Preserving the Spirit of National Parks: The U.S. Army in Yellowstone

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Abstract: As the flagship U.S. National Park, Yellowstone, throughout its administrative history, has set many precedents for park management policies and practices across the United States. This essay examines the period of administration of the park by the United States Army from 1886 to 1916, which was especially formative for Yellowstone. The army reversed the trend of ineffective leadership in administering the park. The policies enacted during that period – regarding nature, wildlife, and tourism management – laid the groundwork for the administration of Yellowstone. In turn, many of these best practices were adopted by subsequent national parks. Most importantly, the army’s work served as a major factor in the very preservation of the national parks system. Therefore, the park administration by the United States Army left a lasting legacy that is still evident in both Yellowstone and many other national parks today.

Yellowstone National Park is one of the world’s premier national parks. As the first national park in the world, Yellowstone received its namesake from the Yellowstone River, which runs through the heart of the park. The park encompasses over 2.2 million acres of land and is extremely biodiverse. There are presently over 75 species of mammals, 322 species of bird, 16 species of fish, and 1,100 species of native plants. The park is also famous for its geological wonders. It is home to one of the largest volcanic craters in the world, containing over 10,000 thermal features and 300 geysers. In addition, the park boasts one of the world’s largest petrified forests, as well as over 290 magnificent waterfalls.

The significance of Yellowstone extends beyond its physical space. In the words of scholar Susan Clark, ‘Yellowstone has also become – in addition to a place, a park, and a region – an idea about nature and our relationship to it, as well as an ethic, calling to our mind our responsibility for our world.’ As the flagship U.S. national park, Yellowstone, throughout its administrative history, has set many precedents for park management policies and practices across the United States. The period of its administration by the U.S. Army, from 1886 to 1916, was especially formative because the army reversed the trend of ineffective leadership in administering the park. The policies enacted during that period – regarding nature, wildlife, and tourism management – laid the groundwork for the administration of Yellowstone. In turn, many of these best practices were adopted by subsequent national parks. Most importantly, the army’s work in Yellowstone served as a major factor in the very preservation of the national parks system. This paper examines how the park’s administration by the United States Army left a lasting legacy that is still evident in both Yellowstone and many other U.S. national parks today.

Pre-Administration (1805 – 1872)

Before analyzing the army administration of Yellowstone, it is important to understand the
history of the park leading up to that point. Yellowstone first entered the American consciousness through brief glimpses during early nineteenth century expeditions and remained clouded in mystery for the next half century. The Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1805 constituted the earliest recorded encounter with Yellowstone by white Americans. As the leaders of the Corps of Discovery, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark explored the land the United States purchased from France in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. During their exploration, Lewis and Clark came across the Yellowstone River at the site where the river makes a ninety degree turn. With no desire to detour from his journey, Clark did not explore the area in further detail. He merely records in his journal that “The Roche [Roche Jaune – i.e. Yellow Stone], passes out of a high rugged mountain covered with snow.” A few years later, a fur trapper named John Colter inadvertently elucidated more details about Yellowstone through a solo quest for beavers in the region. From the end of 1807 to 1808, Colter trekked into the valley of the upper Yellowstone and likely came in contact with “at least one of [the park’s] thermal areas.”

Over the next few decades, the Yellowstone region remained mostly unexplored. While the fur trade continued until 1840, several white Americans interacted with Yellowstone, but none of them significantly expanded the general American consciousness about the region. In the 1850s, a white American named Jim Bridger built upon his friendly relations with the Native Americans to create a map of the Yellowstone region. In addition, Bridger described the natural features of Yellowstone to other Americans. Bridger, however, had a notorious reputation as an uncouth mountain man and a teller of tall tales. This reputation diminished Bridger’s credibility, especially among his contemporaries, to whom Yellowstone remained more myth than reality.

Yellowstone was finally explored in detail by a series of expeditions in the late 1860s that collectively illuminated features of the region. In 1869, the privately financed Cook-Folsom-Peterson Expedition traveled across the Yellowstone River to explore the heart of the Yellowstone region. An account of their trip was published in the Western Monthly magazine in 1870 detailing Yellowstone’s awe inspiring natural features. One particular passage epitomizes the spirit of their descriptions:

[We] found the most gigantic hot springs we had seen. They were situated along the river bank, and discharged so much hot water that the river was blood-warm a quarter of a mile below. One of the springs was two hundred and fifty feet in diameter, and had every indication of sprouting powerfully at times... although we experienced no bad effects from the passing through the ‘Valley of Death,’ yet we were not disposed to dispute the propriety of giving it that name.

