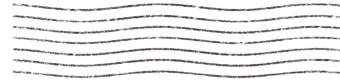
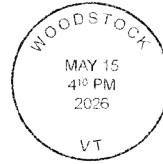




LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



STRESS TEST

How the National Park Service Responded to a Directive to Erase History and Silence Science

Rolf Diamant

In the spring of 2025, Department of Interior (DOI) Secretary Doug Burgum issued Secretarial Order (SO) 3431, “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History.” This Orwellian-titled directive gave all DOI land management bureaus, including the National Park Service (NPS), 90 days to “conduct a review of all public monuments, memorials, statues, markers, or similar properties on lands within its jurisdiction to identify whether any such properties contain images, descriptions, depictions, messages, narratives or other information (content) that inappropriately disparages Americans past or living (including persons living in colonial times), or, with respect to content describing natural features, that emphasizes matters unrelated to the beauty, abundance, or grandeur of said natural feature.”¹

One might think with all the professional editors at DOI, the secretary might have gotten help with this maladroit and painfully longwinded edict, but perhaps most of them had already been fired. In any case, Burgum’s SO 3431 repeated almost word for word Executive Order (EO) 14253 (aimed at both NPS and the Smithsonian Institution) issued by President Trump several months earlier.

Implementation of the SO in the National Park System has been met with a chorus of public protest, congressional criticism, and several lawsuits. Much has been written and said about how the SO flouts up-to-date scholarship and science, existing statutes, established administrative procedures, and long-standing relationships and agreements with partners and communities. Less commented upon—but perhaps, ultimately, the most consequential impact—

LEFT Excerpt from a slide deck that was sent to the field instructing all parks to report “inappropriate content” as defined by EO 14253 and SO 3431. RIGHT The administration ordered every park to post signs with a QR code encouraging visitors to send in examples. The signs were widely derided and the effort largely backfired.

5.b. Review for Inappropriate Content

- All public-facing content for “images, descriptions, depictions, messages, narratives or other information (content) that:
 - inappropriately disparages Americans past or living (including persons living in colonial times), or
 - with respect to content describing natural features, that emphasizes matters unrelated to the beauty, abundance, or grandeur of said natural feature.”
- Response Deadline: July 18, 2025



U.S. Department of the Interior

Wilson’s Creek National Battlefield

belongs to the American people, and the National Park Service wants your feedback. Please let us know if you have identified (1) any areas that need repair; (2) any services that need improvement; or (3) any signs or other information that are negative about either past or living Americans or that fail to emphasize the beauty, grandeur, and abundance of landscapes and other natural features.

To make a submission, please visit go.nps.gov/eo14253 or scan QR code.



Posted by order of the Secretary of the Interior in support of Executive Order (EO) 14253, titled “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History.”



Content Reporting Tool

- All public-facing content and interpretive media (exhibits, signs, waysides, brochures, films, brochures)
- Allows for input of multiple items across media types
- Provide complete narratives or full context



Parks were given a digital “content reporting tool” whose polished interface belied the censorship it was enabling. Employees reportedly “received no guidance” on what to flag. With a few exceptions, what exactly should be sent back to Washington for higher review was left up to each park’s discretion.

is the effect this all-out assault on NPS interpretation is having on the agency’s core values and ethics The Trump/Burgum censorship campaign is an existential stress test of the National Park Service’s ability to carry out its park stewardship responsibilities with professional integrity.

This 38th Letter from Woodstock will look at how NPS has reacted, so far, to this ongoing test, when ordered by DOI to operationalize SO 3431 by reviewing, flagging, and potentially removing interpretive materials in 433 national parks. Specifically, I have reviewed and categorized the responses of individual parks to the DOI order. Much of this detailed information came from an internal DOI database, leaked in early 2026, and made public by *The Washington Post*.² In preparation for writing this Letter, I have spent many hours sifting through this material. First, however, some background.

NPS DATA COLLECTION EO 14253 / SO 3431

I Would like to Change
Select one or more media types.

SELECT Interior / Exterior Exhibits	SELECTED Signs and Waysides	SELECTED Unigrid Brochure	SELECT Monuments, statues, and other markers	SELECT Film	SELECT Digital/Website
☐ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)	☒ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)	☐ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)	☐ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)	☐ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)	☐ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)
☐ Text ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Map	☒ Text ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Map	☐ Text ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Map	☐ Text ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Map	☐ Script ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Animation ☐ Soundtrack	☐ Script ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Animation ☐ Soundtrack
TOTAL NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER

Description Use this area to describe your changes in more detail. Include thoughts on how to make the change.

Add attachments (photos of media to be changed) Photos and Links that help identify requested changes.

UPLOAD

NPS DATA COLLECTION EO 14253 / SO 3431

I Would like to Change
Select one or more media types.

SELECT Interior / Exterior Exhibits	SELECTED Signs and Waysides	SELECTED Unigrid Brochure	SELECT Monuments, statues, and other markers	SELECT Film
☐ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)	☒ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)	☐ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)	☐ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)	☐ Needs Repair/Replacement ☐ Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253 ☐ Other: (include text box to describe)
☐ Text ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Map	☒ Text ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Map	☐ Text ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Map	☐ Text ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Map	☐ Script ☐ Photograph ☐ Illustration ☐ Animation ☐ Soundtrack

STORYTELLERS ARMED WITH FACTS

In recent years NPS has made truly remarkable strides upgrading, expanding, and contextualizing information available to the public through video, publications, museum displays, and wayside exhibits. “Over the past few decades,” historian Kevin Lewis has written, “the NPS has redoubled its efforts to interpret history that has for far too long been pushed to the sidelines or mythologized.”³ The agency has also made a substantial investment in explaining the real-time effects that climate change is having on national parks and surrounding lands. This progress in NPS interpretation and education, and the public discourse it encourages, is a primary target of the Trump/Burgum orders.

As a former NPS superintendent, I know how much painstaking work goes into getting new park media, first, funded; then, researched, written, designed; and, finally,

fabricated. “The interpretive signs, panels, and exhibits visitors encounter,” writes Cybelle Jones of the Society for Experiential Graphic Design, “are developed over months and often years through research, peer review, and coordination among historians, scientists, educators, interpretive planners, designers, and accessibility experts. Every word and image is vetted to ensure authenticity and clarity.”⁷⁴ Historians David Blight and James Grossman described NPS interpreters as “storytellers armed with facts,” praising “the work of our colleagues in federal agencies entrusted with understanding and disseminating the nation’s past honestly and transparently.”⁷⁵

National Park Service interpretive media do not see the light of day until they go through a rigorous research and peer review process. The two panels here, both of which were sent to DOI for review, are no exception. The panel to the right, from Lowell National Historical Park, talks about how the owners of Lowell’s textile mills profited from damming the Merrimack River, but did not fully acknowledge the environmental and social consequences. The panel below explains natural geological processes affecting the Barataria Basin at Jean Lafitte National Historical Park in Louisiana—processes that are being exacerbated by climate change. Both are clear, nuanced discussions of complex issues.

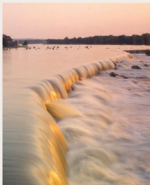
STORYTELLERS DISARMED AND DEMORALIZED

“We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected,” Russell Vought, co-author of Project 2025, was quoted as saying before his appointment as Office of Management and Budget director. “We want to put them in trauma.”⁷⁶ This dystopian sentiment set the tone for the administration’s campaign of disruption and misery unleashed across wide swaths of the federal public service. To that end, starting in the first days of the Trump Administration, the NPS workforce has been drastically cut, as DOI and the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) carried out a sustained

Lowell National Historical Park

Damming the Merrimack

Lowell’s founders intended to profit from nature by controlling the water in the Merrimack River. Here, just above the Pawtucket Falls, they dammed the river and created an 18-mile-long millpond. From that pond, they channeled water into Lowell’s canals.



