

Now and Here: Public Humanities and National Parks in Tumultuous Times — An Introduction

 Eleanor Mahoney and Perri Meldon

At Vicksburg National Military Park in Mississippi, a libation ceremony honors 13 United States Colored Troops massacred in 1864 at Ross’s Landing in Arkansas by Confederate guerrillas; the soldiers’ identities have only recently been rediscovered. A new exhibit at the Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site in New York re-examines how the 32nd president publicly and privately lived with disability. An interactive virtual map shows how historic preservation uplifts the history of women’s suffrage at Belmont–Paul Women’s Equality National Monument in Washington, DC. And at Longfellow House–Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site in Massachusetts, scholars explore a new in-depth research guide on the history and culture of Indigenous Peoples who visited the site.¹

Across the National Park System, visitors, community partners, descendant communities, and researchers are engaging with stories that seek to explore the full breadth of American history. Since 2018, the Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program has helped drive this effort. Thirty-five scholars, representing more than a dozen disciplines, have taken part in the initiative, leading efforts such as those described above. Their work has been both challenging and inspiring. They have questioned long-standing agency narratives and norms, while also affirming—often quite vigorously—the capacity of public humanities to bring people together in dialogue and debate.

As the national coordinators of the Mellon Humanities Program, we are honored to be guest editors of this special issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum*. The featured articles offer insight into the depth and breadth of the Mellon Humanities Program’s achievements over the past seven years. Heralded as a signature element of the National Park Service (NPS) program to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the work of the Fellows represented a broader shift in the agency’s relationship to humanities scholarship as well as its commitment to inclusive, community-based interpretive strategies. What began as a modest pilot program with just three Fellows and little administrative or technical assistance grew into a robust, cutting-edge initiative, with more than 30 scholars and a project team with expertise in digital humanities,

communications, DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility), and project management.

PROGRAM ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY

The Mellon Humanities Program took shape during a period of transition within NPS. Under the Obama administration, the National Park System grew rapidly, adding more than two dozen new units, including Stonewall National Monument (NY), Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument (AL), and César E. Chávez National Monument (CA). Many of these sites were dedicated to sharing stories of struggle and collective action during pivotal moments in

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American history, such as Reconstruction, the fight for industrial unionism, the Civil Rights Movement, and the movement for LGBTQ equality. These histories had long been ignored, downplayed, or even misrepresented by NPS.

Yet, the research and interpretive needs generated by these new sites did not result in additional funds or staff. As the agency’s responsibilities swelled, the number of rangers and cultural resources professionals remained largely stagnant

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or even declined. Newer parks were especially understaffed, while older, more established sites struggled to update programming and build meaningful relationships with diverse partners.

The worsening employment figures and their detrimental effects on historical research and interpretation received significant attention in the 2011 report *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*, released by the Organization of American Historians in partnership with NPS. Among other findings, the report's authors argued that “[c]hronic underfunding and understaffing have severely undermined the agency’s ability to meet basic responsibilities, let alone take on new and bolder initiatives, nurture and sustain public engagement, foster a culture of research and discovery, and facilitate connectivity and professional growth among NPS staff.”² The 2016 NPS Centennial brought additional awareness to the lack of adequate support for research within the agency beyond statutorily required baseline documentation linked to laws such as the National Historic Preservation

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Act (NHPA). In the media and Congress, there was often discussion of the so-called national park maintenance backlog, but there was also an undeniable backlog of scholarship. Park staff at all levels were eager for new information, sources, and methodologies, but struggled to determine where, when, and how to bring updated resources to their sites.

The Mellon Humanities Program was created in large part to address these issues. Developed in collaboration with the Mellon Foundation, NPS, and the National Park Foundation (NPF), the program aimed to bring new expertise and knowledge to sites and programs. The focus of the 2018 pilot program was on research for newly designated parks. Three Fellows specialized in gender and sexuality, labor history, and the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, respectively. They provided targeted bibliographies and reports to interested sites, as well as offered agency-wide webinars and training. Among other projects, Fellows invited scholars to present to NPS staff, organized public lecture series, ran a book club, produced a podcast, and authored extensive content for the [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov) website.³

