

YOSEMITE'S MUSEUM

A TRAILBLAZER IN PARK ARCHITECTURE AND NATURE EDUCATION

One of the most significant buildings in Yosemite is located at the heart of Yosemite Village.

Visitors pass through its doors every day, but few realize the seminal role it played in the development of the National Park Service's signature Rustic style. In fact, the Yosemite Museum was the first building constructed as a museum in the National Park system, and served as the home of educational initiatives that would serve as models for park programs nationwide.

Museum development at Yosemite began even before the creation of the National Park Service. As early as 1915, some exhibits prepared by Chief Ranger Forrest Townsley, primarily specimens of mounted wildlife, were displayed at the Chief Ranger's office. In the fall of 1920, the old Jorgensen Studio building near Sentinel Bridge was made available as museum space. That year, Ranger Ansel Hall was designated as the Information Ranger. He began creating more displays. By the summer of 1921, exhibits in the temporary museum quarters included a history room, ethnology room, natural history room, and terrarium. These exhibits were well received by visitors and inspired donations of both cash and objects for the museum collection.

In May of 1922, a collection of Indian baskets valued at between ten and fifteen thousand dollars was donated to the museum. The donation intensified Hall's desire for a new museum building—specifically a “fireproof” structure to protect the growing and valuable collections. At Hall's request, architect Herbert Maier, then employed by the Buffalo Museum of Science as an exhibit designer,

prepared plans and a color perspective sketch of the proposed museum.

With plans and sketches of the proposed museum in hand, Hall began raising funds for the structure. The Yosemite Museum Association was formed to handle the funds in 1923. As the National Park Service's first nonprofit cooperating association, the group was a prototype for associations that now exist for National Parks nationwide. In later years, the group was renamed the Yosemite Natural History Association and then the Yosemite Association.

While initial fundraising went well, the amount collected was inadequate for the type of building Hall dreamed of. Realizing he needed additional support, Hall turned to Chauncey Hamlin, the president of the American Association of Museums. The two men first met on a high Sierra hike in 1921. Hamlin brought a funding request to the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial fund. The fund approved a grant of \$75,000 in July of 1924. Of that, \$50,000 was to be used to construct the building, with the remainder to be used for equipment, furnishings and salaries for the first three years.

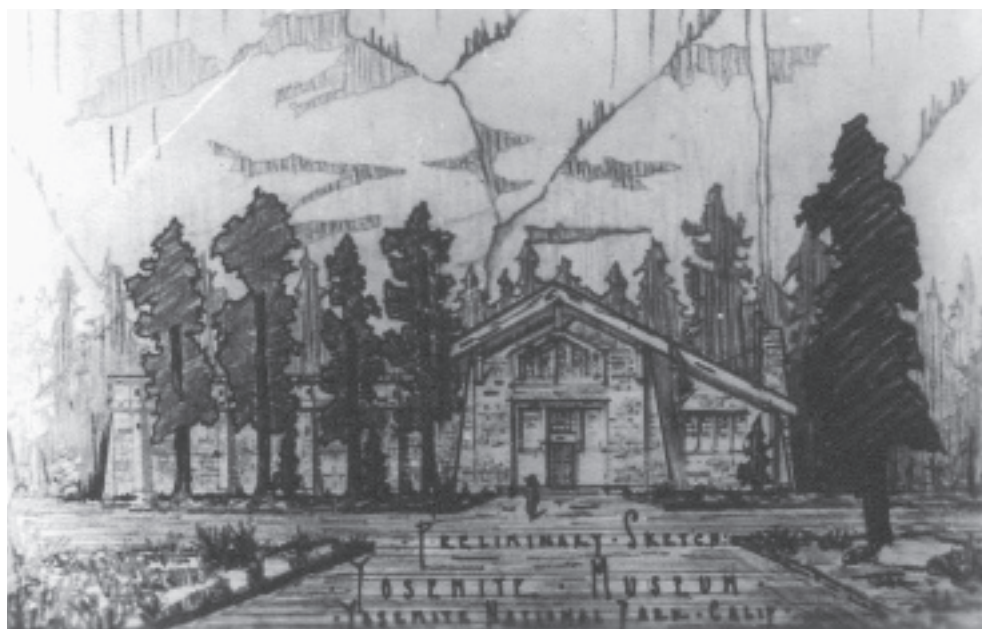
NATIVE ROCKS AND LOGS

Once the funding was secured, Hall met with Hermon Bumpus of the American Association of Museums (AAM) to begin planning the museum's construction. As a first step in the museum project, Bumpus directed Hall to build a branch museum and lookout station at Glacier Point.

The AAM hired Herbert Maier in August to prepare the final plans and oversee construction of the new museum. Maier's first assignment was to design the Glacier Point lookout. His plans were approved within days, allowing construction to begin immediately. The structure was completed in just over a month, making it the first of the Park Service's many trailside museums.

