



# As It Backs Civil Rights Sites, the National Park Foundation Has Some Big Partners in Its Corner

Ade Adeniji | August 10, 2023



THE NATIONAL PARK FOUNDATION AND ITS PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERS SUPPORTED A NEW NATIONAL MONUMENT HONORING EMMETT TILL. PHOTO: JMANAUGH3/SHUTTERSTOCK

When you think of the National Park Service, you probably think open lands, vast waters and the overall preservation of America's diverse landscape. The National Park Foundation (NPF), the National Park Service's nonprofit arm, was chartered by Congress in 1967 with just such a charge: to "further the conservation of natural, scenic, historic, scientific, educational, inspirational, or recreational resources for future generations of Americans."

In the 2022 fiscal year, NPF granted \$59.1 million to parks and held some \$353 million in assets. Among NPF's biggest projects was a revitalization of Fort Wayne in Detroit, with the likes of the Kresge Foundation lending support. NPF also raised \$23 million alongside the Grand Teton National Park Foundation in 2016 to purchase a 640-acre tract of land within Grand Teton National Park from the state of Wyoming. There's also NPF's Flight 93 National Memorial Capital Campaign, which raised more than \$40 million in private support from more than 110,000 individuals, foundations and corporations.

But in addition to projects like those, the National Park Foundation has also funded a series of major civil rights sites including Frederick Douglass National Historic Site and Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site, both in Washington, D.C.

Another such site just came online, and it's an important one. On July 25, on what would've been Emmett Till's 84th birthday, President Biden designated the [Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument](#), managed by the National Park Service. And as it turns out, private philanthropy played a huge part in the Till monument, with NPF receiving key backing for the project from some major players including [Robert F. Smith's Fund II Foundation](#) and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. But how exactly did this work start for NPF? And how did it bring such big names in philanthropy on board?

## The seeds of new work

When I spoke with [Robert F. Smith](#) in 2021, one of the more intriguing aspects of his rapidly expanding philanthropy was a \$39 million gift from the Fund II Foundation to the National Park Foundation in 2016. That gift quietly made Smith one of the largest private donors to support America's national park system. Some of those funds went into preserving MLK's birth home and home during his life, and to digitize and curate those spaces, bringing history alive.

I recently spoke with Will Shafroth, CEO of the National Park Foundation, who provided some valuable context around that gift, and Smith's relationship with NPF generally. The story takes us back a bit. In 2001, the National Park Foundation established the [African American Experience Fund](#) to raise money and establish partnerships supporting national park sites and projects that tell the story of African Americans. "[The goal was] to highlight the contribution of African Americans in our country, with a particular focus on the civil rights movement," Shafroth said.

Tom Goss, Detroit businessman and chair of GOSS LLC, and Steve Hightower, president of Ohio-based Hightowers Petroleum, served on the African American Experience Fund committee and then joined the NPF board in 2012.



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Shafroth said that Goss and Hightower pushed the broader NPF board to champion this issue in a fuller way. NPF began by purchasing the Ohio home of storied Buffalo Soldier Charles Young. Young's military career took him as far and wide as Haiti, where he served as the first military attaché to Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Liberia and Nigeria, where he fell ill and died in 1922.

"The house was going on the market, probably [to be] plowed down and turned into a condo complex or something. So we stepped in and brought the home," Shafroth said.

### A billionaire donor steps in

The next part of our story takes us to around 2014 and 2015. At the time, investor and then-NPF board member Orin Kramer was sitting on the board of Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights along with Smith, whose big-time philanthropy was just about to take off. Fund II Foundation went on to launch in 2014, and has given away some \$265 million to date. "The case that Kramer made was that if you really want to do something at scale, there are a handful [of ways to] do that. More people go visit the national parks than basically anything else in the country," Shafroth said.

The billionaire was convinced: Smith and the NPF team started a year-long conversation and planning process. And then Shafroth visited Smith's home in the fall of 2015 to seal the deal. "He's been a partner ever since," Shafroth said, adding that Fund II Foundation's support extends both to the latest effort with Till as well as broader work with NPF over a period of years. "Robert is interested in the whole thing. As is the Park Service," Shafroth said.

