

## FIRST DRAFT

# CANYONLANDS



CHRISTOPHER TOMLINSON/The Daily Sentinel

In this 2020 file photo, Chesler Park in the Needles section of Canyonlands National Park is pictured during a flyover. Canyonlands was established in September 1964 and covers 337,598 acres.

## Brief but intense political fight led to establishment of National Park

In 1961, Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall called the lands that would become Canyonlands National Park, “acre for acre, the most beautiful country in the world.” He proposed a one-million-acre park.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

Three years later, on Sept. 3, 1964, Congress passed a bill establishing Canyonlands National Park at just over 250,000 acres. Subsequent bills have made it 337,598 acres in four separate districts.

The struggle to win approval for the park is familiar to those seeking special protection for public lands today.

There were heated disputes between Democrats and Republicans in Utah and between Utah and the administration in Washington. There were fights between those who saw the economic potential of tourism versus those who saw financial losses to mining and agriculture. Conservationists and pro-industry factions both argued among themselves about how much compromise was acceptable.

The canyons in southeast Utah were home to Native Americans for millennia before Spanish explorers visited the fringes of those canyon. In the early 19th century, trappers began exploring interior canyons of the Green and Colorado rivers. John Wesley Powell made his famous expedition through the canyons in 1869. Others soon followed.

Ranchers began using the river bottoms to graze their livestock in the late 19th century. Author David Lavender herded cattle in the southeastern part of Canyonlands early in the 20th century.

He later wrote: “The world is awake — except the canyon, its bottom still lost in fathomless black. Slowly the sun climbs higher. Deep down the purple shadows stir and swirl. Light breaks through the blackness, tinting the walls.”

Today, Lavender Canyon is a part of Canyonlands National Park.

By the late 1950s, a number of people with ties to the region began to argue that the canyons needed special protection. One was Bates Wilson, then superintendent of Arches National Monument, who regularly explored the canyon country west of Arches. He became known as the Father of Canyonlands for his tireless efforts to see the

area become a national park.

Wilson had support from Kent Frost, who operated a Jeep touring business in Monticello, and one of Frost’s customers, Frank Masland Jr., chairman of the National Parks Advisory Board.

Both the National Park Service and the Utah State Parks and Recreation Commission began exploring the possibility of a park that protected

some of the stunning land forms in the region.

However, it wasn’t until President John F. Kennedy was elected in 1960, and he appointed a young congressman from Arizona — Stewart Udall — as secretary of interior that the push to protect the Canyonlands really took off.

In July 1961, Udall arranged a boat trip, a four-wheel-drive visit and a helicopter fly-over of the area. Thirty people, including Wilson, Masland and Democratic members of Utah’s congressional delegation, along with Utah Republican Gov. George Clyde, joined him.

Others were not enthusiastic. Utah Republican Sen. Wallace Bennett called the visit “a publicity stunt.”

Udall announced his plan for a national park at the conclusion of his visit. Although Gov. Clyde supported the idea in principle, he wanted to keep the park open to oil, gas and uranium development, as well as grazing. And he was concerned about the size of the park, even though Udall had reduced his proposal to 350,000 acres.

Udall said he was open to compromise. But he urged Utahans to consider the economic impacts of tourism from a national park.

“I will predict flatly that 50 years from now these scenic resources will be the greatest economic asset in this area,” he proclaimed.

Gov. Clyde and Sen. Bennett began organizing opposition to Udall’s expansive plan, even as Utah Democratic Sen. Frank Moss worked with Udall on legislation to establish the park. Although Udall received much of the publicity, Moss did the heavy lifting on park legislation.

Moss introduced a bill in August 1961 that called for a 300,000-acre national park, with pre-existing grazing permits and mining operations allowed. It would protect the Island in the Sky, the Needles



Utah Democratic Sen. Frank Moss



Stewart Udall

and the Maze areas.

