National Postal Museum To Open Exhibition Celebrating the Centennial of America’s National Parks

*Exhibition Looks at the Ways That Mail Moves To, Through and From the Parks*

“Trailblazing: 100 Years of Our National Parks,” opening June 9 at the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum, celebrates the centennial of America’s national parks. The exhibition, open through March 25, 2018, chronicles the intersections between the mail and the parks.

Featuring objects from the museum’s philatelic collection, as well as original postage stamp art from the U.S. Postal Service and artifacts loaned by the National Park Service, “Trailblazing” explores the myriad ways that mail moves to, through and from the national parks. Visitors can reflect on the incredible diversity of national parks—seashores, battlefields, monuments, historic sites and more—while exploring the origins of the national parks and historic sites.

Not only national parks, but other National Park Service sites such as national historic sites and national historical parks are included. Featured objects include mail to and from people of Japanese ancestry incarcerated during World War II at the Manzanar and Minidoka war relocation centers in California and Idaho, which became National Historic Sites in 1992 and 2001, respectively. The remoteness of these facilities meant that postal services were the only connection to the outside world.

“This exhibition marks the centennial of the National Park Service by exploring how the parks and the mail are intertwined, sometimes in surprising and unusual ways,” said Daniel Piazza, chief curator of philately. “We’ve also managed to bring a little bit of the national park experience indoors through artifacts and photographs loaned by Grand Canyon, Sequoia, Petrified Forest and other national parks.”

Tourism to the active volcano at Kilauea on the island of Hawaii took off when it became a national park in 1916, just a few weeks before the National Park Service was created. A popular early tourist activity was walking out onto the hard crust of an active lava flow and using a stick to thrust their postcards into a fissure and scorch it before mailing.
Post offices in the national parks are not just for tourists sending picture postcards back home, however. Park rangers, seasonal employees and backpackers live deep inside many national parks and rely on a range of postal facilities for books, movies, magazines, medicines, hardware and other small articles.

Gen. Leslie Groves, physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and more than 6,000 other personnel who developed the atomic bomb at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico once sent and received their mail from several undercover addresses, including P.O. Box 1663 in nearby Santa Fe. Los Alamos National Laboratory became part of Manhattan Project National Historical Park in 2015.

Visitors will be immersed in an environment inspired by the national parks—setting the stage for contemplation, conversation and appreciation. One of the museum’s goals is to motivate visitors to visit and explore the actual parks. The exhibition is designed as a springboard for more questions and deeper curiosity about America’s national parks. This trailblazing spirit is at the heart of the history, objects and stories featured in the exhibit.

In celebration of the exhibition opening, the museum will host “National Parks Family Day” Saturday, June 11. Visitors will learn about the long history between the National Park Service and U.S. Postal Service by engaging in fun activities for the entire family. Each family will receive an activity booklet to guide them through various stations and activities to achieve “Junior Ranger” status.

About the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum

The National Postal Museum is devoted to presenting the colorful and engaging history of the nation’s mail service and showcasing one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of stamps and philatelic material in the world. It is located at 2 Massachusetts Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C., across from Union Station. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). For more information about the Smithsonian, call (202) 633-1000 or visit the museum website at www.postalmuseum.si.edu.

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