

*Established in 1916 at the height of the war in Europe and just a year before America's entry into it, the National Park Service found its purpose and even existence during the war called into question. When the war ended, the Park Service's deft leadership had prevailed over those demanding access to park resources, leaving the Service arguably in a better position than before the war.*

# THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

## AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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**I**n April 1917, when the United States entered World War I, the National Park Service was an eight-month-old infant bureau tending a fragile collection of national parks and monuments. Given the demands and circumstances of the war, neither the agency nor its park system appeared sure to survive the next few

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years. Congress had established the Park Service to keep the nation's scenic, natural, and historic parklands—which most Americans had never seen—"unimpaired for future generations." That was a stricter and more esoteric conservation philosophy than the country had previously endorsed. The parks and monuments encompassed 5 million acres reputedly rich in minerals, timber, grazing land, and game—all resources that wartime America desperately needed. The Park Service had no money and no personnel to protect park resources, and in 1917 Congress might have found an appeal for their protection unpatriotic. In short, an untested organization was holding essential resources for what, in a wartime context, appeared to be nonessential purposes.

But the National Park Service survived the war, winning respectable appropriations and managing with available manpower until veterans could become park rangers. That the parklands

were so well defended against wartime demands was the remarkable achievement of two men who grasped a unique opportunity to establish conservation principles and precedents that would serve the parks well in the future. What they did might not have been as dramatically effective in peacetime.

Stephen T. Mather and Horace M. Albright, director and assistant director, respectively, virtually were the National Park Service during most of the war. Except for a half dozen appointees of their own, the remainder of their field and Washington staffs were holdovers from the days of the Interior Department's desultory supervision of the parks. Both men had served apprenticeships in the department; having witnessed the unintentional neglect that the parks suffered, they had lobbied for the establishment of a separate, professional bureau to administer an integrated national park system. They were energetic, politically shrewd,

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BY MARCELLA M. SHERFY



*Paradise Inn in Mt. Rainier National Park opened in July of 1917, just four months after the United States entered the war. New roads, newly affordable automobiles, and the patriotic “See America First” campaign had helped to draw visitors to national parks after 1914 in increasingly larger numbers.*

widely recognized spokesmen for park values. Their abilities and accomplishments made them immediate and durable heroes of the organization. The establishment of the National Park Service in 1916 and the successful defense of the parks during the war years can fairly be attributed to their magnetism, skill, and determination.

Long before the war burst upon them, Mather and Albright had learned to marshal public support and its resulting political strength during crises. They relied on a wide circle of friends in Congress, the professions, and the press—persons who had worked with them to establish the Park Service. They took advantage of the war to build a larger, different clientele—park visitors. Since the traveling public could not vacation in Europe after 1914, Mather and Albright urged them to “see America first”—to visit America’s own national parks instead. That sales pitch appeared in every press notice and article that the two men sponsored; by the spring of 1917, they announced that visitations to the parks were increasing in spite of the war. Visitor statistics supported a critical political argument: national parks were not idle luxuries, but important sources of public recreation.

In fact, the park men knew that they had enough popular and political support to approach Congress for appropriations, even

during the “preparedness” days that preceded the declaration of war. Albright, who was acting director during the Park Service’s organizational period, appeared before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Sundry Civil Appropriations in January 1917, seeking money for the 1917–18 fiscal year. The legislators, especially the traditional skeptics of the park idea, questioned him sharply on several issues, but none suggested that the wartime economy could not or should not support national parks. Twenty-seven-year-old Albright emerged from the hearings with a half million dollars. Indeed, on April 17, shortly after Congress declared war, he secured a deficiency appropriation for operating funds until the new fiscal year began on July 1. Although the amount was not large, the money Congress granted represented more than the token support anticipated.

Positions and the men to fill them did not come as easily as dollars. Even if Congress had authorized new positions for the parks, the men required to staff them were committed to Europe. So the Park Service made do with the staff it had inherited, minus some draftees. Many national monuments remained unmanned, and major national parks had skeleton crews of civilians or soldiers. The army had managed several parks since 1886, when civilian administrations had proven unable to protect Yellowstone from



*Horace Albright and Stephen Mather (right), seen here in 1924, were challenged by, and yet benefitted from, the war. They successfully fended off attempts to allow natural resource extraction inside the parks during the war. After the war, returning veterans made good rangers and superintendents.*

poachers and vandals. The military had saved the parks from what might have been serious damage, and it had even undertaken the development of high-quality touring roads and public facilities. But Mather and Albright now wanted rangers who could educate and assist as well as police the public. The army obviously wanted out, too. The transfer of the parks to civilian control occurred in every park except Yellowstone, where congressional whim kept troops through the war. But no park had a staff sufficient to provide the professional public service and protection that Mather and Albright envisioned.

In the end, ironically, the war gave Mather and Albright the kind of people they wanted. Many returning veterans had seen too much of the world to go straight home to take up ordinary business. Accustomed to the disciplines of a uniformed life, they were physically fit, self-reliant, inventive, and in search of the adventure that service in the parks could offer. Many had, as well, the compassion, the gift for public speaking, and the interest in the natural sciences that distinguished Mather and Albright's ideal of the perfect park ranger. After the armistice, the two men lost little time in recruiting rangers and superintendents from among the war veterans.

The greatest threat to the parks during the war was the nation's determined search for food and fuel. Although in reality the park boundaries did not encompass very much public land, they enclosed the only natural resources on federal property that had been permanently "locked up" by Congress. The always-debatable policy of preservation became almost impossible to defend when every backyard sprouted into a victory garden and ships were being built, it was rumored, from trees in which the birds still nested. Not surprisingly, Herbert Hoover's Food Administration demanded grazing permits and access to park fish and game.

