Upon the discovery of gold in the Klondike River of the Canadian Yukon, a stampede of hopeful miners ventured to Alaska and setup boomtowns in Skagway and Dyea. The more than 100,000 people who passed through between 1897 and 1898 transformed the culture, environment, and demographics of the area. The Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, established in 1980, interprets this last major human migration in Alaska alongside diverse and unique ecosystems. Today, Klondike Gold Rush is the most visited park in Alaska—nearly one million visitors per year spend $161 million in local communities. Most visitors explore Skagway’s Historic District, an authentically restored Victorian gold rush town. The park began its leasing program here in the late 1980s and now five historic buildings are being leased, creating a living, viable community and a thriving seasonal business district.
“As a historian who wanted to bring a newspaper and bookstore back to historic Broadway, the NPS leaseback program was a logical fit for both us and the relatively new Klondike Park at the time. We have now been in the 1899 Boas Furrier building for 31 years and continue to serve our community in this beautifully restored park building.”

Jeff Brady, Owner, Skaguay News Depot & Books

THE BOAS TAILOR AND FURRIER SHOP

In 1898, Henry Boas, an enterprising tailor and furrier, built his two-story false fronted building on Broadway Street in the boomtown of Skagway. While Boas moved on shortly thereafter, the building continued to serve a variety of purposes: a jewelry and curio shop, a home to seasonal workers, and an office for the Canadian National Steamship Company. The building—which had been relocated closer to the railroad depot and tourist centers—was sold to the National Park Service in 1978. Rehabilitation efforts began in the mid-1980s. The National Park Service restored the exterior to its 1926 appearance and readapted the interior to fit modern uses.

Jeff Brady, a reporter for The Skagway News, had a longstanding interest in the property and when he learned that the park hoped to lease the building as a newspaper and bookstore, he jumped at this opportunity. Brady signed his first 15-year leaseback with the park service in 1987. He has since completed a second 15-year lease and recently signed a 10-year lease. Brady pays a monthly rent to the park and handles small-scale routine maintenance. This additional revenue stream better enables the park to tackle major projects with the structures it manages, such as upgrading the lighting and fire alarms, refinishing floors, and replacing heating systems. In recent years, Brady has subleased the newspaper business but continues to run the bookstore. Skagway receives up to 12,000 tourists a day over the summer and Skaguay News Depot & Books is one of the few businesses in town that remains open year-round.

The leasing partnerships allow the park to bring historic buildings back to life—oftentimes using them as they were used historically—while also providing opportunities to local businesses and offering experiences and services for visitors.
A PROBLEM

The National Park Service (NPS) maintains a network of 417 parks and sites that protect some of our nation’s most spectacular historic, cultural, and natural resources. However, after 100 years of operation and inconsistent public funding, the NPS faces a deferred maintenance backlog estimated at $11.6 billion—of which approximately 47% is attributed to historic assets. Deferred maintenance in our national parks puts historic and cultural sites at risk of permanent damage or loss, and in the absence of funding, the condition of these assets will continue to deteriorate and become more expensive to repair and preserve in the future.

A SOLUTION

Leasing of historic buildings in the National Park System is an effective and proven public-private partnership that can be used as part of the suite of options necessary to abate the NPS deferred maintenance backlog. The NPS has the legal authority to enter into lease agreements whereby the park maintains ownership of the building, but the lessee is responsible for the preservation and maintenance needs of the structure. For long-term commercial leases of 55 years or more, the lessee is able to utilize the federal historic tax credit and receive a 20 percent credit for qualified rehabilitation expenses. Historic leasing partnerships alleviate the burden on the NPS to maintain historic buildings by reducing maintenance costs and the repair backlog for the park, allow reallocation of scarce resources to other priority projects, create opportunities for private investors, provide services for visitors and residents of gateway communities, and bring iconic historic buildings back to life. The National Trust for Historic Preservation plays a leading role in advocating for the use of leasing by the National Park Service by providing research and guidance about best practices and highlighting opportunities to leverage this innovative preservation tool.

The House Appropriations Committee has also noted, in part, that “leasing of historic park buildings has proven to be an effective public-private partnership that has brought private investment to the repair and maintenance of historic park resources.”


The National Trust for Historic Preservation, a privately funded nonprofit organization, works to save America’s historic places. Visit us at SavingPlaces.org.

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