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Inside

The National Historic Preservation
Act – An Assessment

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Reflections on Historic Preservation and the National Park Service: The Early Years

Frederick L. Rath, Jr.

When Tom Vint, the chief landscape architect of the National Park Service, wrote an article about master plans for the American Planning and Civic Association in 1946, he quite properly started it by pinning down for all time the inventor of the term. It was Director Horace Marden Albright, at a meeting of Park Service superintendents in 1932, who explained the new approach that would guide the development of all parks and monuments; at the end he remarked laconically, "They are sort of a Master Plan." The term caught on immediately, for, as Vint said, "It is expressive, is short, and has worked."

continued on page 3



Ford Mansion (Washington's headquarters, 1779-80), Morristown National Historical Park, NJ. Morristown became the first national historical park on March 2, 1933. Photo by Jim Holcomb, 1988. Inset shows the building as it appeared in the 1930s. The three dormer windows on the roof were removed during a later restoration because they were not appropriate to the structure's 1779-80 appearance. Photos courtesy Morristown NHP.

Reflections on Historic Preservation and the National Park Service: The Early Years

(Continued from page 1)

The article has reminded me of the great formative years of the Service, especially in relation to what has come to be known as cultural resource management. And it has prompted me to supplement the necessarily brief review of those developments by Barry Mackintosh as well as the minibiographies offered in the new publication, *National Park Service: The First 75 Years*, published as part of the Service's 75th anniversary celebration.

The story revolves around Horace Marden Albright, the central figure in bringing history to the Service, but the roots of the movement and the many people who played significant roles throughout the years prior to the outbreak of World War II are worthy of further mention. The movement includes not only Park Service personnel but also men and women who lent their influence, their ideas, and their expertise to the Service to create one of the great systems for the preservation of a Nation's historic heritage. It has become a model internationally.

Chief Historian Edwin Bearss recently pointed out an interesting antecedent to the surge in the early 1930s that brought historians into the Service. John Batchelder, an enthusiastic military historian, arrived on the battlefield at Gettysburg shortly after the action ended. In the following year he was employed by the Gettysburg Battlefield Monument Association as its historian; he spent the rest of his life talking to veterans, collecting primary research material, and documenting troop movement maps. Batchelder's stress on research-in-depth, a principle also laid down in the 19th century by Francis Parkman, et al., became a tenet of later Park Service practice. As the century moved to a close, interest in the Civil War battlefields rose and in 1890 Chickamauga/Chattanooga and Antietam were authorized by Congress; Shiloh (1894), Gettysburg (1895), and Vicksburg (1899) followed.

They were forerunners of a rising interest in the past on another front. In the early years of the 20th century antiquarians and anthropologists alike found a leader in the movement to stop the destruction of the Indian ruins in the Southwest in Congressman John Lacey of Iowa. He was largely responsible for passage of the Antiquities Act of 1906, as well as the legislation creating Mesa Verde National Park. Horace Albright astutely noted later that Lacey "was far ahead of his time in demanding protection for prehistoric sites and artifacts in the public domain." The legislation introduced a new implement to protect historic sites on public lands—Presidential proclamation. One result was that the act setting up the Park Service in 1916 transferred to the new agency administrative responsibility for Mesa Verde and seven national monuments of historical and archeological interest.

When Horace Albright came to Washington from California in the summer of 1913 to serve as an assistant in the Department of the Interior, he followed the advice of Henry David Thoreau who "traveled much in the town of Concord." He traveled much in the District of Columbia and

environs, and mostly to historic sites and places where the years had left their mark. It can be assumed too that he also was well aware of the three conferences, in 1911, 1912, and 1915, that called for the establishment of a bureau of national parks. In this he was joined by the man he would call for the rest of his life "Mr. Mather," Stephen Tyng Mather, Chicago industrialist and philanthropist, one of the great conservationists of his day.

In 1916, five years after the legislation to create the National Park Service was introduced in Congress, Albright, trained as a lawyer, worked with those re-framing the proposed legislation and seized upon wording proposed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., to define the purpose of the Service: "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein." The two words, "historic objects," opened a door that Albright took into the future.

Horace Albright was always quick to point out that Mr. Mather was a man with a deep respect for the past, an attitude that surely came from his distinguished ancestry: the first Mather came to New England in the 17th century. But he gave the historic preservation movement little support; he stressed natural conservation in the early years. Mr. Mather, Albright said, wanted the Service to be active *eventually* in the protection and administration of historic areas and structures.

