The National Park Service and Its History Program: 1864–1986—An Overview

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THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE employs hundreds of historians, more than any other government entity. These people practice their profession in diverse ways. There are those who manage on either the federal, regional, or park level the cultural resources found in the National Park system's 338 units; others are involved exclusively in research and planning; while the greatest number, clad in National Park Service green, have the job title of ranger. The major duties of the latter group, the best known to the public, include interpreting the parks' cultural resources to millions of visitors while insuring preservation of these same resources for the enjoyment of future generations.

The National Park Service was created by act of Congress in August 1916 and charged "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life" within the areas it was to manage 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 NPS did not employ any professional historians until the summer of 1931, when two park historians were hired at Colonial National Monument (now Colonial National Historical Park). Until the mid-1920s the Park Service's focus had been almost entirely on the great natural and scenic parks in the West and Alaska, but with the appointment of Horace M. Albright to succeed Stephen T. Mather as director in January 1929, this changed. Albright—Californian, lawyer, senior park administrator, and history buff—had long dreamed of making the Park Service truly national through more acquisition in that vast region between the Rockies and the Atlantic Ocean. In addition to establishing new parks and monuments, Albright looked to the transfer of those areas administered by the Department of War and the Department of Agricul-

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ture, particularly the Civil War battlefields and coastal fortifications. But before his dream was realized, the sesquicentennial of the Yorktown surrender in 1931 focused attention on the development and interpretation of Colonial National Monument; hence the employment of historians at that site.

That September Director Albright employed Verne E. Chatelain—a professional historian, western scholar, and then chairman of the history and social sciences department at Nebraska State Teachers College in Peru—to join his Washington staff and develop a history program for the Park Service. Understandably, there was no history branch in Washington and Chatelain reported to the Branch of Research and Education. Much effort and thought were devoted to implementing history programs in the few cultural areas then managed by the National Park Service. Chatelain also worked closely with Albright, community leaders, and local preservationists to secure enactment of legislation on March 2, 1933, establishing a national historical park at Morristown, New Jersey, scene of two winter encampments of the Continental Army.

The Morristown act was precursor to one of the most significant events in the evolution of the National Park system and the expansion of the Park Service's history program. An act of Congress approved by outgoing President Herbert C. Hoover on March 3 authorized the president to reorganize the federal government's executive branch. Early in April President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, and Director Albright spent a day at Hoover's fishing retreat on the Rapidan River in Virginia. On the return to the nation's capital, Albright rode with Roosevelt and employed his well-known persuasive powers to win the president's support for his proposal to consolidate the administration of all national parks, monuments, battlefields, and other such areas—irrespective of whether they were managed by the Departments of the Interior, War, or Agriculture—under the National Park Service. This reorganization was carried out under executive orders signed by Roosevelt on June 10 and July 28 and became effective August 10. By adding to the system a dozen predominantly natural areas in ten western states and nearly fifty historical areas in seven eastern states and the District of Columbia, this action gave the Park Service a much broader and more diverse constituency.

Many of the transferred areas already had history programs. Indeed, the first "park historian," John Batchelder, had arrived on the scene at Gettysburg almost as soon as the guns ceased firing and while the fields and woods were still strewn with war's terrible harvest. Batchelder, employing oral history and documentary research, undertook site identification and evaluation studies of the battlefield and prepared a series of documented troop movement maps. These studies were forerunners of what by the late 1960s would be designated historic resource studies. These studies provided an inventory and evaluative review of the cul-

tural resources of an area administered by the National Park Service. They identified and documented those sites eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and provided information to enhance interpretation and help direct management. In 1864 the Gettysburg Battlefield Monument Association was chartered and Batchelder was employed as its historian.

Some twenty-five years later, in August 1890, Congress authorized establishment of the nation's first two historical parks—Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park and Antietam National Battlefield Site. Three more national military parks—Shiloh in 1894, Gettysburg in 1895, and Vicksburg in 1899—were authorized by Congress before the turn of the century. Each of these parks was administered by a three-man commission that reported to the Secretary of War. As the commissions were given a mandate to identify and mark troop positions, camps, and other features, each employed a historian, usually a veteran. Research programs were undertaken that resulted in the preparation and publication of historical base maps, as well as troop movement maps. Synthesizing and evaluating a mass of documentary materials, the commission historians prepared the texts that, when cast into iron tablets positioned on our national battlefields, introduced the combatants and interpreted the ebb and flow of the fighting. The historians also had a key role in locating the sites where states, units, families, and other interested parties would erect their memorials.

