

# Yellowstone

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## Horace M. Albright Pioneer of the National Park Service



Albright, left, and Mather, right

The year was 1914. It was a cold December day in Washington, DC, and Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane had just introduced Horace M. Albright, his assistant, to Stephen T. Mather, to whom Lane had offered the position of Assistant to the Secretary. Lane left the two men alone to become acquainted. Albright and Mather discussed the problems facing the new assistant, particularly the national parks. The U.S. Army, which had been caretaking the national parks, needed all its resources if the country entered World War I. They discussed the possibility of establishing a National Park Service—and decided to work together to make the Service a reality.

### Promoting the National Park Service Idea

Albright did much of the politicking necessary to get Congress to approve the National Park legislation, which it did on August 25, 1916. That same day, Albright managed to get the bill over to the White House and secured the presidential signature—and the pen used by President Wilson. Because Mather was in California, Albright sent a telegram informing his boss of the good news.

Both the pen and telegram are part of Yellowstone's museum collection. They can be considered the first artifacts of the National Park Service history. With the creation of the National Park Service, Mather became its director and Albright his assistant.



*Park Service bill signed nine o'clock last night. Have pen President used in signing for you. Appear before members Senate Subcommittee on deficiency bill today. Also Chairman Fitzgerald of House Subcommittee. Wire instructions regarding matters you wish me to handle before leaving. Horace.*

—telegram from Horace M. Albright to Stephen T. Mather, August 26, 1916

### Establishing the Principles of Park Management

In May of 1918 Secretary of the Interior Lane sent a letter to Mather detailing the principles of park management. It reinforced the National Park Service Organic Act of 1916 by declaring parks were to be maintained in “absolutely unimpaired” condition, all activities were subordinate to the duty of preserving the parks “in essentially their natural state,” and national parks were set aside for the “use, observation, health, and pleasure of the people.” The letter also included concepts

such as not using resources commercially and providing for concessions.

This 1918 letter became the “basic creed” of the National Park Service, and for sixty years was thought to have been written by Lane. In 1976 Albright admitted to former Yellowstone superintendent Lon Garrison that he had been the author of this policy letter that had such far-reaching and long-lasting effects.

*The national parks must be maintained in absolutely unimpaired form, and every activity of the service is subordinate to the duties imposed upon it faithfully to preserve the parks for posterity in essentially their natural state.*

—Secretary of the Interior Lane to Stephen T. Mather, 1918

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## First Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park

In 1919 Horace Albright became the first National Park Service superintendent of Yellowstone. Soon after arriving, Albright stopped commercial fishing and wood-cutting in the park, lobbied against a dam on the Bechler River, and upgraded concession services.

Albright also brought the park into the automobile age. Automobiles had been allowed in the park since 1915, but park roads and facilities had remained unimproved. Albright oversaw the building and upgrading of roads and facilities, and refined the ranger force to deal with the increase of visitors and their mobility.

In addition to upgrading facilities, Albright brought education into the park. He appointed

Ranger Milton P. Skinner to be the first officially designated park naturalist in the National Park Service, and hired the first park naturalist, Isabel Bassett Wasson. He also converted the former Bachelor Officers' Quarters of Fort Yellowstone to a museum (today's Albright Visitor Center at Mammoth Hot Springs).

During this same time, Albright served as assistant to Stephen Mather, the Director of the National Park Service. He oversaw operations and budgets in all the national parks, and lobbied for their funding and support from Congress. He split his time between Washington, DC, and Yellowstone.

*The educational, as well as the recreational, use of the national parks should be encouraged in every practicable way.*

—Secretary of the Interior Lane to Stephen T. Mather, 1918

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## Second Director of the National Park Service

In autumn of 1928 Stephen Mather suffered a debilitating stroke and had to retire as Director of the National Park Service. Albright was offered the position, and became director in June 1929.

Shortly after, the park system acquired several new areas, including the Grand Tetons. Albright had been instrumental in building support for this new national park south of Yellowstone.

He continued to bring education into the national parks. He began to reorganize and coordinate the interpretive programs by establishing a Branch of Education and Research.

After five years as Director, Albright felt he had accomplished his major goals and submitted a



letter the Secretary of the Interior stating: "It is with the keenest regret that I leave the Department of the Interior after more than 20 years." Albright then began a successful business career.

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## Albright's Legacy

Horace M. Albright was a perceptive and effective politician—necessary qualities for the growth and development of the National Park Service. He was also an outdoorsman, interpreter, and successful businessman. Throughout his life he supported national parks and conservation organizations.

Albright received many awards recognizing his work with the National Park Service. In 1981, President Jimmy Carter presented Albright with the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest

civilian award, in recognition of his distinguished contributions to the cause of conservation in America.

When Albright died in 1987, he left a legacy of national park principles that remain of undiminished importance. Among them, "that the national parks must be maintained in absolutely unimpaired form for the use of future generations as well as those of our own time."

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## For More Information

*The Birth of the National Park Service: The Founding Years, 1913–33* Horace M. Albright

*Creating the National Park Service: The Missing Years* Horace M. Albright and Marian Albright Schenck

*Crucible for Conservation: The Creation of Grand Teton National Park* Robert Righter

*Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* Richard Sellars

*The Yellowstone Story (two volumes)* Aubrey L. Haines

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