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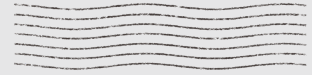
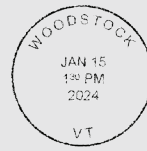
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LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



**From Yosemite
to
Presidio:
Everyone Welcomed**

Rolf Diamant



A couple of months ago I was in California, revisiting a few national parks that I've written about over the years. After too long an absence, I traveled to Yosemite and the Presidio, at Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), taking the measure of noteworthy changes that I believe people should pay close attention to.

My first destination was Yosemite Valley, where I had been invited by the Yosemite Conservancy to talk about my recent book, co-authored with Ethan Carr, *Olmsted and Yosemite: Civil War, Abolition, and the National Park Idea*. I have spent much of the last year and a half presenting in-person and virtual book talks that re-interpret the origins and larger historical context of American national parks.¹ Given that Yosemite Valley figured so prominently in the title and substance of our book, it seemed altogether fitting, if not predestined, that I would eventually find myself speaking there.

While I was in the Valley, I spent an afternoon touring Yosemite Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS) rehabilitation and restoration projects with the Conservancy's thoughtful veteran Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Frank Dean. Frank and I go back a few years: there was a brief time when we worked side by side at GGNRA in the 1970s, when it was a rambunctious start-up park, and later we collaborated on projects as neighboring park superintendents in the Northeast. Before leading the Conservancy, Frank had been superintendent of GGNRA. The scope of the Yosemite Conservancy's partnership projects is stunning, from the restoration of the historic Mariposa Grove of giant sequoia, to the recent rejuvenation of visitor facilities at Bridalveil Falls. As the big-project "to do list" gets shorter, the Conservancy has begun to play a pivotal role in helping address less visible, but no less important, park needs, such as providing more employee housing.

I spent another day with Don Fox, retired Yosemite National Park landscape architect, who still lives



nearby in Mariposa. Don kindly toured us around various places in the Valley that have figured prominently in the sometimes-troubled history of Yosemite Park planning. In our book, Ethan and I wrote that Frederick Law Olmsted envisioned Yosemite Valley as a public landscape that would eventually be visited by millions of people a year, just as Central Park already was, and that circulation systems would be needed to choreograph the public's movement and prevent the damage that millions of feet, not to mention vehicles, would have. For decades, park planners have struggled with politically sensitive plans to deal with the tide of park visitors that flood the Valley floor.² Their "choreography" would eventually include implementing public transportation systems, one-way road loops, relocation of non-essential facilities and housing, new wayfinding and parking schemes,

◀ *Overleaf, above* Visitors in Hmong traditional dress, Yosemite, 2022
Overleaf, below Parks for All Forever Overlook, The Presidio ROLF DIAMANT

▲ Yosemite visitors at rebuilt Tunnel View Overlook ROLF DIAMANT

and the delayed, but inevitable, addition of a timed-entry reservation system. The need for this latter step was abundantly clear when we found ourselves stuck in Valley traffic, even on a weekday in mid-October, which I fondly remember as a quieter time in Yosemite. No longer.

The biggest revelation, however, was not only the number of visitors, but their extraordinary diversity. The park was being enjoyed by people with a wide variety of backgrounds, representing nearly every possible demographic. It may have taken more than a century and a half, but Olmsted's great aspiration, as expressed in his 1865 Yosemite Report, now seemed a reality: that "enjoyment of the choicest natural scenes in the country and the means of recreation associated with them" be "laid open to the use of the body of the people."³

What brought this about? Perhaps credit might be given to the 2016 Centennial "Find Your Park" public service campaign, intentional steps taken by NPS and partner organizations to make parks

more welcoming to non-traditional users, and greater overall attention to recruiting staff more representative of America as a whole. Perhaps we are also seeing the impact of outside factors, the "siren call" of the Instagram moment and other social media, greater mobility linked to discretionary income, and the yet-to-be-fully-understood recreational adjustments related to the Covid pandemic. In any case, what is going on in Yosemite, and I suspect other parks, is transformational.

