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Save Our Signs: A Crowdsourced Project to Combat Censorship at US National Park Sites

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National Park Histories at Risk

Over the past few months, the Trump administration has unleashed an alarming series of attacks on US cultural, arts, and historical institutions. On March 27, 2025, the administration released Executive Order 14253, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." This order took specific aim at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, singling out exhibits at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the planned Smithsonian Women's History Museum. The administration demanded that the Smithsonian "remove improper ideology" within the institution's museums, education and research centers, and National Zoo.¹ On August 12, 2025, the Trump administration sent a letter to the Smithsonian Institution titled "Internal Review of Smithsonian Exhibitions and Materials," which stated that "we will be leading a comprehensive internal review of selected Smithsonian museums and exhibitions. This initiative aims to ensure alignment with the President's directive to celebrate American exceptionalism, remove divisive or partisan narratives, and restore confidence in our shared cultural institutions."²

In addition to the Smithsonian, the executive order had another explicit target: the cultural sites under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior (DOI), including the National Park Service (NPS). The DOI was ordered to scrub any "content that inappropriately disparage[s] Americans past or living (including persons living in colonial times)" from its sites, which include public monuments, memorials, statues, and markers.³ On May 20, 2025, Interior Secretary Doug Burgum issued Secretarial Order 3431, also titled "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." In this order, Burgum directed all NPS sites to perform an internal review of all their signage and additionally required these sites to post new signs asking the public to report "any signs or other information that are negative about either past or living Americans or that fail to emphasize the beauty, grandeur, and abundance of landscapes and other natural features."⁴ Burgum laid out deadlines for interpretative signs to be changed to comply with the executive order.

Collectively, these documents reveal a chilling reality: the current US administration views existing practices of preservation and interpretation of history, culture, and art as an active threat. As Trump stated in Executive Order 14253,

It is the policy of my Administration to restore Federal sites dedicated to history, including parks and museums, to solemn and uplifting public monuments that remind Americans of our extraordinary heritage, consistent progress toward becoming a more perfect Union, and unmatched record of advancing liberty, prosperity, and human flourishing.⁵

In sum, these documents detail the administration's goals to stifle works of culture and accounts of history that go against their chosen ideology and remove portions of history that, in the administration's view, do not cast the United States in a good light.

While it may seem incomprehensible why this administration has chosen to attack an institution that has long been appreciated by Americans across the political spectrum, we can better understand when we remember that the National Park Service, established in 1916, is, in essence, the nation's "largest outdoor history classroom."⁶ While we may traditionally picture parks like Yosemite when thinking of National Parks, the NPS also includes National Historic Sites, National Monuments, National Battlefields, and more. Every NPS site, regardless of type, is designated by Congress and has a unique mandate to tell the story of the historic significance of that site. To meet this goal, each site displays interpretive signs and text to help visitors learn about the land and historic events in that location, connecting them to American history, often beyond what can be learned in a classroom.⁷ Creating interpretations for these sites is a long process that involves consultation with local community groups and stakeholders, consideration of accessibility for visitors with differing reading levels and disabilities, and incorporation of interactive activities and videos.

Sign designers and exhibit curators see these signs as an opportunity to create meaning and to build place-based public memory.⁸ Many NPS sites commemorate significant events and, at times, confront trauma with the aim of facilitating healing and justice.⁹ In this way, these historical sites, memorials, and national monuments, along with their accompanying interpretive signs, help construct public memory and national identity. Signs guide visitors in their experience of these "memory sites," passing along the stories of the past and imparting their national significance to visitors. Due to their role in communicating national significance, "memory sites" are often contested.¹⁰ However, today's contestations around "memory sites" differ from previous debates about public memory in a crucial way: In contrast to prior community-based grassroots efforts, this administration is imposing top-down directives and leaving little room for open dialogue.¹¹

