A Stroke of Luck

How Morristown became the Nation’s First National Historical Park

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Imagine it is 1873. It is June—late spring, early summer. It is a beautiful day with sunshine and mild temperatures. We are on the front lawn of an estate in Morristown, New Jersey; perhaps enjoying lunch in the shade of an old tree, meeting new people, or just walking around. Carriages line the road and vendors of all sorts are scattered about the property. The train station is running a special taxi service to the estate to accommodate all the tourists. Several prominent individuals are seen in the crowd; they appear deep in thought while walking the grounds and muttering to themselves. The whole atmosphere seems quite grand and yet solemn. In the background are muffled sounds of an auction and bidding taking place. As the novelist Henry James drew a similar scene in *Portrait of a Lady*, this day in Morristown could be described as: “Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.” In short, this is a great day to be out and about. Then, suddenly, that peaceful picture is shattered, the pace of activity picks up, and the air is pierced with excitement. Picnic lunches are suddenly abandoned and little children are pulled aside so as not to get run over in the rush.

Our imaginary time journey has taken us to the auction of the Ford mansion in Morristown, New Jersey on June 25, 1873. By mid-afternoon, the auction was well underway. The commotion which broke the
The afternoon spell Henry James described in his novel was because the mansion house itself had come up for sale after all the smaller parcels had been dispensed with. As the local newspaper the *True Democratic Banner* stated: “The Headquarters property was then put up, and immediately the liveliest of interest was manifested.”

Let’s pause here and remember why this auction was occurring in the first place, and how we got to 1873, by looking briefly at the previous one-hundred years of the mansion’s life. Having been built by Jacob Ford Jr. in 1772, the mansion was owned by only one family its entire life—the Fords. The mansion also served as George Washington’s winter headquarters in 1779-1780. Washington, his wife Martha, his military staff, and servants (along with Theodosia Ford and her four children) all crowded into the building during one of the worst winters in recorded history along the eastern seaboard. For six months, from December 1779 to June 1780, the Washington’s made the mansion their home and headquarters.

Moving forward, by 1805, some twenty-five years after Washington’s stay, the Ford mansion was still occupied by Theodosia Ford, the builder Jacob Ford Jr.’s widow and their son Gabriel. Theodosia, the matriarch, led a relatively quiet life, maintaining occasional connections with her family’s extensive business interests inherited from her husband and father-in-law (she died in 1824). Her son...
Gabriel was a prominent attorney and judge with a young family in 1805 and sole owner of the mansion. Gabriel’s young family included his son Henry, whose last will and testament would set in motion the auction of 1873. Gabriel’s siblings however had moved to Charleston, South Carolina, twenty years earlier and became prominent community members and Confederate supporters during the Civil War. During the decades of ownership under Gabriel and Henry in the nineteenth century, the famous history of their home, the Ford mansion was never overlooked or forgotten. The Fords would gladly offer tours to visitors who showed up wanting to see Washington’s headquarters.

In 1872, Henry Augustine Ford (the Fords of Morristown are not related to the automobile Ford, by the way, nor to the former President) died leaving a will with specific instructions to sell his home and property at auction. This was not an unreasonable directive; houses of deceased were auctioned all the time. What made this request so newsworthy and of interest to so many spectators was the fact that Henry Ford’s mansion was no ordinary family home—it was also a genuine George Washington headquarters site. A family home though, it was to be sure; it was over nine-thousand square feet, well situated and handsomely landscaped, it had been in the Ford family for over one-hundred years. Henry raised some of his many children in the house. But, it was old-fashioned and in need of updates. It had been through a
lot in those one-hundred years. Bearing witness to political tumult, economic upheaval, and civil war, the Ford mansion represented and evoked American history. This history of course was not just George Washington, but included the entire social, political, and economic foundations of colonial and early American history—although in those days (1873) it was most-clearly a shrine to the great man.

And so, in 1873, the mansion, and its histories, is sold.

