

# *New Frontiers: Artist Residencies in Our National Parks*

Heather Heckel

*Editor's Note: For several summers Heather Heckel has done what many of us dream of doing - travel to new places and experience different environments while making art that draws inspiration from newly discovered surroundings.*

I make my way out of my house, which was built in 1869. The early morning July sunlight is streaming through the trees as I walk down the dirt lane, past the busy blacksmith shop, one room schoolhouse, and the tiny cabin where our 31st president was born – complete with an outhouse, clothesline, and garden in the backyard. I can hear the insects trilling in the nearby prairie and cardinals dart around the dewy field. The hitching post to tie up your horse glints in the light, and the road that stretches beyond it passes a Quaker meetinghouse and a row of ornate yet modest homes leading to bustling shops on Main Street in West Branch, Iowa. I have my oil paints, brushes, and canvas with me, and am intent on capturing some of the architecture this morning to create an accurate record of this beautiful location.

This was my experience in 2018 as an artist-in-residence at the immaculately preserved Herbert Hoover National Historic Site. The word “frontier” conjures up the past, but we can all experience new frontiers in our modern lives. One way to do this is by visiting our National Parks, which are gifts to everyone. “The National Park Service is dedicated to conserving unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.”<sup>1</sup>

My days during the school year, as a middle school art teacher, are extremely structured. Everything is broken down into the same routines within 45-minute class periods including introductions, demonstrations, in-progress critiques, individual projects, and clean up time. This happens according to a pretty predictable schedule every Monday through Friday. Of course the students and the art projects change, but they still exist within this familiar and established system. This routine enables me to be an expert in my profession, but as the definition of the word “frontier” states, my routine could be described as “the extreme limit of understanding or achievement in a

particular area.”<sup>2</sup> My middle school students are going through immense changes; as adults we are capable of just as much change in our minds, attitudes, and experiences. As a naturally curious person, I am always looking for ways to expand my experiences beyond the familiar.

Outside of the school year I enjoy the privilege of having summers that offer a fluid schedule which provides more time and energy for exploration of my personal interests and traveling. Upon researching opportunities that combined my interests in nature, traveling, and making art, one of the best kept secrets available to art teachers, who are free for two weeks, was revealed: the artist-in-residence program through the National Park Service.

The artist residency opportunities align perfectly with the Park Service’s mission: it offers an incredibly enjoyable experience, allows me to educate myself and others, and provides a deep well of inspiration for new artwork. The artwork that is created during this time period is intended to be viewed now and in perpetuity. The artist residency program offers artists time and space to create art about a specific park. The park

provides housing and requests a public program and a donated piece of artwork for their permanent collection. However, each park’s application process is different, so the National Park Service’s website provides a map and individual links to the requirements of each location: [www.nps.gov/subjects/arts/air.htm](http://www.nps.gov/subjects/arts/air.htm)

Living and working in the New York City area gives me access to wonderful cultural institutions, but traveling to a new location is unique because it is a total immersion into new sights, sounds, geography, climate, people, history, and beyond. The atmosphere of each park differs greatly, and directly impacts my process and the subject matter and style of my final pieces of artwork. As a teacher I experience new input by conducting public workshops that are with total strangers, in different parts of the country, spanning from young children to the elderly. Each park serves as its own new frontier. Below are brief impressions of each of the nine residencies that I have completed so far.

**Summer 2016:**  
**Hot Springs National Park, Hot Springs, Arkansas.** This park is comprised of two mountains bisected by a road lined with local businesses,

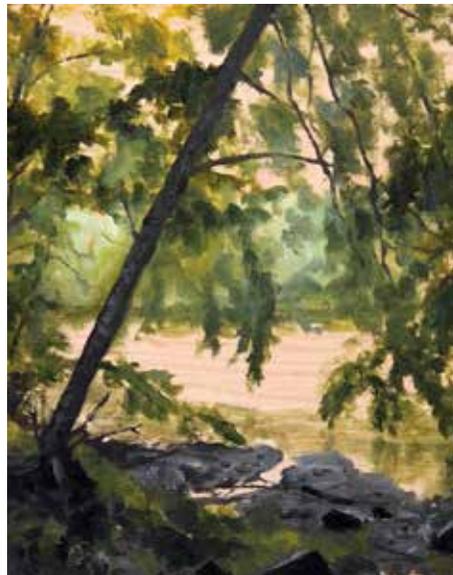
and historic bath houses that are fed by the local hot springs. The park housing provided was a seven-room stone cabin in the campground with a wood burning stove, surrounded by the pleasant camping bustle of seasonal workers and visitors. There were hiking paths through the woods, several picturesque overlooks and Gulpha Creek which provided some cool relief from the hot summer sun. My artwork focused on lights and darks through black and white landscapes on exposed wood panel. I filled my sketchbook with aging local signage which evoked the nostalgic feeling of Americana. I conducted a scratchboard and wax resist postcard-making workshop as my public programs.



