

Gibson and the Yellowstone Park Association 1886–1891

The second day of January 1886, Charles Gibson of the newly formed Yellowstone Park Association (which took over the now bankrupt Yellowstone Park Improvement Company) met with Acting Secretary of the Interior H. Muldrow in Washington. Gibson was asked to provide descriptions of various sites in the park where he and others desired leases and to supply estimates for the cost of the buildings scheduled for erection. This information had previously been requested in October 1885.¹

When the Department of the Interior awarded a new lease to Charles Gibson in 1885, the legal counsel for the Yellowstone Park Improvement Company tried to delay it by filing a brief that alleged the government was obligated to protect the first lessee. Nevertheless, on March 20, 1886, Charles Gibson and his partners were awarded a 10-year lease of seven acres at four different sites: Mammoth Hot Springs, Norris Geyser Basin, Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, and Yellowstone Lake.² The legal counsel for the Improvement Company filed more protests asking that transactions be delayed until there was a decision from the Attorney General, but to no avail. According to historian Richard Bartlett, “Now that it (the Yellowstone Park Improvement Company) had fallen on hard times, it seemed rather callous of the Northern Pacific people to abandon him (Rufus Hatch). Yet this is exactly what they did. . . .” Most of the new investors in the Yellowstone Park Association were “heavy investors” in the Northern Pacific Railroad.³

In April, Western Union Telegraph Company sought permission to erect a telegraph line in the park,

but the Department instructed the Superintendent to award Charles Gibson the right to erect telegraph and telephone lines between his hotels. This was to be done by August. For this right, the government would have free use of the lines.⁴ By the end of the year, Gibson reported that telephones had been successfully installed in all of the hotels.⁵ Gibson was given permission to erect temporary buildings on the tent site at Canyon to accommodate visitors during the 1886 season and to establish a store for “sale of supplies upon ground embraced in his lease.” H. C. Davis, the manager of the National Hotel, was replaced by J. N. Strong.⁶

Included in the supplies that the Yellowstone Park Association had brought in was \$10,000 worth of liquor. This put Superintendent Wear in a predicament because one of the new Department regulations prohibited the sale of intoxicating liquors except to hotel guests for table use and stated that no saloons or bar-rooms were allowed. Gibson argued that the Department of the Interior had approved his construction plans that had indicated bar-rooms and, thus, he had been given approval to have them. The situation was not to be settled in 1886.⁷

For many years, Congress had been hearing of the inept management of the park. The reports finally caused Congress to cancel all funds for administration of the park in early August 1886. The Secretary of the Interior had no choice but to ask the Secretary of War to send in the Army. By the end of the 1886, the U.S. Cavalry was in charge of the park with Captain Moses Harris replacing D. W. Wear as Superintendent.

During the spring of 1887, Captain Moses Harris directed the different lessees to clean up around their properties. This order resulted in the removal of many unsightly barns, stables, and other shacks.⁸ During an inspection tour of the park, Harris found the Marshall Hotel in the Lower Geyser Basin (which came under control of Yellowstone Park Association the previous year) and the adjacent outbuildings to be of “poor and mean construction, and should be replaced by a commodious and well-constructed building capable of accommodating at least one hundred guests.” He described the buildings as “needlessly ugly in architectural design, resembling nothing so much as the section houses of a railroad.” He reported the Upper Geyser Basin Hotel as “more dilapidated than last year” and “not worth repairing.”⁹

In July, a faulty chimney flue caused a fire that burned the newly built hotel at Norris. A hotel tent camp and a temporary structure suitable for the accommodation of 60 guests were approved by Captain Harris and hastily built to accommodate the touring parties.

