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PARKS STEWARDSHIP FORUM

# Humanizing the Seas

A Case for Integrating the Arts and Humanities  
into *Ocean Literacy and Stewardship*

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**Plastic Catch** • Susan Schultz  
porcelain and wood sculpture



## LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



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### A MORE COMPLETE STORY

*Rolf Diamant*

**The US national park system has increasingly become contested terrain in a struggle for the country's past and future.** The events of June 1, 2020, at Lafayette Park, part of the larger President's Park, a unit of the national park system that includes the White House, brought this into sharp relief. Black Lives Matter demonstrators who gathered in and around Lafayette Park, described by the National Park Service (NPS) as “an iconic place for civil discourse,” were violently dispersed to make way for the now-infamous presidential photo-op. That this took place at a national park so closely identified with the practice of free speech is disturbing enough; that it was carried out in large measure by riot-ready US Park Police under the nominal authority of the acting NPS director, should anger all associated with the agency.

National parks are highly symbolic, and we have seen their imagery and history both used and misused. To take two recent cases, there was the encouraging example of an outdoor community forum on racial justice convened at Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie National Historical Park in South

Carolina. The event, organized by Michael Allen, a former NPS community partnership specialist, sought to expand the national dialogue on equality by looking at the historical experience of African Americans in Charleston and on nearby Sullivan's Island. On the other hand, there was the July 4th pageant at Mount Rushmore National Memorial, the backdrop for the elaborate election infomercial complete with military flyovers and fireworks. This was followed by the use of the White House and Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine (also part of the national park system) as speaking venues for the Republican national convention. Commandeering of treasured national spaces for partisan purposes has deeply troubling overtones of authoritarianism. There will come a time, hopefully in the near future, when NPS—and Congress—will have an opportunity for reflecting on what lessons can be learned about using parks to advance civic engagement and national dialogue in times of crisis, but also what lessons can be learned about the system's obvious vulnerability to political manipulation and exploitation.

As these events unfolded, the idea for this 23rd Letter from Woodstock was inspired by the proposed renaming of the handful of US military bases that venerate Confederate generals. These bases were established in the South around the time of the First World War. President Wilson's administration permitted state and local authorities to name the posts for Confederate officers who had all served in the US Army but broke their oath to defend the Constitution when they took up arms against the United States in support of slavery and secession. It seems a legitimate question to ask why a country should honor anyone who betrayed it, or why the Army should name any installations for individuals responsible for the battlefield deaths of so many loyal United States soldiers.

**It struck me that the fledgling NPS had followed along a parallel path** when the first national parks were established in the South in the 1920s. NPS leadership at the time acquiesced to managing the new parks consistent with Jim Crow laws of states in which they were located. In a number of cases

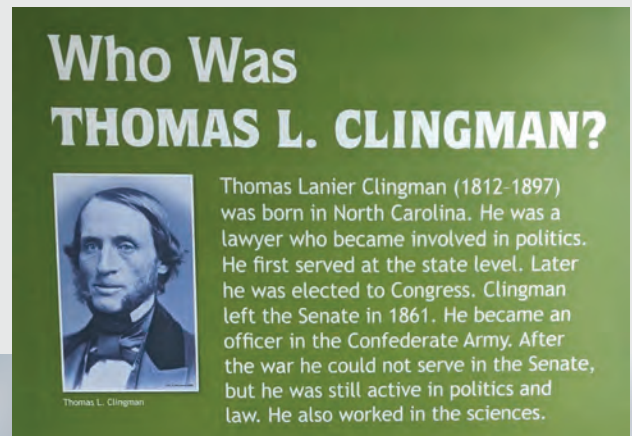
where state governments acquired and transferred land to establish national parks, there was an implicit understanding that the racial segregation practices of their respective state park systems would also be applied to these new federal parks. This was the case at Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks.

There are also a number of prominent park features around the national park system named for Confederate leaders, including the Robert E. Lee tree in Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks. (It should be noted that the park recently removed references to Lee from exhibits and other interpretive materials.) Another feature is one of the most popular destinations in Great Smoky Mountains, Clingmans Dome. This scenic vista and visitor contact station is named for Thomas Clingman (1812–1897), who surveyed the mountains of western North Carolina. Largely forgotten is Clingman's long career as a member of Congress from North Carolina, where he was an outspoken proponent of the "inequality of the negro," and championed

(left) Clingmans Dome visitor contact station, Great Smoky Mountains National Park. (right) The park's interpretive panel on Clingman. (below) The observation tower.



