

# America's Best Idea: Our National Parks Celebrate 100 Years

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By Thomas Mills



CED students gathered data for several days in the Elkmont area in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park for the NPS. Photo courtesy of the Cultural Landscape Lab.

On August 25, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed into law the National Park Service Organic Act, officially creating the National Park Service. Tasked with protecting and managing the 35 national parks and monuments of the United States, the NPS' main mission was to, "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and wildlife therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Today, 100 years later, the NPS cares for over 400 parks with over 20,000 employees. The agency's size, scope, and mission for preserving natural and historic resources have, unsurprisingly, struck a chord with students at the University of Georgia's College of Environment and Design.

Cari Goetcheus, associate professor at the CED, who teaches in the graduate historic preservation program, sees a strong correlation between what the CED teaches and what the NPS practices.

“The NPS is definitely very integrally connected with what we do at the college,” said Goetcheus, whose previous work includes being a historical landscape architect with the NPS in Atlanta and Washington D.C.

“Whether it’s being a park ranger or using landscape architecture design skills to create new areas for parks—additional parking, signage, visitor education, etc., or heritage conservation skills to identify and interpret cultural resources to the public— it directly relates to what we teach at the CED,” said Goetcheus.



Cannon at Fort Sumter National Monument. CED students and CLL faculty and staff produced a Cultural Landscape Inventory and a Cultural Landscape Report for this site for the NPS. Photo courtesy CLL.

Several CED faculty emeriti, including Ian Firth, Richard Westmacott, Allen Stovall and Catherine Howett set the precedents for the study of historically significant landscapes in America’s National Parks and Goetcheus continues that tradition.

“When I first got here, there was a huge amount of interest from the MLA students,” said Goetcheus. “Now we’re beginning to get more interest from the MHP students and, broadly, undergraduate students, which is awesome.”

The burgeoning interest can be attributed to the founding of the CED’s Cultural Landscape Laboratory, whose main mission is to explore how society can best sustain the ecological, social, and cultural systems that constitute America’s most treasured landscapes. In addition to the lab, the college has added two courses (Introduction to Cultural Landscape Documentation

and Introduction to Cultural Landscape Conservation) and continues to offer the Rural Preservation course. Students can also get undergraduate and graduate certificates in historic landscapes. Goetcheus points out that cultural landscapes are all around us, sometimes right under our noses.

“You might not think that you’re in a cultural landscape, but you usually are, as it is any geographic area that has been manipulated by human kind,” said Goetcheus. Places that hold significance for people, “like presidents’ birthplaces, farmsteads, maritime parks and even hiking trails, are all cultural landscapes.”

Moreover, due to the overlapping philosophies of the NPS and CED, many students have expressed interest in joining the NPS for their careers.

“Traditionally, the NPS has been one of the key employers of landscape architects, planners and historic preservation professionals if you wanted to go into a federal career position,” said Goetcheus. CED is teaching people how to do cultural landscape inventories and reports and many students come to her and say ‘I want to work for the NPS. How do I do that?’”



Monument at Cowpens National Battlefield. CED students and CLL faculty and staff produced several Cultural Landscape Inventories and a Cultural Landscape Report for this site for the NPS. Photo courtesy CLL.

At least three students (Fielding Link, MLA, Laura Bradford, MLA, and Daniel Weldon, MHP) have gone to work for the NPS recently, and long-time career employees like Lucy Lawliss (MLA and certificate in Historic Preservation from CED) and Susan Hitchcock (MHP) continue to make their marks on the national park landscapes.

In addition to the long-term management of these important cultural landscapes, landscape architects had a long affiliation with the design of National Parks, going all the way back to their inception.

For more information about the Cultural Landscape Lab at CED, or the cultural landscape courses, contact Cari Goetcheus at [cgoetcheus@uga.edu](mailto:cgoetcheus@uga.edu).

To learn more about cultural landscapes in the NPS, visit [https://www.nps.gov/cultural\\_landscapes/](https://www.nps.gov/cultural_landscapes/)