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Authors

Mahoney, Eleanor
Keel, Roneva

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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



If the Humanities Are Any Guide: How the Methods and Insights of the Humanities Can Shape the Future of Public Lands

ELEANOR MAHONEY AND RONEVA KEEL

INTRODUCTION

In September 2025, an anonymous collective known as “The Secret Handshake” began installing provocative art on and around the National Mall in Washington, DC. The pieces included *A Throne Fit for a King*, a 10-foot-tall faux-gold toilet throne intended to satirize recent White House bathroom renovations, and *Operation Epic Furious: Strait to Hell*, an arcade-style video game in which players take on the role of President Trump and attempt to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. By combining guerrilla art tactics with an internet-savvy approach the installations generated immediate attention, drawing viewers from across the ideological spectrum to the incisive, albeit cheeky, mode of political commentary.¹

Though unconventional in their methods, works like those created by The Secret Handshake build on a long tradition of protest and debate on public lands. From the veterans of the 1930s Bonus Army to the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the occupation of Alcatraz Island, the late-20th-century Redwood Wars, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the 2016 occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, and the January 6, 2021, “Save America Rally” that preceded the attack on the US Capitol, public lands have long been at the center of the country’s social, political, and economic tumult, serving as spaces of civic engagement and as sites whose own meanings remain contested.

As historians who have researched and written about the development of public lands, and as practitioners who have worked with multiple federal agencies on interpretation, preservation, conservation, and recreation initiatives, we believe that any reconsideration of place-based conservation in America must begin with an honest, thorough accounting of public lands history up to the present, including the role of public lands as spaces of displacement, dissent, conflict, and, at times, violence. This overdue reckoning can lay the foundation for a more inclusive, community-oriented approach to protected area management, one in which agencies acknowledge the many past and ongoing harms associated with the designation and management of public lands while recognizing their tremendous potential to foster community, exchange, learning, and activism.

The type of change described above will necessarily occur at multiple scales, drawing on a wide range of skills, experiences, and knowledge systems. In this article, we focus on the distinctive possibilities offered by the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

Scholars in these disciplines bring both content knowledge and extensive methodological training to their work. Though particular expertise varies widely, what unites fields such as history, geography, the arts, anthropology, and literature is an emphasis on critical thinking and inquiry, coupled with a propensity to ask challenging questions about how and why things came to be and who has benefited (and who has not) from existing power relations.

Over the past decade, a number of federal agencies, particularly the National Park Service (NPS), have encouraged such introspection by creating postdoctoral fellowship positions that temporarily place recent humanities PhDs in their workforce. As alumni and former coordinators of these programs, we are uniquely positioned to assess the promise and limitations of integrating emerging scholars into the planning and implementation of new research, interpretation, and resource protection initiatives. The following sections explore two initiatives in depth before concluding with a series of recommendations for similar efforts in the future.

THE NPS MELLON HUMANITIES POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

Launched in 2018, the NPS Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program placed more than 30 scholars at sites across the agency, including park units, regional offices, national heritage areas, and national program offices in Washington, DC.² The program was designed to introduce humanities scholars and their research methods to NPS and to provide Fellows with firsthand experience in interpretation and public engagement—a model intended to encourage significant learning and exchange for both Fellows and NPS staff. Examples of the wide range of projects and products

OVERLEAF Dr. Rami Stucky, a postdoctoral Fellow with the National Park Service, led a research project exploring the histories of punk and go-go music in national parks. A historian, cartographer, and drummer, Stucky demonstrates how humanities scholarship can deepen our understanding of public lands, uncover unexpected stories, and offer new perspectives on park management. ANGELA KLEINSASSER

created through the Mellon Program's work are available at <https://nowandhere.org/>.

Although not initially identified as a primary goal of the Mellon Program, Fellows and NPS host sites soon recognized that exploring the agency's own history and contemporary practices was critical to the success of their efforts. Drawing on their training and expertise, Fellows examined a range of topics, including the content of interpretive programming, institutional culture, labor policies, and the nature of NPS relationships with Tribal Nations, descendant communities, and partner organizations. Fellows visited archives, attended neighborhood meetings, spoke with local officials, conducted oral histories, completed ethnographic fieldwork, and more. This research revealed both the positive outcomes of NPS engagement with diverse collaborators and troubling examples of harm and exclusion, in which the agency failed to act with reciprocity and care in both internal and external relationships.

