

National Park Artist Residencies: How Our Shared Public Lands Connect Us to Our Past, Present, and Future

Heather Heckel

Editor's note: one of our favorite contributors, Heather Heckel, continues to share her experiences as an artist-in-residence at National Parks across the United States. Her approach to the culture, history, geography, and contemporary parallels is fascinating and instructive. The way she synthesizes place, context, and the artist's vision makes her work an interdisciplinary model for us all.

In a particularly polarizing and divisive time in America, it's important to remember that we do share something that collectively belongs to all of us – our public lands, which are stewarded by the National Park Service. We also need hope for our future. The National Park Service “preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources [. . .] for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations” (National Park Service, 2016). During 2024 I was awarded five artist residencies at a diverse collection of parks. My work at the park locations was local and specific to their interpretive themes, however a commonality was my desire to document the past and the present simultaneously. One of the fascinating parts about learning our country's history is relating it to current events, which keeps it relevant and furthers our understanding of the common threads that keep us connected to one another.

During my residencies I investigated the Civil War, one of our founding fathers, our maritime history, the

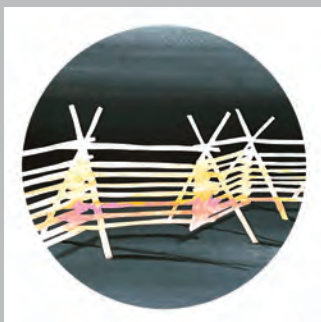
Revolutionary War, and the importance of our wild resources, all of which reminded me of how our national history is so recent that we continue to debate many of the same topics, and we see signs of it around us today. My analysis and invention of artmaking prompts in these widespread and diverse locations, both for myself and for my students, are applicable to art teachers who live and work near the over 30 National Park sites that belong to us in New York State.

Artist residencies through the National Park Service allow me to stay in or near the park for one to two weeks and create site-specific artwork about my experience. Usually housing is provided, and it is expected that a piece of finished artwork be donated to the park within six months of completing the residency. Furthermore, at least one public program is required, and I prefer to conduct both an artist talk and hands-on workshop where visitors can create something tangible inspired by the park. A recent exciting development is that merchandise featuring my

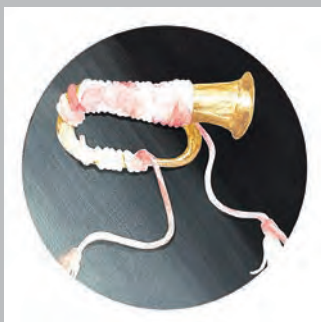
artwork is now for sale in some of the park Visitor Centers where I was an artist-in-residence.

My artistic process always begins with research. I explore the park, talk to rangers, staff, and volunteers, and spend time thoroughly combing through the resources in the Visitor Center to glean as much information as I can. Once I have spent some time on site an idea will form and I distill it into a series of artwork that tells a story, which I work on for the duration of my stay. I prefer to create a series instead of a singular piece to better capture the breadth of my experience. I enjoy experimenting with new art materials and styles at each park, and I find that the atmosphere of the specific time and place directly influences the artistic outcome. As an art educator I find ways to connect themes from the parks to topics which will interest my middle school students back home.

For my first residency in 2024 I stayed at the Stones River National Battlefield, a Civil War site in Tennessee, during my



Battlefield Fence, Gouache on cut Yupo paper on watercolor paper, 8" x 8", 2024



Bugle, Gouache on cut Yupo paper on watercolor paper, 8" x 8", 2024



Cannon, Gouache on cut Yupo paper on watercolor paper, 8" x 8", 2024



Civil War Soldiers, Gouache on cut Yupo paper on watercolor paper, 8" x 8", 2024

Spring Break in April. During my time on site, I was impressed by the juxtaposition between the violent history of the Battle of Stones River, which was fought from December 31, 1862, through January 2, 1863, and the peaceful, uninterrupted nature that occupies this space now. I chose to create circular compositions because of the abundance of cannonballs and cannon wheels here, and those brought to mind more circles – bullet holes, the mouth of a bugle, brass buttons on uniforms, a clock face transitioning to the new year, and the cyclical nature of history repeating itself.

I used white acrylic paint on black watercolor paper to create gradients representing the fog of war. I cut out white silhouettes on Yupo paper to show the fight for racial equality during the Civil War and history's imprint of monuments, buildings, and objects on a place. I painted nature scenes I saw there on my daily trail walks, over those silhouetted shapes to contrast the past with the present. Parts of each silhouette are left blank to honor the over 24,500 lives lost, and to represent all the unknown details that wash away with time. I created a series of 14 images depicting the juxtaposition of peace and violence, enslavement and freedom, man-made and natural objects, Black and White, north and south, and the unfinished lives cut short on the battlefield.