Pawtucket Dam in high water.

\$100 Reward.

WHEREAS some persons are known to be in the habit of stealing, or in the habit of attempting to steal, the property of the Pawtucket Falls, a reward of

ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS

will be paid to whoever will give information of the stealing, or of the attempt to steal, the property of the Pawtucket Falls, to the Pawtucket Falls, a reward of

“KIDNAP BOUNTY,” Agent

For the Department of Justice and Customs at Merrimack River.

See Circular, Sept. 30, 1922. If

Although vandalism was rare, Kirk Boott and the investors who controlled the waterpower system offered a reward in 1825 for information leading to the arrest of individual(s) who had destroyed part of the Pawtucket Dam.

Workers shown here in “Falls on the Merrimack” (1833) by Alvan Fisher, raised the height of the Pawtucket Dam by adding two rows of granite stones.

Water wheels and turbines installed in mills along those canals converted falling water into motive power for thousands of textile-producing machines.

Lowell investors never fully acknowledged the consequences of damming the river and changing its flow. Though they were forced to address recurring problems like flooding and silting, initially they ignored the devastating consequences of dams to fish migration and the livelihoods dependent on fishing. Intent on squeezing as much power as possible from the river, they swept aside opposition and convinced upriver residents to sell water rights to lakes deep in New Hampshire.



Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve

Sinking Land, Rising Water

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

This is the Barataria Basin, built of soil washed to this area by the Mississippi River. This soil is still compacting and sinking, a process called subsidence. Most of the Barataria Preserve is less than two feet above sea level, and its subsidence rate is nearly half an inch a year.

Meanwhile, glaciers and polar ice sheets are melting and our warming climate is heating oceans everywhere, making their waters expand just like water does when you heat it on the stove. Everywhere on the planet, the oceans are a little higher every day.

The combination of the Barataria Basin’s sinking land and global sea level rise means that the ocean is creeping in faster here than almost anywhere else in North America.

- Floods are becoming more frequent and lasting longer
- Coastal wetlands are disappearing as land sinks and water rises
- Less land is available to buffer Gulf of Mexico storms
- Storm and flooding threats to homes, communities, and infrastructure like highways, ports, and energy facilities are increasing
- Salt water from the Gulf is moving into freshwater wetlands, killing the plants that hold the land together
- Death of plants, animals, and microbes that cannot tolerate increased flooding or salt water



The photo shows two feet of flooding on Barataria Boulevard after Hurricane Isaac in August 2012. The map shows predicted consequences of 18 inches of sea level rise in the preserve; blue areas would be flooded and brown areas would remain land.

Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve
Barataria Preserve

campaign of mass NPS layoffs, pressured “voluntary” retirements, and deferred resignations. Vought’s trauma strategy was not just intended to directly drive people out of federal service (though it did that very effectively); it was also to create an environment of fear, uncertainty, and demoralization that hamstring the work of those who remain on the job.

Many of these key newly vacant NPS positions were temporarily filled through “acting” appointments. From Jessica Bowron, the NPS comptroller who has been “exercising the delegated authority of the Director” on down, the senior managerial ranks of the agency have been hollowed out, leaving numerous individuals covering multiple senior positions. Having so many principal jobs, particularly regional directorships and superintendencies, indefinitely filled by a rotation of acting officials made it far easier to intimidate and manipulate a less experienced and more destabilized agency leadership. When SO 3431 was released, it hit NPS at its weakest state in memory.

The propagators of the SO are counting on a traumatized NPS bureaucracy to do what otherwise might have been impossible to accomplish. Historian Timothy Snyder, author of the book *On Tyranny*, has written about the concept of “anticipatory obedience”: people or officials, often with limited guidance, acting in ways they just assume will please authority. Consequences of their actions may end up far exceeding the expectations of those in charge.⁷ There is no censorship as effective as self-censorship.

The people behind the SO may also have counted on a well-deserved NPS reputation for being a “can do” organization. In this case, an asset has been manipulated into a liability. Throughout the agency’s history, NPS has been asked to stretch and meet large-scale challenges, as it did during the Great Depression when the agency was tasked with standing up Civilian Conservation Corps camps throughout the country. NPS also made its park facilities available during the Second World War for the rest and recuperation of many thousands of servicemen, though it courageously resisted considerable political pressure to harvest forests in its great Western parks in the name of war-time expediency. As the agency’s own webpage states, the NPS leadership of this time, under Director Newton Drury, never lost sight of “its primary responsibility for protecting historic and natural resources from long term, and in some cases irreversible, damage.”⁸

Trump and Burgum’s orders have, perhaps for the first time in its history, directed NPS to turn on itself, and compromise the agency’s recognized commitment to accuracy and veracity. SO 3431, with its thinly disguised contempt for scholarship-based history and scientific knowledge, is one more humiliation inflicted on the nation’s professional park managers by this administration.

AN AGENCY MOBILIZES AGAINST ITSELF

A beaten-down NPS Washington Office set about immediately complying with the SO. Acting NPS Director Bowron sent out to every park and office an arrowhead-branded PowerPoint with a digital “content reporting tool.” The reporting tool had fields for identifying materials deemed suspect under the SO, and a field for park comments or recommendations on possible “removal, covering, or temporary replacement.” Using the tool, information submitted by parks was rolled up by DOI into a single database. The database has an 8-GB tranche of digital images, one for each exhibit or publication submitted by a park manager. There is also a spreadsheet, including justifications for the flagged items.

WHAT I FOUND

Given the SO’s vague instructions, what was reported back to Washington for higher review, with a few exceptions, was left up to each individual park manager’s discretion. Even if the language of the SO was imprecise and open to interpretation, most park managers inferred the order’s real intent based on the president’s pronouncements.⁹ “Employees received no guidance on defining problematic content,” reported Lisa Friedman of *The New York Times*. “Essentially left to guess, some staff members opted to flag for review exhibits on topics that Mr. Trump has disparaged, like climate change and immigrants, or on subjects like slavery.”¹⁰

Nevertheless, the response of park managers to the SO varied greatly. I have sorted respondents into five broad categories. The first and largest category are those managers who submitted a negative reply, simply entering “**Nothing to Report.**” The second category are managers who sent in a positive response, but made a likely forlorn appeal to higher-up reviewers to exercise “**Right Reason**” and take no further action. A third category are park managers who flagged a wide swath of interpretive materials, mostly related to climate change. Beyond saying they were acting “**Out of an Abundance of Caution**” they had little more to add. The “**Anything**

and Everything” managers are my fourth category. Like the old saw about throwing spaghetti on the wall to see what sticks, these managers flagged for review even basic natural history information about their parks, public safety messages, and other non-controversial materials. The fifth and last category are managers whom I would characterize as **Overachievers**. They not only liberally flagged interpretive material for review, but went so far as to suggest helpful shortcuts to facilitate removal.

What follows is a sampling of responses in each category, along with representative images from the database tranche. For clarity in the excerpts, I use italics when quoting park management comments taken directly from the DOI spreadsheet.

NOTHING TO REPORT

Approximately two-thirds of national park units responded to the order’s instructions by simply replying “nothing to report.” Recognizing that terms like “inappropriately disparages” or “emphasizes matters unrelated” are highly subjective, it is possible that most parks decided they could not implement the SO without significant clarification. I assume that many sized up the SO as an ambitious but poorly conceived, ideologically driven exercise in self-censorship.

