

History Over the Years

The Expansion of the National Park Service

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A 1983 STUDY by Harlan D. Unrau and G. Frank Williss, two historians of the National Park Service, presented in detailed scholarly fashion the story of that bewildering but exciting time about a half century ago when there occurred a combination of extraordinary events which caused radical changes in the Service and in how the nation would act to protect and use its important historical places.

In their "Administrative History: Expansion of the National Park Service in the 1930s," Unrau and Williss gave lengthy and generous treatment to the career of the first chief historian of the Service. This would seem reasonable inasmuch as the principal elements of expansion in that period were historical places. Among them were the national military parks and monuments previously in War Department custody, including such sites as the Spanish forts in Florida, the Statue of Liberty, and Arlington (Robert E. Lee's house).

The emphasis in this work upon the activities of the Service's first chief historian poses something of a problem for the present writer, since I happen to have been that official. Having no desire to encroach here upon the treatment of Messrs. Unrau and Williss, but wishing to use the opportunity afforded me on this occasion, I will try to supply certain other recollections and observations in the hope that I can contribute to an even better understanding of the situation existing then (a half century ago).

As a youngster growing up among the beautiful hills of southeastern Nebraska alongside the mighty Missouri River, I became aware early in life of the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific Northwest and the fact that those explorers--some forty-three of them in three small river boats--probably had passed upstream almost at the spot where I often viewed my river valley.

In thinking about my environment in that period, I realized how important physical conditions are to historical events. There was, for instance, the Missouri River--how tremendously it af-

fects history in my region! Four great roads stretched out westward from points on my river close by: the Santa Fe, the California, the Oregon, and the Mormon trails. And there was the Pony Express out of "St. Joe"; the Joseph R. Brown "steam wagon" at Nebraska City; the Russell, Majors, and Waddell western freight business; and the year-by-year shipment down my river of countless bales of furs from the Jackson Hole country all the way to the fur depot at St. Louis.

In historic Brownville, on the river too, the federal land office operated long ago, and it contained records of the transaction which produced one of the first homesteads in American history. That homestead, created as the result of the 1862 law, is preserved today by the National Park Service. The farm is near the little city of Beatrice, Nebraska.

The Homestead Act proved to be a remarkable factor in promoting the rapid settlement of an area which had been inhabited by prairie Indians. With the Civil War finally over and life a bit calmer, settlers by the hundreds--many just returned from the war--came pouring into Nebraska lands. Of these, a good number traveled in covered wagons in their journeys from states further East, bringing with them their families and all their earthly belongings as they rushed to stake out new farms under the terms of the act (others, of course, came directly from Europe in this period).

This development was intertwined with the coming of the steam railroad, which, by using numerous branch lines, was reaching out to connect with the many farm communities then appearing for the first time. Bringing the lumber for permanent farm buildings, the well-digging machinery to guarantee a safe water supply, and the barbed wire to fence lands, as well as carrying to market crops of oats, corn, and wheat, the railroad was to be an indispensable factor in ensuring the farmer's survival in my region.

I did my undergraduate work in the little college town of Peru, where I had lived from early boyhood. My graduate school education would come at Chicago and Minnesota after some long days spent with the American Expeditionary Force in France and Germany in World War I. That military experience taught me many new things about the importance of environment and the physical side of history, and I have never begrudged the time spent in the army, away from home.

I carried my deep interest in the physical aspects of life with me to graduate school, and it was indeed satisfying to discourse at Chicago with William E. Dodd and Marcus Jernegan, and at Minnesota with Lester Shippee, Solon J. Buck, and Theodore C. Blegen--men who were not only profoundly great teachers, but also deeply absorbed in the philosophy of frontier history, and especially the Turner doctrine of successive and changing waves of frontiers.

At Minnesota, moreover, it was a privilege for me to fill in one year for Blegen as acting assistant superintendent of the state historical society. That opportunity enabled me to study and visit places associated with other manifestations of frontier life--the American Fur Company at Grand Portage, the operation of the federal land system, the lumber business, and the early military story at Fort Snelling beginning with the War of 1812 and later involving the Sioux Indians. (Dr. Buck was the superintendent of the society during my tenure.)

It was my preoccupation with the problems surrounding important "places" of history--their appropriate protection and use--that persuaded me eventually to leave behind a pleasant educational position in Nebraska and to enter government service in Washington. The choice was certainly not a simple one because, as chair of the department of history and social sciences at my alma mater, Peru State College (the oldest state-supported institution of higher learning in Nebraska), I had a secure job at a time when many were in serious economic distress from the Depression.

The newspapers had been carrying for some time the story of the plans of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to "restore"

Colonial Williamsburg. Likewise, I had read that the National Park Service was engaged in taking over Jamestown Island and the Yorktown battleground and that, working closely with Mr. Rockefeller and others, the Service hoped to gain possession of George Washington's birthplace (Wakefield) and some sites at or near Williamsburg. Then came the announcement of a civil service examination for the position of "park historian." I had no idea whether this was connected with Rockefeller or Park Service plans, but it all sounded intriguing. Acting on impulse, I wrote to Civil Service, secured the forms, filled them out, sent them back, and promptly forgot the whole matter.

Many things then happened in rapid succession. I was given an oral examination by Civil Service, which I almost had decided not to appear for but did, again on the spur of the moment. Looking back now on this particular situation, I think that probably I was just "playing the field," perhaps seeking to find out how good my own qualifications might be in comparison with others trying for the park position. Certainly I did not then entertain any serious thought that I would have a chance at a position of national distinction, as I was given to understand from Civil Service that this appointment would be. Thus, I dismissed the matter from my mind. That was a mistake, for suddenly a telegram came. It was signed "Demaray," and it requested that I meet Director Albright of the Park Service in Omaha "between trains." As it turned out, Horace M. Albright was going from Washington to some of the western parks, and he wanted to take a few minutes en route to size me up.

