

Some Thoughts about NPS, the Humanities, and the Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program

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I'm writing this from a place of sorrow and loss but also of hope.

I served as the project director for the National Park Service (NPS) Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program from its inception during the NPS Centennial in 2016 until NPS withdrew from it in the spring of 2025. The collaborative, cross-directorate project was part of my responsibilities as the program manager for the Cultural Resources Office of Interpretation and Education in the central office in Washington, DC. This was an office within the Cultural Resources, Partnerships, and Science directorate, rather than the Interpretation, Education, and Volunteers directorate, although we collaborated across our structural boundaries.¹ Over the course of my 32-plus years with NPS, I observed the interplay of the humanities and sciences and many competing needs, all firmly rooted in the NPS mission. The Mellon-funded program provided opportunities not only to the Fellows and their host locations, but also to NPS to better understand and embrace the role of the humanities and of philanthropy.

Unfortunately, the fellowship program was a casualty of the impact of the Trump administration and the destructive actions of the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 against federal agencies. I left my job because NPS withdrew from the program. However, in spite of my sense of sorrow and loss alluded to above, I am also intentionally hopeful. All of the people who made this program work possess skill, talent, imagination, and resolve. That gives me reason to hope. In this issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum*, readers will access some of that energy in the Fellows' articles about their experiences and accomplishments.

The National Park Service celebrated its centennial year in 2016. Lots of innovative ideas and aspirations were swirling around the agency concerning resource management, partnerships, interpretation, and more. In the background of this anniversary was the remarkable success of the **Natural Resource Challenge**, which had launched in 2000. The initiative had helped to foreground the importance of science-based natural resource management. It also increased base funding for natural resources and created organizational changes to support applied research, partnerships, and effective collaboration. Robert Stanton, then the NPS director, recognized historian Richard West Sellars' *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (Sellars 1997) as a catalyst for the success of the Challenge within Congress.

The history of cultural resources management in the parks proved far more complex. Unfortunately, in spite of extensive research and several articles, Sellars never completed a companion book project that promised to raise the profile of cultural resource stewardship needs. Cultural resource leadership and staff felt left behind. It felt like cultural resources perpetually came in last in competitions with scenery, science, and recreation. It

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was difficult to find traction for the idea that NPS itself played an important role as a national cultural institution and was much more than just a collection of parks. It was even more difficult to find internal recognition or appreciation for the integral roles of the preservation programs, such as the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation program or the National Register of Historic places, established in the 1930s and 1960s, respectively.

The 2016 Centennial offered some opportunities to raise awareness of the value of cultural resources to the agency.

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Leadership in NPS and in the National Park Foundation (NPF), the agency's philanthropic partner, decided to expand their approach to donors. The Mellon Foundation decided to take a chance, even though it was an unusual and potentially risky decision to fund a federal agency. It was, however, an excellent match between Mellon as the premier funder of the humanities and NPF, the foundation supporting the federal steward of some of the nation's most significant historic sites. Philanthropy could help NPS better meet its mission to broaden and deepen historical interpretation. The pilot grant was just shy of a million dollars and we squeezed every penny out of it, hitting many bumps in the road as we figured out how to run such a fellowship program.

The pilot program helped to demonstrate the relevance of the humanities within the work of NPS. Staff from all across the agency participated in learning opportunities such as webinars and a book club that the Fellows offered. We expected interpreters and cultural resource staff to participate but it was especially moving to find

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that employees from maintenance, human resources, natural resources, learning and development, and more were engaged and appreciative of the humanities scholars in their midst. Thinking ahead, we felt enormous potential to create ongoing collaboration with academia, expand internal collaboration between cultural resources and interpretative staff, and translate new research into public-facing interpretation. The donor felt that potential as well and invited a proposal for expansion.

The idea of scaling up was both exciting and daunting, as this new proposal would increase the number of Fellows and the number of park and program hosts tenfold. It would also add a focus on the digital humanities. At the time of the pilot program, NPS was not ready—technically or conceptually—to embrace the implications of digital reach and virtual visitorship. However, adaptations forced by the Covid pandemic changed the ways that NPS conceived of digital media. We were getting better tools and better support and therefore felt confident that funding a digital humanities support team would be productive.

In response to our proposal, the Mellon Foundation granted NPF nearly \$14 million to support 31 two-year post-doctoral fellowships and a full support system. The intent was to support the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. We wanted to expand the stories to be more representative, more accurate, more forthright, and more thought-provoking. We wanted to invite both staff and visitors to approach conflict and controversy with courage and empathy. It was important to leadership that not only parks but also preservation programs, central offices, and national heritage areas could host Fellows.

Ever since I joined NPS in 1992, I had constantly heard the “if only” statements in any conversation having to do with the interpretation of cultural resources. “If only” we had enough staff, research, expertise, funding, etc., then we could really tell the stories of this place (or some version of that aspiration). Now, it looked like 31 park and program hosts would have the chance to do something terrific. I leave it to the articles in this issue to reveal the fellowship results.

I want to back up a little and say more about the roots of the fellowship program in the work of the Cultural Resources Office of Interpretation and Education. It grew out of an earlier office focused on outreach, which I founded in 2012. During my tenure as program manager, our guiding purpose in the office was “Telling All Americans’ Stories.” We primarily worked digitally via [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov). We promoted historic preservation and its relevance to all Americans, however they identify themselves. We highlighted both the struggles and triumphs of the American experience through the diversity of stories embedded in both the parks and external preservation programs, the latter focused primarily on the National Register of Historic Places.

This purpose was directly rooted in the NPS stewardship mission, based on the long-standing premise of park interpretation that people are more likely to care for something that they understand. Management policies directed not only interpreters but also cultural resource managers to ensure that visitors have opportunities to learn about the resources. Congress codified this logic and responsibility into law for one of the cultural resources management fields when it amended the **Archaeological Resources Protection Act** in 1988 to require federal agencies to educate the public about the importance of archaeological resources with the expectation that doing so would reduce looting and vandalism.