At the time of the auction in 1873, four influential private citizens, William van Vleck Lidgerwood, Theodore Randolph, Nathaniel Halsted, and George Halsey, collectively purchased the mansion and formed the Washington Association of New Jersey in 1874. The WANJ ran the Ford mansion for sixty years after their founding, until 1933. Their initial plan was to donate the mansion to the state of New Jersey to be operated as a house museum. The state declined, however, forcing the new owners to develop a plan B, which was to be the founding the WANJ. While the WANJ may have had vague notions of historic preservation in the current usage of the term, more specifically, they sought to extoll the memory of George Washington, who occupied the house a total of six months out of what was, at the time, a one-hundred year history.

Among the motivations of the WANJ was this observation offered by former New Jersey governor, and one of the four founding members, Theodore Randolph, in September 1873: “Our object primarily was to keep the place from being desecrated by passing into the hands of improper speculative persons.”

This is a clear example of what William Murtaugh writes about in...
the introduction to his book *Keeping Time.* Murtaugh states that the driving force behind mid-nineteenth century preservation was secular pietism. Gov. Randolph was concerned about the Ford mansion being desecrated. The language of that time was filled with religious meaning and symbolism. In fact, nearly sixty years later, Lloyd W. Smith, writing to WANJ board member Henry Pitney, still employed something similar, hoping that someday “respectable people” might be able to visit the mansion on Sundays when funding permitted.

For sixty years, from 1873 to 1933, the WANJ ran the Ford mansion as a historic house shrine dedicated to the memory of George Washington. During this time the WANJ adapted to its role as not just the keeper of Washington’s memory in Morristown; they also had to come to grips with being responsive to the needs of a new concept developing within the historical community. That concept was historic preservation.

For the WANJ and other organizations like them that started to develop in the late nineteenth century, historic preservation as an idea, broadly speaking, was not new. The outlines of what we today see as an academic discipline are there even if they were not recognized at the time. Historic preservation is of course more than just about “history,” it’s about preservation and maintenance, and most critically, a *mission*—a defined sense of purpose. That notion, that sense of purpose, the understanding that history is a process and not a destination, is what separates historic preservation from simply preserving history.

Historic preservation occurs at many levels. Tasks, such as
maintaining artifacts and buildings, research and writing, along with other things, sound familiar to us when we think of “preservation.” Historic preservation also consists of the preservation of a story. This is not always as easy to discern because it is not as readily tangible as a building or artifact. Yet the story is always an accompaniment to the tangible object and in some instances overshadows the object.

Eighty-one years ago though, before Morristown National Historical Park was created, organizations such as Preservation New England, Preservation Virginia, the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, the Washington Association of New Jersey, and other smaller, private organizations were regarded as keepers of the past in a narrow sense. Many times, these groups, while protecting history, also functioned like elite social clubs. (It should also be noted that nearly all of them were founded by women. The WANJ was the exception, most glaringly because they specifically excluded women as members until 1933.)

We began our journey by imagining ourselves in 1873 on the lawn of the Ford mansion. Now let’s look back at commemoration attempts at Morristown prior to 1930. Morristown and the surrounding area had long been a special area for the remembrance of the 1779-1780
Revolutionary War winter encampment. As early as 1871, even before the mansion was auctioned off in Morristown, the Reverend Joseph Tuttle began to scour Jockey Hollow for evidence to document what he felt were the locations of the various campsites. Emory McClintock followed later with maps of the area that were ultimately relied upon as source material by the National Park Service (NPS) in the 1930s.