My second national park stop was at GGNRA, where, in the company of Greg Moore, CEO Emeritus and Special Advisor to the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, I saw much the same phenomena. Like Frank Dean, Greg began his career at GGNRA, where he and I were park planners fresh out of UC Berkeley. Many years later, as founder and leader of the Park Conservancy, Greg played a singular role in the revitalization of the hugely popular Crissy Field, and the recently opened Tunnel Tops within the Presidio, projects being enjoyed by a remarkable diversity of park users.

▼ Tunnel Tops visitor guide map PRESIDIO TRUST





Tunnel Tops, the 14 added acres of new parkland that overtop newly built tunnels along Presidio Parkway, include spectacularly scenic pathways, picnic areas, and overlooks; an inspired children’s play area; an active center for youth and arts programming;⁴ and large campfire circle, one of many places to gather. The entire landscape commands a panoramic view of the Golden Gate. Working closely with the Presidio Trust and NPS, Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy privately raised nearly \$100 million for the project, which opened in 2022. Like New York City’s High Line, it may quickly become an international visitor destination, but with an important distinction. Tunnel Tops was intentionally designed, according to the Conservancy, with “inclusive spaces for Black,

Indigenous, and People of Color communities.” The Conservancy frankly acknowledges that many parks, including national parks, have often not been welcoming spaces for these communities based on “the stories told, the types of recreation welcomed, or the processes associated with visiting parks.” In contrast, Tunnel Tops will provide “accessible, welcoming, and engaging places for people across all cultures, perspectives, and geographies.”⁵

It is never easy to be many things to many different people. But this is the same challenge that has been met at adjacent Crissy Field. A popular and heavily used park site, Crissy has been successful in attracting both tourists as well as nearby neighbors, and regulars from more distant communities. Walking down Crissy Field on a recent weekday afternoon, we passed by parents with strollers, roller skaters, dog-walkers,

▲ Visitors at Tunnel Tops ROLF DIAMANT

joggers, and people in wheelchairs. Nearby groups of picnickers congregated in wind-sheltered alcoves. On the bay side of the long promenade trail, sun bathers, kite-flyers, and wind surfers shared the busy beach; while on the inland marsh side, dedicated birders and tourists trained binoculars and cameras on egrets and great blue herons, as platoons of brown pelicans glided by. There is every reason to believe that the same partners responsible for Crissy can make the Tunnel Tops a similar success, further enhancing the Presidio, and by extension the entire GGNRA, as the most ambitious urban park experiment since the building of New York's Central Park in the mid-19th century.

I wrote a column about the Presidio in 2013.⁶ So, as I conclude this 31st Letter from Woodstock 10 years later, and nearly 30 years after the Presidio was transferred from the US Army to GGNRA, I will share

some observations about how the Presidio is changing, and the evolution of its place and meaning within the larger national park system. In this context, I have a few thoughts about improving the long-standing, but not always clear, relationship between the Presidio Trust and the National Park Service.

When I wrote the 2013 Letter from Woodstock, the Presidio had finally achieved financial self-sufficiency in meeting its operational needs. This was a requirement of the 1996 legislation that set up the Presidio Trust, as a federally chartered corporation, to oversee the challenging transition from “post to park.” This was accomplished with the rehabilitation and leasing of more than 400 historic structures, and other buildings, to generate enough revenue to run this sprawling 1,500-acre urban national park.

Importantly, since 2013, the on-the-ground partnership between the Presidio Trust, GGNRA, and the Golden





Gate National Parks Conservancy has only grown stronger. “Over two decades and through many management challenges,” the Trust reported, “the three organizations have learned how to work together successfully by leveraging our strengths, and bringing a variety of assets, experiences, and resources to the table. Our harmonious collaboration has been well earned and has improved greatly as a result of deepening trust.” The Partnership for the Presidio was created as a collaborative effort to develop an expanding portfolio of major public spaces, amenities, and facilities, with a commitment to “sustain the Presidio’s natural beauty, preserve its history, fund its future, and create inspiring national park experiences for everyone to enjoy.”⁷ A project as ambitious as the Tunnel Tops could never have been pulled off absent this high level of cooperation.

