

A FILM BY KEN BURNS

THE NATIONAL PARKS

America's Best Idea

www.weta.org/nationalparks

Rock Creek Park

Subjects

U.S. History, Government,
Language Arts

Grade Level

9–12

These lessons are provided as an educational service of public television station WETA in Washington, D.C. Our thanks to Greg Timmons, author of the lesson plans.

Overview

For its entire history, the National Park Service has existed under a tension of competing demands that are inherent in American democracy. On one side is the desire by some people to preserve pristine nature for all Americans now and for generations to come. On the other side there is the right of all Americans to enjoy economic opportunity. Consider, for example, the struggle surrounding the creation of Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. In danger of destruction in the late 1880's, it took an act of Congress to save it, making it one of the nation's first national parks. But it wasn't easy, as legislators debated who should pay for such preservation—the local government whose citizens would benefit most or the federal government who controlled the Washington D.C. area.

In this lesson, students will look at the history of Rock Creek's designation as a national park and role-play members of different 19th century constituencies deliberating its establishment.

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Understand the social/economic tension that existed surrounding the establishment of a national park in the Rock Creek region of Washington, D.C.
- Understand the positions of different constituencies regarding the development of a Rock Creek park.
- Apply his/her knowledge of the circumstances and the positions of various constituencies to a deliberation on the issues.
- Synthesize a solution addressing the various constituencies' positions on establishing a Rock Creek Park.

Materials, Information Packet

- Deliberation Procedures
- The Background Story (historical background on the Rock Creek Park)
- Summary of the Proposed Bill/Interest Group Descriptions
- Negotiation Records Statement of Premises
- Negotiation Records Options—Pros/Cons
- Agreement Form

Opening Activity

Open the class by asking students about their favorite outdoor recreation places. What are they? Why do they like going to these places? What other use besides recreation could these places have? Are any of them in the Washington, D.C. area?

Tell students they are going to look investigate a national park in the Washington, D.C. area that has been a favorite of residents for over 100 years.

Show the WETA Extra video segment, “Rock Creek Park” <http://www.weta.org/local/parks>. After viewing the video, ask the students the following questions:

- Have any of you been to Rock Creek Park? What are some of your impressions of the park after viewing the video segment?
- What are some of the different ways people use Rock Creek Park today?
- What were some of the threats to Rock Creek Park in the 1880’s?
- How did Rock Creek Park differ from other urban parks, like New York’s Central Park? Which do you prefer—a planned park or a park left as wilderness? Why?

Main Activity

In this activity, students will role-play members of Congress and several special interest groups during the deliberations in the late 1880’s and early 1890’s over the establishment of Rock Creek Park.

Divide students into the following interest groups, who will deliberate on the fate of Rock Creek Park:

- Commissioner for the city of Washington, D.C. in favor of establishing a park to help increase the city’s water supply
- Prominent civic leaders advocating for a city park similar to Central Park in New York
- Prominent senators and congressmen for the proposed park
- Prominent senators and congressmen against the proposed park
- Landowners adjacent to the area proposed for Rock Creek Park who want to leverage the park to increase their land values

Distribute one Information Packet to each group. Briefly review the materials with students. Read the Background Story aloud to the class. Then review the proposed bill for a Rock Creek Park. Facilitate the group deliberations following the Deliberation Procedures.

Assessment

Students can be assessed in the following areas:

- Cooperative group work during preparations for the deliberation and during the development of the Agreement Form in areas of time-management, contributing to the group, attitude, focus on the task, preparedness, etc.
- Writing mechanics
- Understanding the importance of the featured national historic park

Extension Activities

- Have students take a trip to Rock Creek Park and map out the features presented in the video. They can record their data on a conventional map of the park or develop a map presentation from Google Earth or Google Maps.
- Invite a park ranger from one of the natural-setting parks in the Washington, D.C. area to make a presentation to the class.

Standards

This lesson addresses national content standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks>)

U.S. HISTORY

Standard 22.

The student understands how the United States changed between the post-World War I years and the eve of the Great Depression.

HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

Standard 2.

The student understands the historical perspective.

CIVICS

Standard 1.

The student uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Standard 7.

The student uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.

Standard 8.

The student uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Standard 9.

The student uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

About the author

Greg Timmons is a freelance curriculum writer, and educational consultant of web-based and broadcast media materials. After a 30 year career as a social studies teacher in the public schools, he has written and consulted for several national news and educational organizations including FRONTLINE, the *NewsHour*, History Channel, Colonial Williamsburg, and other projects for WETA.

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Deliberation Procedures

The members of your interest group are meeting to discuss whether the federal government should purchase and establish an urban park in Washington, D.C.

This is not a debate where one side wins and the other side loses. This activity calls for something more subtle and productive. Your group has strong opinions on the subject as do the other groups. You will need to put forward your best argument, but you also will need to listen to others' concerns and ideas so that you can compromise with them and arrive at a solution agreeable to most, if not all, of the interest groups.

Use the procedure below to guide your efforts.