Reactions to these findings varied. In some cases, host sites responded with interest, engaging in critical self-reflection on how the NPS's past and present activities might have caused trauma. For example, working closely with a Fellow, one park unit introduced new onboarding materials that examined the history and ongoing impacts of settler colonialism on Indigenous peoples, including NPS's role in displacement and violence. The development of these resources coincided with a decision by park leadership to withdraw from participation in colonial re-enactments.³

In other instances, park staff reacted defensively to Fellows' recommendations, either ignoring the findings or actively resisting change. Criticism of NPS, at the unit, regional, or national level, could feel personal to those involved, and engaging with communities or individuals negatively affected by past agency decisions carried professional risk. Even before the 2024 election, politics emerged as a central concern. Across a wide range of issues, from interpreting histories of enslavement, to immigration and the border, to Tribal co-stewardship,

fear of political blowback, including censure from online commentators and scrutiny from elected officials, weighed heavily on the decision to engage with Fellows' insights. Concerns also extended to leadership's potential reaction, with staff at all levels expressing unease about how those higher in the agency hierarchy might respond to criticism of NPS and its practices.

What does the experience of the Mellon Program reveal about the potential role humanities scholarship can play in shaping the future of public lands? The results suggest tremendous possibilities for growth and change, but also significant limitations. In many cases, Mellon Fellows successfully introduced new content and methodological insights to park units. This led to internal changes in employee training, improved relationships with a wide range of partners, and the development of numerous public-facing products, including exhibits, articles on [NPS.gov](https://www.nps.gov), K-12 teaching materials, public events, and publications.

Agency-wide, assessing results is much harder. A core group of dedicated NPS staff working in cultural resources, interpretation, and partnerships regularly attended sessions organized by the Mellon Program, building a community of practice and learning from one another through program-sponsored webinars, book clubs, and workshops. However, reaching wider audiences remained difficult due to competing time demands, especially for those in the field who often lacked reliable access to a computer. Stronger, more consistent support from agency leadership, whether at the park, regional, or national level, could have made a difference, as could extending fellowships from 2 years to 3–5 years. An extended term of service would also have allowed Fellows to gain a deeper understanding of federal service in general and NPS in particular. Entering an organization with well-established norms and practices is always challenging, especially when one is expected to be a changemaker. Having more time to adjust to NPS and its structures, and, crucially, to build trust and mutual understanding, could have greatly aided Fellows.



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Another significant impediment to sustaining the Mellon Program's impact was the lack of a viable employment pathway for Fellows. Employment opportunities proved difficult or even impossible to secure for those Fellows who wanted to continue with the agency. Of the 35 scholars who participated in the program, only one is currently employed by NPS, with the majority now in academic appointments. This illustrates not only the challenges of federal hiring but also the scarcity of positions focused on humanities research, learning and development, employee engagement, and community partnerships. Ultimately, the Mellon Program demonstrated that engaging seriously with history and its ongoing impacts can lead to institutional development, but the process is uneven, emotionally charged, and only an initial step toward more lasting growth.

LANDSCAPES OF PROTEST: PUBLIC PARKLAND AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT

In addition to large-scale, multi-site efforts such as the NPS Mellon Program, smaller initiatives placing a single scholar at a public lands host site have also expanded in recent years. One example is the 2021–2022 Landscapes of Protest: Public Parkland and the First Amendment Fellowship.⁴ Sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies, with support from the Mellon Foundation, the 12-month position set forth an ambitious research and publishing agenda. Under the auspices of the National Capital Region of NPS, the fellowship had two primary objectives: conducting archival research and oral interviews exploring the past and present of protest and First Amendment activities on park lands in and around Washington, DC, and producing a report detailing NPS's complex role as steward of these spaces.⁵

NPS has regulatory authority over First Amendment expression in some of the nation's most iconic and symbolically powerful protest venues, including the National Mall, the Lincoln Memorial, and Lafayette Park. While heavy-handed responses to protest—such as the forceful clearing of protesters by the US Secret Service and US Park Police from Lafayette Park during the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations and the park's subsequent closure, which the Secret Service justified as a matter of security and the pro-

tection of park resources—often garner the most widespread attention, the Landscapes of Protest study found that mundane administrative tasks have been equally influential in facilitating or obstructing First Amendment expression in the name of resource protection.⁶ Prior to the fellowship, little to no scholarship documented the wide-ranging impacts of this bureaucratic decision-making on protest activities in public lands.⁷

As highlighted earlier, humanities scholars are trained to apply a critical lens to their sources. They question long-standing assumptions, analyze institutional norms and practices, and trace the historical evolution of governing systems and structures. The Landscapes of Protest fellowship was designed to encourage this approach, scrutinizing NPS's actions in a region closely associated with popular political expression. By shifting focus from high-profile protests to ostensibly neutral bureaucratic processes such as permitting, the study revealed how administrative hurdles can reinforce existing disparities and harm marginalized communities.

