



Iconic, early black-and-white photo of Yosemite Valley, taken circa 1864, by photographer Carleton Watkins

2014 marks the 150th anniversary of the creation of what we now know as Yosemite National Park. It’s also the sesquicentennial anniversary of California’s State Parks System. The two events are, in fact, inextricably related. And how they occurred is a noteworthy and truly inspirational story.

In 1864, in the midst of the Civil War, a movement swelled to preserve a pair of mysterious and beautiful sites in California that members of Congress and President Abraham Lincoln had only learned about through third party diaries and pictorial accounts from the then-new technology of photography. Those sites, totaling 39,000 acres, consisted of two spectacular and proximate venues in the Sierra Nevadas that we now know as Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree (i.e., Sequoia Redwood) Grove. California Senator John Conness introduced a bill in March 1864 to preserve the Valley and Grove. A mere three months later, President Lincoln signed into law what we now know as the Yosemite Grant.

That Congress and President could act so quickly is itself remarkable, given that it occurred at the height of the bloodiest war in American history. But, 150 years later, what is even more impressive is that the Yosemite Grant represents the first time in recorded history that a national government set aside lands simply to protect them and to allow for their enjoyment by the public. So was born America’s national parks movement, what iconic filmmaker Ken Burns—himself a national treasure—has quite aptly termed “America’s best idea.”

Since a wartime national government in 1864 lacked the funds and resources to manage these new parklands, the federal government immediately transferred Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove to the State of California. Thus were created the first assets in California’s now-spectacular and far-flung State Parks System.

Truth be told, the State of California did a less-than-stellar job of managing Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove for the next 42 years. Chronic state underfunding and gubernatorial appointments of some unqualified political hacks as Park Superintendents left the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove vulnerable to some who viewed these spectacular natural resources as ripe for exploitation. It ultimately took the U.S. Cavalry to stop the private predations.

In 1890, Congress expanded on the 1864 Yosemite Grant by officially creating Yosemite

National Park which, depending on how you categorize it, was either the first or second national park in American history. (More on that in a moment.) Initially, the 1890 Yosemite Park approximated the Park’s current exterior boundaries, but contained not one but two “holes in the doughnut”—Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove, which remained owned and managed by the State of California.



1903 photo of President Teddy Roosevelt, John Muir and other dignitaries standing in front of the “Grizzly Giant” redwood tree in the Mariposa Grove

That dual system of park ownership and management made little sense, however, and in 1906 California ceded back to the federal government Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove. Both properties were then absorbed into the previously created Yosemite National Park to create the beloved and iconic natural resource that today draws over four million visitors annually from around the globe.

I marvel at the fact that in the midst of America’s worst military and political crisis, the nation’s political leadership was able in 1864 to pause to create something as novel, far-reaching and consequential as the Yosemite Grant. And it reflects well on both the national and state governments that they were able to collaborate so effectively in simultaneously creating Yosemite National Park and California’s State Parks System. They were arguably America’s and California’s first major acts of environmental leadership for the world.

So, Happy 150th Birthday, Yosemite Grant and California State Parks System!

(A footnote: vigorous debate still exists among those who claim that Yellowstone National Park—created in 1872—is America's first national park and those who contend that Yosemite deserves that distinction. In point of fact, the only reason the feds transferred the 1864 Yosemite Grant lands to the State of California was that the national government lacked the resources to manage the park in wartime and the State was...well, a State—one that presumably could do the job. And historians similarly tell us the only reason the federal government did not try to effect a similar transfer of Yellowstone was that Wyoming and Montana in 1872 were mere territories, and would not achieve statehood until 1890. So there was no state government(s) in place in 1872 to which the national government *could* transfer Yellowstone, and the U.S. Army wound up patrolling Yellowstone (and Yosemite, for that matter) until the National Park Service was itself created in 1916. So Yellowstone and Yosemite both have credible claims to the title of America's first national park. Let's call it a tie...)