

“To Protect These Matchless Wonders”

The Administrations of Nathaniel Langford and Philetus Norris

Oh, for wisdom in this council
Of our nation great
To protect these matchless wonders
From a ruthless fate!¹

—Philetus W. Norris, 1878

In March 1872, just seven years after the end of the Civil War, the United States Congress passed Senate bill 392, the Organic Act that created Yellowstone National Park.² The first part of this act sought to preserve matchless natural wonders from “settlement, occupancy, or sale,” as well as “from injury or spoliation,” and to retain these same wonders “in their natural condition.”³ The second part of the act mandated that these wonders should be enjoyed by the public; the park was to be a “pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”⁴ To this end, the park’s Organic Act stipulated that “the Secretary [of the Interior] may in his discretion, grant leases for building purposes . . . of small parcels of ground, at such places in said park as shall require the erection of buildings for the accommodation of visitors.”⁵ Money from the granted leases would then be used to manage the buildings and build further improvements, such as “roads and bridle-paths.”⁶ Thus, from the beginning, those working to create the park had in mind the area’s improvement for public use. However, the park’s early civilian administrators had little time for improving the park; they had their hands full with the first part of the mandate, the protection of the park’s wonders. The task was enormous, and unfortunately, Congress provided little assistance in the form of funding to aid improvement efforts.

The Park’s First Leaders

The park’s first superintendent, Nathaniel Pitt Langford, was born on August 9, 1832, in Oneida County, New York. He was educated in a rural county school when he was not busy with chores on his family’s farm. After establishing himself as a banker in St. Paul, Minnesota, Langford moved west to join an expedition to the Idaho gold fields, and then settled for a time in Alder Gulch (Virginia City), Montana Territory. He served for several years as an internal revenue collector in the territory, and aspired—unsuccessfully—to be its governor. After visiting the Yellowstone region as part of the Washburn expedition in 1870, Langford pushed for establishment of the park by lecturing in the East on its many wonders. President Ulysses S. Grant appointed him to be the park’s first superintendent in May 1872, and he served in that capacity until April 1877. During and after his stint as superintendent, Langford carried on his job as U.S. bank examiner for the territories and Pacific Coast states. In 1885, he entered the insurance business, finally resuming public service as president of the Ramsey County, Minnesota, Board of Control in 1897. He died on October 18, 1909, at the age of 79.⁷

The park’s second superintendent, Philetus Walter Norris, was born on August 17, 1821, in Palmyra, New York. He spent his early youth exploring the area around the great falls of the Genesee River before moving with his family to newly opened land in Michigan, where Norris was obliged to forgo formal schooling to help on the farm. Several years later, he settled on his own frontier acreage in northern Ohio, and helped to

establish the town of Pioneer, serving as the town's first postmaster. In May 1862, Norris left Ohio to volunteer his services to the Union cause, but was injured so seriously in West Virginia that he had to resign his position as captain in January 1863. After the war, he purchased 1,900 acres of improved swampland in Hamtramck Township, Michigan, and laid out a town in his own name—Norris, Michigan.

Once he had moved his family to Michigan and begun a successful real estate business and newspaper, the *Norris Suburban*, Norris spent his time and money exploring the West. After making a trip through the Yellowstone area in 1875, Norris criticized the job Langford was doing in his newspaper, and was subsequently asked to serve as the park's second superintendent. He remained in that position until February 1882. According to former Yellowstone historian Aubrey L. Haines, Norris spread the park's appropriations too "thinly in an attempt to give immediate access to most of its interior," and consequently failed to maintain adequate roads in the area. After he was replaced, Norris returned home and devoted his remaining years to writing (*The Calumet of the Coteau*, 1883 and 1884) and to scientific exploration. He died on January 14, 1885.⁸

A Park Without a Purse

It was clear to Nathaniel Langford, the park's first superintendent, that one of his duties was to "survey the park" for possible lease sites for visitor accommodations; it was equally clear to him that it would take money to accomplish the task.⁹ Langford also needed money to help protect the park's features for visitor "comfort and pleasure."¹⁰ Unfortunately, money for surveying the park, for building any roads or facilities to help protect the park, or even for such basic things as his own salary was not forthcoming, and would not be for all five years of Langford's tenure as superintendent. Consequently, Langford's term in office was unproductive in both arenas: protecting the park's wonders and making them accessible to tourists.

One problem was that Congress had been promised that no money was necessary. According to historian Louis C. Cramton, Professor Ferdinand V. Hayden—one of the proponents of the congressional act to create the park and the leader of an important exploratory visit to the area in 1871—"had been compelled to give [to Congress] 'a distinct pledge' that 'he would not apply

for an appropriation for several years at least." Furthermore, according to Cramton's account, "passage of the bill [creating the park] would have been very doubtful," had Hayden not promised to refrain from asking for appropriations.¹¹ Early park historian Hiram Chittenden concurred; Congress, he argued, would not "have created this reservation had it not believed that no additional public burden was to be incurred thereby."¹² Hayden and other early proponents of the Organic Act had apparently argued that the park would be self-supporting—that income from leases would pay for its management. However, it is clear that managing the park without appropriations was impossible. Thus, for the first five years, a period of time long enough to allow detrimental effects on the park's wonders, Langford's "hands were tied."¹³