Despite differences in its design and implementation, the Landscapes of Protest fellowship encountered many of the same challenges—sustainability, uneven reception to research findings, and lack of institutional support—as the Mellon Program did, with similarly mixed results. The research process, which included extensive interviews and archival work, initiated valuable conversations among cultural resources staff in the National Capital Region, bringing a critical historical framework into dialogue with the material conditions of park staff in the present day. However, maintaining this dialogue beyond the fellowship term was not easy. Even more difficult was translating the study's findings into tangible policy and practice. Internal agency struggles, heightened in the Washington, DC, setting, along with external forces, including political pressure and fears of increased media scrutiny, minimized the study's reach and lasting impact.

The position's even shorter term (one year) limited the Fellow's ability to develop a deep understanding of the day-to-day operations of a complex organization



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like NPS and made developing proficiency in nuanced regulatory processes, such as Section 106 review under the National Historic Preservation Act, unfeasible. Being an outsider to NPS brought valuable insights to the study but also limited the Fellow's analysis of agency practices. This knowledge gap, in turn, created a barrier with field practitioners, who were understandably wary of critical assessments, particularly in an era of increased politicization of cultural resource management and public lands.

A second shortcoming was structural. The fellowship itself was extraneous to the work of the office in which it was embedded. While the study generated useful insights and provided a valuable learning opportunity for the Fellow, the position's ancillary nature made its connection to the work of the NPS regional office in which it was based more tenuous. Furthermore, the staff who designed the study and selected its focus had little say in its final use, and ultimately, the scholarship produced was not connected to any meaningful action.

CONCLUSION

For all the wrong reasons, 2025 and 2026 have been historic years for public lands in the United States. The Trump administration has moved quickly to reshape the country's protected areas, elevating its own priorities over the many, often competing values that have long shaped the management of these special places. In addition to unprecedented staff attrition, established regulatory protections, from roadless areas to endangered species habitat, are under threat from an executive branch seeking to "unleash" American energy. History, historic preservation, and interpretation are also targets. Numerous NPS units have removed exhibits and digital content from public view and severely limited the scale and scope of new research proposals. And, in a potentially devastating step, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation has sought to make sweeping changes to the administration of the National Historic Preservation Act, endangering the protection of historic sites across the United States, including on public lands.

It is impossible to predict the future. What seems certain, however, is that the skills and insights of the humanities will be essential to addressing the profound upheavals of

this moment and the ongoing repercussions of 250 years of American history. The case studies in this article illustrate both the promise and the limitations of integrating cutting-edge scholarship into public lands management. Whether working through a cohort-based model or individual research appointments, humanities scholars can expand not only how public lands sites interpret the past and present but also how these agencies engage with their own fraught histories and contemporary management practices. As the Landscapes of Protest project demonstrates, even seemingly mundane activities—training, permitting, licensing—merit scrutiny owing to their power in shaping who has access to institutional resources and sanction. The ethics and methodologies of the humanities can also guide the building of relationships with diverse communities, especially when earlier actions have resulted in harm and distrust.

Incorporating the humanities into protected area management at NPS and other agencies will not be easy. To be effective, fellowship programs need to be meaningfully and consistently integrated into the basic programming and management of host sites, not treated as an ancillary activity or a one-off project. Leadership at the highest levels needs to make a sustained, serious commitment to this work, demonstrating tangible "buy-in" through increased funding and meaningful commitments to internal cultural change. These actions provide a foundation for ensuring that research and recommendations reach a receptive audience, rather than one that is surprised and perhaps even dismayed by the work of a Fellow.

Support must also include creating viable pathways for scholars seeking to transition from temporary fellowships to permanent employment. Many public service programs impose age limits, requiring participants to be under 30, which excludes the majority of PhD holders. Absent changes to hiring rules, public lands agencies should explore partnerships with non-profit organizations and corps networks to create alternative pathways into long-term positions. Extending appointments in this way is essential. The longer a scholar works at a site or within an agency, the deeper their institutional knowledge becomes, and, by extension, the more credible their suggestions and critiques are likely to be. Openness to change depends on trust, and trust can only be built over time. By investing in longer-term employment, public lands



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agencies can foster a culture in which critical reflection is grounded in deep institutional knowledge and viewed as an opportunity for growth and improvement.

