

Yellowstone's Howard Eaton Trail as Management Tool and Cultural Artifact

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ON JULY 19, 1923—amid much pomp and circumstance—the National Park Service (NPS) opened a 157-mile bridle and hiking trail in Yellowstone National Park and named it the Howard Eaton Trail (HET). For the next half-century, NPS administrators used the HET to address the agency's need to provide public transportation and recreation options during the pivotal years when automobiles replaced horse-drawn vehicles as the primary means of transportation in Yellowstone and hiking replaced trail-riding as a recreational activity. In 1970, when the General Authorities Act defined the Park Service's mission as being more focused on nature preservation and ecological restoration, NPS made the decision to stop maintaining the HET, allowing nature to reclaim the path that had been maintained so assiduously for so many years. As a result, the HET went from being a useful and popular corridor for equestrians and hikers to being a cultural artifact, a conceptual historical marker encapsulating a century of social change.

Despite the widespread use and name-recognition of the HET during its heyday, its significance has been under-represented in the scholarly literature. This may be because some see the HET simply as an element of the park's infrastructure—a means of connecting important Yellowstone features to one another—rather than as an important and meaningful place in and of itself. What follows is an attempt to explain this latter perspective by showing how the history of the Howard Eaton Trail mirrors the history of NPS as a federal land management agency and how NPS policies manifested themselves on the Yellowstone landscape. This is done through maps, historical photographs, and documents graciously provided courtesy of the NPS's Heritage and Research Center in Yellowstone National Park, and a series of digital maps created by students at Missouri State University. The maps show three

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historical locations of the HET: the original location in 1923, its location in the mid-1930s after a major re-construction effort, and its location in the late 1950s. With the exception of three minor segments still in use today, the named Howard Eaton Trail does not appear on maps produced by the federal government after its decommissioning in 1970. Further, this is also the story of Howard Eaton's association with Yellowstone, a role memorialized in his namesake trail.

Eaton was a Pennsylvania native who moved to Dakota Territory in the late 1870s and started a cattle ranch near what would become Medora, North Dakota. Eaton soon invited his brothers, Willis and Alden, to join him in the cattle business, and a decade later, the Eaton Brothers' Ranch expanded its business to include serving as a dude ranch (Rodnitzky 1968; Borne 1983). In 1904, the Eaton brothers moved their operations to Wolf, Wyoming, where the neighboring Big Horn Mountains provided good land for their cattle as well as hunting and fishing opportunities and railroad access to Yellowstone's north entrance at Gardiner, Montana, for their dudes (Ringley 2010). In addition to activities at the ranch, Howard Eaton began offering guided saddle-horse trips to Yellowstone and later to Glacier and Grand Canyon national parks. Eaton's Yellowstone pack tours during the 1880s included only a dozen or so men who were "roughing it," if the few grainy photographs documenting these tours are any indication of life on the trail. By the early 1900s, however, Eaton's pack tour clientele was "roughing it with comfort" as described his brochures. Eaton's later Yellowstone tours had up to 60 members, both men and women, who spent two or three weeks touring the park and suffered few privations. "Girls made the guests' beds and served them food while wranglers took care of the horses and set up the equipment" (Borne 1983: 102). Today, we would call this "glamping"—glamour camping—rather than a real wilderness experience, but Eaton understood what people wanted, and he took a personal and active role in shaping that experience.

Eaton's clients were primarily wealthy, educated Easterners who opted to ride horses and camp with Eaton rather than touring by stagecoach, staying at the park's grand hotels, and eating in fancy dining rooms. Even a quick glance at Eaton's promotional brochures reveals his keen understanding of what Easterners wanted of a Western experience. He appeals to their sense of adventure, of living out-of-doors in frontier America, at one with wilderness yet with all the safety and amenities of modern, civilized travel. During his almost 30 years as a trail guide, Eaton was an energetic and shrewd promoter of the national parks, not so much *discouraging* people from traveling by other means so much as singing the praises of trail riding. Never openly criticizing his competition, Eaton suggests that traveling on horseback provides a more authentic and satisfying park experience, and he extolled the virtues of the national parks as places with clean air, clean water, and the opportunity to see wild animals in their native haunts rather than confined in a zoo.