It appears that Langford may have been unaware of Congress's plans to forgo appropriations, because he kept asking for them.¹⁴ He even tried to convince Congress that some up-front investment would increase the potential for returns later on. "With a liberal appropriation now for roads, and a few other needed improvements, it is impossible to foresee what will be the future of this remarkable aggregation of wonders," he wrote in his report to Secretary of the Interior Columbus Delano in 1872, the first of a long series of annual reports originating in the park superintendent's office, but the only one Langford would write.¹⁵

Public funds would have to be expended for Langford to do his job and for the park to remain a protected place for visitors to enjoy. The "duty of preserving the Park from spoliation . . . cannot be performed without moneyed aid," he argued. Because the park was worth preserving, the money would be well-spent: "Our Government, having adopted it [the park]," he argued, "should foster it and render it accessible to the people of all lands, who in future time will come in crowds to visit it."¹⁶

Langford's comment about crowds of visitors would, of course, prove true. However, while early visitors might not have come in droves, they were plentiful enough to cause harm to the area. They killed game, shot birds, and fished to excess, provoking one critic to despair: "there will be none [game] left to protect."¹⁷ They also destroyed thermal features in their search for just the right souvenir.¹⁸ Langford had to do something. With an empty purse, however, his only recourse was with the pen. Thus, he called for laws to strengthen the park's rules and regulations—laws that would be enforced

by means of fines and imprisonment.¹⁹ Unfortunately, during Langford's tenure, any such laws remained as elusive as appropriations. The park was being pillaged, and there was little he could do about it.

Having no funds for salary or expenses, Langford did not remain long in the park.²⁰ In fact, there was no administrative presence in the park during most of Langford's five years in office.²¹ In the absence of any police protection, wanton destruction of both wildlife and scenic features increased. Toward the end of 1873, Henry Horr, local resident and partner of J. C. McCartney in the crude hotel built at Mammoth Hot Springs prior to the creation of the park, wrote to Secretary Delano, alerting him to the fact that elk and deer were being killed in the park for their tongues and skins. Horr suggested that Jack Baronett, owner of the Yellowstone River toll bridge (also built prior to the creation of the park), be given some authority to aid in year-round park protection, stating that only Baronett and Horr himself "would hibernate in this national domain." Secretary Delano also received requests from Governor John A. Campbell of Wyoming Territory, and Governor Benjamin F. Potts of Montana Territory, seeking appropriations not only to construct roads and provide for protection of the park's wonders and curiosities, but also to employ a



Y.N.P. PHOTO ARCHIVES/YELL #147202

Buffalo hunting, date unknown.

resident superintendent.²²

The situation had not improved by 1875; in fact, it had worsened. Montana territorial delegate Martin Maginnis decried the destruction of the park's curiosities. "From members of Secretary [of War William W.] Belknap's party who came down recently," he wrote, "I learn that the spoliations in the park are great. There is at present no way of checking them. Several of the geysers are now nearly ruined and the Government should take some action to preserve these wonderful and beautiful curiosities before it is too late."²³ In August, Captain William Ludlow visited the park with scientists George Bird Grinnell and E. S. Dana. In his report, Ludlow complained about the lack of supervision of the nation's park. He spotted tourists "prowling about with shovel and axe, chopping and hacking and prying up great pieces of the most ornamental work they could find."²⁴ He recommended that the "care of the Park, at least temporarily [be entrusted] to the War Department; at least until such time as a Civilian Superintendent, living in the Park, with a body of mounted police under his orders, can suffice for its protection."²⁵ Things were so bad that a daily newspaper in Bozeman, Montana, about ninety miles north of the park, asked, "must this robbing the Park of its treasures be kept up continuously . . . ? Where's Langford?"²⁶

Whether one agrees with Chittenden, that Langford's "hands were tied" and that he was "unjustly charged in the public press with responsibility for a condition of things for which he was in no sense to blame," or with others who claim the park's first superintendent was too detached to be effective, it is clear that Langford's tenure as superintendent was unsuccessful in terms of protection. To his credit, his own ineffectiveness in office troubled Langford; as Chittenden put it, it was "of great annoyance to him."²⁷

Just as he lacked money to protect the park's natural features, Langford was equally poorly positioned to make any improvements. Although he envisioned a road leading to all the great wonders in the park, and wanted to build "at least one stopping place for tourists," he received no support from the Secretary or Congress to realize his plans. Furthermore, he refused to grant leases for private "improvements" until he had surveyed the area and had a better sense of Congress's intentions.²⁸ Some have criticized Langford's unwillingness to grant leases. Park historian Aubrey Haines, for example, claimed that Langford did not grant leases because of his connection to the railroad interests that he hoped would

obtain those same leases later in the process.²⁹ Haines also speculated that the lack of leases cost Langford his job.³⁰ Langford also opted against private roads, or toll roads, in the park. The park's roads should be "free to all who [wish] to visit this wonderful region," he wrote.³¹ Thus, what was already in the park upon its creation—the few private structures, the road, and the toll bridge—stood as the only "improvements" in the park when Langford was replaced in 1877.

