

Where Women Will Venture

Muir Woods National Monument

Mill Valley, CA

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This exhibit is by women, for women, and women powered.

FRAMING

The National Parks Service (NPS) is one of the most beloved American environmental legacies and provides millions of people access to the outdoors every year. NPS is an institution that originated as part of the US military, run and operated by men. However, historically, women have been stewards of the land, persevering and trailblazing until they achieved their goals.

Despite being an integral part of early park communities, overarching park narratives have scarcely included women. Even today, the general perception of NPS rangers typically involves a male-presenting person. Without the creative problem-solving skills of these historical women, parks and rangers as we know them today may not exist.

Why have women's voices been largely invisible? These stories are often difficult to find and research thoroughly. The persistent absence of women's stories is telling us something about how we record and display our collective history. Since 2019, NPS has featured an increased number of women's narratives. Following the 19th Amendment's centennial, public excitement regarding women's history has increased, and so has the demand for these stories.

Muir Woods National Monument's interpretive staff was already reflecting on their place in history and asking difficult questions of themselves such as: who/what is missing from this story/place? The traditional story told at Muir Woods focuses on players such as William Kent, Theodore Roosevelt, and its namesake John Muir. But women, too, have impacted and persevered for this place and it is time to tell their stories on site.

This thesis project acknowledges that its work and narrative discusses the history of and takes place in the un-ceded ancestral lands of the Coast Miwok people of present-day Marin County who have stewarded this land throughout the generations.

We honor with gratitude the land itself, and all of its ancestors: past, present, and emerging. We thank them for their strength and resilience in protecting this land, and aspire to uphold our responsibilities according to their example.

The purpose of this project is to provide Muir Woods' with an interpretive product package promoting the roles of women steward-leaders in the formation, history, and continued function of the park.

DELIVERABLE

The deliverable, based on historical research and collected stories of these amazing women, is an interpretive package including three products, each with sub-deliverables:

Physical Exhibit Workbook

- Exhibit window design
- Exhibit interpretive labels
- Original historic research

Online Interactive Prototype

- Themed, interactive, multimedia experience
- Uses a combination of original media, NPS resources, & historical research
- Incorporates virtual Jr. Ranger Badge as a prize

Personal Recorded Narratives

- Written and recorded (audio, visual, captioned)
- Unique primary source
- Incorporated into exhibit

Exhibit-Specific Goals

1. Inspire Muir Woods visitors to pursue science in their everyday lives.
2. Expose new histories, ideas, and heroines on site at Muir Woods.
3. Amplify and validate women's voices in public exhibit spaces.

Team and stakeholder updates sought to frequently iterate within our timeline.

Autumn: Exhibit scoping, background research, host site selection

Winter: On site visit, group historical research, design ideas

Spring: On site visit, research, storyline, interview conduct, design package, label writing, finishing touches

RESEARCH PROCESS

The entire thesis ideation, creation, and completion was done virtually during the COVID pandemic.

The exhibit team came into this process intending to present an alternative storyline. This meant researching a plethora of potential groups connected to the park. Unknown history is hard to find but important figures emerged and the exhibit updated accordingly. Research-focused team members continued exploring individual stories to feature in the exhibit.

Our storyline covers the following: Huimen Coast Miwok women and communities are the original people of this area. Their connection to land and community helped resilient Coast Miwok women survive European colonization. More well-known Muir Woods women and women's clubs inherited this colonial history and responsibility to safeguard Muir Woods. They worked together to advocate for women's rights and conservation by leveraging more "socially acceptable" roles that suited their goals.

Other communities of artists, activists, and nature lovers worked indirectly with Muir Woods. Absent from the forest today are Coast Miwok peoples and their allies. However, outside of Muir Woods, they still maintain cultural, historical, and ancestral ties in different forms of resistance. Muir Woods' female scientists more directly challenged traditional gender roles in vocational fields. Their advancement of non-Indigenous scientific knowledge of Muir Woods continues with current women in NPS.

DESIGN PROCESS

The design process began with ideas, sketching, and a Pinterest board - where all team members "pinned" design visions. Next came designing three approaches, experimenting with color theory, and matching the look we liked with the functional purpose of the exhibit.

The exhibit aesthetic and overall design story is inspired by:

- 1) the bright, jewel toned colors of 1970s National Park posters
- 2) the layout of a textured, embroidered, vintage Girl Scout patch
- 3) a bold, stylish infographic poster featuring natural, artistic elements

CONCLUSION

Beyond providing a concrete resource to Muir Woods, this exhibit's contribution will have a larger social impact by bridging NPS and the public in public history. This interpretive package gives more communities an opportunity to see themselves in a stewardship role and recognize their own characteristics in these spirited historic figures.

Before the exhibit will be seen on site at Muir Woods next steps include:

- Verifying storyline and featured women with community stakeholders
- User interface testing for visitor accessibility, readability, and language
- Printing panels or components and laminating to complete fabrication
- Installing printed materials on site

Thoughts on sustaining the spirit of the project:

This work is never done; it builds upon the work done by women before me and women after me will continue it.

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