

The origins of the national park system is usually [traced](#) back Lincoln's 1864 signature of the Yosemite Grant Act. But Congress had actually had the idea of protecting extraordinary places over thirty years earlier, in Arkansas of all places. Hot Springs isn't high on the list of American places to see, which may be one reason this episode had been forgotten. But it deserves to be remembered as a milestone in federal policy.

The springs are located in the Ouachita Mountains of central Arkansas. About 500 million years ago, a collision between the North and South American plates produced mountains in the area, apparently also leaving a legacy of faults. Rain water from the mountains sinks about a mile underground, where it's heated and rises through fractures in the rock. In the 19th Century, hot mineral springs like this were thought to have medicinal value.

The basics of the story are pretty simple. In 1820, the state legislature requested that the land be transferred to the territory to "include all of the Hot Springs for the benefit of that watering place." Congress apparently paid no attention. In 1830, the territorial legislature requested that Congress provide funds for a hospital at the springs, "taking the waters" then thought to be very conducive to health. Hernando de Soto was apparently the first known European to see the springs in 1541.

The 1830 request was [apparently](#) the outcome of a struggle between local settlers who wanted to establish a private health resort and those who wanted to make the springs available to everyone. This request was partially successful. Congress didn't provide funding for a hospital but it did set aside the springs from development.

On April 20, 1832, Andrew Jackson signed [legislation](#) to set the springs and surrounding mountains from development. The legislation provides that the township surrounding the springs "shall be reserved for the future disposal of the United States, and shall not be liable to be entered, located, or appropriated, for any other purpose whatever." The law also authorizes the governing to use the revenue from short-term leases of the spring to fund "the opening and improving such lands in said territory, as said legislature may direct, and to no other purpose whatever."

Unfortunately, Congress didn't appropriate any money to supervise the area, and the result was helter-skelter private developments. The private owners later sued to establish title to the land they were using, under a law that Congress passed specifically to authorize federal litigation on the issue. The Supreme Court ruled against them in *In re Hot Springs* cases, 92 U.S. 698 (1875). That ruling cleared the way for active federal management of the land by the Interior Department. The land is now a National Park.

Yellowstone is in some ways a clearer story about preserving nature. Hot Springs began with the different but related goal of ensuring that valuable public resource was used for the benefit of the public. That may be one reason why the Hot Springs story hasn't gotten as much attention. Hot Springs did set an important precedent, however, about keeping land of public value out of the hands of developers. That's a story worth telling.