While Cook tries to stick to facts in his descriptions, his astonishment at the sheer scale of the natural features in Yellowstone is clear. One year later in 1870, the Washburn-Langford-Doane Expedition traversed into the Yellowstone region for further exploration. Their published work in news outlets informed and inspired U.S. Representative William D. Kelley to initiate the movement that ultimately resulted in the establishment of Yellowstone National Park. The Hayden Geological Survey of 1871 further supported Kelly’s efforts for a national park. This comprehensive report detailing the features of Yellowstone convinced the United States Congress to remove the region from public auction. In fact, Hayden’s survey included sightings of destructive frontier-esque behavior. Haines argues that “the process of subduing the Yellowstone wilderness had been begun in the style of the American frontier... and surely it would have gone the way of many another pristine locality” had it not been made into a national park. The expeditions illuminating the richness and diversity of Yellowstone culminated in the United States government’s
decision to establish Yellowstone National Park through the Act of Dedication in 1872. Under the “exclusive control of the Secretary of the Interior,” Yellowstone National Park became the first federal institution of its kind. Moreover, the creation of Yellowstone sparked a bigger phenomenon now known as the United States Park Movement. Thus turning Yellowstone into a national park was a monumental achievement, but many unforeseen challenges lay ahead.

**Early Administration (1872 – 1886)**

In the fledgling years of Yellowstone as a national park, the administration faced a number of obstacles. The United States government had virtually no previous experience in dealing with a national park. Historian Richard Bartlett reflects that “the creation of Yellowstone National Park was an experiment in government; administering such a region hardly fell within [traditional arenas of U.S. government authority] ... with no experience to fall back on, the first administrators had no profound underlying philosophy to guide them in [administering the park].” In other words, the first few park superintendents experienced trial by fire. Through their failures, they helped identify policy areas crucial to the successful maintenance of a national park. Moreover, their struggles ushered in the era of administration by the U.S. Army, which proved to be a turning point for the growth of Yellowstone. Nathaniel Langford, the park’s first superintendent, suffered from a lack of financial and legislative resources to effectively regulate the park. The creation of the park drew national attention toward Yellowstone, which naturally led to an influx of visitors to the area. Unfortunately, the tragedy of the commons, whereby a common unregulated resource is drained by the individual behavior of those who benefit from it, occurred in full force. The visitors exploited the park’s wildlife to the point where it “cause[d] harm to the area.” When Langford turned to Congress for public funds to install a policing force, he was completely turned down. Historians speculate that Congress had likely only agreed to create Yellowstone if no cost was initially incurred. Yellowstone historian Hiram Chittenden explains that, “Congress would not have created this reservation had it not believed that no additional public burden was to be incurred thereby.” Langford’s hands were tied. In addition, due to the lack of policy precedent for national parks, Langford was unable to enact legislation to regulate the park. To make matters worse, since the superintendent job did not pay a salary, Langford lived outside of Yellowstone and had a day job as a bank examiner. As a result, his time actually in the park was limited, which contributed to the dysfunction of park regulation. Ultimately, Langford was removed from the post in 1877 after earning a reputation as ineffective. The next superintendent, Philetus W. Norris, better handled the issues that plagued Langford and left a much greater administrative mark on Yellowstone. In the domain of protection of resources, Norris set regulations to outlaw poaching and exploitation of wildlife. In a report to the secretary of the interior, Norris states 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.” To fight this endangerment of wildlife, Norris created a set of policies, which included the restriction of long-range rifles and the domestication of certain wildlife, such as the bison. Moreover, he secured funding from Congress to hire a gamekeeper to enforce the regulations. In the domain of scientific study within the park, Norris – who was the “ethnologist, zoologist, archaeologist, and geologist [of] the park” – contributed greatly to the scientific understanding of the ecological niches of the park. This knowledge, both quantitative and qualitative, enabled the introduction of more informed administrative policies for the park.
Norris oversaw the construction of fences, roads, and utility buildings. In addition, he built the first administrative buildings in the park that protected the park from vandalism, increased accessibility for visitors and officials, and provided basic services to the public.\(^{26}\) Norris’s leadership of the park was cut short in 1882 due to political pressures stemming from the 1880 presidential election.\(^{27}\) He left a powerful legacy by setting a positive precedent on how to place the park onto a track of effective administration. However, his work was almost undone over the next decade by a combination of external pressures, events, and the short and limited reigns of three ineffective successors.\(^{28}\) During this period, railroad and mining interests lobbied the government to enter the park. Moreover, the park direly lacked federal support on both financial and policy fronts due to its low legislative priority.\(^{29}\) As a result, there was a substantial increase in park policy violations, which ranged from vandalism to poaching, within the park.\(^{30}\) Fortunately for Yellowstone, the U.S. government turned control of the park to the U.S. Army in 1886 as a last resort. This ended the era of early park administration, which, though mostly ineffective, provided a necessary starting baseline for future park management endeavors. United States Army Administration (1886 – 1916)