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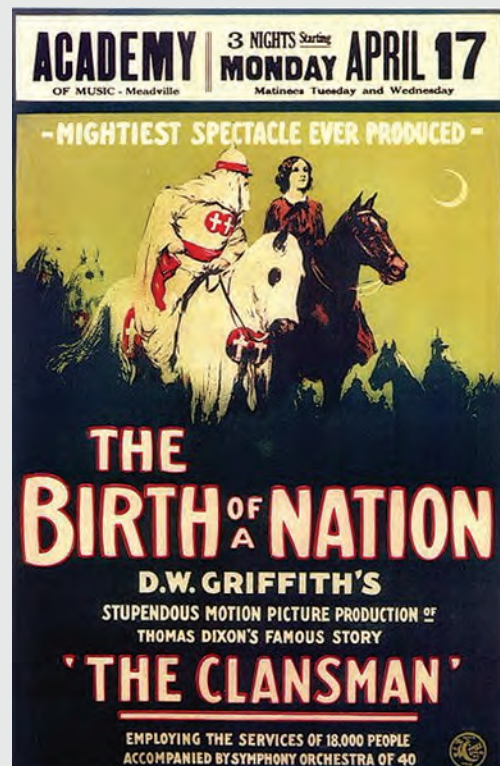
the legitimacy of slavery and secession. On the wall of the contact station (now a park cooperating association bookstore) is an interpretive panel about Clingman's career as politician and explorer that disingenuously states, "he left the Senate in 1861" and became a Confederate officer. Clingman did not actually resign his seat but was formally expelled by a vote of his senatorial colleagues for conspiring "against the peace, union, and liberties of the people and Government of the United States." I believe park managers are now aware of this context, and hopefully will make changes to the panel. In any case, Congress is now paying closer attention to the larger issue. The House 2021 Interior Appropriation Bill requests an inventory of all assets with Confederate names under the jurisdiction of the Department of Interior. It remains to be seen whether this language remains in the final legislation, but regardless, it is time for a fuller understanding and acknowledgement of NPS's own complex history.

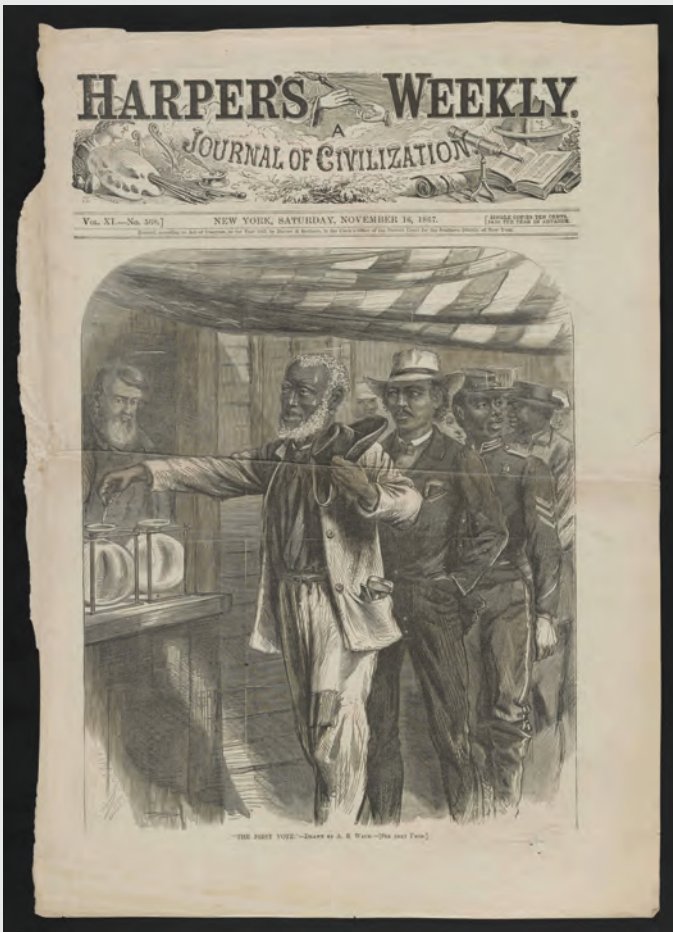
**A lot of excellent work has already been done,** including Susan Shumaker's background research for Ken Burns' 2009 national parks documentary series, compiled in the insightful publication *Untold Stories of America's National Parks* (2009). National parks are doing a better job interpreting their own unsettling practices of racial segregation, including interpretive panels in Shenandoah National Park's Byrd Visitor Center and a wayside exhibit outside of the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center at Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park. These installations document the separation of races and chronicle the protracted struggle in the early 1940s to fully integrate the parks. Recent academic studies have helped to fill out much of this picture. Carolyn Finney, a scholar who served on the National Park System Advisory Board, has written and spoken from a compelling personal perspective on the impact of racism on the enjoyment of public lands, including national parks, by visitors of color. Stephanie Heher's master's thesis (Savannah College of Art and Design, 2018) on Jim Crow and the design and development of Blue Ridge Parkway, Angela Sirna and Rebecca Conard's comprehensive administrative history of Stones River National Battlefield (2016), and Erin Devlin's NPS-sponsored historic resource study (2020) on segregation and African American visitation in Virginia's national parks are

