipation," Waite said. "I mean, they covered their tracks really, really well." More broadly, these sites shine a light on the largely unacknowledged reality of slavery in the West.

When Christella Maldonado, one of the interns assisting Waite with the Network to Freedom nominations, described the focus of her summer job to friends and acquaintances, she was frequently met with incredulity. "They're like, 'Slavery in California, really?'" Maldonado recalled. A doctoral student in public history at the University of California, Riverside, she had been "shocked" to learn that there was a population of enslaved people so close to where she grew up. And yet, she wasn't surprised that her education had skipped those tales. "The ways in which we're taught history in high school, or even in some college classes," Maldonado said, "are not fully going to highlight a story about a Black woman who won her freedom."

COURTESY OF ANGELA WILKINSON

Given how infrequently women of color appeared in 19th-century records, cobbling together a picture of the lives of the two leading ladies at the heart of this landmark case was an exercise in persistence and conjecture. Using Waite's research as a launchpad, Maldonado and fellow park intern Isaiah L. Martin scoured microfilm in the basements of county buildings; pored over library directories, university archives and newspaper clippings; puzzled through tax, property, baptismal and church records; and reviewed the accounts of neighbors, descendants and more. Despite their collective efforts, information gaps abound.

Mason doesn't appear in any record by name until she's "well into adulthood," according to Waite. We know she moved to Los Angeles after her emancipation and achieved renown as a midwife, real estate mogul and philanthropist. We know she had a will — a rarity for any female at the time — and was one of the wealthiest Black women west of the Mississippi River upon her death in 1891. Yet, "she was still a Black woman in a deeply racist and inhospitable landscape," Waite said, "and so she did not make as many appearances as somebody of that stature would today." His forthcoming biography on Mason

has been assembled over the course of a decade with what he calls "a degree of informed speculation." He hopes the book's upcoming publication "sparks a conversation and reevaluation," he said.

These days, Mason lingers in L.A.'s collective memory as an entrepreneurial benefactor — one can tour her memorial park south of downtown, visit the church she founded or donate to the foundation established in her honor. Embers, on the other hand, has largely vanished, a victim of her time and — Maldonado argues — her class. Basic details, such as the dates of her birth and death, remain frustratingly murky. She lived 40-odd years, married and owned property, but appears conclusively in few of the traditional records. "We don't even have a photo of her," said Angela Rona Ingham Wilkinson, Embers' third-great-granddaughter. "I'm not sure if there ever was one."

Maldonado repeatedly hit dead ends in her research but said that Embers' own tenacity in the face of a lifetime of adversity inspired her to persevere. "I so wanted to just kind of do her justice," she said. Her biggest regret is that she couldn't locate Embers' gravesite. Martin and Wilkinson joined her one morning for what she called a "little scavenger hunt" in the most promising location — a cemetery in San Bernardino for the area's earliest pioneers. They left no closer to the truth, having discovered only badly eroded headstones and telltale signs of neglect. One thing that's helped Maldonado make peace with the ambiguity has been meeting the woman's descendants. "In a way," she said, "I guess she's kind of still living through them."

Wilkinson, 66, became active in the research into Embers' life when she inherited her father's genealogical and family papers after he died in 2017. She'd been made aware of her lineage decades earlier when, as a teen, she visited the San Bernardino County Museum with her grandmother and paused at a display illustrating the arrival of pioneers via wagon train in the wake of California's Gold Rush. Wilkinson's grandmother had pointed to the mannequins representing the entourage's enslaved attendants and explained that they were her ancestors. In the years since her father's death, Wilkinson has gleaned that Embers was an expert horsewoman and was likely the one to instruct Mason in nursing. "I'm finding out more and more information on this amazing woman," she said.

Though she wishes her father were alive to witness the recent revival of interest, she is happy that Black history, especially Black women's history, is being recognized with these new Network to Freedom sites. "When I talk about this, it just sends chills through me," Wilkinson said. "Our history is ugly. You know, slavery is ugly, but we must learn from our past."

—KATHERINE DEGROFF

PRIOR TO EMANCIPATION, Hannah Embers, Biddy Mason and their respective children were held in a remote canyon in the Santa Monica Mountains.

©LUX BLUE/ISTOCKPHOTO

Editor's Notes:

Neither Hannah nor Biddy appears with last names in archival records until after their emancipation. Hannah used both Embers and Smiley as surnames later in life. For simplicity's sake, we've identified them as Mason and Embers throughout.

Maldonado had planned to return to Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area last summer to continue efforts to share this story with park visitors, but the funding for that position was effectively eliminated. Martin teamed up with Santa Monica Mountains Fund, the park's official nonprofit partner, to work on developing materials for the visitor center, though how those might be deployed — and when — remains unclear.

OUT THERE: A NATIONAL PARKS STORY

TO MAKE "Out There," Brendan Hall and his childhood friend Anthony Blake went on a three-month road trip and visited as many national parks as possible.

A Cinematic Ode to Parks

A Q&A with the director of "Out There: A National Parks Story."

Growing up, Brendan Hall knew he wanted to be a filmmaker. Even though he lived by a lake in Connecticut, he showed no interest in filming the natural beauty at his doorstep. He wanted to make Hollywood movies.

But everything changed in 2014, when he went on his first-ever road trip, with his childhood friend Anthony Blake, to explore national parks in the Southwest. Hall was so in awe of the landscapes that he decided he wouldn't go to Hollywood after all — he would make documentaries in the outdoors instead. And so in 2016, right after Hall graduated from college and during the centennial of the National Park Service, the two cooked up an ambitious project: They would visit as many national parks as possible on a 10,000-mile cross-country road trip and capture it all on film.

Early on in their three-month journey, the pair had a revelation. "We found that we were being inspired by people, just as much as the landscapes themselves," Hall says in his film, "Out There: A National Parks Story." What started with the search for the next great lookout point evolved into a love letter to national parks — and to those who care for and enjoy them.

In "Out There," viewers meet protagonists such as trails foreman Gary Stellpflug, who reflects on decades of lovingly creating and maintaining Acadia National Park's paths. In Shenandoah National Park, pint-sized Lilianna marvels at the butterflies that her parents told her were connected to her late tío (uncle). "I couldn't stop crying," she says in the film. "I love butterflies." In Montana, Jack Gladstone, a citizen of the Blackfeet Nation and a storyteller and musician, shines a light on the dark history of Glacier National Park, which was established in part on his Tribe's ancestral territory.

It took Hall years to edit and complete the film as he gathered more footage and worked on other projects, and it finally premiered at a film festival in Florida in 2023. But over the past year, as Hall took his film on a road trip of its own to audiences across the country, "Out There" has taken on new meaning. Against the backdrop of large reductions in park funding and staffing, as well as an extended government shutdown, Hall has turned screenings into platforms for advocacy.

So far, more than 12,000 people have gathered in cinemas, libraries, schools and community halls — and yes, parks — to watch the documentary. Hall and his team partner with nonprofits supporting parks, and the screenings often include interactive panels with park staff, advocates or some of the film's stars. (The April event in Washington, D.C., promoted NPCA and featured a discussion with Ed Stierli, NPCA's Mid-Atlantic senior regional director.)

Screenings will continue through 2026, and in the spring the filmmakers will launch a web platform and app for viewing the film that will also provide educational resources and ways to contribute to parks. A percentage of the film's proceeds from this distribution model will go back to park-focused

organizations.

In this Q&A with Hall, the film's director, he shares what he has learned since starting "Out There," how it has unexpectedly become a civic action passion project, and how national parks can unite Americans across political divides.

©GABRIELLA CANAL

Jack Gladstone is one of the movie's most compelling characters. Before you met him, how familiar were you with the history of Indigenous peoples and national parks in the U.S.?

To be honest, we were deeply unfamiliar with this history. We knew that Native peoples had been stewards of these places and had been removed from them. But in school, Indigenous culture was taught to us as a relic of the past.

Jack has given decades of his life to sharing the story of Glacier National Park. He speaks of his own Indigenous history in Glacier as one of darkness and light: the light of this park — the beauty, its protection of wildlife — and the darkness of his people being pushed from that park for its creation. He taught us the importance of co-stewardship and co-management and of Native people sharing their own stories.

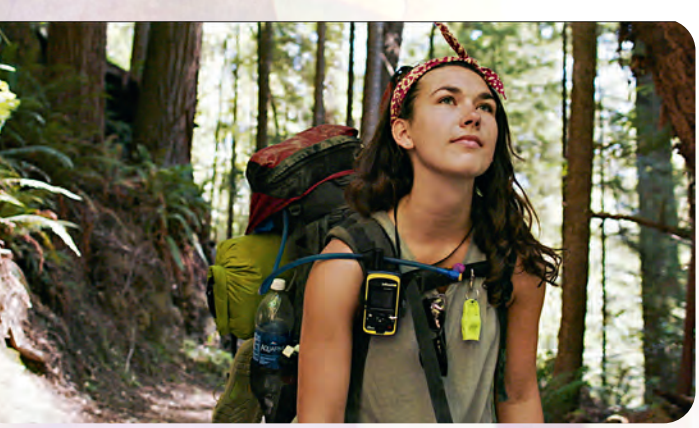
Jack showed us a much deeper and more complex side of national parks. They're not just a place to play and have an amazing experience. They're also that balance of reverence and sometimes really difficult histories.

Parks have a profound potential for healing. Similar to our nation, national parks hold all those stories, with both the darkness and the light.

What about your film seems to be resonating with audiences?

"Out There" is an experience that reconnects viewers to the reverence of parks, reminding us of the millions of shared stories that we have within them. It's

MOVIE DIRECTOR Brendan Hall (above). Below, from left to right: Film stills of Julia Michalski, a solo backpacker; Jack Gladstone, a Blackfeet storyteller; Lilianna, a young Shenandoah visitor; and QT Luong, a photographer known for his images of national parks.



OUT THERE: A NATIONAL PARKS STORY (FOUR MOVIE STILLS)

"The importance of parks could never be overstated. Parks really shape us."

an ode to road trips and that spirit of leaving the confines of your everyday life to see what's "out there" for you to discover.

It's also a story that has a lot of joy, moments of laughter and quite a few emotions along the way. From the feedback of audiences, it just seems that people have a really enjoyable experience watching it and reflecting on their own shared memories in the parks. It's made in the spirit of that indescribable freedom of hitting the open road.

The current context for national parks is very different from when you made your film. What has changed?

We never could have expected that after nearly a decade of working on this film, it would be released in a year where the foundation of parks is at such risk.

Defunding is rampant, grants have fallen through, park staff morale is at an all-time low. People who have given decades of their careers to preserve these places are seeing a lot of that work slip through their fingers. Especially with climate change, we don't have much time to go in the wrong direction before steering it back.

This is a generational fight. I hope we can come together and this can be a unifying issue where people speak for themselves, and our politicians have no choice but to support these parks fully.

A lot of us have amazing public lands right in our backyards and home states. We can support our local organizations through donations, a volunteer day, ordering lunch for staff or sharing with Park Service workers how much their work means to us. If we all come together to do that on our community level and state by state, it will create a national ripple effect that can kind of support our parks and also support morale during these difficult times.

How are you and your team using the film to build support for national parks?

We've screened at over 20 film festivals and done over 50 different screenings. Anthony and I are really passionate about merging live events, community screenings, education and advocacy for parks. The film has been a great tool for different organizations to bring people together, share messages, get feedback on what they can do to better support their communities and their parks, and fundraise.

What has making this film taught you about the importance of national parks to visitors?

I think one of the most common experiences of people from all over the world is awe, wonder and joy. Parks give us access to these amazing journeys of love and loss, adventure, friendship and healing.

The importance of parks could never be overstated. Parks really shape us. They preserve our history, they give space to look at righting different wrongs, and they build our future.

