

A FILM BY KEN BURNS
THE NATIONAL PARKS
America's Best Idea

THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA
LESSON PLANS

**EXPANDING THE MISSION:
HISTORICAL PARKS**

For more information, visit

www.pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/

EXPANDING THE MISSION: HISTORICAL PARKS

Overview

In this lesson, students explore how, in the 1930s, the national parks' mission expanded to include preserving sites of historical as well as natural importance. They evaluate why – or whether – history is as important to defining Americans as geography. Students will locate and categorize the 45 national historical parks, and identify the different types of events, activities, and people that they commemorate. They will decide whether adding historic sites to the national parks was a good idea, identify a potential historic site in their own community, and present a persuasive argument about why that site should become a national historic park.

Objectives

The student will:

- Review and understand a video clip
- Use a wall map or Google Earth to locate the nation's historical parks
- Research and report on the nation's historical parks
- Identify the types of events, activities, and people that historical parks commemorate
- Discuss why – or whether – preserving historic sites is as important as preserving natural sites
- Identify a local site that they think could be a national historic park
- Present a persuasive argument about why a selected local site should become a national park

Estimated Time

- Two class periods, plus homework

Materials Needed

- Internet access. Much of this lesson depends on Internet access. If not all students have a computer in the classroom, it would be a good idea to do the lesson in a computer lab, or have students do the lesson in groups, or have them do the online research as homework and bring it to class the next day.

Activity/Procedure

Day 1

1. Ask students what they think of when they think of national parks. (*They will probably say things that refer to nature: mountains, waterfalls, wildlife, Old Faithful.*) Point out that while most of *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* is about parks that preserve nature, the film also describes how the national parks' mission expanded to include preserving historical sites. Tell students that in this lesson they will be learning about national historical parks.
2. Display the **Expanding the Mission Introduction** with an LCD monitor, distribute copies to students, or have them bring it up on their computers. Read the introduction aloud while students follow along. When you're done, explain that today you'll be studying historical parks and what they mean about the mission of the national parks.
3. Show students the clip "Expanding the Mission - Historical Parks" (<http://www.pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/lesson-plans/#historical>). As they view, have students think about their idea of a national park.
4. Direct students to this listing of the national historical parks: www.npca.org/parks/park-list.html?park_type=nhp. Assign each student one or more of the historical parks on the list until all the parks have been assigned.
5. Have students read about their park or parks. Explain that they can start their research with the link on the National Parks Conservation Association Web site, but that for some of the parks they will need or want to follow the link to the National Park Service site (www.nps.gov). Tell students to use the **Historical Parks Template** to guide their research. They should fill in one copy of the template for each park they are researching.
6. When students finish their park research, have them locate where their park is on a map of the United States. (Have them try to be as accurate as possible by using nearby cities to help them determine where in the state the parks are located.) Use Google Earth or a wall map for this activity. Have all students put their parks on one class map, so that they can see where the parks are clustered.
7. Look at the locations of the historical parks on the national map. Ask students what they notice about the locations. Ask students why they think that is the case. Suggest to students that they may get more answers about the parks' locations when they look more closely at the different kinds of people and events that are most frequently commemorated at these national historical parks.

Day 2

1. Display the map with the historical parks marked on it to remind students where they are. Then draw their attention to the **Historic Parks Tally**. Explain that now with the parks located, they will look at what the parks commemorate. Have students go back to the two Web resources they used earlier and record on the class tally sheet the categories into which their parks fall. The aim of this part of the exercise is to see if there is a pattern to the types of events, activities, or