examples of recent scholarship on this troubled implementation of "America's Best Idea."

What appears to be still missing from this emerging picture is a more complete story of the National Park Service's creation in 1916 and the less publicized but pervasive influence of white supremacy on the agency's early development and, in particular, on its founding narrative. NPS was established in 1916 at a time when the "Lost Cause" campaign was becoming a dominant national narrative, nostalgically glamorizing the "Old South" and portraying treason and terrorism as honorable heritage. A year earlier there was a special screening of the pro-Klu Klux Klan film *Birth of a Nation* for President Wilson in the White House. Jim Crow policies were rolling back all civil rights gains dating back to the Civil War and Reconstruction. "By 1913 racism in America had become a cultural industry," observed historian David Blight, "and twisted history a commodity. A segregated society required a segregated historical memory and a national mythology." In 1922, six years after the establishment of the National Park Service, the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated by President Warren

A 1915 poster for "The Birth of a Nation."





"The First Vote," Alfred R. Waud, *Harper's Weekly*, November 16, 1867.

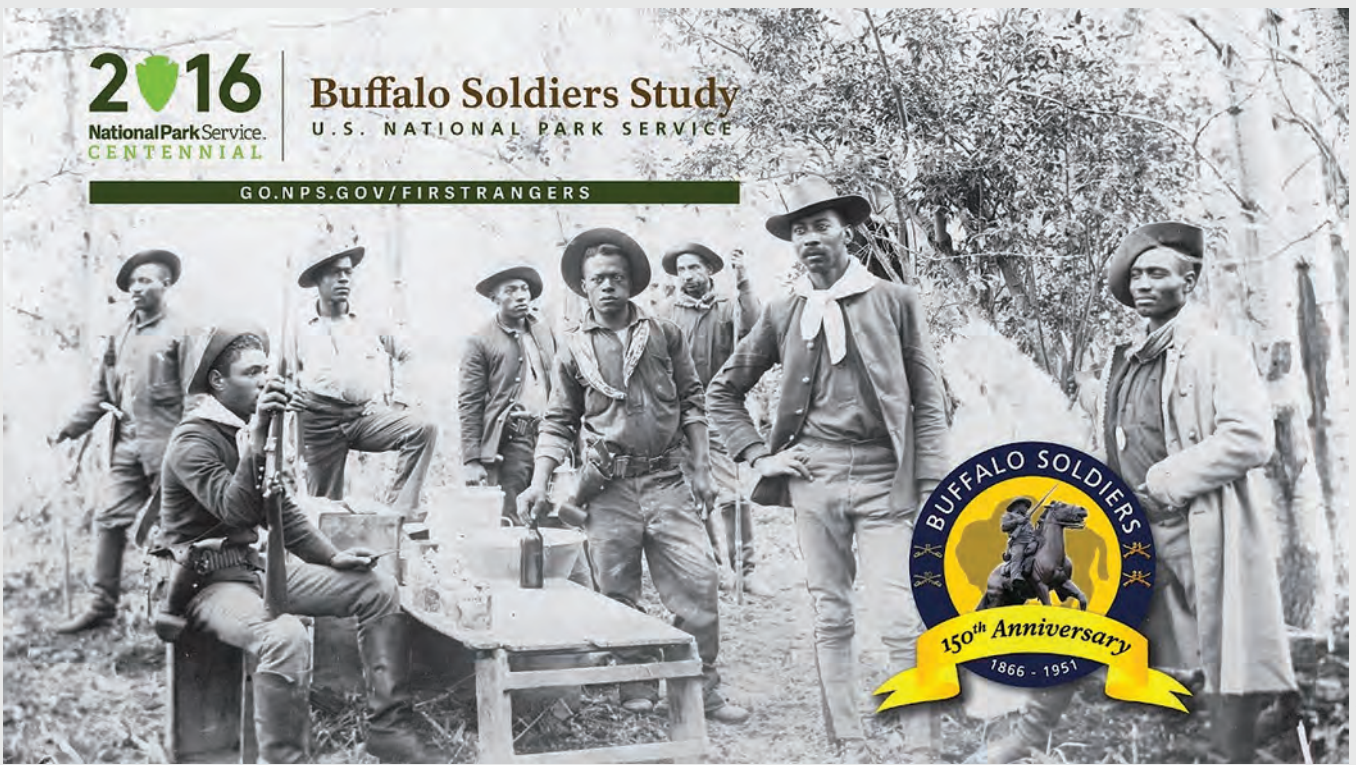
Harding in a ceremony stained by the sad irony of segregated seating for event attendees. "The Lincoln Memorial was presented as a shrine not to emancipation," wrote Roger Kennedy, historian and former NPS director, "but to the reconciliation of North and South—reconciliation without redemption, leaving unaddressed the original sin of slavery and its lingering effects."