In our community screenings, we have audiences that are conservative and liberal, young and old. I hope we can dissolve some of those political differences and unify around this one thing that is part of all of us.

For more information about "Out There: A National Parks Story," visit www.outthere.film.
This Q&A was lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

HOLLY JONAS is an independent journalist currently based in Washington, D.C.

Shutdown Rundown

How did the 43-day closure of the government affect national parks?

This fall, Congress failed to pass a spending bill for the government, ushering in the longest shutdown in history. Park Service employees, like millions of other federal workers across the country, were furloughed or expected to work without pay. Given the inadequate staffing, NPCA exhorted Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum to close parks for the duration of the shutdown to protect natural and cultural resources and avoid putting visitors at risk. Instead, Secretary Burgum pushed parks to remain as accessible as possible. Information about which sites, facilities and offerings were open or available was scant, contributing to visitor confusion, as many news outlets reported. With limited access to Park Service personnel, NPCA staff documented park impacts as best they could. Here's what they discovered.

Some states, localities and associations pitched in hundreds of thousands of dollars — with no guarantee of repayment — in an unsustainable bid to keep visitor centers open and staffed at parks such as New River Gorge and Great Smoky Mountains. Other parks, including Rocky Mountain and Glacier, dipped into their pot of fee dollars, an understandable move, but one that advocates argue is illegal as the legislation that allows for parks to collect fees dictates that those dollars be used for projects that enhance the visitor experience — not for normal park operations. "The fee fund is not supposed to be a rainy-day piggy bank for the Park Service," NPCA's Kyle Hart explained in The Roanoke Times.

9,000

Number of national park staff who were furloughed as a result of the government shutdown. Despite operating with just one-third of their staff, parks were expected to remain open to the extent possible. This situation exacerbated the strain on park resources and staff; since January, the Park Service has lost 25% of its full-time, permanent workforce through firings, buyouts and forced retirements.

$41 million

Approximate fee revenue the park system lost during the government shutdown.

$62,000

Approximate cost per day to keep Great Smoky Mountains National Park facilities open during the first month of the shutdown. The funds were provided by state and local governments, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and the Friends of the Smokies.

450

Number of retired Park Service leaders who called on the administration to close the parks during the shutdown.

With only a skeleton crew at most parks, ranger visibility was minimal, furthering concerns over resource damage and reckless visitor behavior. "It felt like you showed up to school and none of the teachers were there," NPCA's Mark Rose told The Guardian, regarding his trip to Yosemite. Journalists reported people BASE jumping off El Capitan, flying drones and camping without permits, all prohibited activities. According to firsthand reports from NPCA staff, visitors ignored trail closure signs at Rocky Mountain, jumped barricades at Bandelier and parked illegally along the Blue Ridge Parkway. In mid-October, a portion of a stone wall at Gettysburg National Military Park was mysteriously toppled and later graffitied. The lack of park personnel also halted routine maintenance, impeded resource monitoring, stalled conservation efforts, and resulted in the cancellation of volunteer, youth and community events. "The shutdown is leaving national parks without the experts needed to protect fragile ecosystems, interpret American history and serve the public," NPCA's Kyle Groetzinger told Business Insider.

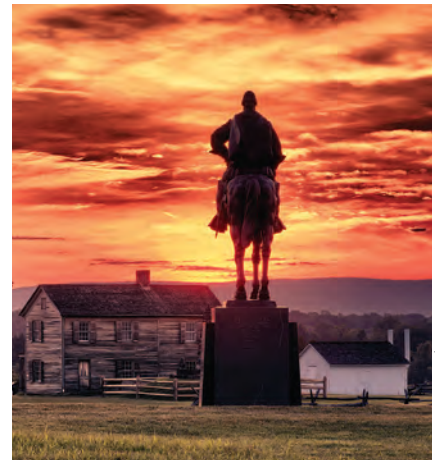
Against this backdrop swirled rumors and fears of another mass termination of federal staff. While a judge issued a temporary restraining order and then a preliminary injunction to bar the firing of certain union-represented employees during the shutdown, files submitted as part of the court proceedings indicated that hundreds of Park Service employees were in the crosshairs.

"These court filings offer a glimpse of what's ahead," said NPCA President and CEO Theresa Pierno. "Any additional cuts to the Park Service will be devastating."

—K.D.

Battling Data

Advocates slow the advancement of two massive data center projects bordering national park sites.



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Virginia is for lovers — and, increasingly, for data centers. For a variety of reasons — tax breaks, an outsize customer base, a fiber optic network superhighway — the state has more active and planned data centers than anywhere else in the world. By a lot.

"It's like a snowball," said Kyle Hart, NPCA's Mid-Atlantic program manager and a critic of the unchecked growth. "Once it got going, it was kind of this thing that was almost impossible to stop."

But residents, environmentalists and preservation groups are saying "enough" — and it turns out that it is possible to halt, or at least pause, the snowball. Two massive data center projects adjacent to national park sites have faced setbacks in court recently — outcomes hailed by NPCA and its allies, who have been fighting these projects for years. They say that if allowed to proceed, the developments could increase noise and traffic, degrade drinking water and viewsheds, block access to recreation, create an unsustainable need for energy, and impinge on treasured Civil War battlefields.

"We know people need places to live and work and shop and recreate, and now, of course, to have access to their data," said David Duncan, the president of the American Battlefield Trust. "But we can do those things and still protect the irreplaceable historic resources."

The first case concerns the Prince William Digital Gateway, a proposed data center behemoth next to Manassas National Battlefield Park (pictured), which commemorates two significant Civil War battles. The project consists of up to 37 buildings, some rising as high as 100 feet, with footprints the size of football fields. "It's not just the biggest in the Commonwealth of Virginia," Duncan said. "It's intended to be the largest data center campus of its type on planet Earth."

In August, a circuit court judge sided with a homeowners association, ruling that previously approved rezoning that would pave the way for the project was null and void because the county failed to give sufficient public notice prior to the Prince William Board of County Supervisors' vote. A spokesperson for the board declined to comment on ongoing litigation but confirmed that the county appealed the decision. (In late October, a state appeals court judge ruled to allow project construction to continue while the case advances. Separately, the American Battlefield Trust and the Coalition to Protect Prince William County are involved in a lawsuit that makes similar arguments to the homeowners'.)

The other case revolves around Wilderness Crossing, a development slated for 2,600 acres near the historic Wilderness Battlefield, a remarkably intact part of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park that memorializes a harrowing 1864 battle. The project includes residential, commercial and industrial development and allows for both data centers and warehouse distribution centers. In September, a judge ruled that the case brought by the American Battlefield Trust (one of two active legal challenges) had enough merit to proceed.

"We're very, very hopeful that we're going to prevail on this," said Duncan, whose organization argued that Orange County leaders had made procedural errors that violated the law when they approved the project. "The goal would be, ultimately, hopefully, the developers would reconsider the size and scope and location of their project. But at the very least, let's have a fair, open, honest and transparent process so people in those areas know exactly what they're signing on for."

Glenda Bradley Paul, the county administrator, said in a written statement that the county is reviewing the decision with legal counsel. A trial date has not yet been set.

One of the most vexing parts of the state's data center push, Hart said, is the lack of foresight about energy production. According to a 2024 state government report, to meet the data center energy demands on the table, Virginia would have to build a new natural gas plant every 18 months for the next 15 years, increase nuclear power generation, double the rate of solar deployment, drastically increase the state's wind energy generation, and double the amount of energy being imported from other states. "It's absolutely insane," Hart said.

He contends that the rate of data center growth has outpaced the demand. Rightsizing would naturally occur, he said, if developers did the "right thing," such as employing efficient water-use practices and generating their own clean energy.

"This bubble is being propped up on the backs of everyday Virginians with their electricity bills, with the lost tax revenue, with poorly sited plans and projects," he said. "As soon as state and local leaders start holding the industry accountable, the industry will have to start answering those tough questions, like, does this actually make sense economically?"

—R.M.

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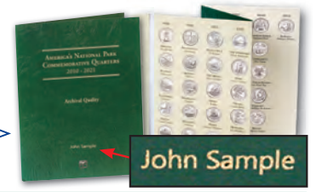

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FOR 469 MILES, the Blue Ridge Parkway meanders through Virginia and North Carolina. Opposite: In September 2024, torrential rains from Hurricane Helene caused at least 57 landslides along the parkway.

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The Long Road to Recovery

Appalachian communities along the Blue Ridge Parkway are struggling to bounce back as big sections of the park remain closed to visitors because of hurricane damage.

In September 2024, as Hurricane Helene lashed western North Carolina with torrential rains and powerful winds, Carter Francois noticed that the front door of his Alpine Inn was not latching. It didn't take him long to realize that something was very wrong with the mountainside lodge's foundation. "I heard some cracking," he said, "so I went outside, and the deck that was in front of the lobby just kind of exploded and went down the hill between the building and the road right in front of me."

Francois, the inn's co-owner and a few guests escaped the perilous situation by trekking about a mile through knee-deep mud to the town of Little Switzerland where they found shelter at a posh hotel. With all roads to Little Switzerland blocked by landslides and treefall, the National Guard was called in to airlift stranded people off the mountain. By the time Francois returned to his inn several days later, he found one of the buildings missing: It had tumbled down the mountainside.

A year later, Francois and his business partner have partially reopened the inn, but there aren't enough tourists to fill even half of the remaining rooms. The inn is just 1 mile from the Blue Ridge Parkway, but with the storm-damaged roadway near Little Switzerland still closed in one direction, many visitors are choosing to spend their money elsewhere. "Tourism out here right now is almost nonexistent," Francois said.

With some 16 million visitors in a normal year, the Blue Ridge Parkway is one of the nation's most-visited national park sites and central Appalachia's

economic powerhouse, generating an estimated $1.4 billion in annual spending and supporting over 19,000 jobs. So the closure of large swaths of the 469-mile roadway has had a big impact on the local economy.

One of the areas most affected was McDowell County, where the Alpine Inn is located. Local boosters have worked for decades to rebrand this former manufacturing area into a hub for outdoor recreation, but the tourism sector has been suffering from the hurricane fallout. Kim Effler, president and CEO of the McDowell Chamber of Commerce, said traffic at the chamber's visitor center in Marion, the county seat, decreased by 50% in June and July, compared with the previous year. Many visitors who do come seek information on accessing the parkway, but Effler must tell them that big sections of it remain inaccessible. Still, she directs tourists to visit the area's hardest-hit towns, telling them, "Your visit to us is part of our economic recovery."

Twelve miles west in Old Fort, Jeremy Poore co-owns a business that transports mountain bikers up 3,800 feet to a point on the parkway where they can let gravity carry them back down on scenic trails. Because of the parkway closures, shuttle revenue is down 98%, Poore said. He's still paying for insurance, web hosting and permits, and he said he hopes to keep his business afloat until the local section of the parkway reopens. "Our goal is to be able to survive financially until that time," he said.

The drop in mountain biking clientele hurts other businesses, too. "The average person who comes to ride the shuttle might spend $30 on our shuttle, and they'll spend another $30 to $50 in town," Poore said. "That's having a coffee and a pastry or having beer and lunch."

The National Park Service closed the entire length of the parkway in the immediate aftermath of Helene. The agency began reopening sections of the parkway in Virginia a couple of weeks later, but it took months to assess the full extent of the damage, especially in North Carolina. In the spring, the Park Service said that at least 57 landslides had wiped out entire sections of the roadway. Restrooms and visitor centers were severely damaged by the storm, with the Linville Falls Visitor Center completely destroyed by 12-foot-high rushing floodwaters. It was clear that reopening the entire parkway was going to be a herculean task. In addition, park employees, many of whom suffered directly from the storm, would face uncertainties of their own as the Trump administration targeted the Park Service with massive staff reductions and budget cuts. "There's a devastation that comes with that, too," said Eboni Preston Goddard, NPCA's Southeast regional director.

