

How It All Started

Western National Parks Association (WNPA) got its start in the 1930s—an era that produced monumental achievements, such as the Hoover Dam, Empire State Building, and Golden Gate Bridge. By the late 1930s, the National Park Service (NPS) was over 20 years old. It was during these formative years that the NPS discovered a distinct gap in the National Park System: they had a limited budgetary capacity to create the interpretive materials (signage, books, etc.) that help visitors better understand the parks and their social, scientific, and historical significance. In 1936 Congress established agreements with cooperating associations, private nonprofit 501(c)(3) organizations that support government agencies, to help perform these interpretive functions.

At the same time, the Casa Grande Ruins National Monument staff frequently gathered after work in Superintendent Frank “Boss” Pinkley’s garden to discuss improvements and innovations. During these informal sessions, park naturalist Dale King persuaded Pinkley to support efforts to establish a cooperating association, which King insisted could help them better serve the public.

King’s argument was compelling, Pinkley gave his support, and Southwest Monuments Association (later renamed Southwest Parks & Monuments Association, the precursor to WNPA) was established on July 22, 1936, with \$234.50 in start-up contributions. It served 18 remote park units.

Today WNPA operates more than 80 park stores in more than 70 partner parks across 12 Western states. WNPA helps the NPS educate and connect visitors to the nature, history, culture, and recreation in our partner parks. We do so primarily by operating park stores and developing educational products that tell the parks’ stories. As a cooperating association, WNPA works closely with the NPS and follows NPS Director’s Order #32. We support national parks directly with cash aid and indirectly with staff, sales, and organizational support.

Timeline History of WNPA

1930s

- 1938: Southwest Monuments Association (SWMA) is founded at Casa Grande Ruins National Monument to serve 18 monuments in the Southwest. Park naturalist Dale King is appointed executive secretary.
- 1938: SWMA publishes its first book, *The Guide to Southwestern National Monuments*, on December 15, 1938.

1940s

- During World War II: Gas rationing and raw material shortages caused by World War II stalls SWMA efforts. Many rangers, including Dale King, join the military. As a cost-saving measure, the SWMA office relocates from Casa Grande to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to consolidate with the NPS Regional Office. SWMA book sales earn around \$3,000 annually.

- Post-World War II: With World War II and the Great Depression in the rearview mirror, the nation starts to move forward. National park visitation increases, which makes supplementing park interpretation more essential. Dale King returns home and begins an energetic program to provide association-funded trail guides to partner parks.

1950s

- 1952: SWMA relocates to Gila Pueblo in Globe, Arizona, and the association continues to add more parks to its roster.
- 1957–1966: The postwar push to enjoy national parks leads the NPS to initiate “Mission 66,” a 10-year plan, in hopes of upgrading NPS facilities, including the addition of a visitor center in every park.

1960s

- Late 1960s: Earl Jackson becomes executive director of SWMA. Because SWMA now serves national parks and national monuments, the organization reincorporates as Southwest Parks and Monuments Association (SPMA).

1970s

- 1972: SPMA has 37 partner parks.
- 1974: SPMA moves to its own facilities in Globe, Arizona. The Department of the Interior (DOI) recommends that agreements be negotiated and maintained with each cooperating association. Up to this point, the partnership was informal.

1980s

- 1981: Executive Director Earl Jackson announces his retirement. The board of directors selects Tim Priehs to succeed him.
- 1983: SPMA purchases an adobe building, a former maternity hospital, in El Presidio Historic District in downtown Tucson, Arizona.
- 1984: After a restoration project, SPMA’s staff is relocated. The SPMA warehouse remains in Globe. The Home Office relocation allows SPMA to open a small sales outlet, The Bookshop.
- 1988: SPMA celebrates its 50th anniversary. By now, SPMA works with 48 partner parks. SPMA has an award-winning publishing program and is able to give grants to support scientific research in its parks. SPMA has more than 50 employees at parks to manage bookstore operations and assist with visitor contact services.

1990s

- 1993: WNPA's cumulative aid to parks exceeds \$10 million.
- 1995: A lack of space in the Home Office causes The Bookshop to close its doors.
- 1999: The SPMA Board of Directors purchases a site in Oro Valley, Arizona, to build a new Home Office.

2000s

- 2001: Construction begins on the new Home Office facility.
- 2002: The Tucson office staff and Globe warehouse and staff are both relocated to the new site in Oro Valley. The new site features a presentation room and The National Parks Store.
- 2002: SPMA becomes WNPA. WNPA is associated with 62 parks.
- 2003: LeAnn Simpson is hired as executive director.

2010s

- 2011: James E. Cook is hired as executive director.
- 2011: WNPA becomes a major sponsor of Tucson Festival of Books and brings luminaries such as actor Ted Danson, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, NPS Advisory Board member Milton Chen, historian Douglas Brinkley, author Terry Tempest Williams, and others to The National Park Experience Pavilion.
- 2012: WNPA adopts its first strategic plan, including a goal aligned to the NPS Urban Agenda Call to Action. Work begins to establish a presence in downtown Los Angeles.
- 2014: NPS Urban Agenda and WNPA's urban outreach efforts align with firm plans to establish The Gateway to Nature Center: Western National Parks, Los Angeles.
- 2016: WNPA starts the NPS Centennial by participating in the Rose Bowl Parade post-event and many other Centennial activities throughout the year. Gateway to Nature: Western National Parks Center, Los Angeles, opens.
- 2018: WNPA celebrates its 80th anniversary. It supports 71 parks, operates 81 park stores, and its annual gross revenue exceeds \$16 million.