Help On the Way

Langford's successor, Philetus Norris, had visited the park twice prior to becoming the park's second superintendent on April 18, 1877.³² Norris's appointment was a clear response by new Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz to cries for better protection of Yellowstone. Norris had been one of many who spoke out in protest as Yellowstone's treasures were marred or stolen during its first five years as a park. Thus, Norris was invited to accept what Haines referred to as "the thankless responsibility" of serving as superintendent.³³

In effect, Norris had been called to the rescue, and he succeeded to the extent that he could, with little money and few helping hands. In fact, according to Chittenden, "the real administration of the Park" began with Norris's "term of service."³⁴ He left his mark on the park in several important areas. To protect the park, Norris re-wrote the park's official rules and regulations and, for the first time, actually implemented and enforced them. To open the park to visitors, he oversaw construction of a road to Norris Geyser Basin, and of several administrative facilities (none of which, with the exception of the Queen's Laundry bathhouse, to be discussed, have survived). With development of the park's first tourist trails, he also took some of the first steps toward providing interpretation of its scenic features. Furthermore, he extended the administrative duties of park management to a new arena—scientific investigation. By exploring the park, studying its various facets, and writing extensively about its cultural and natural history, Norris set the precedent for future park administrations to promote serious study of the area. He also accumulated ethnographic and natural history collections, which he donated to the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. Finally, he left his name on several features in the park, most notably Norris Geyser Basin.³⁵

Protection: The First Pillar of Park Management

Norris's efforts to protect the park and its resources were extensive. Despite a lack of guidance from the Department of the Interior, and inadequate funding from Congress, Norris believed it was his duty to call attention to depredations against the park's wildlife, timber, and scientific resources. His concern for protecting the park resulted in several important achievements. First and foremost, he immediately requested "practical legislation and rules" for park management. In his 1878 report to the secretary of the interior, Norris expressed apprehension concerning his ability to guard the park against all types of transgressions, including unlawful hunting, unauthorized disfigurement of the park wonders, and potential threats from nearby American Indian tribes. In this and subsequent years, Norris forwarded an array of requests for legislation that would enable the park's administrators to enforce the rules and regulations necessary to manage the park. In 1881, he tried to strengthen the rules and regulations themselves, by rewriting them in an expanded format and in much more forceful terms. To the list of regulations, for example, he added, "The sale of intoxicating liquors is strictly prohibited," and to other rules he added the words, "strictly forbidden by law."³⁶

Second, he advised the Department of the Interior that Congress should appropriate funds for a salary for a resident superintendent, for a survey to mark the park boundary, and for the construction of roads and bridle paths to lessen the potential for wildfire damage to timber.³⁷ Norris noted in his report that "careless use of fires ha[d] destroyed vast groves of timber," and he believed the construction of bridle paths and roads would help prevent further destruction.³⁸ Congress had been right, he believed, to set aside the park, but it had been wrong not to fund its protection. The problem was "not what Congress has done, but what it so long neglected to do," he wrote in 1878. Norris also claimed that it was Congress's "failure to make moderate appropriations for [the park's] protection and improvement until leases could be made to assist in rendering it self-sustaining, which compelled its first superintendent, N. P. Langford, to abandon all efforts for its protection."³⁹ Congress heard Norris's plea, appropriating \$10,000 in 1878.⁴⁰

Norris agreed with Langford that neither protection nor improvement could proceed successfully without the expenditure of time, energy, and funds for

exploration. Indeed, exploration, Norris argued, should precede improvements so the latter could be planned expeditiously. He wrote in 1879,

While, by the language of the [1878] act appropriating funds, as well as my instructions for its expenditure, protection and improvement of the Yellowstone National Park appear more prominent than its explorations, still, practically, considerable of the latter is indispensable for an intelligent and judicious performance of the former; the real danger, indeed, being a deficiency rather than an excess of knowledge of the local peculiarities of that wonderful region prior to expenditure upon buildings, roads, bridle-paths, and other permanent improvements.

Against his better judgment, but because he was bound by the intentions of Congress and the appropriations bill, Norris agreed to “push improvements,” thus devoting “less time and funds to exploration,” though he believed the latter would “ultimately [be] the most beneficial to the park.”⁴¹ When Congress increased the park’s appropriation to \$15,000 in 1880, Norris took full advantage of the opportunity to resume his explorations and pursue further scientific studies.⁴²

Exploration was essential for sound decision-making about improvements, but it was also important as a way to enhance scientific learning. The park, according to Norris, was a scientific laboratory, and studies of its inhabitants, geology, weather, history, and wildlife would enhance the nation’s understanding about the region. Thus, to the two pillars of management mandated by the Organic Act—preservation and use (which required improvement)—Norris added his own: scientific study. From Norris’s term in office to the present, Yellowstone National Park has been a center for research, and in 1998, the U.S. Congress, in the form of the National Parks Omnibus Act, provided a clear mandate for parks to use the highest-quality science to aid managers in making decisions.⁴³

Immediately upon becoming superintendent, Norris urged the secretary of the interior to support a boundary survey. The survey was necessary, according to Norris, because of potential incursions from nearby mining interests. Norris knew of the mining areas just north of the Gardner and Yellowstone rivers (today’s Jardine, Montana), and speculated that the narrow canyons of Crevice, Slough, and Soda Butte creeks might contain

valuable mineral resources. Furthermore, he had visited the active mining camps at the head of Little Rosebud Creek and the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River, and thus was well aware that dealing with mining interests could be challenging. He told the secretary that “the entire character of ownership and development of all these mining interests are so dissimilar to the anomalous rules and regulations necessary for the management of a wild national pleasure resort, that antagonism and annoyance so arises and increases at every phase of their contact.”⁴⁴ A boundary survey would help keep the two interests separate, he argued. An added benefit, according to Norris, was that surveying and marking a northern boundary would help keep local mountain men from disobeying the park’s rules and regulations.⁴⁵

