

The Heart of the Matter

New essential reading on parks, protected areas, and cultural sites

Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History, by Denise D. Meringolo. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.

Reviewed by John H. Sprinkle, Jr.

ON APRIL 20, 1970, the former National Park Service historian Charles Porter reminisced with Charles Hosmer about the operation of the agency's history office during the 1930s and 1940s. Porter recalled Verne Chatelain, who in 1931 had been hired as the agency's first historian, as "a constructive thinker" who was "way ahead of his time" and as "someone who had a real vision of what the historical work of the Federal Government ought to be like."¹ In many ways Chatelain, as one of the first federally sponsored public historians, is the hero of Denise Meringolo's recent work, *Museums, Monuments and National Parks*. In designing the National Park Service's history program, Chatelain successfully crafted a bureaucratic system that reinvigorated the American narrative for those to whom it had become "a dull recital of meaningless facts" and recreated "something of the color, the pageantry, and the dignity of our national past" (p. 106). Meringolo places the establishment of the park history program within a long context of changing attitudes regarding conservation and the appropriate management of federal lands. Anyone interested in the history of conservation, the national park system, or the public history movement should read *Museums, Monuments and National Parks*.

Based on her 2005 dissertation from The George Washington University, the book is divided into three parts bound together by a prologue and a conclusion. In it Meringolo "seeks to challenge received wisdom regarding the professionalization of public history and argues that the effort to define public history will be improved by examining its emergence as a multidisciplinary government job" (p. xxvi). She documents that deliberations between the Smithsonian Institution and the National Park Service were vital in giving "form to the foundations of public history" and forecasted "current debates about the role of historical interpretation in public service" (p. xxvii).

Focusing on how the federal government created methods for describing and categorizing the vast western portions of the contiguous United States, Meringolo first reviews developments during the period from the mid-19th century through the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916. While leaders such as John Quincy Adams thought the national government should engage in scientific investigations to gather information

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in support of agriculture, commerce, arts, and industry, others in the Congress were less sanguine, arguing during debates over the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution that research and education were not federal prerogatives and that such studies might compromise states' rights.

"Between 1870 and 1916 the human past became visible as a national resource worthy of protection in an era of relentless change" and it was becoming apparent that it was the federal government's job to manage these resources (p. 42). Federally owned landscapes were enormous, poorly understood, and more than simply beautiful—they held the promise of recreation and enjoyment that might balance the impact of modernization. Interestingly, the most picturesque landscapes—some of which would be set aside for conservation—were considered from an economic point of view as being "useless, too wild and inaccessible to be valuable to industry or agriculture" (p. 41). Yet places like Yellowstone were recognized as being "unmatched anywhere in the world and stood as a testament to American exceptionalism" (p. 41).

Addressing the diversity of federal designations during the second half of the 19th century, the Antiquities Act of 1906 standardized the recognition of federally protected areas and 20 national monuments were established in its first decade of operation. "As the number of federally protected sites expanded, so did debate about the standards guiding site selection and concerns about the inefficient federal approach to park management" (p. 48). The inherent conflict between providing public accessibility and resource protection illustrated two distinct management philosophies: one pragmatic, the other romantic. Under Director Horace Albright the Park Service developed educational programs and on-site museums as "a safety valve, providing visitors with the appearance of intimacy while establishing clear boundaries between them and the park landscape" (p. 55).

From the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution in 1846 to the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, the American landscape was transformed. Federal lands were first seen as source of raw materials for economic development and military defense and their management reflected national attitudes towards "nature, federal authority, intellectual expertise, and entrepreneurial innovation." Viewing the continent as a "resource worthy of protection and needing careful management," the federal government developed policies that mediated "the difference between usefulness and uselessness, experts and amateurs, legitimate research and treasure hunting, education and recreation" (p. 55).

The second part of Meringolo's book documents how during the first 20 years of its operation the National Park Service turned "nature into history" and laid the foundation for the public history movement. Throughout the early 20th century, the Park Service and the Smithsonian Institution competed over the meaning and usefulness of artifacts yielded from federal properties. As the Park Service's collection of historic sites grew, the agency also expanded its museum program as part of a comprehensive interpretive plan that engaged visitors and protected unique and irreplaceable resources. By sponsoring on-site museums at park units, NPS archaeologist Jess Nusbaum and others challenged the Smithsonian's role as the only official federal repository for archaeological materials. During the 1920s, "the specific introduction of archaeology as an intellectual framework for understanding artifacts in parks challenged Smithsonian curators' assumptions about the meaning of artifacts

and created a framework for thinking beyond science, to consider the influence of history and culture on the landscape” (p. 73). For the Park Service, the best use of artifacts was in interpretive and entertaining exhibits housed at museums seated within the landscape in which the remains were excavated.