When establishment of the Park Service was authorized on August 25, 1916, Albright decided to concentrate on the possibility of transferring custodianship of the military parks to the new agency and in the first annual report, written in the absence of his ailing boss, he posed the question. The idea lurked through the years and the patient Albright was able to get the Secretary of War to agree to the transfer in 1924. But there was no Congressional support until 1929; even then the House Military Affairs Committee failed to consider the measure.

By that time Horace Albright was second director of the Service; Mr. Mather's illness at the end of 1928 led to Albright's appointment on January 12, 1929. The new director immediately declared that his job would include going "rather heavily into the historical park field." In relatively quick succession he set up a Branch of Research and Education after naming an Educational Advisory Committee to advise on historical policy matters (1929); then, with vital assists from Congressman Louis Cramton, in 1930 obtained the legislation for the creation of George Washington Birthplace National Monument and Colonial National Monument. And on March 2, 1933, the first national historical park was set up in Morristown, New Jersey.

In the year after Albright became director three men whose thoughts and actions were to influence historic preservation greatly were hired. In 1930 Charles E. Peterson was hired as a landscape architect. In the years ahead he would become a restoration architect, architectural historian vital in the creation of a preservation philosophy and of professional preservation practices, and principal promulgator of the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1933. In July 1931 Elbert Cox was hired and stationed at Colonial, one of the first two field historians in the Service; and in

August Verne E. Chatelain became in effect the chief historian. Chatelain, a professor of American history who had served as the assistant director of the state historical society in Minnesota, came to the Service with a clear sense of the importance of the physical historic site. He soon had a vision, shared with Albright, of a system of parks and monuments that stressed the large patterns of the American story. By 1932 he was able to suggest to a conference of Service executives that no park or monument "should be entirely free of historical activities," a stunning idea for all those who thought of national parks only in terms of their scenic and scientific values. By April 1933 in a report to Assistant Director Arthur Demaray he was able to go further: "the sum total of the sites which we select should make it possible for us to tell a more or less complete story of American history." He is, I am happy to note, still alive and has seen his prediction come true.

In the same month and year Horace Albright moved toward the realization of his dream. On Sunday the ninth, on the return trip to Washington from the Rapidan camp bequeathed to the country by outgoing President Herbert Hoover, he and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a local history enthusiast who would lend a friendly ear to the Park Service until the end of his life, discussed placing all Federal sites and monuments in the Service. The President's quick acquiescence to Albright's proposals resulted in the executive order effective on August 10 that authorized the transfer. On the same day Arno B. Cammerer, longtime associate director and yet another enthusiast for preservation, became director; Horace Albright accepted a position in private industry that allowed him to remain active in conservation and preservation.

The great emergency relief programs set up in the first hundred days of the new presidency were immediately applied to the vastly expanded program of the Service. One

result was that there came to the Service in the summer of 1933 a group of historians who would help to merge the interdisciplinary preservation program with the master plan concept at its center. One among them moved rapidly onto center stage. Ronald F. Lee was a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) historian at Shiloh in 1933-34; he then became one of Chatelain's assistants and worked on research projects connected with the drafting of the Historic Sites Act of 1935, which set up an Advisory Board and outlined a set of regulations and procedures to govern the enforcement of the act. There followed a position under Conrad Wirth, who was directing the activities of the ECW (Emergency Conservation Work), a part of the Civilian Conservation Corps; Lee became historian for the State Park Division, which led to his taking charge of a national program of research. In the summer of 1936 he returned to Washington, again under Chatelain, in the Branch of History. Chatelain, however, was having difficulties with Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who throughout his long incumbency gave full support to the preservation cause but who was at best a difficult man to please. Chatelain's resignation in September 1936 was almost inevitable, but he left behind him an historic preservation program almost fully realized. Lee continued to serve in the Branch of History under acting assistant director Branch Spalding until May 1938 when Spalding decided that he preferred to go back to Fredericksburg National Military Park. Lee succeeded him and with great tact and diplomacy worked successfully with the "Old Curmudgeon" throughout his secretaryship. In the years prior to World War II Lee expanded and strengthened the historic preservation program. He also had significant help from the Advisory Board, which included such strong and influential characters as Fiske Kimball, Waldo G. Leland, Hermon C. Bumpus, and Indiana's Col. Richard Lieber, "the conscience of the early



Headquarters building, Mesa Verde National Park, AZ, constructed between 1920 - 1930. Photo courtesy Mesa Verde NP. (Watch for more on Mesa Verde's early architecture in a future CRM.)

board" and "a fierce advocate of unvarnished historic truth" according to Charles Hosmer.

