

Inventing Wilderness

Nobody invented Yellowstone. The geysers had been throwing boiling water into the sky, bison had been crossing the plateau, and people had been living with that country for thousands of years before Congress arrived with stationery. What Americans invented was the national park, and even that sentence gives the history more order than it really had.

The land that became America's national parks wasn't waiting around to be discovered as nature. People hunted there, traveled through it, burned it, named it, fought over it, farmed it, prayed in it, made money from it, lost money in it, painted it, photographed it and told stories about it long before a federal agency started putting arrowhead signs by the road. Some of those uses were ancient. Some were new and destructive. Some were both, depending on who was standing where.

The odd part isn't that Americans eventually wanted to protect beautiful places. Beautiful places have always been pretty good at recruiting defenders. The odd part is that the answer became this particular thing: draw a boundary, keep the land out of the ordinary churn of private settlement and sale, invite the public in, put government in charge and call the result preservation. That took a while.

George Catlin usually gets a chair at the origin-story table because, decades before Yellowstone, he imagined a large western landscape protected from the changes spreading across the continent. The idea sounds strikingly modern until you stay with him long enough to hear the nineteenth century in it too. His vision mixed preservation with romantic ideas about Indigenous people and a country that

was already treating Native nations as obstacles to expansion. That's a recurring problem in this history. A person can see something worth saving and still be unable to see clearly the people already living inside it.

Trying to crown a single father of the national park sends the story in the wrong direction anyway. There wasn't one. The idea accumulated through laws, paintings, photographs, survey reports, railroad timetables, political bargains, military patrols, commercial ambition and a growing suspicion that some places were too important to be left entirely to whoever could buy, mine, log, dam or subdivide them first.

Yosemite is where the contradiction becomes impossible to keep at arm's length. In 1851, during the Gold Rush invasion of California, the state-sanctioned Mariposa Battalion entered Yosemite Valley. Villages and food stores were destroyed, and Indigenous people were forced from their homes. If the story begins a few years later, with white visitors marveling at granite walls and waterfalls, the valley can look naturally empty. Begin in 1851 and emptiness starts looking less like scenery and more like an outcome.

The people didn't disappear, either, which makes the usual before-and-after version of the story even less satisfying. Survivors returned. Native families maintained relationships with the valley, worked in the growing tourist economy, sold baskets and other goods, and lived with rules that increasingly separated the Indigenous presence visitors were encouraged to admire from the Indigenous land use administrators were willing to allow. A park could celebrate Native culture as part of the visitor experience while narrowing Native gathering, residence and authority. That's a nasty little distinction, and it hangs around.

In the early 1860s, Carleton Watkins hauled large-format photographic equipment into Yosemite. That meant cameras, glass plates, chemicals, darkroom supplies and all the other inconvenient realities that disappear when we look at a finished nineteenth-century photograph hanging quietly on a

wall. Photography out there was labor before it was art. The images that came back were technically demanding, visually astonishing and politically powerful. They made Yosemite portable. A politician or newspaper reader who had never crossed the Sierra could suddenly see the cliffs and waterfalls people were talking about. The photograph could do something a description couldn't quite manage. It could make distance feel less like an excuse for disbelief.

And, yes, every camera still has edges.

A granite wall can be completely real while the road sits outside the frame. A waterfall can be completely real while a hotel, a farm, a worker, a fence or a Native family remains somewhere the lens isn't pointed. That's what makes the photograph more interesting than propaganda. It doesn't have to lie to be selective. It can tell the truth beautifully enough that millions of people begin mistaking one truth for the whole place.

In 1864, with the Civil War still underway, Congress granted Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove to California for public use, resort and recreation. Yosemite wasn't yet a national park. That came later. But the grant mattered because the federal government was doing something unusual with land. Instead of treating scenery as acreage waiting for a conventional private owner, it reserved the place for a public purpose.

You can admire the impulse and still notice the timing. Thirteen years separated the Mariposa Battalion's violence from the Yosemite Grant. The same political culture capable of forcing people out of a valley was also learning to describe that valley as a public treasure.

Preservation did not arrive after power. It arrived through power.

And then visitors came, which meant the protected landscape needed roads. And stages. And lodging. And food. And bridges, trails, horses, workers, guides, maintenance,

waste removal and somebody who knew what to do when a tourist discovered that granite scenery doesn't cook dinner.

Yosemite became famous partly because it looked untouched, while an increasing amount of human effort went into making it possible for people to experience the untouchedness comfortably. Stage roads cut access into the valley. Hotels and farms served visitors. Businesses and concessions grew around scenery whose value supposedly lay in being beyond ordinary development.

That isn't a cheap hypocrisy gotcha. It's the park problem arriving early. Public preservation needs a public. A public needs access. Access changes the place.

John Muir would later become one of Yosemite's most powerful preservation voices, and he deserves the attention. His writing helped people feel the Sierra as something more than timber, water or real estate. But he doesn't solve the origin story either. His influence worked because photography, tourism, law, political networks and a growing preservation constituency were already giving such arguments somewhere to land. His wilderness philosophy also carried assumptions about human presence that could make Indigenous relationships to the landscape harder to see.

No lone prophet invented this thing. America was learning it collectively, badly, and with mixed motives. Yellowstone turned the experiment federal.

Before the 1870s, Euro-American stories about its geothermal features could sound ridiculous enough to be dismissed. Organized expeditions in 1870 and 1871 changed that. Surveyors, scientists, guides, photographers and artists came back with maps, measurements, reports and images. William Henry Jackson's photographs and Thomas Moran's paintings made a landscape most Americans would never visit suddenly available for inspection, argument and awe.

It's easy now to treat those expeditions as the prelude before the real event, which is Congress. I think that's