Earlier, an attempt by DOI to collect crowd-sourced examples of NPS “negative” interpretation, by posting QR-coded signs (derogatorily referred to by critics as “snitch signs”) in visitor centers, appears to have been a bust: the QR signs were largely ignored, or utilized by visitors to defend their parks.

LEFT Managers at Gateway Arch National Park submitted images of exhibit panels such as this one to DOI for review. They appealed to the ancient principle of “right reason,” a philosophical and theological concept referring to the application of sound, rational thinking, moral principles, and virtue to guide decision-making and actions, and argued that the messages were within the bounds of right reason.

RIGHT An interpretive panel flagged by Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site. For some sites like this, the very reason for their existence guaranteed that they would be in violation of SO 3431.

The McIntosh Lynching

On April 28, 1836, Francis McIntosh, a free mixed-race steamboat steward, was arrested on the St. Louis levee for interfering with sheriff’s deputies as they were apprehending a felon. Frightened, McIntosh reacted by taking the knife of one of the deputies, killing him and wounding another. McIntosh was apprehended and taken to the city jail.

Later that afternoon, an incensed mob broke into the jail and carried McIntosh out, intending to lynch him. The crowd cheered him to a fire at Seventh and Market Streets, to the sound of drums and whistles. McIntosh was killed and burned to death. A short guard of investigation failed to arrest the lynch mob. The Missouri Digest carried the story in its issue. The Missouri Digest carried the story in its issue. The Missouri Digest carried the story in its issue.



Burning of McIntosh at St. Louis, in April, 1836.

Four Executions

In addition to the McIntosh lynching, the public execution in 1841 of four Black river workers was used to intimidate free and enslaved African Americans. Three of the executed men were free persons of color from Ohio, the fourth was enslaved. The four men robbed a St. Louis store, killing two men and setting fire to the building to conceal their crime. While guilty of the crime, their confessions included coerced statements that they were abolitionist agents sent to St. Louis to urge enslaved persons to revolt and escape via the Underground Railroad.



Four men were hanged for their crimes as a means of intimidation.



Execution of a man by hanging.

The mass hanging held on Duncan’s Island just south of the city center became a public spectacle. Over 20,000 people attended, equal to three-fourths of the city’s population at the time. After the hanging, the heads of the four men were severed from their bodies and displayed in a doghouse window on Main Street. The warning was unmistakable: White St. Louisians would not stand for rebellious enslaved or free Blacks.

WITHIN RIGHT REASON

The park managers in this category identified interpretive materials that they were obviously proud of and wanted to see remain unchanged, but nevertheless passed on for higher review. Trying to dissuade unidentified reviewers from taking any action, the managers explained in their submittals that their exhibits and publications were based on the best available research, consultations or agreements with Tribes or other partners, or the clear direction of their park’s enabling legislation. It is difficult to see how any of these arguments would be persuasive in a hyper-politicized DOI, where loyalty to the president, and strictly adhering to his views, are valued above all else.

This category’s name comes from a description of exhibits at the Old Court House in **Gateway Arch National Park**. In flagging the exhibits on the lynching and murder of free and enslaved African Americans in St. Louis before the Civil War, managers repeatedly defended their installations using the term “*within right reason*,” a concept of reasonableness and fairness dating back to the ancient Greeks. Other parks tried to justify keeping their flagged interpretive and educational materials by quoting park foundation statements and enabling legislation. **Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site** explained that their wayside exhibits “*have gone through an extensive tribal consultation process, as required by the park’s enabling legislation.*” **Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail** reported almost 80 items for review, which constitutes much of the park’s interpretive content explaining the 1960s struggle for voting rights. Nearly every item listed in the DOI

Dawn November 29, 1864

In the Cheyenne and Arapaho camps, the early hours of November 29, 1864 started like any other day – people up before sunrise greeted the day cautiously, but with little trepidation.

“Heap of Buffaloes Coming!”

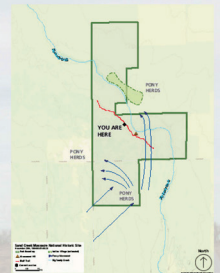
Always alert to subtle changes across the prairie, some women noticed something different about this morning: in the distance, the sound of hooves caught their attention. A rumble from the south, barely audible, then slightly louder, as several miles away, hundreds of animals dashed towards the valley. Within moments, these women were the first to notify the camp of *esewene nitcho ahetsot* – buffalo approaching!

It soon was apparent this was not buffalo, but the approach of hundreds of mounted soldiers. Within precious moments, life and death mingled, as frightened villagers huddled in terror.

Among those who heard what they first thought were Buffalo were Cheyenne women Medicine Road and Short Chief and their daughters Standing Woman and Woolly Dog. The memory of this fateful day is etched into family history – their father, Yellow Fingernails, would not survive the day. Woolly Dog passed away December 17, 1941; Standing Woman lived until October 14, 1946, perhaps the last survivor of the Sand Creek Massacre.



“...on Tuesday morning, the 29th, a squaw came into the lodge where we were eating breakfast, and said there was a heap of buffaloes coming.” David H. Loderbach (Loderbach accompanied John S. Smith to the Cheyenne and Arapaho village on November 27 and was present the morning of the attack on the 29th. Testimony given March 30, 1865.)



Background photo: NPS

Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Bloody Sunday

The 600 marchers who left Brown AME Chapel bound for Montgomery on March 7, 1965, were elated. As they walked, they sang, "ain't gonna let nobody turn me round." But over 50 armed Alabama state troopers and dozens of mounted posse men waited for them here, beyond the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Maj. John Cloud approached the leaders and gave a two-minute warning to disperse. No one moved. Several seconds later, he ordered the troops to advance. With shrieks and thud bodies fell. Tear gas choked and blinded the victims. Posse men used cattle prods to chase the marchers back to Brown Chapel, where

the injured collapsed, weeping and moaning. Footage of the violence aired on television across the nation. Shocked Americans witnessed the horror of what came to be known as Bloody Sunday.

Maj. John Cloud gives march leaders Hosea Williams (SCLC), Albert Turner (SCLC), John Lewis (SNCC), and Bob Moses (SNCC) a two-minute warning.

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Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

A Grassroots Movement

For centuries, Selma was a city where the rules of race were enforced by humiliation and fear. But Selma gave birth to one of the greatest grassroots campaigns in history—the voting rights movement. The Selma to Montgomery march was the culmination of many years of hard work by courageous souls who realized that things would never change if they did not act. The direct result of their work was passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

Samuel Boynton and his wife Amelia were actively registering blacks in rural Alabama in the 1930s. They founded the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL), which Mrs. Boynton and seven colleagues continued to run after Mr. Boynton's death in 1963. The group had much work to do in the early 1960s. 57 percent of Dallas County was African American and only 1 percent of those over 21 were registered to vote. Their efforts were supported by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which organized mass meetings and registration drives in Selma churches.

A voteless people is a hopeless people.
Sign in Samuel Boynton's office

The hearing of marchers by state troopers on Bloody Sunday forced national attention on the Selma voting rights campaign.

Selma children march for their parents' right to vote.

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Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

We Are Here

They told us we wouldn't get here . . . but all the world knows that we are here and that we are standing before the forces of power in the state of Alabama saying, "We ain't goin' let nobody turn us around."

Martin Luther King Jr., March 25, 1965

The 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery ended at the steps of the Alabama State Capitol on March 25. An exuberant crowd of 25,000 gathered to protest voting injustices for African Americans and deliver a petition to **one of the civil rights movement's greatest opponents, Gov. George Wallace. The violence the marchers endured to complete the 54-mile trek and their resolve to make it to Montgomery at all costs** captivated the country and forced passage of the Voting Rights Act later that year. The Act enforces the intention of the Fifteenth Amendment—that no person shall be denied the right to vote on account of race or color.

