

The National Park Service and the New Deal

Verne Chatelain

A HOT AND steamy Washington afternoon greeted me as I set out on foot for the old Interior Department building on F Street to begin my career as the first Chief Historian of the National Park Service in September 1931. I had just completed in my decrepit Essex car a punishing four-day trip from Nebraska, in uncertain weather and over roads hardly comparable to the modern turnpikes or interstates. Completely exhausted after arriving in Georgetown early that morning, I had sought refuge in the National Hotel, which I recalled as the one-time abode of Henry Clay and other notables of early American history.

I had little time to feel tired or sorry for myself, for from the moment of arrival at Service headquarters I found myself caught up in the intense atmosphere and hectic pace of the place. Everybody in the little office (there were scarcely fifteen people in all--administrators, secretaries, and clerks) greeted me cordially enough, but it was clear that there were many problems and much work demanding the attention of all present. My own enthusiasm mounted as Arno B. Cammerer and Arthur E. Demaray, Director Horace M. Albright's two top assistants, talked to me about the new eastern parks, Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah, and the historic sites in Virginia, Colonial National Monument and George Washington's birthplace at Wakefield. There was also great activity involving the new parkway to Mount Vernon, running along the Virginia side of the Potomac from above Georgetown to Washington's beautiful home south of Alexandria.

Horace Albright had succeeded Stephen T. Mather as director in January 1929. I quickly learned that he was no beginner but a seasoned veteran: he had come to the Interior Department in 1913 and had been involved with Mather in establishing the National Park Service three years later. The two men had gained a deserved reputation for efficiency and careful public relations; and although their Washington staff was hardly a baker's dozen, it was known in federal circles for its high-grade operation within a small budget.

The director had let it be known that he wanted me immediately to visit the Service's prehistoric Indian monuments in the Southwest and Mesa Verde National Park, as well as Yellowstone, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, and Glacier--just to get the "feel of things." I often traveled to Jamestown, Yorktown, Williamsburg, and Wakefield. One of my memorable early experiences was the pageant at Yorktown on October 19, 1931 reenacting the surrender of the British forces under Cornwallis. The presence of President Herbert Hoover, his cabinet, and the governors of the thirteen original states gave me great satisfaction, as did a personal encounter there with that grand old warrior, General John J. Pershing. The

occasion provided an excellent example of how vital and significant the Service's historic sites program might become with professional development.

My pride in my new position grew steadily as I realized how much dependence was being placed on my initiative and judgment. Little by little, I began to feel like a veteran--despite my knowing that there was yet much to learn about dealing with Park Service operations and the public generally.

As a civil servant in the second half of the Hoover administration, I found that the federal government was already



A 1934 aerial view of Pennsylvania Avenue showing most of the downtown Washington, D.C. area. Pennsylvania Avenue runs diagonally north of the National Archives building under construction in the center foreground. Photograph by the United States Navy, courtesy of the Department of the Interior.

inaugurating programs and creating jobs to counter the Great Depression. This growth movement fitted nicely the mood of Horace Albright, a brilliant and imaginative administrator who seized every opportunity to increase the scope of Service operations. This was especially true in the eastern part of the nation where the bureau heretofore had been little involved. Albright talked to me early about the possibility of acquiring from the War and Agriculture departments the military parks, the Spanish forts in Florida, the Statue of Liberty, and prehistoric Indian sites held by the Forest Service.

The prospect of these acquisitions and the opportunity they would afford the chief historian to bring about a great national program for the preservation and use of historic sites greatly appealed to me even though planning for such increased responsibilities heightened the pressures and strain already felt. Here was the challenge of traveling in fields hardly before traversed, of being a creative force in a program largely without precedent. Although the New Deal is associated with Franklin D. Roosevelt, for me it began the moment I entered federal service in 1931.

My position as the sole historian in the Service's Washington office during those first months was not just lonely; it demanded one hundred percent of my effort if I were not to disappear in ignominy. Hundreds of multifaceted questions began coming my way from my first day on the job. What to do with Jamestown. Should it be another wholesale "restoration" like Williamsburg, or something else? How should we present Wakefield, Washington's reconstructed birth house, recently inherited by the Service with the site? We had the birthplace property, but there was still doubt about the accuracy of the reconstruction; there was a "fly in the cake."