At the start of the summer tourist season, elected officials, business leaders and Park Service officials in North Carolina gathered in an emotionally charged meeting. Business leaders

NPS

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LITTLE SWITZERLAND, a small North Carolina town along the parkway, has suffered from a drop in tourism post-hurricane.

wanted to know when sections of the parkway would reopen, but park staff were only offering imprecise estimates. "That 'we're not really sure' answer didn't sit well with a community that was gearing up for the summer and needed those answers," said David Jackson, president and CEO of the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce, in the northwestern part of the state.

The Park Service is using a reinforced soil slope procedure that involves constructing a tiered embankment of gravel underneath the roadway to improve its long-term resiliency, Leesa Brandon, the park's spokesperson, told me. While only 50 miles of roadway remain closed to the public, the area between Linville Falls and Mount Mitchell, where Little Switzerland is located, will not likely reopen until the fall of 2026, but "we've got good momentum going," she said.

Meanwhile, the parkway may not fully bounce back, even after repairs are completed. In July, the president signed a law that strips $267 million from the Park Service's budget, while an NPCA analysis noted a 25% reduction in permanent staffing and a nearly 50% reduction in seasonal hiring. Brandon and the agency's communications office did not comment on the impact of staffing cuts on the parkway's operations, but those could affect whether campgrounds, picnic areas, visitor centers and restrooms will be staffed and open to the public in the years ahead.

Over the past year, Carter Francois said, he made countless calls to his insurance company and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but he and the inn's co-owner were denied coverage by their insurance carrier and only received a "chunk of change" from FEMA. It may cost as much as $3 million to fully rebuild the 1929 inn, a gigantic sum for a business that saw revenue fall 73% so far this year.

To make ends meet, Francois made the difficult decision to partially close the lodge for the leaf-peeping season and go sell tacos out of a food truck to workers at an IV bag manufacturing plant at the base of the mountain. He said he thinks the parkway near his lodge may not open until the spring of 2027 — some 2 1/2 years after the passage of the hurricane. But he has a request for returning tourists once the parkway does eventually reopen: "When you come here," he said, "have empathy."

G. SAMANTHA ROSENTHAL is an independent journalist, historian and award-winning author. Her most recent book is "Living Queer History: Remembrance and Belonging in a Southern City."

National Parks
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CITY OF MUSIC

A jazz fan takes a long-awaited journey to New Orleans.

Words & pictures by Keith Henry Brown

Having been a jazz fiend since my teens, I'd long fantasized about making a pilgrimage to New Orleans for one main reason: to immerse myself in the culture that shaped the music I love.

New Orleans is often described as the birthplace of jazz, and though that's open to debate, the city is undeniably one of the musical form's most vital homes.

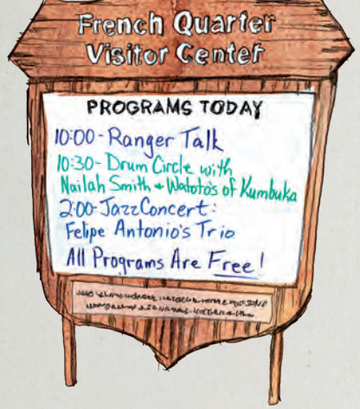
The city's distinctive blend of African, European and Caribbean influences, its ubiquitous brass bands, and its joyful street parades all helped lay the foundation for jazz.

New Orleans has produced giants such as Louis Armstrong and Wynton Marsalis, but its magic goes beyond any individual.

It is, quite simply, a city of **music.**

The jazz rangers!

I began my visit at the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, tucked into the heart of the French Quarter. Easy to miss if you're not looking for it, the park site offers free performances and talks on the city's musical heritage. I caught a set by some "jazz rangers" — park rangers who are also accomplished musicians. I was floored.



The New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park.

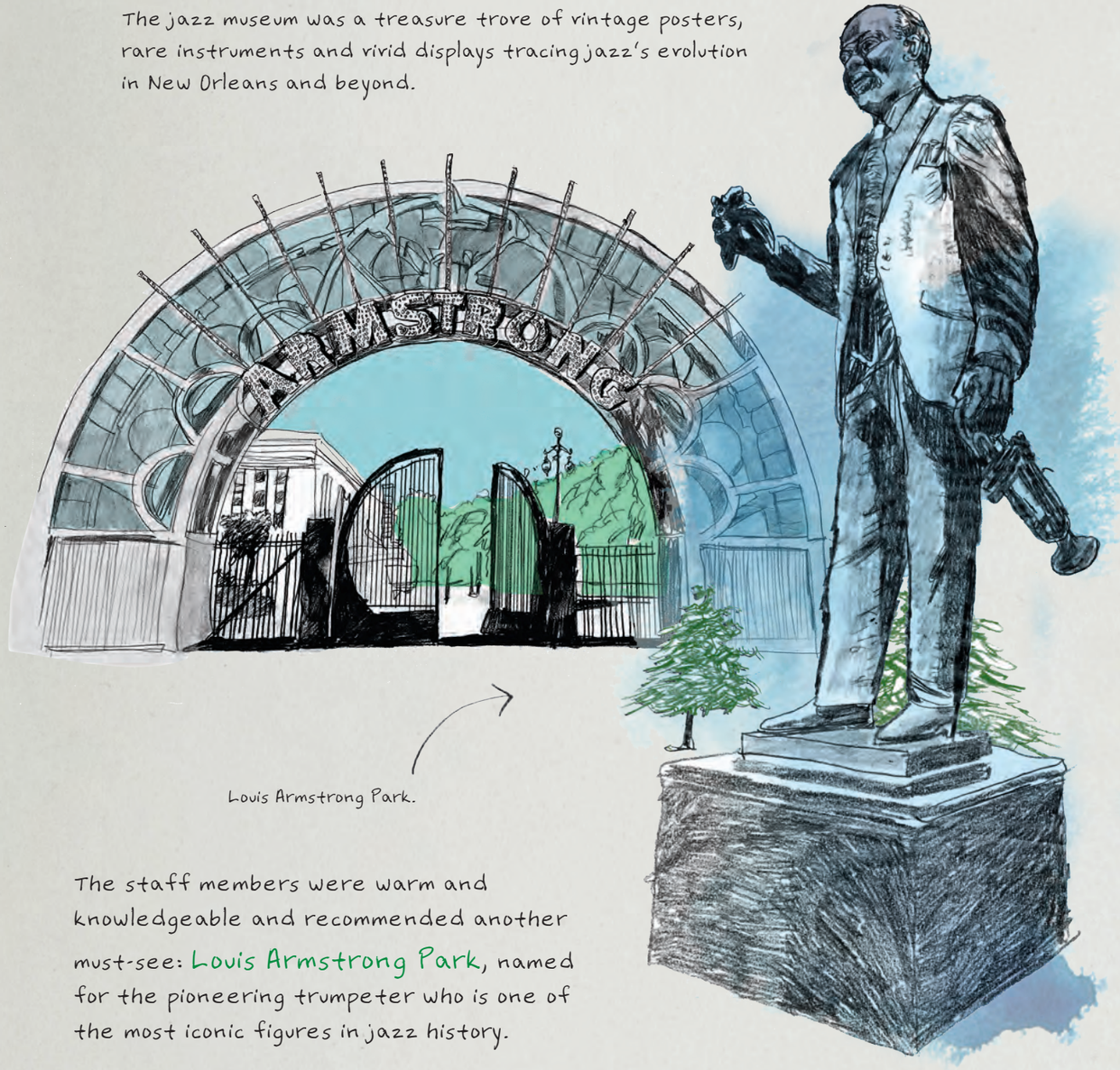
They played beautifully and spoke with passion about jazz as both a historical tradition and a living art.

Before the trip, I'd done my research and compiled a list of essential sites. But in New Orleans, jazz doesn't live only in museums or clubs — it lives in the streets.

Heading toward the New Orleans Jazz Museum, I passed street musicians playing with a fire and finesse that rivaled anything you might hear in a concert hall.

One group near Café du Monde, where I stopped for a warm beignet, included a wildly expressive tuba player who practically stole the show.

The jazz museum was a treasure trove of vintage posters, rare instruments and vivid displays tracing jazz's evolution in New Orleans and beyond.



The staff members were warm and knowledgeable and recommended another must-see: Louis Armstrong Park, named for the pioneering trumpeter who is one of the most iconic figures in jazz history.

One of the pleasures of New Orleans is how walkable it is.

On my way to the park, I passed colorful shops, impromptu street gatherings and sharply dressed locals who seemed, more often than not, to be in the middle of a celebration. Music drifted from every corner. Joy felt ambient. It was as if the entire city was improvising — just like jazz itself. On Frenchmen Street, club after club offered its own strain of live music, from traditional jazz to funk to blues.

I wrapped up the day with a quiet moment outside Preservation Hall, one of the most sacred spaces in the world for traditional jazz. Though I didn't manage to get inside that evening, just standing before its doors felt like arriving at a kind of musical mecca.

Another unforgettable stop was Kermit Ruffins' Mother-in-Law Lounge, where the legendary trumpeter served up soulful jazz and some of the best barbecue chicken I've ever had. The vibe was pure community — where the line between audience and performer disappears.

Kermit Ruffins!

Before ending my jazz weekend, I decided to return once more to the national historical park.

This time, I caught a spirited community drum circle that highlighted jazz's West African percussive roots.

I also learned more about Congo Square, northwest of the French Quarter, which is famous for its central role in the history of African American music. As the beat grew, a history lesson unfolded, courtesy of an enthusiastic jazz ranger — and soon, everyone was dancing, lost in rhythm, grinning wide.

New Orleans didn't just live up to my expectations — it played them back to me in harmony. If you love jazz, it's not just a place to visit.

It's a feeling to absorb.

Keith Henry Brown is a Brooklyn-based artist, author and illustrator. Known for his jazz-inspired work, he's designed for Jazz at Lincoln Center and illustrated acclaimed children's books such as "Birth of the Cool." His latest project is "Pushing Hope," a graphic memoir by Raymond Santana of the Exonerated Five.

Reflecting on America's 250th anniversary in the National Park System.

PARKS& REVOLUTION

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BUNKER HILL HERO

by Dorian Fox

Salem Poor, a Black soldier, was singled out for his bravery in one of the first clashes of the American Revolution, but his role in the battle is a mystery that historians have been wondering about for more than 200 years.

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SALEM POOR was featured on a 10-cent postal stamp issued in 1975.

ON THE MORNING OF JUNE 17, 1775, after a night spent shoveling dirt to build fortifications just southeast of Bunker Hill in Charlestown, Massachusetts, provincial militias were beset by cannon fire from British Navy ships. By that afternoon, 2,400 British soldiers sent from Boston — then a separate city — had advanced on the peninsula, and soon most of Charlestown was in flames. Two months after the first bloodshed of the American Revolutionary War at Lexington and Concord, tensions had boiled over again.

Although the Colonials would lose the Battle of Bunker Hill — the site of which is now part of Boston National Historical Park and a stop on the city's Freedom Trail — the conflict resulted in significant casualties on the British side. More than 1,000 were killed or wounded (as opposed to around 450 militiamen), a toll that proved the mettle of the Continental Army and solidified the fight for American independence.

Amid the fray of the day's battle, Salem Poor, a formerly enslaved man who had purchased his freedom several years prior, stood out for his poise and valor. As British forces made their third charge on the redoubt, Poor's unit came under heavy fire and returned shots at the redcoats as it retreated.

Six months later, 14 regimental officers signed a petition to recognize Poor as a "brave and gallant soldier" who had "behaved like an experienced officer," and sent it to the Colony's general court. No other soldier in the battle was given such an honor.