Heightened media scrutiny and mounting political pressure have undeniably raised the personal and professional stakes for the serious analytical engagement proposed here. For that reason, it is all the more essential that leadership stand up for this type of inquiry, recognizing it not as supplemental to their agencies' missions but as core

values they are meant to uphold. Scholars, too, will face challenges as they move from the norms and rhythms of academia to settings where public engagement and political involvement are far more widespread. At this moment, even with the success of efforts like the NPS Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, it's not altogether clear how, or even if, the humanities will play a role in the Refoundation of place-based conservation. Yet their absence would leave the field far less capable of confronting the obstacles that lie ahead.

Eleanor Mahoney is the co-editor of *Living Landscape Observer* and has spent more than a decade designing programs that connect humanities scholarship with conservation and protected area management.

Roneva Keel is a historian and cultural resources professional with experience in public history, historic preservation, and public land management.

ENDNOTES

1. For more on The Secret Handshake and its installations see, Frank Langfitt, "A Propaganda War on the National Mall Pits Trump Against Satirical Statues and Posters," *NPR*, April 1, 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2026/04/01/nx-s1-5770077/president-trump-national-mall-jeffrey-epstein-stephen-miller-pam-bondi>, and "Secret Handshake," *Heni News*, March 31, 2026, <https://heni.com/news?artist=Secret%20Handshake>; Jonathan Wolfe, "Statue of Trump and Epstein Holding Hands Returns to National Mall," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2025, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dYJRPr_r6jx8DPY5jQdMnPUUcFFKwaK40aXF_eL0BXw/edit?tab=t.0; and "Trump-Mocking Gold Toilet Sculpture Appears on National Mall," *Artforum*, March 30, 2026, <https://www.artforum.com/news/trump-mocking-toilet-sculpture-pops-up-on-national-mall-1234746549/>.
2. Co-author Eleanor Mahoney served as a Mellon Fellow focused on labor history with NPS from 2018–2021. From 2022–2026, she coordinated the first expanded cohort of 15 Fellows. For more on the program and its evolution over time, see Eleanor Mahoney and Perri Meldon, "Now and Here: Public Humanities and National Parks in Tumultuous Times—An Introduction," *Parks Stewardship Forum* 42:1 (2026): 17–23, <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.62074>.
3. In "Moving Toward Accountability: Challenging Settler Narratives through Interpretive Shifts and Tribal Engagement at Anza National Historic Trail," Sarah Montoya summarizes her time (2023–2025) as a Mellon Fellow at the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail. The piece includes a discussion of new internal onboarding materials designed to reorient staff towards new understandings of the impact of Indigenous dispossession, settler occupation, and the legal and structural violence that shaped the United States federal government and the National Park Service. Montoya's article is published in *Parks Stewardship Forum* 42:1 (2026): 101–110, <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.62083>.
4. Co-author Roneva Keel served as the Landscapes of Protest: Public Parkland and the First Amendment Fellow from 2021–2022. The position was part of the Leading Edge program, which placed recent PhDs with a wide range of non-profit and public-sector organizations.
5. The work of the fellowship took on even greater significance given the social and political context in which the study was conducted. The Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020 and the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol both heightened scrutiny of NPS's management of protest on park lands.
6. The full study, "Landscapes of Protest: A Study of First Amendment Expression in the National Park Service," can be found on the National Park Service History Electronic Library and Archive, <https://npshistory.com/publications/ncr/keel.pdf>. The archive is a private endeavor and not affiliated with NPS.
7. Since NPS first began requiring permits for First Amendment demonstrations in 1966, park administrators, politicians, and the general public wondered how (and even if) the agency could balance First Amendment rights with its mission to "preserve unimpaired" the natural and cultural resources and values of park lands for present and future generations. Through more than five decades of litigation, the courts have affirmed both the right to free speech and assembly on national park lands and the authority of NPS to regulate First Amendment activities. However, setting aside the increasingly polarized political environment, reconciling the right to use park lands as a venue for protest with legitimate concerns about security and resource protection require a

nuanced understanding of policy, how the regulations evolved over time, and the implications for the manner in which NPS regulates a First Amendment activity. In “Regulating the Landscape of Protest: The National Park Service National Capital Region as Testing Ground for First Amendment Rights,” Roneva Keel draws on her research from the Leading Edge fellowship to analyze the history of First Amendment regulations in NPS. Keel’s article is published in *Parks Stewardship Forum* 40:3 (2024): 577–586, <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.35443>.