Eaton's guest list and circle of friends included movers-and-shakers in Western politics, conservation, and the arts, including Teddy Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell, Charlie Russell, and Mary Roberts Rinehart, whose book, *Through Glacier Park* was sub-titled *Seeing America First with Howard Eaton*. When Eaton died in the spring of 1922, just as NPS was completing construction of a first-of-its-kind, park-encompassing, bridle trail, Yellowstone's

chief ranger, a close friend, suggested the trail be named “in honor of Howard Eaton, celebrated horseman and guide, who had conducted nearly a hundred horseback parties through the Yellowstone” between 1883 and 1922 (Chittenden 1924: 259).

In some ways, the HET that opened to the public in 1923 pre-dates the establishment of NPS as the federal agency mandated to manage an assortment of existing national parks, monuments, battlefields, and other sites managed at the time by several different federal agencies (Foresta 1985). When US Geological Survey (USGS) expedition leader Ferdinand Hayden returned from his exploration of the Yellowstone region in 1871, he submitted a report to Congress that included descriptions of what would eventually become the “must-see” sights of a typical Yellowstone tour: Mammoth Hot Springs; Norris Geyser Basin; the Lower, Middle, and Upper geyser basins along the Firehole River; Yellowstone Lake and West Thumb; and the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River and its two waterfalls, the Upper and Lower (Hayden 1872; see also Meyer 1996). When Yellowstone became a national park the following year, it was assigned to the Interior Department, a huge federal agency with seemingly little interest and certainly no expertise in managing a park (Ise 1961; Foresta 1985).

Yellowstone’s first administrators were civilian superintendents appointed through political favors rather than out of respect for their managerial skills, leadership experience, or even familiarity with the park (Bartlett 1983). One of the few directives imposed on them by the Interior Department was to improve public access (O’Brien 1966), resulting in the gradual construction of a Figure 8-shaped road that came to be known as the “Grand Loop.” In its earliest form, the Grand Loop was merely a rough clearing through the forest that allowed riders, pack trains, wagons, and stagecoaches to reach the must-see sights/sites (Cramton 1932; Schullery 2001). In addition to the Grand Loop, there were bridle trails extending into the backcountry used by those more interested in riding and camping than seeing the most famous sights.

When poaching and vandalism became more of a problem than the superintendents could handle, the War Department was asked to intervene and station soldiers in the park (Rydell and Culpin 2006). In 1886, the US Army became the park’s administrators, and the Army Corps of Engineers stepped up construction of roads, bridges, and bridle paths. Park visitation had been growing steadily over time and adding infrastructure—roads and trails, in particular—helped keep tourists and the impact of their activities confined to specific areas within the park. Although providing good roads for stagecoaches and wagons was paramount, the Corps also built new backcountry trails and improved existing ones, because such routes served both the public and the Army’s other obligations, as an Army administrator explains:

Late last fall 25 miles of new trails or fire lanes were built in the southeast corner of the park, and during the present summer similar passageways were built.... These, together with such trails as have been opened up by troops, enable scouts and patrols to get about much easier and quicker and are of great importance in the protection of game and of forests from fire. (Brett 1911: 574).

