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REFOUNDATION: DOES PLACE-BASED CONSERVATION IN AMERICA NEED TO START OVER?
REBECCA CONARD, ROLF DIAMANT, DAVID HARMON & JOHN REYNOLDS, THEME EDITORS



Renewing the Promise: The Humanities, Higher Education, and the National Park Service

ANNE MITCHELL WHISNANT

Fifteen years ago (2011), three other historians and I released *Imperiled Promise*, a study commissioned by the National Park Service (NPS) and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) to assess the “state of history” in NPS. *Imperiled Promise* identified barriers preventing the agency from realizing its potential to be the nation’s premier place-based classroom for historical and cultural learning. Over 100 recommendations suggested how NPS and OAH could buttress, expand, and enhance park-based historical work and better connect it with new scholarship and the larger history community. We urged dramatically increased hiring of qualified cultural resources staff, expanded interpretive frames and boundaries, attention to the dynamism in history and conflict and controversy in and about the past, and openness about “contested and evolving understandings of American civic heritage.”¹

The study has been widely read and influential, helping NPS pry open doors between internal interpretation and cultural resources silos, and empowering staff to move from “fixed and fearful” interpretation into bolder work presenting historical dilemmas and elevating all Americans’ stories and voices.² Despite chronic understaffing, things have been moving in the right direction.

For example, an ongoing appropriation for civil rights projects, created by Congress in 2016, has sparked innovative scholarship around Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ, disability, and other marginalized histories related to the national parks. The Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellows Program, inspired by *Imperiled Promise* and profiled in a recent issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum*, began to infuse new energy into cultural resources preservation and interpretation.

In 2025, as we all know, much of this progress crashed to an ungraceful and cruel halt, with the arrival of Trump, Musk, DOGE (the self-styled Department of Government Efficiency), Burgum, and silly but deeply pernicious ideas of “restoring truth and sanity” to history. NPS lost 25% of its staff and cut off the Mellon Fellows. Signs, waysides, and exhibits “disparaging” Americans got flagged or removed. After the hard-won progress of the last 15 years, this careless and wanton destruction of NPS is shattering.

And yet, resistance is popping up everywhere, often feeding on the connections and collaborations between professionals within NPS and NPS-oriented scholars outside the agency that *Imperiled Promise* (and other efforts) urged and facilitated over the last 15 years.³ Here is where I find inspiration for the vision I’d like to focus on for the rest of this essay.

Two sets of concerns have driven my professional life for 30 years: one has had to do with the history of the national parks, and the other revolves around graduate education in the humanities and interpretive social sciences, the crisis in employment for PhDs in those fields, and the need for radical reform of systems in academia.⁴

Here, I’d like to weave these threads together to imagine what a robust future for cultural and historical engagement and lifelong learning with public lands and the national parks might look like, and how reforms and better collaboration with a re-thought world of academic humanities might help bring that future about. The vision involves making fundamental reforms in graduate education that could prepare a new generation of flexible, collaborative cultural and interpretive professionals for parks-related work, and then committing to employing them to rebuild and expand the educational and enrichment reach of our national parks.

Because the fact is, in this country, we have the talent, we have the educational resources, we have the places and sites, we have publics who hunger to explore. Perhaps the current breakdown—which of course is also affecting academia deeply—could let us abandon outmoded practices and obsolete structures, and invite us to *invest* (#taxtherich) in something new that could be rooted in optimism, hope, and trusting people.

