

Eighty Pounds of Bronze — Grand Canyon's Memorial Mather Plaques



Mather Plaque, author's photo. Plaque's inscription was taken from the House of Representatives speech given by the Hon. Louis C. Cramton on the retirement of Stephen T. Mather, January 15, 1929.

by G. Arthur Janssen

For years the bronze plaque hung on its boulder along a bleak dusty path trampled lifeless by streams of gawking tourists on the South Rim. Somehow Stephen Mather is important to the Park Service and the Grand Canyon, but here it isn't apparent how or why. Putting together plans and funding, the Park Service pulled off an elaborate renovation of Mather Point starting in 2010. Amid accessible concrete walks,

stone trim, car-size chunks of Kaibab limestone, a cozy rustic amphitheater, and all native vegetation, the Mather Plaque on its boulder is now perched at rim's edge atop a stairway. It is a stunning presentation.

Stephen Mather's part in the Park Service's founding is a great story that was meant to be. Successes and failures. A remarkable Secretary of Interior in Franklin Lane. Mather's able assistant (and successor), Horace Albright. Congress. Politics. Money. Through it all, Mather managed to

cobble together 57 Park units and create a new, respected Federal agency between 1915 and 1929. Now with more than 400 Park units around the world today and a broad range of interpretive programs, research projects, and educational services, the legacy of Stephen Mather in the 21st century is simply astounding.

The founding of Grand Canyon National Park is equally storied with Teddy Roosevelt, a rogue Arizona senator, John Muir, a millionaire land baron/newspaper magnate, Indian

tribes, miners, scoundrels, a legendary liar, entrepreneurs of all sorts, the Forest Service, a prima donna architect, and an avaricious railroad. Whew! Through all this, Mather's goal for America at the Grand Canyon came together pretty well, all things considered. The Grand Canyon remains among the seven wonders of the natural world and continues to be a premier international destination.

As for the Mather Plaque—well, Mather didn't like plaques. He didn't want world-class National Parks cluttered up like some courthouse square. True, he knuckled under to the Sierra Club for a plaque at the site of John Muir's "Hang Nest" cabin in Yosemite Valley. True, he played politics in the dedication of a John Wesley Powell memorial on the South Rim. In his vision, a National Park was to show *itself*. National Parks were not the time or place for trivial amusements and trite entertainment.

Mather retired after a devastating stroke in 1929. He died a year later at age 62. His broad following of friends and colleagues joined in wanting to

recognize the remarkable achievements of this charismatic man and what Parks mean to all America. In the seeming urgency of the moment, planting a tree seemed simple and appropriate enough. Several letters passed back and forth between the South Rim and Park Service headquarters to wit, a tree planted on the 4th of July (Mather's birthday) as suggested did not have a ghost of a chance to survive the summer heat. In October of 1930 a Utah juniper was planted as part of a native plant garden adjacent the Yavapai Observation Station, complete with dress uniforms, guests, and a photographer. Alas, the little tree didn't make it. Today, about 10 feet away, a shapely Utah juniper twines up a weathered corner of the old stone building. Rangers and docents refer to it as the "Mather tree." Maybe it is? Why not?

A more formal national group of friends and admirers formed "The Stephen T. Mather Appreciation," a Who's Who of 1930 America, to entertain more than twenty different suggestions for a more dignified rec-

ognition. They settled on the idea of a memorial tablet to be sent to Parks where Mather had been personally committed to their development and success. Bryant Baker, a world-renowned sculptor, was chosen as artist and paid \$1,000 for the arts and crafts design. Gorham Bronze cast 28 plaques in late 1930. Twenty were sent to National Parks, two to National Monuments, three to State Parks, one to the University of California at Berkeley, and one plaque was placed outside the Director's Office in Washington D.C. at Horace Albright's request.