As for the other historians--where should they be appointed, and according to what standards? I was aware early that well-trained academic historians do not necessarily make good Park Service historians. The Service people must have the personal attributes that enable them to meet park visitors and enjoy that

contact. Furthermore, rather than specializing only academically in a period or topic, they must sometimes travel far afield, acquainting themselves with the patterns and implements of everyday life in times past so as to interpret them effectively to the less-informed public. Where does one find and how does one select that rare breed, the park historian?

Because many places were being proposed for inclusion in the National Park system, I had to be concerned as well with standards for their selection, so that politics would not be entirely controlling. What would make a place like the proposed Morristown National Historical Park in New Jersey a "must"--as it turned out to be? Preliminary negotiations for such desired properties, obtaining administrative support, drafting the necessary legislation, and lobbying for the measures in Congress all required hours of planning and personal contacts.

It was thus that I spent much time in preliminaries before those eventful years of the New Deal proper, when the historical program of the National Park Service reached its climax and breakthrough.

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of Washington; the Spanish forts in Florida and the Statue of Liberty; and other sites with prehistoric and historic characteristics.

Commenting years later on the Executive Order, Horace Albright declared that Roosevelt's action created a truly national bureau with a national constituency. The Service thereby became the primary federal entity responsible for historic and archaeological sites and structures and the leader in the field of historic preservation. It also attained magnitude and influence sufficient to forestall any future threats of consolidation with another bureau.

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In connection with many of these programs, beginning with the CCC, the Service expanded its rolls to supervise and carry out its increased functions. Among the new positions established was that of "historical technician." For the first time, the Chief Historian was able to appoint many field and Washington office assistants, to set up (initially on a temporary basis) a Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings within the Service organization, and to direct an active program in both newly acquired and previously established historical parks around the country.

In brief, it was believed that the historical administrative machinery and personnel in operation at the

end of 1933 ought for the most part to be made permanent, if that could be done; and such a step, to be accomplished, would demand the type of action which only the Congress could bring about, just as had been the case in the creation of the Morristown National Historical Park.

What was called for, therefore, was the enactment of a historic sites act, centering initiative in the National Park Service, as well as setting up a permanent branch of historic sites and buildings, and providing for the systematic classification, preservation, and use of historical places of every category and rank.

The time was ripe for the drafting and enactment of such an act, if agreement could be reached on its various provisions. But it is not surprising, considering the great diversity of places and people involved, that there would be much discussion concerning what ought to be the course of action, and by whom the leadership role should be undertaken. This situation tended naturally to promote confusion and result in delays.

What emerged was the draft of a proposed bill, originating from the offices of the Chief Park Historian and the chief of the agency's legal services, George Moskey, in consultation with Rufus Poole of the Solicitor's Office, Department of the Interior. This draft came, it may be added, after a prolonged waiting period during which the Interior Secretary commissioned a young lawyer from outside the Department, J. Thomas Schneider, to make an independent study of European preservation methods. Schneider was sent overseas for this study; he eventually made a report and was consulted by Poole in connection with the proposed sites draft.

The draft of the legislation proposed for the historical program of the National Park Service reached Congress early in the year 1935. The bill, known as S. 2074, was sponsored and introduced by the Senator from Virginia, Harry F. Byrd; in the House it was a member of Congress from Texas, Maury Maverick, who placed the bill "in the hopper" as H.R. 6670. Hearings were held before the committees on Public Lands and Surveys. It was before the

committee in the House, however, that Secretary Ickes appeared, and, also, the Chief Historian of the Park Service. There was little opposition, and the proposed sites measure quickly passed both houses of Congress, and on August 21, 1935 was signed into law by President Roosevelt. An accompanying measure providing for a National Trust board and fund had already become law on July 10.

Thus it was that a goal set years earlier by Director Horace M. Albright and myself, in our first meeting together in Omaha, Nebraska had become reality -- the creation under service leadership of a national program for the appropriate preservation, development, and public use of the nation's great historic places.

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