

NATIONAL PARKS

POSTER ART OF THE WPA

After the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent economic depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched a massive bureaucratic structure called the New Deal whose primary goal was to put America back to work. Between 1935 and 1943, the WPA, or Works Progress Administration, was established by presidential order and employed more than 8 million workers. Seven percent of the WPA budget went for arts projects, producing 475,000 artworks through the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Art Project, collectively called "Fed One."



The Western Museum Laboratories produced interpretive materials and museum exhibits for the National Park Service.

The efforts of the Federal Art Project are mainly known today by the 4,000 public murals that survive on the walls of schools, hospitals, and other public buildings. Perhaps least known, by virtue of the fragile nature of paper and cardboard, are the more than 2 million posters that were printed by the Federal Art Project's poster division. These posters were based on 35,000 designs, of which approximately 2,000 posters survive today. Sadly, nearly 33,000 poster designs have been lost forever, representing 99.9 percent of our public poster art.

The early posters were individually hand-painted in one or two colors and were produced in very limited quantities. Poster subjects included art, theater, travel, education, health, and safety. Initially, about a third of the artists producing these posters resided in New York City; however, by 1938 the WPA/FAP poster divisions had spread to all 48 states, with the Chicago units producing as many as 1,500 posters per day—in up to eight colors—for as little as 10 cents a poster. This prolific output was largely due to Anthony Velonis and his implementation of the silkscreen process.

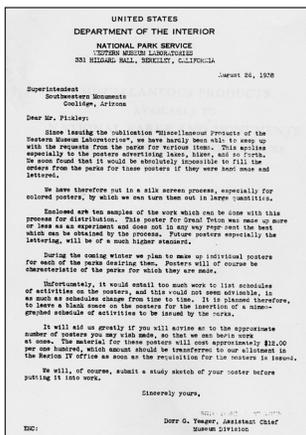


The 1940 display introducing the National Park WPA poster project.

On August 26, 1938, the National Park Service poster program was launched by Dorr Yeager, assistant chief of the Museum Division of the Western Museum Laboratories in Berkeley, California, using WPA artists. In his letter to Frank Pinkley, Superintendent at Southwestern Monuments in Coolidge, Arizona, Yeager clearly adopted the improved silkscreen techniques of Anthony Velonis. Accompanying this letter were 10 poster designs, which included a preliminary sketch for Grand Teton National Park. In this letter Yeager stated:

This poster for Grand Teton was made up more or less as an experiment and does not in any way represent the best which can be obtained by the process. Future posters, especially the lettering, will be of a much higher standard.

WPA artist Chester Don Powell was probably the chief designer of this "Ranger Naturalist" series. Only 14 National Park designs were produced, ending in 1941 with the onset of WWII. The number of posters printed of each design is unknown, but the fragility of silkscreens used at this time would have limited each edition to between 50 and 100 at a cost of just 12 cents each. They were most likely produced and distributed to local Chambers of Commerce in communities surrounding each park to encourage visitation. After the end of WWII the remnants of this park collection were first stored in the U.S. Mint building in San Francisco, and in 1951 were distributed back to the parks.



The original 1938 letter that was the genesis of the poster project. Download this letter from our website.

For 35 years, they disappeared into history. Then, in 1973, a Grand Teton poster turned up destined for the park burn-pile. It was this poster that piqued the curiosity of seasonal park ranger Doug Leen, and a 20-year effort led him to Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, where 13 black-and-white negatives survived in the file drawers of the National Park Service archives. Using these negatives and the single poster as a template, each of the 100 screens were hand-traced—a process taking nearly five years.

With the re-publication efforts under way, originals slowly began to emerge. It took another five years for two Mount Rainier posters to surface in a garage near Seattle. A year later, another Mount Rainier poster turned up in an original frame; when taken apart to clean the glass, it was discovered that three posters were "sandwiched" together.

National Parks started searching their archives' flat files, with Grand Canyon and Petrified Forest also finding their originals. In 2003 Bandelier National Monument discovered 13 posters in a file drawer—some cut up and used as cardboard file dividers! In 2004 a Los Angeles art collector stumbled upon the largest single find: nine original park posters, which later sold at auction, the Grand Canyon poster bringing \$9,000—the first test of value in a free market. And in 2007, a third Grand Teton poster surfaced as cardboard in a plant press in White Sands, New Mexico. Today, 42 originals have been found, with only one copy each for Yosemite, Yellowstone Falls, and Petrified Forest. The two posters that remain unaccounted for are Wind Cave and Great Smoky Mountains. The only known copy of Yosemite sold to a private collector at auction, disappearing yet again.

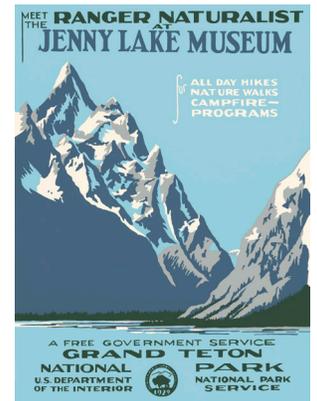
Because only 14 parks subscribed to the Western Museum Laboratory's 1938 offer to produce posters, many parks today have commissioned contemporary images "in the style of" the WPA. Now numbering about 50, these designs are a collaborative effort by both Doug Leen and Brian Maebius. Silkscreen reproductions, notecards, postcards, calendars, books, puzzles, and other historic ephemera can be found at:

 **Ranger Doug's Enterprises**
25 Nickerson Street, Seattle WA 98109
888-WPA-POSTers (888.972.7678)
rangerdoug.com

 **Ziga Media, LLC**
5 Overbrook Lane, Darien, CT 06820
203.656.0076
zigamedia.com



WPA artist C. Don Powell and his screener Dale Miller at the Western Regional Laboratories, Berkeley, California, c. 1938.



The Jenny Lake Museum poster was the first in the series published in 1938.



"Ranger Doug" hand mixes inks to match the original Petrified Forest poster colors.