

National Park Service 75th Anniversary



Evolution of an Idea

Imagine our lives today without the unimpaired views of Yosemite, Yellowstone, or Grand Canyon! We take for granted that we can always visit national parks to view their natural features. What if,

instead, stores, hotels and residential areas blocked our scenic views? Yet, a strong philosophy of commercial development, was a stimulus for creating a National Park Service

(NPS). The act to establish a National Park Service was passed when political and social attitudes were quite different from today.

EARLY THOUGHTS ABOUT PARKS

The American public in the late 1800s and early 1900s, viewed this nation as teeming with natural resources; conservation seemed unnecessary. No wonder that the people who campaigned and fought for the establishment of the first National Parks thought of them only as scenic recreational areas! Americans made a business

of scenery. Some early park proponents wanted our national parks developed with roads, trails, and comfortable public camps in sufficient abundance to meet all demands. Lodges and chalets commanding all the best scenic viewpoints. The best and cheapest accommodations for hikers and motorists. Railroad executives

glowingly endorsed establishing a national park bureau for economic reasons.

This was the climate that motivated the players in the drama to establish a National Park Service in the early 1900s.

THE EARLY 1900s



The world of 1910-1916 was a rapidly changing place. The boom of industry drew people from farms to cities. In 1870, only 25 percent of Americans lived in urban areas. By 1916, the figure reached almost 50 percent.

Henry Ford assembled cars in mass. Automobiles owned by Americans climbed from 8,000 in 1900 to almost 3,500,000 in 1916. President Wilson (pictured) described roadbuilding projects as "knitting together the energies of the country".

In 1914, long-standing problems among European nations erupted into a World War. After more than a year of bloodshed, events dragged the United States into the war and tested its new role as a world power.

Orville Wright vigorously promoted air travel in addressing the 1917 National Park Conference in Washington. He proposed landing strips near parks. Wright believed that travel to parks would be as easy by air as over roads.

Amidst these events, several prominent citizens spearheaded attempts to establish a National Park Service within the Department of the Interior. The Department already had jurisdiction over 31 parks and monuments. Management of existing areas was minimal, for the most part a matter of custodial law enforcement. Proposals for new parks were coming before Congress in growing numbers. A central bureau was desperately needed to give direction and consistency to the rapidly expanding "system" of parks.

THE KEY PLAYERS

A most vocal proponent of a national parks bureau was J. Horace McFarland, prominent horticulturalist, planner, and leader of the "City Beautiful" movement. McFarland and his contemporaries saw the parks as "playgrounds" which should be "made comfortable" for the American public. McFarland's influence with government officials fueled his campaign to establish the National Park Service.

Stephen T. Mather actively joined the campaign in 1915 when he became the new Assistant to the Secretary of Interior. Mather was a Chicago businessman who brought skills, energy, and much of his own money to the NPS cause. He became the first Director of the NPS after its establishment on August 25, 1916.

Horace M. Albright, a young graduate of the University of California, shared Mather's enthusiasm for opening and

developing the parks. As his principle assistant, he thrust energetic, intelligent support into the legislative campaign. Albright's political skills became crucial to passage of the Act.

Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. joined the campaign for a national parks bureau in 1910. His influence in this effort rivaled McFarland's: it was Olmsted who wrote the fundamental statement of purpose for the National Park Service. With this text, next to the actual establishment of the Service, Olmsted contributed the most vital aspect of the Organic Act. His distillation of goals declared that the new agency would "...provide for the enjoyment of said scenery and objects by the public in any manner and by any means that will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." On August 25, 1916 his words appeared in the draft legislation with only minor changes.

THE IDEA EVOLVES

After 75 years, park managers still rely on that vital statement to guide their actions. Although first conceived as "pleasuring grounds" and recreational areas, today's parks are much more. To maintain parks for future generations, resources must be managed according to scientific principles. Proposed developments must be weighed and examined carefully. Facilities cannot be constructed on the brink of the scene as first envisioned.

Moreover, the needs and desires of all people cannot be met without degrading the resources. Parks must be managed as a whole, not just for scenery or for a particular resource.

National park management concepts have changed considerably since 1916. We expect that early proponents of a park service bureau would look in pleased amazement today at the results of their wonderful vision.

Organic Act (in part)

"To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."



The National Park Service is celebrating its 75th anniversary, and we invite you to read more about it. The following books provide information on the colorful history of the service:

Albright, Horace M., *The Birth of the National Park Service*, Howe Brothers, Chicago, 1985.

Robert Shankland, *Stephen Mather of the National Parks*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1951.

Swain, Donald, *Wilderness Defender, Horace M. Albright and Conservation*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970.

