

# In America, national parks are more than scenic—they're sacred. But they were created at a cost to Native Americans

November 21 2023, by Thomas S. Bremer

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The site of a former Miwok village in Yosemite Valley is now an outdoor museum display of traditional shelters. Credit: Thomas S. Bremer, [CC BY-ND](#)

Abraham Lincoln has an almost saintly place in U.S. history: the "Great

Emancipator" whose leadership during the Civil War preserved the Union and abolished slavery.

Often overlooked among his achievements is [legislation he signed June 30, 1864](#), during the thick of the war—but only marginally related to the conflict. [The Yosemite Valley Grant Act](#) preserved the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove in California as a [park](#) "held for public use, resort, and recreation ... for all time."

It was [the first time](#) the [federal government](#) had set aside land for its scenic value, and it created a model for U.S. national parks, which are themselves hallowed sites in American culture. Originally granted to the state of California, Yosemite formally became the third U.S. [national park](#) in 1890, joining a system of picturesque lands that hold spiritual and patriotic significance for millions of Americans.

At the same time, however, the establishment of national parks had severe consequences for Native American peoples across the continent. [My research](#) on the [religious history of U.S. national parks](#) illustrates how religious justifications for establishing parks contributed to the persecution of Indigenous tribes, a reality that the National Park Service has begun to redress in recent decades.

## US civil religion

With [more than 300 million annual visitors](#), the U.S. National Park System is a much-valued treasure. It encompasses stupendous scenery, opportunities for encounters with wildlife, outdoor recreation, and commemorating important places and events.

But the parks' significance goes beyond this. The national parks, historic sites, battlefields, and other sites of the National Park Service are sacred places [in U.S. civil religion](#): the symbols, practices and traditions that

make the idea of a nation into something sacred, seemingly blessed by a higher power.

First brought attention by [sociologist Robert Bellah](#), [civil religion](#) flourishes alongside conventional religious traditions, like Christianity or Buddhism, with its own sacred figures, sites and rituals. In the U.S., these include George Washington and Martin Luther King Jr., the U.S. flag and Pledge of Allegiance, and national holidays such as Independence Day.

[I have observed](#) that many of the most sacred places of the nation's civil religion are found in sites cared for by the National Park Service, from Independence Hall in Philadelphia and the Statue of Liberty in New York to Mount Rushmore in South Dakota.

In addition, the National Park System is a testament to Manifest Destiny, a prominent feature of U.S. civil religion. This 19th-century notion held that Americans had divine blessing to expand the borders of the nation. As historian [Anders Stephanson](#) writes in his [book about Manifest Destiny](#), it became "a catchword for the idea of a providentially or historically sanctioned right to continental expansionism."

This westward expansion came at the expense of Native Americans and other groups that previously inhabited the territory. For many Protestant Christian Americans, the superlative scenery of natural sites like Yosemite and Yellowstone affirmed their belief that God intended for them to conquer and settle the American West in the decades following the Civil War—as I write about in [my forthcoming book](#).

## **Products of Manifest Destiny**

The earliest national parks were established [as products of Manifest Destiny](#), amid the national push to bring land from the Mississippi to the

Pacific into the United States, which many white Americans viewed as a mission to expand settled Christian society.

Beginning with [Yellowstone in 1872](#), followed by Sequoia, Yosemite and Mount Rainier, the early parks created in the 19th century had symbolic significance for U.S. civil religion. In many Americans' eyes, the sites' beauty affirmed their belief that [the U.S. was exceptional and divinely favored](#).

Westward expansion had severe consequences for American Indian nations, and the earliest national parks played a role in forcing their removal, as historian [Mark David Spence has documented](#). Transforming lands into national parks for visitors' enjoyment meant dispossessing communities whose ancestors had valued those places for generations.

Following the creation of Yellowstone, the world's first national park, a band of Shoshone people who had been there for generations—the [Tukudika, or Sheep Eater](#)—were relocated to a reservation in Wyoming. A similar situation involved the [Nitsitapii, or Blackfoot people](#), whose treaty rights were abrogated with the establishment of Glacier National Park in 1910.

In contrast, the [Yosemite Indians](#) of California, who were mainly a band of Miwok people known as the Ahwahneechee, remained in Yosemite long after it became a national park. By 1969, though, [they had been eliminated from the park](#) through decades of onerous regulations, economic pressures, and attrition.

## **A new era**

Over the past few decades, the National Park Service has made progress in [acknowledging Native American connections to parklands](#), beginning to address the history of Manifest Destiny and Indigenous peoples'

exclusion.

The agency is a key contributor to the Interior Department's recent initiative to facilitate [tribal co-management of federal lands](#). Though much still needs to be done, national park managers are increasingly consulting and cooperating with tribal authorities on a range of issues.

Deb Haaland, the first Native American in U.S. history to hold a cabinet position, initiated a process to [review and replace derogatory names](#) on federal lands—one of her earliest actions as secretary of the interior. For example, she specifically identified the term "squaw"—a slur often directed at Indigenous women—as offensive, declaring that "racist terms have no place in our vernacular or on our federal lands." Within a year of her directive, [24 places in the National Park System](#) had new names.

Other issues on which the park service is collaborating with tribal communities include adopting [Native American strategies of using deliberate fires](#) to maintain healthy, thriving ecosystems. These Indigenous traditions have become a regular part of [fire prevention and management efforts](#) throughout the park system.

Tribes have also cooperated with a variety of national parks to restore bison herds. Historically, these animals were central for many tribes not only as a source of food and materials for tools, clothing, and blankets but also in traditional spirituality. The Interior Department's [2020 Bison Conservation Initiative](#) and partnerships with the [InterTribal Buffalo Council](#) have helped begin to restore herds on Native American lands with bison from [national parks](#), including [Yellowstone](#), [Badlands](#) and [Grand Canyon](#).

Perhaps the most noticeable initiative, from visitors' perspective, are the [stories of Native American culture and history](#) in displays, ranger talks, roadside exhibits and the [National Park Service website](#), [amplifying](#)



[Native voices](#) in the parks. These programs have begun the process of reconciliation and healing—working to make a more inclusive and democratic civil religion.

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