A sea of marchers heads toward the Alabama State Capitol to celebrate the end of the 54-mile journey.

You can follow the marchers' historic route through Montgomery. See the City of St. Jude, where they camped on March 24. Proceed past First Point, where they paused to pray on March 25. Explore Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where Martin Luther King Jr. was a young pastor. Stand at the site of the final rally at the Capitol grounds.

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Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Letter from Selma Jail

You are facing the building where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed on February 1, 1965. While incarcerated in the Public Safety Building, he wrote his now-famous "Letter from a Selma, Alabama, Jail," which appeared as an ad on February 5, 1965, in the *New York Times* and made the nation aware of racial struggles in this city.

King was arrested while leading 250 followers in a voter registration march to the Dallas County Courthouse.

The march intentionally violated a parade ordinance issued by Public Safety Director Wilson Baker, but King was undeterred. He knew his arrest would dramatize the plight of African Americans who were denied their right to vote. Baker was aware that arresting King would bring a torrent of negative publicity to Selma, but he was obliged to uphold the law. **Hundreds of marchers were booked that night, until the Public Safety Building jail was overflowing.**

THIS IS SELMA, ALABAMA. THERE ARE MORE NEGROES IN JAIL WITH ME THAN THERE ARE ON THE VOTING ROLLS.
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Selma, Alabama, Jail"

Wilson Baker (right) taking Dr. King into custody. Behind them are Reverend Ralph Abernathy (left) and Reverend Frederick Reese (right) of the Dallas County Voters League.

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Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail felt compelled to report much of the park's interpretive content. Note that in each image someone has highlighted in yellow text that apparently was judged to be problematic in terms of SO 3431. It's not clear whether this was done by park staff or DOI reviewers.

spreadsheet referenced the park's enabling legislation, which park managers quoted verbatim: "[the Trail] will serve as a reminder, we must be ever vigilant in securing our right to vote. It will also give long overdue recognition to the men and women who have sacrificed so much for, and dedicated their lives to, voting rights for all Americans."¹¹

It is hard to read these submissions without feeling empathy for this group of park managers. Some might fault them for wishful thinking, or even naïveté, but caught in an impossible situation, they tried their best to plead their case.

ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION

Responses in this category mostly relate to climate change. A majority simply included the statement "Needs Review: Contains content that may conflict with SO 3431 or EO 14253," adding that they were flagging their respective materials "out of an abundance of caution." Even if there was no explicit mention of climate change in the SO instructions, managers at national parks such as Acadia, Glacier, Rocky Mountain, Olympic, and others—presumably responding to the White House's well-known antipathy toward this subject—offered up on the SO's sacrificial altar extensively developed interpretive materials on climate impacts.

Acadia National Park, arguably once the flagship park for NPS climate change interpretation, identified for review and removal a score of waysides, including signage explaining air quality and atmospheric ozone levels, the decline of spruce-fir forests and habitat, and the fundamental importance of research in "helping park managers make informed decisions." Acadia's managers also flagged a sign about Acadia's RAD resource management strategy for *resisting, accepting, or directing* climate change. Five years ago, I devoted a Letter from Woodstock called "Thinking and Acting Anew"¹² to Acadia's pioneering application of RAD in the National Park System. In the wake of the SO, signs on climate change and Indigenous history have been removed from two heavily visited sites, Cadillac Mountain and the Great Meadows wetlands, and from the Sieur du Monts Nature Center.

"The brochure 'Losing a Namesake' is a popular and well-researched brochure that is available to visitors," reported **Glacier National Park** managers. "Visitors frequently have questions about glaciers, so this brochure was created to help address these questions.... [T]he data has been thoroughly vetted with resource experts and is supported by current science." Yet, Glacier officials decided to leave it up to higher authorities to rewrite the narrative as

needed: "We will be doing a reprint soon ... specifically, we are interested in any comments on the second page under 'Why are the glaciers shrinking?' and 'What can be done?'"

Within this category, however, a few outlier responses were also recorded. There were stalwart, but likely forlorn attempts by park managers to infuse the SO with a measure of practicality, pleading the case for upgrading degraded exhibits and waysides. "Waysides at AMGH are worn," reported **Amache National Historic Site**, and "do not comply with ADA standards, and are not reflective of the most recent scholarship." **Grand Canyon National Park** declared that most of their exhibits

"Popular and well-researched," this brochure from Glacier National Park presents irrefutable evidence of climate change impacts on the park's namesake features.



More Than a Garden

These plants show us whether the air they're breathing is clean or dirty. See for yourself! This garden is planted with cutleaf coneflower, a plant sensitive to ozone that helps scientists know when ozone levels get too high. Walk into the garden and look closely at the leaves—do you see black speckling or other signs of damage? Most visible in late summer, this damage is directly caused by exposure to ground-level ozone.



Like these plants, breathing ground-level ozone can hurt you. At high concentrations, ground-level ozone can lead to difficulty breathing, chest pain, throat irritation, and reduced lung function.

Good up high. Naturally-occurring ozone in the upper atmosphere protects all life on earth from the sun's harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays. When you hear of the ozone hole, this is where to look!

Bad nearby. But ground-level ozone is a pollutant. Created when emissions (motor vehicle exhaust, gasoline vapors, electric utilities, and more) chemically react with sunlight, ground-level ozone harms human health and damages vegetation and ecosystems.

Reduce air pollution to protect your health and the plants and animals around you.

- ✓ Carpool or use the park's free shuttle bus.
- ✓ Reduce idling in your car. View wildlife with motor off and parked.
- ✓ Stop at the clerk when refueling your car. Overfilling allows pollution-causing vapors to enter the air.
- ✓ Refuel in the evenings. Without

sunlight, fuel vapors don't have as much of a chance to react and create ground-level ozone.

- ✓ Maintain your vehicle. Poorly-maintained vehicles can pollute as much as 25 times more!
- ✓ Limit your exposure to ground-level ozone by observing local health advisories.

STRATOSPHERE
10-20 miles above Earth

TROPOSPHERE
0-10 miles above Earth

Surface-level Ozone (Smog)

Stratospheric Ozone (Ozone Layer)

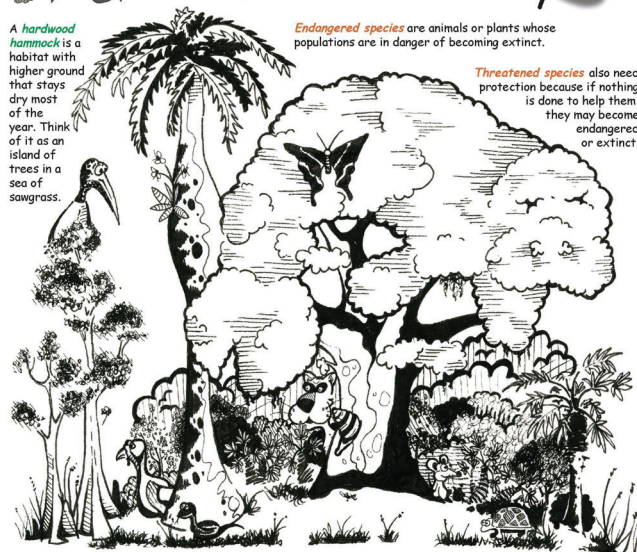


Hammock Hideaway

A **hardwood hammock** is a habitat with higher ground that stays dry most of the year. Think of it as an island of trees in a sea of sawgrass.