Once the northern boundary was surveyed, Norris argued, the northern and western boundaries should be changed “to conform to those of Wyoming Territory, thus at once severing an unnecessary 3-mile strip upon the west, and also the 2½-mile strip of mining region upon the north, and leaving the park clear of an antagonistic mining population, questions of jurisdiction, and [with] its two most important boundaries run, well marked, known, and recognized by all parties, without cost to the park.”⁴⁶ He did not get the boundary adjustment he advocated, but his request for a survey was granted. The survey, completed by R. J. Reeves in 1879, had the anticipated results. “[I]t has greatly assisted in restraining lawlessness within and adjacent to the park,” Norris wrote in his report of 1879, “and in checking the influx of ranchmen upon the southeastern border of the Crow Indian Reservation and determining the true location of the mining camps across the Yellowstone, from the main portion of the park where the Crow Indians seldom go. . . .”⁴⁷

While Norris was wary of skirmishes with miners and ranchers, he was more charitable toward the Crow tribe. Norris respected the Crow Indians and believed they should be treated fairly and recompensed for their land. He argued for an “honorable treaty” through which the Crow would “obtain a recession of the old Sheepearer mining portion of the Great Bend of the Yellowstone [present Livingston, Montana] . . . by satisfactory remuneration if necessary. . . . [This to be done] in the interest of humanity towards the Crows, who . . . have as a tribe ever been our true friends.”⁴⁸

Norris’s attitude toward other native inhabitants of the Yellowstone Park region—and his prescription for the relationship between those natives and the whites

who managed and visited the park—was more complex. He was both interested in furthering the peaceful side of the relationship and also well aware of the potential for trouble. As he saw it, the park was a place where tourists should be free of worry and annoyance, not to mention “molestation” by local American Indian tribes. Thus, while he marveled at his discoveries of various Sheepeater haunts, he was also grateful for the regional military presence that kept local native inhabitants under a watchful eye.

In some ways, native tribes were the least of Norris’s worries. Faced with so little congressional support for legislation concerning park protection—Congress had appropriated funds but passed no rules and regulations—Norris immediately began to enforce the five rules established by previous secretary of the interior Columbus Delano.⁴⁹ These rules prohibited the following: (1) hunting, “except for purposes of recreation, or to supply food for visitors or actual residents”; (2) building fires “except for necessary purposes,” and/or leaving those fires before extinguishing them; (3) cutting timber without written permission from the superintendent; (4) breaking the deposits surrounding or in the vicinity of thermal features; and, (5) residing permanently within the park without permission from the Department of the Interior. Norris had these rules printed in No. 62 of the newspaper he wrote and published from his home in Michigan, the *Norris Suburban*, and he had “several hundred copies [of the same] . . . gratuitously distributed throughout the regions adjacent to the park during the spring of 1877.”⁵⁰ As an added warning against unlawful behavior, Norris had a “large number of spirited cautions against fire and poaching in the park printed upon durable cloth and affixed to trees, and otherwise at prominent points of interest therein and the adjacent places of resort.” Furthermore, because the superintendent still did not remain in the park through the winter, Norris appointed entrepreneur J. C. McCartney to act in his absence as his resident assistant, primarily in the capacity of enforcer of the park’s rules and regulations.⁵¹

Because one area of real concern to Norris was poaching, he took specific and immediate steps to preserve the park’s large animals. In his first report to the secretary of the interior, Norris estimated that during the spring of 1875, more than 2,000 elk hides, plus many bighorn sheep and antelope hides, had been taken from the park, and hundreds of bison and moose had been slaughtered. He also predicted that “within a decade the buffalo, the bison, and, in fact, most of these

larger animals will be either extinct or extremely rare elsewhere in the United States.” The time was right for action, he argued. “[I]f our people are ever to preserve living specimens of our most beautiful, interesting, and valuable animals,” he intoned, “here . . . is the place and now the time to do it.”⁵²

The difficult part of protecting wildlife was that these same wild animals were a source of food for visitors and area residents.⁵³ Thus, many animals were not only valued as part of the scenery in the park, but also as an essential source of sustenance. Norris recognized this dichotomy and responded by railing against the wanton slaughter of large animals in the park while arguing for the domestication of some for food.⁵⁴ “Why not thus utilize a waste corner of our . . . National Park by timely protection of our rarest animals, our national bird of valor, and our matchless speckled trout?” he asked in 1877.⁵⁵ In 1878, Norris again called for domesticating some of the large animals in Yellowstone. The bison “could be reasonably reared as domestic cattle, . . . and with the excellent and abundant timber material, inclosures can be cheaply made for preservation of a few specimens of the elk, antelope, and other animals of great interest to future tourists.”⁵⁶

In 1879, he repeated his call for the protection and domestication of wildlife. While he believed the numbers of game had increased a bit, Norris knew the increase was not enough to offset the continued destruction of herds. “[W]ith the rapid influx of tourists and demand for such food,” he wrote, “this [increase] cannot long continue, and hence the more evident and pressing necessity for systematic and permanent protection of all, and domestication of some of the most rare and valuable of animals in the eastern portion of the park.”⁵⁷ When his domestication plan was not approved, Norris resorted to arguing for increased protection. As part of his case for tougher federal protection and a management plan, he applauded Montana Territory for enacting legislation to protect bison in certain counties.⁵⁸

One way to make it more difficult to poach wildlife was to restrict the use of long-range rifles in the park. Norris advocated such a restriction, arguing that only government agents or employees should carry such weapons with them, especially as visitors need not worry about self-protection or securing food now that the park—no longer “a haunt of hostile savages”—contained “roads, hotel [and] other conveniences of civilization,” Norris reasoned. He believed that an appeal to the national pride for the preservation and protection of the noble animals



