

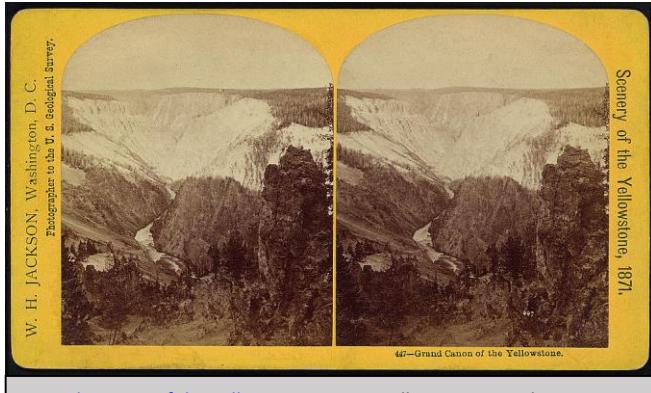
Yellowstone: National Park

As cities, railroads, and steamships began to significantly change the appearance of the East, the need for public parks was more frequently expressed. Artist **George Catlin** was one of the first Americans to suggest the concept of a national park. In 1832, he wrote about his concern for the native populations, wildlife and wilderness, recommending that the American West might be preserved as “a Nation’s park . . . containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature’s beauty!” One of the earliest and most influential figures in the public parks movement was **Andrew Jackson Downing**, a gardener turned landscape architect, who in the 1840s successfully introduced nature into the domestic routine of the average American. Through his numerous and popular writings, Downing attempted to make the public more aware of the general characteristics of American scenery and to stress the moral and sociological benefits of a life lived in contact with nature. In his later writings he turned his attention to public parks, where he hoped people of all classes might enjoy themselves together. American authors, too, had proposed “national preserves” as a solution to the rapid growth of industry. In 1856 **Henry David Thoreau** wrote, “Why should we . . . have our national preserves . . . in which bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be “civilized off the face of the earth” . . . for inspiration and our true re-creation? Or should we, like villains, grub them all up for poaching on our national domains?”

When the members of the Hayden Expedition returned from surveying the Yellowstone in the early autumn of 1871, lead geologist **Ferdinand V. Hayden** mounted a campaign to protect the natural wonders he and his team had witnessed. He penned an article for *Scribner's Monthly* titled “Wonders of the West II – More about the Yellowstone.” The article was accompanied by Thomas Moran’s sketches of the region (right). Soon, newspapers began reporting that a bill to make Yellowstone a national park was being considered by Congress. His efforts were bolstered by American financier and railroad magnate **Jay Cooke**, head of the **Northern Pacific Railroad**, and in the United States House of Representatives by Congressman **William D. Kelley** of Pennsylvania, where the Northern Pacific Railroad was headquartered. The Northern Pacific could look for plenty of business as people traveled west to visit the new park. Hayden enthusiastically championed the bill and found the compelling images from the expedition by Moran and Jackson of great help in his new cause. The sketches worked to convince citizens in the East of the wonder and majesty of the West.



The Great Cañon and Lower Falls of the Yellowstone, Thomas Moran;
Scribner's Monthly, Volume 3, Issue 4, February 1872



[Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone](#), 1871, William Henry Jackson,
Library of Congress

In arguing for the case to preserve Yellowstone as a national park, Hayden cited Niagara Falls as an example of a natural wonder which had fallen to crass commercialization. Hayden warned, “If this bill fails to become a law this session, the vandals who are now waiting to enter into this wonder-land will, in a single season, despoil, beyond recovery, these remarkable curiosities, which have requires all the cunning skill of nature thousands of years to prepare. . . . [They will] make merchandise of

these beautiful specimens, to fence in these rare wonders, so as to charge visitors a fee, as is now done at Niagara Falls, for the sight of that which ought to be as free as the air or water.” It is open to interpretation if Hayden meant that Yellowstone should be preserved specifically for ecological reasons, or if he simply meant that Yellowstone’s features should be preserved for recreational and scenic purposes. For instance, Mammoth Hot Springs had the same health benefits as similar spas in England, Germany, and Switzerland, which Americans had been visiting for years for health and recreation.

To bolster support for the Yellowstone bill, Hayden had some of the “curiosities” from his travels exhibited in Washington D.C. at the Smithsonian Institution and in the U.S. Capitol rotunda. William Henry Jackson’s photographs and Thomas Moran’s watercolors were presented by Hayden at numerous congressional committee hearings that winter as visible proof of Yellowstone’s wonders. Hayden also distributed copies of *Scribner’s* articles about Yellowstone illustrated by Moran. Decades later, photographer Jackson recalled that “the watercolors of Thomas Moran and the photographs of the geology survey [Jackson’s own] were the most important exhibits brought before the Committee.”

By February 27, 1872, both the Senate and the House had approved the Yellowstone park bill, which outlined that “the tract of land in the Territories of Montana and Wyoming, lying near the head of the Yellowstone river, . . . is hereby reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale under the laws of the United States, and dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasure-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” On March 1, 1872 President **Ulysses S. Grant** signed the bill into law, making Yellowstone America’s first national park. The bill specified it’s “regulations shall provide for the preservation, from injury or spoliation, of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park, and their retention in their natural condition. . . . [The Secretary of the Interior] shall provide against the wanton destruction of the fish and game found within said park, and against their capture or destruction for the purpose of merchandise or profit.”