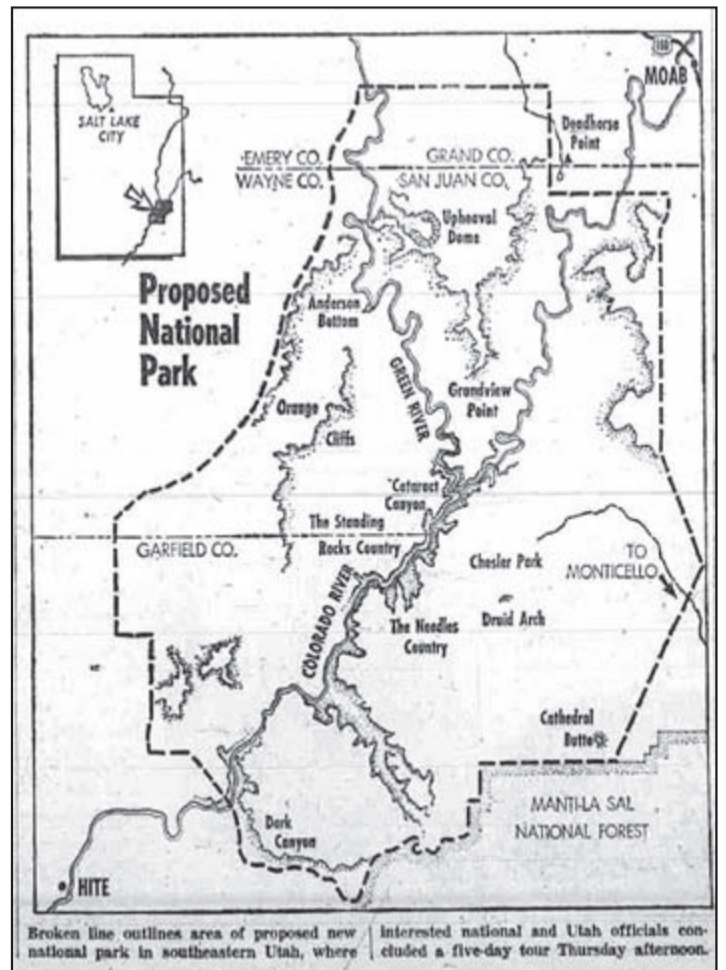
Sen. Bennett responded with a proposal to create three small national parks, totaling only 11,000 acres. Neither of the proposals moved forward before Congress adjourned that year.

But the disputes continued. Udall ordered the Bureau of Land Management, which controlled most of the property being considered for the park, to deny any applications for new uses that failed to meet “the high public values of the land.”

Bennett declared Udall’s directing was “an arrogant flaunting” of his plan, and Udall soon rescinded the order. Then he met privately with Gov. Clyde, hoping to win the Republican’s support. The two men had vastly different interpretations regarding their talk.

Conservation groups began taking aim at Udall, accusing him of giving up too much to pro-industry groups. But David Brower of the Sierra Club came to Udall’s defense, objecting to environmental “purists” who would rather have no park than compromise on commercial uses.

Meanwhile, Udall asked author Wallace Stegner to organize conservationists in Utah to support the park. Stegner formed a group that sought to influence public opinion in favor of the park.



Broken line outlines area of proposed new national park in southeastern Utah, where interested national and Utah officials concluded a five-day tour Thursday afternoon.

In February 1962, Moss introduced a revised version of his bill, attempting to reconcile the differences between what were called “scenery purists” and “resource hogs.” Protecting the landscape would be the top priority, but commercial uses would be allowed with the approval of the secretary of interior.

Before it could move forward, Sen. Bennett again attacked Udall as a “hustling” bureaucrat intent on preventing economic development in southeastern Utah.

Even so, Moss held hearings on his bill in Monticello, Moab and Salt Lake City. There was significant public support, as long as some commercial development was allowed in the park. But the congressional clock again ran out before the Senate voted on the bill.

Moss introduced a third version of his bill in January 1963, reducing the park’s size to 250,000 acres. Restrictions on grazing and mining were eased, and hunting was allowed in some areas.

He also met with Clyde, Bennett and other opponents of the earlier bills to seek their support. With more modifications, and with growing public support for the measure, opponents began to relent.

On Aug. 2, 1963, the Moss bill was approved by the full

Senate, and Bennett voted for it. But it still had to go to the House, where Colorado Congressman Wayne Aspinall headed up the Interior Committee.

Aspinall delayed meetings on the bill until early 1964. His committee made some minor acreage adjustments, but rejected amendments to significantly expand commercial activities.

Finally, in April 1964, the House approved an amended version of the Moss bill, and sent it back to the Senate.

There were more attempts at compromise, but in the end, the Canyonlands National Park legislation was passed with few exemptions for commercial uses. It allowed grazing permits to be extended for no more than 10 years.

The bill passed on Sept. 3 was signed into law on Sept. 17, 1964, by President Lyndon Johnson.

**Sources:** “The Canyonlands National Park Controversy, 1961-1964,” by Thomas G. Smith, Utah Historical Quarterly, 1991; “A New Park is Born,” U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 1327; “Canyonlands National Park,” National Park Service, www.nps.org; historical newspapers at www.newspapers.com and www.digitalnewspapers.org.

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