Western cattle and sheep graziers, many of whom had never accepted their loss of access to parkland, joined in the clamor. Western newspapers carped about the foolishness of preserving beauty at the expense of food. Fuel shortages, although less critical than those of food, also brought demands for park minerals and timber. Even Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane, not wanting his department to appear unpatriotic, urged that park resources be made available for the cause.

Mather and Albright resisted those demands with their usual blend of political skill, compromise, and adherence to principle. They granted token grazing permits to park neighbors who did not intend to use the privilege very much. They persuaded Secretary Lane to modify his stand. They directed longtime park supporters (groups like the Sierra Club and the American Civic Association and such indi-

viduals as Gilbert H. Grosvenor of the National Geographic Society and E. O. McCormick of the Southern Pacific Railroad) to court unsympathetic congressmen. They made it known that western lobbyists were often less interested in the national need than in recovering their access to the national parks. They even persuaded officials of the Food Administration to acknowledge that fish, game, and pasturage in the parks were not sufficiently abundant to warrant their sacrifice. Despite a few compromises, park resources and the principles undergirding their preservation survived the war intact.

In that sense alone, World War I may have benefited the National Park Service, the park system, and the national park idea. Even in times of peace, little of America's land is safe from the demands of progress. The idea that wild, beautiful, dramatic, or historic landscapes have a public value exceeding that derived from practical, consumptive use has never been accepted universally, much less by those whose interests have been immediately affected. Mather and Albright, pragmatists and visionaries at the same time, realized that park resources, the essential integrity of parkland, and, most importantly, the national park idea would never be safe if they surrendered to wartime pressures. So they stood firm in their position that parks should not become commodities of war, and they held their ground until the crisis passed. The national park idea emerged from the trial of wartime with the strength and authority to triumph over the more subtle, but perhaps more serious, challenges of peacetime. □

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# World War I: 10th and 20th Forestry Engineers



**JOIN THE  
Largest Regiment  
in the World**

**THE TWENTIETH ENGINEERS WILL BE THE WORLD'S LARGEST REGIMENT—7500 men will fill its ranks. There will be ten battalions of 750 men each. Each battalion will be divided into three companies of 250 men each. All but 3000 have already been recruited—3000 skilled woodmen and lumbermen are needed at once.**

Your work in this Regiment will be in France. There will be no duty. The Regiment will go across to France as it is fully organized and equipped.

On the other side your Regiment will back up every activity of the Army Engineers at the Front. You will help convert the French forests into railroad ties (sawed and hewn), bridge timbers, poles, telephone poles, trench planks, pit props, lumber for maintenance, hospital, incinerated, charcoal, etc.

**You are needed NOW!**

**YOU NEED NO MILITARY TRAINING**  
Previous military training or experience is not necessary. Often work or sales work in the lumber field will be no qualification either for officers, non-commissioned officers, or privates.

This is no "fit-or-not" job. Skilled men are needed—men who know how to work without supervision.

Here are some of the 2000 men who are needed:

<b>FOR WOODS WORK</b>	Logging Foremen
Woods Drivers	Millmen
Woods Filers	Skidmen
Top Leaders	Chainsaw Men
Wagoners	French Drivers
Blacksmiths	Gasoline Motor
Gasoline Motor	Repair Men
Tractor Drivers	Military Foremen
Military Engineers	The Handmen
Log Builders	Charred Drivers
Pole and Piling Men	Woods Laborers
Cooks	Woods Drivers
Woods Drivers	
<b>FOR LOGGING RAILROADS</b>	Laborers
Truck Drivers	Truck Men
Locomotive Engi-	Locomotive Firemen
neers	Blacksmiths
Ironmen	
<b>FOR SAWMILLS</b>	Millmen
Sawmill Foremen	Trimmers (Circular and
Operating Mill-	straight)
wrights	Trimmer (tooth
Shapers	only)
Carpenter Men	Trimmer Men
Millwrights	Millwrights
Millwrights	Truck Drivers
Gasoline Tractor	Gasoline Motor
Operators	Repair Men
Cooks	Mill and Yard La-
Construction Mill-	borers
wrights	

(This space is donated to the Chief of Engineers, Washington, D. C., by the Stimson Mill Co., Ballard Station, Seattle, Wash.)

## To cut down the enemy, they didn't use a gun. They used an axe.

When the U.S. entered World War I, Gen. John Pershing quickly realized that his troops required an uninterrupted supply of lumber to defeat Germany, and that wood couldn't come from America. Within months, thousands of foresters, loggers, and sawmill workers had joined the U.S. Army's Forestry Engineers and were working in the French countryside, cutting wood at an unbelievable pace. The "forest soldiers" may not have fired a shot at the enemy, but as one of the men proudly proclaimed, they were "hell on cutting down trees."

Many of the men began recording their experiences with pen and camera from the moment they signed up. They returned home with diaries and photo albums, most of which have remained unseen by the public for decades. Now these exceptional forest history documents are just a mouse click away. On our website you'll find photo galleries, a timeline of events, links to books and correspondence, and so much more—as only the Forest History Society can present them.

**Explore "World War I: 10th and 20th Forestry Engineers"  
at [www.foresthistory.org/forestry-engineers](http://www.foresthistory.org/forestry-engineers)**

The Forest History Society is proud to present the digital exhibit "World War I: 10th and 20th Forestry Engineers." This online offering brings together the diary entries, photographs, and articles by those who served. Included are:

- An overview of their mobilization and work
- Information on recruitment efforts
- Accounts of deployment and service
- Personal accounts of soldiers and commanding officers
- A special issue of *American Forestry* magazine dedicated to the forest engineers



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