

# Some Notes on Thematic and Multi-Park Administrative Histories

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All 1997 saw the publication of an important new study by Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History*.<sup>1</sup> This long-anticipated overview of natural resource management in the parks has been greeted with enthusiasm and praise. It has appeared on the National Park Service's website since publication and is confidently predicted to be a landmark in scholarship on the agency.

The Sellars book establishes another, less celebrated, landmark as well. Park Service Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley, at a meeting of agency historians in Austin, Texas,<sup>2</sup> extolled it as a fine example of an administrative history. For some of those assembled that description may have sounded incongruous. Administrative histories typically focus on a single park. They follow a traditional chronological outline of pre-park land use, the campaign to establish the unit, land acquisition, planning and construction, and resource management, often in chapters organized by superintendent or by some internal set of phases.

An administrative history, however, is a history of the way that a government agency carries out its duties and the successes and failures of its management. For the National Park Service, Sellars' book is one of all too few that looks beyond an individual park at larger topics, regions or questions of administration. A bibliography of park administrative histories maintained by bureau historian Barry Mackintosh shows nearly 90 completed since 1982, and at least 31 others underway. By contrast, only 25 book-length reports exist that analyze topical issues, compare park units, or evaluate regions or other groupings of units.<sup>3</sup>

Scholarly research in history, as in any discipline, advances on a balance of multiple detailed studies countered with overviews that synthesize those studies and provide a framework for new ones. A library of individual park administrative histories, while of great use to park managers, is but a portion of the detailed studies that should contribute to scholarship and managerial perspective on the park system. Furthermore, it is a portion of one side of a balanced research agenda. In

this short essay, I will suggest opportunities for future research that will expand and refine the administrative historical picture of the national park system by adding non-park-specific detailed research and studies that integrate multiple units. In each of three categories, I will cite some existing work and provide examples of the types of research needed for an enhanced understanding of the park system and a better perspective for subsequent histories of individual parks.

## *Topical Studies*

One counterpart to the individual park history is a topical investigation. Studies of specific topics across the park system, or large segments of it, have flourished in the journal literature for decades. The majority of the non-park-specific studies fall in this category. Among the latter are a number that consider sweeping topics, such as wildlife or natural resource management, system-wide. Sellars' book is the most recent example but others by Olson<sup>4</sup> and Wright<sup>5</sup> preceded it. Mackintosh's report on interpretation,<sup>6</sup> Kaufman's on women in the Park Service,<sup>7</sup> and recent works by Carr on landscape architecture<sup>8</sup> and McClelland on historic landscape design<sup>9</sup> correlate data from around the system to achieve the grand overview of a major topic. Other works have narrower foci but no less coverage of the park system. Paige on the Civilian Conservation Corps,<sup>10</sup> McFadden on the development of the telephone and radio systems in the parks,<sup>11</sup> and Lewis' treatment of NPS museum curatorship<sup>12</sup> provide critical building blocks for all local administrative histories.

Not every topical history surveys the entire park system. In *Trains of Discovery*, Runte<sup>13</sup> considers the role of railroad corporations in the establishment of the great western parks. Keller and Turek's *American Indians and National Parks*<sup>14</sup> and Catton's discussion of Native Americans and the Alaskan parks are major additions to the scant literature on that subject.<sup>15</sup> A recent dissertation by Barringer<sup>16</sup> looks at concession management in Yellowstone but includes a perspective on system-wide policy as well. Finally, *Administrative History: Expansion of the National Park Service in the 1930s* by Unrau and Willis<sup>17</sup>

provides an important temporal look at Park Service expansionism.

These excellent books leave many topics available for future fruitful research. Sellars is just beginning a major cultural resource counterpart to his natural resource volume, but many subjects need specific overviews. Management of historic homes, presidential sites, military forts, memorials, and sites commemorating negative aspects of American history are a few of the specific subjects that come to mind. Living history and interpretive programs, signage and brochures also merit attention. On the natural resource side, fire in the national parks still needs work in spite of the contributions of Stephen Pyne.<sup>18</sup> Coastal erosion and construction, pest management, hazard mitigation, and coping with feral animals are processes that also need system-wide study. Administrative issues such as responses to overcrowding, development of trails and camping, dams and reservoirs in the parks, and the evolution of infrastructure like water, power and sewage lines demand attention as well. All these topics, and many others each reader of this essay will devise, will help provide a rich frame of reference for the park system in general and any one unit in particular.

#### *General Administration*

A variety of subjects suitable for study may be designated "general administration." Among them are biographies, park system subdivisions or offices, and programs carried out by the agency. For example, there are several good but dated biographies of major figures like Stephen Mather<sup>19</sup> and Horace Albright.<sup>20</sup> Reinterpretation in light of recent research on the park system is certainly one direction for study. New research to supplement the autobiographies by former directors George Hartzog<sup>21</sup> and Conrad Wirth<sup>22</sup> provides another. In addition to these notable figures, many less senior officials should be considered. Frank Pinkley, Roger Toll, and George Wright come to mind immediately. Others might be handled in groupings of shorter biographies such as Strong provided for conservationists in *Dreamers and Defenders*.<sup>23</sup> The first tier of Mather-appointed superintendents including Washington B. Lewis of Yosemite, J. Ross Eakin of Glacier, George B. Dorr of Acadia, and John White of Sequoia is one example. The first Division of Biology personnel including Joseph Dixon, Lowell Sumner, and Ben Thompson is another.

