

This Day in History... October 27, 1986

Great Basin National Park

On October 27, 1986, Great Basin National Park was established in Nevada. The park protects ancient bristlecone pines, Wheeler Peak Glacier, and more.

Some of the earliest-known Paleo-Indians in the Great Basin arrived as early as 10,000 BC. Archaeological evidence shows the area had regular inhabitants for several thousand years that included the Shoshone, Ute, Mono, and Northern Paiute.

The Fremont Indians, who lived in the Great Basin from about 1000 to 1300 AD, left behind a legacy of rock art in Upper Pictograph Cave. Within the cave's walls are several drawings picturing humans, animals, and abstract designs. Evidence of the Fremont in the region disappeared around 1500 AD, with their departure likely due to the arrival of other tribes. Among these new tribes were the Shoshone, whose descendants still live in the area today.



The park is home to Wheeler Peak, the tallest mountain entirely in Nevada.

Trappers such as Jedediah Smith and Captain John Fremont, leading a military expedition, were among the first to travel across Nevada in the early 1800s. By the 1850s, mail and pony express stations began to enter the area as well as immigrants traveling to California. The Great Basin's first white settler arrived around 1855 to establish a ranch. As gold, silver, and other valuable minerals were discovered, more and more people flocked to the area.

The movement to protect America's natural resources began in the mid-1800s. By 1905, the United States Forest Service was established and its chief, Gifford Pinchot, turned his attention to central eastern Nevada. He grew concerned over the remaining timber supply and wanted to protect it from fire and exploitation. Pinchot also recognized the need to conserve the local watersheds and avoid overgrazing of the fields.

The following year, Pinchot sent a surveyor to the area who concluded that four national forests be established (two of which later became part of Great Basin National Park). The surveyor also reported that most of the settlers were in favor of the national forest, as it would protect their timber and water, while the shepherds opposed it.

On February 10, 1909, President William Howard Taft created the Nevada National Forest (with roughly the same boundaries as the proposed forest reserve). A new highway opened near the Lehman Caves in July 1920, bringing new interest to the area. On a visit



The park contains America's only cold desert. Most of its precipitation falls as snow, though precipitation is limited due to a "rain shadow effect" created by the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

to the caves the following year, Cada C. Boak, who had been influential in building the new road, was one of the first people to suggest establishing a National Monument to protect the caves. After lengthy correspondence with the National Park Service, Boak's suggestion was approved. On January 24, 1922, President Warren G. Harding officially established the Lehman Caves National Monument.

The first talks of making the area a National Park came in 1955. County officials supported the idea, believing it would increase publicity and tourism, creating a new source of income as the local mining industry was unpredictable. Another driving force behind establishing a park was the discovery of the Wheeler Ice Field. Despite having the support of the National Park Service, the movement was hindered by the National Forest Service, which formed the Wheeler Peak Scenic Area in 1959, comprising much of the land planned for the national park. After several years of tension, debates, and court proceedings, the 76,000-acre Great Basin National Park was established when President Ronald Reagan signed it into law on October 27, 1986.

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This Wonders of America stamp honors Great Basin as the country's largest desert.



The park protects bristlecone pines, the oldest non-clonal organisms (they don't grow from multiple plants).

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