The first known attempt to link the Revolutionary Morristown sites from a tourism perspective occurred in 1895. George Howell proposed the establishment of what he termed Washington Park, encompassing the Ford mansion, the Morristown Green, Fort Nonsense, and Jockey Hollow—essentially the park today except for the Green. By 1930, interest in the land had come to include economic development. The owners of the land at Jockey Hollow, a group called the Jockey Hollow Club, and led by W. Redmond Cross (owner of the Cross Estate, today part of Morristown NHP), had come upon hard financial times with the onset of the Great Depression. This distinct group of investors owned most of the Jockey Hollow encampment area with publicly undetermined goals. The financial crisis ultimately forced the sale of the Club’s lands to Lloyd W. Smith. After the sale, the New York Herald Tribune noted that the Jockey Hollow Club “could not hold the land long enough to make a profit on it as a real estate transaction, but an appeal to their patriotism made them agreeable to the sale” to Lloyd W. Smith. Vern Chatelain, the first historian employed by the NPS, later wrote that “It was a stroke of luck that [the Jockey Hollow Club] was hit by financial worries and was unable to go ahead immediately with its plans” to develop the land. Redmond Cross later visited NPS offices in Washington in March 1931—after the Club sold their holdings to Lloyd W. Smith—to meet with Horace Albright, whom he was probably acquainted with through New York City club membership, to discuss the national park idea. Lloyd W. Smith must have known about Cross’s overture to Albright too. This would be Cross’s last involvement in Jockey Hollow before Lloyd W. Smith became the primary driver along with Mayor Potts of the national park idea.

The National Park Service
The National Park Service (NPS) is today regarded as a viable partner
with other organizations in the field of historic preservation. Yet eighty years ago, this was not the case. The NPS was known at the time exclusively for preservation of large outdoor natural parks—the type of park that almost instantly comes to mind when the term “national park” is mentioned. Yellowstone was the first national park when it was created in 1872. Strikingly, the WANJ came into existence just two years later in 1874, when the idea of a historical park operated by the government would have been unheard of. Yet, there were two examples which challenged this approach: the Hermitage, Andrew Jackson’s home, was acquired by the state of Tennessee in 1856; and Hasbrouck House, George Washington’s last headquarters about an hour north of New York on the Hudson, was acquired by the state of New York in 1850. Still, there was even one which was earlier—the City of Philadelphia acquired Independence Hall in 1816.
The federal government formally entered the historical preservation field in 1906, the year of the Antiquities Act. This Act was prompted almost exclusively by the desire to preserve the southwestern Indian ruins from pillage and vandalism. To this day incidentally, individuals can still be criminally charged under this Act. Of course, the founding of the National Park Service in 1916—at the height of World War I—set the stage for an injection of federal dollars and influence into the nascent field of historic preservation, although it was not the field we recognize today. Ironically, the agency that came to embody historic preservation was seen when it was created in 1916 as a threat to the emphasis on buildings which many easterners saw as the true priority and which the agency should (and ultimately came to) protect.

In August, 1931, NPS director Horace Albright appointed Verne E. Chatelain as the first historian of the National Park Service. Chatelain was at the time chair of the history and social services department at Peru State College in Nebraska. This was before the development of historical parks and served as a call for parks to utilize the cultural
resources existing within their boundaries in an effort to expand beyond natural resources exclusively. Even natural parks, which until 1933 were all that existed, had a backstory, a history beyond the wonders of nature. Albright, NPS director from 1929 to 1933 before pursuing a lucrative business career, was instrumental in finding Chatelain and giving him nearly free reign to move the NPS more forcefully into the history field. Chatelain’s appointment was prompted in part by a report by NPS anthropologist Clark Wissler who wrote in 1929, “In view of the importance and the great opportunity for appreciation of the nature and meaning of history as represented in our National Parks and Monuments, it is recommended that the National Parks and Monuments containing, primarily, archaeological and historical materials should be selected to serve as indices of periods in the historical sequence of humans life in America.” Chatelain was given the task of providing the intellectual foundation for Albright’s plan. This was not an easy task. The NPS was disproportionally represented in the west as a manager of wild, natural, open spaces. Now, suddenly, the NPS moved full force into the eastern states and took primary interest in the historical remains of America’s past. Chatelain wrote he “had the task of attempting to reorient the organization from its longstanding concern with western natural areas to a new awareness of its responsibilities for eastern historical parks and preservation issues.”

Exterior rear of the new museum building, ca. 1938.
Chatelain wrote of his influences growing up in Lewis and Clark country having provided him from a young age an awareness of the importance of “the physical site...to the effective realization of historical conditions and events.” Chatelain said that the experiences of European cities also helped him appreciate the importance of the physical site and structure to the understanding of history and of how people responded to these special places.