- people that are being commemorated. The tally numbers – how many parks fall into each category – should reveal that information. When students have added their parks to the **Historic Parks Tally**, tally the numbers of different kinds of events commemorated. Ask students:
- a. Which type of historical park is the most common? Why do you think that's the case?
 - b. What other type(s) are common? Why do you think that's the case?
2. Arrange students into small discussion groups. Ask groups to think about what in history they find most interesting. They can think about topics they have studied in a history class, something they read about in a historical novel or saw at a museum, a topic they have seen in a documentary film, or a historic marker they found intriguing. Have the student groups discuss these interests, and write about them in their notebooks. Ask groups to share their interests with the class. Ask students to think about what's missing from the tally and have them generate their own list of underrepresented events/peoples.
 3. Then explain to students that in addition to national historical parks, there are other historical sites that fall under the control of the National Park Service. These include National Battlefields, National Cemeteries, National Heritage Areas, National Historic Sites, National Historic Trails, National Memorials, and National Monuments. (Note that this is a partial list. Students can see all the classifications of parks' historical "units" at www.npsa.org/parks/park_definitions.html.)
 4. Continue to have students, work in small groups and use the Web site to look for national historical parks and other historical units in your state or region. Have groups list what they find. When they are finished, ask them to share their findings with the class.
 5. Have all students come together as a full class. Display **The Meaning of the Parks**, and/or distribute copies of it to students, or have students bring it up on their computers. Discuss the quotes, using the following questions to frame the discussion, if you wish.
 - a. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the first quote. Ask students: Do you think that Shelton Johnson would favor the creation of national historical parks? Why or why not?
 - b. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the second quote. Ask students: What do you think William Cronon meant when he characterized the national parks as 'icons of our nationalism'? What do you think Cronon would think about national historical parks? Why do you think so? What type of events do you think he would be most interested in?
 - c. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the third quote. Ask students: Why was the future of the country in doubt in 1933 when Franklin Roosevelt decided to include historic sites in the park system? Why might historical parks be especially important at such a time?

- d. Have a student read aloud the fourth quote. Ask students: How does Carl Pope think that national parks are related to the fact that the United States is a nation of immigrants? Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. Divide the class into groups. Tell students that you would like them to think about sites in your town or region that they think could be national historical parks. To help groups start to think about likely sites, direct their attention to:
 - a. the **Historic Parks Tally**
 - b. the listing of different types of historic sites at npca.org/parks/park_definitions.html
 - c. the National Park Service web site, nps.gov
 - d. pbs.org/nationalparks/parks

Remind them that these sources can help them identify the kinds of sites that might be good candidates to be historic sites in your community. Students may also wish to look at your town or state's web sites to find out about places they might not know about that might be good candidates for historical park status.

Give students time to work with their groups to identify possible historic sites.

7. Tell students that for homework they are going to write a proposal to have one of the sites their group has identified become a national historical park. Distribute to students **National Historical Parks Proposal Worksheet**. Explain that this form will guide their writing. Go over the form with students, and answer any questions they may have. After students complete the Worksheet, have them write their proposal letter.

Assessment Suggestions

Each student will individually complete a **National Parks Proposal Worksheet** and write a proposal letter. Both can be used for assessment. If time permits, review the worksheets before students write their letters and give them suggestions that can help their letters be more effective, and perhaps make the writing process go more smoothly for them.

As a technology extension to this activity, have students develop their proposal as a digital slide presentation or as a narrated tour on Google Earth. Information is available at earth.google.com/support or pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/digital-storytelling/. Proposals can also be uploaded to the "Youth Project" section of pbs.org/nationalparks/share-your-story.

Related Academic Standards

This lesson meets the following curriculum standards set by McREL – Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning:

Civics

- 8: Understands the central ideas of American constitutional government and how this form of government has shaped the character of American society
- 9: Understands the importance of Americans sharing and supporting certain values, beliefs, and principles of American constitutional democracy

Geography

- 2: Knows the location of places, geographic features, and patterns of the environment
- 3: Understands the characteristics and uses of spatial organization of Earth's surface
- 4: Understands the physical and human characteristics of place
- 6: Understands that culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions
- 17: Understands how geography is used to interpret the past

Historical Understanding

- Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective
- Benchmark 10 (Grades 9-12). Understands how the past affects our private lives and society in general

Language Arts / Writing

- 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
- 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing
- 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes

Listening and Speaking

- 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

Viewing

- 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

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Expanding the Mission

The Lowell National Historical Park, in Massachusetts, commemorates one of the country's first industrial cities. Lowell lore has it that some tourists came to the park's visitors center and asked, "Where are the mountains?" The park ranger looked at them quizzically. "The nearest mountains are about two hours north of here," she said, referring to the White Mountains in New Hampshire. Lowell, on the other hand, is in the Merrimack River Valley, a location that was perfect for early water-powered factories. It took the ranger a while to figure out why the visitor expected mountains: Lowell was a national park, and national parks exist where there are mountains, so surely there must be mountains in Lowell.