Indeed, Shafroth clarified that NPF is in a long-term partnership with Fund II, where NPF is essentially a partner in an equity fund. At the time of the gift, NPF's share was worth nearly \$40 million. As NPF deploys these funds, Shafroth described a delicate balance of managing the funds and making the right moves at the right time. With MLK, there was some early money that came in so that the National Park Foundation could purchase the home.

Other civil rights sites NPF has funded include the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site, Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, Pullman National Monument, and the Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home National Monument in Jackson, Mississippi. Sites run the gamut of the Reconstruction era, Jim Crow and the Civil Rights era.

### Earning Mellon's support

Joining Fund II Foundation in supporting NPF's work with the Till monument is the Mellon Foundation, the storied philanthropy known for its arts and humanities funding. Mellon itself had been working with Emmett Till Interpretive Center independently since 2020 and Mellon President Elizabeth Alexander [has written about](#) the watershed civil rights moment and its reverberations today. In 2021, the foundation hosted a virtual roundtable discussion, "[Let the People See What They Did to My Boy](#)": Commemorating Emmett Till for Future Generations.

The nexus between racial justice and American monuments has been a prime focus for Mellon over the past several years. In 2020, Mellon made a [huge, \\$250 million commitment](#) to a new initiative, the Monuments Project, "to transform the nation's commemorative landscape by supporting public projects that more completely and accurately represent the multiplicity and complexity of American stories." Since then, over \$150 million has gone out the door.

But how did Mellon get involved with NPF specifically? Well, that same hedge fund investor Orin Kramer connected NPF to Mellon, who found common cause around [a fellowship program](#) involving work within the park service on humanities issues. They funded three fellows whose work would focus on connections between and among national parks. To take one example, one fellow focused on labor, telling the story of Cesar Chavez and of Pullman National Park Monument, bringing these spaces and stories together — rather than just telling one story in isolation.

The whole experience went so well that Mellon invited NPF back. "And when Mellon invites you back, you just say 'yes'," Shafroth said with a laugh, explaining that an initial \$1 million grant from Mellon to NPF exploded to a \$13.5 million gift to expand that fellowship program. Now, the fellowships focus on broader storytelling, aiming to tell the full story of America and labor, women's rights, and, of course, Black history and civil rights.

### Commemorating Emmett Till

NPF and Mellon's collaboration on the Emmett Till monument traces its origins back to when Shafroth read a story in the *Washington Post* about Mellon resolving a thorny disagreement at Montpelier, President James Madison's house, involving their the site's board, the descendants of the enslaved, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Shafroth reached out to Mellon, which expressed serious interest in the Emmett Till project, and went on to contribute \$2 million to facilitate the acquisition of the Tallahatchie County Courthouse in Mississippi, where an all-white jury acquitted J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant of Till's murder in 1955.

A total of \$5.9 million in philanthropic funding went to the new Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument, which encompasses sites in two states, Mississippi and Illinois. That includes \$1 million from Fund II Foundation, supporting a National Park Service park ranger position focused on community engagement and enhanced digital storytelling around the Till family in the visitors' center. A contemplative area will be created at a second monument site at Graball Landing in Mississippi, where Till's body was recovered. Meanwhile, the third site in Chicago includes Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ, where Mamie Till-Mobley held her son's open-casket funeral.

To handle the delicate issues surrounding implementation, NPF is leaning on the Emmett Till Interpretive Center (ETIC) in Sumner, Mississippi, which has been working on the ground for years to honor Till's story and memory. ETIC also supported the purchase and renovation of a nearby building as the location of the new Tallahatchie courthouse.

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It's worth noting that all of this work with NPF, Fund II and Mellon forms a clear counterpoint to the efforts of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and others on the right who are taking very different approaches to remembering the full scope of our nation's history — or, rather, not remembering it. As some of those figures invoke the powers of government (and private funding) to clamp down on education around historical racism and racist violence, this collaboration is one way philanthropy and government are coming together to keep shining a light. "I didn't appreciate this about the Park Service as much as I do now," Shafroth said. "And their perspective on telling history is really straightforward: We're just going to tell the truth."

*Editor's Note: This piece has been updated to clarify Mellon's involvement with the Till monument and that they had been engaged in such work prior to also connecting with NPF.*

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