

The process undertaken in the last few months to research and write my Senior Thesis has led not only to an incalculable amount of acquired knowledge, but also an immense personal growth as an emerging historian. My own fascination and passion for the outdoors and national parks inspired me to follow the history of the policies and people who directed and managed these vast reserves over the last century and a half.

My research began primarily with secondary sources—the goal being to gain a general background for the events surrounding the national parks from the 1870s to the 1930s. These dates were chosen based on the time frame of imperative events, most notably the establishment of the first national park in 1872, to the Reorganization Act of 1933. Secondary analyses, such as Roderick Frazier Nash and Alfred Runte, provided exceptional arguments for the demise of the parks, and in part, influenced the evolution of my own thesis. Once I felt I had done a significant amount of secondary research, I began the process of finding primary sources to further support my thesis. I relied most heavily on Government Serial Sets and search engines such as the New York Times: Proquest Historical Newspapers to locate important and revealing documents printed within the specified time frame. However, upon the realization of my inability to access early government documents myself, I contacted Sarah Gewirtz at the St. John's University Alcuin Library for help. She was more than willing, and extremely helpful, in helping me understand the microfiche document collection, and provided me with a trial access to Lexis Nexis historical documents in order that I could locate and Inter Library Loan specific Serial Sets. From these databases, I successfully located Congressional hearings, editorial comments on the national parks, and personal testimonies from national park administrators and advocates. I also found newspaper and magazine articles from the turn of the 20th century that were crucial in understanding and proving my thesis that national park policies failed to define and enforce “preservation”. The New York Times provided a large basis for evidence, as did other small articles found in Academic Search Premier. Having had extensive background knowledge already attained by secondary source means, the primary sources were invaluable!

With the bulk of my research complete, I began the tedious process of “sorting” through unnecessary sources and narrowing my research topic. I focused primarily on those Serial Sets that dealt with policy establishment or changes in policy. Numbers, figures, and statistics for park management were also helpful and were located within many of the documents. During this phase, I discovered that bibliographies of helpful or influential secondary sources were most helpful in finding new or beneficial sources to help support my own thesis. Often, these bibliographies had other materials that led to additional authors or documents not previously known or thought of. The most rewarding aspect of being a historian and partaking in research is the overwhelming amount of knowledge gained, not to mention the feelings of success when the right documents are found to support one’s thesis.

However, as rewarding as these experiences may be, it can be quite frustrating to begin to know where to start researching such a large project. To those endeavoring to begin their own researching endeavor, I recommend reading—and lots of it! Part of my ability to condense my thesis so quickly was the amount of background knowledge I had acquired simply by reading what other historians had said on the same topic. It is important to gain a complete sense of “What is going on?” before one can look for evidence to support their argument! I, like many writers, struggled with an unclear thesis in the beginning of my researching stages. Having discussed the topic with my advisor, I was excited—yet puzzled by what I was supposed to “look” for. My thesis’ focal point evolved as my research continued, and I began to narrow what exactly I had concluded from my research. Again, I suggest that anyone undertaking a similar task remember that their argument can, and most likely will, change as they develop new ideas and theories; it is best to let these evolutions take place.