Let’s start with graduate education. I earned my PhD in History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1997. My program, like most, was structured to prepare us for careers as university faculty working with the protection and job security of tenure. Never mind that since the 1970s, the availability of tenure-line faculty positions has been unstable and increa-

singly insufficient to provide full employment for humanities PhDs.⁵

From the late 1990s on, numerous initiatives emerged to support doctorate holders in identifying “transferable skills” to help them find jobs in other sectors. They met with mixed success, and many humanistic researchers found reasonably satisfying work. But the fact remained that the PhD was generally not the best path to any of these other jobs. And as the 1990s and 2000s wore on, many scholars languished—their doctorates a liability rather than an asset.⁶

And yet, universities resisted making foundational changes that would have improved the situation for their doctoral students. Some graduate programs tweaked requirements and incorporated skill development like digital humanities, GIS, or even public history. But on the whole, humanities doctoral programs today look much like the one I completed: disciplinary coursework, comprehensive exams, and dissertations designed to morph into the book generally needed for the imagined later tenure process. Few include courses on historic preservation, museum studies, conservation, or place-based interpretation or public engagement. Their faculties, meanwhile, know little about other work environments and are poorly equipped to advise about options, or to imagine how advanced history training could be differently structured or deployed. Professional development for most graduate students keeps them firmly in the academic orbit, doing teaching or research assistantships. Neither faculty nor graduate students have much opportunity to move back and forth between higher education to other employment sectors.

The upshot of these problems with academia is a generation of scholars with few viable paths to do the research and teaching they were trained for, and who have also found that their specialized training has not equipped them with essential skills and credentials to move into related work outside of academia. For their part, academic institutions with libraries, buildings, and highly qualified and bright people remain constrained by faculty “lines,” rigid gatekeeping, financial inaccessibility, and systems that tend to separate them from the broader community. Under the same withering right-

wing political attack currently squeezing and starving the federal civil service, universities struggle to connect with a public that could rise to their defense.

What a waste of talent and resources.

My more recent professional experience suggests that things don’t have to be this way. In 2019, I was fortunate to be hired to direct the interdisciplinary Graduate Liberal Studies master’s program at Duke. Serving students of all ages and backgrounds at a tuition level that is half that of other Duke master’s degrees, our program—founded in the 1980s—prioritizes student curiosity, risk-taking, and flexibility, and allows students to assemble their own curriculum from among *any courses that Duke offers at the graduate level*. A capstone project that can be either a traditional research “thesis” or an applied or creative project ends the program. Operating outside of conventional departmental structures, we can easily hire credentialed teaching faculty without the usual cumbersome hiring process. And we pay them a much higher rate (currently \$9,500 per course) than is customary for adjunct instructors.

Seeing students and faculty grow and thrive here has expanded my imagination about graduate education and inspired how I envision the new, flexible, and porous collaborations between academia and the Park Service that I suggest below.

If we as a society invested as we should in humanities-oriented work in both American universities and the Park Service (yes, it will take money, perhaps several billion dollars over a decade⁷), and if *both* institutions could shed accreted systems that no longer serve and thus collaborate more easily, we might create unparalleled spaces for networked research, free and relevant life-long learning, and civic, social, physical, and cultural enrichment for Americans and international visitors of all ages, stages, and backgrounds. What I am proposing is a National Parks New Deal that pulls together aspects of the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA’s) “Federal One” cultural programs, the GI Bill, the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, and the Cooperative Ecosystems Studies Units initiative.⁸



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The core of the suggestion is an immediate, massive hiring initiative to bring many from the lost generation of humanities-trained graduate degree holders into NPS. The second piece is purposeful reform of graduate education in the humanities to create realistic, stimulating, affordable pathways into these park jobs for the long term.

On the NPS side, doing this would require changes in both NPS culture and federal (Office of Personnel Management) civil service hiring laws, practices, and processes. Dismantle the hierarchical, military model of park management and professional advancement through expectation of constant mobility, eliminate the veterans' preference that creates perverse incentives to hire only from within, and scrap the restrictive civil service hiring questionnaires that AI will render easier to game and that deter outside talent. Create opportunities for growth and professional advancement at individual sites or programs.

The recent Mellon Fellows initiative provides a proof of concept of this idea, but for real, durable change to come, new hires need to be more embedded and permanent. Initially, scholars hired into NPS might need additional training in the applied work of the parks—preservation aspects as well as interpretive or public history elements. Over time, however, a multi-year commitment to hiring advanced cultural resource experts should feed back to academia—accelerating humanities graduate educational reform to prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration, a blend of practical and analytical skills, and experience producing scholarship in multiple formats. Conventional doctoral programs might wither in favor of master's programs or become shorter endeavors designed with parks and public lands work in mind.

