

# Reckoning with Our Past

---

## California State Parks and the Dark Side of the Conservation Movement

---

*Paul Spickard*

**ABSTRACT:** This introduces the special issue, “Reckoning with Our Past: California State Parks and the Dark Side of the Conservation Movement.” It identifies Madison Grant, conservationist and White supremacist, who was honored by California State Parks with a monument and grove bearing his name. The introduction describes the rest of the articles in the issue: David G. McIntosh on Grant’s work as a conservationist and eugenic propagandist; Rena M. Heinrich on a campaign to have Grant’s monument removed; Leslie Hartzell on the response of California State Parks to that campaign; Victor Bjelajac on the Grant removal and other state parks initiatives to undo past wrongs; and a letter sent by Jim Weaver to California State Parks employees calling for the removal of the Grant monument. It concludes with discussion of other state parks that should be considered for renaming.

**KEY WORDS:** Madison Grant, California State Parks, monuments, eugenics, White supremacy, reckoning

Madison Grant was the foremost American propagandist of White supremacy of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> He stood in the line of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, Francis Galton, Lothrop Stoddard, Earnest A. Hooton, Carleton Coon, Richard J. Herrnstein, and J. Philippe Rushton as

1 Throughout this article “White” as well as “Black” is capitalized when it refers to people. My reasoning is rather simple. When referring to a person’s or a group’s racial or ethnic identity, it is customary to capitalize “Japanese” and “Mexican” and “European” because they refer to particular groups. They derive from proper nouns. “Black” and “White” when they refer to persons are *not* descriptive adjectives. They also derive from proper nouns; they are the names of racial groups. I have known many thousands of Black people, and I can think of only a handful whose skin color actually approached the color black (none quite reached it). Likewise I have never seen a White person who is actually the color white. I am a very light-skinned White person, but my skin is not the color white; it is mottled with pinks and tans. Black people are a people, White people are a people—just as much as Asians or Latinos are a people. Nell Painter makes this argument rather more elegantly in “Why ‘White’ Should be Capitalized too,” *Washington Post*, July 22, 2020, as does Kwame Anthony Appiah in “The Case for Capitalizing the *B* in Black,” *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2020.

---

**THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN**, Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 9–15 (August 2023). ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576. © 2023 by The Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2023.45.3.9>.

a purveyor of pseudoscientific racial ideas.<sup>2</sup> Grant is best known for his influential 1916 book, *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, the Racial Basis of European History*.<sup>3</sup>

Grant's ardently eugenic ideas had an outsize impact on American racial politics. They lie directly behind the racist Immigration Acts of 1917, 1921, and 1924, which resulted in the halting of immigration from Asia and the severe curtailment of immigration from southern and eastern Europe on the grounds that such people were believed to be inferior to northwestern Europeans and incapable of assimilating into American society. Grant's ideas about racial hygiene also underpin the antimiscegenation laws passed in those decades. A translation of *The Passing of the Great Race* was in Adolf Hitler's library, and the Führer referred to it as his "Bible"—his blueprint for the racial hygiene laws of the Nazi era in Germany.

In 1948, the State of California chose to honor Grant by designating a portion of Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park in far northwest Humboldt County as the Madison Grant Forest and Elk Refuge and erecting a plaque on a large rock as a tribute to Grant. This recognition was ostensibly for Grant's work in promoting conservationist causes.

2 Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind. De generis humani varietate nativa*, translated and edited from the Latin, German, and French originals by Thomas Bendyshe (New York: Bergman, 1969); Nicolaas Rupke and Gerhard Lauer, eds., *Johann Friedrich Blumenbach: Race and Natural History, 1750–1850* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*, translated from the French by Adrian Cook (independently published, 2020; French original, 1855; English translation, 1915); Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* (London: Macmillan, 1869, 1914); Galton, *Natural Inheritance* (London: Macmillan, 1889); Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883); Galton, *Essays in Eugenics* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004); Debbie Challis, *The Archaeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (New York: Scribner's, 1920; repr. Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1971); Stoddard, *The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under Man* (New York: Scribner, 1922; repr. Garland, 1984); Earnest A. Hooton, *Apes, Men, and Morons* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1937); Hooton, *Up from the Ape* (New York: Macmillan, 1946); Carleton S. Coon, *Races of Europe* (New York: Macmillan, 1939); Coon, *Origin of Races* (New York: Knopf, 1962); Coon with Edward E. Hunt Jr., *Living Races of Man* (New York: Knopf, 1965); Richard J. Herrnstein, *I.Q. in the Meritocracy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973); Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Steven Fraser, ed., *The Bell Curve Wars: Race, Intelligence, and the Future of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); J. Philippe Rushton, *Race, Evolution, and Behavior: A Life History Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995).