1. Opening Statements

Prepare an opening statement that is one minute long. Use the "Interest Group Descriptions" handout to help you construct your statement. The statement should sum up your group's position and make your strongest points. Your statement should answer the questions: *What group do I represent? What outcome would I like to see happen? Why is this important?*

2. Statement of Premises

After each group presents its opening statements to the class, meet in your interest group and think about each group's position. Summarize their position and concerns using the "Negotiation Records – Statement of Premises" handout.

3. Identifying Options/Evaluating Options

Complete the "Negotiation Records—Options Pros/Cons" handout. List possible options for amending the bill on Rock Creek Park in the left hand column. Then look at each option and determine its benefits and costs. List these in the Pros and Cons columns.

4. Deciding on the Best Option

Meet together again as a full group and state the option(s) you would like to propose. Discuss which option or options have the most benefits and which have the fewest drawbacks, in your opinion. Is one option clearly superior to the others? Which one will help the group come to an agreement?

5. Completing the Agreement Form

In your interest group, fill out the details of the agreement on the "Agreement Form" handout.

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Rock Creek Park

The Background Story (1866–1890)

Originally, interest in creating a Rock Creek Park stemmed from public dissatisfaction with the White House during the Lincoln and Johnson administrations (1861–1869). The White House had serious shortcomings. Since the business and living quarters were all contained in the executive mansion, there was little privacy for the family. The grounds just outside the White House were swampy and a nearby canal was the disposal site for Washington City's sewage. Many believed the residence of the most prominent leader in government should have more suitable grounds on which to spend their leisure time. ("their" in this sentence refers back to "residence"—either change "residence" to "family" and "their" to "its," or take out "the residence of" and change "their" to "his.")

Studies commissioned during the next few years determined that the White House should be secluded and serve as a private residence. Other nearby buildings should be used for offices and meeting rooms. A park, north of the executive mansion in the Rock Creek valley, should be open to the public. Early plans called for around 2,000 acres of spacious grounds to be set aside, with miles of drives and walkways, a thick primeval forest, grand old trees and flowery shrubs, and wild, bold rapid streams running throughout.

Several bills were introduced in Congress over the next two decades, all with strong initial interest but then dying in committee or being burdened with numerous amendments nobody had agreed to. While most in Congress could agree that a park in central Washington, D.C. was a good idea, many couldn't support one fully funded by U.S. taxpayers that only benefited the residents of Washington, D.C. Though the land was deemed unusable for commercial or residential purposes, land speculators saw the park as an opportunity for increased land values if it were developed. But the different sides couldn't come to an agreement and the idea languished in Congress for nearly 20 years.

In 1883, interest was renewed when a report by the Engineer Commissioner of the District of Columbia advocated a park in the Rock Creek region. But instead of a public park, the Commissioner sought to increase the city's water supply by building a dam just above Georgetown, creating a four-mile-long reservoir and submerging a major portion of the valley.

This proposal renewed the interest of several prominent civic leaders who lobbied the commission to consider another source for the water supply. They then promoted the benefits of a public park for Washington, D.C. comparable to New York's Central Park or Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. For the next five years, the civic leaders found champions for their cause in Congress and lobbied hard for the passage of a bill to purchase the land

and create a park. But opponents to the government take-over of the land argued over the loss of the land's commercial value to private citizens and the use of federal tax money for local benefit. The bill floundered in Congress until 1889 when all groups met to form an agreement.

In this activity, you will represent a constituent group either advocating or opposing the establishment of Rock Creek Park between 1889 and 1890. Follow the Deliberation Procedures to review and understand the bill, identify options, and arrive at a solution that will address the concerns of the different interest groups.

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Rock Creek Park

A Bill to Acquire Land in the Rock Creek Valley for the Purpose of Constructing a Natural Park

Sponsors

Senator John Sherman of Ohio, Senator John J. Ingalls of Kansas, Representative Jonathan H. Rowell of Illinois, Representative John J. Hemphill of South Carolina

Washington City in the District of Columbia is the capital city of the United States of America and as such is a growing urban area of national prominence. As important as other major cities in the country, Washington City is a showcase for all Americans as well as all citizens of the world who come to visit. As such, it should have an urban park in or near its city limits for leisurely recreation and communing with nature, and be a place of pride for all Americans.

BE IT ENACTED by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled that:

Section 1

Congress will appropriate \$508,000 for the purchase of 1,800 to 2,500 acres in what is known as the Rock Creek Valley, for the purpose of developing an urban park.

Section 2

The land is located north of the Washington City limits, east of Tenleytown Road and west of Rock Creek Church Road.

Section 3

The park shall be accessible to the public. The natural scenery of the park shall be preserved, featuring primeval forest and green fields, grand old trees and flowering shrubs, streams coursing their way along the entire length and breadth of the park in a succession of rapids, and slow moving waterways making their way to ponds and lakes.

Section 4

The parcel of land includes several military defenses created and utilized during the War Between the States, which have become historical and significant to those living today and will serve as a reminder for future generations of the sacrifice made by men on both sides.