National and global events, most notably the First World War, set in motion the creation of NPS as a non-military agency to oversee the parks. NPS's first two directors, Stephen Mather and Horace Albright, shared a single vision for the parks, one that emphasized tourism and recreation (Sellars 1997; Pritchard 1999; Stephenson 2014), and good transportation infrastructure was essential to the fledgling NPS's way forward. The motivation behind both the initial construction of the HET and the fanfare of its opening lay with forces playing out on a much broader scale than simply inside Yellowstone Park. One was the growing popularity of saddle-horse riding and camping as forms of outdoor recreation associated with the public lands of the American West, particularly national parks and forests (Foresta 1985; Schwantes 2001). Another was the emergence of the US Forest Service (USFS) as a "functional competitor with the new Park Service" (Foresta 1985: 21) in providing outdoor recreation. In the political foment surrounding the creation of NPS, USFS hoped to expand its political clout and the acreage under its control by bringing national parks under its jurisdiction alongside the national forests. USFS "was closing the potential niche in the federal bureaucracy for a preservation and recreation agency ... even while the Park Service was being established (Foresta 1985: 20). Treadwell Cleveland, Jr., named an "expert in forest history" by Gifford Pinchot himself (Pinkett 1962: 10), made the case that national forests—rather than national parks—were better suited as outdoor recreation destinations for independent, self-reliant horseback riding and camping enthusiasts, subtly insinuating that national park goers were an effete clientele:

Recreation in the national forests usually takes the form of summer outings devoted simply to camping out. Individuals and small parties, or clubs, come in by stage or wagon ... and shift for themselves with true western independence and skill. Doing without many conveniences is not regarded as privation. In comparison with this western way of enjoying nature, the usual eastern summer vacations ... appear highly artificial. In the national forests enjoyment of recreation is largely based on the absence of conditions which less sincere and capable lovers of outdoor life find quite as indispensable in the woods as in the towns. This fact explains much of the very wide use of national forests for recreation, in regions which are largely pure wilderness (Cleveland 1910: 25–26).

Cleveland went on to suggest that the proliferation of logging roads in the national forests was an asset to outdoor enthusiasts, because logging roads provided easier access to a greater expanse of federal lands. USFS even had a hand in helping start the Trail Riders of America (Foresta 1985), one of many equestrian clubs springing up all over the country looking for places to ride other than in city parks and horse farms.

Mather countered by publicizing his view on the difference between riding on trails in the national forests and national parks and argued that only the parks provided an authentic "wilderness experience." In his first official annual report as NPS Director, Mather cautioned, "one must not confuse the national forests with the national parks," because national forests allow timber-cutting, livestock-grazing, and hunting: activities not permitted in the parks. Instead, "the national parks, unlike the national forests, are not properties in a com-

mercial sense, but natural preserves for the rest, recreation, and education for the people.... They alone maintain 'the forest primeval'" (Mather 1916: 754).

Mather's energetic and determined leadership allowed NPS to consolidate control of existing federal holdings and make plans to add more. He worked hard to strengthen and broaden the NPS's image and popularity among politicians and the general public at a time when automobiles were becoming affordable to American families. Mather reached out to auto clubs and gateway communities, advocating for paved roads to and through the national parks (Whitely and Whitely 2003). Tourists were already allowed to drive automobiles in Mount Rainier National Park beginning in 1908, and General Grant, Crater Lake, Glacier, Yosemite, Sequoia, and Mesa Verde national parks quickly followed suit. In the NPS's inaugural year, Yellowstone still relied on horse-drawn vehicles, and elaborate schedules regulated the times when automobiles could use the Grand Loop so as "not to interfere at all with the regular horse-drawn stage coaches" (Mather 1916: 764). This road-sharing arrangement proved disastrous for both car and horse, and automobiles replaced horses as Yellowstone's primary means of transportation the following year. Some concessioners who had provided stagecoach tours retired from the business altogether, while others sold their horses and coaches and replaced them with touring cars. Eaton benefited from the dissolution of stagecoach-based tours by buying up "some of the coaches, many of the horses, and all of the harness equipment" for use in his booming trail guide and camping business (Culpin 2003: 60).