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Harry Yount, Yellowstone's first gamekeeper.

that roam through this great National Park” would be enough to convince local mountain men to stop hunting big game in the parks, and that visitors could be turned to fishing and bird hunting for their enjoyment.⁵⁹

Watching over the park's wildlife, Norris recognized, was too big a job for a seasonal superintendent. It was a job for a resident superintendent with a number of assistants. For one thing, an increased government presence would make poaching more difficult. Hence, Norris followed up on his plea for adequate funds to house and support a resident superintendent in 1877 with a call in 1880 for a “force of determined police” to enforce park rules and regulations and “to properly protect the park, its contents, officers, and visitors.”⁶⁰ To help with this protection effort, Norris used an increase in appropriations in 1880 to hire a gamekeeper, Harry Yount, who when not protecting game, was to make explorations into the unknown sections of the park.⁶¹ During the summer months, a log cabin was built for Yount above the mouth of Soda Butte Creek. The cabin, which had an excellent view of the creek and the “East Fork of the Yellowstone” (today the Lamar River), was strategically

placed to protect the game, particularly elk and bison, from Clarks Fork miners and other local hunters living near and in the east side of the park.

Yount, who began his duties in July 1880, found his previous visits to the park helpful as he began to explore the areas surrounding Yellowstone, Shoshone, Lewis, and Heart lakes. At the end of his first season, Yount reported that all sections of the park needed protection. He also called for “the appointment of a small, active, reliable police force, to receive regular pay during the spring and summer at least, when animals are liable to be slaughtered by the tourists and mountaineers.” Yount advised Secretary Schurz (in language similar to that used by Norris) that this force could also assist the superintendent in “enforcing the laws, rules, and regulations for protection of guide-boards and bridges, and the preservation of the countless and widely scattered geyser-cones and other matchless wonders of the Park.”⁶² Personnel were also needed to help prevent and extinguish human-caused wildfires.⁶³ When Yount resigned his position at the end of the 1881 season, he again suggested to Superintendent Norris that the latter needed a small group of men, most of whom could be discharged at season's end, to assist in the protection of the park.⁶⁴ But while Norris was waiting for both “the speedy enactment of laws” and assistance in the form of a police force, he supervised the construction of bridle paths and roads that would make the park more accessible for enforcement efforts.

Scientific Study: The Second Pillar Under Norris

Norris spent countless hours on horseback, getting to know the park and its resources. On all such trips, he was vigilant in his observations and notations of the area's cultural history, natural history, and geology. His curiosity about the park's story was part of the much broader interest in history and natural history that Norris brought to Yellowstone. His reports to the secretary of the interior can be read as natural histories of the region, drawn from the kind of notes kept by nineteenth-century natural scientists while out in the field. They were long, detailed, and filled with data on just about every field of study necessary for exploring a new region, understanding its past, and predicting its future. Norris kept meteorological records and drew sketches; he wrote descriptions and dissected fish. His annual

report for 1880, for example, comprised 65 pages of such details as the “true origin” of such prominent wonders as “spouting or intermittent geysers” and “hot-foaming or laundry springs”—which he believed had incredible cleansing properties. He also included sketches of such things as the rock formations at “Hoodooos, Or remnants of erosion in the golden Labyrinths.”⁶⁵ In 1881, he filled eighty-one pages with such insights.

Norris’s favorite fields of study were probably anthropology and archeology. He was interested in the cultures of the native peoples who lived in or near the park, and he arrived freely at various conclusions regarding their practices and habits—many of which have subsequently proven to be errant. He claimed, for example, that the Crow, Shoshone, and Bannock tribes had made little actual “use” of park land, and speculated that they refrained from venturing into the park, “deterred less by . . . natural obstacles than by a superstitious awe concerning the rumbling and hissing sulphur fumes of the spouting geysers and other hot springs, which they imagined to be the wails and groans of departed Indian warriors who were suffering punishment for their earthly sins.”⁶⁶ He found traces of the “timid and harmless Sheepstealer Indians,” which he recognized as connected somehow to the Bannock and Shoshone tribes. “[T]heir . . . traditions and the similarity of their languages and signals indicate a common origin, or, at least occasional intermingling,” he wrote under the heading “Aborigines of the Park” in his report for 1880.⁶⁷

On his first visit to the park in 1870, Norris had examined the “small rude stone-heaps, and . . . many mining shafts and drifts of some prehistoric race” near Trail Creek Pass in the Yellowstone (Paradise) Valley north of the park. Because Norris did not possess the necessary tools to complete a detailed study of such artifacts, he collected and sent all remains—arrowheads, rock specimens, obsidian tools, and other implements—from these archeological sites to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.⁶⁸ Norris did not eschew disturbing and collecting such remains as long as they were “in public or private museums . . . greatly adding to a correct knowledge of, and desire, to visit, the matchless ‘wonder-land.’”⁶⁹