Our interview, which lasted perhaps forty minutes, proved to be a complete meeting of minds, and I was overwhelmed when the director invited me to come to Washington and to take charge of the Park Service's budding historical program. As I recall, Mr. Albright did not at that moment use the term "chief historian" in this invitation. But it was quite clear that I was to have charge of a program national in scope (the Civil Service had been right in its description of the position) and that it would include my dealing with such tremendous places as Jamestown Island, Yorktown, and George Washington's birthplace.

Did I immediately say "yes" to Mr. Albright's invitation that same evening in Omaha? Today my mind is a bit hazy about this, but I am sure that I did not reject the offer. It is likely that I said I would give the matter serious consideration and reply promptly. I suspect that Albright wired Assistant Director Arthur E. Demaray from Omaha that night, instructing him to give me by wire a formal invitation. When the message came from Demaray, I was "on the spot." After a day or so of anxious soul-searching, I accepted.

On September 15, 1931, I came to Washington to begin work with the National Park Service. Director Albright was still away visiting the western parks, where he had gone from Omaha directly after our conference. I was received cordially by the small central office force of the Service. It was evident to me from the outset that there was a high degree of morale, from Associate Director Arno B. Cammerer and Arthur Demaray on down the line to the newest file clerk and secretary.

I embarked on my new activities with a sense of confidence, thinking I fully understood what Mr. Albright meant when he asked me to take charge of and develop the fledgling historic sites program, for it had already demonstrated--with vigorous public approval--its ability to protect the national parks and monuments in essentially their original and primitive condition, while at the same time developing a skillful interpretive program calculated to supply the visiting public with carefully researched and accurate information. If the Service could do this, then it could--using similar approaches--do the same kind of thing for its historic sites.

Certain conditions, nevertheless, immediately gave me a feeling of uneasiness. For one thing, the entire staff was clearly "western park" oriented, despite new responsibilities in the East at the Great Smokies and Shenandoah and the historic sites in Virginia. It was also quite evident that I, as the newest member of the office, was, as far as everybody else was concerned, a strange breed--a historian. While there was a spirit of friendliness toward me, there was yet a great deal of puzzlement, for nobody seemed to

have the slightest notion of what I might or should do. I suddenly found myself feeling very lonesome and wondering if even Mr. Albright could rebuild my confidence when he got back.

Particularly, as I recall, I was disturbed by my place in the office organization (as worked out by Demaray and the chief of the Branch of Education and Interpretation). The arrangement, I soon learned, was that while I was to be chief of the historical division (and that sounded pretty important), there was to be another division alongside. The naturalist division had a chief of equal status, and both divisions were to operate inside the Branch of Education and Interpretation headed by Dr. Harold Bryant, a distinguished scientist and naturalist from the western parks. Bryant, by his own frank admission, was completely without expertise in matters historical, and yet as my boss he would be in the position to "call the shots" in all aspects of the historical program.

This to me was illogical to the point of being ludicrous. I was beginning to learn something about the bureaucratic mind, and it shocked me. It required nearly two years to correct this situation; the emergence of the New Deal in 1933 made possible the separate Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings within the Service. In all fairness to Dr. Bryant, who was always agreeable and understanding to me, while we worked together he never interfered with me in the slightest way. I can only speculate on what the situation might have been had he been a different kind of person.

The struggle of the chief historian to achieve a thoroughly professional program involving the historical places of the Service--one that for all time to come would stand up under the most severe testing--is well illustrated by happenings at Colonial National Monument (Jamestown and Yorktown) in my first year of tenure. Two field historians had been selected from the Civil Service lists, B. Floyd Flickinger and Elbert Cox, along with a superintendent, William M. Robinson, Jr., a Civil Service man from a different

"administrative" list.
Robinson had no previous Park Service experience, only military.

Since under long-established Service rules field employees in all categories were placed under the field officer in charge, Flickinger and Cox were assigned to Robinson. The latter, reflecting little inclination to observe the proprieties, objected strenuously to the meeting of the field and Washington office historians to study and recommend proper historical procedures for Jamestown Island and York-

town, claiming that this was an invasion of his right to decide what should be done within his area.

This situation led to my recommending to the director that the historians in the field be placed directly in charge administratively, and this brought about (when Albright agreed) the appointment of Flickinger as superintendent at the Colonial National Monument and later Cox at Morristown National Historical Park in New Jersey. Many other competent Service historians of that decade were to have significant records in

administrative positions: men such as Herbert E. Kahler, T. Sutton Jett, George A. Palmer, Ronald F. Lee, and George F. Emery. Now that the professional historian has gained the same degree of status and respect in the Service as the naturalist and the ranger, it may no longer be necessary to insist on the practice I once recommended.

As I review this manuscript and think about the great National Park Service historical program that now has been realized nationwide, the perhaps considerable use of the first person pronoun and its

variants I trust will be forgiven, for this was the only effective way that "I" could find to tell "my story."

Verne E. Chatelain was the first Chief Historian and the first Chief of the Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings of the National Park Service. Retired now as Professor Emeritus in History, University of Maryland, and the recipient of a Distinguished Citizenship Award from the State of Maryland, Dr. Chatelain was cited in 1965 by the President of the United States for contributions to American education.