After Congress decided not to appropriate any money for the superintendent of Yellowstone, the Interior Department turned to the army to preserve the national park. Over the course of the next 30 years, the U.S. Army broke new ground in administrative policy for Yellowstone. Moreover, the army’s policies became the paradigm from which subsequent national park policies were derived. The army arrived at an abused and endangered Yellowstone in 1886. Bartlett recounts that “the park was indeed in a chaotic state. Tourists were more prevalent than ever, drifters located their tents or lean-tos wherever their inclinations directed, and there was no satisfactory enforcement of regulations.”\(^{31}\) While the army’s potential for efficient management of a park was unproven, there were no doubts about their ability to enforce their policies. Bartlett emphasizes that “the ‘army way’ involved regulations, good, bad, and stupid, and by the Eternal, they were to be enforced.”\(^{32}\) Over the course of their control of the park, the army experienced great administrative success. Rydell evaluates that “while there were some setbacks... the military succeeded to a large extent in protecting the park’s natural curiosities and much of its wildlife and in building an infrastructure of administrative facilities that is still in use today.”\(^{33}\) Before analyzing the policies involved, it is important to understand the factors that contributed to the successful reign of the army. First, the army brought its tough brand of discipline that mandated responsibility and enforcement of rules. This brought credence to the policies that it created and garnered respect from Congress and civilians alike. Furthermore, the army had sufficient manpower to do the aforementioned enforcement throughout the entire park. The number of stationed officials in the park at any time was at least 34 men and reached as high as 136 men.\(^{34}\) Finally, the military superintendents were generally “good managers of people” and capable.\(^{35}\) Bartlett reflects that “the officers appear to have been brusque, spit-and-polish men who went by the book and yet possessed the intelligence to recognize that the command was handling a peacetime policing action, not a military operation against an enemy.”\(^{36}\) Thus, these factors empowered the army to achieve their main administrative goals – namely to fight vandalism, establish wildlife and resource management, and set tourism policies.

In the fight against vandalism, the army built a series of forts and outposts to monitor park activity. Most notably, Fort Yellowstone was built in 1891 to quarter the troops patrolling the park.\(^{37}\) This fort, along with many other smaller outposts, provided permanent residence for the troops working in the park.
The army implemented year-round patrols from strategically placed outposts. The increased permanent presence proved to be effective in reducing vandalism in the park.

While the views concerning wildlife and resource management policy varied slightly among army superintendents, there was a common goal of protecting wildlife. Some were in favor of absolute protection of wildlife, as part of the larger “Yellowstone Crusade” movement, while others were more in favor of the enjoyment of the wildlife as natural curiosities. However, even the less stringent superintendents, such as Frazier Boutelle, had policies that reflected the administration’s appreciation for wildlife. For example, the army administration worked to preserve the bison population in the early 1900s. They built a buffalo ranch and hired a salaried buffalo keeper to replenish the wild herd. In fact, by 1916, the 72 bison herd roaming the park was the last remaining wild herd in the United States. Along these same lines, the army restocked the park’s rivers and lakes with fish, with up to 150,000 trout and salmon introduced by 1890. Over the course of their administration, the army added an estimated 9 million fish. Meanwhile, the network of troopers in the park prevented poaching and exploitation of natural resources. A poaching incident in Yellowstone directly influenced the passage of the Lacey Act in 1900, the first federal law protecting wildlife. This monumental law banned “all hunting, or the killing, wounding, or capturing at any time of any bird or wild animal [except to protect human life],” and provided the legal backing to effectively enforce preservation regulations. The army also addressed tourism and public
access to the area. The administration limited the influence of private enterprise in the park. The first superintendent, Moses Harris, stated that he was “very forcibly impressed with the danger to which [the park] is subjected by the greed of private enterprise.” Because the threat was keenly recognized by the park administration, private enterprise never took major hold within the park.

Tourism in the park increased exponentially at the beginning of the twentieth century, which, in turn, caused a myriad of problems.

To account for all the visitors, the administration established a registration system through outposts throughout the park. Also, the army dealt with the issues of unclean campsites by creating permanent campgrounds, so camping could be more closely regulated. In particular, these campsites were created with the support of the Interior Department at the Upper Geyser Basin, Yellowstone Lake, and Canyon. Another issue that accompanied the tourists was the lack of visitor facilities. By the early 1900s, the Army Corps of Engineers had built roads and trails to improve visitor access to points of interest, such as Lone Star Geyser and Inspiration Point. Finally, viewing facilities and outhouses were also built to improve the visitor experience, and informational signs were put up around the park for directions and to improve visitor safety. Many of these improvements greatly benefited both the park and the American public.

