

Obama names five new national monuments, including Southern civil rights sites

By **Juliet Eilperin** and **Brady Dennis** January 12 at 6:00 PM

President Obama declared five new national monuments Thursday, ranging from a Birmingham, Ala., church bombed by segregationists to the coniferous forests of Oregon. He has now used his executive authority more than any other president to protect iconic historic, cultural and ecological sites across the country.

Three new monuments in the South, all of which have bipartisan support, exemplify Obama's push to expand America's shared national identity through the narrative it tells with its public lands. Two of them, in Birmingham and Anniston, Ala., were sites of violent acts perpetrated against African American children and an interracial group of civil rights activists. The third, in Beaufort, S.C., commemorates the period between the Civil War and the push for segregation in the 1890s when freed slaves worked to establish schools and communities of their own.

In a statement, Obama noted that the monuments "preserve critical chapters of our country's history" and reflect his long-standing effort to "ensure that our national parks, monuments and public lands are fully reflective of our nation's diverse history and culture."

The president also enlarged once more the California Coastal National Monument, which was established by President Bill Clinton and expanded by Obama in 2014, and the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, another Clinton monument, by roughly 42,000 acres in Oregon and 5,000 in California. Many environmentalists and scientists had argued the two protected areas needed a wider buffer to guard against the future effects of climate change.

Adding six sites to the California coastal one will make it more accessible, said Conservation Lands Foundation Executive Director Brian O'Donnell, who added that Americans will celebrate these sites "for generations."

The president has used the Antiquities Act frequently to safeguard vast stretches of habitat in the West, but he has also invoked it throughout his time in office to recognize key advances in the fight for a more inclusive American society. Those monuments include ones to Latino farmworkers in California; Japanese Americans placed in internment camps in Hawaii; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rioters at New York City's Stonewall Inn; a stop along the Underground Railroad in Maryland; and ancestral Pueblo sites in Colorado and Utah.

Alan Spears, the National Parks Conservation Association's cultural-resources director, said in an interview that the designations demonstrate how the administration "is placing more of our shared history on the collective mantelpiece" of American history.

"There was a time when we only focused on men on horseback, with swords," Spears said. "That was a different time. We've expanded the definition of what's important, and what's nationally important."

By invoking the Antiquities Act of 1906 to designate the sites, Obama has now used the act more than any other president. He has created or expanded 34 national monuments, two more than Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The new Birmingham Civil Rights National Historical Monument features the site of the Sept. 15, 1963, bombing of the city's 16th Street Baptist Church, which killed four girls and injured 22 other people, as well as the A.G. Gaston Motel, where segregation opponents organized in the 1960s. The death of the four girls, who were attending Sunday school, outraged many Americans and provided a critical impetus for the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation and the city of Birmingham are working on a \$9 million project to restore the motel, which housed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "war room" in the spring of 1963.

The new Freedom Riders National Monument pays homage to the May 14, 1961, attack on a bus in Anniston that was carrying an interracial group of young men and women who were challenging the segregation that existed at that time on public transportation. The former Greyhound bus station on Gurnee Avenue where the riders attempted to board, as well as the site where the bus was firebombed and burned shortly afterward, will be part of the monument.

While preservationists and civil rights proponents had long expected the Alabama sites to be designated as national monuments, Obama's decision to establish one to Reconstruction was more surprising.

Advocates, including Rep. James E. Clyburn (D-S.C.), noted there is not a single site in the national park system dedicated to telling the story of Reconstruction. The Sons of Confederate Veterans had initially protested the idea of singling out the Penn Center site in South Carolina, and National Park Service Director Jonathan B. Jarvis had held a community hearing on the proposal only less than a month ago.

Northwestern University history professor Kate Masur, who pushed for designation along with University of California at Davis history professor Gregory Downs, said in an email that the site will illuminate "one of the most important and most misunderstood eras of our past."

“The Reconstruction era was the nation’s first effort to grapple with slavery’s lasting impact, when millions of former slaves began forging lives in freedom, and when the nation remade the Constitution to better protect citizenship and individual rights,” she said.

Many Republicans in the South have come to embrace the idea of highlighting some of the more painful aspects of the region’s history to foster racial reconciliation. The entire Alabama House delegation — including six Republicans — signed onto legislation Rep. Terri A. Sewell (D-Ala.) introduced to create the Birmingham Civil Rights National Historical Park site.

Anniston Mayor Jack Draper (D) said in an interview that the monument to the Freedom Riders was broadly supported in the community, as well as by lawmakers on both sides of the aisle.

“We’ve come a long way,” Draper said. “People need to understand we’ve come a long way. The community at large has embraced this and recognized that this is a story that ought to be told.”

However, at least one of the new protected landscapes, at the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, is more controversial. Jack Williams, Trout Unlimited’s chief scientist, said enlarging it was critical because warmer temperatures, decreased winter snowpack and more variable storms have all affected local streams and rivers needed by imperiled native fish species.

The new designation will probably translate into better road maintenance and restrictions on cattle grazing or timber logging in key areas along waterways that will reduce erosion, Williams added.

But Jerome Rosa, executive director of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, said in an interview that his members “are extremely disappointed in this going through. The impact it has on grazing land, timber production and on jobs will be devastating. It’ll hurt our ranchers who are managing these properties.”

Rosa said that what is happening in Oregon is a story playing out across the West — the federal government making land grabs, local governments losing taxable property and local ranchers and timber workers losing work. He also insisted that the designation will limit access to the land for hikers, birdwatchers and other outdoors enthusiasts.

“The Antiquities Act really needs to be reformed,” Rosa said. “Hopefully President Trump will do something about that. This thing has been abused by so many presidents.” He said that the 1906 law was meant to preserve historic cultural sites but that “it’s turned into this thing for outgoing presidents to ensure their environmental legacy. It’s really a serious abuse of what the Antiquities Act was supposed to do.”

But Oregon outfitter Dave Willis, who has spent 34 years fighting to first establish the Cascade-Siskiyou monument and then extend it, said the region serves as a land bridge to “a veritable Noah’s ark of biodiversity.”

Willis was so dogged about pushing for federal protection that in the 1990s he mailed an Interior Department employee material about the region every day for three weeks, until he got an in-person meeting with then-Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. In Clinton’s final weeks of office, Willis managed to corner the president four separate times to press for expanding the

monument, but that moment did not arrive until 17 years later, on Thursday.

“The job isn’t done, but it’s a great step forward,” he said. “We’re trying to protect the best and restore the rest.”

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