The Glacier Point lookout site, atop a cliff on the south side of the Yosemite Valley, was selected for its educational value. The shelter

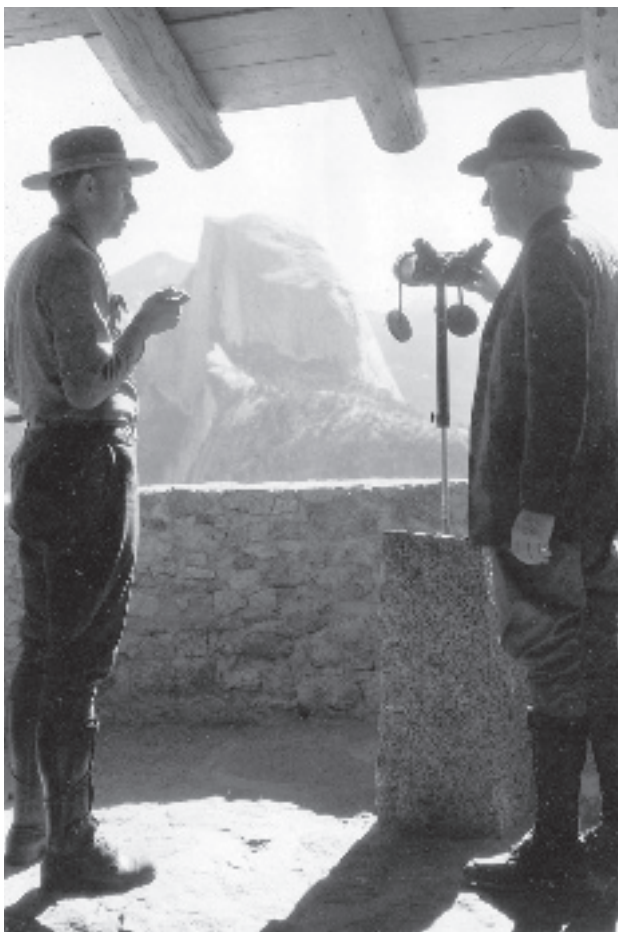
Herbert Maier's first proposed Museum design was far more ambitious than the modest building budget would allow.



YOSEMITE RESEARCH LIBRARY



The Glacier Point lookout under construction in 1924. The site was chosen for its breathtaking views.



Stephen Mather (right) visits the Glacier Point lookout in the 1920s.

affords a spectacular view of the valley and surrounding cliffs, making it an ideal location for naturalists to provide visitors with information about park geology.

Meanwhile, the original design for the main museum building was rejected by the NPS Landscape Design Office. Maier reworked the plans with input from the design office and both Hall and Bumpus. These revisions were approved in September. The approved plans were far more modest than the design originally proposed. Among the factors that led to this was NPS Director Stephen Mather's desire to give the entire village, including the museum, a unified architectural theme.

Myron Hunt, a prominent Los Angeles architect, designed the Administration Building, which was under construction while the Museum and Post Office were being designed. Gilbert Stanley Underwood, architect of The Ahwahnee, designed the Post Office. Hunt's design clearly set the tone for the other Village buildings. Despite being designed by three different prominent architects, the three buildings are nearly identical in form and detailing.

Maier fully embraced the revised design concepts. The buildings at the heart of Yosemite Village were among the first to be designed in the National Park Service Rustic style of architecture. Maier later became a leading practitioner and spokesman of the style. In a 1926 Nature Notes article describing the Museum building, Maier wrote of the importance of harmonizing the structure with its surroundings, both in terms of the natural and built environments.

Maier pointed out that the museum "must take its place as an integral unit of the new village....In willing



The Museum and Yosemite Village in 1928. The edge of the Administration Building can be seen to the left.

deference to the park service, there is observed restriction to indigenous building material in all visible exterior parts; namely native rocks, logs and shakes.”

Describing the relationship between the building and its natural surroundings, Maier wrote, “The elevation of the museum stresses the horizontal—that seemed the logic of the situation.... To attempt altitudinal impressiveness here in a building would have meant entering into competition with the cliffs; and for such competition the architect has no stomach.”

The more restrained design for the building was also more in line with Stephen Mather’s vision for museums in the parks. In a 1925 Director’s Report, Mather wrote:

It is not the policy of the service to establish elaborate museums in any of the national parks, or to have them considered “show” places. Rather they are to be regarded as places to stimulate the interest of visitors in the things of the great outdoors by the presentation of exhibits telling in a clear consecutive way the story of the park from its geological beginning through all branches of history The national parks themselves are the real museums of nature, and the park museum in each will simply serve as an index to the wonders that may be studied and enjoyed on the ground by the observant student of nature.

