



The First Directors: Mather and Albright

Stephen Mather

Although Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane supported the bill, National Park Service (NPS) Director Stephen T. Mather was adamantly against it. The Hetch Hetchy Valley of Yosemite National Park had turned into a reservoir in 1913, and then just six years later, politicians in Idaho and Montana wanted to create a huge reservoir inside Yellowstone National Park. In the eternal war between use and preservation, Stephen Mather sided with preservation: “Is there not some place in this great nation of ours where lakes can be preserved in their natural state; where we and all generations to follow us can enjoy the beauty and charm of mountain waters in the midst of primeval forests? The nation has wisely set apart a few national parks where a state of nature is to be preserved. If the lakes and forests of these parks cannot be spared from the hand of commercialization, what hope can there be for the preservation of any scenic features of the mountains in the interest of posterity?” (Stephen Mather, 1919 Report to the Secretary of the Interior).

The first director of the National Park Service (NPS) was born on Independence Day, 1867 in San Francisco. After graduating across the bay at the University of California-Berkeley, Mather eventually became a millionaire due to his success managing a borax mining company.

Mather’s expanding wallet coincided with his increasing interests in nature, mountaineering, and national parks. He became an active member of the Sierra Club, twice climbing Mt. Rainier with the group. Mather also camped with his family in Yosemite

and Sequoia national parks. It was on a particular trip to Yosemite in 1914 that Stephen Mather took notice of the abysmal conditions of the park: roads were bumpy, narrow and dangerous; lodging was inadequate; and cattle and sheep were destroying pristine meadows. Mather wrote about these problems in a letter to Secretary of the Interior Lane. To Mather’s surprise, Lane offered him a job to tackle the national park problems. Mather would spend the remainder of his life preserving and promoting the national parks.

Mather worked tirelessly in 1915 and 1916 to learn all that he could about the national parks and to establish the NPS. As a result, when the bureau was established on August 16, 1916, he became its first director.

Although Mather had numerous accomplishments as director, only two have room to be highlighted here. First, he used his own money to expand the National Park System. Mather bought the Tioga Pass Road from private interests and gave it to Yosemite National Park; purchased a sequoia grove for \$50,000 and gave it to Sequoia National Park; and donated \$15,000 dollars to help start the Save-the-Redwoods League (in a burst of adrenaline while at a public rally, Mather also donated \$15,000 of Congressman William Kent’s money, much to Kent’s surprise!).

Second, Mather improved concessioner services within the national parks. The director claimed that “Scenery is a hollow enjoyment to a tourist who sets out in the morning after an indigestible breakfast and a fitful nights’ sleep



Stephen Mather in conversation with Secretary of the Interior Albert Bacon Fall atop Glacier Point, Yosemite National Park. August 9, 1921.
NPS Photo

Mather struggled throughout his life with manic depression (bipolar disorder). Twice during his NPS career he had to take several months off work to recuperate, and twice he attempted suicide. The fact that Mather accomplished so much during his career even with his mental disability proves to the millions of Americans with depression and bipolar disorder today that anyone can accomplish their goals and succeed in life.

on an impossible bed.” Mather replaced low income concessioners with wealthy ones, enabling these companies to build grand hotels to accommodate tourists.

Mather was known throughout his NPS career for his high energy and enthusiasm. In late 1928, his health deteriorated rapidly. He resigned in early 1929, and passed away the next year. Stephen Mather’s death represented the end of a great chapter in NPS history. Fortunately, Mather had recommended that his behind-the-scenes assistant be the title of the next chapter.

Horace Albright

Horace Albright, who was also Californian and UC Berkeley graduate, became director of the NPS after Mather. He served in the position from 1929 through the summer of 1933. Albright expanded the park service into the realm of history. He also brought the Civilian Conservation Corps to work for the service. If Mather built the foundation of the NPS, Horace Albright constructed its first floor.

Horace Albright was born in Bishop, California on January 6, 1890. An avid reader and history buff early in his life, Albright attended UC Berkeley from 1908 to 1913. It was at Berkeley that he received his B.A. degree, started law school, and met the love of his life: Grace Noble.

Fate occurred for young Horace in 1912. While in the middle of an assistantship, his professor was offered a job in the Department of the Interior. To Albright’s surprise, the professor asked him to be his assistant in Washington. And so at age 23, Albright was headed to the nation’s capital as ‘lawman’ of the Interior.

When Stephen Mather arrived on the scene in early 1915, Albright and Mather immediately became great friends and work partners. In essence, Albright served as Mather’s personal secretary throughout his directorship.

When the NPS was established in 1916, Mather was struggling with severe depression and was forced to take a leave of absence. As a result, Albright served as acting director for the first two years. When Mather recovered and returned as director, Albright decided to leave the NPS and start his law career. Luckily, Mather’s power of persuasion talked Albright into staying. In 1918, Albright accepted a new post as superintendent of Yellowstone, working there for 11 years. During this time, he continued to work behind the scenes with Mather on service-wide affairs.

Albright succeeded Mather as director in early 1929, but it wasn’t until Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became president that he set his legacy. In FDR, Albright recognized a great opportunity. Both Albright and the president had a passion for history. On a Sunday drive, Albright discussed with the new president the idea of bringing history and military parks into the National Park System. FDR concurred, and the Reorganization Act of 1933 transferred dozens of parks and monuments from the War Department, the Forest Service, and the capital region to the NPS.

Albright also played a lead role in getting the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to work on projects with the NPS. The CCC constructed campgrounds and ranger stations, established trails, and planted trees inside dozens of national parks and monuments.

Claiming to be long overdue for a career in law, Albright resigned in August of 1933 to work for the U.S. Potash Corporation, eventually becoming its CEO. Before resigning as director, Albright wrote a final letter to NPS employees: “Do not let the Service become just another government bureau,” he stated. “Keep it youthful, vigorous, clean, and strong.” Albright continued to be a spokesman and advocate for the national parks until his death in 1987.



Horace Albright in his office at National Park Service Headquarters. Circa 1929.

NPS Photo