The pilot’s success convinced the Mellon Foundation to re-invest in the program. The need for scholarship was even more urgent in the lead-up to the 250th commemoration of the Declaration of Independence. Recognizing the anniversary’s potential to share a more inclusive story of America at 250, NPS embraced the opportunity to host more Fellows. Ultimately, the Mellon Foundation, in collaboration with NPF, increased its investment from roughly \$1 million for the pilot to nearly \$15 million in 2023. These funds would support 31 fellows and a project team to dramatically scale up the program’s impact, with the fellows divided into two cohorts (2023–2025 and 2024–2026). The fellowship structure also shifted, with each Fellow now working closely day-to-day with a park, regional office, national heritage area, or national program office. Finally, American Conservation Experience (ACE) became a key program partner. Instead of serving as independent contractors, as the initial Fellows had, the expanded cohorts would be hired as ACE employees—an important change that provided greater stability through health insurance, vacation, sick leave, and other benefits.

The two cohorts, onboarded in 2023 and 2024, respectively, focused on several core areas identified by NPS as priorities for the 250th.⁴ In addition to original research, many Fellows also worked collaboratively to mend and develop relationships with diverse communities and to develop educational and interpretive products and programs. Significantly, because of the program’s design, Fellows brought cultural resources staff into conversation with their colleagues in interpretation and education, bridging a long-standing internal divide in the NPS bureaucracy.

2025: A YEAR OF UPHEAVAL AND ADAPTATION

The program’s original goals were to foster empathy and understanding between the NPS and new and existing partners, test new approaches within parks and programs, and cultivate relationships with impacted communities, among other values that guided its work. Through collaboration, the program would support NPS in expanding the humanities as part of the visitor experience, accelerating internal change, and enhancing inclusivity across its work. Fellows, in turn, would gain deeper understandings of how to conduct and disseminate research with and for public audiences, as well as broaden their own career opportunities.⁵

Following President Trump’s inauguration in 2025, however, these aims immediately came under scrutiny from the new administration, creating stress and uncertainty for the Fellows, their partners, and the program team. It

became increasingly clear that the Mellon Humanities Program chafed against presidential executive orders (EOs). In particular, EOs like “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing” (January 20, 2025) and “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” (January 27, 2025) threatened the program’s efficacy so long as it continued as a formal partnership with NPS.

In the spring and summer of 2025, NPS and NPF withdrew from the Mellon Humanities Program. Made with minimal transparency, this decision brought an abrupt end to what had been a transformative collaboration among public, academic, non-profit, and philanthropic partners. The Mellon Foundation and ACE generously agreed to continue supporting the work of the Mellon Humanities Program. Over the summer, Fellows and the program team pivoted toward developing new partnerships with Tribes, universities, museums, and non-profit organizations, adapting projects to acknowledge termination of the NPS and NPF affiliations. We remain grateful to and recognize the many NPS and NPF partners who envisioned, forged, and advocated for this work.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue of the *Parks Stewardship Forum* is devoted to the work of Mellon Fellows and their partners, highlighting their innovation, impact, and commitment to meaningful and sustained community engagement. Their work demonstrates what’s possible when NPS invests considerable resources in bridging long-standing, fictive boundaries between natural and cultural resource management, and how re-imagining stale, often outdated approaches to interpretation and education can initiate and strengthen community partnerships. In the spirit of Fellows’ resilience, this special issue is titled “Now and Here: Public Humanities and National Parks in Tumultuous Times,” named for the Mellon Humanities Program’s re-branding, to include the launch of a new website in early 2026, nowandhere.org. We encourage you to visit the website and learn more about Fellows’ impressive projects.

Across these essays, *PSF* readers will find shared themes that emerged during the Mellon Humanities Program. At all times, work on and with public lands and impacted communities is politicized. Several essays touch upon urgent topics such as jobs and labor, immigration, and Indigenous sovereignty. Additionally, the contributions of Mellon Fellows showcase how funding creates opportunities not only to address long-standing deferred maintenance in national parks, but also how philanthropic

support, such as that provided by the Mellon Foundation, empowered innovation and much-needed critical analysis in interpretation and education.