As more Parks were added over time, Gorham cast a run of 14 plaques in 1959 using the plaque in Park Service Headquarters to make a master mold. Hank Schoch, Chief Ranger at Colorado National Monument,



Powell Memorial dedication. GRCA NPS photo



Mather tree planting. GRCA NPS photo

looked to obtain a Mather Plaque for his monument's 75th anniversary in 1986. With none to be had, he embarked on the project of having a plaque cast for his Monument. Over the next five years his persistent effort led to a Rededication Activity of 20 Park units in 1991, on the 75th anniversary of the Park Service. Gorham cast 20 individually numbered plaques using the 1930 plaque at Wind Cave (then in storage) as a master mold. In 2015 Jim Milestone, Superintendent at Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, independently had three plaques cast using the 1930 Berkeley plaque as a master mold. One was dedicated at Whiskeytown's 50th Anniversary, 22 August 2015. The other two are to be placed at Redwood National and State Parks and Joshua Tree National Park in 2016. Using the Milestone mold, other donors purchased plaques for Saguaro National Park and Walnut Canyon National Monument. (Current price is \$2,350 plus shipping.)

So 67 Mather Plaques total have been cast. Thanks are due Don Lago for verifying production numbers from Gorham before the company closed. Where are the plaques today? Good question! And finding them all is another story. Inasmuch as these

plaques were all a private donation and never budgeted by the Park Service, there is no official NPS record of how many they have actually received, where they went, or where they are now.

Arizona has seven of those 67 Mather Plaques. (Only California with twelve has more—but one of those is lost somewhere (?) and another one has been in storage for almost 70 years—leaving ten currently on display or awaiting dedication in that state.) The two National Monuments to receive 1930 plaques are both in Arizona. Both were administered by the curmudgeonly Frank "Boss" Pinkley, a long time Mather appointee and friend. Both of those plaques were dedicated in 1932 and both remain in their original locations at Petrified Forest and Casa Grande Ruins. Mather and his cronies donated the money to purchase Pipe Spring National Monument on the Arizona Strip in 1923. With its quintessential western lore of cattle rustling, a wagon trail, Indian raids, smuggling, polygamy, God-seeking, and desert rats, this cool green wayside was too much for Mather to resist. That it was a natural stop along the way between Zion and the Grand Canyon on his Grand Circle of National Parks

made it perfect. The Mather Plaque at Pipe Spring was obtained in 1991 and looks over the North Kaibab Plateau from a hillside above the spring and Winsor Castle. Saguaro National Park and Walnut Canyon National Monument will dedicate their plaques in 2016.

Which brings us back to the Grand Canyon and its two plaques. While most Parks don't have a Mather Plaque, three National Parks have two! Each of these Parks has two plaques for a different reason. (The other Parks are Mt. Rainier and Sequoia/Kings Canyon.) The Grand Canyon has no idea why it has two plaques. The Mather Plaque on the South Rim is well known and well documented with a file of letters, notes, photos, memorandums, telegrams, reminders, architect's drawings, and a bill of lading. It was dedicated on 4 July 1932 with Arizona Governor Hunt as the guest speaker. 3 year old Sonny Lehnert, photographer Emery Kolb's grandson, placed a wreath on the monument. Since that day, the plaque has moved three more times enroute to its current location. Its present setting is certainly one of the most esthetically pleasing of any plaque and eminently worthy of your appreciation.

A maintenance worker found a Mather Plaque in a storage shed on the North Rim in 1995. The plaque was promptly whanged onto a limestone boulder and placed in front of the North Rim back country office. No documentation there or any place else has ever been found concerning this plaque. It is from the 1959 casting. The maintenance officer whose crew found the plaque retired and was lost to contact. For a while the search stopped there. Earlier this year (2015) when a friend had a permit for South Coyote Buttes and asked me to go along, the third hiker with us was in fact that retired maintenance supervisor. So I got the rest of the story: The discovered North Rim plaque was new, in the box. It had never been mounted. The shipping crate was broken up and burned as firewood. No, there was no documentation or paper

work of any sort. Upper management on the South Rim decided where the plaque was to go. The worker that found the plaque was just trying to clean things out to make more room in the sign shop.