Subdivisions of the agency also can provide instructive topics. An administrative history of the Midwest Region (in its various permutations) would form a natural data bridge between its individual parks and the entire system. Perhaps because of structural differences in the two agen-

cies, several such regional studies exist for the U.S. Forest Service,<sup>24</sup> but none for the Park Service. On the other hand, historians have studied several National Park Service offices in depth. Corkern, Glass, and Mackintosh have authored monographs respectively on the Historic American Buildings Survey, the National Historic Preservation Program, and the Historic Sites Survey and National Historic Landmarks programs.<sup>25</sup> Opportunities remain in many areas including the offices for Planning, International Affairs, Design and Construction, the Harpers Ferry Center, and the Denver Service Center.

Official and unofficial programs and events affecting the parks have received some attention. A recent dissertation by Noll expands on the history of Mission 66.<sup>26</sup> Mattes' study of the American Revolution Bicentennial<sup>27</sup> is a timely addition to the literature exploring politics, policy, and interpretation. Williss' excellent monograph on the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act<sup>28</sup> further bolsters the story of National Park Service administration.

Many other subjects offer opportunities for either a first comprehensive analysis or for a deeper one than is present in the journal literature. These include management of the park system during both world wars, the recreation imperative during Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, and agency experience with the Wilderness Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. Programs like the one for national natural landmarks, though young, deserve careful research. Once again, each of these research foci is part of a historical framework for individual park histories. No park ever operated outside an organizational, regional, and programmatic framework. Knowing more about it means knowing more about each park.

#### *Comparative Histories*

Both topical histories and studies of general administrative regions, offices, and programs use inductively structured research procedures. An alternative with promise is a carefully designed comparison of like units to deduce reasons for differences in administration. There are few examples of this type of research. *Preserving Different Pasts* by Rothman<sup>29</sup> surveys the national monuments. While it is not a structured comparison between units, it does provide useful data on a whole category of the park system. A recent dissertation on Civil War battlefields by Abroe<sup>30</sup> and Norris' administrative history of Katmai and Aniakchak<sup>31</sup> also review related parks.

However, a designed comparative study of subject-related parks or ones from the same originating process may be especially enlightening. In a project I began three years ago, I am attempting to

do this. While researching another subject at the archives in Harpers Ferry, I discovered two boxes of reports from seashore and lakeshore surveys conducted by the Park Service in the 1930s and the 1950s.<sup>32</sup> They indicated that 36 areas around the Atlantic, Gulf, Pacific, and Great Lakes coastlines had been proposed for “national seashore (or lakeshore) recreation area” status in the park system. From this group Congress established 10 units and added four more from the list proposed for state park status. Two more became part of Channel Islands National Park. Questions immediately came to mind: What criteria identified a coastline as “nationally significant?” What happened to the 24 that are not today part of the national park system? Why did the campaigns that resulted in the establishment of the existing 14 seashores and lakeshores succeed? Familiarity with several of the units brought other questions. Why did some, but not all, of the units’ management philosophies and policies diverge so far from the “recreation area” concept under which they were identified? How and why did their prescriptions for development of roads and structures, off-road vehicle use and natural resource management come to vary so widely?

I came to hypothesize that the pressure from local populations was the primary factor in their differentiation. The book to come from this study thus will compare 14 units identified in a series of studies for one purpose, outdoor recreation. Analysis of the many tracks their establishment and administration have followed will prove or disprove that hypothesis as well as identify other variables for investigation. All these influences can be researched in other combinations of units. Some groupings that come to mind are desert parks, urban recreation areas, wild and scenic rivers, Alaskan natural parks, and parks with trans-mountain roads.

### Conclusion

The purpose of the administrative history of the national park system is to explain the condition and management of that system. There are a variety of approaches to and components of the program for such history. First, research must balance between a diverse group of detailed studies and occasional overviews. These are symbiotic in a proper research agenda. Second, the existing program of individual park histories should not only continue but should expand. These are the tools for current managers and every unit needs one. Third, scholars also should conduct complementary focused research on topical, general administrative and comparative history of the parks. The latter in particular is an organizing approach that can identify the critical factors in the evolution and

administration of the park system in a way no single park study can.