When the Grand Loop opened to automobiles, park administrators had to find an alternative route for saddle horses. At the national level, Mather wanted and needed broad public support which meant appealing to a wide variety of park user groups, including trail riders, automobile tourists, and eventually, hikers. Mather made efforts to satisfy as many user groups as possible, especially after having so recently wrested the outdoor recreation function away from USFS. Mather pointed out that new and increasingly popular "horseback and foot travel this season in the parks ... has demonstrated the necessity for more trails for equestrians and pedestrians, and comprehensive studies will be made by the engineering department in planning such trails as will properly supplement the road systems and permit their fullest utilization and benefit by the people" Mather (1920: 91–92). One such planned trail would be Yellowstone's HET, a single trail linking must-see sights without sacrificing the wilderness experience. Such a trail would comply with Mather's pro-auto-tourist approach while simultaneously continuing Yellowstone's long tradition as a tourist destination for those seeking the more rugged, trail-riding and camping "frontier-experience." In 1921, Horace Albright was Yellowstone's superintendent, but he would soon replace Mather as NPS director. While still superintendent, Albright indicated that "no new roads should be planned for the Yellowstone; the portions not now accessible to motorists should remain forever in their present condition of primitive wilderness, accessible only by trail—for the saddle-horse parties and hikers" (Albright 1921: 122).

It was during this exciting, contentious, and transitional period that the HET emerges from the shadows and into the light as an integral part of the Yellowstone landscape (Figure 1). When NPS officially opened the HET, the agency manifested two important aspects of a Yellowstone experience on the physical landscape. First, the trail itself was the culmination

Figure 1. Map of the Howard Eaton Trail and Grand Loop Road in Yellowstone National Park. The darker line indicates the location of the HET as it appears in segments on seven USGS 15 minute topographic maps: 1956 Old Faithful Quadrangle, 1956 West Thumb Quadrangle, 1958 Madison Junction Quadrangle, 1958 Mammoth Quadrangle, 1958 Norris Junction Quadrangle, 1959 Canyon Village Quadrangle, and 1959 Tower Junction Quadrangle. The map was created using ArcGIS 10.2 and is courtesy of Aaron Pavlowsky and Marc Owen, Missouri State University.



and expression of a long tradition of trail riding in Yellowstone. Second, naming the trail for Howard Eaton may have been a last-minute decision predicated on his untimely death, but it was a gracious nod to the popular horseman and concessioner who had done so much to popularize Yellowstone and other national parks. Mather traveled from Washington, D.C., to attend the HET dedication ceremony during which a commemorative sign was placed at the Sheepsteer Cliffs (Figure 2), supposedly one of Eaton's favorite camping spots. Albright, already in Yellowstone, was joined by an impressive assortment of local politicians, residents, and community leaders, and the event gave national NPS officials a chance to meet-and-greet local stakeholders.

Over the next several decades, NPS directors and superintendents wrote glowingly of the HET, using it as evidence of how the Park Service was meeting its agency obligations. Albright, of course, was no exception:

There was a great increase this year in the use of Yellowstone trails. Many saddle-horse parties and several hundred visitors enjoyed the wilderness charm of sections of the park reached only by trail, where wild life is abundant and easy to approach



Figure 2. Howard Eaton Trail sign erected for official dedication on July 19, 1923. The sign reads, “Howard Eaton: Celebrated Western horseman and guide on his favorite mount ‘Danger.’ He conducted over one hundred horseback and camping parties through Yellowstone National Park and other scenic regions of the Rocky Mountains from Canada to Mexico. Died April 5, 1922.” Lantern slide courtesy of Yellowstone Heritage and Research Center, YELL 16371.

and photograph. The trails are all kept in good condition and some new trails were built. The Howard Eaton Trail was finished and dedicated July 19, 1923, to that famous old guide and conservationist, the late Howard Eaton (Albright 1923: 85–86).