Endangered species are animals or plants whose populations are in danger of becoming extinct.

Threatened species also need protection because if nothing is done to help them, they may become endangered or extinct.



Find these endangered and threatened species before they disappear! Search the hardwood hammock above and circle the species listed below. Look closely, some are camouflaged. Then color them and their habitat.

Eastern Indigo Snake
Clamshell Orchid
Schaus Swallowtail Butterfly
Liguus Tree Snail
Key Largo Cotton Mouse

Wood Stork
Florida Panther
West Indian Manatee
Gopher Tortoise
Wild Turkey



Try this at home!

Find out which plants and/or animals near your home are endangered or threatened. What is being done to help protect them and what can you do to help? Suggestion: search the internet or ask at a local park.

Which species is endangered, but does not belong in the hardwood hammock?

Which species pictured is NOT endangered or threatened? (Hint: traditional Thanksgiving meal)

IS THERE REFUGE FROM A CHANGING CLIMATE?

Though Acadia's mountain summits are experiencing climate change, some parts of them are cooler than the rest of the landscape. These spots can provide habitat for sensitive plant and animal species as temperatures warm.

Park staff and partners want to protect such "refugia" for rare plants and subalpine species, while also managing an inevitable transition to new plant communities that thrive in warmer settings.



Photo by Catherine Schmitt, Schoodic Institute

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE

Help us monitor change, and our responses to it, by sharing your observations of plants and wildlife to iNaturalist and eBird.



go.nps.gov/
acadia_3b

04 / 06

On Guard

Amache's residents (also referred to as internees and inmates) were under 24-hour guard by military police stationed in towers and along the barbed wire perimeter.

- Number of towers: 6
- Tower height: Nearly three stories
- Each tower had a searchlight
- The towers' octagonal shape was unique to Amache

When authorities learned that the residents posed no security threat, guards were removed from the towers. Sentries continued to monitor the main entrance and patrol the perimeter, watching over daily activities and religious ceremonies.

A Tower Stands Again

This glass tower was removed during Japanese American incarceration and has since been reconstructed.

Reconstruction Partners:

American Japanese Society
American Preservation Society
Colorado Preservation, Inc.
Friends of Amache
The National Park Service
The National Trust for Historic Preservation
The Town of Granada
University of Denver, Department of Anthropology



A sampling of park interpretive material that falls into the "Abundance of Caution" category.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

A panel on air pollution impacts, Rocky Mountain National Park; a QR-coded panel at Acadia National Park inviting visitors to share nature observations that could be helpful in monitoring climate change; a weather-worn wayside at Amache National Historic Site; a Junior Ranger activity page from Big Cypress National Preserve/Biscayne National Park/Everglades National Park.

were overdue for replacement and “of our 400 waysides, approximately 70% of them need to be replaced due to sun damage and other degradation.”

While interpretive materials dealing with Black, Native American, and Women’s history were being flagged for possible removal across the National Park System, **Natchez Trace Parkway** interpreted “disparagement” rather differently. There, staff took the opportunity to critique older signs that they believed unfairly treated Black and Native American people and events. Park managers reported that a sign placing a photograph of a Civil War Black soldier serving with the United States Colored Troops (USCT) right next to a Confederate flag “does not address the purpose or importance of the photographed soldier nor the USCT as a whole, which is disparaging to those who fought.” The Natchez staff also flagged their “Red Dog Road” routed sign about Choctaw Chief Ofahoma, or “Red Dog,” as disparaging to Native Americans. The current sign reads, “like other Choctaw, he had accepted the way of his European neighbors” which, parkway managers noted, “diminishes the forced removal of all native tribes and is disparaging to these Americans.”

Applying the SO’s directions literally—or perhaps to make a point—**C&O Canal National Historical Park** asked for clarification on whether its Lockhouse 22 Wayside, which recounted the story of an inebriated lockkeeper who allowed a canal boat loaded with coal to sink in the lock, “could potentially be seen as denigrating the lockkeeper.” Similarly, as reported in the *Washington Post*, “**Glen Canyon National Recreation Area** in Arizona asked for clarification about whether displays on California condors’ return from the brink of extinction disparage hunters ‘or tell a success?’”¹³

ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING

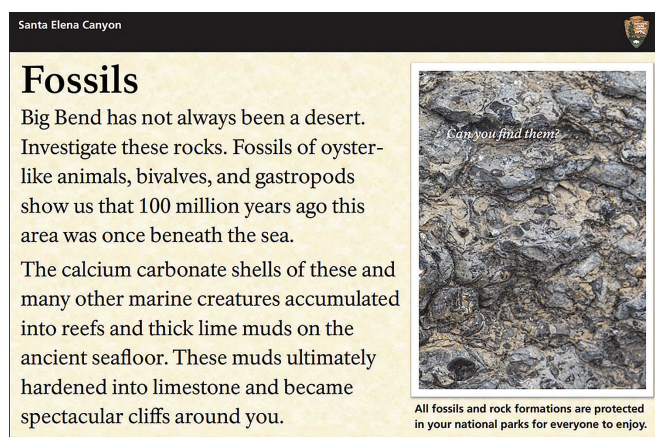
This category of park managers, taking no chances, zealously listed just about every single interpretive panel and publication in their respective parks. Some possibly discerned the practical difficulty DOI reviewers would face in going over mountains of interpretive material. Or given the unprecedented numbers of people in acting jobs, perhaps some of these managers were nervous about holding onto their temporary promotions, or maybe, seeking advancement, they wanted to impress their bosses by their responsiveness to the SO.

“We are submitting photos of all of the exhibits found within the museum,” reported managers at **Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial**. “We decided to submit all exhibits so they can be reviewed in their entirety.” Big

Bend National Park sent in images of signs describing everything from fossil discoveries to declining flows on the Colorado River. “These wayside exhibits describe natural features,” wrote park managers, “but emphasize ‘matters unrelated to the beauty, abundance, or grandeur of said natural feature.’” The park, however, stated they did not “advocate changing these wayside exhibits, unless scientific methods or new information identify a better interpretation.” All the same, the *Washington Post* reports many of Big Bend’s geologic and natural history signs are targeted by DOI for removal.¹⁴

Cape Hatteras National Seashore managers also worried that their various signs explaining the dynamics of coastal erosion, an ever-present reality of life on barrier islands, “might not focus on the grandeur, beauty and abundance.” The park desired higher review for the temporary public signs put up to explain a \$3.6-million project to rehabilitate Ocracoke Light Station. The signs described how the work would mitigate “reasonably foreseeable” storms and related

Big Bend National Park and Cape Hatteras National Seashore submitted images of exhibits featuring seemingly non-controversial natural history subjects.

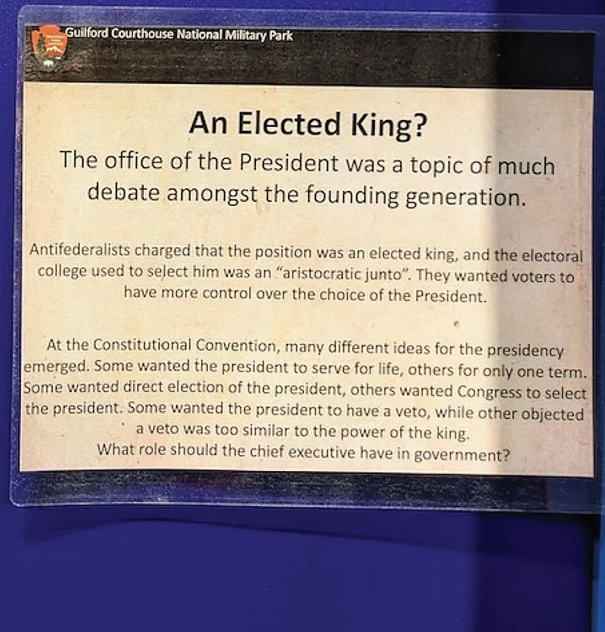


A President, Not a King

Realizing the need for a strong president, Congress placed its hopes in George Washington. The country needed a man who would not abuse power.