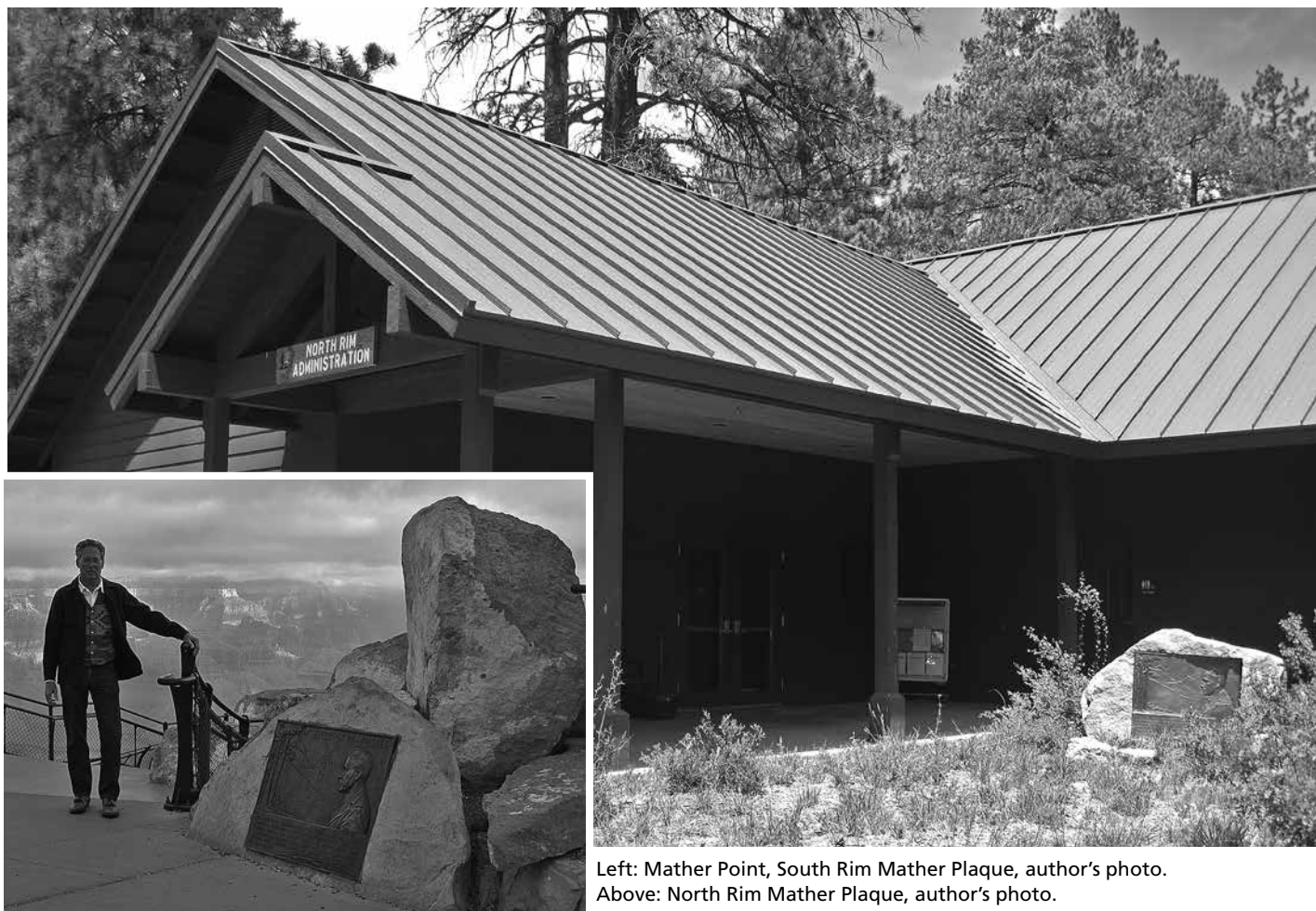
Of the fourteen 1959 plaques, three have moved completely from their original locations. Mather Junior High School was closed and the building turned over to the city of Darien, Connecticut, for its City Hall in 1983. Harper's Ferry picked up its plaque and dedicated it that November in front of the Mather Training Center. Mounted on a large boulder from the Shenandoah River, it is referred to as the Mather Rock. Another plaque from an as yet unknown location was returned to the NPS History Collection at an unknown time. Sent to the Blue Ridge Parkway about 1989 or 1990, it was mounted outside behind the Linn Cove Viaduct Visitor Contact Station. This plaque is deeply weathered and somewhere along the

