



February 6, 2018

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20546

Dear Secretary Zinke:

On January 15, seven members of the National Park System Advisory Board announced their resignations from that Board, because the current administration has not taken up their requests to meet and inform new Department of the Interior officials about the Board's past work. This is alarming. Board members – scholars in the humanities and the social, natural, and physical sciences as well as experts in issues related to park management – give of their time and talents because they are committed to helping the National Park Service live up to its mission and mandate to protect some of America's most treasured places, cultural and natural.

The National Coalition for History, which represents historians and more than 50 leading historical organizations in the United States, finds disturbing – indeed ominous – the Interior Department's apparent lack of regard for the expertise and open processes required for effective policy formation and implementation in our national parks. We call on you to acknowledge the concerns of the Advisory Board members who have resigned, and commit the Department of Interior to a return to what Senator McCain has called in another context “regular order.”

Meeting with the Advisory Board, of course, will require rebuilding it. Like their predecessors, prospective board members should demonstrate evidence of sustained engagement in, and support for, the mission of the National Park Service (NPS). They should bring to the boardroom the sort of expertise that befits the significance of the NPS in American public life – men and women whose research and scholarship commands the respect of peers in their fields and disciplines. The group should include individuals with a clear record of scholarship in the sciences and humanities disciplines relevant to the work of the NPS. And their biographies should feature commitment to parks that exist as public spaces, managed in the public interest.

As historians, we view such citizen engagement as crucial to advancing the public interest in the preservation of historic places, and in national parks as places for informed engagement with our nation's past. Congress has emphasized, in laws such as the Historic Sites Act of 1935 and an omnibus park law of 1998, the necessity of sustained research programs as the foundation of NPS activities. Boards like this one are an essential vehicle for connecting NPS, like other federal agencies, to public concerns and to the best, most current research. Refusing to meet

with this Advisory Board suggests a disinclination among Interior Department officials to seek the expertise required for well-informed, evidence-based policy.

The NPS Advisory Board, like its counterparts elsewhere in federal and state government, also exists to provide venues for public input into decision-making. The current Interior administration's failure to meet with the board suggests a lack of interest in or respect for the concept of open, responsive government. While we are aware that the Interior Department has renewed the Advisory Board's charter, we cannot be confident that the board's role will be taken seriously until Interior leadership has met with and consulted the board as is customary and necessary to prudent management.

For decades, the Advisory Board's work has been far-reaching, touching many management, educational, and research functions fundamental to the preservation and conservation mission of the National Park Service. Some Board reports have been broad in scope, future-oriented and visionary, such as "Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century," published in 2001 when the eminent historian John Hope Franklin chaired the Board. More recently, in helping NPS reflect on the path forward on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of the NPS founding legislation, the Board's efforts involved some 180 experts in a range of projects, ranging from guidance on the planning processes NPS uses to make the National Park System more representative of the breadth of our natural and cultural heritage, to a study on "American Latinos and the Making of the United States."

By regulation, the Board plays a key part in the process of public review of National Historic Landmark (NHL) nominations, advising the Secretary of the Interior on Landmark designations. Through the National Historic Landmark program, NPS can foster recognition of nationally significant historic places outside the National Park System, across the nation, from the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York and the Reconstruction-era Penn School in South Carolina, to Elvis Presley's Graceland and George Washington's Mount Vernon. Given the Board's role in the NHL regulations, it is unclear how Landmark nominations could move forward without their review; the NPS Advisory Board's reviews of Landmark nominations are essential if the standards for and quality of new designations are to be maintained.

As historians who understand the importance of place-based history education, our members will continue to watch and advocate for a robust National Park System Advisory Board that includes scholars and other experts whose advice is based in fact, evidence, scholarly analysis, a deep appreciation of the role of the National Park System in protecting places that belong to all Americans, and a commitment to ensuring that the National Park Service serves all Americans.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Alan Kraut in black ink.

Alan Kraut, Ph.D
President

Handwritten signature of Lee White in blue ink.

Lee White
Executive Director