Further, the language of the administration's executive order and subsequent secretarial order is vague, perhaps intentionally, so it is difficult to know which signs and exhibits will be targeted for censorship. As has been widely reported, in responding to these orders, NPS staff have flagged exhibits addressing topics including civil rights, slavery, Indigenous history, women's rights, and climate change.¹² As the *New York Times* reported, the first redaction took place at Muir Woods National Monument in California (fig. 1).¹³ The *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and other news sources have reported on the planned removal and alteration of signage at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, in anticipation of the 250th anniversary of American independence in 2026.¹⁴ In the redaction process, this administration is censoring not only ideas and narratives, but it is also obscuring the historical record and delegitimizing public history work, a process that links scholarship with grassroots efforts. For example, the Philadelphia exhibits slated for revision were

created thanks to the efforts of community activists who organized for years around adding more historical context about the nine enslaved people whom George Washington had held there.¹⁵

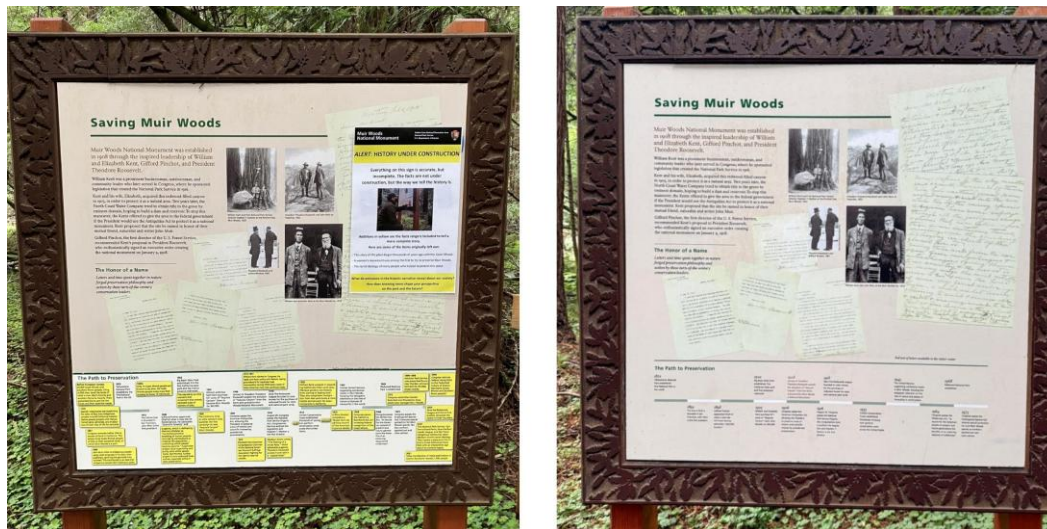


Fig. 1a, b. Left: "Saving Muir Woods," with "History Under Construction" additions from 2021, from Muir Woods National Monument, CA. Digital photograph submitted to Save Our Signs project, March 4, 2025, and released under CC0 license. Right: "Saving Muir Woods," with "History Under Construction" removed, from Muir Woods National Monument, CA. Digital photograph submitted to Save Our Signs project, September 11, 2025, and released under CC0 license

This article describes a collaborative effort to preserve NPS signage through a crowdsourced project called Save Our Signs, which aims to create a "people's archive" of these interpretive signs before they disappear.

The First Attempt

Secretarial Order 3431, the order directing NPS sites to review their signage and post new signs focusing on the "greatness of the achievements and progress of the American people" and the "beauty, abundance, and grandeur of the American landscape" sparked deep concern among members of both the Data Rescue Project (DRP) and Safeguarding Research and Culture (SRC), two grassroots organizations dedicated to preserving government information.¹⁶ DRP is a collection of data librarians and professionals that formed in February 2025 in response to changes under the Trump administration that potentially threatened or diminished public access to federal datasets. Formed in 2025, SRC members preserve born-digital at-risk materials by using web scraping techniques to create a snapshot of the content contained on a website at a specific moment in time. Both organizations serve as gathering places via online forums and chat groups for people from different institutions who are interested in working on the issue of government censorship.

In past months, DRP and SRC had cultivated a strong relationship through joint work on other initiatives, and the groups set to work to pool ideas, contacts, and resources to

address the threat to NPS signs. Because neither group could easily set up a scalable digital infrastructure to collect photos of signs on such short notice, they initially identified Wikimedia Commons as a potential solution.¹⁷ Since Wikimedia Commons serves not just as a media repository for Wikipedia but as a collaborative project in its own right, it seemed like the perfect fit. The ability to create custom upload campaigns would ensure ease of use for volunteers, uniform public visibility, and consistent information about each sign photo.