Section 5

Congress will appropriate an additional \$100,000 to enclose the grounds for a short period of time to improve and repair existing drives and walks and construct new ones.

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Interest Group Descriptions

Commissioner for the city of Washington, D.C. in favor of extending private grounds beyond the White House and constructing a dam to help increase the city's water supply

Point to make

- The present location of the executive mansion provides the President and his family little privacy from the business of running government.
- An area should be set aside to provide residents of the White House with a suitable area for relaxation and outdoor recreation.
- The city of Washington has an increasing population that is in need of an adequate source of water.
- The Rock Creek region would lend itself well to the creation of a private park for the President and his family and a reservoir for public use. Placing a dam across the creek above Georgetown would create a four-mile-long reservoir.

You are willing to compromise and listen to alternatives, but you want to stress the need for your proposal and/or the concerns you identify. During deliberations, present and advocate the option(s) you developed to address the concerns raised by the other groups and the reasons why you believe these options will help the groups reach an agreement.

Prominent civic leaders, advocating for a city park similar to Central Park in New York

Point to make

- Many of the world's major cities and capitals have urban parks designated and maintained by the government and open to the public. Washington D.C. should be one of them.
- The lands identified as the Rock Creek region are of little agricultural or construction value, but would be well suited for an urban park.
- Little cost and development are needed for the Rock Creek region to be made into a natural-setting park. The park would benefit the entire population of Washington, D.C. and visitors to the city.
- The establishment of an urban park would add value to the lands surrounding it, making them desirable for rural residences and commercial interests.

You are willing to compromise and listen to alternatives, but you want to stress the need for your proposal and/or the concerns you identify. During deliberations, present and advocate the option(s) you developed to address the concerns raised by the other groups and the reasons why you believe these options will help the groups reach an agreement.

Prominent senators and congressmen for the proposed park

Point to make

- The grounds within and adjacent to Rock Creek are well suited for the creation of an urban park. The area has running water, rugged hills and picturesque scenery with an abundance of natural vegetation and wildlife.
- It is fitting that the nation's capital has a natural-setting park that is comparable to the urban parks of many of the world's major cities. Such a park will promote tourism and project an image of sophistication befitting a national capital.
- It will be important to acquire the parcel in a timely manner, as land speculators will buy up the land in hopes of making a profit from the eventual government purchase.
- The government would offer fair market price to those landowners who are willing to sell, but would encourage the donation of land. Condemnation proceedings would take place when necessary.

You are willing to compromise and listen to alternatives, but you want to stress the need for your proposal and/or the concerns you identify. During deliberations, present and advocate the option(s) you developed to address the concerns raised by the other groups and the reasons why you believe these options will help the groups reach an agreement.

Prominent senators and congressmen for the against park

Point to make

- The actual cost of the project will run over the projected budget as land speculators find out about the project. In addition, the cost of improving the area and its yearly maintenance will require additional expenditures beyond those proposed.
- Federal tax dollars should not be spent to finance a local park. Most of the people paying for the park will never travel to Washington, D.C. to enjoy it.
- The initial concern of cleaning up the grounds surrounding the White House and establishing a water reservoir for the city has been lost in the rush to build a park.
- There is no need to move quickly on this measure as the land has been deemed unusable by proponents of the bill. The land will be there for future generations to consider.

You are willing to compromise and listen to alternatives, but you want to stress the need for your proposal and/or the concerns you identify. During deliberations, present and advocate the option(s) you developed to address the concerns raised by the other groups and the reasons why you believe these options will help the groups reach an agreement.

Real Estate developers who see the establishment of the park as a benefit to the city

Point to make

- Designating the area for a public park will increase the value and tax assessment of surrounding lands, providing more investment for landowners and more revenue for the government.
- The land being considered is not suitable for expansion of city streets and dwellings.
- The city will benefit from the park as there will be numerous opportunities for entrepreneurs to establish related services and businesses.
- The entire country will feel pride in knowing that the nation's capital ranks up with any major city of Europe for its scenic beauty and natural environment.

You are willing to compromise and listen to alternatives, but you want to stress the need for your proposal and/or the concerns you identify. During deliberations, present and advocate the option(s) you developed to address the concerns raised by the other groups and the reasons why you believe these options will help the groups reach an agreement.

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Negotiation Records

Statement of Premises

Think about each group's opening statement. Summarize the positions and concerns of the other groups. In which areas do you agree/disagree?

Interest Group

Areas of Agreement

Areas of Disagreement

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Options—Pros/Cons

During your group meeting, identify some options or alternatives to your proposal in order to address as many of the concerns raised by the other groups as you can, and assess the costs and benefits of each.

Options

1.

2.

3.

Pros

Cons

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Agreement Form

Fill in names interest groups who are participating in this agreement:

1. Background

We are negotiating a bill on the creation of an urban park in the Rock Creek region of Washington, D.C. We understand that the proposed bill has the following problems:

2. Premises

We have reached the following basic understandings on the areas where we agree.