The budget for the building was barely sufficient to cover the revised design and would not have been enough to construct Maier’s more elaborate original concept. Maier pointed out that while the grant was given specifically for a “fireproof” building, “the money would not go far enough for that and leave over enough of a museum worth fireproofing.” Maier resolved this dilemma by constructing the entire first floor of concrete, creating a “fireproof” vault for the collections while framing the second-level office space with less expensive wood.

CONSTRUCTION

On November 16, 1924 NPS Director Stephen Mather presided over a day of ceremonies for the new Yosemite Village Center. This included the dedication of the newly completed Administration Building, and laying the cornerstones of the Museum and Post Office buildings.

Construction continued through the winter, despite inclement weather. On December 16, ten inches of snow fell in the valley and had to be shoveled off the recently constructed second floor of the structure. Other provisions for the weather had to be made as well, including covering the new concrete with hay to protect it from freezing and building makeshift shelters over portions of the work in progress.

The building was completed in April 1925, one month ahead of schedule, but it took another year for the museum displays to be completed. The Museum finally opened to the public on May 29, 1926. The Superintendent’s report for June indicated the museum was “besieged by hordes of visitors” estimated at approximately 2,000 per day.

The museum encouraged visitors to view the exhibits chronologically, beginning with geological exhibits describing the formation of the valley and proceeding through time to the stagecoaches that brought early visitors to the park. The Geology room occupied the first exhibit space to the right of the foyer. From there, a U-shaped path of travel led visitors through the Natural History exhibits, the Life Zone room, and the Indian Room, then out the back door to the stagecoach and wildflower exhibits on the covered rear porch. The backyard contained more displays related to Indians in

The Museum played a seminal role in developing the Park Service’s architectural style.

Yosemite. Visitors could return to the foyer through the back door and proceed upstairs to additional exhibits, including insect displays on the landing and the Tree room, Flower room and lecture room. A library was located on the first floor, accessed through double doors on the west side of the lobby.

A MODEL FOR EDUCATION AND ARCHITECTURE

Ranger Ansel Hall went on to play a leading role in education in parks nationwide. By the time the Museum building was built, Hall had been promoted to Chief Naturalist for the entire National Park Service, where he directed the development of educational programs throughout the



The Yosemite Museum against the Valley's majestic granite cliffs, circa 1938.

YOSEMITE RESEARCH LIBRARY

The construction of the Museum. Ranger Ansel Hall, the impetus behind the Museum, stands beside the cornerstone; the Administration Building can be seen in the background.



YOSEMITE ARCHIVES

Workers toiled through the winter of 1924 to build the Museum. Here, workers shovel snow from the building's floor slab forms so they can continue construction.



YOSEMITE ARCHIVES



The Museum's cozy original library, circa 1932. The library was located in the west wing of the building's lower level.

system. While the Museum and its exhibits served as a model for other parks, the building served as an incubator for ideas about the role of parks in education.

The Yosemite Field School of Natural History, founded by Harold C. Bryant, embodied the principle of parks as a place for education and study. Bryant had been a nature guide in Yosemite since 1920 and helped to organize a field school for nature guides starting in 1925, with headquarters in the newly completed museum. The first such field school for the National Park Service, it provided seven weeks of intensive study for twenty future nature guides selected from numerous applications received each year from around the country. Bryant left Yosemite in 1929 to direct research and interpretive work for the Park Service from its Washington D.C. office, applying many educational concepts developed at Yosemite.

The Yosemite Museum project inspired a successful and continuing partnership between the AAM, NPS and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial fund. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the fund awarded grants for museum work in Grand Canyon National Park, Palisades Interstate State Park in New York and four museum structures at Yellowstone National Park. All were designed by Herbert Maier and are regarded as some of the finest examples of the Rustic style.

In 1933, Herbert Maier was hired by the Park Service

as a regional director for Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) work in state parks. In this capacity, Maier helped develop guidebooks on Rustic design principles for state park designers. Widely distributed throughout the Park Service, these books influenced the design of park structures nationwide at a time when hundreds of new parks were being developed with CCC labor.

Today, the Yosemite Museum is easy to take for granted. Its Rustic style has become so synonymous with National Park architecture that the building now seems very ordinary. Its modest structure, which blends in so well with both the natural and built environments of Yosemite Village, obscures the important role it played in the design of so many NPS buildings and the development of educational opportunities in parks.

Now over eighty years old, the museum has outgrown its original building. But as planning for the future Yosemite Museum progresses, we would do well to remember that the building itself is an important part of the museum collection.

Sueann Brown is the Historical Architect for Yosemite National Park, Division of Resources Management & Science. She loves rocks and logs and buildings made out of rocks and logs.