What Poor did to earn that praise, however, is still a mystery. If the officers were effusive, they were also vague. "To set forth the particulars of his conduct would be tedious," they wrote.

"I call that the most frustrating petition in American history," said John Hannigan, an archivist at Tufts University who studies the institutional effects of slavery in New England. "They picked Salem Poor for a reason. We don't know what that reason is."

This didn't stop historians from speculating about Poor's heroic deeds. In the 1780s, Jeremy Belknap, a clergyman and a founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, was told that during the Bunker Hill battle, which took place primarily on nearby Breed's Hill, a man named Salem shot and killed Maj. John Pitcairn — a British commander despised by colonists, in part because he may have fired the first shots at Lexington. But according to subsequent assessments by scholars and depictions of the shooting, the marksman was more likely Peter Salem, another Black soldier fighting alongside Poor. In 1880, historian Sarah Loring Bailey suggested that Poor had shot British Lt. Col. James Abercrombie, though based on the officer's own written words in the days after his mortal wounding, it's more likely he was hit by friendly fire.

Over time, despite the hazy particulars — or perhaps because of them — the story of Salem Poor became more widely known. As Americans began to commemorate their independence more openly in the 1800s and antislavery efforts gained traction, abolitionists sometimes cited Poor's example, often alongside Peter Salem's.

In 1975, for the American bicentennial, the U.S. government issued a postage stamp featuring Poor's image (the same year, the Bunker Hill Monument, which was completed in 1842, became part of the National Park System), and in 2001, the National Park Service published a pamphlet celebrating Poor's life and service.

Here's what historians have pieced together about Poor's life: Born into slavery in the 1740s, he was acquired as an infant by Lydia Abbott in Salem, Massachusetts (archival accounts suggest this could be how he got his name), and brought to Andover, where he grew up working on the farm of John and Rebecca Poor, whose son married Abbott's daughter. In 1769, Poor purchased his freedom for 27 pounds, or roughly a working man's annual wages. How he earned the sum is unknown, but he may have been paid for his labor performed for others, which was not uncommon in New England at the time.

Before enlisting, Poor married Nancy Parker, an African American and Native woman who had also recently secured her freedom through a lawsuit. In the New England Colonies, "freedom suits" were sometimes brought on the grounds that people whose mothers were born free could not be sold into slavery. Often, owners didn't bother to contest the cases.

Edward L. Bell, an independent researcher who has studied Parker's life extensively, explained that Poor and Parker may have pooled their resources and knowledge of such laws. "I think they strategically planned this freedom suit for her," he said, "so that they could get married, and have kids who would have a legal declaration of contingent freedom." Records show the couple had a son, Jonas.

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VISITORS CAN ASCEND to the top of Bunker Hill Monument by climbing 294 steps inside the obelisk (above). Opposite: Capt. William Smith's house, where Cato Smith, a Black soldier in the Revolutionary War, was an enslaved servant.

Given the treatment of non-white people in the Colonies, which, in addition to enslavement, included the brutal removal of Indigenous people from their lands, it's unclear why Poor — and more than 5,000 Black and Native American men — would enlist to fight the British in the first place. Hannigan's research suggests the reasons varied, and for some, it was probably about making a living. "Most of the men are receiving money," he said. "Some men are receiving cattle. You see bushels of grain." In the case of some enslaved soldiers, service was tied to freedom, which also bears out in historical records. For others, though, there were no such guarantees; some colonists sent enslaved men to fight in their place and collected their pay.

As a freed man, Poor would have chosen to enlist, and it's possible he was stirred by talk of patriotism and liberty in the Colonies. Even though he served honorably, there's little evidence that his distinguished service improved his lot. The petition praising him was tabled by the legislature and never acted upon. Poor himself might not have known about it.

And as impressed as the officers who signed it might have been, Hannigan said, it's probable their support of Poor was driven partly by self-interest. A couple of weeks after the Bunker Hill battle, George Washington assumed command of the Continental Army, and he promptly banned Black soldiers from enlisting. Concerned about meeting troop quotas, the Massachusetts officers may have held up Poor's example in the hope of convincing Washington that soldiers of color were just as capable and dependable as any men in the field. "These white officers were not doing this because they believed in Black freedom, or even Black personhood," Hannigan said. "They believed in recruiting numbers for their army."

Washington reversed his decision, and ultimately Poor would go on to reenlist — serving three more years and fighting in some of the war's most significant battles, including at Saratoga. He served until 1780, and later that year he was married a second time after having separated from Parker. By the end of his life, he had married twice more and fathered at least two children. He spent time in Providence, Rhode Island, before returning to Boston. Records show he was admitted to an almshouse in 1793, and in 1799, he was briefly jailed for "breach of peace." Details about his life after the war are scant, but the road was probably not easy.

"Before the war, there had been a vibrant Black community in Boston," Hannigan said. "But the British take over the city, and most people evacuate. I think it was just very difficult for people who were living more of that transient lifestyle to find themselves and get settled."

In addition, despite their role in winning the country's independence, veterans were not exactly celebrated after the war. "Many people, particularly in New England, had a pretty dim view of soldiers," Hannigan explained. "There was an understanding that armies were tools of the tyrants." Although disabled soldiers were granted some benefits just after the war, pensions wouldn't be offered to all Continental Army veterans until 1818.

Poor died in 1802 and may be buried in Boston's Copp's Hill Burying Ground or in the Central Burying Ground. While his name wouldn't be widely known for decades, the Revolution he fought in had awakened African Americans to new possibilities for dignity and equality under the law. In 1783, Quock Walker successfully sued for his freedom, and slavery in Massachusetts was declared unconstitutional, though the institution wouldn't be abolished until the passing of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865. Other veterans of color, such as George Middleton, who led the Bucks of America (one of several Black militias active during the Revolutionary War period), would become activists for emancipation in the years to come, alongside Prince Hall and other Black abolitionists in Boston.

Hannigan said that although the attention paid to Poor's life is understandable, his story is one among many. "It's great that we know who he is," he said, "but we should also remember that he's one of several thousand Black men who served in the Revolution, all of whom had stories to tell."

Forced Into Battle?

Unlike Salem Poor, some Black men in the New England militias had little choice but to serve. In 1775, Cato Smith was living as an enslaved servant in the house of William and Catherine Louisa Smith and their three small children in Lincoln, Massachusetts, a site now preserved in Minute Man National Historical Park.

Though the house was near what is now known as the Battle Road between Lexington and Concord, there is no record of Cato Smith fighting in the Revolution's first battles on April 19. Five days later, however, he enlisted with the Lincoln Minute Men, a company captained by William Smith, his enslaver. According to George Quintal Jr.'s 2004 study "Patriots of Color," which was commissioned by the Park Service and identifies over 100 Black and Native men who fought on the Battle Road and at Bunker Hill, it's possible that Smith wanted to join, but his relationship to William Smith suggests his service was probably compulsory.

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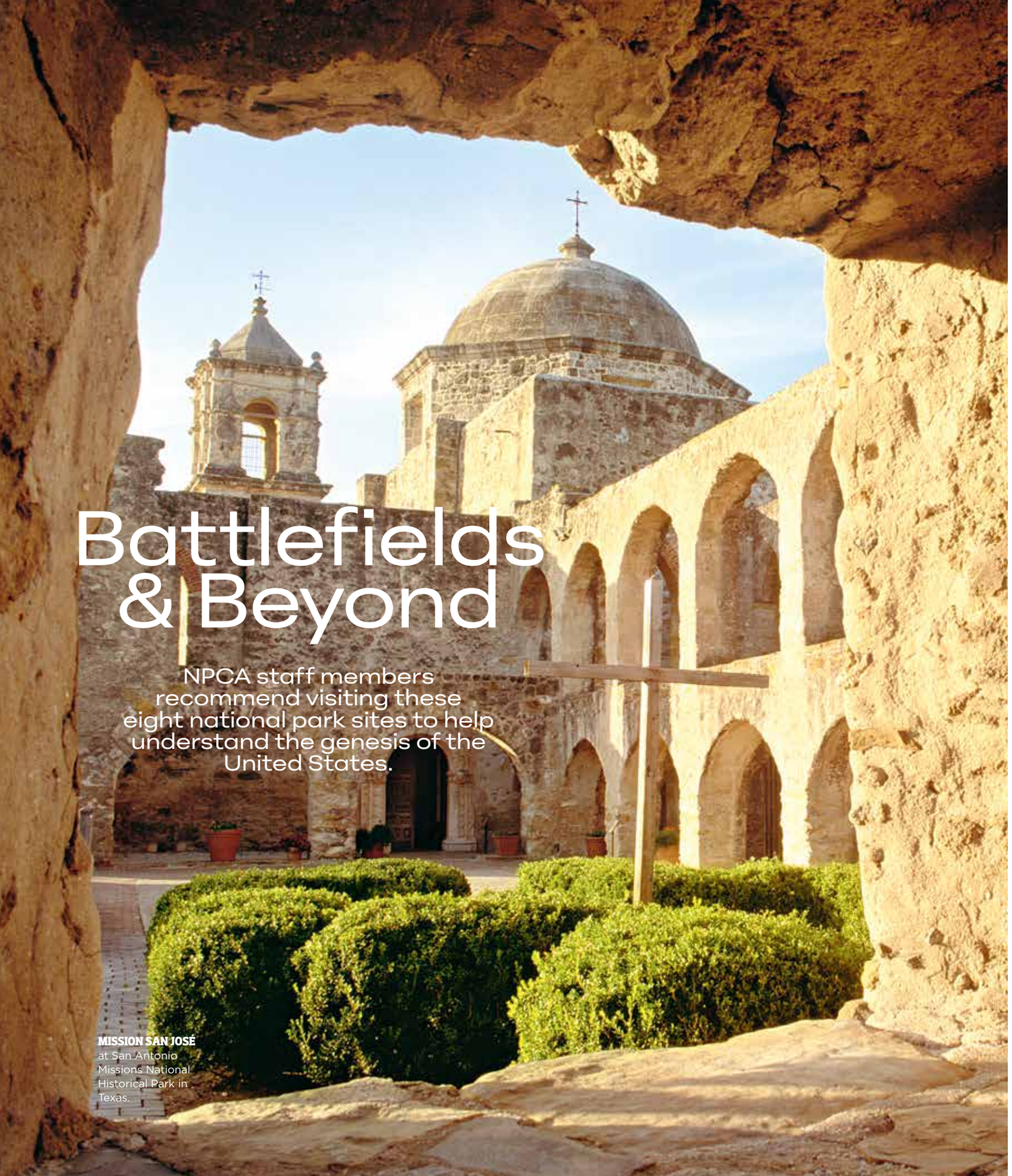
Cato Smith was born in Africa. At 10 years old, he was taken on a slave ship to Boston, where he was purchased by Rev. William Smith of Weymouth, Massachusetts. The Reverend gave Smith to his son, the younger William, a decade later.

After serving during the Siege of Boston in 1775, Smith reenlisted in 1776 (possibly in William Smith's place, Quintal notes). He was sent to the New York theater, fighting in battles at Long Island and White Plains, among others, but his health clearly suffered. In late January of 1777, Smith died at camp in New Castle, New York. He collected his soldier's pay during his service, though after his death, William Smith was able to claim his back wages. Cato Smith fought for the ideals of freedom and independence, but it's likely he was never granted freedom himself.

DORIAN FOX is a writer, teacher and freelance editor living in the Boston area.



Battlefields & Beyond

NPCA staff members recommend visiting these eight national park sites to help understand the genesis of the United States.

MISSION SAN JOSÉ at San Antonio Missions National Historical Park in Texas.