Director Albright, in making the case for inclusion of the cultural sites managed by the War and Agriculture departments in the National Park system, had constantly cited two factors—administrative efficiency and an improvement in interpretive programs. In regard to the latter, with the phasing out of the responsible commissions and with the passage of time annually reducing the number of veterans of the blue and grey, there was a critical need to bring the interpretive and education programs that were a popular hallmark of the western national parks to the nation's battlefield parks. Coincidentally, in the years since the Great War, there had been a revolution in the way middle-class Americans enjoyed additional days of leisure time and a family automobile. As most Americans still lived east of the Mississippi, visiting the nation's cultural sites was becoming an increasingly popular form of recreation.

This was the challenge that senior National Park Service management confronted in the days and weeks following the 1933 reorganization. Other forces, however, racked the nation. Franklin D. Roosevelt had been inaugurated at a time of worldwide economic chaos. To meet this crisis, the New Deal was born. The first 100 days of the Roosevelt administration saw the birth of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Public Works Administration (PWA), and a host of other "alphabet" agencies and programs.

The Park Service, as one of the nation's key conservation bureaus,

was the beneficiary of several of these programs, particularly the CCC and PWA. Chief Historian Chatelain, in the months since reporting for duty in September 1931, had assessed the situation and was prepared to capitalize on it. Within a few weeks of the August 1933 reorganization, Chatelain visited most of the Park Service's new historical areas. He took advantage of the New Deal's Emergency Conservation Work (ECW) programs to employ a talented corps of professional historians, many just out of the halls of academia or working on graduate degrees. A number of these young people liked the challenges encountered and went on to long and productive careers with the NPS or other agencies as public historians. Several served the Park Service as its chief historian, others as regional historians, while some became superintendents, and Ronald F. Lee headed the Northeast Region as its regional director.

At first most of these historians were stationed in Washington and were under the supervision of Chief Historian Chatelain. Thus Chatelain within a few months saw his staff grow from himself and a secretary to more than sixty staff historians. After a brief period of indoctrination and training, most were assigned to the parks or ECW field offices. Those sent to the parks found much of their time and energy engrossed in developing and carrying out programs aimed at interpreting the parks in an interesting and relevant manner to the visitors, whether families on a day outing or university professors and their students.

They were also responsible for undertaking research, developing standards, and providing technical oversight of preservation, restoration, and reconstruction programs undertaken at those cultural parks where CCC camps were located. As planning and treatment focusing on historic buildings was complex and exacting, a multidisciplinary report, the historic structure report, evolved in the mid-1930s. This study has stood the test of time, and more than fifty years later, it is a required planning document whenever a proposal calls for substantial intervention in a historic structure's fabric. Historians became key members of the multidisciplinary teams preparing the park master plans for management, development, and interpretation; they likewise provided background data for museum plans. To acquaint local communities with the National Park Service's role in interpreting and protecting the new areas for which it was responsible, the historians gave off-site programs to civic clubs, historical societies, schools, and other groups. The historians assigned to the ECW field offices (precursors of the NPS regional offices) initially had oversight of or involvement in projects affecting cultural resources in state, county, and city parks involved in the ECW programs.

On August 21, 1935, President Roosevelt signed into law the Historic Sites Act establishing "a national policy to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings, and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States." To carry out this policy, the act assigned broad powers and duties to the Secretary of the

Interior and the National Park Service. As one of their responsibilities, they were to survey historic properties "for the purpose of determining which possess exceptional value as commemorating or illustrating the history of the United States."

The Historic Sites Act, through its provision for a historic site survey, gave a new and expanded dimension to the Park Service's history program. From 1936 until the pre-Pearl Harbor buildup of U.S. military forces, National Park Service historians, employing a thematic context, undertook a survey of the nation's historic sites and structures, aiming to identify potential additions to the system. This activity was re-established in the autumn of 1957. In the years since then thousands of sites have been studied and more than 1,700 have been designated as national historic landmarks by the Secretary of the Interior.

World War II saw the end of the CCC and related emergency conservation work, as well as a drastic cutback in other park-related activities. Most parks, in view of travel restrictions brought on by rationing and a longer work week, found their staffs and appropriations slashed. Many of the Park Service's historians joined the military. The months after V-J Day found millions of men and women mustered out of the armed services, and the end of wartime controls. Most NPS historians who had served in the military or worked in defense-related activities returned to the parks or regional offices. Americans again took to the roads in ever-increasing numbers. In view of the postwar nationwide economic boom, however, there was no perceived need for reinstituting the New Deal's emergency conservation programs. Although NPS budgets increased and personnel ceilings inched upward, these increases did not keep pace with the surge in visitation. Then, in June 1950, the Korean conflict erupted and by 1952 the NPS found itself with lean and mean budgets. In 1953 there was a reduction in force.