**In this atmosphere of white supremacy,** early national park publicists steered clear of any connection between national parks and trauma and the contested public memory of the Civil War—even though there is a direct association between the idea for national parks and profound changes to America brought about by the war. No reference was ever made to the inspiration and decisive precedent of the Yosemite Act, signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1864, a wartime affirmation of government's capacity to function and entertain new ideas and initiatives even while operating under the greatest duress. This was the first time public land was reserved in perpetuity as

a park for the benefit of the entire nation. Neither was there any reference to park-maker, unionist, and anti-slavery activist Frederick Law Olmsted and his 1865 Yosemite Report, which called for "the establishment by government of great public grounds for the free enjoyment of the people." This was an unequivocal endorsement of a national park system, if not in name, certainly in principle. Yet backers believed that the parks needed a new pedigree; they believed, in the words of NPS historian Richard West Sellers, that the national park idea deserved "a virgin birth." Hence the official NPS embrace of Nathaniel Langford's account of the 1870 Washburn-Doane Yellowstone expedition and his fabricated claim, that in this perceived wilderness tableau, the explorers first came up with the idea for national parks as they sat around a campfire at Madison Junction. Native Americans were erased from this imagined national park narrative as they were uprooted and forced to give up long-inhabited ancestral lands repurposed for national parks.

The Madison Junction campfire story about the birth of the national park idea fit perfectly into the "national mythology" and was enthusiastically embraced by national park leaders and advocates. This story was certainly not going to discomfort southern congressmen, nor a southern-born and avowedly racist president in the person of Woodrow Wilson, and it had wide appeal. Once adopted, the campfire story was hard to shake even when NPS historians began debunking it in the 1960s. "If it didn't happen," declared Lon Garrison, Midwest Regional Director at the time and a former Yellowstone superintendent, "we would have been well advised to invent it. It is a perfect image."

I have long wondered why NPS interpreters, who do a fine job talking about the early park protection duties of "Buffalo Soldiers" (Black cavalrymen serving in the Sierran parks in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) do not take the story back to the Civil War and make a connection to the creation of national parks. Some 180,000 African Americans put on their nation's uniform during the Civil War to fight for the republic and freedom. The US Colored Troops, the direct progenitors of the Buffalo Soldiers, played a crucial role in securing a military victory and ensuring the survival of a national government, one which emerged from the



Civil War politically realigned and empowered to do things it never had done before. This included setting aside public lands for public purposes—first with land grant colleges in 1862, followed by the Yosemite Act in 1864, and then the Yellowstone Act in 1872. Therefore, not only can Buffalo Soldier interpretation take on a new dimension linked to the earliest action on national parks, but the national park founding narrative becomes a more complex and inclusive story with other actors and events—not previously recognized—finally acknowledged.

**If we can revisit our more distant past with openness to new information,** a quest for greater context, and a willingness to accept complexity and contradiction, we may be better positioned to assess events of our very recent past and present. A good place to start any conversation on how the National Park Service is responding to Black Lives Matter and the unprecedented politicization of the park system is with a refreshed history of its true origins. There has never been a better time for a more complete story.

*The views expressed in editorial columns published in Parks Stewardship Forum are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, the Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity, or the George Wright Society.*