A few years earlier, Washington stepped down from his position as Commander-in-Chief of the army, when others might have declared themselves king. King George III had predicted, “If he does that, he will be the greatest man in history.”

With independence secured, and Washington as President, a new era began for the United States of America.



Guilford Courthouse National Military Park submitted a photo of an exhibit whose topic has taken on new significance today.

flooding, exacerbated by sea level rise.”¹⁵ Taking no chances, Hatteras flagged no fewer than 20 interpretive signs, many located in their excellent Discovery Center, including panels on ocean currents, shorebirds, and the life-cycle of sea turtles. One gets the feeling that someone at the Center, unable to decipher what the SO was asking for, just instructed a park interpreter to photograph everything on the walls and send it in.

San Juan Islands National Historical Park tagged an exhibit panel on prairie landscape decline due in part to invasive Canada thistle, cheatgrass, and tansy ragwort, and the introduction of non-native European rabbits. Similarly, **Cumberland Gap National Historical Park** flagged for review a sign on the woolly adelgid insect pest. **Canyonlands National Park** submitted for review wayside text that “introduce visitors to biological soil crust and its ecological services.” Park managers sought guidance “on whether the text describing negative outcomes associated with loss of soil crusts is within [the] scope of Secretary’s Order 3431.”

Some park submittals reflected the pervasiveness of the paranoia the SO successfully induced. As first reported in *National Parks Traveler*, park managers at **Guilford Courthouse National Military Park** were concerned about a sign in the park that explained “the Founding Fathers’ desire for a president, ‘not a king’ to lead the fledgling United States of America.” No doubt they feared this basic statement of fact might incur the ire

of the sitting president, who has made no secret of his monarchical inclinations.¹⁶

Not even visitor convenience and safety messages seemed exempt from the SO’s reach. **Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie National Historical Park** flagged for review the instructions for its water bottle filling stations that encouraged visitors to use refillable water bottles rather than single-use plastics. **Rocky Mountain National Park** recommended review of a wayside about infestations of pine beetles that also warned park visitors to look up and “watch for falling trees while hiking, camping, or picnicking in the park.” Cape Hatteras National Seashore flagged a sign that included a beach safety warning to prospective swimmers on how to survive being caught in a rip current.

OVERACHIEVERS

This last category of submissions is perhaps the most discouraging. These park managers showed themselves willing to not only identify targets for editing or erasure, but to suggest helpful ways to get the job done.

Fort Pulaski National Monument selected for review several movable signs that among other topics addressed the acute danger to the low-lying fort posed by recurrent storms and the rise in sea level. The park described these materials as “temporary interpretive signage that allows for topical interpretation inside Fort Pulaski that can also be quickly stored and dismantled by park staff during park storm/hurricane prep.” With no discernable irony, they

reported, “Because of this, most FOPU interpretive content can be quickly and easily edited, if necessary.”

The anxious managers at **Harpers Ferry National Historical Park** flagged over 30 items for higher scrutiny, including a text box from their Civil War Driving Tour titled “*In Their Own Words, the Cause of the Civil War.*” The suspect text directly quotes from primary sources, citing original state secession declarations, including Mississippi’s, which stated: “*Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery.*” Also quoted is Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens’ well-known “Cornerstone” speech, in which he declared, “[*Slavery*] was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution.” Former NPS Chief Historian Dwight T. Pitcaithley has authored no fewer than five scholarly books on state secession documents,¹⁷ irrefutably backing up the park’s text. Harpers Ferry managers acknowledged in their response to the SO that the text was “true,” but they still asked “*is this considered cherry picking and denigrating southerners?*” “If it needs to be changed,” they obligingly offered, “*we can just remove this text box.*”

Antietam National Battlefield also flagged for review many excellent interpretive materials, including the contextual framework used for the park’s visitor center exhibits, organized around the universal concepts of “*Conflict, Terror, Survival, Freedom, and Memory.*” They explained, “*This approach provided a framework ... an entry point for all visitors to connect with the material.*” It was still submitted for review “*out of an abundance of caution.*” And “*if they’re determined to be in conflict with the EO/SO,*” the park helpfully suggested, “*we’d simply take them down. They’re taped to the wall.*”

Wilson’s Creek National Battlefield submitted a reproduction of “The Scourged Back,” a famous 1863 image of the lacerated back of Peter Gordon, a formerly enslaved man from Louisiana. An identical copy of the image displayed at a Fort Pulaski wayside had been removed, and after public protest, restored. In this case, Wilson’s Creek managers explained that they thought “*the photo speaks for itself*” and that “*the abuse and violence are rooted in historical evidence and factual materials to support it.*” Yet, they were concerned that the image “*could be viewed as*

inappropriately disparaging to the slaveholding population with the associated text that highlights abuse, violence, and a system that ignored human rights.” This statement demonstrates just how obsequious some NPS managers

Specificity and generality: A driving tour guide at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park was flagged because of precise language taken from secessionist states themselves identifying slavery as the cause of the Civil War (TOP), while Antietam National Battlefield submitted panels focused on universal feelings evoked by violent combat (BOTTOM).

Auto Tour

This 6.8-mile tour consists of 5 stops. Once you depart the Visitor Center, the roads used are public (state or county). Use caution when traveling (especially on Rt. 340). Obey all posted speed limits and traffic regulations.

Stop 1 Bolivar Heights

The primary US defensive line stretched across this ridge facing School House Ridge to the west. To the east looms Maryland Heights, site of fighting on the first and second days of the battle. Loudoun Heights sits south of Maryland Heights, across the water gap, and was occupied by Confederate Gen. Walker on the second day. The Chambers Farm is to the south across Rt. 340. Cannons from both heights, School House Ridge, and eventually the Chambers Farm bombarded the US troops here, forcing the garrison’s surrender and mortally wounding Col. Miles. This site features easy to moderate hiking trails ranging from 0.3 of a mile to 3.2 miles roundtrip, panoramic views of the Blue Ridge mountains and surrounding areas, interpretive markers and signs, reproduction cannons, and Civil War earthworks.

Stop 2 Lower Bolivar Heights

US pickets, soldiers posted in front of the line to warn of an enemy attack, exchanged occasional gunfire here with their Confederate counterparts. After nightfall, this sporadic firing, or even just twigs snapping, sometimes prompted a full volley from the jumpy, raw recruits in the US garrison. Confederate Gen. Jackson also advanced soldiers to this area in a feint attack to cover for Gen. A. P. Hill’s flanking maneuver on the night of September 14. This area includes a moderately difficult hiking trail of approximately 0.9 of a mile roundtrip, views of the surrounding ridgelines, and interpretive markers and signs.

Stop 3 School House Ridge North

At this point you are about mid-way between the center and left flank of Jackson’s position. Confederate Gen. J. R. Jones’ division was located on the left flank at the north end of the ridge, while General Alexander Lawton’s division sat astride the Charlestown Pike (modern Rt. 340) in the center. This site includes a moderately difficult hiking trail of approximately 1.75 miles roundtrip, views of the surrounding ridgelines, interpretive signs and markers, reproduction cannons, and restroom facilities.

