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## National Park Service

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# World War II National Park Service Headquarters move to Chicago

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## Introduction

From [Parks, Politics and People](#) "Chapter 8 War: Hot and Cold" by Conrad L. Wirth

By 1941 the oncoming war had affected all activities in the National Park Service and in many other bureaus of the government as well. Although a bill had been introduced in Congress to abolish the CCC, many of us were still clinging to the hope that it could be sustained at a low ebb for at least a few years. In December, Secretary Ickes wrote to the president regarding a letter the president had sent to Social Security Administrator Paul V. McNutt that called for gradual elimination of the army from the operation of the Civilian Conservation Corps and that requested that legislation be framed to consolidate the corps with the National Youth Administration. The secretary stated that he was in full accord with the removal of the army from the CCC, but he concluded with this appeal: "I strongly urge that instead of transferring all War Department duties in the CCC administration to the Federal Security Agency you consider a plan which would transfer the bulk of these duties to the Departments of Interior and Agriculture, leaving with the Federal Security Administrator responsibility for determination of general



*National Park Service Director Newton B. Drury and Elizabeth Drury. They saw the National Park Service family safely through the trying years .of the move to Chicago and back during the World War II and cold war periods of restricted operations, 1940 to 1951.*

*Conrad Wirth/NPS*

policies and for program coordination." He reported that the Department of Agriculture fully agreed with his recommendations. That letter was forwarded to the White House on December 6, 1941.

The next day, Sunday, December 7, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and we were at war. The United States declared war on Japan on December 8, and on Germany and Italy on December 11. There was no doubt then that we were through with the CCC; it was no longer a question of reorganizing it but rather of disbanding it. Every emergency program began to dry up, and by the next fiscal year—July 1, 1942, to June 30, 1943—the only funds available for CCC operations were a few thousand dollars to take care of the transfer of equipment and materials to other jurisdictions.

## National Park Headquarters Move to Chicago

Meanwhile, orders came for the National Park Service, along with two other bureaus of the Department of the Interior, to move to Chicago and make their Washington space available for war activities. With the splendid cooperation of all concerned, all arrangements were handled smoothly. Associate Director Arthur Demaray, his secretary, and three or four staff members remained in Washington to carry out the service's responsibilities there and to act as liaison for the Chicago headquarters. An office and a secretary also were maintained in the capital for Director Newton B. Drury, who often had to visit Washington.

August 8, 1942, was our moving day. Assistant Director Hillory A. Tolson was assigned full responsibility to organize the move. Many railroad cars were required to transport the service's furniture and equipment to Chicago. Arrangements had to be made to temporarily house the service's staff in hotels and motels there until houses and apartments could be found to rent. Quite a few of us found living quarters along the north shore of Lake Michigan. The offices were in the Merchandise Mart, within walking distance from the station for me; though there were winter days when, walking into the icy wind blowing off Lake Michigan, I didn't think I'd make it.

## NPS Staff Leave For War Service

Those were very discouraging and trying times. Many of our best people were the first to leave for military service, and because of family ties many could not go to Chicago with the Park Service. Further, the call to military service affected the individual parks almost as much as it did the Washington office. With gasoline rationing, travel to the parks went down. Funds for maintenance and care of facilities were cut below the minimum needed for preservation alone. Our appropriations in 1940—regular funds together with the cost of the CCC camps in national parks—amounted to \$33,577,000, but during the war years they were rapidly reduced. The low point was reached in the 1945 fiscal year, when funding for the service amounted to only \$4,740,000. After V-E Day our budget began to pick up until it reached \$30,111,000 in 1950. But the damage had been done so far as maintaining park roads and structures was concerned. Moreover, our organization had been greatly reduced, and not all who had left came back.

The National Park Service made a very important contribution to the war effort, although we had to assume a defensive attitude. We wanted to cooperate to the fullest extent possible with the military and other federal agencies involved in war activities without allowing the national park system to deteriorate. Many of the facilities, especially those that belonged to the concessionaires, were made available to the military as rest areas for recuperation of injured men. Some park areas were used for mountain maneuvers and for training ski troops. Others were used to train paratroopers and men who would work as saboteurs behind the enemy lines.

## Heritage to Be Preserved

All of this was good, and we were happy we had facilities and personnel to be of help, but we did not lose track of the fact that the national park system was a heritage that should not be destroyed, except as a very last resort. The service's main problem was with those who wanted to exploit the resources that were being conserved in the national parks. Some thought the sitka spruce in Glacier Bay National Monument, in Alaska, should be cut for airplane construction or for the use of other countries, even though they had far more sitka spruce than we had. There were situations where certain minerals in a park were closer to manufacturing centers than the source of minerals the manufacturers were using, and therefore they wanted to take minerals from the park. Many applicants would not take no for an answer but would apply all the pressure they could muster. Although the pressures on Director Drury were tremendous, he approached all the problems in a very practical way. In a few places where no appreciable harm could be done, he allowed certain surface minerals to be used if they were in short supply. I know of one case in particular in which a valuable source of a mineral that was in very short supply was located in one of our big parks way up on a mountain and very close to the park boundary. No permit was granted, but under our close supervision we allowed the mineral to be removed.