To traditional Park Service supporters, any expansion of the agency’s mission to include the stewardship of historical units was controversial and “exposed knotty philosophical differences” about the future of the system (p. 85). While areas east of the Mississippi River did not have the same natural and scenic qualities as those found in the West, they did contain important historical landscapes representing the American Revolution and the Civil War. “It was clear that the Park Service needed a new set of experts to help justify the creation of eastern parks” (p. 86) and through this process, Meringolo argues, the Park Service established the foundations of public history today. As early as 1917, Albright began to argue for the transfer of the military parks from the War Department. His campaign concluded successfully in July 1933—just before his retirement from the agency—with Executive Orders 6166 and 6228, after which two-thirds of the system’s units were historical in nature.

This explosion of historic parks paralleled the NPS leadership’s emphasis on the educational promise of these resources. Beyond an appreciation for nature, the parks, argued anthropologist Clark Wissler from the American Museum of Natural History, presented a great opportunity to “teach the greater lessons of human history” (p. 92). Supported by the conclusions of a variety of committees—filled with outside experts such as Wissler—the Park Service established its Branch of Research and Education in July 1930, followed closely the next year with the hiring of the agency’s first chief historian, Verne Chatelain. Arriving from the Minnesota Historical Society, Chatelain’s mission was to transform “a rather disconnected group of regionally significant places into a truly national collection” (p. 99). According to Meringolo, Chatelain’s approach was both pragmatic and ideological. While he believed that “historians could play a powerful public role, transforming individual sites into a map of national identity that visitors might use to locate themselves inside the American past” (p. 108), he also realized that the resources available to the Park Service were extremely limited and that, by necessity, political and economic forces would govern the development of existing sites and the selection of new sites.

Years later Chatelain said that “the New Deal was just made to order for us.” As federal programs designed to counter the worst effects of the Great Depression came online, the Park Service’s budget nearly tripled, with 40% of its funding coming from what was known as “emergency work.” Due to the worsening economy, the agency was flooded with requests from local preservationists seeking federal stewardship for a wide range of historic sites. These appeals allowed Chatelain and his staff to come forward with a servicewide plan to coordinate and rationalize the agency’s historic preservation policies.

Described by Meringolo as an “antidote to the consumerism, industrialism, and urbanism that had come to dominate, and ultimately endanger American life” (p. 118) in the 1930s, the “documentary impulse” (illustrated by the creation of the Historic American Buildings Survey [HABS] in December 1933) was expanded by the creation of the Historic Sites Survey as part of the implementation of the Historic Sites Act in 1935. Working with the newly constituted National Park System Advisory Board, Chatelain created a thematic

approach to the study of new park units that could illustrate a comprehensive view of American history and that incorporated regional perspectives as well as concepts of historical, aesthetic, and scientific values. In 1936 Verne Chatelain's career with the National Park Service was cut short, apparently over issues arising from the inauthentic reconstruction of Wakefield, George Washington's birthplace on Virginia's Northern Neck. Ironically, the controversy caused by "Fakefield," as it was sometimes called, solidified, for more than two decades, the significant role of the history office he created in the overall management of the National Park Service.²

In part three of this book Meringolo summarizes her story and expands the "genealogy" of the public history movement, tracing how, from 1916 to 1936, the National Park Service established history as an accepted function of government service and crafted a new profession. History became a management tool for the expansion of the park system and the further development of existing parks through interpretation and museum programs.

This work is significant because it correctly argues that the "decisions made by Park Service historians during the 1930s had a long and profound influence on the nation's historical landscape" (p. xxxi). Not surprisingly, given the book's subtitle, it also correctly focuses on the role that individuals like Verne Chatelain and others played in shaping the system. As was her goal, Meringolo has successfully shifted the public history debate "away from matters of definition and toward questions regarding the larger value of history practiced as public service" (p. xxxii). In addition, she has added an important layer of context to previous studies of the development of the National Park Service.³ For that we are in her debt.

The views and conclusions in this essay are those of the author and should not be interpreted as representing the opinions or policies of the National Park Service or the United States government.

Endnotes

1. Interview with Charles Porter, April 20, 1970. Papers of Charles B. Hosmer, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, p. 11.
2. Ibid., p. 7.
3. For example, see Edwin C. Bearss, "The National Park Service and its History Program: 1964–1986—An Overview," *The Public Historian*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Spring 1987), pp. 10–18; Harlan D. Unrau and G. Frank Williss, "To Preserve the Nation's Past: The Growth of Historic Preservation in the National Park Service during the 1930s," *The Public Historian*, vol. 9, no. 2, (Spring 1987), pp. 19–49; and Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., "Verne E. Chatelain and the Development of the Branch of History of the National Park Service," *The Public Historian*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 24–38.