During a later venture in the Mount Washburn area in 1878, Norris found “the ruins of an ancient, once-loopholed, earth-roofed block-house some 16 by 20 feet in diameter and of unknown origin.” He immediately reported this and other evidence of pre-park human activity to the secretary of the interior. For example,

he reported finding a corral near Amethyst Mountain; the remains of ancient tree stumps used for breastworks [fortifications]; “foot-logs” across Crevice, Hellroaring, and other creeks; and Hudson Bay-type martin steel traps near “the Indian arrowhead quarry at Beaver Lake.”⁷⁰ He continued to collect specimens for the Smithsonian Institution and the Anthropological Society of Washington. On one expedition, he and his work crew unearthed “a circular deposit of several bushels of beautiful white bead-like shot or pebble specimens.” At the end of the season, Norris took the samples with him to investigate their origins. He entertained theories that the pebbles might be the petrified eggs of some ancient reptile or, “as [he] was inclined to believe, the berries of juniper or cedar, doubtless long antedating those of Solomon, from Lebanon.”⁷¹

On another expedition, this one to the eastern portion of the park, Norris found the upright poles of an American Indian lodge, and the remains of nearly 40 others. The sites, located between Miller and Hoodoo creeks, and on the side of Parker Peak, also produced remnants of blankets, bed-clothing, apparel, and china. He also found pathways lined with decaying brush or poles, used by American Indians for driving game, mostly in the northern part of the park. One such “driveway” was on a south-facing cliff overlooking Rustic Falls, and another was near Swan Lake.⁷² Aware of the importance of preserving and studying the park’s past, Norris instructed his road construction crew to carefully scrutinize “all material handled in excavations; and all arrow, spear, or lance heads, stone axes and knives, or other weapons, utensils or ornaments. . . .” Each day, all such objects were to be collected and presented to the officer in charge of each crew, so Norris could send them to the Smithsonian.⁷³ The materials Norris sent to Washington were varied and extensive.⁷⁴

By 1881, Norris had learned quite a bit about the park’s history; in fact, he felt confident enough to write a 15-page section devoted to the “History of the Park” in what was to be his final annual report. In this section, he traced the park’s history from the time of early native peoples to the trappers who entered the park just a few years before it was set aside. He also drew a rendition of a stump he found with the initials and date (J. O. R., Aug. 29, 1819) of an early white explorer to the region embedded in its wood.⁷⁵

Norris’s interests also included the life sciences. In a report on the fishes of the park, for example, after describing the ease with which “the yellowish speckled

salmon trout” could be caught—they took “the hook so near boiling pools at various localities along the shore line,” he wrote, “that they may with ease be cooked in them upon the line without the fisherman changing position”—he described a parasite that infested most of them. He also noted a change in the occurrence of the infestation. “The proportion of them thus diseased,” he wrote, “has increased from something over one half in 1870 until all are apparently infested.” He was so curious about the relationship between the infestation and an increase in the growth of a certain weed along the lake’s shore that he “sent the skin, a portion of the meat, entrails, and worms of one of these trout, . . . and some of the sprigs of this weed, . . . as well as porous yellowish stone tubes of some worm or insect . . . found in abundance along the bank of the lake, to Prof. S. F. Baird, director of the Smithsonian and National Museum, and United States Commissioner of Fish and Fisheries.”⁷⁶

Norris so strongly believed that science should play a role in park policy and administration that he argued for employing a resident scientist in the park. In his 1877 annual report, he made his case for such a position:

having an ambitious scientific signal-officer at the Mammoth Hot Springs or the Geyser Basin, or both, might with little additional duty or expense, greatly aid science in solving many interesting and practical questions connected with the origin, character, duration, and decadence of . . . various classes of hot springs, the degree of their connection with the earth’s internal fires, and their combined influence upon the climate of the park.⁷⁷

Norris knew early on that Yellowstone would eventually “become and remain the chosen resort” for student and scientist.⁷⁸ Indeed, that has proven to be the case.

Improvement: The Third Pillar of Park Management

While Norris had intended to spend the park’s first appropriation largely on building a headquarters at Mammoth Hot Springs, he changed his plans in favor of constructing a road from Mammoth to the lower Firehole River. This road, which would link Fort Ellis, near Bozeman, Montana, to Henry’s Lake in Idaho, would provide the U.S. Army with a direct route through the

park to head off conflict between the Bannock Indians and white settlers.⁷⁹

When he was able to start building the park’s first official structure—an administrative headquarters—Norris chose a site near Mammoth Hot Springs. In his report to Secretary Schurz, Norris described the site, with its abundant grass, wood, and water, being ideal for the park headquarters, where Norris planned to construct a “plain but comfortable residence with the necessary outbuildings.” With that in mind, Norris, using the balance of the 1878 appropriations, began to stockpile the necessary lumber and other building materials so construction could begin early in the 1879 season.⁸⁰

Upon arriving at Mammoth Hot Springs for his third summer season in June 1879, Norris, accompanied by a new assistant, C. M. Stephens, and a crew of thirty men, immediately began work on the headquarters project. He selected a large “natural mound” that provided a commanding view of the Mammoth Hot Springs area and all approaches to the park headquarters. Norris described the site as being one that “commands the entire mound, valley, and terrace, within range of rifle or field artillery.” The mound, approximately 600’ in length, 300’ in width, and 150’ high, also had a natural depression, ideal for a reservoir, and “smoothly eroded depressions” on either ends, useful for carriageways.⁸¹ The site is known today as Capitol Hill.