Both the photographs of William Henry Jackson and the paintings and illustrations by Moran provided Congress with strong, persuasive images advocating the preservation of the region as a place of natural American wonders. The distribution of Moran’s print illustrations provided the American public with its first glimpse of the wonders of the West. These illustrations were effective pieces of propaganda for the

preservation of the Yellowstone region, helping to convince Americans that the land was worth preserving in its natural state. Corps of Engineers Captain Hiram M. Chittenden wrote that Moran's paintings and Jackson's photographs "did a work which no other agency could do and doubtless convinced everyone who saw them that the regions where such wonders existed should be preserved to the people forever."

Moran's great painting *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* was completed the following month on April 28, 1872. He later wrote to Hayden, "I have been intending to write to you for some months past but have been so very busy with . . . designing & painting my picture of the Great Cañon that I could not find the time to write to anybody. The picture is now more than half finished & I feel confident that it will produce a most decided sensation in art circles." Congress purchased the painting that same year for \$10,000. Hayden wrote Moran in August that year proclaiming that "There is no doubt that your reputation is made [by the painting]." The memorable work both Moran and of photographer William H. Jackson in the summer of 1871 finally made people in the East believe the mythical wonders of Yellowstone Park.

Despite the passage of the Yellowstone Park bill as a milestone in the history of the environmental conservation movement, the bill was not passed for this purpose alone. Rather, the bill's success was due to the region's commercial potential and its abundance of exploitable natural resources. The bill does include language that would allow for the erection of buildings for the "accommodation of visitors" and the creation of "roads and bridle-paths therein." The bill's supporters consisted of interested parties, especially representatives of the Northern Pacific Railroad who stood to profit from the bill's passage. In fact, a number of Northern Pacific railroad directors visited Moran in his studio prior of the official unveiling of the canvas. Moran wrote to Hayden that they were "decidedly enthusiastic about [the painting]." To a degree, Hayden was acting in accordance with railroad interests. He assured Congress that because of the altitude, weather, and geography, the entire Yellowstone area could never serve any "useful" purpose – whether for mining, ranching, or farming. Consequently, preserving it as a national reservation would incur "no pecuniary loss to the Government."

Yet as the nineteenth century progressed and our environment became better understood, the damage being done by civilized greed became more obvious. A strong conservation movement was established at the end of the nineteenth century, under the spiritual and political leadership of **John Muir** and **Theodore Roosevelt**. Muir wrote movingly about the High Sierras in California, the glacial formations and the magnificent trees, and, on occasion, with great distress about the conditions he witnessed:



[Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir on Glacier Point, Yosemite Valley, California, in 1903](#); Library of Congress

In this glorious forest the mill was busy, forming a sore sad center of destruction, though small as yet, so immensely heavy was the growth. Only the smaller and most accessible of the trees were being cut. The logs, from three to ten or twelve feet in diameter, were dragged or rolled with long strings of oxen into a chute and sent flying down the steep mountain side to the mill flat, where the largest of them were blasted into manageable dimensions for the saws . . . by this blasting and careless felling on uneven ground, half or three fourths of the timber was wasted.

Glossary

George Catlin: (1796-1872) American artist, traveler, and writer, best known for his portraits of Native American Indians.

Jay Cooke: (1821-1905) American financier and railroad magnate. Cooke's firm financed the construction of the Northern Pacific Railway, which had a vested interest in seeing the Yellowstone park bill become law.

Andrew Jackson Downing: (1815-1852) American landscape designer and proponent of public parks.

Ulysses S. Grant: (1822-1885) 18th President of the United States and commanding general of the Union Army during the Civil War.

Ferdinand V. Hayden: (1829-1887) American geologist, noted for his pioneering expeditions into the Rocky Mountains.

William D. Kelley: (1814-1890) Member of the United States House of Representatives from the state of Pennsylvania. He was one of the first Washington politicians to support the Yellowstone park bill.

John Muir: (1838-1914) American environmental philosopher, author, and early proponent of wilderness preservation. Founder of the Sierra Club, a prominent conservation organization.

Northern Pacific Railroad: (or Railway) a transcontinental railroad which ran along the northern tier of the western United States, starting in Minnesota and ending at the Pacific Ocean in Washington state. Construction began in 1870 and was completed in 1883. The railroad's main purpose was to ship goods like timber, wheat, minerals, and cattle to the East, while transporting prospective settlers to the West.

Theodore Roosevelt: (1858-1919) 26th President of the United States, American statesman, explorer, and naturalist. Known for his reforms during the Progressive Movement and his strong support of ecological preservation.

Henry David Thoreau: (1817-1862) American author and poet, best known for his work *Walden* (1854), a novel that is both memoir, social experiment, and a voyage of spiritual discovery. It is a reflection of a man's experience living simply in nature, outside "civilized" society.