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Visitors to Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park in Atlanta in front of Dr. King's boyhood home. Photo: Christopher T. Martin

America's Collective History

Through the Lens of Parks and Historic Sites

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As we commemorate the 250th anniversary of the United States this July, the nation’s parks and green spaces will take center stage. They’ll host outdoor concerts, parades, fireworks, and jamborees, connecting people to the great outdoors and to each other while they pay homage to what many consider to be the world’s oldest continuous democracy.

Naturally, American history will loom large during this semiquincentennial year: The Revolutionary War that gave rise to these United States, of course, but also the generations of people, movements, innovations, conflicts, and acts of courage that have shaped the nation since. America’s story includes moments of extraordinary achievement and chapters of profound injustice, cultural milestones and scientific breakthroughs, struggles for freedom and equality, and our ongoing effort to build a more perfect union.



On the Fourth of July, Americans will descend on parks across the United States, like this reveler at Lake Superior Falls in Wisconsin. Photo: Sara Rubinstein

Telling that complete and inclusive story of America—including through our national parks and historic sites—strengthens our public memory and national identity.

Americans across geographies and political affiliations agree. They’re unequivocal in their desire to see the full arc of the nation’s history on display in their public parks and historic sites.

[New polling commissioned by Trust for Public Land \(TPL\) and conducted by YouGov](#) found that:

- **88 percent** of Americans—including the vast majority of Republican and Democratic voters—agree it’s important to preserve historical and cultural landmarks in outdoor spaces that tell the full American story, even and especially the difficult chapters, such as slavery and the mistreatment of Native Americans.
- **85 percent** agree that national parks, public lands, and natural landscapes are something they are proud of about the United States today.
- **83 percent** agree that outdoor public spaces are among the most important elements of their communities’ identities.
- **75 percent** say they want parks and public spaces to do more to reflect shared history and culture through signage, programming, and interpretation.

“At a moment when our country faces division, parks and public lands remain a unifying force—places where communities come together, history is remembered, and our shared story is made tangible,” says Dr. Carrie Besnette Hauser, the president and CEO of TPL. “As we reflect on America’s 250th anniversary, these spaces remind us of who we are and who we can become.”

Particularly at a time when foundational parts of our nation’s history are being targeted for erasure, we must safeguard landmarks and the milestones that hold our ever-growing story of America.

Trust for Public Land is proud to have helped protect and preserve many such sites over the past 50 years, including a few described below that demonstrate two things: the power of place in producing an honest accounting of the nation’s triumphs and failures and what we stand to lose if we discontinue or diminish our tradition of conservation. The Organization of American Historians recently put it this way: “Historical knowledge is a shared civic resource and a bedrock of accountability.”



Pride flags adorn Stonewall National Monument, which tells the story of the events in New York City that sparked the LGBTQ+ rights movement. Photo: Warren Eisenberg

Parks and Public Lands Are Where We Live Our Truth

It was a hot, humid night in New York City on June 28, 1969, and the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village was packed. Stonewall was a bar that welcomed the city’s marginalized residents, especially gay, lesbian, and transgender patrons. And as the sole gay bar in New York that permitted dancing, the owners circumvented the lack of a liquor license by making under-the-table payments to local police.

Despite that arrangement, police raided the Stonewall Inn that night. With such a large crowd gathered, the situation quickly escalated. After years of discrimination and unequal treatment by law enforcement and society more broadly, many members of the LGBTQ+ community resisted dispersing.

Demonstrations and unrest continued for several nights. Against a backdrop of anti-war activism and the broader civil rights movement, the events at Stonewall catalyzed a renewed movement for LGBTQ+ rights. Decades later, same-sex marriage is the law of the land.

Nearly 50 years to the month of the uprising, Stonewall—including Christopher Park, a green space across the street where protestors gathered and demonstrated—became the first national monument to tell the story of the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. Trust for Public Land played a small but decisive role in securing the site by assisting New York City with the property negotiations.