The essays are organized thematically, beginning with the program’s original vision and mission, before addressing its pivots in 2025. As founder and former director of this program, Barbara Little introduces the motivation behind hiring postdoctoral fellows to work with national parks

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and programs. As Little writes, the program originated in the 2016 momentum of the NPS Centennial, as awareness grew for the significant investments needed in cultural resources management. The effort then expanded as the need for enhanced humanities research and methodologies within NPS became more apparent.

Following the 2022 expansion of the Mellon Foundation award, the program team welcomed three digital humanities (DH) experts. As Jessica Dauterive, Michael Faist, and Caitlin Johnson demonstrate, the addition of DH expertise transformed the capacity of the Mellon Fellows’ work to expand beyond place-based interpretation into strategic digital products. Showcasing tools for innovative interpretation, the DH team offers techniques for museums, historic sites, universities, non-profit organizations, and parks to effectively engage virtual audiences.

Sarah Pawlicki and Rami Stucky invite readers into their research, as both share findings from their respective fellowships. Based on their work with the National Historic Landmarks (NHL) Program, Pawlicki examines historical debates regarding the concepts of “significance” and “integrity” in the NHL nomination process. Stucky, meanwhile, shares a noteworthy moment in the history of Washington, DC’s music scene, based on his fellowship to document punk and go-go in the nation’s capital. Stucky connects the rise of go-go with the 1980s origins of a non-profit arts program that engaged Black youth across several national park sites in DC.

This special issue also includes two interviews with Mellon Fellows, both of which examine the unique challenges of interpreting histories that have been both intentionally and unintentionally suppressed from official narratives.

Mellon Fellow Laura Dominguez speaks with national coordinator Eleanor Mahoney about her experience re-examining the history of the Transcontinental Railroad. Building on her expertise in historic preservation, ethnic studies, and reparative memory, Dominguez reflects on efforts to challenge myth-making that erased immigrant

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labor from railroad history, as well as to collaborate with diverse stakeholders to embrace what she describes as a “relational, entangled approach to our storytelling.”

In another interview, this one structured as a conversation, Shanleigh Corrallo and Lavada Nahon discuss their collaboration with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation to research histories and legacies of enslavement in New York. Their conversation highlights Corrallo’s work as a Mellon Fellow and Nahon’s decades-long research on New York State’s Black history as both reflect on their commitments to centering the lives of enslaved people through “empathetic history.”

In the following section, Mellon Fellows Sarah Buchmeier and Melissa Benbow Flowers invigorate their respective park partnerships with exploration of mobility and multisensory engagement. Buchmeier draws upon her background as a literary scholar to re-examine the historical narratives at Lowell National Historical Park in Massachusetts. By partnering with musical composers, Buchmeier developed sound-centric activities that reimagined visitors’ experience with the historic textile mills. Benbow Flowers, meanwhile, adopts a spatial approach to interpreting the historic landscape of Thomas Edison National Historical Park in New Jersey. Focused on the contributions of domestic workers at the Edison family home of Glenmont, Benbow Flowers proposes strategies for the park to make histories of labor more visible.

Several articles examine the persistent legacy of settler-colonial violence in the National Park System. Sarah Montoya details her work as a Mellon Fellow at Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail. She outlines the collaborative efforts undertaken by trail staff to identify and address long-standing gaps in Indigenous representation and participation and to confront

past actions that perpetuated violence, erasure, and marginalization, such as historical re-enactments and offensive outreach materials. In her article, Mellon Fellow Brittany Romanello explores how public lands along the border between the United States and Mexico serve not only as sites of recreation and preservation, but as spaces of intense surveillance and state control. Romanello especially highlights how increasingly militarized borderlands undercut already-strained reconciliation efforts by NPS and other conservation organizations with Indigenous communities.

Recent years have seen public lands agencies, including NPS, make greater efforts to meaningfully incorporate Indigenous Knowledge and Traditional Ecological Knowledge into their governance structures. The results of such initiatives vary widely. Drawing on original ethnographic analysis and a review of policy documents, including Biden-era executive orders, Mellon Fellow Shelly Biesel scrutinizes the implementation of these programs in the Northeast United States. Her analysis highlights tensions between symbolic gestures and actual power-sharing, demonstrating that real and lasting change remains elusive within the confines of an unpredictable settler-state political system.