way, painted silver.

Over a period of many years (since the 1970's) several people had occasion to note and document a Mather Plaque stored in a supply room at Fire Island National Seashore. The plaque in storage there was new and had never been mounted. Rather than email, I called Fire Island about this plaque on a cold winter day in early 2015. It didn't seem likely to me that a New York beach should be very busy middle of the week in February. The Ranger answering the phone turned my inquiry into an interrogation. "Why do you want to know about this Mather Plaque?" "Do you do this often?" No, she personally had not seen a Mather Plaque at Fire Island. "Who is funding your research?" No one—me! "Why do you think our plaque is missing?" "How do you know about our supply room?" "Have you located other missing plaques?" Yes, several. She noted in detail my personal identification and

contact information. Abruptly ending the conversation she said "I'll get back to you" and hung up. Lo and behold, it was the Chief Ranger and she did get back to me. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, Fire Island underwent a complete inventory of all buildings and property. They have no Mather Plaque on their present manifest. As Fire Island has no record of ever having a plaque, they could not possibly know when it left, why it left, or where it went. But where else could a new 1959 plaque come from to be found in 1995 on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon? The mystery remains: who took or sent this plaque and why?

Of the 67 plaques cast, two are currently in storage. Haleakala took down its plaque several years ago as part of a renovation at Park Headquarters for bathroom and sidewalk construction. For unknown reasons it was never put back up. An offer to privately fund its mounting has met



Left: Mather Point, South Rim Mather Plaque, author's photo.
Above: North Rim Mather Plaque, author's photo.

Plaque Production and Current Dispositions

1930 Casting (28 plaques)	1959 Casting (14 plaques)	1991 Casting (20 plaques)	2015 Casting (5 plaques)
Acadia NP	Big Bend NP	#1 Colorado NM	Joshua Tree NP (2016)
Bryce Canyon NP	Blue Ridge Parkway	#2 Chamizal NMem	Redwood N & SPs (2016)
Casa Grande Ruins NM	Cabrillo NM	#3 Guadalupe NP	Saguaro NP (2016)
Crater Lake NP	Carlsbad Caverns NP	#4 Big Cypress NPRes	Walnut Canyon NM (2016)
Denali NP	Death Valley NP	#5 NPS Rocky Mtn.R.O.	Whiskeytown NRA (8/22/15)
Glacier NP	Everglades NP	#6 Pipe Spring NM	
Grand Canyon NP (South Rim)	Grand Canyon NP (North Rim)	#7 Great Basin NP	5/5
Grand Teton NP	Haleakala NP (storage)	#8 Santa Monica Mtns NRA	
Hawaii Volcanoes NP	Harpers Ferry NHP	(lost)	
Hot Springs NP	Isle Royale NP	#9 Allegheny Portage NHS	
Indiana Dunes NL	Mammoth Cave NP	#10 Boston NHP (lost)	
Lassen Volcanic NP	Theodore Roosevelt NP	#11 Fort Clatsop NMem	
Mesa Verde NP	Virgin Islands NP	#12 Golden Spike NHS	
Mount Rainier NP (Longmire)	Mather High School (Chicago)	#13 Petersburg NB	
Mount Rainier NP		#14 Old NPS Region III Bldg.	
(Tipsoo Lake/Mather Pkwy)	14/14	#15 Canyonlands NP	
Petrified Forest NP		#16 Bent's Old Fort NHS	
Rocky Mountain NP		#17 Yucca House NM (lost)	
Sequoia NP		#18 Hovenweep NM (lost)	
Wind Cave NP		#19 Fort Union NHS	
Yellowstone NP		#20 Assateague NS	
Yosemite NP			
Zion NP		16/20	
National Park Service Headquarters (Washington D.C.)			
New York-New Jersey Interstate Park			
(Bear Mountain State Park)			
University of California, Mather Memorial Grove			
(Botanical Garden at Berkeley)			
Redwood Highway			
(Humboldt Redwoods State Park, Kent-Mather Grove)			
		TOTAL—60/67	
		Lost—5, Storage--2	
27--General Grant NP plaque in museum storage, Ash Mountain, Sequoia NP			
(28--replacement to Acadia in ME for lost plaque?)			
27/28			