My next residency was during the school year at Hamilton Grange National Monument since I live only a mile away from Alexander Hamilton's home in Manhattan. One of our founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton, supported a strong central government – a fiercely debated topic to this day – and helped establish our nation's currency and economy. He was a merchant's clerk, Revolutionary War soldier, and the first Treasury Secretary of the United States. A highlight during my residency was that I got to hold one of the books that belonged to him in my hands, and see his iconic signature and notes written on the inside of the book.

Alexander Hamilton's house, known as the Grange, was moved two times after

its original location – first to make way for a city street, and again to a location similar to its original natural surroundings after it had been boxed in by surrounding buildings. To represent the three locations of the house I created colored pencil drawings of three objects from each room—the foyer, the parlor, the dining room, and the office. The objects are in motion to represent the movement of relocation, and the incredible energy and momentum that Alexander Hamilton demonstrated during his lifetime.

I collaged the floor patterns onto the walls of the rooms to showcase the intricate details of the period designs, how their familiarity is woven into the fabric of one's domestic life, showcasing multiple planes of perspective at once. I then created ethereal lines using alcohol-based markers on Yupo paper that extend from objects in the rooms. These echo the beams of light streaming through the many windows of Hamilton's home, represent his monumental trajectory both personally and professionally, the path of the bullet that killed him, and the continual momentum of our country that he helped set into motion. I depicted two exterior views of the Grange. One shows a location nestled in nature with the current backdrop of St Nicholas Park. There are 10 tree trunks that represent Alexander Hamilton, his wife Elizabeth Schuyler, and their 8 children that they raised together. The other view shows a modern urban background with 10 iconic neon signs, representing the rise of the Capital of Black America in Harlem. Hamilton fought to end slavery, and his efforts eventually contributed to the freedom that spurred the Harlem Renaissance, which blossomed in the very neighborhood that grew up around his home. The Grange is a piece of living history where people can step back in time while interpreting the home through their journeys and experiences.

My third residency took place at the beginning of the summer. I spent a week at Salem Maritime National Historic Site on the Massachusetts coast and stayed nearby at the historic Hawthorne Hotel. The Salem Maritime



The Parlor, Colored pencil, marker, and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2024



The Dining Room, Colored pencil and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2024



North Side of the Grange, Colored pencil, marker, and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2024



South Side of the Grange, Colored pencil, marker, and cut paper on paper, 12" x 12", 2024



Custom House, Watercolor, Acrylic, and Digital Print on Paper, 10" x 10", 2024



Friendship of Salem, Watercolor, Acrylic, and Digital Print on Paper, 9" x 12", 2024



Narbonne House - West, Watercolor, Acrylic, and Digital Print on Paper, 9" x 12", 2024



Carolina Wren with Yellow Creamer, Marker on Paper with Digital Background, 12" x 12", 2024

National Historic Site, established in 1938, was the first in the country. It preserves a collection of historic buildings and structures including houses, community storefronts, a lighthouse, and a replica of a 1797 tall ship. These places tell the story of life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries along the Salem waterfront and relate to topics being debated today including global trade, tariffs, immigration, and the influence of families that amass huge fortunes. Salem minted (probably) America's first millionaire, Elias Hasket Derby, whose ships were the first to go beyond the Cape of Good Hope to trade with China, Russia, Japan, East Africa, and Australia.

While conducting research I created digital templates of each park structure using Adobe Illustrator to accurately portray the numerous straight lines of shingles, doors, and windowpanes. Then I painted with watercolor and acrylic on top of giclee prints to add texture and color. I enjoyed documenting the symmetry, site-specific structural details, and living history while creating these structural portraits.

I then flew to my next residency, a Revolutionary War battle site, at Ninety Six National Historic Site in South Carolina. Ninety Six National Historic Site provides a combination of American history and quiet solitude in the wilderness. The town was named Ninety Six in the early eighteenth century by Charleston traders who estimated that that was the amount of remaining miles to Keowee, a Cherokee village. The park site preserves a rare eight-sided earthen star shaped fort, several structures, and land that was used during the battle and as a small town.

For this series I combined the history of the land with the natural setting that it has become today. Each background features a star to represent the fort, but with ninety-six points for the name of the town. The silhouettes echo the metal cutouts in the park depicting everyday life during the 1700s, and feature four sides of the Logan Log Cabin, and two sides of the Stockade

Fort building. I illustrated birds that have been spotted in the park since it is now a popular place for birding, and artifacts on site to further combine the concept of the past and the present. I drew the birds and objects using alcohol-based markers on Yupo paper and collaged them onto digital backgrounds using Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator.