The Buffalo Soldiers also played an essential role in park administration. The Buffalo Soldiers were African Americans who served in specific army regiments at the time. During the army’s reign in Yellowstone, many Buffalo Soldiers served as the earliest form of park rangers. In addition, they developed the park infrastructure, created maps, fought wildfires, and thwarted poachers. A legislative representative for the National Parks Conservation Association stated, “What I think is important about [the Buffalo soldiers’ stories] is that the early American West was a far more diverse place than we originally believed. African Americans have always been in these parks and on these Western landscapes, far more than we knew.”

By 1916, given the combination of the relative maturity of Yellowstone and pressing external needs for military force, the army handed the administration of the park back to civilians. The policies implemented by the army stabilized the park in terms of resource management and rule enforcement. At that point, it would have been unfair to the army for them to continue administering the park, as that would continue to apply their appropriations from Congress toward the responsibilities of the Interior Department. In addition, wars such as the Mexican Revolution and Civil War in the 1910s pressured the army to end their park duty.

Moreover, many conservationists and some of the Interior Department called for the return of Yellowstone to civilian management. As a result, the National Parks Service Organic Act was passed on August 25, 1916, to establish the National Park Service that would work solely in the administration of Yellowstone and the 35 other national parks at the time. Legacy Over the course of 30 years, the United States Army left an everlasting impression on both Yellowstone National Park and the entire national parks system. Their administration of the park helped to legitimize its management and gain national reverence. Historian Duane Hampton comments that while the army had “little to do with the establishment of Yellowstone...it had much to do with [its] preservation.” As a testament to the contribution of the army, notable conservationists John Muir and Robert
Underwood Johnson were both openly impressed by the army’s work and in turn called for military control of the entire public domain. To help ease the transition process, a small group of 21 veterans remained behind in Yellowstone as permanent, salaried park rangers. They proved critical to the early years of civilian administration because they were already experienced in managing the park. This empowered the National Park Service to refine and build upon the army’s administrative policies in order to display and preserve Yellowstone’s natural magnificence.

Since the National Park Service has taken over, they have instituted new policies and revised preexisting ones to adapt to the changing times and needs of the American people. However, the fundamental guiding principles of the park, especially regarding preservation and management, remained constant from the period of army administration. In fact, the very bill that created the National Park Service was heavily influenced by the spirit of army administration in Yellowstone. The bill aimed to protect the park through regulations and conservation, while still providing the opportunity for the American people to experience the natural magnificence of the national parks. The bill specifically states:

[The NPS’s] fundamental purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as we will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

This mindset, along with many administrative policies, has been successfully applied to other major national parks around the country, such as Yosemite, Sequoia, and General Grant. While the army administration in Yellowstone fulfilled its duty of preserving a beautiful piece of nature, it achieved the far greater goal of preserving the very idea and spirit of national parks. By protecting the first national park, the army established transformative legislative and cultural precedents.

This influence is aptly summarized by the National Park Service’s own rendition of its history:

The national park idea was part of a new view of the nation’s responsibility for the public domain. By the end of the 1800s, many thoughtful people no longer believed that wilderness should be fair game for the first person who could claim and plunder it. They believed its fruits were the rightful possession of all the people, including those yet unborn.

Essentially, Yellowstone became the paradigm for the national parks idea, which gradually took hold in the consciousness of the American public. Since then, the National Park Service has grown significantly in size and influence. Today, the national parks system contains over 400 areas, which covers over 84 million acres across all 50 states. Regardless of the changing times, the spirit of the Yellowstone policies under the army remains firmly embedded in the core values of the National Park Service. Thus, over the course of its 30 year administration, the army not only saved Yellowstone National Park but elevated and empowered all national U.S. parks for generations to come.


Black, Empire of Shadows, 50.


Rydell and Culpin, Managing the “Matchless Wonders,” 2.

Ibid.

Ibid., 3.

Bartlett, Yellowstone, 217.


Bartlett, Yellowstone, 272.

Rydell and Culpin, Managing the “Matchless Wonders,” 7.

Bartlett, Yellowstone, 272.

Ibid., 228. During this time, there was political pressure from different railroad companies that influenced decisions in Congress. Norris’s enemies took the opportunity in the 1880 election to remove him from power.

Ibid., 235.


Bartlett, Yellowstone, 259.

Ibid., 251.

Rydell and Culpin, Managing the “Matchless Wonders,” 25.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., 262.

Fort Yellowstone,” National Park Service.

Rydell and Culpin, Managing the “Matchless Wonders,” 41.


Hampton, “The Army and the National Parks,” 77.


Rydell and Culpin, *Managing the "Matchless Wonders,“* 44.

Ibid., 48.

Ibid., 49.

Ibid., 49.


Ibid.

Hampton, “The Army and the National Parks,” 78.

Ibid., 79.


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