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AS THE COUNTRY PREPARES to commemorate the 250th anniversary of its independence, those interested in learning more about the birth of the United States have a vast resource at their disposal: the National Park System. Indeed, the Park Service cares for some of the most significant Revolutionary War sites, from Minute Man National Historical Park in Massachusetts, the location of some of the war's first skirmishes, to Colonial National Historical Park in Virginia, site of the war's final major battle, to the building at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia where both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were signed. Independence Hall and Yorktown Battlefield would rank high on any list of must-see Revolution-era locales, but we wanted to learn about perhaps less-obvious parks preserving historic sites that played important roles in the country's creation, so we asked some of the best experts out there — our NPCA colleagues — for suggestions. And they gave us more than a little food for thought, with recommendations to visit parks from New Mexico to Indiana. Here are eight sites that parkgoers can tour to better understand the United States' origin story.

By Nicolas Brulliard and Katherine DeGroff

COURTESY OF PAUL VANDERVEEN

Chaco Culture National Historical Park, New Mexico

The United States didn't blink into being with the signing of the Declaration of Independence — the seeds of its existence were sown much, much earlier, said Katie Shea, NPCA's Tribal policy fellow. "It's essential to recognize that the nation's origin story is not solely defined by 1776," she said.

By the time European settlers began arriving on this country's shores, entire cultures had already come and gone, and hundreds of others were thriving. At Plymouth, for example, the Wampanoag famously taught the Pilgrims how to interplant the three sisters (corn, beans and squash) for a successful harvest. In what is now Florida, the Seminoles — themselves migrants from northern lands — met, traded and sparred with the Spanish. Across a vast tract that includes modern-day New York, the Haudenosaunee (or Iroquois) Confederacy practiced one of the oldest participatory democracies in the world, the principles of which served as a model for the Founding Fathers.

Throughout the Park System, dozens of sites "honor the deep histories and enduring legacies of Native nations whose stories predate and shape the United States," Shea said. She highlighted Ocmulgee Mounds and Nez Perce national historical parks, Effigy Mounds National Monument, and her personal favorite, Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

Shea, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, described her awe at visiting this 34,000-acre site in northwestern New Mexico for the first time in college. "It just has, like, this sense of otherness around it," she said. During its heyday, around 1050 C.E., Chaco was the center of Ancestral Puebloan culture, serving as a massive hub for trade, ceremony and politics. The inhabitants erected dozens of circular "great houses" — multi-storied architectural wonders complete with hundreds of rooms — linked via roads to a network of some 150 other complexes in the broader region. Everything at Chaco, from the sandstone walls of the buildings to the elaborately decorated pottery to the pendants fashioned from shells from faraway lands, speaks to "the sophistication of people who were here," Shea said.

She believes visiting Chaco Culture can change the way someone thinks about America's 250th. "When you have a site like Chaco that's very well traveled and is very well connected, it kind of gives you an idea of how many people were actually here in North America before people came over from Britain or Russia or France or Spain," she said. "I think it challenges people to think backwards," Shea continued, to recognize that there was "a shared fabric of history before the United States came in and became the nation that it is."

Fort Necessity National Battlefield, Pennsylvania

In 1754, several of the Revolutionary War's players clashed in an area that is part of today's southwestern Pennsylvania. Their roles were quite different from the ones they'd play a couple of decades later, though. George Washington, in his first military campaign as a 22-year-old, was fighting the French, his would-be allies during the American Revolution, on behalf of the British Empire, his future mortal enemy, over territory that both colonial powers considered crucial.

The first shots of the French and Indian War, which was fought by France, Britain, and their respective settlers and Native allies, were fired on May 28, 1754, at a site that is now part of Fort Necessity National Battlefield. In circumstances that remain unclear, Washington's troops attacked a French encampment, and an officer was killed. The French retaliated a few weeks later when they assailed Washington's encampment a few miles away. After an all-day battle conducted in a heavy downpour, Washington surrendered. He and his troops left on July 4, and the French burned down Fort Necessity.

The British would end up winning the larger conflict in 1763, but victory came at a high financial cost. "The British came, and they fought the French, and they spent all this money. I think in part the parliament and the king felt like the colonists owed them," said Chad Lord, the senior director of NPCA's environment and energy policy, who several years ago visited the park where the main attraction is a wooden fortification reconstructed based on archaeological excavations.

In subsequent years, Britain imposed a series of taxes on its American subjects, which led to increasingly violent confrontations between colonists and British forces. The French and Indian War "was kind of a catalyst for the actions by the British Parliament, which then the colonists reacted to," Lord said. "So, I can draw a line to Fort Necessity and say this is where some of the seeds of revolution were sown."

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Salem Maritime National Historical Park, Massachusetts

Much of the Revolutionary War was fought on land, but the battle was raging on the seas, too. Britain had the most powerful navy in the world at the time, while the American naval forces were close to nonexistent, so the colonists resorted to what was known as privateering. Under established rules, private crafts from small whaleboats to large, multi-gun vessels were authorized to attack British ships and seize their cargo, which the boat owners could then auction off.

©IAN DAGNALL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

"It's almost like legal pirates, but if they got caught, they were totally screwed and could be shipped to England," said Sarah Barmeyer, the deputy vice president of NPCA's conservation programs.

The privateers in Salem, one of the few significant ports that never fell to the British during the American Revolution, made an outsize contribution to the war effort. They attacked Britain's fleet, disrupting supply lines and trade routes and eroding the British Parliament's support of the war in the process. Out of Salem alone, 158 privateers captured 445 British vessels.

Barmeyer, who stopped by Salem Maritime National Historical Park this summer, said the park's attractions include centuries-old buildings, a replica of a late-1700s vessel and what she considers a mandatory stop for souvenir hounds. "It's one of the better gift shops I've seen in the Park Service," she said.

Boston National Historical Park, Massachusetts

Boston National Historical Park encompasses an impressive collection of major Revolution-era sites, but what makes it stand out is that it is deeply embedded in a vibrant city, said NPCA Senior Visitation Program Manager Cassidy Jones, who calls it a "neighborhood national park."

Jones, who lived in the Charlestown Navy Yard when she worked as a ranger at two other Boston-area park sites a little more than a decade ago, said she'd watch from her window as nor'easters rolled in and battered the USS Constitution, a three-masted ship built a decade after the Revolution. And on the way to her train stop, she would follow the Freedom Trail, a 2.5-mile red line on the ground that connects most of the park's attractions as well as other landmarks related to the Revolution and beyond.

During her time in Boston, Jones particularly enjoyed spending time in the North End, a well-preserved neighborhood that is home to some of the park's associated sites, including the Paul Revere House and Old North Church — and standout Italian restaurants where visitors can feast on pizza and cannoli. "It's this site of amazing history that also continues to be a living neighborhood," she said.

Some of the historic buildings and modern-day hangouts are one and the same. One of Jones' favorite nighttime activities was trivia night with a group of colleagues at Warren Tavern, a haunt once patronized by the likes of Paul Revere and George Washington that sits a couple of blocks from Bunker Hill Monument. Visitors interested in joining in the fun should know they might face stiff competition. "Rangers are the best people to go to pub trivia with," she said. "They have a lot of obscure knowledge."

George Rogers Clark National Historical Park, Indiana

Several Revolutionary War battles were consequential, but only one led to the young United States nearly doubling the size of its territory.

The British didn't expect the Continental Army to attack Fort Sackville, in the southwestern part of today's Indiana, in the dead of winter, but that's exactly what George Rogers Clark did. Clark's troops, which included Americans and Frenchmen, outnumbered British soldiers, and he made his forces appear even larger by unfurling an inordinate number of flags. After Clark had five Native American warriors allied with the British brutally executed, the officer in charge of the fort surrendered on Feb. 25, 1779. As a consequence of Clark's victory, Britain ceded lands to the United States that included today's Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin and part of Minnesota.

"I like this park because it moves the Revolutionary War story beyond the 13 Colonies and ties it into the next stage of American history — westward expansion," said Tim Koenning, NPCA's Midwest program manager, who went out of his way to check out the George Rogers Clark Memorial, a columned rotunda housing Clark's statue and the park's main attraction.

As fate would have it, in 1804, William Clark, one half of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, would begin his famous journey in Illinois — land secured a couple of decades earlier by his brother George. In other words, George Rogers Clark's victory "made that expedition possible," Koenning said.

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Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia

During the spring and summer of 1780, royal forces were rolling from one win to the next in South Carolina, and victory in the war seemed within grasp.

"The British had a lot of momentum, they had taken Charleston," said Jeff Hunter, NPCA's Southern Appalachian director. "Things were not looking good for the patriots."

But in late September, patriot militias departed from various points in the region and headed toward Kings Mountain near the North Carolina-South Carolina border, where British Maj. Patrick Ferguson had assembled troops of locals loyal to the British Crown. On Oct. 7, 1780, the patriots overwhelmed their adversaries and killed Ferguson. "They were able to decisively beat the British at Kings Mountain, which turned the tide in the war," Hunter said.

Along some 330 miles of roads and 80 miles of trails, the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail follows the approximate path of the victorious militias all the way to Kings Mountain National Military Park. It intersects with the Blue Ridge Parkway near the Orchard at Altapass, where visitors can sample apple pie and get history lessons from one of the former owners. It also crosses what Hunter described as one of the most beautiful sections of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. Hunter, who thru-hiked the AT in 2000, spent the night near the intersection of the two trails in "one of the coolest shelters" on the AT.

"It's gone now because it became unstable, but it was an old barn, and back then I slept in the loft," Hunter said of the Overmountain shelter. "It was very, very memorable."

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San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Texas

What would the United States look like without California, Texas and much of the American Southwest? Fortunately, we don't have to contemplate that alternate reality thanks to the establishment of a few Spanish churches decades before 1776, said Cristóbal López, a historian who is also NPCA's Texas program manager.

It's a little tortuous to follow, but here it is: In the early 1700s, Spain, in a last-ditch effort to maintain a stronghold in Texas, built several missions in a territory that would become the property of Mexico a century later. It was at Mission Concepción that Texas rebels and Mexican soldiers faced off in what may have been the first major battle of the Texas Revolution. Texas won the conflict and eventually became the 28th U.S. state. That move incensed Mexico and contributed to the start of the Mexican-American War, which the United States won in 1848. As a result, the U.S. not only solidified its claim to Texas, but it also acquired California, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, most of Arizona and Colorado, and parts of Kansas, Oklahoma and Wyoming. "It's kind of just a big chain reaction," López said.

Today, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park (which includes Mission Concepción and three other missions) along with the Alamo, the famous mission that is the property of the state of Texas, are also protected as a World Heritage Site, but Texans did not always have the same level of reverence for the missions. López, who interned twice at the park a few years ago, said he and his colleagues would often show Mission San José visitors the marks possibly left by the Texian army's musket balls and cannon shells during the Texas Revolution. "They would shoot the mission," he said. "They would use it as target practice."

Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site, Arkansas

The events at this historic site occurred nearly two centuries after the Revolution, but NPCA's Chad Lord sees a direct connection between what happened in 1776 and 1957. That was the year when Black students braved hostile crowds to exercise their right to attend what had been an all-white high school in Little Rock.

"The Declaration has an ideal that we've never been able to achieve fully," said Lord, who visited the park on a road trip a couple of years ago. "And that site in Little Rock, Arkansas, demonstrates an ongoing desire to meet that vision" — that all people are created equal.

Following the Brown v. Board of Education 1954 Supreme Court decision, which ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, the school board in Little Rock agreed to make a plan for integrating local schools starting in September 1957. On Sept. 4, a small group of Black students tried to enter Central High School, but they were barred from doing so by the state's National Guard. Media coverage reverberated across the nation, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower intervened, eventually wresting control of the National Guard from the Arkansas governor and deploying federal troops to protect the students later known as the Little Rock Nine. They attended their first full day of classes on Sept. 25.