with noncommittal disinterest. The phantom plaque at General Grant National Park was taken down, probably in the late 1940's, for unknown reasons—possibly the graffiti dated 1934 scrawled across its front. It was located in museum storage beneath a warehouse stairwell at Ash Mountain, Sequoia National Park—where it has been stored for almost 70 years. An offer to pay for professional restoration, repatinate this otherwise pristine plaque and have it mounted has also failed to elicit much more than a

lukewarm official response.

Five of the 67 Mather Plaques are missing. One may well have been lost or damaged in the big 1947 wildfire at Acadia and replaced with the last 1930 copy remaining at Park Service Headquarters. This is not clear, however, as the current interpretive staff at Acadia denies that their plaque on the summit of Cadillac Mountain has moved since the day it was dedicated there by Superintendent George Dorr on the 4th of July 1932. A wonderful historian in Darian, CT simply ren-

dered the personal observation that “when something happens in Maine, there are usually at least two versions of what happened and why... and usually both are wrong.” Four plaques from the 1991 casting reached their shipping destinations but nothing has been seen or heard of them since. It is suspected that they may well be lost in storage somewhere in the Parks that received them. (Each of those plaques cost \$1,275 plus shipping, est. \$60--\$65, and weighs close to 100 pounds.) The new never

mounted 1991 plaque at Big Cypress (#4) was located in their headquarters attic after multiple email inquiries and a three month search in 2013. They received it in August of 1991 and hope to have it mounted in time for the 2016 Park Service centennial.

Some plaques have taken on a life of their own. At Great Basin National Park the plaque has been stolen twice and miraculously recovered both times—last time from a scrap yard in Reno two years after disappearing. Now mounted in a “bomb proof” wall at Mather Overlook along the Wheeler Peak Scenic Drive, it is among the most beautiful of settings. Following a Freedom of Information Act request at Mt. Rainier, the story of gunplay at Tipsoo Lake was detailed, thus explaining the 40 caliber bullet ricochet marks on that plaque. The Old Santa Fe Trail Building (former Region III office) is home to 1991 plaque #14. This classic CCC building was negotiated back from the General Services Administration at a swank dinner party in Ft. Worth, Texas after cocktails, with the transfer note written on a bar napkin. Indiana Dunes State Park gave their lovely old original 1930 plaque to Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore next door when that Park unit was brought online in 1966. It was finally put up on display with development of the Lakeview picnic area in 1989. Mounted on a movable sawhorse affair in front of the Cruz Bay Visitor Center, a tourist managed to knock over the Virgin Islands plaque and it landed on another visitor’s foot breaking a toe. A possible lawsuit has been considered. A flash flood in the 1950s washed Zion’s plaque away from its first location. Fortunately it was promptly located and recovered from a sand burial with the aid of a WW II mine detector. It is now in its third location on the wall of the Zion Human History Museum. And so it goes.