The monument helps preserve a fuller history of the movement, including the contributions of Black, Latinx, and other LGBTQ+ people of color, as well as transgender activists such as Marsha P. Johnson, whose advocacy helped inspire generations of people seeking dignity, visibility, and equal rights. Today, it hosts festivals, educational workshops, and art exhibits, giving visitors insight into a pivotal chapter in history.

An outgrowth of that chapter: Every June, tens of thousands of people including members of the American LGBTQ+ community and their friends, neighbors, and allies, gather and enthusiastically celebrate their culture and their identities with peaceful Pride parades in parks and public spaces across the country.

But were it not for one night at one bar in New York City, and a few hundred activists, these joyful celebrations might not happen, and those people might still live in the shadows.

Parks and Public Lands Are Where We Connect With Our Culture

On the rugged flank of Mount Taylor in New Mexico, herds of elk move through stands of ponderosa pine, and black bears and mountain lions roam across grasslands into valleys of dense pinyon and juniper.

Trust for Public Land has protected more than 54,000 acres surrounding the mountain, which is sacred to as many as 30 Native American tribes, including the Pueblo of Acoma (ACK-uh-muh), the Pueblo of Laguna, the Hopi Tribe, the Navajo Nation, and the Pueblo of Zuni. “It’s significant to Acoma in terms of how we orient ourselves to the landscape,” says Theresa Pasqual, a Pueblo member and former director of the Acoma Tribal Historic Preservation Office. “This particular mountain is associated with the cardinal direction of north, and there is associated religious and cultural significance tied to it.”

And yet, early American policy displaced the Tribes from these lands, and hundreds of years of private ownership restricted the Tribes’ access, disconnecting them from their history, their culture, and their full identity.

Starting in 2022, when TPL purchased two adjoining ranches that made up the private [L Bar property](#), as it was known, the land once again became publicly accessible as it was added in phases to the Marquez Wildlife Area. The addition of the property more than quadrupled the existing wildlife area’s size, making it the largest state-owned recreation property in New Mexico.

In recent years, some 400,000 acres on and around Mount Taylor, an extinct volcano rising to 11,301 feet, were designated under state law as a traditional cultural property.

“About half of L Bar is within the Mount Taylor Traditional Cultural Property, and that is an important part of the story,” explains Jim Petterson, vice president of TPL’s Mountain West region. “Members of the Tribes, nations, and pueblos who value it once again have access in perpetuity.”

Pasqual, who’s also an archeologist, explained that generations ago, before L Bar became privately owned, the Acoma people would have used the natural resources there, such as timber, plants, and wildlife. The upper portion of the property would have also provided valuable lookouts in all directions, helping Pueblo members see distant communities and potential trade routes, as well as migration of elk and deer. “When we restore people’s connection to land, we restore their oral history; we restore their identity for future generations. We restore their cultural connection to the landscape that hadn’t seen their footprints in generations.”



Hikers enjoy sweeping vistas from former L Bar property, now part of the Marquez Wildlife Area in New Mexico.
Photo: Dave Cox/Mountain Media

Parks and Public Lands Are Where We Encounter the People Who Lived and Made Our History

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s role and significance in the American civil rights movement is well enshrined in our historic record that captures the things he did: helping to win passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and leading a nonviolent movement that demanded equality for Black Americans and all oppressed people.

But it is the places where he was born, and where he lived and worked and worshipped, that capture and convey who he was. Those places—including his childhood home, Ebenezer Baptist Church where he preached, the offices of his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)—all sit within a few blocks along and around Atlanta's Auburn Avenue.

Because we as a nation have preserved and protected those sites and officially designated them, collectively, as a national historical park managed and activated by the National Park System, we and future generations can experience them as Dr. King did. We have a window into his daily routine and the people and places that formed him.

"The park service can now give a richer narrative of who Dr. King was as a human being," says Dr. Jocelyn Imani, national senior director of TPL's Black History and Culture program. "He's a real person. Maybe he spent some time at the church in the morning, and now he is walking to his office. Part of the reason 'place' is so critical is that it allows us to take the past off a magic pedestal and put it in our hands."



