

THE HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE WOMEN'S UNIFORM



National Park Service Women's Conference
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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
CELEBRATING SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS OF SERVICE

Women have participated in a variety of skilled job functions since the inception of the National Park Service. In 1918, Claire Marie Hodges and Helen Wilson were the first women hired by the Service. Both were considered to be temporary (summer) help and were hired as a direct result of the man-power shortages created by the First World War. Wilson worked at the main gate of Mt. Rainier National Park checking in traffic, while Hodges performed ranger duties at Yosemite National Park. Early photographs show that Hodges modified the standard NPS uniform with a riding skirt instead of breeches.

After the promulgation of the National Park Service Uniform Regulations in 1920, all Park Service employees were required to wear the "Official National Park Service Uniform" designed for men. During this period and for many years to come women in temporary (summer) positions were considered rangers, while all permanent field positions were classified as naturalists. The naturalists performed a multitude of duties such as park guides and interpreters.

By the late 30's women in temporary (summer) positions began to wear white blouses and forest green skirts. Permanent employees continued to wear modified versions of what has now become known as the "traditional NPS uniform".

Finally in 1947, when the number of NPS women employees reached 45, an "official" uniform was adopted for women. The NPS Administrative Manual, Volume 19, stated that the uniform would consist of a WAC-type coat, overseas cap, neck-tie and the same insignia as the men. Although, an extra "USNPS" collar ornament was issued for the cap.

In 1959 NPS uniform regulations described in general terms the women's uniform; but it wasn't until January 1961 that the regulation described the women's uniform in detail. This "new" uniform was copied from the American Airlines hostess uniform and the most significant changes were in the hat, jacket and skirt, the addition of a white shirt and the replacement of the embroidered initials on the hat with a small arrowhead patch.

The arrowhead patch elevated the professional appearance of the women's uniform which until that time had been lacking. Ruthanne Hariot, Historian at Harpers Ferry Center in West Virginia told of a time in 1970 when she ordered a businessman special lunch and proved, by the insignia on her hat, that she was not a Girl Scout leader but a "businessman" and therefore entitled to the luncheon special.¹

After years of impractical straight skirts and uncomfortable fitting jackets, with much fanfare, a **new career apparel wardrobe** was introduced in the summer of 1970. It was described as being six outfits in one, all related in color and designed to be functional, practical and stylish. Beige and white double knit replaced the forest green elastique material. The basic uniform consisted of a double knit dress and matching jacket which coordinated with culottes and pants. The uniform also had a work dress of beige and taupe, an accent scarf with an embroidered arrowhead and a beige coat with a zip-out lining of bright orange. To top it all off, there was a beige lightweight version of the ranger hat. The hat was so fragile that most women preferred the traditional campaign style straw hat. This new career apparel wardrobe, although fashionable, was not functional in many work environments which resulted once again in a "uniform change".

¹"A Personal Memoir On NPS Women's Uniforms" by Historian Ruthanne Hariot, Published in the COURIER, March 1984

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In 1975, in an attempt to achieve a more professional image, another "new look" was adopted. The color scheme returned to forest green. In addition to double knit, cotton/polyester fabric was included to add comfort to the uniforms. Design changes were made to the dress to make it more functional and a tunic was added for versatility. A NPS motif scarf and the traditional campaign hats were also added to complete the new ensemble.

After considerable assessment of uniform image and function, in 1980, the traditional style uniform was officially adopted for both men and women uniformed employees. **At last**, the "traditional uniform" was designed and manufactured for **women** of the National Park Service.

Over the years it had become very clear that the appearance of the traditional uniform, including the campaign style hats, the arrowhead shoulder emblem and the badge were the symbols that promoted professionalism and created the image that the public had come to know and respect.

HISTORY DOES INDEED REPEAT ITSELF!



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