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| |  | | --- | | The last two months of responding to COVID-19 have presented unprecedented challenges to the National Park Service and Sagamore Hill National Historic Site. One of the most important tasks in the park during this time has been our continual receiving, reviewing, and interpreting of new policies and guidance relative to COVID-19 and the management of park staff, volunteers, and visitors.  This monsoon of local, state, and federal guidance is voluminous, constant, and sometimes capricious, but it is all essential reading. Often the greatest challenge in wading through pages upon pages is to distill a functional directive from the guidance to answer our many questions, including "What should we do and how should we do it?” and "What is most important?" I’ve learned from swimming in this ocean of guidance for weeks that the best “guidance” is often communicated in a brevity of language – and can also be found hiding within our Agency’s own history.  *"Your prime directive is to slow the spread of the virus . . . make all of your decisions to achieve this goal."*  These twenty words, spoken repeatedly by our Regional leadership on weekly telephone calls over the last two months, have been instrumental in helping us respond to this ongoing crisis. This succinct phrase fits in your pocket and is as accessible as it is actionable. It cuts through ambiguity in a manner that a 22-page document cannot. This phrase, exposed to the gravity and pressure of COVID-19, has been transformed into bedrock – a fundamental principle that now guides our decision-making in the park.  We will need additional instructive bedrock to inform our decision-making in the months ahead, core principles that will guide us through future months characterized by adaptation and fluctuating risk. The federal law establishing the National Park Service in 1916, the "Organic Act", contains a succinct prime directive (hidden in plain sight) that has shepherded the parks for the last 103 years. This phrase, casually referred to as a “Hippocratic Oath” for NPS employees and volunteers is as follows:  *"....[the purpose of the NPS is] to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the [public] enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."*  The essence of the above phrase has been that the NPS must do two things concurrently to appropriately manage the parks: a) provide for public "enjoyment" and use of the parks and b) provide "enjoyment" in a manner that does not impair park resources.  COVID-19 places the Organic Act, our "Hippocratic Oath", in stark relief. How do we uphold these tenets if both principles are equal? Is it possible to "provide for enjoyment" of the parks in a safe manner that does not “impair” park resources, including the safety of visitors, in the midst of a pandemic? If so, how do we do it?  Answering this question is one of our many challenges in the months ahead – and we need unambiguous guidance. Luckily for us, there is clarity to be found within the current NPS Management Policies that govern all national parks.  *In its role as steward of park resources, the National Park Service must ensure that park uses that are allowed would not cause impairment of, or unacceptable impacts on, park resources and values. When proposed park uses and the protection of park resources and values come into conflict, the protection of resources and values must be predominant. (1.5 Appropriate Uses of the Parks)*  This policy directs the NPS to place **added weight** and priority on managing the parks in a manner that reduces or eliminates impairment relative to the use of the parks. To (grossly) paraphrase, protection from harm should come first. “ . . . conserving [the parks] unimpaired” is a prime directive that has safeguarded the national parks, and billions of visitors, for more than 100 years.  As I prepare to depart Sagamore Hill in early June and in the midst of COVID-19, I ask that all of us be mindful of the indelible need to make decisions that prevent the impairment of park resources, with the most important resource being the life, health, and safety of all people in the park – including you!  Please be patient, flexible, and open-minded with one another as you adapt to changes in park operations in the months ahead. Above all, choose to make decisions that protect yourself and improve the safety for those working within and visiting Sagamore Hill. Work to prevent impairment and remember, *“ . . . the protection of resources and values must be predominate.”* | |

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