For perspective on this line of thinking, see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1996); Jonathan Marks, *Human Biodiversity: Genes, Race, and History* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995); Joseph L. Graves Jr., *The Emperor's New Clothes: Biological Theories of Race at the Millennium* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Michael Udell, *Race Unmasked: Biology and Race in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); William H. Tucker, *The Science and Politics of Racial Research* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); William H. Tucker, *The Funding of Scientific Racism: Wickliffe Draper and the Pioneer Fund* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, 6th ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1997); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

3 Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, the Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Scribner's, 1916); Jonathan Peter Spiro, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant* (Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2008).

The causes he championed included promulgating the first deer-hunting laws (in New York state), co-founding the Bronx Zoo, reserving land in Alaska for Mt. McKinley (later Denali) National Park and in Montana for Glacier National Park, and co-founding Save the Redwoods League. Grant is also honored by the Humboldt Redwoods State Park Founders Tree (dedicated to Grant and his associates John C. Merriam and Henry Fairfield Osborn), one of the world's tallest, and by Grant's Caribou, a species of Alaskan reindeer named after the environmentalist.

The essays that follow examine the legacy of Madison Grant and the effort to rename monuments to him in the California State Parks system. First David G. McIntosh, a professor of history and anthropology at Southeast New Mexico College, assays Grant's achievements as a conservationist and as a White supremacist polemicist. The impulse for both of these activities stemmed from Grant's ideology of the superiority and inevitability of what he regarded as apex species—big trees, big animals, White people. In the second essay, Rena M. Heinrich of the University of Southern California tells the story of how a group of academics discovered a monument to Grant as a conservationist in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park, with no mention of his White supremacist doings. Heinrich and her colleagues rustled up 212 signatures from historians and other scholars across the country and around the world for a letter to California government and State Parks officials, which demanded that the Grant monument in Prairie Creek Redwoods be replaced. In June 2021, that monument was removed and replaced by a balanced account of Grant's achievements.

Next, the special issue goes inside the California State Parks system. Leslie Hartzell, Chief of the Cultural Resources Division, describes how this matter came to the attention of top California State Parks officials and how the system responded, including it in the Re-examining Our Past Initiative. Victor Bjelajac, District Superintendent of the North Coast Redwoods District State Parks, centered in Eureka, tells of his efforts not only on the Grant monument but also to rename another state park and to bring Yurok and other Indigenous tribes into the park system as keepers of their ancestral lands. Bjelajac points out, among many other things, the importance of the momentum provided by the 2020 protests following the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement to the effort to rename some state parks.

Finally, we reproduce a historical document that represents a road not taken, or at least not taken in a timely manner. In 2017, Jim Wheeler, a longtime state parks employee and interpreter in North Coast State Parks, wrote his superiors an account of Grant's doings, positive and negative, and asked for an adjustment to the stories told by the Prairie Creek memorial and the Founders Tree monument. Wheeler later wrote:

I sent that paper in an All Employees message to both state and federal employees at Redwood National and State Parks [an unusual cooperative arrangement between California State Parks and the National Park Service in Northwest California]. . . . I realized we were heading backward into another period of anti-democratic and racist thinking in the USA.