Popular guidebooks, too, publicized the HET as both corridor and as recreation destination. The *Haynes Guide*, one of the most popular guidebooks and one published annually from 1890 until 1968, includes lengthy descriptions of the HET. The *Guide* cautions drivers to be aware of horses and riders on the HET, because although “this much needed trail affords equestrians ideal routes to all main points without conflict with motor traffic” (Haynes 1927: 174), there are, in fact, points where the HET intersects with the Grand Loop. The guidebook also includes a lengthy description of the official dedication, details of the HET’s length, route, and purpose, and states that “the splendid Howard Eaton Trail links not only the famous scenic regions of the park but leads also to many points of romantic and historic

interest ... which might be quite forgotten if park travel were confined to main-line automobile roads” (Haynes 1927: 177). Thus, the HET became a landmark representing both a place/location and a tourist activity within a broader “Yellowstone experience.” Even visitors who would never ride or hike the HET were aware of its presence.

The original 1923 HET seems to have been hastily and inexpensively sewn together from bits and pieces of pre-existing bridle trails (New York Times 1918), both named and un-named, some of which appear on park maps as early as the 1880s, as well as parts of freight roads and even game trails. Its route “followed in general the course of the main loop highway and connected the points of outstanding interest” (Skinner 1937: 1), because its primary purpose was not to carry tourists into the backcountry but to provide a corridor for horses so recently excluded from the main road. Mather and Albright may have used the HET as a means of promoting the parks as destinations for trail riding and camping, but little money was allocated to designing and building a good trail, especially when building roads for automobiles would serve a much larger portion of the park-going public.

All that changed, however, during the Great Depression when Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) came to Yellowstone. Federal dollars were needed to compensate for the decline in tourist spending, and road and trail construction figured prominently among the many projects undertaken with CCC funding and labor. Four CCC camps were set up in Yellowstone just to work on the new Howard Eaton Trail during the summers of 1936 and 1937 (Haines 1977; Rydell and Culpin 2006). Historical photographs reveal the Herculean task of building a completely new trail in some places and vastly improving the condition of the original trail in others. Photographs and comments also indicate a general lack of concern for the environmental impact of trail construction (Figures 3 and

Figure 3. Building the second Howard Eaton Trail. Photograph titled “Plowing out ditch along trail at Arnica Cr. (Lake), 7-29-36, Jacobson,” courtesy of Yellowstone Heritage and Research Center Museum, YELL 192993-1161.



Figure 4. Condition of the Howard Eaton Trail prior to reconstruction. Photograph titled “Side hill gully before rip-rapping with rock, Tower Falls, 7-27-36, Jacobson,” courtesy of Yellowstone Heritage and Research Center, YELL 192993-1158.



4). Trail crews blasted-away boulders sitting along the new route, cut down trees, dug drainage ditches, hauled in aggregate, built retaining walls and bridges, and erected signs and mileage markers.

The original HET may have been constructed in a hurry, but the new and improved trail constructed during the 1930s was built by a more mature, better-funded, and more organized NPS. Notes by the acting assistant chief ranger during the reconstruction project indicate a concern for maintaining NPS standards for “width of tread, grade, drainage and general landscape treatment” that were scrutinized, and then agreed to, by civil engineers and landscape architects. In designing the new trail, NPS had to reconcile its preservation-and-use mission by providing “ease of travel, maximum scenic features and good drainage” while simultaneously minimizing environmental impact, a difficult task due “to the varying topography of Yellowstone Park” (Skinner 1937: 3–4). To build the sort of high-quality trail that met NPS requirements, the original HET had to be moved to where the topography was more forgiving. The HET of the 1930s was an impressive, modern feature (Figure 5), one of which NPS and park users could be proud. Ongoing maintenance included spraying the trail with “CS-2 road oil to prevent dust and for a binding of the loose soil” and recommended “one gallon of road oil to the square yard of trail surface, the oil to be raked into and mixed with the upper layer of the trail surface” (Skinner 1937: 6). Such highly intrusive “hard-scaping” practices are anathema to the NPS mission today but were in keeping with NPS expectations at the time, evidence of the inter-connectedness of the HET, Yellowstone, and the mission of NPS generally.