Stop 4 School House Ridge South

This was the right flank of Jackson’s position. Confederate Gen. A. P. Hill’s 5,824-man division marched off the line here to execute their flanking maneuver on the night of September 14. This area features easy to moderately difficult hiking trails ranging from 1.2 to 3.7 miles roundtrip, views of the surrounding ridgelines, interpretive markers and signs, reproduction cannons, and restroom facilities.

Stop 5 Murphy/Chambers Farm

This farmstead was on the far-left flank of the US defensive line and only lightly guarded. A. P. Hill’s division easily scattered the few US troops posted here before dawn on September 15. Then, as Hill said, “The fate of Harpers Ferry was sealed.” As the sun burned off the morning fog, the Confederates renewed the bombardment and Hill’s infantry prepared to assault Bolivar Heights. The US garrison surrendered soon after the bombardment began. This site includes easy to moderately difficult hiking trails of up to 1.2 miles roundtrip, views of the surrounding ridgelines and the Shenandoah River, interpretive markers and signs, reproduction cannons, and Civil War earthworks.

In Their Own Words, the Cause of the Civil War

“That reason was [the United States of America’s] fixed purpose to ... abolish slavery.” - Georgia Declaration of Secession 1861

“[Slavery] was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution.” - Vice President of the Confederate States of America, Alexander Stephens - 1861

“Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery.” - Mississippi Declaration of Secession 1861

A Family and Community In the Path of War

The Joshua Newcomer Farm was a busy enterprise. Joshua and his wife Mary Ann were of German-Swiss heritage. Two adult sons helped operate the farm and mills, although one was serving in the Confederate Army by the time of the battle and the other was drafted into the Union Army the next year. Six of their nine children were living here in September of 1862: Josephine, Emma, Ann, Isaac, Lewis, and Samuel. All were young adults or teenagers. The youngest, Charles, passed away in 1856 at age three.

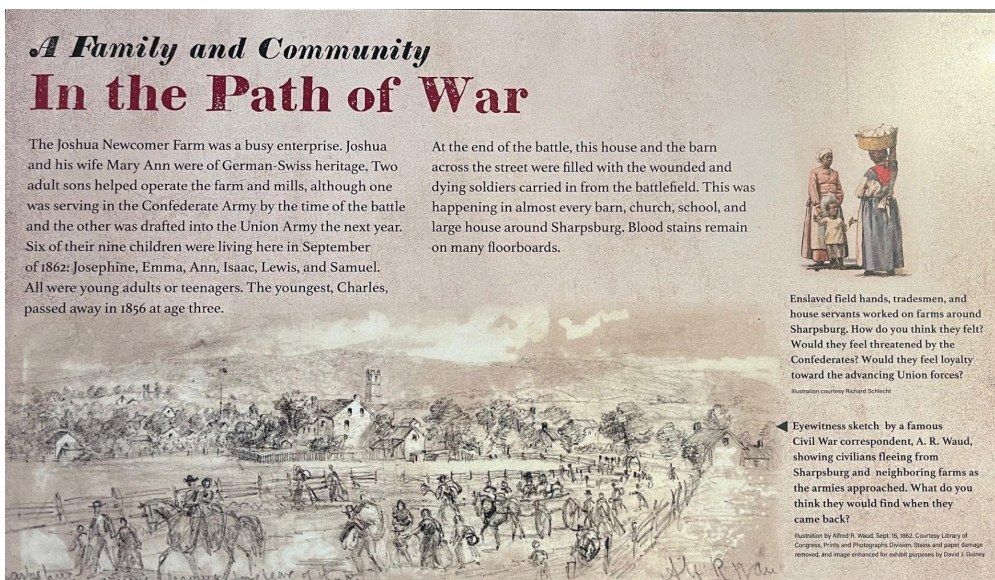
At the end of the battle, this house and the barn across the street were filled with the wounded and dying soldiers carried in from the battlefield. This was happening in almost every barn, church, school, and large house around Sharpsburg. Blood stains remain on many floorboards.



Enslaved field hands, tradesmen, and house servants worked on farms around Sharpsburg. How do you think they felt? Would they feel threatened by the Confederates? Would they feel loyalty toward the advancing Union forces?

◀ Eyewitness sketch by a famous Civil War correspondent, A. R. Waud, showing civilians fleeing from Sharpsburg and neighboring farms as the armies approached. What do you think they would find when they came back?

Illustration by Alfred R. Waud, Sept. 15, 1862. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Stains and paper damage removed, and image enhanced for web purposes by David J. Gurnea.



can become in this climate of fear, but you have only to look at the abrupt removal of signs at Independence National Historical Park, ordered by DOI, to fully grasp what scares them.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

All told, the DOI database identified approximately 800 items flagged for review in approximately 140 out of 433 national parks. My analysis of park submissions reveals a significant degree of variability in the way park managers responded to the SO, with some standing up for integrity even in this current environment of fear and insecurity. Nevertheless, much damage is being done across the National Park System. Signs and other displays have been ordered removed, or have been removed, from approximately two dozen parks to date.¹⁸ Several of these acts of censorship are being actively challenged, and a few, including at **Stonewall National Monument** and **Independence National Historical Park**, have been fully or partially reversed by court orders or legal settlements.¹⁹

A March 2026 article by Heather Richards in *E&E News* suggests that the Trump Administration may “have bitten off more than they could chew” and that the

whole campaign might be “bogging down.” The environmental news site further reported that an internal NPS review team “broke up after a few months” and pointed out that—in what one might describe as an ironic example of unintended consequences—the severity of NPS staffing cuts have further slowed the whole process down. The article described NPS staff as “frustrated and angry” about the SO, and anonymously quoted a park ranger as saying, “This is precisely the opposite of what we swore an oath to do.”²⁰

Of course, the administration has many other tools at its disposal. “A small group of DOI employees has been reviewing new submissions for National Park Service websites since February,” reported Richards in a follow-up article, “in part evaluating the material for compliance with President Donald Trump’s 2025 mandate to present a more positive history of the country at its many historic sites, battlefields and natural wonders.... One NPS employee described the new process as a ‘total lockdown’ on information — part of a larger effort at Interior to restrict who can communicate with the public and what gets said.”²¹

The wholesale removal of interpretive panels and video from the President’s House exhibit at Independence National Historical Park is the subject of an ongoing lawsuit. This image of the right half of a panel titled “The House and the People Who Worked & Lived in It” rankled the Trump administration with its straightforward description of Washington’s slave-holding, including maneuvers to prevent his enslaved household from being freed under Pennsylvania law.

& Lived In It

THE PRESIDENTS' VISITORS

OFFICIALS

Many dignitaries met or dined with Presidents Washington and Adams including men who would become presidents themselves—Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and John Quincy Adams. Visitors also included Supreme Court justices, cabinet secretaries, and congressmen.

AMBASSADORS

Foreign ambassadors and emissaries were welcomed. Secretary of State Timothy Pickens met with Joseph Bonnet who was sent by Toussaint L'Ouverture to strengthen economic ties with Haiti. L'Ouverture led the revolution that liberated the enslaved Africans in St. Domingue (Haiti) and was the first government leader in the Western Hemisphere of African descent.

NATIVE AMERICAN DIGNITARIES

Presidents Washington and Adams met with many delegations from indigenous nations. President Washington invited Thayendanegea, also known as Joseph Brant, a famous Mohawk leader of the Iroquois Nation. Washington also invited a Chickasaw delegation, including Chiefs Pimingo, George Colbert, and William Glover, to the house to discuss future relations with the United States. Other Native American chiefs, including Seneca Chief Red Jacket, met with Washington in the state dining room. Efforts to befriend the native tribes and secure treaties of peace during this period failed over time.