It was during these years that many World War II veterans, taking advantage of the GI Bill to complete their education, joined the NPS, a number as historians. The park historians saw more of their time and energy focused on interpretation. The Handbook Series (thirty- to seventy-page booklets with well-illustrated narratives of the areas' principal themes) was inaugurated and proved an instant success. Those historians with a flair for writing found an outlet for their talent. The park historian became a subject expert, and a number soon had extensive bibliographies to their credit through publication of Park Service–related monographs.

In 1951, National Park Service Director Arthur E. Demaray called for each area to prepare an administrative history chronicling its evolution and development. Such a document was aimed at improving the administration of the Park Service's 170-odd units. In certain parks, even where there was a staff historian, the superintendent prepared the area's administrative history. Because of lack of guidance from the Washington and

regional levels and the advent of programs focusing on other forms of park history, the park administrative history program did not flourish.

By the early 1950s, a huge backlog of deferred park maintenance and development projects—compounded by a dramatic growth in visitation—posed serious problems for the Park Service. The major response was MISSION 66, a ten-year rehabilitation and capital development program initiated by Director Conrad L. Wirth in 1955 to improve facilities, staffing, and resource preservation at all areas in time for the Park Service's fiftieth anniversary.

The MISSION 66 years saw a significant increase in the number of Park Service historians. While some of these historians were sent to parks to assume the workload resulting from increased planning and interpretive responsibilities, others were assigned to teams headed by veteran Park Service historians and undertook short-term crash research programs at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park and Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine. Longer-term research and development projects were staffed by multidisciplinary teams with historians in key roles at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial and Independence National Historical Park. The Eastern and Western Museum Laboratories, to meet their MISSION 66 goals, reinforced their staffs, and those historians involved in exhibit planning and research made significant contributions. The Southeast Region, faced by its MISSION 66 responsibilities as well as the approach of the Civil War Centennial, established two historian positions in the regional office. One of these positions was staffed by a planning and interpretive specialist, the other by a research historian.

Like the New Deal era, the MISSION 66 years were a productive time for Park Service historians. Deadlines were tight, but accomplishments were dramatic. Many handsome visitor centers with exhibits and audiovisual programs were planned and built, there were road and trail waysides, a new look in park leaflets, attractive handbooks, the national historic landmarks program, new parks, and ever-increasing visitation. MISSION 66 veterans can be proud of their accomplishments.

In October of 1966, the year targeted for completion of the MISSION 66 goals, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the National Historic Preservation Act. This landmark legislation redirected the energies of many Park Service historians. Six months before, in April, the National Park Service had centralized its history research program in the office of the chief historian in Washington. Robert M. Utley, distinguished western historian and able administrator, had prevailed on Director George B. Hartzog, Jr., to transfer to his office from the field eight or nine historians who had demonstrated a flair for research. With a core of research historians in Washington, senior management decided they did not need park historians or similar discipline specialists in the parks. What was needed were communicators, because all they had to

do to answer a question was go to the library, pull out a book, and look up the information. By doing this, Civil Service grades were reduced, and communication skills became all-important.

The era of the "great communicators" in the parks lasted from the mid-1960s until the late 1970s, when members of Congress became concerned about complaints from park visitors about the lack of subject knowledge on the part of many field interpreters. This led to a five-day workshop at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, in January 1979, attended by senior management and professionals. Participants discussed the quality and character of interpretation in the field, as well as such other issues as the inappropriate recreational use of parks set aside for their historical and archaeological values and the proper sequencing of research and planning. As a result of the workshop, senior National Park Service management made a commitment to turn back the clock to the years before the mid-1960s. Park interpreters would again be discipline specialists first and communicators second.

Following the 1966 establishment of a corps of research historians under Chief Historian Utley's leadership, there were two groups of Park Service historians—those committed to mission-oriented research in Washington and those committed to interpretation in the parks. Then, in 1970, to provide a closer link between planning and history research, management transferred the research historians to service centers in Washington and San Francisco. In late 1971 the two service centers merged in Denver. History research was then accomplished principally through the Denver Service Center, with the Washington office charged with oversight of policy and standards. The regional offices were in charge of programming and liaison with the parks. The Park Service is currently divided into ten regions, and a regional historian is assigned to each.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 had far-reaching effects on the activities of National Park Service historians. Heretofore, their energies had been focused on interpretation, research, protection, and administration of sites and resources determined to be or believed to be nationally significant. There was no Section 106 compliance, no Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, no comprehensive National Register of Historic Places, no state historic preservation officers. The parks were "Islands in the Sky."