USGS topographic maps published in the 1950s reveal that NPS built at least one more version of the HET during the post-war and Mission 66 era. The newest HET catered to tourists traveling in their own cars and able to stop and go as they pleased. As early as 1921, Mather anticipated the emergence of hiking as a recreational activity, and he recognized the potential in courting hikers as a park user group, writing that “particular effort was made by the Park Service to stimulate foot travel in the parks—hiking, as it is popularly called.... More trails are needed in all the parks, and, in fact, in national park development consideration is always given to what parts of the park can be better served by trail than by road” (Mather



Figure 5. Completed New Howard Eaton Trail. By the end of the 1930s, the HET was wider, smoothly graded, and dead trees and other debris had been removed from the area on either side of the trail. Photograph titled "Howard Eaton Trail, completed along side hill. Tower Falls, 7-27-36, Jacobson," courtesy of Yellowstone Heritage and Research Center Museum, YELL 192993-1159.

1921: 113). As young people, especially college students, began taking to the trails, NPS once again used the HET to adapt to the new recreational demands. Yellowstone administrators built trail-heads along the Grand Loop, making it easier for hikers to leave their vehicles while they hiked a section of HET and then return to the Grand Loop either where they started or at a different trail-head. Whereas in the 1930s the HET was moved further away from the Grand Loop to reduce the number of times riders needed to cross it, in the 1950s the HET was moved closer to increase day-hiking options. Thus, in less than 20 years, the location and condition of the HET changed from serving primarily trail riders to serving hikers.

By the 1960s, NPS's shift toward nature-based management goals became more pronounced. For the first time in Yellowstone history, concerns for ecological integrity were weighed seriously and scientifically against tourism and recreation, and the HET was a ca-

sualty of this latest stage of “mission creep.” In 1970, on the eve of Yellowstone’s centennial and as part of the new management goals, the decision was made to stop maintaining most of the HET. Because the HET was designed to provide panoramic views and access to a variety of park environments such as wildflower meadows, lakes, mountain slopes, and backcountry thermal areas not visible from the main road, it passed through areas now considered geothermally sensitive, prime grizzly bear habitat, or wolf reintroduction areas. Three short segments of the former Grand Loop-encompassing trail are still open in the Old Faithful, Mammoth Hot Springs, and Fishing Bridge areas, however.

The demise and eventual disappearance of the HET as a visible feature on the Yellowstone landscape may evoke bittersweet emotions. There are still hundreds of miles of open, well-maintained trails in Yellowstone, so losing the HET is of sad consequence only to those who recognize its name, traveled on it in the past, and understand its relevance to Howard Eaton, Yellowstone, NPS, and the history of tourism in the American West. However, the fact that nature is, indeed, reclaiming much of the path should bring a sense of satisfaction to those who value allowing nature to run its course. Ecological resiliency is visible in most places along the HET, and where it is not, the HET serves as a baseline for measuring environmental factors that delay or preclude re-establishment of more natural conditions.

Thankfully, NPS is not limited to preserving only natural landscapes and the processes that act on them but also to preserving history, including the historical materials that allowed this preliminary research on the HET. Because NPS has dedicated part of its budget, space, and talent to collecting, preserving, and archiving historical materials and making them available to the public, the HET will be remembered not only as a place name but also as a cultural artifact. For example, the Yellowstone Association (now Yellowstone Forever, an organization created in late 2016 by joining together the Yellowstone Park Foundation and the Yellowstone Association) has offered a summer day-hiking course, “Continuing on the Trail of Howard Eaton,” as part of its summer institute series. And, the internet has allowed former and current HET-hikers to share photographs and reminiscences of their time on the trail as blogs and Facebook postings. Hence, although most of the historic length of the HET has a reduced presence on the Yellowstone landscape, it lives on as a cultural artifact. The idea of—or awareness of—the history of the Howard Eaton Trail serves as a touchstone tying together the story of people, places, and experiences with how the changing mission of NPS manifests itself on the physical landscape.

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