As *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* shows, national parks began with the goal of preserving natural sites. Over time, their mission expanded – to include preserving wildlife as well as geographic wonders, and by the 1930s, to include preserving historic as well as natural sites.

This film clip (Episode 5, "Great Nature," 0:07:06 – 0:10:20) briefly shows how Horace Albright lobbied newly elected President Franklin Roosevelt to put military battlefields, monuments, and historic sites under the jurisdiction of the national parks. By executive order, Roosevelt did so almost immediately.

In one sense, Roosevelt's action was simply a bureaucratic shuffle – moving sites from one government agency's control to another government agency's control. But the action has deeper meaning. Monuments, battlefields, and other historic sites changed the mission of the national parks. Including them in the national park system asserted that just as nature and wildlife are worth preserving, so, too, is American history. If the parks define Americans, as numerous people in *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* say, then including historic sites suggests that we are as defined by our history as by our geography.

Historical Parks Template

Name of Park: _____

Location of Park (Which state/territory is it in?): _____

What the park commemorates (Check all that apply):

- Artistic Achievement
- Battle/War
- Business/Commerce/Industry
- Culture
- Disease
- Expansion/Exploration
- Groups of Americans
 - African Americans
 - Asian Americans
 - Hispanic Americans
 - Native Americans
 - Women
 - Other (Which group?)
- Nation's Founding/Founders
- Presidents
- Technological Development
- Transportation

Historical Parks Tally

Park Commemorates	Number
Artistic Achievement	
Battle/War	
Business/Commerce/Industry	
Culture	
Disease	
Expansion/Exploration	
Groups of Americans	
African Americans	
Asian Americans	
Hispanic Americans	
Native Americans	
Women	
Other	
Nation's Founding/Founders	
Presidents	
Technological Development	
Transportation	

The Meaning of the Parks

“When we look at parks and we look at the United States, and we examine the whole idea of democracy, I think that the park experience is an exploration of the idea of freedom. Where did I come from? Where am I going? How did I get here? How did we as a people get here? I think that when people go to a national park they get a sense, a compass to history.”

--Shelton Johnson

“What happens in the United States is that the land comes to embody the American nation, and the national parks become icons of our nationalism, the place where we come to celebrate what it means to be an American.”

--William Cronon

“And at a time [in 1933] when the future of the country was most in doubt, the symbols of her complicated past would be set aside and cherished, while Americans from every walk of life and every possible background would find in the parks a deeper connection to their land, their nation, and themselves.”

--narrator

“My sense is that our special connection with the national parks comes from the fact that we’re a nation of immigrants. We’re a nation of people for whom this is not home, and the national parks are what anchor and root us on this continent. They are the meaning of home for many of us. They’re what it means to be an American, to inhabit this continent. It’s at the end of the immigrant experience, and they’re what takes you and says, ‘Now I am an American.’”

--Carl Pope

National Historical Parks Proposal Worksheet

Use the following questions to clarify your thinking before you write a proposal to have a site in your community classified as a national historical park.

1. What site do you propose for status as a national historical park?

2. Summarize, in one or two sentences, why you think this site should be a national historical park. (Hint: You may want to write this last, after you have completed the rest of the worksheet.)

3. The Age of the Site: To be a national historical park, the site must be historical.

- How old is the site? _____
- Is it old enough to be historic (generally at least 50 years old)? _____
- Does it look much the way it looked in the past? _____

4. The Significance of the Site: To be a national historical park, the site must be historically significant. Use **Historical Parks Tally**, **The Meaning of the Parks**, www.npca.org/parks/park_definitions.html, and www.nps.gov to think about and explain why your proposed site is significant. Use these questions to help you:

- What event(s), activity/activities, or developments took place at the site? With what achievements is the site associated?

- With what people is the site associated?

5. When you have finished filling out this worksheet, turn your notes into a letter and send to the National Park Service and to your senators and representatives proposing that your site become a national historical park. Remember that your letter must be persuasive, so make your best case! Make the letter no more than a page and a half. You don't want to overwhelm your readers with too much information at this stage! At the conclusion of your letter, ask the recipients for a response so that you can continue your efforts.