

This Day in History... September 24, 1906

Devils Tower – First American National Monument

On September 24, 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt took a historic step in the protection of America's natural and cultural treasures when he proclaimed Devils Tower in northeastern Wyoming as the first United States National Monument. This designation, made under the brand-new Antiquities Act of 1906, marked the beginning of a tradition of preserving special landscapes for future generations — a legacy that continues today in more than a hundred national monuments across the country.

Devils Tower is one of the most striking geologic features in North America. Rising 1,267 feet above the surrounding plains and the Belle Fourche River, the formation seems to jut out of the earth like a giant stone pillar. Its almost perfectly vertical columns and flat summit make it instantly recognizable, and its size makes it a landmark visible for miles in every direction. Geologists believe the formation is the hardened core of an ancient volcano, formed roughly 40 to 50 million years ago. Over millions of years, erosion slowly stripped away the softer surrounding rock, leaving the harder volcanic columns exposed in their dramatic shape. Today, climbers from around the world visit Devils Tower to ascend its natural columns, while others simply come to marvel at its unique beauty.



There have been several attempts to rename Devils Tower "Bear Lodge" to honor its Native American history.

For centuries, the tower has held deep spiritual meaning for Native American tribes of the region, including the Lakota, Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. Many know it as "Mato Tipila," or "Bear Lodge," a name that reflects a well-known legend. According to one version of the story, seven young girls were playing when a giant bear began to chase them. The girls prayed to the Great Spirit for rescue, and the ground beneath them rose toward the sky, carrying them out of the bear's reach. The bear tried to climb the rising rock but slid down, leaving long, deep claw marks on the sides. The girls were lifted into the sky and became the seven stars of the Pleiades constellation. These stories give the tower a sacred significance, and many tribal members continue to hold ceremonies in the area today.

The landmark first caught the attention of US military and scientific expeditions in the mid-19th century. In 1875, Colonel Richard Irving Dodge led a US Army expedition through the region and recorded the site for wider public knowledge. One of Dodge's interpreters reportedly mistranslated the Native name as "Bad God's Tower," which was later shortened to "Devil's Tower," the name that eventually stuck.

Efforts to protect the tower and the surrounding land began in the 1890s. Senator Francis E. Warren of Wyoming successfully pushed for the creation of a forest reserve around the formation in 1892. Though the reserve's size was later reduced, Warren continued to advocate for stronger protections and even proposed making the area a national park. That idea stalled in Congress for over a decade, but it laid the groundwork for later action.

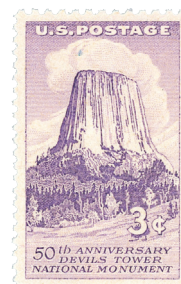
The turning point came with the passage of the Antiquities Act in June 1906. This important law gave the president of the United States the authority to protect "objects of historic or scientific interest" on federal lands by designating them as national monuments. The act was partly a response to widespread looting of archaeological sites in the Southwest and reflected a growing conservation movement in the early 20th century. President Roosevelt, an avid outdoorsman and one of the era's leading conservationists, quickly embraced this new power. Just three months after signing the act into law, and at the urging of Wyoming Representative Frank W. Mondell, Roosevelt issued the proclamation that made Devils Tower the very first national monument.

Devils Tower has earned a place in popular culture. Most famously, it was featured as the dramatic setting for the 1977 science-fiction film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which introduced the landmark to audiences worldwide. The film turned Devils Tower into an instantly recognizable icon, inspiring many people to visit and experience the monument for themselves. Its starring role on the big screen only deepened its reputation as a mysterious and awe-inspiring place.

Beyond *Close Encounters*, Devils Tower has appeared in documentaries, television shows, and even video games. It has inspired album art for several rock bands, and shows up regularly in photography and advertising as a symbol of the American West. These appearances help keep the monument in the public imagination and continue to draw new generations of visitors to its base.

Today, Devils Tower National Monument attracts nearly half a million visitors each year. It stands not only as a natural wonder but also as a symbol of America's commitment to preserving its most important landscapes and cultural sites. Roosevelt's decision in 1906 set a precedent that would protect other irreplaceable places — from the Grand Canyon to the Statue of Liberty — under the Antiquities

Act. More than a century later, Devils Tower remains a place of wonder, a site of spiritual and scientific importance, and a reminder of how one bold decision helped shape the modern conservation movement.



Issued for the monument's 50th anniversary.



Devils Tower is a butte, a steep, isolated hill with a flat top and steep sides, smaller than a mesa.



It's unknown whether Roosevelt ever visited the tower, though he may have seen it from a distance on one of his hunting trips in the Black Hills.



The National Park Service was founded 10 years later and took over management of some monuments. In 1933, FDR consolidated all national monuments and military sites under the NPS.

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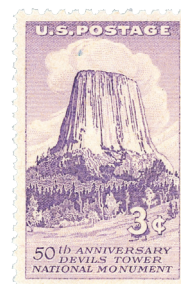
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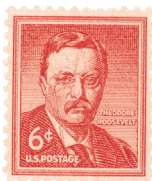
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