However, the decentralized and community-based nature of Wikimedia Commons made the actual setup difficult. As outsiders to the Wikimedia Commons community, it took the SRC and DRP over a week to get permission to create a custom campaign. Even after these groups successfully attained permission, the first test upload was immediately flagged due to Wikimedia's automatic anti-spam measures and deleted. Without a way of ascertaining what exactly in the uploaded image triggered this filter and lacking any preexisting connections in the Wikimedia Commons community, the SRC and DRP collectively decided to look into other alternatives, as the September 17 deadline was looming.

Joining Forces

Around the same time that DRP and SRC were developing plans to collect photos of National Parks signs, librarians and public historians at the University of Minnesota (UMN) were becoming alarmed by news of the impending review of the parks' interpretive signs. They quickly formed a team of librarians, spatial-data experts, and public historians involved in the library-based research project Mapping Prejudice. Since its formation in 2016, Mapping Prejudice has worked with community members across the nation to identify and map racial covenants, which are clauses that were inserted into property deeds to keep people who were not white from buying or occupying homes.¹⁸

This internal collaboration across units in the UMN Libraries brought a variety of strengths to developing the Save Our Signs project. The Mapping Prejudice team contributed deep crowdsourcing experience and a public history lens; the spatial-data experts brought technical skills and geographic knowledge; and the government publications and social sciences librarians brought subject knowledge and collections and archival goals.

After brainstorming a variety of potential methods to collect National Park sign photos from the public, the UMN team settled on using a Qualtrics survey because the tool made it easy for members of the public to submit photos, had the ability to protect participant anonymity, and could generate a structured dataset that would allow for future photo and data sharing. The UMN team developed a draft survey and took test photos in late June at Independence National Historical Park (a park specifically cited in Executive Order 14253 in the section "Restoring Independence Hall") while attending the annual American Library Association conference in Philadelphia. At the end of the conference, a member of the UMN group learned that the DRP was looking for volunteers interested in working to preserve NPS signs and reached out to form the official collaborative Save Our Signs project.

SRC purchased the domain name at saveoursigns.org and pointed it at the new Qualtrics survey to make it as simple as possible for users to add photos to the collection. We launched our project on July 3, 2025, the eve of the Fourth of July holiday weekend; our initial messaging leaned into this connection with the tagline "Save Our Signs: Celebrate All-American History."

Reclaimed by the Public, Strengthened by Partnership

Once the groups joined forces and developed the initial infrastructure, the next challenge was to quickly spread the word about this time-sensitive project. Due to the project's crowdsourced element, it was crucial to quickly reach individuals across the country. Our first step was to utilize existing connections through the DRP, the American Library Association (ALA), and public history groups and send out email blasts to a number of organizations.¹⁹ Members of these organizations, in turn, helped spread awareness through social media. In addition, these initial contacts helped improve the project's design and communication by providing early feedback. The first public iteration of the survey was very basic and only allowed participants to upload one photo each time. Through DRP connections, a Qualtrics expert at another university gave advice, and with her help, the survey was revamped to better follow web accessibility guidelines and improve usability.

Media coverage was crucial to boosting the project. The first media inquiry came from *404 Media*, a publication with which members of the DRP had cultivated a strong relationship through previous projects and initiatives. On July 8, just days after the project launch, *404 Media* published an article titled, "'Save Our Signs' Wants to Save the Real History of National Parks Before Trump Erases It."²⁰ A second early media inquiry came from the *Minnesota Star Tribune*, where a reporter published a column about the project on July 19.²¹ These two initial publications raised early awareness about the project and sparked increases in photo submissions (fig. 2).