The appropriation of less than \$5 million in 1945 was barely enough to keep the heart of the park organization intact and could not provide even ordinary protection of some 180 parks. Some units in out-of-the-way places, especially, were left unattended. Although there was a gradual buildup after 1945, by 1950, with 21 additional parks and twice as many visitors as we had in 1940, the Park Service funds were 25 per cent less than in 1940. And things were getting worse. The shooting war was over, but the cold war and grants in aid to nations throughout the world—allies and former enemies alike—left very little funding for the National Park Service. The number of visitors to the parks had grown from 33.2 million in 1950 to 56.5 million by 1955, while our appropriations had increased from \$30.1 million to only \$32.9 million. It got so bad that conservation writer Bernard De Voto wrote a very strong column urging that half of the parks be closed and that all funds be devoted to those left open to the public. It was quite evident that the cold war was damaging our parks more than the war itself had. We coined such expressions as "the people are loving the parks to death," and "patch on patch is no longer possible," to describe the seemingly hopeless situation in 1955. Something drastic had to be done to protect the parks and keep them in condition for the amount of use that people were entitled to give them. Many natural, scientific, and historic areas that should have been added to the national park system were being gradually destroyed and lost forever. The seashores that were studied and recommended for parks in the

thirties were disappearing; they were no longer available. It was most discouraging.

## Restoring the Parks after the War

Looking back, suppose we had got double the appropriations we were given between 1950 and 1955. Could we possibly have done enough to heal the damage suffered during the stagnant war years? What would have happened had we carried out Bernard De Voto's suggestion and used the money we had for operating half of the parks, letting the rest go to seed? I know, of course, that De Voto didn't really mean that; it was just his way of saying how bad things were. We were, however, in a situation where something spectacular had to be done to awaken Congress and the administration to what had actually happened, to rouse everybody to roll up their sleeves and go to work.

The damage to parks during World War II was going to require a big sum of money to bring all the various elements back into full bloom to be of service to the public. The fact is that even twice the amount of funds that we were getting at that time would not have provided the answer. It was not alone a question of repairing what existed; it was a question of rebuilding both the national park system and the National Park Service. Conditions got so bad that greater amounts of money, up to an average of \$100 million a year for ten years, would have to be provided to do the job right. The Park Service was ready and willing to roll up its sleeves and go to work if the administration and Congress would only give the word. And under the Mission 66 program, they did.

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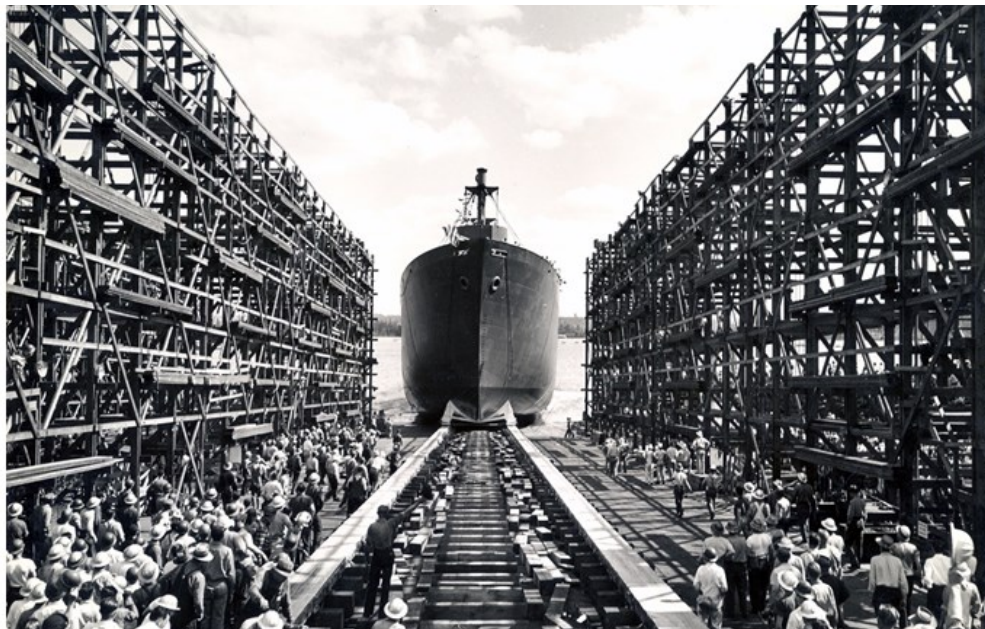
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