Of the Mather Plaques currently on public display, they are scattered from Alaska to the Virgin Islands, Maine to the Big Island of Hawaii. You can find them in National Parks, Monuments, a Seashore, a Lakeshore,

Parkways, Memorials, a Preserve, a Battlefield, a Recreation Area, Historic Sites, and Historical Parks. They adorn three administrative offices, a couple of State Parks, and two schools. There are Mather Plaques in 16 UNESCO Biosphere Reserves and 10 World Heritage Sites. As the Park Service reaches its centennial in 2016, Stephen Mather and the Memorial Mather Plaques firmly remain an integral part of Park history, they are a touchstone to our present, and they are a challenge to our future. They are America at her best. Visiting them is a journey. And you can start it all right here at the Grand Canyon.

THANKS

To the countless people who contributed to this collection, I give my heartfelt gratitude. For all the suggestions, criticisms, and freethinking ideas I’ve received, I love you for it. Any mistakes, omissions, or inaccuracies—and there may be some—are inadvertent but they are all mine. Should you have any additional information, corrections, facts, sources, or material related to Mather Memorial Plaques, kindly send it along as this continues to be a work in progress. Thanks. It’s been fun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

While in university and graduate school, G. Arthur Janssen MD worked four summers with the National Park Service in the 1960’s as a backcountry fire fighter, packer, fire crew foreman, and ranger. After a 40 year career first as an academic and then as a clinical anesthesiologist, he is now a full time dirtbag hiker and pursues eclectic historical interests. ajansiv@gmail.com

SOURCES

Don Lago, “There will never come an end to the good that he has done—The Stephen Mather Memorial Plaques,” Grand Canyon Historical Society, *The Old Pioneer*, Vol. 21 No. 4 (2010). This is the only published article of any veracity that I could find. Don had access to the Gorham company archives at the time he wrote this. Currently (as of this writing) the Gorham records are in storage with very limited accessibility at Brown Uni-

versity under auspices of the Smithsonian.

David Nathanson, “The Mather Memorial Plaques,” NPS Park History Program Subject Files, 12/4/97, updated 9/21/99 & 1/7/02. This is the only NPS document relating to Mather Plaques from any NPS national source. This paper is helpful but contains a number of errors, several inaccuracies, and is incomplete.

Personal communication with a Deputy NPS Director, an Associate NPS Director, five Park Superintendents, and a Washington D.C. Department of Interior Librarian.

Personal communication with six retired Superintendents and two retired Regional Directors.

Emails with museum curators at NPS Headquarters, Moab, Grand Canyon, Sequoia, Yosemite, Zion, Crater Lake, Darien and Boston. Emails with two Chief Rangers.

Countless email exchanges with each National Park, State Park, or school possessing a plaque as well as many Park units that don’t have one.

Wikipedia.

Various Park Administrative Histories are available on the internet. When you can find them, these comprehensive documents are most interesting for many reasons.

Only one email received was succinct to the point of rudeness. The vast majority of folks receiving my inquiries were variably interested and at least tried to answer my questions. It must be realized (as I have learned) that often Park archives, records, memos, photo files, etc. are “off site.” If these collections have not been cross referenced and digitalized (and most have not because that costs time and money) then these resources are not available to the interpretive Rangers schlucking through the daily emails, trying to answer peoples’ endless nitpicking questions about their Park. If a plaque doesn’t have much supporting historical information, it may not exist anymore or there may not be a reasonable way to obtain the information if it does exist. A substantial number of Rangers gave me more information than I had requested. Maintenance officers should never be overlooked as they know where things are in Parks. One superintendent personally answered my general email to his Park from his cell phone on a Sunday afternoon.

Details and descriptions of plaque locations are based on firsthand experience.

Shankland, Robert, “Steve Mather of the National Parks,” Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1951.

Albright & Schenck, “Creating the National Park Service—The Missing Years,” Oklahoma, 1999.