Central High remains an active high school with around 2,500 students, and the inside of the building is currently off-limits. Visitors can stroll the grounds of the school, which the American Institute of Architects named the most beautiful high school in the country when it was completed in 1927. They can also check out the nearby historic gas station that served as a makeshift office for national and international reporters covering the 1957 events that energized efforts to integrate schools across the South. "This Arkansas site definitely contributes to our revolutionary story," Lord said.

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LIBERTY BELL, Independence National Historical Park.

A REVOLUTIONARY ITINERARY

Here are some additional national park sites that preserve stories and places associated with the American Revolution and the founding of the country.

Adams National Historical Park, Massachusetts

Charles Pinckney National Historic Site, South Carolina

Colonial National Historical Park, Virginia

Cowpens National Battlefield, South Carolina

Fire Island National Seashore, New York

Fort Stanwix National Monument, New York

George Washington Birthplace National Monument, Virginia

Guilford Courthouse National Military Park, North Carolina

Hamilton Grange National Memorial, New York

Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site, Pennsylvania

Independence National Historical Park, Pennsylvania

Kings Mountain National Military Park, South Carolina

Longfellow House-Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site, Massachusetts

Lower Delaware National Wild and Scenic River, Pennsylvania and New Jersey

Minute Man National Historical Park, Massachusetts

Morristown National Historical Park, New Jersey

National Mall and Memorial Parks, Washington, D.C.

Ninety Six National Historic Site, South Carolina

Saratoga National Historical Park, New York

Springfield Armory National Historic Site, Massachusetts

Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial, Pennsylvania

The First American Revolution?

A century before the Revolutionary War, Pueblo people defeated and expelled a European colonial power. **By Nicolas Brulliard**

★

THE WOODEN ROOF of the mission church in Pecos was engulfed in flames, but the massive adobe building, some 145 feet long, wouldn't collapse on its own. So the rebels, intent on destroying this symbol of colonial power, tore down the church's walls brick by brick — all 300,000 of them. "With an explosive vengeance, the Pueblos had reduced the grandest church in New Mexico to an imposing mound of earthen rubble," wrote John L. Kessell in his 1979 study of Pecos history, "Kiva, Cross, and Crown," conducted for what is now Pecos National Historical Park.

Over the course of a dozen days in August 1680, Pueblo people revolted against Spanish friars, settlers and soldiers. Under the leadership of Po'pay, a religious figure, they overwhelmed Spanish forces, forced them to leave the region, and put an end to many decades of oppressive rule. "They kicked the Spanish out," said Michael Wilcox, the author of "The Pueblo Revolt and the Mythology of Conquest." "I don't think that ever happened anywhere else."

The Spanish did return 12 years later, but the balance of power between the colonists and the Pueblos would be forever altered, with the latter retaining a degree of autonomy that would continue over the following centuries. Little known outside of New Mexico, the Pueblo Revolt "was, in effect, the first American Revolution with far-reaching consequences continuing today," wrote Joe S. Sando, the late Pueblo historian, in "Po'pay: Leader of the First American Revolution."

It was rumors of unimaginably wealthy cities that first lured conquistadors to northern New Mexico, and in 1540, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado led a large expedition toward the country of the people the Spanish called the "Indios de los Pueblos." One of the places Coronado would visit was Pǽkilâ, which the colonizers would refer to as Cicuye and later Pecos. The easternmost Pueblo city state, Pecos was accustomed to trading with Plains Tribes and would have been more inclined to treat the arriving Spaniards as equals rather than conquerors they needed to submit to.

"They knew that this was just another group who was coming into their territory," said Wilcox, a Stanford University senior lecturer of Yuman descent who has focused much of his work on Indigenous history and archaeology in the Southwest.

One Spanish chronicler described Pecos as a pueblo consisting of four-stories-high buildings. A quarter of Pecos' 2,000 inhabitants were warriors, and the pueblo was "feared throughout the land," he wrote. The Spanish delegation and the residents exchanged gifts, and the conquistadors read out the Requerimiento, a declaration warning that Indigenous people would have to accept the authority of the Catholic Church and Spanish monarchy or face dire consequences. None of the locals understood a word of it.

The Spaniards enlisted guides at the pueblo and pushed as far as present-day Kansas, but they found none of the riches they were looking for and tortured and killed one of the Pecos guides. Pueblos to the west fared worse at the hands of Coronado's troops, as hundreds of Native people perished and entire villages were burned in the so-called Tiguex War.

Over the next six decades, the Spanish made other forays into the area and reached Pecos again, but settlement didn't begin in earnest until the arrival of Juan de Oñate in 1598. Oñate was the first governor of the New Mexico colony, and his rule was notoriously brutal. To crush resistance at Acoma Pueblo, for example, Oñate had his men kill countless residents, force many others into slavery and mutilate male survivors over the age of 25.

"They're thinking that the only way to make these people do what they want them to do is using violence," Wilcox said.

Franciscan friars exerted their own authority, and it was not always benevolent. They attempted to forcibly convert locals, and so they sought to root out what they considered devil worship. In Pecos around 1620, the friar in charge gathered all the ceremonial objects he could find and smashed them to pieces. "What ends up happening is that people's religious beliefs, their spiritual practices, they all go underground," Wilcox said.

Religious repression, forced labor and heavy tributes continued for the next half century, and in the 1670s, these harsh living conditions were exacerbated by drought. Tensions esca-

lated further in 1675 when the Spanish governor rounded up 47 Pueblo religious leaders — Po'pay among them — on charges of witchcraft. All were harshly beaten, and several were killed. The Pueblos responded by sending an armed contingent to Santa Fe that threatened the governor with violence unless the captives were released. The governor relented, and the remaining prisoners returned home.

Po'pay and other Pueblo leaders met regularly over the next few years and eventually reached the conclusion that the only solution to their problems was to expel the colonists by force. To coordinate their effort, the group of leaders dispatched two runners on Aug. 8, 1680, to alert the region's pueblos of the uprising slated to begin five days later. The runners were seen in Pecos, their first stop. They were later arrested at another pueblo, and they disclosed plans for the impending rebellion to the Spanish authorities.

Aware of the arrest, the Pueblos decided to move earlier than originally planned. On Aug. 10, the first of many priests was murdered, and the rebels soon attacked the Spanish all over the region, killing hundreds of them, burning their houses and destroying churches, including Pecos' towering mission. Gov. Antonio de Otermín ordered settlers to retreat to Santa Fe, and the Pueblo warriors surrounded the colony's capital. Pueblo and Spanish forces battled over the ensuing days, but Otermín realized that the besieged settlers would soon run out of food and water. And so, on Aug. 21, Pueblo rebels watched as the Spanish filed out of Santa Fe. The Pueblo Revolt had succeeded.

Though the Spanish weren't ousted permanently, when they returned in 1692, they abandoned some of the more abusive labor practices and gave locals more religious freedom. While Pueblo people nominally accepted Catholicism, they were also able to maintain their traditional and religious practices — Pecos, for instance, had nine ceremonial spaces known as kivas in 1777.

Pecos' importance as a trading center decreased as the Spanish established outposts farther east. Residents later suffered from famine, land theft and attacks from Plains Tribes. The pueblo's population dwindled until 1838, when the last inhabitants moved to Jémez Pueblo some 60 miles to the west.

A national park unit since 1965, Pecos includes sites such as pre-revolt kivas, an 1850s trading post and a Civil War battlefield. Park staff engage "in ongoing Tribal consultation and ethnographic work with Jémez," wrote Leah Schulson, the park's interpretive ranger, and Jeremy Moss, its chief of resource stewardship and science, in an email. In 1999, some 2,000 human remains and almost 1,000 objects that had been removed during archaeological excavations and had been housed in museum collections were returned to Pecos. That repatriation "healed some past wounds," and today "Tribal members visit Pecos to spiritually and culturally reconnect with their ancestral home and honor their ancestors," Schulson and Moss wrote.

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A CEREMONIAL KIVA at Pecos National Historical Park in New Mexico. In the background is a church that was built in 1717 on the site of a larger church destroyed during the Pueblo Revolt in 1680.

Meanwhile, the memory of the Pueblo Revolt is very much alive and has been invoked with pride by Pueblo activists and leaders in campaigns for causes that include land claims and heritage protection. In recent years, Pueblo advocates have also pushed for symbols of Spanish colonization, such as statues of Oñate, to be removed.

Wilcox said that by attempting to subdue Pueblo people by force centuries ago, the Spanish created the very conditions that made colonization more difficult. They inadvertently encouraged autonomous pueblos to establish connections that weren't there before and to develop an ingrained identity of resistance that continues to this day.

"They had violence happen to them, but they're still Pueblos, and they're still here," he said. "They were never really conquered."

NICOLAS BRULLIARD is senior editor of National Parks magazine.

TO TELL THE TRUTH

BY ALAN SPEARS

NATIONAL PARKS HAVE A DUTY TO SHARE THE FULL, MESSY, COMPLICATED STORY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE COUNTRY.

AS THE NATION TURNS 250, NPCA'S RESIDENT HISTORIAN WARNS AGAINST WHITEWASHING HISTORY.

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THE EVENING OF APRIL 18, 1775, British forces sallied out of Boston and headed west toward Concord, Massachusetts. Their aim was to capture stores of weapons, powder and ammunition thought to be in possession of upstarts from Massachusetts intent on revolution.

At Lexington the next morning, the British found their way barred by the Colonial militia. For a few tense moments, neither side knew what to do next. The minutemen weren't rebels … yet. And the red-coated adversaries on the opposite side of Lexington Green were professional soldiers and fellow Englishmen.

During the ensuing fracas, the British got the better of their American cousins, killing eight and wounding 10. Although it's unlikely that any of the roughly 700 British troops noticed, among the militiamen gathered to prevent them from reaching Concord that morning was a 35-year-old enslaved Black man named Prince Estabrook.

Though a British musket ball hit Estabrook in his left shoulder that day, this wounded warrior would recover and go on to serve in Gen. George Washington's army for the duration of the Revolutionary War. Estabrook was one of around 5,000 free and enslaved men of African descent who fought for American independence.

GREAT COUNTRIES DON'T HIDE FROM THEIR HISTORY, BUT THE PRESIDENT AND INTERIOR SECRETARY ARE ENCOURAGING US TO DO JUST THAT.

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Estabrook serves as a poignant example of the complicated roles of race and slavery in our foundation story. Although laws from this period prevented Black people from training to be soldiers, the National Park Service staff at Minute Man National Historical Park note that they were nonetheless required to "turn out" armed during an emergency. In 18th-century Massachusetts, people of African descent could be embraced as neighbors and allies in one instance and in the next, disregarded as chattel or members of a race undeserving of the basic rights of citizenship.

Why Estabrook was so devoted to American independence is unknown. Did he enlist as a substitute for an owner who wanted to avoid military service? Or was there something about the principles of liberty and patriotism that so appealed to Estabrook that he remained dedicated to the fight for freedoms he had never known?

It is critical for Park Service historians and interpreters to further explore the many outstanding questions about Estabrook and other Black soldiers who fought in the war and to share their findings about this fascinating piece of American history with park visitors. This important work is in danger of being curtailed, however, by recent policy initiatives from the Trump administration.

On March 27, 2025, the president issued an executive order calling for the restoration of "truth and sanity" to American history. Interior Secretary Doug Burgum followed suit on May 20, issuing a secretarial order that launched the implementation of the president's directive within the Park Service. Both men seem to believe that the interpretation of our history has become radicalized and bears a distinctly anti-American viewpoint. They intend to eradicate that view by banning examination of anything that touches on troubling episodes in the nation's past, which they equate with disparagement.

