

Explore 250 Years of American History Through Our National Parks!

The National Park System plays an important role in preserving America's history by protecting the lands where key events happened and where influential figures lived and worked. From battlefields and historic homes to museums and memorials, these sites keep our nation's stories alive. By exploring them, visitors can better understand how our country has changed over time and the people and ideas that helped shape it. Walk through some important milestones across 250 years of American history and discover which parks you can visit to learn more!

1776

The United States gains its independence

[Minute Man National Historical Park \(MA\)](#) preserves the places where the American Revolution began, including the battle sites of Lexington and Concord and where the "shot heard 'round the world" was fired. [Independence National Historical Park \(PA\)](#) is where the Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence, formally declaring America's independence from Great Britain on July 4, 1776.



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George Washington becomes the first president of the United States

Following the creation of the Constitution in 1787, which established the framework of the federal government, George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the U.S. at the site now known as [Federal Hall National Memorial \(NY\)](#), the nation's first capital. This is also where the First Congress met and where the Bill of Rights was introduced. [George Washington Birthplace National Monument \(VA\)](#) preserves the site where he was born and interprets his early life and the environment that shaped him.

1789

1803

Westward Expansion begins

Through the Louisiana Purchase, the U.S. doubled its territory. President Thomas Jefferson commissioned explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to map the new land and find a route to the Pacific Ocean. The area where their expedition ended is now [Lewis & Clark National Historical Park \(OR, WA\)](#) and the route they took from Illinois to Oregon is preserved as the [Lewis & Clark National Historic Trail](#).



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The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is signed

The signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American War in 1848, with Mexico ceding its northern territories, land that would later become all or part of California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. [Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park \(TX\)](#) preserves the site of the first major battle of the war. [Casa Grande Ruins National Monument \(AZ\)](#) tells the history of the Southwest and shows how U.S. expansion after the war impacted Indigenous peoples and Mexican territory.

1848

1865

The Civil War ends and slavery is abolished

The Civil War began in 1861 and ended in 1865, when General Robert E. Lee surrendered his troops at what is now [Appomattox Court House National Historical Park \(VA\)](#). Under the leadership of President Abraham Lincoln, slavery was abolished nationwide and the North and South were reunited. The place where he delivered his iconic Gettysburg Address and the site of the largest Civil War battle is preserved today as [Gettysburg National Military Park \(PA\)](#).



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NPS/Jim Peaco

The first National Park opens

[Yellowstone National Park \(ID, MT, WY\)](#) was not only America's first national park, but the world's. In 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act, protecting more than two million acres of land "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." The creation of Yellowstone and other national parks was made possible by the Yosemite Grant Act of 1864, which set aside the [Yosemite Valley for the state of California](#)--the first time the federal government set aside land specifically for preservation and public use, marking a major shift in how people valued natural spaces.

1872

The United States enters World War I

After the interception of the Zimmerman Telegram, the U.S. entered World War I. During the war, [Governors Island National Monument \(NY\)](#) served as a major Army headquarters and training site. Most people don't know that the fighting even reached American soil: off the coast of [Cape Cod National Seashore \(MA\)](#), a German U-boat attacked a patrolling vessel, and its shells landed on Nauset Beach.



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1917



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Women gain the right to vote

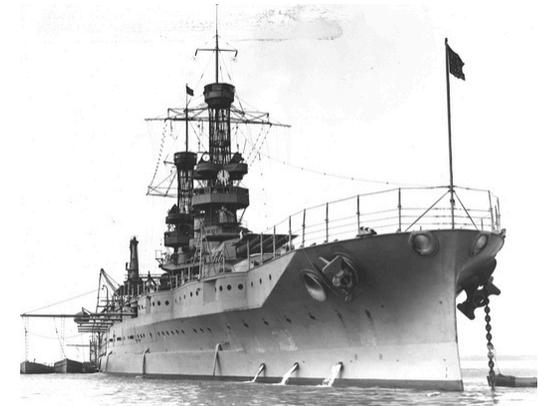
The 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote, was ratified in 1920. Before becoming the [Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument \(DC\)](#), the building served as the headquarters of the National Woman's Party, a central hub in the suffrage movement. There, Alice Paul and other activists met to develop strategies to secure the vote and advance equal rights. [Women's Rights National Historical Park \(NY\)](#) preserves the site of the first Women's Rights Convention in 1848, where the organized movement for gender equality began.

1920

1941

Pearl Harbor is attacked

The day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. declared war on Japan, officially entering World War II. Today, [Pearl Harbor is preserved as a National Memorial \(HI\)](#). One of the few battles fought on U.S. soil occurred in what is now the [Aleutian Islands World War II National Historic Area \(AK\)](#), where American forces retook Attu Island from Japan. [Manzanar National Historic Site \(CA\)](#) preserves one of the largest Japanese American internment camps and honors the thousands of people who were forcibly relocated during the war. The site highlights their resilience and lasting contributions to American society.



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NPS/Mark Wilderman

Tension between the United States and the Soviet Union rises

During the Cold War, the U.S. engaged in an arms race with the Soviet Union and developed a network of nuclear missile sites across the country. One of these facilities is now preserved as [Minuteman Missile National Historic Site \(SD\)](#). After the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the HM-69 Nike Missile Base was built in what is now [Everglades National Park \(FL\)](#) to defend against potential attacks from Cuba.

1962

1964

The Civil Rights Act is passed

Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership during the Civil Rights Movement was essential in building support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which ended segregation and banned discrimination based on race, religion, and gender. [Martin Luther King Jr. National Historical Park \(GA\)](#) preserves the places connected to his life and legacy. [Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site \(AR\)](#) preserves the school where the first African American students integrated under federal protection, sharing the story of their courage and the national fight for desegregation.



NPS/Gary Tarleton



NPS/L. Bartsch

Apollo 11 lands on the moon

On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first humans to walk on the moon, marking a major victory for the U.S. in the Space Race. About one million people gathered along the beaches of Florida to watch the historic launch. One of those beaches was Apollo Beach, which is now part of [Canaveral National Seashore \(FL\)](#). Before the mission, the Apollo 11 astronauts trained in [Big Bend National Park \(TX\)](#), whose rugged terrain closely resembles the moon's surface. Today, the park is also designated as an International Dark Sky Park and is a prime place to connect with the stars.

1969

2001

The Twin Towers fall

[Flight 93 National Memorial \(PA\)](#) preserves the crash site of the plane that terrorists intended to strike the U.S. Capitol on September 11, 2001, honoring the passengers and crew who bravely prevented the attack. Flight 93 was one of four planes hijacked that day, with two hitting the Twin Towers in New York City and one striking the Pentagon. 9/11, the deadliest foreign attack on U.S. soil, triggered the "War on Terror," reshaped national security, and united the country in its aftermath.



NPS/Brenda Schwartz



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America celebrates its 250th birthday

July 4, 2026, marks the 250th anniversary of America's independence! To celebrate this historic milestone, the [National Park Service](#) and [America250](#) are inviting Americans nationwide to share their personal stories, family histories, and dreams for our country. Visit their websites to find ways to get involved and join the celebration. In honor of this anniversary, [National Mall and Memorial Parks \(DC\)](#) is offering a [special free virtual program](#) that explores sites connected to America's 250th.

2026