HOUSEHOLD LABOR

ENSLAVED AFRICANS IN THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE

George and Martha Washington transported nine enslaved African descendants from their Mount Vernon estate to Philadelphia. The enslaved included their cook Hercules, Hercules's son Richmond, Martha's personal maid Oney Judge, Oney's brother Austin, Christopher, Giles, Joe, Paris, and Moll.

PAID ARTISANS & LABORERS

Thousands of craftsmen and laborers, including free people of African descent, lived in Philadelphia in the 1790s and were essential to the city's prosperity. Some worked and lived in the presidential households.

INDENTURED SERVANTS

George Washington also had indentured servants at the President's House and in nearby Germantown, where he lived for several weeks with his family and servants in the summer of 1794. Most indentures required at least three years of work without wages in exchange for ship's passage, housing, food, clothing, and training. At the end of the indenture, the servant was free to negotiate wages for labor.

SLAVERY IN THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE

WASHINGTON & MOUNT VERNON

Mount Vernon, Washington's 8,000-acre plantation in northern Virginia, helped make him one of the wealthier men in the United States. In addition to dozens of hired people and indentured servants, Washington controlled the lives of more than 300 enslaved Africans and their descendants.

MARTHA WASHINGTON & THE DOWER SLAVES

Martha Dandridge Custis, the widow of Daniel Custis, married George Washington in 1759. Martha's inheritance from the Custis estate, which had 17,880 acres with 285 enslaved men, women, and children, provided the lifetime use of, and income from, one-third the property, including at least 84 enslaved people. The rest of the estate was held in trust for her son and his heirs.

When they married, George Washington became the manager of Martha's enslaved people. However, he did not own them. In his will, George Washington directed that the 123 enslaved men, women, and children he personally owned be freed upon his wife's death. Martha in fact freed them in 1801, prior to her own death.

Washington attempted to find a financially sound way to free his enslaved workers during his retirement years, but he had no success. He lamented that intermarriage had created families that by his will would free some, while others would remain enslaved by the Custis estate. Martha Washington was not legally able to free the 123 people enslaved by the Custis estate, but evidence suggests that she accepted the institution of slavery. These “dower slaves” were transferred as property to her four grandchildren, breaking up families that now had both free and enslaved members.

While some Americans chose to free their enslaved Africans during their own lifetime, others, like the Washingtons, decided the fate of the enslaved by the terms of their wills.

WASHINGTON'S DECEIT

Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act (1780) granted freedom to any enslaved person brought into the state and held there for at least six months. Non-resident slave owners needed only to send their enslaved out of state for a day to start the six-month period again. President Washington, when reminded of the Abolition Act, chose to renege some of his enslaved servants to Virginia to prevent them from claiming their freedom. His correspondence indicates that he wanted to do this in secret.

RESISTANCE AND ESCAPE

While residing here, Washington signed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1793, which required the return of escaped slaves who had crossed state lines, and allowed slave catchers to operate freely in every U.S. state and territory. During Washington's presidency and retirement, four of the nine enslaved who spent time in Philadelphia attempted to run to freedom, but only two succeeded—Hercules from Mount Vernon and Oney Judge from Philadelphia. Though still legally considered a fugitive, Hercules, who had been owned directly by George Washington, was probably emancipated after Washington's death. Oney Judge's freedom, however, was always endangered after she escaped to New Hampshire, until her death in 1848, as she was a dower slave owned by the Custis Estate.

Be aware that here you are following in the footsteps of these enslaved as much as those of the Founding Fathers.

PRESIDENT ADAMS

John and Abigail Adams never enslaved Africans, and both were strongly opposed to slavery, though John Adams made no public move against slavery while president. He later wrote that during his presidency he had deferred decisions on slavery to southern politicians because he feared a bloody slave rebellion like those reported in the West Indies.

REFLECTION AND REFOUNDATION

Some day in the future, after the second Trump Administration, it should be possible for NPS to look back at SO 3431, and its problematic response to it, as an extraordinary stress test of NPS fidelity to historical and scientific truths: one of a series of stress tests that the agency was subjected to under this administration. There are lessons NPS can learn from all of them: assessing sources of weakness and vulnerability, as well as strength and resiliency.

One obvious vulnerability is the toxic relationship between NPS and the department that oversees it. Any conversation around Refoundation, building a more robust conservation future, should consider ways to extricate an undermined NPS from the growing domination of DOI. For decades now, one function after another has been stripped away from the department's bureaus, including NPS, and consolidated within an ever-expanding DOI—a trend that is being drastically accelerated under the current administration. If this process remains unchecked, favoring façade at the expense of substance, NPS is at risk of becoming increasingly diminished, much like Lewis Carroll's disappearing Cheshire Cat, where only the feline's fading grin is left.

When I was a park superintendent, I remember reading a detailed account of how, in 1992, Hurricane Andrew impacted the South Florida national parks and their staff. The report addressed the incredible strain placed

on NPS employees as they tried to protect park visitors and resources, and at the same time safeguard their own families and homes. It was a candid appraisal that looked at lessons learned that might be applicable in scenario planning and leadership training for responding to future disasters.

NPS will need to undertake a similar effort to evaluate the hurricane-like impact that this administration is having on our National Park System, and on the well-being of its staff. If such an evaluation can be done, then widely shared and honestly discussed, perhaps one day in the future NPS employees might be better prepared—legally, ethically, and psychologically—should they again have to navigate trials of a similar magnitude.

I conclude this letter with a few poignant words from a colloquy that took place on the floor of the House of Representatives in March 2026. New Mexico Representative Melanie Stansbury rose with several colleagues to collectively speak out against the acts of erasure in national parks. “This is our true history as a nation,” said Stansbury, “not something we should be ashamed of, but what has shaped who we are.” Her compatriot, California Representative Doris Matsui, who was born in a Japanese American internment camp, eloquently appealed to NPS not to remove references to the incarceration she, her family, and so many others endured. “History is not just something we remember,” cautioned Matsui, “it is something that teaches. When we strip away the truth, we strip away all the warnings that go along with it.”²²

ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/>
2. Karin Brulliard and Brady Dennis, “Confidential database reveals which items NPS thinks may ‘disparage’ America,” *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2026; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2026/03/02/national-parks-signs-censorship-slavery/>. The people responsible for leaking the database wrote in a cover note, “This data belongs to the American people, who need to know what is being done in their name.”
3. Kevin M. Levin, “What the National Park Service Has Flagged Thus Far. It’s Much Worse Than I Thought,” *Civil War Memory* (Substack newsletter), March 3, 2026. <https://kevinmlevin.substack.com/p/what-the-national-park-service-has>
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9. I use the generic term “park managers” to collectively refer to superintendents, chief interpreters, or other senior park leaders involved in responding to SO 3431. The review process was almost certainly carried out differently

in various national parks. In some cases, the superintendent may have taken charge, or the task may have been delegated to chief interpreters, resource managers, or larger park review teams. Commentary added in the “content reporting tool” is unattributed.

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18. Acadia, Bent’s Old Fort, Bryce Canyon, Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie, George Washington Memorial Parkway, Golden Gate, Glacier, Grand Teton, Gulf Islands, Hawai’i Volcanoes, Hubbell Trading Post, Jean Lafitte, Lake Mead, Little Bighorn Battlefield, Lowell, Muir Woods Organ Pipe Cactus, Rock Creek, and Stonewall.
19. To track developments throughout the National Park System, see the Save Our Signs project (<https://sites.google.com/umn.edu/save-our-signs/home>) and Missing History’s map (<https://missingparkhistory.org/>).
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