Confusion about a change from logs to lumber for Walter and Helen Henderson’s new addition to the Cottage Hotel delayed construction. However, the hotel was sufficiently complete at the end of 1885 for the Hendersons to welcome the first five registered guests on Christmas Day 1885 (the guests braved the winter conditions and swam in Bath Lake),¹⁰ and in February 1886, the Hendersons hosted a “masquerade ball.”¹¹ By 1887, the hotel accommodated 100 guests at \$2.50 per night or \$10.00 per week. John Yancey, who operated a small hotel in Pleasant Valley on the route to the Lamar Valley, could accommodate 20 guests at \$2 per day or \$10 a week. Yancey’s hotel continued to attract trout fishing enthusiasts.¹² In December, Secretary Lamar approved the transfer of James Clark’s livery stable lease at Mammoth Hot Springs to T. Stewart White, Thomas Friant, and Francis Leterllier, a Michigan group who had loaned Clark considerable funds to keep his operation in business. The following year, the Michigan firm transferred its rights to George Wakefield, who was also an agent for the Yellowstone Park Association.¹³

The well-equipped Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel, formerly called the National Hotel, was wired for additional electric lights during 1887, which helped reduce the risk of fire. At Canyon, temporary facilities accommodating about 70 tourists, under

G. F. Haraden as manager, were still allowed, and permission was given to the company to erect tents at Lake with the understanding that all debris would be removed by the end of the 1887 season.¹⁴

Harris felt that all of the Yellowstone Park Association hotels, which were under General Manager E. C. Waters, were well conducted, the food adequate, and the rooms clean. He did not think their daily charge of \$4 per day or \$3 per day for an extended stay unreasonable, considering the fact that the business was providing a service and supplies in such an isolated part of the country.

Despite 1887 visitation being somewhat lower than the year before, numerous visitors arrived in the park until the end of September. Later arrivals were accommodated by some of the hotel winter keepers in the interior of the park and by the Hendersons at the Cottage Hotel at Mammoth Hot Springs.¹⁵

Hotel and camping registers indicated the 1888 season set a record for numbers of visitors—6,000. But, Captain Harris’s 1888 report to the Secretary of the Interior reveals that he had begun to lose patience with the Yellowstone Park Association and with Charles Gibson, in particular. He was disturbed by the lack of information regarding the ownership of the company, and he believed that most of the stockholders were associated with the Northern Pacific Railroad.¹⁶ He complained that the company began the 1888 operations “with great vigor,” but had been remiss in fulfilling the obligations of constructing the hotels identified in their lease and were now providing the visitors with inadequate service. Harris recommended to the Secretary that Gibson be given notice of possible forfeiture. He described the condition of the park facilities and strongly emphasized to the Secretary that “Eminent men from all parts of the civilized world, scholars, law makers, divines, and soldiers come here, attracted by the fame of this land of wonders, and by the invitation implied in its dedication as a National Park, to have their senses offended and their enjoyment of nature’s most wonderful and beautiful gifts destroyed by the presence of unsightly filth and rubbish.”¹⁷

The nebulous arrangements between Charles Gibson, of the Yellowstone Park Association, and the park were clarified in March 1889. All leases held by Charles Gibson were surrendered to the Department of the Interior, and the Department issued six new leases to the Yellowstone Park Association for:



Yancey's Hotel. 1905.

Mammoth Hot Springs	3 acres
Norris Geyser Basin	1 acre
Lower Geyser Basin	2 acres
Grand Canon	2 acres
Yellowstone Lake	1 acre
Thumb or Shoshone Lake	1 acre

These new leases specified time limits for completion of construction of hotels and allowed manufacturing of bricks, quarrying for stone, and the use of dead or fallen timber in the construction of buildings in the park. The Yellowstone Park Association was also given permission to maintain a naphtha launch on Yellowstone Lake.¹⁸

With the increase in visitation and the accumulation of downed timber near the roads, Captain Harris's replacement in the summer of 1889, Captain F. A. Boutelle, suggested that designated campsites should be spaced a few miles apart and inspected daily by the patrols to help prevent forest fires.¹⁹

The photographic work of F. Jay Haynes as well as his association with the Northern Pacific Railroad gave the park international publicity. His photographs and albums were not only sold to visitors, but could also be seen on different Atlantic steamers, at resorts in Europe, and in advertisements in Thomas Cook's internationally distributed publication *Excursionist*.²⁰ Haynes maintained a very open relationship with the Northern Pacific Railroad, and after the lease agreement was signed between the Secretary of the Interior and the Yellowstone Park Association in 1889, Haynes signed an agreement with the Yellowstone Park Association in which he agreed to:



Uncle John Yancey. Date unknown.

the exclusive sale of such goods as are sold in the hotels...furnish suitable space or rooms in any or all hotels desired by [Haynes]...goods embraced in this agreement are plain and coloured photographs, photo-gravures, lithographic Souvenir albums, guide books, transparencies, and all similar landscape views of the Yellowstone National Park, made and published by [Haynes]...[Haynes] to pay...eighteen per cent of the gross sales of such goods in the hotels, and in the studio except upon proceeds of portraits of private individuals.²¹

In 1889, D. B. May of Billings, Montana, received permission to install an elevator or incline at the Lower Falls. After making a carefully examining of the plans with Arnold Hague, Captain Boutelle recommended that May's lease be cancelled, that a more sensitive location be selected for the incline, and that no structures or buildings be allowed at the bottom of the canyon.²² Also in 1889, Ole Anderson received a personal and non-transferable privilege to "engage in

the business within the Park of placing small articles in the waters of the hot springs, to be encrusted with the deposit left by the water, and of selling such coated articles to tourists.” (Anderson had been unofficially selling coated specimens in the park since 1883.) The Mammoth Hot Springs postmistress, Mrs. Jennie Henderson Dewing, received permission to sell stationery, photographic views, and other such items in the post office during her term as postmistress. And, because the doctor practicing in the park, Dr. Pettigrew, did not come back after his first year, the Department authorized the Army medical officer to practice medicine within the park.²³

The transportation situation in the park in 1889 was not as good as it had been in previous years, but the following year, George Wakefield was praised by the new acting superintendent, Captain F. A. Boutelle, as running it [transportation concession] almost to “perfection.” Wakefield willingly paid nearly twice as much for good horses that were brought in from Iowa rather than purchase local ones, and he provided excellent carriages. Because his record was exemplary with no passenger injuries in the seven years he had operated in the park, Wakefield had a good reputation as a lessee. In 1889, for the first time, Wakefield offered a daily stage service that allowed stop-overs in addition to a regular route.

Just prior to the beginning of the 1890 season, George Wakefield sold his company to the National Park Transportation Company, a subsidiary of the Yellowstone Park Association. This marked the beginning of the Yellowstone Park Association acquiring control over a diversity of private activities in the park. The company had bought the Cottage Hotel in 1889.²⁴

Boutelle was optimistic about Yellowstone Park Association improving the hotel situation. Instead of placing blame on the indifference of the company officials toward park problems, Boutelle believed that the company officers probably had more pressing matters than giving the park their personal attention.²⁵

While on an inspection of the park, the company’s acting president, T. B. Casey, recognized the “bad condition of affairs” and indicated that improvements would be made. Casey saw firsthand the insufficient equipment, inadequate numbers of accommodations, and management problems. Boutelle informed the company that construction of a road to Thumb from Old Faithful would probably not receive

appropriations soon. Consequently, despite the fact that the company had received approval for a hotel at Lake and at Thumb, it was decided only to cut the timber during 1890 and build only a portion of the Lake Hotel that year. Work on the Lake Hotel began during the winter of 1889–1890 and in May 1890, Yellowstone Park Association Assistant Treasurer W.G. Johnson wanted some minor changes made in the plans for the location of water closets. He recommended seeking approval from the builder, R. Cummins and also the Department of Interior. After receiving numerous complaints about the Lower Geyser Basin Hotel, the company decided to construct a new hotel there. They decided that the visitors to the Upper Geyser Basin could backtrack to the Lower Geyser Basin and spend the night at the new hotel.²⁶

