

Managing the “Matchless Wonders”



A HISTORY OF ADMINISTRATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, 1872–1965

Historic Resource Study, Volume III
Park Administrative History, Part I

By Kiki Leigh Rydell and Mary Shivers Culpin

National Park Service
Yellowstone Center for Resources
Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming
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Contents

Preface.....	v
1. “To Protect These Matchless Wonders”	1
2. Management by Fits and Starts, and the Pressure for Preservation	13
3. The War on Vandalism.....	25
4. Administration in Turmoil	51
5. “Nature is the Supreme School-Teacher”	75
6. Refuge in Rusticity.....	109
7. “A Hodgepodge Where, Instead, There Should Be Uniformity”	137
Appendices.....	161
Notes	175
Bibliography.....	211
Index.....	214

Preface

The administration of Yellowstone National Park, created in 1872 by an act of Congress, has, from the beginning, been dedicated to protecting the park's resources and providing opportunities for visitor enjoyment—the latter, specifically, through interpretation and improvements. To protect and interpret the park and to provide services to the visitors who have chosen to explore its natural splendors, park administrators over the course of time have orchestrated both the construction of a built environment and a constellation of policies that have allowed park officials to implement and coordinate their various tasks. This historic resource study and administrative history of the park discusses the ways successive administrations facilitated the park's practices of protection, improvement (public access), and interpretation by crafting what is, in effect, a cultural landscape—a built environment with a concomitant set of protective, interpretive, and public-access-oriented policies.

There can be no doubt of a clear relationship between broad trends in policy and the historic structures one sees today in Yellowstone. For example, the U.S. Army—and after that, subsequent civilian administrations—built, throughout the park, a set of snowshoe cabins “at a distance of about 10 miles from the outlying outposts [the soldier stations],” a distance one park official, in 1908, “considered to be a fair day's travel for . . . men on snowshoes through the mountains.”¹ These cabins were created to serve a specific protection goal—that is, to allow soldiers and then rangers to oversee the park more easily from these outposts and thus, better protect park wildlife and other natural phenomena from poaching and vandalism—and have since become part of the park's cultural landscape and historical legacy. Similarly, Yellowstone's museums and visitor centers—for example, the rustic museums at Norris, Fishing Bridge, and Madison Junction, or the Mission 66 visitor center at Canyon—have also served policy goals of providing visitors with information and interpretation of the park's natural environment and history.

In addition to reflecting policy, the structures built in the park also reflected aesthetic goals or philosophies important at the time of construction. For example, the buildings at Fort Yellowstone were examples of typical army architecture, considered appropriate and commanding of respect. The museums built in the late 1920s and the early 1930s were of a specific rustic design, a style *au courant* during that period, especially in national park architecture across the nation.

When the U.S. Congress passed Yellowstone's Organic Act on March 1, 1872, it withdrew a large area near the headwaters of the Yellowstone River to be used as a public park and stipulated that the land “reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale” be used as a “pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.” The act further stated that the park would be under the direction of the secretary of the interior, who would “make and publish rules and regulations” for the care and management of the same. These regulations would provide for the “preservation from injury or spoliation, of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park, and their retention in their natural condition.”² They set in motion a dual mandate, as well as an enormous experiment in federal land management that has served as an example worldwide. The park's Organic Act also set the stage for an often-contentious debate on how simultaneously to preserve and promote enjoyment of—in short to both protect and use—a national park.

The National Park Service Act of 1916 did little to resolve the matter. Like Yellowstone's Organic Act, it also contained contradictory goals, ordering the newly created National Park Service to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life [in the parks] 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.”³

Thus, all government structures built in the park and physical changes made to the park over the years have

been intended to serve either—or ideally, both—of these mandated goals: protection of, and the provision of public access to the park’s treasures. Balancing the two sides of this mandate has not been without hard questions. For instance, how can a building intended to inform visitors be compatible with preserving the park’s natural conditions, when a building, per se, is not natural? Any history of the administrative facilities built in the park must address these tensions. The complexities set in motion by the language of both Yellowstone’s Organic Act and the National Park Service Act have been central to the administrative history of the park, and thus, to the

history of the park’s administrative facilities.

This study begins with the first administration of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, and ends around 1965, with the nominal end of the so-called Mission 66 program, a massive effort to revamp national parks with adequate facilities designed both to accommodate and to educate masses of Americans eager to explore them. This document examines the structures built during the first 90 years of the park’s history, and the policies adopted by the various administrations both to protect the park’s resources and to interpret those same resources for visitor enjoyment.