By July 1879, Norris’s crew had erected “a genuine Montana fence,” nearly two miles long, using pine, fir, and cedar from the nearby terrace, to enclose headquarters and a sheltered pasture.⁸² They also used timber and shingles, both of which had been hewn upon the mountain terraces and hauled to the top of the mound, to erect the 40’ × 18’, two-story blockhouse with three side-wings and an eight-foot balcony facing the terraces. Sitting atop the main building was an octagonal “turret or gun-room, 9’ in diameter and 10’ high, well loopholed for rifles, and all surmounted by a national flag 53’ from the ground, upon a fine flag staff or liberty-pole passing from a solid foundation through and sustaining all the stories, turret, and roof thereof.”⁸³ Upon completing the blockhouse, the workers began constructing the reservoir “fronting” the mound, and a stable and corral.⁸⁴

Elsewhere in the park, with the help of some irrigation, Norris experimented with the planting of turnips, potatoes, and “other hardy vegetables in a half-acre garden one quarter mile below McGuirk [sic] Springs.” The production of vegetables was satisfactory, but vandalism prompted Norris to plan a fence around

future gardens and to locate them nearer the blockhouse. This garden experiment was the beginning of what later became known as the “Chinaman’s Garden.” Norris also left his trainmaster (foreman) J. E. Ingersoll and a crew to build “a loopholed, earth-roofed log-house and other improvements” with a stone chimney in a grove of trees between Beehive Geyser and Castle Geyser in 1879. Norris planned to spend time there during the winter to observe the Upper Geyser Basin year-round, but bad weather with heavy snow caused him to abandon the idea.⁸⁵

Subsequent years in Norris’s tenure as superintendent saw the addition of a few more buildings to the park’s cultural landscape. At Mammoth, Norris had his crew build a blacksmith shop, barn, and bathhouse.⁸⁶ He also helped to select a good mail route from the park’s West Entrance, and to establish the site for a mail station and hotel (never built), along with an earth-roofed cabin and barn—in the Norris area, as well as a mail station and barn where the new “cut-off [road] would strike the Madison [River] at Riverside.”⁸⁷

Only one of the structures built during Norris’s time has survived to this day: a half-completed public bathhouse, known by the name of the spring by which it was built, Queen’s Laundry. Surrounded, and all but consumed by thermal features today, the Queen’s

Laundry bathhouse was, according to park historian Aubrey Haines, “the first government building constructed specifically for the use of the public in any national park.”⁸⁸

Norris had his workers begin construction of the bathhouse, intended “for the free use of the public,” in 1881, west of the forks of the Firehole River. The hot spring by which the remains of the structure stand today had attracted Norris’s attention during the previous summer, during the construction of the road from the Riverside Mail Station (near the West Entrance) to Marshall’s mail station by Nez Perce Creek, in the Lower Geyser Basin.⁸⁹ Construction of the two-room, earth-roofed bathhouse, which boasted “wooden troughs for conveying [hot]water thereto,” was not finished before Norris was replaced as superintendent, and subsequent superintendents chose not to complete the structure.⁹⁰

The Queen’s Laundry bathhouse was, however, used for a brief span of time. In a guidebook he wrote after leaving the park, Norris explained that one could travel from Marshall’s Hotel “through largely groves and glades, and amid unique geyser and other hot-spring cones to . . . a bath-house which I constructed in 1881, or hopefully a better one, [and] test for themselves the velvety feel and cleansing properties of these waters.”⁹¹ Another guidebook—W. W. Wylie’s *The Yellowstone National Park, or the Great American Wonderland*—published in 1882, recommended that guests visit the bathhouse while staying at Marshall’s hotel, which was situated two miles away.⁹²

Though never completed, the building’s remains are evidence of Norris’s farsightedness, and serve as



NPN PHOTO ARCHIVES, YELL #129257

Norris blockhouse.



NPN PHOTO ARCHIVES, YELL #36540-3

Queen’s Laundry ruins, ca. 1960s.

testament to the “humble beginning to a policy of accommodating tourists in the national parks.”⁹³ Indeed, it is the oldest, and thus the “earliest recognition that providing for visitor accommodation was a legitimate use of federal funds within a National Park.”⁹⁴ It remains today as the only building left from the pre-military administrations.

In 1964, the park’s administration considered removing the remains of the bathhouse because it “impinge[d] upon a thermal feature.” Aubrey Haines, at the time a retired park engineer turned park historian, objected and, in fact, argued that the structure be restored and interpreted. “If this unusual structure cannot be interpreted within the present scope of planning,” he wrote to the park naturalist, alluding to the administration’s emphasis on protecting thermal features, “it should at least be allowed to remain to a time when it will be better appreciated.” He believed that the proposal to remove the bathhouse was “a purist approach which is both unrealistic and destructive, and I hope it will receive no further consideration.”⁹⁵ Haines won the argument—the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2001, and its ruins remain in place today.

Though few of Norris’s physical improvements to the park remain intact, his legacy lives on in the form of a less tangible, yet equally important kind of improvement: visitor assistance in the form of signs, trails, and informational writings. Norris firmly believed that one of his duties was to “assist tourists with information and guidance,” and he accepted that responsibility with relish.⁹⁶ Among other things, he took the first steps toward interpreting the park by building guide boards and affixing them to trees, rocks, and posts. Placed in 1879, the park’s first informational signs were “well-dressed, painted white, and then black-lettered with the names of the most important streams, passes, geysers, etc., and tables of distances between them.”⁹⁷ While the signs “proved . . . of great value to all persons visiting the Park,” many unfortunately were destroyed by “opponents of improvement,” according to Norris.⁹⁸

Even when they remained standing, however, visitors needed more than signs for a successful visit to the park. They also required access to the area’s most spectacular features. Hence, Norris suggested to the interior secretary that trails, both bridle and foot, be built throughout the park. For example, he asked the secretary to support the building of a trail through the upper Gibbon Canyon so tourists could view the numerous springs

and geysers there.⁹⁹ While visiting Mount Washburn, Norris envisioned a trail facilitating visitor appreciation: “No tourist should fail in securing this enchanting view,” he noted. He also added amenities to the foot trails built under his supervision. For example, in 1881, he had a trail bridge constructed at Crystal Falls and Grotto Pool (in the Lower Falls of the Yellowstone River area), along with ladders, pole railings, and some benches. He planned to have more substantial timber railings installed there as the supply of lumber permitted.