I think about the tie to stewardship like this: If I don't see myself reflected and respected on public lands—that is, places and stories relevant to me as I identify myself—then I feel excluded, as if I don't belong. Then I have no particular incentive to support the stewardship of those lands. And if I see myself but I don't see “you,” however you identify yourself differently from me, then I don't feel that you belong and I have no incentive to support stewardship of places that you may care about as relevant to your stories and identities. It's a familiar idea that everyone wants to see themselves reflected or acknowledged as belonging. It's important, however, that I think beyond the need to see myself. I need to see you too. We need to see each other as people who belong, whose stories and historic places are worth knowing, preserving, and—as appropriate—sharing. Public lands and public preservation programs serve the public, all Americans. Therefore, we reasoned, our interpretation efforts needed to also serve everyone.

A major part of the educational aspect of the office's work was to provide paid internships and fellowships for students and recent graduates in academic fields related to cultural resource stewardship. There were very few federal personnel in the office and that number continued to shrink (down to two over the last few years). Instead, the office benefitted from constant rotation of non-federal staff. Assignments could vary between ten weeks and two years. Every new person brought their fresh ideas, up-to-date training and education, and their own expectation that they would perform and produce work of relevance to their generation. It was an exciting and fulfilling workplace where young people could perform meaningful work relevant to their career goals and know that they were also being of service. I and the other federal staff (in the office and beyond) learned constantly from this talented and committed ever-changing team and took great joy in their accomplishments.

This office mindset and structure helped to create the model for the Mellon fellowship program. We were already responding to requests from the field for information about how we ran our fellowships. Giving young scholars opportunities at the beginning of their careers helped both the scholars and NPS. Therefore, building on this success felt feasible.

NPS leadership wanted certain outcomes from the fellowship program. Among these were improved collaboration between cultural resource and interpretation staff at the host sites, and for the public to engage with up-to-date, relevant interpretation based on new, trustworthy

scholarship. Cultural resource folks in NPS often refer to a “transfer of knowledge” when talking about getting information out to the public. That phrase strikes quite a different tone than the way that Interpreters speak of their craft. Instead, they seek to provide visitors opportunities to experience emotional and intellectual connections to the resources. The interpretation profession encourages the exploration of meaning in ways that cultural resource management per se is not designed for. The transfer of knowledge approach is intended to teach facts. Interpreters recognize that visitors interact with resources and ideas with both thought and feeling. NPS was in the process of adapting the interpretation trend of facilitated dialogue, a technique rooted in the work of the **International Coalition of Sites of Conscience**. In such a dialogue, a facilitator poses a question which invites participants to consider their own experiences related to a topic. A dialogue would encourage sharing and exploration within the group to consider topics from others' perspectives. The goal is not to resolve controversy or come to agreement but to deepen individual and collective learning. NPS leadership encouraged interpreters to use dialogic questions and our office adapted the idea for digital work. For example, in a feature on **“Suffrage in America: The 15th and 19th Amendments”** we developed questions to frame articles. **“Fighting for Suffrage: Comrades in Conflict”** starts with “What happens when people can't agree on the right way to do something?” The summarizing questions ask the reader to consider: “How open are you and your community to hearing different perspectives to reach a shared goal?” and “How would you reach out to repair relationships that have been harmed?” These questions are intended to invite curiosity and expand thinking.

The humanities, when they are uncoupled from the management process and attached instead to interpretive storytelling, are suited for exactly this kind of questioning and thinking, for shaping our understanding of what it

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means to be human, for shaping the stories that we use to give meaning to our experiences, our relationships, our place in the world, our lives. The Mellon fellowship program was giving NPS the opportunity to figure this out, to experiment beyond the normal boundaries of day-to-day demands.

External partners and scholars can provide a unique vantage point to observe, reconsider, and re-vision possibilities that fulfill the NPS education mission. The 2011 report, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service*, challenged NPS with aspirations for the integration of history and interpretation (Whisnant et

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al. 2011). The report encouraged NPS to connect parks with histories beyond their borders and to address both historical conflict and current controversies about the past and its meanings. It had a broad impact across NPS and certainly influenced the work of Telling All Americans' Stories. *Imperiled Promise* encouraged the kind of collaboration envisioned for the Mellon fellowship program. We were looking for purposeful collaboration across NPS between cultural resources and interpretive staff and also between NPS and outside scholars, both Fellows and their mentors.

I'll close with some hopeful thoughts drawn from the prolific author and humanities scholar Wendell Berry. In *Imagination in Place* (2010: 186–187) he writes that our resort to violence—our violent way of life that

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destroys land and people—is a failure of imagination. He sees imagination as a force of justice and offers it as a “way of knowing things not otherwise knowable,” the “power by which we sympathize” and the “power by which we see the place, the predicament, or the story we are in.” Practicing any of the humanities requires imagination and constantly asking deeper questions. What does it mean—what will it mean—to do the work of the humanities in the face of Artificial Intelligence and systemic crises in our social, cultural, economic, political, ecological, and interpersonal structures and relationships? All of the crises that currently enmesh us affect public land and our relationships with it. It takes courage to imagine new realities. The imagination embedded in the humanities gives me hope. The humanities offer tools as we consider humanness and the vulnerability of our lives and our landscapes at the hard bright edges of inhumanity and disaster.

Opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect any official position of the National Park Service or other organization.

ENDNOTE

1. The organizational structure of the National Park Service is summarized at <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/organizational-structure.htm>. This information was likely up-to-date as of early 2025 but may not reflect the current leadership structure.