Moving forward, a virtuous cycle might be imagined that continuously strengthens links between academia, independent scholars outside NPS, and colleagues within NPS by inviting professionals to move back and forth between sectors. Scholars who have worked in

(or independently with) NPS could teach in graduate programs, and academic faculty might make mid-career shifts to the parks. As we have recently seen, those connections are essential to sustaining the broader work of civic engagement and lifelong learning at which the parks excel.

This may seem like an impossible dream, with so many practical details to be addressed that change feels futile. Accreted systems of credentialing, accreditation, equal opportunity hiring, civil service classifications and levels, and career trajectory and advancement would all have to change. And yet, many of these are already so broken and ill designed to meet the current moment that maybe scrapping them is better than trying to tweak them.

How would we start?

STEP 1: EMERGENCY ACTION

This is mostly on the NPS and federal government side. Make things simple. Eliminate barriers and aim to hire 1,000 humanities and interpretive social sciences master's or PhD holders into permanent NPS jobs within three years. Create a special hiring authority, and somehow foster broad matching of background, interests, and expertise with sites or programs. Fund all new hires to complete an NPS bootcamp incorporating elements of prior training programs within the agency. Rehire experienced NPS staff who have retired or recently lost jobs under DOGE to help develop and lead this. Charge these new hires with stopping the censorship of humanities-oriented expertise and scholarship through reversion of altered signage and exhibits, protection of data, and revitalization of community partnerships and programs decimated by the current administration. Then set them loose to build out the creative, expansive program of historic preservation and public humanities engagement that is one of the parks' core promises.

STEP 2: ONGOING DEVELOPMENT

This part would be carried out through long-term partnerships between NPS and a set of academic graduate



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programs in the humanities and interpretive social sciences. Identify departments and universities that will commit to creating degree pathways for aspiring NPS cultural resources and interpretive professionals. The specific nature of the pathways could be worked out at the master's or perhaps accelerated doctoral level, but in either case should be funded programs offering opportunities for practical, applied work (ideally with NPS or other park or public cultural institutions) during a student's education. Modeling on the open inquiry of Duke's Master's in Liberal Studies and similar programs, these pathways would have a small number of core courses, but should offer students maximum flexibility to design applied curricula tailored to their interests and specific park roles. Guarantee NPS jobs to graduates who want them. Universities that want to host these initiatives, in turn, commit to hiring faculty with pertinent expertise and experience to teach core courses and advise students. Most universities have "professor of the practice"-type appointments that could be used to make these hires.

I know that many readers of this short essay will immediately think of 15 (or 40) practical or political reasons why something like this can't work. The NPS Organic Act (1916), however, is not one of them. Its mandate to conserve park resources unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations requires that we marshal our best expertise for public benefit. Elaborations of this mission—through policy declarations, memos, and legislation—have only expanded the research and educational missions of NPS. We ought to recommit to these principles, perhaps explicated as well as anywhere in Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane's 1918 "Letter

on National Park Management," sometimes called the "Magna Carta of the national parks."⁹

After all, the basic problem is simple: how can we further develop and harness the deep well of talented, well-educated, creative, experienced professionals we have and the vast resources already embedded within American higher education (libraries, databases, facilities, faculty), and the beautiful and promising collection of parks and sites contained in our existing National Park System? There is no reason we could not make a case for improving and expanding these resources and making them as freely and widely available as possible to all Americans, as well as the international visitors that come to our national parks from across the globe.

In an age where educational gaps are widening, where access to humanistic higher education has become the realm of the privileged, and where AI threatens to rob us of the connections to place and to each other that help us and our planet thrive, well-supported, freely available, place-based cultural and historical lifelong learning could enrich all of our lives and help us build the empathetic, educated, thoughtful society we deserve and that will be crucial to our survival.