That said, there is a notable absence of NPS identity at the completed Tunnel Tops. Of course, I realize that I may be particularly attentive to this nuance; it was of little matter to the people around me enjoying the park. Nevertheless, I would have been pleased and proud to see the iconic NPS arrowhead displayed alongside Trust and Conservancy logos on signs. Some of the signs did say, “Welcome to Your National Park,” and “Presidio is a national park site that belongs to everyone.” But there could be a few more visual cues suggesting this great park is part of the larger national park system.

This ambiguity about identity may in part be exacerbated by lingering discomfort within the NPS hierarchy

▲ Tunnel Tops, view toward Presidio Main Post ROLF DIAMANT



regarding the Presidio Trust’s relative independence, and special authorities granted by its novel enabling legislation. If this is the case, I urge a relationship reset. NPS should be celebrating all that has been accomplished at the Presidio, and proudly identifying with one of the largest historic preservation projects in the country, contained within one of the greatest urban parks in the world. The innovative work being done at Tunnel Tops, Crissy Field, and elsewhere to guarantee greater inclusion of diverse communities should resonate throughout the entire national park system.

Yes, the Presidio is different from many other national parks. Let’s not forget, however, that throughout its history, NPS has been constantly evolving. There have always been new kinds of national parks, from parkways to seashores, from recreation areas to historic sites and reserves. National park governance has been changing as well, starting with the cooperative agreement negotiated with the Navajo Nation at Canyon de Chelly almost a century ago. Today, operating partnerships take many different forms at national parks such as Redwood, New Bedford Whaling, Boston Harbor Islands, Pinelands, Fort Monroe, Mississippi National River, Chesapeake Bay Watershed, Blackstone River Valley, Appalachian Trail, and many others.

Every time I return to GGNRA, I am amazed by all that has been done. I have great respect for the collective work of the Presidio Trust, Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and GGNRA. I

▲ Crissy Field ROLF DIAMANT

trust they will continue to lean into their role as an incubator for new ideas that can be replicated throughout NPS. In turn, NPS, at its highest levels, should no longer consider the Presidio as an outlier, but rather as another park model that can add value to the whole of the national park system.

As I concluded my California visit, it was clear to me that from Yosemite Valley to the Presidio Tunnel Tops, national parks are confronting an unprecedented challenge—to truly serve the “body of the people” in all its diversity. In a democracy, that is the job of national parks—preserving the nation’s most remarkable places with a commitment to making everyone feel welcomed. Never an easy job, but possible, especially with the help of remarkable partners, like the ones at work at Yosemite and Golden Gate.

Endnotes

1. Rolf Diamant and Ethan Carr, “Three landscapes: An excerpt from *Olmsted and Yosemite: Civil War, Abolition, and the National Park Idea*,” *Parks Stewardship Forum*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2022), 505–515.
2. Rolf Diamant and Ethan Carr, *Olmsted and Yosemite, Civil War, Abolition, and the National Park Idea*, Amherst, MA: Library of American Landscape History (2022), 59.
3. *Ibid.*, 72.
4. Rolf Diamant, “Picturing the Cost of Freedom,” Letter from Woodstock, *Parks Stewardship Forum*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2023), 160.
5. <https://www.parksconservancy.org/parks/presidio-tunnel-tops>
6. Rolf Diamant, “The Presidio Matters,” Letter from Woodstock, *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 30, no. 3, (2013), 225–229. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43598295>
7. Toby Rosenblatt, Amy Meyer, John Reynolds, and Craig Middleton, “Continuing the Legacy of Presidio Leadership: Two Decades of Bi-Partisan Stewardship.” San Francisco: Presidio Trust, 2017.

The views expressed in Parks Stewardship Forum editorial columns are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity, or the George Wright Society.