

HOME

Message from

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Centennial Challenge to Revitalize National Parks and the National Park Service

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Homestead National Monument of America

On March 1, 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant set aside a remote area including parts of modern Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana as Yellowstone National Park. The act signed that day withdrew over two million acres from the public domain to be "set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." Though the United States government had previously and informally set aside natural areas for preservation, the creation of Yellowstone gave birth to the national park idea; indeed, Yellowstone was the world's first national park. Several other major national parks were created in the years after Yellowstone.

By 1916, the U.S. Department of the Interior administered 14 national parks, 21 national monuments, and a few other affiliated areas. However, there was no uniform, systematic management of the areas. In several, the United States Army was responsible for administration and enforcement of anti-poaching laws. Stephen T. Mather, a wealthy Chicago businessman and dedicated outdoorsman, complained to his friend, Interior Secretary Franklin K. Lane, about the lack of management of the national parks. In response, Lane hired Mather as assistant secretary for park affairs. Mather became an articulate and forceful advocate for the creation of a government agency to manage the parks, and Congress responded. President Woodrow Wilson signed the law creating the National Park Service (called the "Organic Act") on August 25, 1916.

Today, the National Park Service manages 391 units. Over 20,000 employees proudly work every day to preserve America's natural and cultural resources, history, and heritage. The National Park Service employs police officers, maintenance workers, administrators, biologists, natural

resource managers, interpreters, firefighters, social scientists, historians, and more. All are eagerly anticipating the activities that will accompany the Service's 100th birthday in 2016.

Accordingly, at the direction of President George W. Bush and Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne, the leadership of the National Park Service has developed a program called the Centennial Challenge. The Challenge has its roots in a May 31, 2007 report by Secretary Kempthorne to President Bush entitled *The Future of America's National Parks*. In it, the Secretary lists five overarching themes for the National Park Service to pursue between now the 2016 centennial: stewardship; environmental leadership; recreational experience; education; and professional excellence.

Special federal funding would provide the dollars necessary to achieve these goals and the specific projects that individual parks view as centennial projects. Each project will also require a 50 percent match

volunteers to assist us with these important projects.

Secretary Kempthorne and NPS Director Mary Bomar announced the first round of approved Centennial Challenge projects on August 25. Homestead did not have any projects on that first list, but we intend to continue seeking Centennial Challenge funding and matching funds from partners to move Homestead National Monument of America forward.

The National Park Service has much exciting work to do over the next nine years to complete the vision for the Centennial Challenge and to prepare to celebrate its 100th birthday. As always, however, the primary focus of the parks is you—the visitor. All Centennial Challenge projects are intended to improve your national parks so that you and the 290 million other visitors per year have quality educational and recreational experiences at all 391 units. As Secretary Kempthorne's May 31 report to the President explained it:

As always, however, the primary focus of the parks is you – the visitor.

from a non-governmental partner. The projects selected for funding will allow the National Park Service to accomplish specific performance goals:

- Improve priority facilities to acceptable condition;
- Restore native habitats by controlling invasive species, and reintroducing key plant and animal species;
- Improve natural resources in parks as measured by scientific vital signs monitoring;
- Reduce environmental impacts of park operations;
- Double the amount of volunteer hours;
- Enroll two million new Junior Rangers;
- Encourage greater partnership and philanthropy; and
- Reshape the workforce to meet the needs of America.

At Homestead National Monument of America, Centennial Challenge funds may be pursued for projects such as converting the old visitor center into the Homestead Education Center; removing exotic plant species from the nation's second-oldest restored tallgrass prairie; creating a new Junior Ranger program specific to the Homestead Heritage Center; preserving homestead records and making them available for public research; and more. The next nine years will be very busy and very exciting at Homestead, and we will continue to rely on our Friends group and dedicated

The 21st-century National Park Service will be energized to preserve parks and welcome visitors.

Stewardship and science will guide decisions... Parks will be known as America's best classrooms. We will work carefully to add new parks to tell America's stories. Facilities will be in better condition. Hallowed battlefields will be preserved. Majestic species that symbolize this nation, such as bison and bald eagles, will thrive in their native habitats. A new era of private-public partnerships will bring greater excellence to parks. More volunteers will add value to park experiences... Children will reconnect to the outdoors and lead healthier lives. A new generation of conservationists will convey parks unimpaired to the next generation.

Homestead National Monument of America looks forward to working with you and our 390 sister parks to improve your parks and the National Park Service by the agency's 2016 centennial. The new Centennial Challenge will give Homestead and all of the parks the resources to accomplish these lofty and necessary goals.

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO KNOW OUR OWN STORY

The name National Park Service always makes me think of the Yellowstone National Park where it all began. Homestead National Monument

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Homestead Heritage Center

Photo by Jerry Davison

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO KNOW OUR OWN STORY ...continued

of America is not far behind in my thoughts, but there is something about that phrase “national park” that really sounds magnificent! When I first moved to Beatrice, I wondered if “national monument” was some lesser category. I wasn’t even certain if the staff at Homestead National Monument of America were really park rangers in the same unit of government as those at the officially-named “national parks”. The uniforms did look familiar. The arrowhead logo looked the same. I quickly found out that it was definitely all part of the same National Park Service.

A quick check of library books about the National Parks resulted in a list that includes monuments, preserves, memorials, historic sites, historic parks, battlefields, lakeshores, rivers and recreation areas, historic trails, riverways and recreational rivers. That was just in the twelve states in the “heartland” area. When I looked at the more comprehensive national park list, there were military parks, battlefield parks, battlefield sites, seashores, scenic trails and parkways. There are probably even more National Park Service categories that I missed. What I did realize that there are many different designations that are all part of the National Park Service. Whether we are a park or a monument, we are in good company.

It is easy to understand why a unique place like Yellowstone area is included in the National Park Service. It is not as easy for people to understand “why Homestead National Monument of America? Why is it here?” It is important for us to know our own story, to know why we are in the company of so many spectacular and significant places in our country’s history. Rather than being “the one and only”, we are a monument that uses one site as a symbol of many. And like every single one of the millions of family homestead sites, it has its own unique history. And it has its own special, well-deserved place in the National Park Service, as a proper memorial emblematic of pioneer hardships and the settlement of the West.

– Lauren Riedesel, President,
Friends of Homestead National
Monument of America

– FREE LAND – Transforming the Nation

The Homestead Congress is a Friends of Homestead National Monument of America program, communicating with those persons interested in learning more about the mission of Homestead National Monument of America and the effect it had on the growth of this nation. Those registering their e-mail address at homesteadcongress@gmail.com receive this free newsletter plus quarterly updates to your e-mail address. The cost-cutting advantage of e-mail will enable reaching a greater audience.

- To receive:
1. Register your e-mail address by sending it to the above e-mail address.
 2. Consider sharing this program with your interested family and friends.

The Homestead Act of 1862 provided a robust opportunity for westward development of this country. Needs of the Homesteaders were great. Those needs were also the needs of the country, resulting in an explosion of inventions, industrial applications, agriculture, finance, art, photography, communications, transportation, medicine and many more. These are the stories the Homestead Congress want to receive. How did the Homestead Act of 1862 connect with and relate to this important growth in the early years of what we now have and take for granted? These one page remembrances will be shared in the e-mails to those sending their addresses from across the globe. It is a big story, the Homestead Congress wants to help create a better awareness of the Homestead Act of 1862 and the Homestead National Monument of America, the one site mandated by Congress to tell this story.

– Jerry Davison, Facilitator,
Homestead Congress

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