Speakers celebrate the addition of the Prince Hall Masonic Grand Lodge to Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park in Atlanta. Photo: Tom Miller/Pretty Good Productions

The most recent addition to the national historical park came with the addition and restoration of Prince Hall Masonic Grand Lodge, which famously housed the SCLC. Madam C.J. Walker Beauty Shoppe, whose owner (a Black woman) became America's first self-made female millionaire, occupied the building's ground floor, while WERD, the nation's first Black-owned radio station, was located on the second floor. TPL worked closely with the Prince Hall Masons, the National Park Service and local leaders to restore and permanently protect the building. "This site holds a central place in the American story, a history not separate from our national history, but foundational and integrated with it," Imani says. "The brave leadership and civic courage forged here moved this country closer to its ideals. That legacy belongs to all of us."

Other Black historic sites across the South, including the Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home National Monument, Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, Freedom Riders National Monument, Natchez National Historical Park, the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, and Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site, shed light on the multidimensional human beings who lived and in some cases died in the pursuit of equality.

Martin Luther King III recently spoke about his grandfather's legacy and the importance of centering history in the present. "It is said that [people who] do not remember their history are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past," he said. "This solidifies a great history that certainly is in transition, because the dream my father shared and my mother and others worked to institutionalize is not yet fulfilled. Yes, we've made strides, but the question is where are we now and what are we going to do in the future?"

Parks and Public Lands Express and Preserve Community Identity

Snow-capped peaks and lush pastures form the backdrop for family-owned ranches in Colorado's [Upper Arkansas River Valley](#) that date to the late 1800s. Today, the market for second homes in this region, like so many others across the Mountain West, has put a strain on the working lands and water resources that make the valley both productive and an attractive place to live and work.

By providing food for the country and stewarding the land, farmers, ranchers, and loggers in rural working communities have for centuries contributed to the economic and cultural quilt that is the United States. Their stories, their experiences, their ways of life, and their rural community identities should also be preserved in our collective narrative.

We can do that by protecting rural, working landscapes—along with the lifeways and economies they support—through conservation easements, which help landowners to continue working their properties while also granting public outdoor access to some of the land.

Trust for Public Land has safeguarded at least eight ranch legacies across more than 4,500 acres of this region alone. These ranches' permanent protection means they'll continue to anchor the agricultural, ecological, and scenic heritage of the region.

"One of the great things about protecting working agricultural land is that you're helping families continue to own and work land that's been in their family for generations," says TPL project manager Wade Shelton. "However, their benefits don't end there; by protecting properties, we're ensuring that future generations can continue to enjoy the Upper Arkansas Valley."



A ranch hand walks through one of the fields at Hutchinson Ranch in Colorado's Upper Arkansas River Valley, which was protected through a conservation easement. Photo: Dave Lauridsen

Parks and Public Lands Are America

As the recent TPL polling found, Americans of all political persuasions are clear that public spaces like Stonewall; Mount Taylor; Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Park; and the Upper Arkansas River Valley are among the most important elements of our collective identity.

At this moment, we should be proud of the history and culture we've preserved with our parks and public lands and acknowledge where we can do more. People long marginalized and discriminated against are still inadequately represented in the public sphere.

For example, of the nearly 100,000 places included on the National Register of Historic Places, only 3 percent convey the experiences of Black Americans. As of 2024, only 141 of the 2,651 national historic

landmarks had a connection to women’s history. The National Mall in Washington, DC, has 22 monuments to individual men and zero commemorating women.

All of this exists amid a recent push not to expand representation but to sanitize our collective history. As a result, we’re at risk of losing the stories and places that have helped shape this country and of ignoring what nine in 10 Americans agree on: that our parks and public lands, historic and cultural landmarks must tell a full and unflinching American story.

“This work is not about politics; it is about people,” says TPL’s Besnette Hauser. “It is about ensuring that every community can see themselves reflected in this place, these places that tell our nation’s story. And it allows us to see ourselves in one another. Protecting these places strengthens humanity, human understanding, empathy, and connection at a time when these values are deeply needed.”



Visitors to the Clemmons Family Farm, one of the largest African American–owned farms in Vermont, now protected as a Black arts and cultural center. Photo: Emily Landauer

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