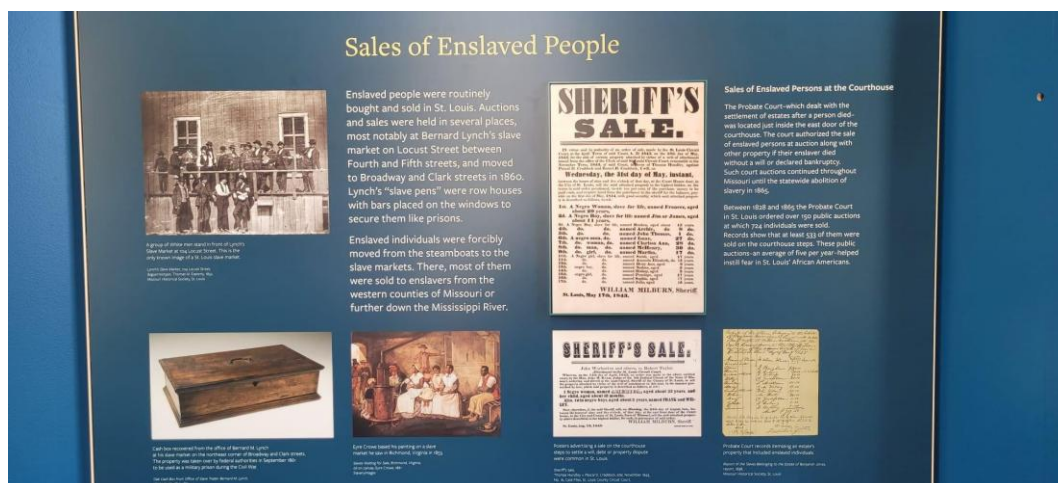


Fig. 2. "Sales of Enslaved People," from the Gateway Arch National Park (Old Courthouse Museum), St. Louis, MO. Digital photograph submitted to Save Our Signs project, July 29, 2025, and released under CC0 license

Feedback from both volunteer photographers and the media also helped to improve the project, aiding in the crowdsourcing process and developing clearer and more effective messaging around the urgency and significance of the project. Save Our Signs added a Frequently Asked Questions page to the project website to clarify the goals and scope of the project and share some basic general guidance for photo submission. Specifically, this guidance stressed the importance of capturing legible sign text and discouraged the submission of photos with people in them.²² In response to repeated media requests for sample photo submissions and information about which sites had been documented, the site added a photo highlights page as well as a photo counter page to share which NPS sites had submissions and which still needed photos. These additions addressed common media questions and encouraged volunteers to visit locations that still lacked photographs.

The project experienced the largest boost in visibility when a *New York Times* article on July 22, 2025, covered the administration's censorship of NPS signage.²³ This story was published shortly after the NPS altered certain signs in Muir Woods National Park. While the initial *Times* story did not reference Save Our Signs, project supporters reached out to the reporters to alert them about our efforts. As a result, a reference to the project was added to the *Times* article just hours after its initial publication, sparking a huge boost in photo submissions and additional media inquiries.



Fig. 3. Postcards sent to Save Our Signs project leads based out of the University of Minnesota Libraries, September 3, 2025

Shortly after this publication, project leadership received about two dozen postcards expressing appreciation for the project (fig. 3). These postcards underscored how members of the general public grasped the gravity of this threatened censorship of US history. “Thank you for informing and including the public in pushing back against revisionist regulations and working hard to keep our history safe into the future,” one individual wrote. Others expressed gratitude for the opportunity to take action at a time when many Americans felt disempowered and hopeless in the face of ongoing administrative censorship and threats to US democracy and human rights: “Thank you for giving the rest of us a job to do—to save signage.” And one perfectly encapsulated the unique power of crowdsourced projects: “Thank you for your courage. Each act of

courage builds hope and engagement for people like me. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Advice for Other Crowdsourced Projects

The Save Our Signs project deliberately chose a crowdsourced model for three main reasons. First, given the decentralized nature of the NPS sites, Save Our Signs realized that it needed to mobilize as many people as possible to document these signs. Second, the group believed it was crucial to invite the public into the preservation effort, since NPS signs were created for the public in the first place. Crowdsourced research projects are unique in that the research process is collective, not solely conducted by academics, and often the resulting dataset is open access. The group wanted to keep this research, and any data created from it, in the public's hands. The third reason Save Our Signs chose a crowdsourcing model is that it wanted to invite the public into the research process not as test subjects but as coresearchers. Through community data generation, people are invited to exercise their critical and creative faculties and to participate in experiential learning as they engage with interpretive signage in new ways. In this way, crowdsourcing offers an action step that people can take that provides a sense of purpose. This aspect of crowdsourcing is especially pertinent during our current cultural climate, in which large swaths of the public feel apathy or paralysis in the fight for social justice. By inviting anyone and everyone to engage with this project, Save Our Signs hopes to create a "people's dataset" about which the people will feel ownership.