Chatelain was someone enthusiastic about presenting history to the general public. For Chatelain, history was the province of all people, not just academics who wrote mainly for their own edification. Chatelain wrote that “historical activity is primarily not a research program but an educational program in the broader sense.” He encouraged park interpreters and historians to prepare periodic brochures much like the natural resources staff did in wilderness parks. Chatelain would move quickly to initiate a vision of historical engagement utilizing already existing parks and strongly advocated for new, historical themed parks. His interest, as well as that of his boss Horace Albright, came to center on Morristown, NJ, where conditions seemed best suited to put into place the policies and goals he had been advocating to develop a historical park from scratch.

**Morristown**

Morristown Mayor Clyde Potts came to office in 1922. A native of Iowa, Potts was a civil engineer by training who specialized in sanitation issues and was particularly interested in clean, abundant, public water.
Potts saw civil engineering as a natural partner with government to facilitate infrastructure to allow for private growth. Potts also developed a strong sense of history, perhaps due to his many business travels abroad to places associated with great moments in history. Potts was a fervent believer in the progressive policies of the early 20th century and easily straddled the line between Democrat and Republican in his campaigns. Potts was also visionary enough to recognize tourism as an economic engine before it became widely accepted. In fact, Potts and Vern Chatelain shared an expansive view of both tourism and looking to Europe for inspiration to an uncanny extent—they were both doing this independently before they met one another.

This is not to say that Potts had the fully conceived idea of a National Historical Park—he didn’t. Potts can, however, rightly be seen as the originator of the historical park idea on the local level, along with W. Redmond Cross. His thought however did move well beyond a shrine or memorial as originally envisioned. Still, he was the one who most actively promoted the idea of some sort of physical preservation of the memory of the Jockey Hollow encampment.

**Waiting**

In December 1931, in an effort to prompt NPS director Albright, Lloyd W. Smith (who felt Albright was not moving fast enough on the Morristown project) sent a letter to him, on the last day of the year, telling him of his plan to give his Jockey Hollow land (which he had purchased from the Jockey Hollow Club a few years before) to the War Department. Lloyd W. Smith and Potts were clearly not familiar with the slow workings of Washington. Albright coolly responded that he felt this was a mistake and that the historical park was Smith’s best option. Smith, seemingly satisfied, bided his time with this commitment. What Lloyd W. Smith and Potts perhaps failed to realize was that, naturally, Albright and Chatelain had larger concerns which enveloped the Morristown issue. Chatelain was refining and focusing his thinking overall on history in the NPS. Albright had appointed Chatelain, barely four month’s on the job in December 1931, to a committee to study the history program in the NPS. This committee determined that the NPS “should ‘actively advocate, investigate, and promote a proper national historical policy.’” In other words, the NPS needed to be more involved in the history field—this helped to further strengthen the efforts at Morristown.

In March 1932, Chatelain journeyed to Morristown to meet with Potts and Smith in a further attempt to make clear their commitment to the historical park idea. Chatelain issued a four page report a month later which focused on Jockey Hollow. To help move the proposal along
further—and to entice the NPS—Potts arranged for a vote in Morristown, whereby the town voted to turn over its holdings in Jockey Hollow to the NPS for a new park in mid-1932.

1932 was a very anxious year for Clyde Potts. His dream seemed to stall at every turn. Potts was particularly worried about the Ford mansion—he felt the WANJ should just keep it as is, Albright however insisted that the Ford mansion be part of the deal—Potts was convinced the WANJ would never turn over its prize possession. Albright however was adamant that for the NPS to enter the historic preservation field, the Ford mansion had to be obtained. In an effort to calm Potts, Albright himself visited Morristown in October 1932.