Next, I flew to Valles Caldera National Preserve in New Mexico. This park highlights geology and the balance between preserving wilderness and developing land for its resources. It used to be private land that was used by ranchers, and as a filming location, but is now being rewilded with some permits granted for hunting and fishing. Valles Caldera is located in the sunken crater of a volcano that erupted 1.2 million years ago. The combination of grasslands and Ponderosa pines make for stunning views, as well as frequent sightings of prairie dogs, elk, and coyotes. The historic cabins on site allude to the recent presence of human activity, and their natural settings are a nod to the restoration efforts as this now public land returns to the wild. Ultimately, I wanted to tell the story of how our actions impact our environment and capture a moment in time by documenting what was left behind.

For each piece of artwork I used a circular composition, called a tondo, to echo the shape of the caldera. I used alcohol-based markers on Yupo paper to illustrate the natural settings; the plastic surface of the paper allows for vibrant colors, and the resulting overlapping linear textures mimic the striations of the earth's crust and the tectonic plates that contribute to volcanic activity. I used adhesive vinyl to create the historic cabins; this material provided a solid color other than white to build a cohesive color palette on top with the markers.

Currently I'm a visiting artist-in-residence at Stonewall National Memorial in Manhattan. This park is another relevant topic today regarding equality for people identifying as LGBTQ+. I am working on a tunnel



Bond Cabin with Coyote, Adhesive Vinyl and Marker on Yupo Paper, 12" x 12", 2024



Old Barn, Adhesive Vinyl and Marker on Yupo Paper, 12" x 12", 2024



Ranch Foreman's Cabin, Adhesive Vinyl and Marker on Yupo Paper, 12" x 12", 2024



Ruby's Home, Adhesive Vinyl and Marker on Yupo Paper, 12" x 12", 2024

book that will showcase historical and current photographs of activists and allies marching, protesting, and celebrating identities for all. Ultimately, I want to complete a residency at all 12 National Park sites of New York Harbor, which preserve more than 400 years of American history.

Experiencing a park in person, just as experiencing a piece of artwork in person at a museum or gallery, is an enriching experience because it engages all five of our senses. There is also the chance to interact with park rangers, staff, volunteers, and visitors, all of whom contribute to the process of getting to know a specific place. If this privilege is not possible there are numerous resources on individual parks' websites that can be used to research lessons including photos and videos, and Google Arts & Culture provides interactive street views of some of the parks. Creating art lessons based on National Park sites directly relate to interdisciplinary concepts because the creation of art fuses with the interpretive themes of the parks, which frequently highlight subjects including Social Studies, American History, and Environmental Science. I believe that any connection can be made between a New York State National Park site and a career in the arts, art standards, works from art history, or art styles since there are a myriad of ways to interpret the information that each place has to offer.

New York State has a plethora of National Park sites that can serve as inspiration for art lessons: African Burial Ground National Monument, Appalachian National Scenic Trail, Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, Castle Clinton National Monument, Chesapeake Bay Watershed, Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, Ellis Island National Immigration Museum, Erie Canalway National Corridor, Federal Hall National Memorial, Fire Island National Seashore, Fort Stanwix National Monument, Gateway National Recreation Area, General Grant National Memorial, Governors Island National Monument, Hamilton Grange National Memorial, Harriet Tubman

National Historical Park, Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site, Kate Mullany National Historic Site, Lower East Side Tenement Museum National Historic Site, Martin Van Buren National Historic Site, North Country National Scenic Trail, Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, Saint Paul's Church National Historic Site, Saratoga National Historical Park, Statue of Liberty National Monument, Stonewall National Monument, Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace National Historic Site, Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic Site, Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River, Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail, Women's Rights National Historical Park, and Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site.

References

National Park Service (2016). [About Us. https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/aboutus.htm](https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/aboutus.htm)

Links

To learn more about the National Park artist-in-residence program please visit: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/arts/air.htm>

To learn more about my artist residency experiences please visit:

<https://heatherheckel.com/residencies.html>



Dr. Heather Heckel, EdD is an artist and art educator living in New York City and teaching on Long Island. Her

award-winning artwork has been shown internationally, is in several national permanent collections, and is featured regularly in the Park Slope Reader. She is a lifelong learner who loves to travel and has been awarded 25 artist residencies through the National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management. She is in her twelfth year of teaching public school art, and has taught at the college, high school, and middle school levels. She earned her BFA in Illustration from the Ringling College of Art and Design, her MAT in Art Education from the School of Visual Arts, her MFA in Painting from the Savannah College of Art and Design, and her EdD in Educational Leadership from the University of the Cumberlands, where her research investigated the relationships between art education, leadership, and creativity. She lives with her two dozen houseplants, and loves going to the movies and the New York Philharmonic.