Two final thoughts must be considered in the program of administrative history. National Park Service Associate Director Kate Stevenson<sup>33</sup> informed the Austin meeting of agency historians that additional money for administrative history is simply unavailable. Competition for funds from other worthwhile projects is too great. This is a situation that, if it persists, will damage the National Park Service in ways evidently unrealized. The rationales for decisions and actions that impact park management daily are slipping away. Related to that is a second concern. Many National Park Service personnel are guilty of ignoring the documentation of their actions. The agency has suffered from inconsistent records keeping for decades despite existing policies. Now the advent of email and wordprocessing threatens even those efforts. Drafts of documents are deleted with no paper copy to show the historian how a plan evolved. Important decisions communicated through email may also vanish. Further, many records and documents saved on disk face a short life if not preserved on paper as well. National Park Service Archivist Diane Vogt O’Connor<sup>34</sup> explained to the Austin meeting that disk memory lasts between five to twenty years. Acid free paper may last 150 years. It is time to ensure that each employee of the agency follows the existing regulations on preserving records and, furthermore, that these records be on paper and include all the steps in the history that each is making.

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### Notes

- 1 Richard W. Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).
- 2 National Park Service historians meeting held at the annual conference of the National Council for Public History, Austin, TX, April 14 and 15, 1998.
- 3 Barry Mackintosh, “Historical Research in the National Park Service,” *CRM*, 21:2 supplement (1998); Barry Mackintosh, “Park Administrative Histories,” unpublished bibliography, Park History Office, National Park Service (1998).
- 4 Gordon C. Olson, “A History of Natural Resources Management within the National Park Service,” MA Thesis, Slippery Rock University (1986).
- 5 R. Gerald Wright, *Wildlife Research and Management in the National Parks (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992)*.
- 6 Barry Mackintosh, *Interpretation in the National Park Service: A Historical Perspective* (National Park Service Report, 1986).

- 7 Polly W. Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice: A History* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).
- 8 Ethan Carr, *Wilderness by Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).
- 9 Linda F. McClelland, *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1998).
- 10 John C. Paige, *The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Park Service, 1933-1942, An Administrative History* (National Park Service Report, 1985).
- 11 Ralph R. McFadden, *From Ground Wire to Microwave: A Chronicle of Telephone and Radio System Development in Our National Park System* (National Park Service Report, 1991).
- 12 Ralph H. Lewis, *Museum Curatorship in the National Park Service, 1904-1982* (National Park Service Report, 1993).
- 13 Alfred Runte, *Trains of Discovery: Western Railroads and the National Parks* (Niwot, CO: Roberts Rinehart, 1990).
- 14 Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, *American Indians and National Parks* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1998).
- 15 Theodore Catton, *Inhabited Wilderness: Indians, Eskimos, and National Parks in Alaska* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997).
- 16 Mark D. Barringer, "Private Empire, Public Land: The Rise and Fall of the Yellowstone Park Company," Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Christian University (1997).
- 17 Harlan D. Unrau and G. Frank Williss, *Administrative History: Expansion of the National Park Service in the 1930s* (National Park Service Report, 1983).
- 18 Stephen Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1982, 1997 reprint).
- 19 Robert Shankland, *Steve Mather of the National Parks* 3d. ed. (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).
- 20 Donald C. Swain, *Wilderness Defender: Horace M. Albright and Conservation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
- 21 George B. Hartzog, Jr., *Battling for the National Parks* (Mt. Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell, 1988)
- 22 Conrad L. Wirth, *Parks, Politics, and the People* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980).
- 23 Douglas H. Strong, *Dreamers and Defenders* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).
- 24 Thomas G. Alexander, *The Rise of Multiple-Use Management in the Intermountain West: A History of Region 4 of the Forest Service* (U. S. Forest Service Report, 1987); Robert D. Baker, et al., *Timeless Heritage: A History of the Forest Service in the Southwest* (U. S. Forest Service Report, 1988).
- 25 Wilton C. Corkern, Jr., "Architects, Preservationists, and the New Deal: The Historic American Buildings Survey, 1933-1942," Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University (1984).
- 26 William N. Noll, "Mission 66: The National Park Service Program for the Revitalization of America's National Parks, 1955-1966," MA thesis, Kansas State University (1997)
- 27 Merrill J. Mattes, *Landmarks of Liberty: A Report on the American Revolution Bicentennial Development Program of the National Park Service* (National Park Service Report, 1989).
- 28 G. Frank Williss, *Administrative History: The National Park Service and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1990* (National Park Service Report, 1985).
- 29 Hal K. Rothman, *Preserving Different Pasts: The American National Monuments* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989).
- 30 Mary M. Abroe, "All the Profound Scenes: Federal Preservation of Civil War Battlefields, 1861-1990," Ph.D. dissertation, Loyola University-Chicago (1996).
- 31 Frank B. Norris, *Isolated Paradise: An Administrative History of the Katmai and Aniakchak National Park Units* (National Park Service Report, 1996).
- 32 Harpers Ferry Center Library and Archives, 175, Boxes 1 and 2.
- 33 Kate Stevenson, National Park Service Historians Meeting, op. cit., note 2.
- 34 Diane Vogt O'Connor, National Park Service. Historians Meeting, op. cit., note 2.

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