*Gulpha Creek Bridge, Oil on wood, 12" x 16", 2016*

**Weir Farm National Historic Site, Wilton, Connecticut.** This park is dedicated to an artist, the American Impressionist artist J. Alden Weir, and celebrates the arts. They provide a renovated barn full of windows as an artist studio, and the housing in an 18th century home where the caretaker used to live. I painted landscapes on the grounds, and still lifes of found objects around the house where I was staying. The park is relatively small, but the grounds are packed with historic stone walls and nature trails, and the easily accessible Weir Pond which was a meditative site for Weir. This park is unique in that they do not require any

donated artwork or public programs, the program exists to provide time and space to practicing artists.



*Weir Pond, Oil on board, 9" x 12", 2016*

**Summer 2017: Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area, Kettle Falls, Washington.** This park is over 120 miles long and spans diverse ecosystems of both forest and desert. Several different groups interact and manage Lake Roosevelt including several Native American tribes, local municipalities, and the federal government. These differing viewpoints and interests provided a complicated and ongoing dialogue of the purpose of the park. The lake was created by the Grand Coulee Dam. I created artwork about the lake, leaving the paper white to signify that the water was not always there, and that certain historical perspectives about it can be whitewashed, such as the destruction of the culture of Native Americans who lived on the land for over 9,000 years before the dam was created. I employed varying textures to



*Lake Roosevelt, Oil on paper, 22" x 30", 2017*

communicate the complex relationships of all the living beings that use the lake.

**Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, Redding, California.** This park encompasses a large body of water surrounded by mountains. The park asked that I focus on people working in and enjoying the park, so I focused on visitors and park staff. There was historic housing on the grounds, and I got to pan for gold just as people had during the gold rush over 150 years ago. There were four waterfalls to hike to, some of them required climbing up the steep paths where loggers used to slide huge tree trunks down to lower altitudes in the 1800s. There was also an abandoned boys camp from the 1950s that I had access to explore before it was to be demolished. Some especially memorable experiences included night kayaking, a bobcat sighting, and being driven by a ranger to the top of a mountain with sweeping views of Northern California, where the air is clear and dry. I swam everyday and ate wild blackberries between drawing and painting.



*Whiskeytown Lake, Oil on paper, 22" x 30", 2017*

**Summer 2018: Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, West Branch, Iowa.** I had the privilege of staying for an entire month at this park, which was described at the beginning of this article. The park is

dedicated to preserving the cabin where Herbert Hoover was born, the schoolhouse where he attended, and a meetinghouse representing his Quaker upbringing. The park asked that I focus on architectural structures, so I rendered all 11 historic houses, and a farmhouse on the prairie which houses native plants and animals.



*Schoolhouse, Colored pencil and oil paint on paper, 9" x 10", 2018.*

**Indiana Dunes National Park, Porter, Indiana.** This park is incredibly diverse with wetlands, sand dunes, bogs, the lakeshore, woodlands, black oak savannas, and historical architecture. The Houses of Tomorrow were created for the 1933 World's Fair and were each constructed from one material such as steel or wood or sandstone,



*Black Oak Savanna, Oil on paper, 11" x 14", 2018*

and a bright pink one was inspired by a cruise ship. These houses were showcased as proposals for affordable and easily assembled homes for the masses. They were shipped from Chicago by barge across Lake Michigan to the park. Today, tenants lease the

homes from the park over several decades to restore with their own money, to be returned to the park in the future. The park is extremely fragmented, with natural lands interspersed between looming steel mills. There is ample hiking, and the park allows visitors to easily access the lake.