Based on her Mellon fellowship in the Mariana Islands, Jennifer Craig reports on her experience partnering with CHamoru/Chamorro people and War in the Pacific National Historical Park to establish the Marianas Wartime Oral Histories Portal. Informed by practices of reciprocity and democratic decision-making, this public-facing digital archive amplifies stories of military service, Japanese occupation and forced internment, and Indigenous survival and resilience. Through her collaboration with Guampedia, a community-based project serving Guam and the Micronesia region, Craig developed both digital and in-person educational resources, such as the self-guided tour *Voices of Guåhan* and public programming on Guam and Saipan.

As a co-authored publication, Mellon Fellow Michelle Night Pipe, joined by Felicia Bartley (Pueblo of Isleta), Fallon Carey (Cherokee Nation), and Samuel Torres (Mexico/Nahua), share findings and reflections from their process of digitizing, researching, and establishing protocols around the archival records from Pipestone Indian Boarding School. Operated from 1893–1953 in southwestern Minnesota, the site of this federally run industrial training school on Yankton Sioux (Ihanktonwan Dakota Oyate) treaty lands shares a border and history with Pipestone National Monument.

Through their research, the authors determined that the federal government forcibly took 4,000 Native children from over 40 different Tribes and attempted to strip them of their cultures, languages, and belief systems. The authors offer readers a possible blueprint for truthful and effective government-to-government consultation with Tribal Nations as they examine the arduous processes of documentation and education regarding the site and its painful histories.



The personal, social, and political ruptures arising out of the 2024 presidential election are devastating. Yet, as this special issue demonstrates, public humanities professionals remain committed to their work, even amid the escalating racism, ableism, censorship, and prejudice of the current administration. The Fellows, in collaboration with their federal and community partners, have made a lasting impact on NPS. Whether through original research, innovative interpretive projects, or sustained relationship-building, their labor has enriched the agency’s public programming and deepened its efforts to acknowledge and address past and enduring harms.

The experience of the Mellon Humanities Program offers one potential template for future efforts to re-imagine the meaning and import of public lands and to foster a sense of belonging among visitors, staff, and impacted communities. Guided by cooperation and exchange among Tribal Nations and public, non-profit, and academic institutions, the program illustrates that creative and thoughtful approaches to education, conservation, and preservation are achievable, though planning and implementation present significant challenges. A necessary and rewarding endeavor, the possibilities to tell new and more inclusive stories, now and here, are too important to ignore.⁶

The views, opinions, and research expressed in this special issue are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views, positions, or policies of American Conservation Experience (ACE) or any other institution. All research outputs and associated intellectual property are the property of the individual Fellows. ACE supports the work of the Mellon Fellows but does not endorse or assume responsibility for the conclusions or interpretations they present.

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ENDNOTES

1. Based in Mississippi, Beth Kruse held the “African American Experience in Vicksburg from Civil War through Reconstruction” Fellowship. The Mississippi River landing point at Ross’s Landing is no longer extant. Shelby Landmark worked with the Home of FDR National Historic Site as the “Disability Representations at Historic Sites” Fellow. Caitlyn Jones collaborated with Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality National Monument during her “Including All Women in the Sequel: The History and Legacy of the National Woman’s Party” Fellowship. At Longfellow House-Washington Headquarters National Historic Site, Benjamin Pokross served as the “Examining the Intersections of Indigenous Collections, Context, and Contemporary Art” Fellow.
2. Anne Mitchell Whisnant, Marla R. Miller, Gary B. Nash, and David Thelen, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (Organization of American Historians, 2011), 80; https://www.oah.org/site/assets/files/10189/imperiled_promise.pdf.
3. The authors thank Dr. Stephanie Toothman for providing historical context on the evolution of NPS cultural resources programs.
4. Core areas of interest identified by NPS for the 250th included (1) Advance Equality and Justice for All, (2) Acknowledge and Honor Indigenous Peoples, (3) Acknowledge and Honor People of African Descent, and (4) Acknowledge and Honor the Contributions of Women.
5. We express gratitude to our partners at the research and evaluation firm Education Development Center (EDC), especially Erin Stafford and Carrie Liston, for helping us to develop a programmatic logic model and coordinating surveys and other evaluative tools to strengthen the efficacy of the Mellon Humanities Program.
6. For more on the Mellon Humanities Program and an inventory of the Fellows’ work, visit nowandhere.org.

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