Of course, these orders won't improve public understanding of the past or help our national parks to tell stories in ways that are accurate, just, inclusive and inspiring. Rather, these retrogressive, unnecessary and un-American directives will have a chilling effect. They will reduce the willingness of Park Service staff to think critically about our past and will rob the public of one of their best resources for honest storytelling.

Now is the time for all Americans — including those who love our public lands — to fight back against such dangerous policymaking. In national parks, that means celebrating the 250th anniversary of America's independence from Great Britain in a way that upholds the truth, no matter how complicated and unsettling it is. Great countries don't hide from their history, but the president and interior secretary are encouraging us to do just that. If their efforts are successful, they will deprive people of crucial information about figures and ideas that made the struggle for American independence meaningful, and they will lessen the value of the semiquincentennial.

How exactly did we get here? To recap: Back in the summer, the secretarial order first required the land management bureaus to display QR codes on every property — including all national park units. The hope was that visitors would see and be offended by the kind of interpretation of American history that so vexes the president, then use the codes to tattle on the agencies. At national parks, the public has, in fact, used those QR codes to send a clear message to the Trump administration that these sites are loved and regarded by most as needing better funding, more staff and a free hand to interpret the nation's history as their trained, professional historians and cultural resource managers see fit.

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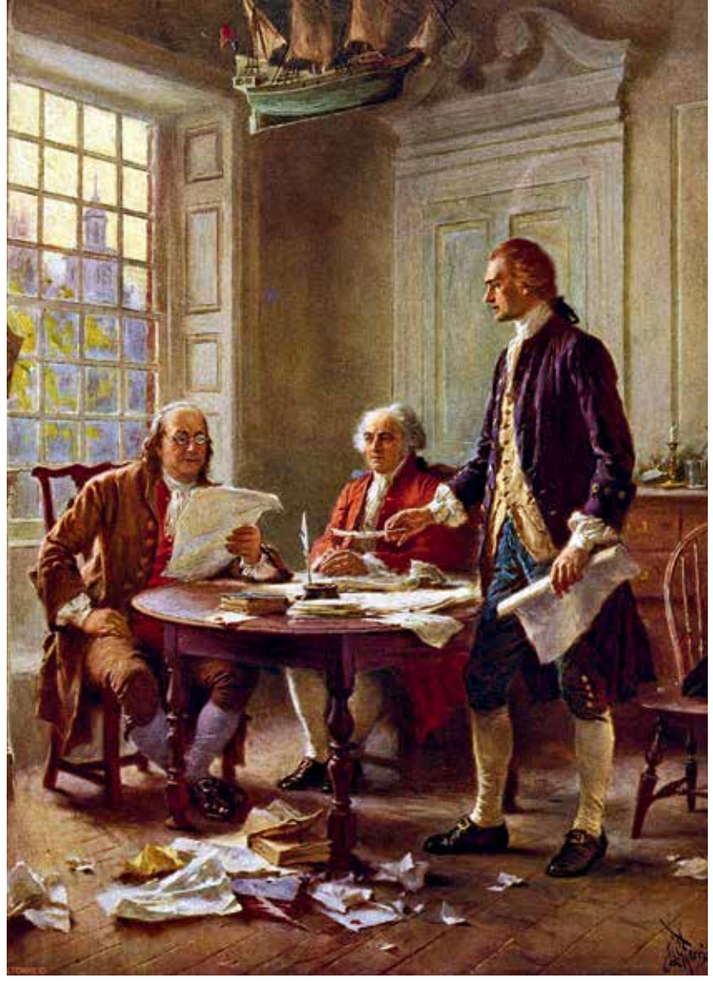
NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

PAINTING OF THE 1775 Battle of Lexington by William B. Wollen (opposite). Top: Mercy Otis Warren, an activist and political writer, by artist John Singleton Copley. Bottom: Abigail Adams, the influential wife of the second president, by artist Gilbert Stuart.



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THAT CLEANSING HAS ALREADY BEGUN.

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The order also required Park Service staff to catalog any materials that might run afoul of the president's truth and sanity directive. Lists were made, submitted to the Department of the Interior, and as of this writing, more than 100 national park sites have received letters of noncompliance requiring them to sanitize or remove signs, displays, exhibits or publications.

That cleansing has already begun.

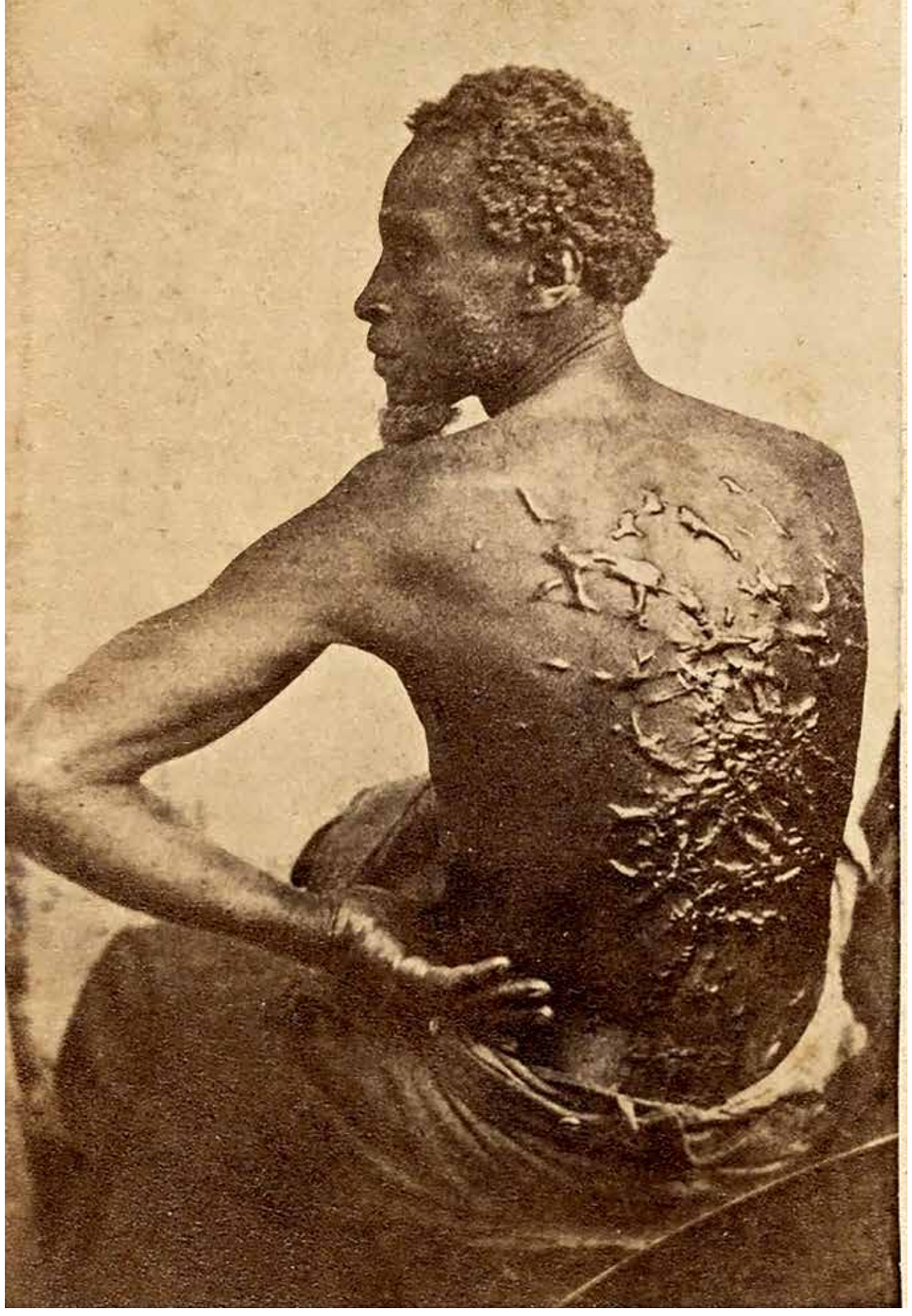
Staff at Fort Pulaski National Monument in Georgia have been ordered to remove "The Scourged Back" photo. The image, which shows an enslaved man's scars from whippings, has been on display in the park for years and serves as a visceral reminder to the public of the violent, horrid nature of slavery. And at Independence National Historical Park, an outdoor exhibit listing the names of the enslaved men and women President George Washington brought with him from Mount Vernon to his presidential residence in Philadelphia in 1790 was targeted for removal.

To be clear, the accuracy of the Park Service's interpretation is not in question. Rather, the administration objects to the telling of stories in ways it believes reflect poorly on the nation and the character of its Founding Fathers and cultural icons.

Because this process lacks transparency, we don't know precisely what materials and signage have been flagged for noncompliance and removal — and whether or when these orders will be executed. The full list could include anything that mentions the horrors of slavery (so long Prince Estabrook?), the fight for women's suffrage, the forced removal of Japanese Americans to incarceration camps in 1942, or the abrogation by the U.S. government of treaties with Native American Tribes. Despite the fact that transgender activists led the uprising that took place in 1969 outside the bar that is now the heart of the Stonewall National Monument, the word "transgender" has already been scrubbed from the park's website. In fact, the terms "transgender" and "queer" have been removed from all the Park Service websites, and LGBTQ+ has been shortened to LGB. The sanitization effort even extends to the removal of signage that describes the adverse and ongoing impacts of the climate emergency in places such as Acadia National Park.

The Park Service is one of the largest stewards of history in the U.S. Especially over the last 30 years, the agency has increased the breadth, depth and diversity of the stories it tells. That work remains far from complete, but new site designations such as the Birmingham Civil Rights and César E. Chávez national monuments and the creation of public-facing programs such as the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom were notable advancements toward making our parks more relevant to a wider range of people.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson meet to review a draft of the Declaration of Independence. Lithographic print by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris (left). Right: "The Scourged Back," which vividly shows the horrors of slavery, is among the works the current administration has targeted for removal from a park site, according to The Washington Post.



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THE JUST GOVERNMENT LEAGUE of Maryland marching in the Woman Suffrage Procession, March 3, 1913 (top left). Top right: "The Four Spirits" statue at the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument commemorates the four girls killed in the city's 1963 church bombing. Bottom right: A child and his grandfather at the Manzanar War Relocation Center, now a national historic site that tells the story of the incarceration of Japanese American citizens and Japanese immigrants during World War II. Bottom left: The Park Service has removed the word "transgender" from all park webpages, including from the website for Stonewall National Monument (pictured).

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INSTEAD OF SETTLING FOR FIREWORKS AND EVENTS TIED TO A SANITIZED AND SIMPLIFIED VERSION OF OUR HISTORY, LET'S STRIVE TO MAKE THIS ANNIVERSARY A BOLD, VISIONARY THING THAT REPRESENTS US ALL.

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The Park Service has enhanced pride of place in communities across this nation. It has brought economic opportunity through heritage tourism to moribund economies nationwide and helped weave the stories of displaced and marginalized people solidly into the fabric of our shared national narrative. That work, those victories, our history are under a generational threat.

So how then should the nation's 250th birthday be celebrated in our parks? Instead of settling for fireworks and events tied to a sanitized and simplified version of our history, let's strive to make this anniversary a bold, visionary thing that represents us all. A fully staffed and adequately funded Park Service could expand on some of the programming already in place at sites across the country that introduces the public to new historic figures, or it could expand our understanding of the themes most closely associated with the fight for independence.