By the end of that year, visitors could walk six miles of trail on Terrace Mountain (near Mammoth Hot Springs), one mile of trail to the falls of the “East Gardner” River, one mile of trail at Monument Geyser (west of Gibbon Canyon), approximately 200 yards of trail to the head of the Lower Falls (then called the “Great Falls”) of the Yellowstone River, and about 200 yards of trail to the river below the “Great Falls.”¹⁰⁰ Eight bridle trails covered 234 miles of country; Norris listed them for the secretary in his report for 1879: “Middle Gardiner [*sic*], Forks of the Yellowstone, Clarks Fork Mines, Fossil Forrests [*sic*], Stinking Water, Yellowstone Lake and Falls, Mount Washburn, and Grand Canon [*sic*].”¹⁰¹

At this point in the park’s history, only local guides were available to help tourists locate the park’s spectacular features. These guides were often of questionable experience or character. Norris called them a “small but despicable class of prowlers” who preyed on tourists’ desire to see “this peerless region of wonders.”¹⁰² Because he was concerned about deceptions foisted off on visitors by some of these local guides, and because of his experience in the publishing business, Norris made plans to produce his aforementioned guidebook and a good map of the park; he also proposed granting licenses and issuing badges to qualified persons to protect visitors against such unscrupulous behavior.

Norris had at least one plan for “improvement” that never came to fruition. In his report to Secretary Schurz in 1880, Norris expressed his desire to reactivate the Liberty Cap “geyser-cone” by “cheaply convey[ing] into the ancient supply pipe of the cone . . . a sufficient quantity of water from the much more elevated Mammoth Hot Springs . . . in order to throw an ornamental column of water to any desired height.”¹⁰³ In accordance with the German chemist R. E. W. Bunsen’s theories of thermal features (the park’s Bunsen Peak bears his name), Norris believed that the “terrace-building properties of the water would soon encase this interesting cone with the inimitably beautiful[ly]-bordered pools of the

terrace formation, and also ultimately surround it with an effective and permanent support.”¹⁰⁴ A few years prior to this report, Norris had inserted a piece of lumber to support the cone, which he was sure would fall over without assistance from park management. There is no evidence that this reactivation plan, however, was ever implemented.

All in all, Norris managed to “improve” the park quite a bit, considering the time, energy, and funds he also devoted to protection and exploration. While Norris was pleased with his accomplishments, especially the new blockhouse—he was troubled by the possibility that he had chosen the wrong site for park headquarters.¹⁰⁵ By 1880, because the Utah Northern Railroad was making greater progress toward reaching the park from the west than the Northern Pacific was making from the north, Norris questioned whether the headquarters should be nearer the West Entrance instead of at Mammoth Hot Springs, because it appeared that the West Entrance would receive more use than the North Entrance. He went so far as to suggest that his assistant could occupy the original headquarters at Mammoth while an alternative headquarters was established.¹⁰⁶ With this idea in mind, Norris suggested to the secretary that land be reserved in the Firehole area, but as Norris’s tenure as superintendent was cut short, this plan never materialized.

Conclusion

Toward the end of the 1881 season, Norris made plans for the following year. He thanked his “own personal assistants” and the secretary of the interior for the “uniform kindness and assistance” he had received from the department. He concluded his report—what he called his “fair and full statement of facts . . . made to show to Congress and the people of the United States, that the slender appropriations which have been made for the protection and improvement of the distant nearly

unknown Wonder Land have not been misappropriated or misspent”—with respect and hope for the park’s future.¹⁰⁷ But that future did not involve Norris. Whether it was because of pressure from officials of the Northern Pacific Railroad, who suspected Norris of showing favoritism toward the Utah Northern Railroad, or because of political favoritism in Congress, or because of poor road conditions in the park, Norris was dismissed from his position as Yellowstone’s second superintendent before the park opened in 1882.

He left a lasting legacy, however. He laid out a primitive road system, initiated the early stages of a wildlife management program, conducted and supported scientific observations, and built the first administrative facilities in the park. His hiring of Harry Yount as the park’s first gamekeeper sparked the genesis of a ranger corps (Yount’s idea). He also took the first steps toward education and interpretation for visitors. He got the park’s record-keeping program underway and instigated some of the earliest scientific experiments in the park. While some of these programs were demanded by politicians and government scientists, Norris’s interest in the protection and betterment of the park complemented such external demands. His achievements have been best described by Haines, who wrote:

The second superintendent of Yellowstone National Park was a fortunate blend of the pioneer and the scientist—just the right man to open a wilderness. He was practical enough to see the immediate need for trails, roads, and buildings, and scholarly enough to record the area’s human and natural history; in everything he was enthusiastic and sincere, and his achievements were monumental.¹⁰⁸

By any standard, Norris rose to the challenges presented to him and broke administrative ground, facilitating park developments and protection under future administrations.