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

Exhibition Chronicles the Intersections Between the Mail and the Parks

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

Visitors to the exhibition learn about a village at the bottom of the Grand Canyon that eats most of its mail and that one of America’s newest national park units was once so secret it used multiple undercover addresses. “Trailblazing: 100 Years of Our National Parks,” chronicles these and numerous other intersections between the mail and national parks.

Featuring 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 in various themes, including Origins, Tourism, The New Deal, The Grand Canyon, National Parks, National Monuments, National Military Parks, National Seashores, National Historic Sites, National Historic Parks, Parks in Your Backyard and Wish You Were Here.

“America’s national parks are treasured possessions,” said Allen Kane, museum director. “We are excited to celebrate their centennial through the unique lens of postal history and philately.”

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 exhibition.
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 them 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.

“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.”

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 Trailblazer” status.

A special website and illustrated gallery guide augment the exhibition as well, providing additional access to the rich content presented.

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 Ave. 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.