To meet these challenges, the Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation was established in Washington, headed by Dr. Ernest A. Connally, an articulate and knowledgeable professional from academia. Bob Utley's History Division, along with other offices concerned with cultural resources, now reported to Dr. Connally. New divisions to focus on the National Register programs were established and staffed. In 1973 the link between those history programs associated with the parks and those focused on the National Register and the external mission of the

National Park Service was formalized by establishment of the Assistant Directorate for Archeology and Historic Preservation and the Assistant Directorate for Park Historic Preservation. The former included these divisions—Grants, National Register, Historical and Architectural Surveys, and Interagency Services—and the latter the History, Archeology, and Historic Architecture divisions. Then, in the summer of 1978, the separation of those divisions concerned with cultural resources outside the National Park System from those that focused on the system became a divorce: Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus removed the former to a new bureau, the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

Among the first initiatives undertaken by Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt in 1981 was to abolish the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service. Those divisions concerned with external cultural resources, headed by Associate Director Jerry L. Rogers, returned to the National Park Service. Then, in February 1983, to insure a better use of resources and promote efficiency through recognition that a number of the external and internal cultural resource programs were interdependent, the associate directorates for National Register Programs and cultural resource management (including the history, anthropology, historic architecture, and curatorial services divisions) were merged. Jerry Rogers, a skilled administrator sensitive to the need for Park Service historians to work with the state historic preservation offices, the preservation community, academia, local governments, and other outside parties to meet the challenges of the 1980s, was named to head the new associate directorate. The post-1983 organization of those offices on the Washington level concerned with cultural resources represents a return to the situation as it existed before the 1973 reorganization.

In the mid-1960s, coincident with completion of MISSION 66 and the beefing-up of the History Division in Washington with a corps of historians drawn from the field, the regional historian positions had been phased out. In the early 1970s, the evolution and growth of the National Register, the necessity to comply with Section 106 and National Environmental Protection Act regulations and the inventorying and evaluation requirement of Executive Order 11593, and the transfer of Washington Office research historians to the service centers resulted in reestablishment of the regional historian positions. The regional historian, along with regional counterparts in archaeology, historic architecture, and curation, constituted a regional counterpart to the cultural resource office in Washington. Under the tripartite programmatic memorandums of agreement hammered out by the Park Service, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers, regional cultural resource professionals were thrust into the forefront of the Park Service's efforts to address and monitor its Section 106 compliance responsibilities.

The effects of the National Historic Preservation Act have been profound and beneficial as they affect historic properties within park boundaries. Management in the Park Service's natural and recreation areas has become responsible for the protection and interpretation of cultural resources. Superintendents of areas established because of their national cultural significance now must be concerned with sites and structures of state and local significance as well. Cultural properties in all parks must be inventoried and evaluated and those deemed eligible nominated to the National Register, and this has had major repercussions on the role and activities of Park Service historians. The Park Service crafted a new category of history report, the Historic Resource Study (HRS), designed to answer the needs of management by providing a narrative history of a park's cultural resources, an inventory and evaluation of the area's above-grade structural resources, and preparation of documentation for those properties deemed eligible for listing in the National Register. Historic resource studies for Redwood National Park, North Cascades National Park, and Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area were undertaken and completed in 1969. These historic resource studies were the first of many; such studies became increasingly important as management and planning tools during the middle and late 1970s when a large number of new areas were added.

The expansion of the system climaxed in December 1980, when President Jimmy Carter signed into law the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, more than doubling the acreage administered by the National Park Service. Coincidentally, new government initiatives aimed at curbing double-digit inflation and putting a cap on spending for many programs were instituted. These necessary economies compelled the Park Service to re-evaluate its priorities in addressing its cultural resource management needs. Competition for positions for history research and interpretation was keen, and lean and mean budgets compelled historians—whether in Washington, the regional offices, or parks—to take a hard look at their programs and to focus on core missions.

The role and esprit, as well as many of the functions, of the Park Service historian of the seventies and eighties, however, is rooted in the past. Following a discipline pioneered by War Department battlefield historians and developed and honed by the professionals of the 1931–1965 era, National Park Service historians today have a vital mission in protecting, preserving, and interpreting the history of our nation in the 338 areas constituting the National Park system.