A month later, after the Presidential election, Albright and his staff moved to work with the lame duck Congress to get a bill prepared and passed before Franklin Roosevelt took office in March 1933. In January 1933 Chatelain and Albright’s deputy again journeyed to Morristown to meet with the WANJ. The board was resigned to the fiscal inevitability in exchange for advisor status to the new park in the founding legislation. On January 18, 1933 the Morristown NHP bill was submitted to Congress and hearings were scheduled for January 24th, 27th, and 31st.

Congress

The NPS, headed by Albright, would probably never have submitted the legislation without knowing a decent chance of passage existed. During their testimony, Chatelain and Albright maintained a consistent theme concerning Morristown: good location, good historical value, scenic quality, rustic charm; Albright sounded the alarm that if Jockey Hollow returned to private hands “the chance to create a great national shrine is likely to be gone forever.” The Lloyd W. Smith gift, under normal circumstances other than the Depression, would have been worth over $1 million. Albright asked Congressmen to compare this to the tiny budget the NPS was asking for—$7,500 per year. Albright also talked of the need to round out the NPS system with historic sites. He didn’t dwell on the value and virtue of historic preservation as such, other than to point out the differences between Morristown and Valley Forge, to head off any possible comparisons and questions about why we needed another winter encampment sight preserved.

With a basically fact-inspired presentation, Albright still felt the need to wax poetic in his concluding statements:

Through this forest and over these hills for one hundred and fifty years, almost unmolested, the creatures of Nature have roamed and
flown. Providence has preserved this area by some miraculous divination from the ravages of the developers and the builders. For one hundred and fifty years it has lain dormant in its primitive state.¹³

Mayor Potts kept his testimony simple and straightforward. He testified of the need for patriotism during the national crisis (Great Depression) and suggested that historic sites of this type would be beneficial for the well-being of the nation.

The Home Stretch

Some congressmen questioned the proposed use of the word “park” to describe Morristown. Some felt this designation should be reserved for traditional, outdoor natural sites. To them, historic sites should have some other designation to distinguish them in the public’s mind. Likewise, many NPS senior staff felt the same way too. Albright and Chatelain, however, didn’t. This was no minor point. “Park” designation required congressional approval and all that goes with that. A park was created by more than a presidential proclamation—such as a monument. A park meant a location of national significance. Chatelain later wrote that “the Morristown program gave us a chance...to develop a new concept...the concept of a national historical park and using those great values at Morristown which had so much to do with the story of the American Revolution, we could not only apply the term NHP [National Historical Park] to this area under the provisions of the act that Congress passed but we could administratively set up the kind of historical program for the first time that I had begun to feel was necessary.”¹⁴ From this seemingly simple designation, the NPS became the leading manager of historic sites and collections today. Finally, in February 1933, in an effort to obtain support of western congressmen, Potts and Smith invited several to Morristown for a private tour. It worked.

The WANJ was still not completely convinced of the whole idea though. In a summary of the events of 1932-1933 prepared for its members, it was stated that “on December 29, 1932, Mess. Lloyd W. Smith, one of our Trustees, and Clyde Potts, Mayor of Morristown, were present and presented a suggestion of this National Park and participation by our Association therein.”¹⁵ Less than three months before the bill creating the park was signed into law and barely a month before testimony began, the Association was still debating and wondering what to do with this new proposal. Indeed, at the February 22, 1933 meeting, the WANJ “briefly discussed” the proposed park and their participation in the new entity. Finally, when President Hoover signed the bill into law on March 2, 1933, the participation of the WANJ and the Ford mansion were still an unresolved issue. The law allowed for
the inclusion of the mansion and the WANJ museum and library collection, but only “when donated to the United States.” No time frame was given.

The Trustees of the WANJ approved the transfer and called on all stockholders to agree to the transfer on March 17, 1933, two weeks after President Hoover signed the law. A special meeting was called for May 8, 1933, for all stockholders to consider the Trustee’s finding. In the end, only 57% of members approved. This was a majority certainly, but hardly overwhelming. And, consider that almost half of those voting shares were the state of New Jersey—which was eager to transfer.