In July, the Yellowstone Park Association expected the “entire frame of Lake Hotel [to be raised inside of two days.” The company hoped to install electric lights during the summer, but had to delay installation until the following spring. The furniture ordered at the request of E. C. Waters did not meet the expectations of the Assistant General Manager, W. G. Johnson. Johnson suggested that it could be used in the third story of Lake Hotel, but according to Johnson, the furniture was not good enough for the Lake Hotel.²⁷

Despite “bad conditions” at the hotels, the wines, teas, and foods served there were often first-class. Anxious for publicity, the shipper who supplied the park hotels with wine wanted to advertise his firm on a wine list card. This did not happen because Yellowstone Park Association general manager, E. C. Waters, objected to making “our dining room an advertising medium.” Among the wines served in the park in 1890 were St. Julien, Pontet Canet, Chateau la Rose, Haut Sauternes, Chateaaau Yquem and Latour Blanc.²⁸ Waters had formerly been in the tea business for 12 years and was very particular about the quality and types of tea used in the park; he was willing to pay more for a superior tea. He preferred to use a New York importer instead of the having the “very poor stuff” shipped from St. Paul. Guests were offered Oolong, Young Hyson, and a good Japan tea.²⁹ Other delicacies ordered in 1890 were sweet breads, oysters, and truffles.³⁰

By the end of the summer and after Casey’s visit to the park, W. G. Pearce, Yellowstone Park Association official, was placed in charge of all of the



Lake Hotel. ca. 1895.

company's interest in the park, including the responsibility held by former general manager E. C. Waters, who had been removed from his position by the company. Waters had secured for himself a lease authorizing a general boat business on Yellowstone Lake. The Yellowstone Park Association wasted no time in planning its strategy for getting a similar lease.³¹ Waters hoped to take advantage of the increased visitation and have his steamboat on Yellowstone Lake in July of the next year. The 10-year lease allowed him to carry passengers and transport. In addition to Waters, the other directors of the new boat company were M. B. A. Waters, George Gordon of Livingston, A. L. Smith of Helena, and J. A. Hays of Beloit, Wisconsin.³²

The 1891 season saw major changes in the transportation business. In March, Charles Gibson of the Yellowstone Park Association appointed George Wakefield as the Master of Transportation in the park at a salary of \$250 a month, including use of the James Clark cottage for his family and free board for himself at the hotels. A few weeks later, the Department of the Interior annulled the lease held by the Yellowstone Park Association for transportation and awarded it to Silas Huntley of Helena, Montana, effective November 1, 1891.³³

Visitation in 1891 seemed off to a better start than the previous year.³⁴ The Yellowstone Park Asso-

ciation noticed that the profile of the visitors seemed to be changing, with entire families including small children coming to the park. The company partially attributed the change to the positive publicity about the ease of traveling to and within the park and the modern conveniences now available in the park. One could now buy a *Boston Herald*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, or *Chicago Tribune* at the Mammoth News Stand!³⁵

During the summer of 1891, different kinds of fire extinguishers were tested and the question of fire escapes was discussed. Yellowstone Park Association official W. G. Johnson prepared sketches for potential locations of fire escapes for the Mammoth, Grand Canyon, and Lake Hotels. Johnson felt that a wooden escape was just as effective on a frame building as an iron one, but the company officials in Minnesota favored iron ladders without a platform on each floor. Johnson responded, "I believe it would be politic, however, to go into this matter with more detail."³⁶

By mid-summer 1891, the construction work on Lake Hotel was finished; Fountain Hotel and dining room wing were completed and furnished, with the exception of the hall carpet en route from New York. The siding for the other wing of Fountain Hotel and for the Help's Hall was in progress. R. Cummins supervised the construction of Lake, Fountain, and Canyon hotels.³⁷



Fountain Hotel. n.d. Collection of Mary Shivers Culpin.

Despite strained relations with Secretary of the Interior John Noble, the Yellowstone Park Association was pleased overall with the 1891 season. Company President Casey reported that “hotels are well and economically conducted. The transportation is

excellent. Both give as much and general satisfaction as could be expected....There is decidedly less fuss and friction, and as far as I can learn the amount made on the same business is equal to and perhaps a little more than it was formerly.”³⁸