Our national parks could acknowledge that the passions that inflamed the hearts of patriots such as Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams and Benjamin Franklin also touched the souls of Native Americans and people of African descent. In an Oct. 22, 1774, letter attributed to Bristol Lambee, a free man of color, and addressed to the Sons of Liberty in Connecticut, the author stated that "Your practitioners apprehend that LIBERTY, being founded upon the law of nature, is as necessary to the happiness of an African as it is to the happiness of an Englishman." Lambee, on behalf of his enslaved brothers and sisters, urged the Sons of Liberty, patriots who organized resistance to British governance in the Colonies, to live up to the principles they were espousing by freeing the thousands of enslaved people then toiling in the state.

The admonition of Abigail Adams, the wife of John Adams to "remember the ladies" might be addressed by using the semiquincentennial to examine the impact that women such as Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, an activist, poet and political writer, had on the patriot cause and the outcome of the American Revolution. But we must also study the lives of those such as Judith Jackson, an enslaved woman who escaped from her owners in Virginia in 1779, worked and resided in British-controlled New York City for the duration of the revolution, then evacuated with a few dozen other Black loyalists in 1783 to Nova Scotia. For Jackson and some 3,000 other Black loyalists, the freedoms promised by the birth of a new nation were hardly guaranteed and could not outweigh the pain of enslavement and family separation that were so common during this time. Thus she chose to leave America, a nation she had known only as a slave and a fugitive.

We might also study the critical (though not well known) role the slave trade and a determined Spaniard played in the American victory at Yorktown in October of 1781. Washington had managed to bottle up the British on the coast of Virginia, but he desperately needed backup, and the French fleet was too broke and too far away to help. Enter Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis, a Spanish official and the man who may have single-handedly saved our revolution. Saavedra raised money in Havana for the patriot cause by appealing to wealthy Spaniards (and possibly some Cubans) who were eager to see the defeat of Great Britain, Spain's rival. The money these benefactors lavished on the cause of American liberty had been acquired largely from profits drawn from the labor of enslaved people who spent their lives doing backbreaking physical work on plantations.

Saavedra delivered sufficient funding to the French to enable them to send their ships from the Caribbean to the Chesapeake Bay. Their victory over the Royal Navy there on Sept. 5, 1781, sealed the fate of British Gen. Charles Cornwallis — he would surrender his army a month later — and gave Washington and our new country a crucial victory.

The complexity of our history is what makes it so compelling, and we should use this keystone anniversary to let the Trump administration know what most Americans already understand: We value our history, even the noncompliant parts. And we can handle the truth.

ALAN SPEARS joined NPCA in 1999 and is currently the senior director of cultural resources in the government affairs department. He serves as NPCA's resident historian and cultural resources expert.

HISTORIC TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

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A MUDBANK in the lower section of Cataract Canyon. The Colorado River drops its load of silt where it runs up against the Lake Powell reservoir.

Wild River, Ghost Lake

Drought is a crisis for the West. But it has also resurrected a long-lost desert river.

I WAS SITTING IN the bow of a rubber raft, halfway through Gypsum Canyon Rapid on the Colorado River, when I spotted a blue heron wing across the water, right to left. It was the fifth heron of the day, and my fifth day on the river. My eyes charted the bird's path until a cresting wave slapped the boat, and I remembered to hunker down and hang on. Cheers rose from the other rafts as we finished the run.

"Thanks for showing me the line," my guide, Sienna Chilcutt, shouted to the trip leader, Nick Smith, and I realized it was her first time rowing Gypsum Canyon Rapid, the last rough water we'd run in Cataract Canyon, a river-carved gorge in this heat-seared desert of southern Utah. That's because the rapid was submerged beneath a reservoir, Lake Powell, for decades, and only recently reappeared.

Earlier that morning, we had crossed from Canyonlands National Park into Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, two national park sites with opposing goals. Canyonlands protects a wild river, Glen Canyon a flatwater reservoir. On maps, the border is a straight line, but the real boundary between river and reservoir constantly shifts. That's what I came to see.

This area is the ancestral land of the Navajo, Hopi, Zuni, Ute, Southern Paiute and Pueblo peoples, who each have their own name for the river. John Wesley Powell called this rocky stretch of the Colorado River "Cataract Canyon" because of its ferocious rapids — averaging more than one per mile over the course of 40-some miles. The upper canyon is still full of cataracts. But the rapids on the lower end vanished after Glen Canyon Dam near the Arizona-Utah border closed its gates in 1963 and the reservoir behind it began to fill, smothering the rapids as it rose. Lake Powell topped out in the 1980s. It's been shrinking since then, drunk down by cities and farms and siphoned away by decades of drought and rising temperatures.

I'd never rafted this stretch of river before, but its water is in my bones and blood. I grew up drinking the Colorado, piped to me through a plumbing system

that included the dam that drowned Cataract. That September of 2024, I didn't know if I'd find wreckage or treasure, a landscape changed beyond recognition or reborn.

So far, what I'd found was mud. Wherever the river runs up against the reservoir, it drops its load of silt, like a tired traveler leaving suitcases at the door. Now, the boats floated among enormous islands of mud with sheer, fissured slopes. They rose above us like brown icebergs — the remaining bits of the old lakebed, carved into pieces as the newly awakened river cut its way through. Once, the tops of those "mudbergs" were the bottom of the reservoir. If our boats could stay in place but teleport a few decades back in time, we'd be underwater. I was boating down a real river, but also a ghost lake.

"It's like being in a submarine," Chilcutt suggested, "except in air."

Later that day or perhaps the next morning, we would cross the invisible boundary where the river's current disappeared, swallowed by the diminished reservoir. The only hint would be the extra effort our guides put into rowing. One of them, Abbey Woodruff, told me it's a point of pride to row all the way to the takeout point, nearly 30 miles downriver from Gypsum Canyon Rapid. Other expeditions skip over this tedious stretch by bringing a motorboat; we waved one such group by.

I felt grateful for the slower way. It gave me time to see this in-between place, a murky borderland cradled in beige-and-pink cliffs that looked like they were carved out of rock candy and chewed on. Plants took up residence on the new land provided by old lake sediment, including non-native species: tamarisk trees and Russian thistle. They would lose their precarious footing if the mud calved away, or if the reservoir rose. We passed a cluster of Canada geese huddled on a sandbar like schoolkids in overlarge coats — taking a rest, perhaps, on their migration route south for the winter — and I glimpsed what Cataract used to be.

About seven years ago, Meg Flynn, a Moab librarian, her husband, Mike DeHoff, a river runner, and others started the Returning Rapids Project to document the revitalization of Cataract Canyon: rapids, sandbars, willows, cottonwoods, beavers and otters. "The landscape has the ability to take care of itself," Flynn told me. "Sometimes better if we just get out of the way." It's a gift of the National Park System that ecosystems have space and time to recover from catastrophe.

But if *catastrophe* describes what the reservoir did to the river, it also describes the forces killing Lake Powell: decades of overuse, laws out of step with science and climate change-fueled aridification in a place that was already dry. I hardly know whether to celebrate or mourn.

Earlier that week, before heading downriver, I had stopped in Moab to chat with Flynn, and she handed me a historical photograph of Inscription Rock, where explorers of yore painted or carved their names on a cliff wall. The reservoir drowned the spot, and we wondered if it had reappeared. I was eager to search. On the sixth and final day of the trip, as the boats approached the former site of Dark Canyon Rapid — once one of the river's most feared, now smooth as glass — I pulled out the photograph and copies of old expedition journals, hoping to find a clue.

My six-person boat filled with excited shouts, mostly mine. "Look at that pointy rock!" "What about up there?" "No, it's got to be farther down." Then a musical sound distracted us from the quest. A frothy white spring gushed from beneath one of the mudbergs. The two geologists in the boat speculated it was bank flow: water pressed into the surrounding rock by the massive weight of the reservoir, now returning to the

JOHN WESLEY POWELL called a stretch of the Colorado River "Cataract Canyon" because of its ferocious rapids, including Little Niagara (pictured in 1911).

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY. CLINE LIBRARY

river after decades entombed.

"What makes the water so white?" I wondered aloud. One of them replied it was probably full of aluminum.

At that moment, I glanced at the journal pages in my hands, and a chill raised the hairs on my neck. "... [F]ound a beautiful spring, enclosed by ferns ... very metallic tasting," Norman Nevills, one of the Colorado's first commercial river guides, wrote on this spot in 1938. "Probably aluminum in it."

Past and present collided. The cliffs swung into position as if enacting a slow ballet. I felt sure their outline matched the photo Flynn gave me, but either Inscription Rock had been sponged clean by its time underwater, or else it was still buried beneath towers of mud. The researchers with Returning Rapids say some of that mud will continue to slough off downriver, but some of it is there to stay — a new sediment layer appearing before our eyes. The Dominy formation, they call it, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation commissioner who built Glen Canyon Dam.

What lies hidden, just beyond reach? What might emerge, given time?

To be human and to be awake in the world is to hold contradictions in one's mind. This was the place for paradox: half river, half lake. Half hope, half heartbreak. I wanted the drought to end, but also the river to thrive. I wanted the safety of abundance, but also the splendor of the desert. If Cataract Canyon was the hero of the story, it was on its way back from the underworld, irrevocably changed by its time below. It wasn't Lazarus that came to mind, but Persephone, climbing back into spring but doomed to return periodically to the depths. As long as Glen Canyon Dam remains, lower Cataract will be a liminal space. Its fate rests not just on weather and climate, but the politics of water. Which is to say, people have some choice in the matter.

DeHoff offered his own metaphor: "For me," he said, "the Colorado River as it flows through Gypsum Canyon Rapid is like an old friend that's come home after being in the hospital for a long, long time." He took a deep breath. "They're not the whole way healed. They're not the same. But they're back home."

I have to believe in a future where humans and rivers thrive. Flynn put it this way: Cataract Canyon "has value unto itself, separate from us and what it does for us. But taking care of our spaces also ultimately takes care of us, too."

The river's current slowed, mirroring my reluctance to reach the journey's end. I soaked up every glimmer of revival. A cluster of willows. A sprawl of sacred datura, their white flowers blooming in the shade like tiny moons. They would close at the first real touch of sun. Then, I saw them: two bighorn sheep perched up high on top of the mud, the exact color of the rock behind them and so narrow they looked like they might vanish if they turned to face us head-on.

We all looked up, and they looked down.

"Cataract isn't dead," Chilcutt said quietly, as if to herself. Up ahead in the sky, a ghostly gibbous moon floated between the cliffs, half here, half vanished in the day.

GLEN CANYON DAM was completed in 1963. As the reservoir filled, it smothered rapids miles upriver, including in Cataract Canyon.

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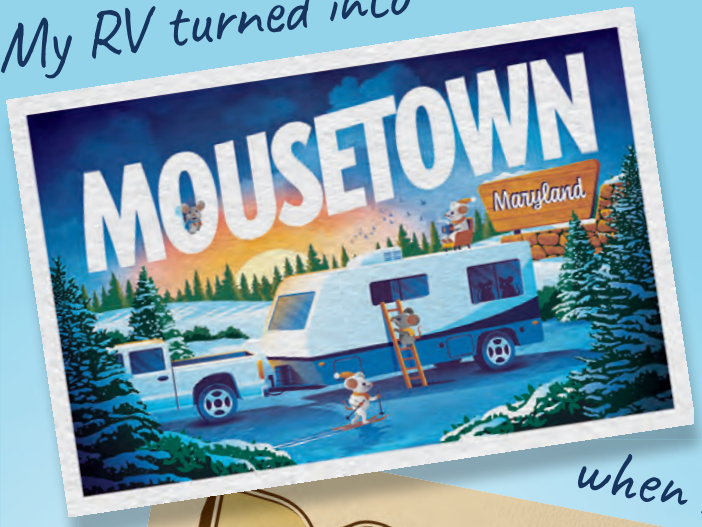
MELISSA L. SEVIGNY is an award-winning science writer and author of three nonfiction books, most recently "Brave the Wild River." She lives in Flagstaff, Arizona.

My RV turned into



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