Wheeler had intended to teach a course at Humboldt State University on Grant and racism in the environmentalist movement, but “I ended up not teaching the course at HSU because Trump got elected, and I had no desire to put a target on my back. . . . not very many people responded to the paper.”<sup>4</sup>

His plea went unheard at the time, but it is central to the victory for historical truth and human decency that was achieved in more recent years. The final paragraph of his analysis is worth quoting in full:

It is often said that we cannot hold people of the past responsible for the beliefs of their time and place. I disagree. I believe all of us, no matter our race or time in history, intrinsically know the difference between right and wrong. Mass delusion is no excuse for being wrong. Even the founding fathers must have understood the irony in the wording of the Declaration of Independence in a land of slavers. So they had to define native people as savages and black Americans as 3/5 human. It was much easier, politically expedient, economically feasible, and perpetuated the delusion for them that way. They were wrong then, just as those who perpetuate the same ideas are wrong today, and we’re still paying for it socially.<sup>5</sup>

In *Re-Examining Our Past*, the California State Parks system is beginning a long process of opening itself for calls to review names and histories of particular parks and monuments. This effort is not unrelated to the George Floyd moment nor to the removal of Confederate monuments and reckonings with slavery and colonialism that have occurred in many parts of the United States and abroad.<sup>6</sup> In the future, California State Parks may well be removing some memorials or changing the messages that are attached to them. They have already begun to do that in the case of the Founders Tree signage although they still have work to do as the revised signage continues to soft-pedal the three founders’ roles in eugenics and in promoting White supremacy. Additionally, in the fall of 2021, State Parks renamed Patrick’s Point State Park, also in Bjelajac’s North Coast Redwoods District. Long the ceremonial home of the Yurok people, California’s largest tribe, the state park has now been restored to its proper name, Sue-Meg. For several years, Native people have been rebuilding ceremonial sites and Yurok tribal members have been employed by the Parks Department to interpret their significance.

Meanwhile, Save the Redwoods League has been reexamining its eugenic origins and striving to make amends. The League supported the Grant rock removal.

4 Jim Wheeler, email to Paul Spickard, December 1, 2021.

5 Jim Wheeler, “Madison Grant and the Dark Side of the Conservation Movement” (draft privately circulated).

6 Karen L. Cox, *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Roger C. Hartley, *Monumental Harm: Reckoning with Jim Crow Era Confederate Monuments* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2021); Ty Seidule, *Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner’s Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2020); Clint Smith, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (New York: Little, Brown, 2021).

In early 2022, the League was instrumental in purchasing five hundred acres on the Lost Coast and returning them to Native management through the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council, a consortium of ten tribes.<sup>7</sup>

Plenty of questionable state parks and monuments remain to be evaluated. A very partial list would include the following:

- **Phelan State Beach.** James D. Phelan was a banker who served as mayor of San Francisco for six years (1897–1902) and US senator from California for another six (1915–21). He was instrumental in extending the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1902 and making it permanent in 1904. He campaigned on the slogan “Keep California White” and spoke often against the “Yellow Peril,” which for him included both Chinese and Japanese immigrants. He wrote an influential long article, “Why the Chinese Should Be Excluded.”<sup>8</sup> As a senator (and former senator), he had a hand in the racist Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924. (Research by Ashten Reese; supervision by Alison Rose Jefferson). Phelan State Beach would seem a worthy candidate for renaming.
- **Sutter Buttes State Park and Sutter’s Fort State Historical Park.** Lots of places in California—a county, streets, Sutter Buttes, a famous collection of medical centers—are named after Johann August Sutter. He was a Swiss immigrant who talked the governor of Mexican Alta California into a massive (48,000 acres) land grant. Sutter is famous because in 1848 he built the sawmill where gold was first discovered on the land of the Nisenan tribe, which resulted in the California Gold Rush. What is less well known is that Sutter relied heavily on the forced or coerced labor of Indigenous people, including those belonging to the local Miwok and Maidu tribes, as well as Native Hawaiians he had brought across the Pacific. Sutter believed that Indigenous people had to be kept “strictly under fear,” leading to brutal conditions and horrific abuse being commonplace at Sutter’s Fort. He forced Indigenous laborers to sleep on bare floors, locked them in during the night, gave them no access to sanitation, and made them eat from pig troughs. He imprisoned women in facilities for raping. Those who did not comply with Sutter’s orders were subjected to whippings, incarceration, or execution. Sutter and his friends, such as John C. Frémont, planned and launched several murderous raids on Native communities from Sutter’s domains.<sup>9</sup> (Research by Skylar Payab and Madison Thomas).

7 Brian Melley, “Tribal Group Will Reclaim Redwood Forest,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 27, 2022.