A year earlier, before the vote and the creation of the park, Lloyd W. Smith may have provided a glimpse into the thinking of the WANJ as it approached the challenges of the Depression. Trying to raise money, they floated the idea of being open on Sundays. Raising money though could only come by donation, as the WANJ was prohibited from charging an entrance fee. On his Chase Harris Forbes Corporation letterhead, Smith wrote to the WANJ secretary Henry Pitney that “I do not happen to know much at this moment as to the state of the Treasury of the Washington Association of New Jersey but would assume that it is not in sufficient funds to consider adding materially to our expenses, which would seem to me a pretty good reason why we should not have any Sunday openings right now.”

The WANJ cited concerns over safety and security by opening on Sundays with only one caretaker present. They cited the need to guard the “Revolutionary relics” and to keep them from “any unscrupulous visitor who might carelessly handle or make off with the relics.” Furthermore, the WANJ was attempting to save money ahead of the George Washington bicentennial scheduled for 1932. What is important to keep in mind with this transition to a more formal historic preservation approach is the evolution of language. Gone are the antiquated “relics” and “shrines” of the WANJ days. The NPS, and indeed the field of historic preservation, was moving, however slightly, to a more nuanced, research based approach to history and interpretation. The move from veneration to practical inquiry had begun—in other words, no more Tempe Wick and the horse stories.

With the establishment of Morristown NHP, the NPS quickly moved to solidify its management of historic sites. This meant Chatelain would be busy. He was quick to recognize the link—emotional or otherwise—that needed to be established with visitors and the larger public—now that the semi-religious language once relied upon was no longer employed in terms of history. In a 1935 talk, Chatelain started that:

The conception which underlies the whole policy of the NPS in connection with [historical and archeological] sites is that of using the uniquely graphic qualities which inhere in any area where
stirring and significant events have taken place to drive home to the visitor the meaning of those events showing not only their importance in themselves but their integral relationship to the whole story of American development.¹⁹

Chatelain was also advocating for history which is much more than just a boxed or canned version cut off from the rest of history. Put another way, history did not happen in a box. It is a process, not a destination.

Chatelain’s views were echoed in 1937 by Director Cammer:

It should be kept in mind that the ultimate objective of the service in its administration of historical areas is the teaching of history to the public through the physical sites of its enactment.²⁰

This outlook developed by the NPS in the early years prompted the passing of new legislation—The Historic Sites Act—in August 1935 which codified the role the NPS took towards history. “The Historic Sites Act represented a popular idea at a time of economic crisis when the nation needed a sense of its cultural heritage.”²¹

It has been written that the Historic Sites Act was seen by the historic preservation community as “the Magna Charta in the program for the preservation of historic sites and provided evidence to them ‘that a new cultural nationalism’ had arrived.”²² The NPS was to maintain museums in connection with historic properties and to install tablets and markers. Furthermore the NPS was to “develop an educational program and service for the purpose of making available to the public facts and information pertaining” to sites of national significance.²³

Along with the creation of the national historical park at Morristown, two other events occurred which put the NPS squarely in the business of historic preservation. The Civilian Conservation Corps, and Historic American Building Survey, are two examples of ways the NPS aggressively moved into historic preservation. These programs allowed the NPS to play the most significant role in preservation during the Depression and beyond.

In the Words of the Historic Preservation Act of 1935:

“It is hereby declared that it is a national policy to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings, and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States.”

That began at Morristown, NJ.
2. Ibid., 83.
4. Larry Lowenthal, Morristown National Historical Park Administrative History—Draft. 41.
5. Ibid., 45.
9. Ibid., 33.
12. Lowenthal, Morristown NHP Draft Administrative History, 58.
13. Ibid., 57.
15. WANJ files, Box 15, folder 3.
17. Ibid.
18. Temperance Wick, daughter of Henry Wick, lived near the Jockey Hollow campsite. When her father’s home was utilized by senior officers in Washington’s Army as a headquarters during the 1779-1780 encampment, the engaging teenager became the focus of much attention. One particular tall tale had Tempe hiding her horse from mutinous soldiers—a particular yarn that has never gone out of fashion.
20. Ibid., pg. 55.
22. Ibid., 34.