As historians, we often speak of the contingency of the past—the fact that outcomes are never predetermined, but are shaped by people acting when they aren't sure how everything will go. I offer this proposal in that spirit. Can we make the future different? I don't know for sure, but I think the first step to creating the world we want is to imagine it.¹⁰

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ENDNOTES

1. Anne Mitchell Whisnant, Marla Miller, Gary B. Nash, and David Thelen, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (Organization of American Historians/National Park Service, 2011), 6.
2. Here I am thinking, among other things, of the "Telling All Americans' Stories" initiative, some aspects of which remain online here: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/index.htm>. (Please note that as of July 5, 2026, a number of internal links from this site are dead.)
3. See, for example, the Save Our Signs project from the University of Minnesota Libraries, the Resistance Rangers, the We Need More History initiative set for fall 2026 involving several professional history organizations, and efforts of organizations like American Conservation Experience, the Mellon Foundation, and the National Council on Public History to continue to support NPS-related historical and cultural work done by scholars outside the agency when NPS efforts have been curtailed.
4. I have done over two dozen presentations or workshops on the post-PhD career process and published a dozen articles related to this in various publications. See "A Move to Bring Staff Scholars Out of the Shadows" (with Donna M. Bickford), *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 25, 2013; "In Admin: Four History PhDs Discuss

their Alt-Ac Careers” (with Lauren Apter Bairnsfather, Pam Lach, and Jason Myers), *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, November 2013; “I Am Natalie Henderson: Reflecting on My ‘Nonacademic’ Career in Academe and the #alt-ac Quest,” *#Alt-Academy: A Media Commons Project*, edited by Bethany Nowviskie, 2011; “Building a Corps of Administrator-Scholars,” (with Donna Bickford), *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 14, 2010; “Trading \$80 Wine for Cheap Cookies,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 31, 2007, [under the pseudonym “Natalie Henderson”]; “Surviving a Professional Slide,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 7, 2007, [under “Natalie Henderson”]; “A ‘Nonacademic’ Career in Academe,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 20, 2005, [under “Natalie Henderson”]; “Questioning the Promise,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 18, 2005, [under “Natalie Henderson”].

5. For a recent discussion, see Karin Wulf, “Humanities and Graduate Education: The Crisis Is Real, but Not New,” *The Scholarly Kitchen*, April 29, 2022, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2022/04/29/humanities-and-graduate-education-the-crisis-is-real-and-not-new/>.
6. There are far too many blog posts, reflections, essays, reports, and other materials discussing the PhD career crisis and individuals’ experiences over the last 30 years to even begin to list them here.
7. I am imagining 1,000 staff hired at \$125,000 annual total compensation per person times 10 years = \$1.25 billion. This is only a bald estimate that does not factor in university costs. A country that has squandered many times this amount this year on a purposeless war with Iran can certainly afford this if it would choose to do so.
8. The WPA’s Federal Project Number One included the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Writers’ Project, and the Historical Records Survey. See “Federal Project Number One,” *Wikipedia*, December 23, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Federal_Project_Number_One&oldid=1329108882, accessed July 5, 2026.
9. Reproduced in Lary M. Dilsaver, *America’s National Park System: The Critical Documents* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 35–39; see also Secretary Stewart Udall’s “Letter on National Park Management,” 1964 (reproduced in Dilsaver, 241–245).
10. As I was finishing this essay, my colleague Dr. Amanda Starling Gould suggested that this idea is well elaborated throughout Black and Indigenous feminist thinking, writing, and activism. Without time to delve into this literature, I would like to nod in its direction and note one recent work that draws productively upon it to consider Earth’s future: Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, *What If We Get It Right? Visions of Climate Futures* (New York: One World, 2024). The book opens with two quotations that encapsulate this idea: “What lies ahead? Reimagining the world. Only that.” (From Indian writer Arundhati Roy.) And from American activist Angela Davis: “You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.”