In the summer of 1937 Elbert Cox, the park superintendent in Morristown who already had six years of experience in the Service and was successfully bringing to fruition the comprehensive interdisciplinary program, offered me what was known as a temporary-seasonal job. With no other job prospect in sight I stopped my graduate studies in American history at Harvard to test the waters of what I came to call roadside education. Three professors—Arthur Meier Schlesinger, Frederick Merk, and Paul Buck as well as author and critic, Bernard DeVoto—were involved in the decision. Schlesinger and his co-editor of a great social history series, Dixon Ryan Fox, were social historians keenly aware of the implications of the New Deal programs. Merk was a student of Frederick Jackson Turner, and he appreciated the potential for understanding American history that the Park Service might offer. Buck had written his master's thesis on the Service early in the 1920s. DeVoto was slated to go on the new Advisory Board to the Service. And, probably most important, fellow student Harold R. Shurtleff, an architect who was brushing up on his American history because he had become chief of research at Colonial Williamsburg and told us about the Service program and personnel at Yorktown and Jamestown.

In the next seven months as ranger-historian (i.e., as low man on the totem pole), I learned firsthand not only what was happening in setting up the interdisciplinary program; I met many of the principal characters who in addition to those mentioned above were active in an exciting cross-fertilization of ideas and practices. There was, for example, Herbert Kahler, principal assistant to Lee and a great stabilizing force who would eventually become chief historian; Melvin Weig, the historian who was my immediate boss, who daily taught me much; and the visiting "firemen," experts like Peterson, who were the pioneers in laying down the applications of their disciplines to cultural resource management, among them Tom Waterman in architecture; Jean ("Pinky") Harrington, a pioneer in making the profession of historical archeology a recognized branch of scholarly investigation; Ned Burns, who directed the Service museum laboratory and wrote the *Field Manual for Museums*, which laid out paths for interpretation to the public that are still followed today. I heard about and sometimes even briefly met other men and women who were important in the movement in the formative years. There was Louise du Pont Crowninshield, who became president of the Wakefield National Memorial Association and later helped a fine regional historian, Ed Small, in Salem; and still later was a founder of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, where she taught me to appreciate the role that interested and knowledgeable citizens could play in the development of the new combination of disciplines.

There was Arthur Demaray, who could always be depended on to give "continuity of support, . . . encouragement, and . . . vision of what might be done" on behalf of historic preservation in the Service, according to Ronald Lee. Charles Peterson later added his opinion that Demaray was a linchpin in the development of cultural resource management throughout his many years in the Service. There was

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., friend of Horace Albright and generous contributor to many Service projects and through Colonial Williamsburg a key figure in the development of cultural resource management. There was Aubrey Neasham, a regional historian of distinction, who contributed on many fronts and left a lasting thought in the minds of all those involved in preservation activities by advocating in 1941 the setting up of a national, nonprofit, private organization that would be ready in the wake of World War II to give added strength to the movement now so strongly under way. There was, finally, George McAneny, distinguished New Yorker and preservationist, who with Horace Albright and Ronald Lee picked up Neasham's challenge in 1946; they became principals in the movement to create the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Obviously, it was a great cast of characters who learned to define and practice cultural resource management as a team, not as individuals. They laid the foundations for a Park Service with a well-rounded program for historic preservation that was truly national and ultimately international. □

Author's Note: Had it been possible, Professor Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., author of the great three-volume history of the historic preservation movement, would have been co-author of this article. But the deadline for submission and our schedules and other commitments made the collaboration impossible. So I turned to his volumes, as everyone dealing with historic preservation before 1950 must, and I wove my own observations and my own memories of the people who seemed important around his research. He and Marian Albright Schenck, Elbert Cox, Herbert Kahler, and Barry Mackintosh also checked the manuscript for factual error and I am grateful.

Frederick L. Rath, Jr., was historian at Fort Pulaski and Vicksburg, 1939-41, after his introduction to the National Park Service at Morristown. He then had four years in American Field Service and Army Intelligence, after which he became the historian at Roosevelt-Vanderbilt NHS. Nominated by the Service to be executive secretary of the new National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings in 1948, he became the first director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1949. From 1956 on, he never lost his interest in the Service and Eastern National Park And Monument Association, of which he was a founding member. Since 1987 he has been involved with research, writing, lecturing, and dealing with his personal historic preservation collection of more than 50 years. Publication of a book with David Muench, *History on the Land*, tracing the major patterns and events in American history from the Bering Strait some 20,000 years ago to the last shot into space from Cape Canaveral solely through units of the National Park Service, is pending. Mr. Rath's honors include the Conservation Service Award of the U.S. Department of the Interior and an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from the State University of New York. In 1989 he was awarded the National Trust for Historic Preservation's highest honor, the Louise Du Pont Crowninshield Award.