In wanting to engage the public, crowdsourced projects need to be thoughtful about the "user experience." This means making the public-facing interface accessible and intelligible. From the mechanics of the Qualtrics survey down to the website's messaging and word choice, the Save Our Signs project keeps this emphasis on accessibility central to the project design. In order to prioritize accessibility, crowdsourced projects need to be open to continually adjusting design and functionality. As mentioned previously, Save Our Signs started out with a more clunky user interface and no bulk upload option, but it adapted in response to community feedback.

While crowdsourced projects should remain open to feedback and responsive to their volunteer base, it is crucial that they retain a firm grasp on the scope and primary purpose of their project. As the Save Our Signs project gained visibility in the public eye, it received multiple competing requests from external stakeholders to expand or focus the project in different ways. Thanks to the expertise of project leadership who are also involved with Mapping Prejudice, the team understood that the project would need to clearly articulate its scope in order to both successfully collaborate and communicate its goals to the public. This does not imply preemptively cutting off potential future work or stifling natural innovations; rather, it serves to protect the capacity of the project leads. At its beginning, Save Our Signs was approached to include signage for other Department of Interior bureaus and offices, such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management, and even the US Forest Service sites, which are part of the Department of Agriculture. The group chose to stick to the NPS because of the unique congressional mandates of each site to tell site-specific history. With public historians as project leads, this initiative had more content expertise, which made its launch easier and quicker than if it had to build new relationships and content expertise for other bureaus of the

Department of the Interior. In addition, the NPS has a public list of all its sites, and each has a website.²⁴ This existing structure enabled the team to quickly develop a concrete list of sites, maintain the data on the back end as submissions came in, and easily research any oddities when volunteers raised questions about specific parks. Instead of undertaking compounding projects, the leads continue to strategically pursue collaborations that may expand the scope and reach of the project in ways the Save Our Signs project team alone could not.

As a project that holds community cocreation and public access as central tenets, Save Our Signs welcomes any "spin offs" or sister projects that may arise. The team has already consulted with a group hoping to launch a sister project relating to recent censorship attacks on the Smithsonian Institution. As an effort that greatly benefited from the precedence and guidance of another crowdsourced project (Mapping Prejudice), Save Our Signs hopes to offer similar support to other groups that want to expand on this work or take it in different directions.

Future Plans

At the writing of this article, the project is still very much underway. Given the original September 17, 2025, deadline for the removal of "negative" content stated in the Secretarial Order, the project committed to making the initial photo collection public by October 13. This date gave the group time to curate the photographs and data before officially publishing them (fig. 4). Photos will likely continue to be submitted into the future, especially if and when volunteers notice that changes have been made in park signage. Save Our Signs will continue to make periodic updates to the public data to incorporate new photo submissions.

The collection of photos and location data will be downloadable in whole or in part, and there are plans in development to create a basic interface for ease of access, such as a simple map or gallery of the photos.

As academic librarians and public historians, the team's goal is to create a long-term archival home for the photos and data, in which, most importantly, the photos are publicly accessible and reusable by anyone. Hopefully other organizations and researchers will bring their own expertise and knowledge and create new outcomes with this photo collection—such as visualizations, interactive tools or maps, and educational materials. The team also anticipates that the photos, being in the public domain, could be added to public photo collections like Wikimedia Commons to further increase access.

The outpouring of support and participation that Save Our Signs has seen from all over the country demonstrates the power of crowdsourced projects in offering people a means to



Fig. 4. Project members look at Save Our Signs photo submissions, September 3, 2025

activate and engage around issues that matter to them. Save Our Signs underscores that many Americans deeply care about National Parks and the indispensable histories told in them. The intent is for volunteers, by helping to create this crowdsourced public photo collection, will feel a part of the collective work to resist government censorship and preserve cultural history.

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Notes

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