8 James D. Phelan, “Why the Chinese Should Be Excluded,” *North American Review* 173, no. 540 (November 1901): 663–76.

9 Erin Blakemore, “The Enslaved Native Americans Who Made the Gold Rush Possible,” *HISTORY*, January 24, 2018; Sammy Caiola, “What Was John Sutter’s Legacy? Written Records Don’t

Our conclusion is that Johann August Sutter was a significant, willing, and enthusiastic contributor to the enslavement and genocide of Indigenous people in what is now the state of California. There is nothing in Sutter's history that justifies the praise and recognition inherent in the use of his name to identify not one, but two California State Parks. Because Sutter Buttes is a federally designated geographic feature name, this will involve steps beyond the California Department of Parks and Recreation—but they are steps worth taking. This guy is not a hero. He should be expunged.

There is work to be done. Scholars such as Sklyar Payab, Madison Thomas, Ashten Reese, Alison Rose Jefferson, Heinrich, McIntosh, and Spickard, as well as many colleagues across the country and around the world, stand ready to help. State Parks leaders such as Wheeler, Bjelajac, and Hartzell have made a good start. For California readers who feel the urge to help the California State Parks continue their transition, the State Parks website describes how to help through their Re-Examining Our Past Initiative. The California Advisory Committee on Geographic Names also takes proposals for name changes.<sup>10</sup> There are analogues to these offices in most other states.

Madison Grant's aggressive eugenic ideas, James Phelan's reprehensible anti-Chinese vitriol, and John Sutter's racialized violence and enslaving are loathsome by the moral standards of our own time; however, each of these men was lauded by some Californians in their time and after. There were reasons why they were celebrated. One of those reasons—advocacy of White supremacy—is on the rise again today. That is all the more reason why we should not simply remove their names from parks and monuments. Rather, we need to tell the public why these figures were once thought to be magnificent exemplars, what else they did, and why we no longer hold them in esteem, to the point that we have removed their names (and in Grant's case, his monument) from public spaces.

That is what California State Parks did in the case of the Grant Monument in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park. As the reader will see in Rena Heinrich's article in this special issue, there are now two panels where a huge boulder with a plaque lauding Grant the conservationist once stood. The first new panel explains who Grant was and what he did in advocating conservation, showing his picture and a picture of the monument. The second explains his broader eugenics activities and his Nazi connections, tells why we took the monument down, and invites the reader to ponder the tangled roots of racist ideas and conservationism.

---

Tell The Whole Story," CapRadio, June 19, 2020; Albert L. Hurtado, "California Indians and the Workaday West: Labor, Assimilation, and Survival," *California History* 69, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 2–11; "John Sutter and California's Indians," *HistoryNet*, August 9, 2016; Howard R. Lamar and Kenneth N. Owens, "John Augustus Sutter, Wilderness Entrepreneur," *California History* 73, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 98–113; Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846–1873* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> California State Parks, Reexamining Our Past Initiative, [https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=30464](https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=30464); California Advisory Committee on Geographic Names, <https://cacgn.ca.gov/how-to/>.

Every state has parks and monuments. Many of them celebrate sanitized memories of people whom most Americans today would regard as pretty awful: enslavers, robber barons, political or religious fanatics, and thieves of Native lands. Public historians in every state have the opportunity and duty to examine the history of the figures who are memorialized in their locales and, when it is warranted, to organize campaigns to end their celebration. When they do so, I hope they will not just erase the past. Instead, as we did in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park in California, I hope that they will tell the public why we once honored people whom we now regard as reprehensible and why we no longer honor them.

• • • • •

*Paul Spickard* is Distinguished Professor of History and Affiliate Professor of Asian American Studies, Black Studies, Chicana/o Studies, East Asian Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and Religious Studies at UC Santa Barbara. He has held appointments at fifteen universities in the United States and abroad. He is author or editor of twenty-four books and more than one hundred articles on race, immigration, and related topics, including *Shape Shifters: Journeys Across Terrains of Race and Identity* (2020); *Race in Mind* (2015); *Global Mixed Race* (2014); *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (2007); and *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in 20th-Century America* (1989). He is currently UCSB Faculty Representative to the NAGPRA process for repatriating Indigenous remains.