**Summer 2019:  
Hubbell Trading Post National Historic Site, Ganado, Arizona, in Navajo Nation.**

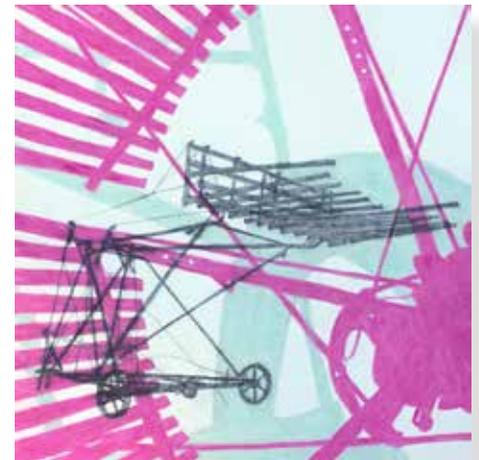
This experience allowed me to spend time on a Navajo reservation while living in the park. I focused on the residents, structures, and still lifes in the park. The trading post has been continually operational since 1878, and the historical house has an extensive collection of "redhead" portraits in red conte crayon created by the artist E. A. Burbank. Ranger Alvis Burbank, who gave me several tours of the house, is a direct descendent of the artist. On site there was a horse named Rambo, rams, sheep, chickens, and a very vocal and proud turkey who displayed his fanned feathers from dawn until dusk. The housing provided was a traditional guest hogan, which is a circular structure built of stone with a fireplace in the center. This park was bustling during the day with many visitors to the trading post, and extremely quiet and peaceful at night.



*Rambo, Oil on board, 10" x 10", 2019*

**Homestead National Monument of America, Beatrice, Nebraska.** This park is dedicated literally to the concept of the new frontier. It is located on the first 160 acres that were given to a

farmer to cultivate under the Homestead Act of 1862. There is an extensive collection of antique farm implements in the park. I was inspired to create positive and negative shapes by overlapping the abstract shapes in colored pencil. I also painted four oil paintings, one for each of the elements: fire, water, earth, and sky. The paint is blurred in a different cardinal direction representing each element. These tools and the direct connection to the land provided rapid growth and development of our country through farming and raising livestock.



*Jayhawk, Colored pencil on paper, 9" x 9", 2019*

**Fall 2019:  
Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, Oyster Bay, New York.** This park preserves the 19th century home where Theodore Roosevelt lived and died, and it was the Summer White House while he was our president. Since I live on Long Island this park invited me to be a visiting artist. I drew with colored pencils on site on Saturday afternoons while interacting with visitors. For my subject matter I drew objects from the inside of the historic house paired with found natural objects on the grounds. This historic site is full of history, and it was a treat to be given access to the rooms of the house by a curator to collect photo reference for my drawings.

**Winter 2020:  
Big Cypress National Preserve, Ochopee, Florida.** This park has personal significance because it is located less than an hour from where I grew up in Naples, Florida. It



*Girl, Colored pencil on paper, 6" x 7.5", 2020*

encompasses the hot and humid tropical paradise that is unique to the southwest gulf coast. The protected lands within this preserve provide refuge for the highly endangered Florida panther, as well as freshwater habitat that eventually feeds into the neighboring Everglades. My focus for this residency is pairing portraits of visitors, volunteers, and staff with the objects that they are viewing. The smallest post office in the United States, measuring 7 feet x 8 feet, is also located here!

I take what I learn at each park and bring it back to my classroom. Most recently I took my Foundations in Studio Art 8th grade class to Sagamore Hill National Historic Site for a field trip that focused on combining art and history. As my students took a tour of the historic site and sketched on the grounds, I was excited to see that this coupling of art and the park was creating a new frontier for my students. They now have a lifelong memory and the inspiration to return to the park and share it with others in their future. New frontiers create ripples of inspiration beyond ourselves.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "About Us," *National Park Service*, <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1955/our-mission-and-role.htm>. Accessed on November 21, 2019.

<sup>2</sup>"Frontier," *Dictionary.com*, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/frontier?s=t>. Accessed on October 27, 2019.

Heather Heckel has taught art in New York for six years so far, at both middle school and high school levels. Her favorite thing to do during the summer is to travel to be an artist-in-residence for the National Park Service at various locations across the country. She would love to hear about how her story relates to yours: [heather.heckel@gmail.com](mailto:heather.heckel@gmail.com)



*Skull, Colored pencil on paper, 6" x 6", 2020*

