

**A New Deal for the Arts and Crafts:
Herbert Maier and the California “Boys” in the National and State Parks**
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The designers of the structures erected by Civilian Conservation Corps labor in the national and state parks in the 1930s would have felt that they had succeeded if you noticed little about their creations other than their exceptional craftsmanship. Inspired by the writings and example of John Ruskin and William Morris in Britain, Arts and Crafts architecture and decorative arts enjoyed their heyday in the U.S. from about 1895 to 1920. Within the nation’s parks, however, the aesthetic and ethos of the movement guttered on and then flared anew in the 1930s. It owed its rebirth largely to the economic catastrophe of the Great Depression and the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt whose New Deal programs successfully fought the crisis. A man and a town transmitted the movement from the first decade of the century to the fourth: little known architect Henry Maier and Berkeley, California.

The English Arts and Crafts designer and advocate Charles R. Ashbee recalled after visiting California in 1896 and 1900 that

California Speaks... Here things were really alive — and the Arts and crafts that all the others were screaming about are here actually being produced. Curious it is that the best work in Arts & Crafts in America is already being produced on the Pacific Coast.¹

The ideals of the movement were transmitted to California as early as 1876 when the Swedenborgian minister Joseph Worcester built a simple, low-slung house of unpainted redwood so that he could be closer to nature in the oak-studded hills of Piedmont above Oakland. Worcester designed his house with its expansive verandah for indoor-outdoor living and to take advantage of a sweeping panorama of San Francisco Bay.

Worcester later moved to a similarly informal house he designed for himself on San Francisco’s Russian Hill to better accommodate his parishioners. In the early 1890s he commissioned a group of progressive young architects who had recently arrived in the city² to design a modest building integral with its garden. The church’s interior featured a domestic brick fireplace, painted landscapes of California’s four seasons, and unpeeled madrone trunks that Worcester personally selected in the Santa Cruz Mountains for use as rafters. One of its designers was Beaux-Arts trained

¹ Freudenheim, Leslie M. *Building With Nature: Inspiration for the Arts & Crafts Home*. Salt Lake City Gibbs Smith, 2005, 186

² Longstreth, Richard. *On the Edge of the World: Four Architects in San Francisco at the Turn of the Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Bernard Maybeck who — as an instructor in the University of California’s College of Engineering in Berkeley — was then laying the groundwork for the first architectural school in the West. Maybeck and his wife Annie briefly lived in a cottage next to Worcester’s Piedmont house which, Maybeck’s friend Charles Keeler said, was a “revelation” to him.³ The couple soon moved to their own unpainted house in Berkeley so that the architect could be closer to work at the University as well as to enjoy, as had Worcester, the natural opportunities afforded by the steep backdrop of the East Bay hills.

Though then as now little funded by the State, the University had become the intellectual center of the Far West and attracted settlers seeking more stimulating company than San Francisco could afford. It was especially congenial to Bohemians like the Maybecks.

John Muir frequently visited Berkeley from his ranch in nearby Martinez. The charismatic Muir had many friends on the faculty while his daughters Helen and Wanda attended the Anna Head School housed in a cluster of rustic shingle buildings south of the campus. On May 28, 1892, Muir founded the Sierra Club with kindred associates. His professor friends and their wives were heavily represented among the charter members. They shared the charismatic Scots naturalist’s deep love of Yosemite and used it for both recreation and as a natural laboratory.⁴ A thick umbilicus grew between the University town by San Francisco Bay and Yosemite’s spectacular valleys and high country. The connection would subsequently grow to feed the fledgling National Park Service as well.⁵

Muir’s club in 1904 dedicated the LeConte Memorial Lodge on the floor of Yosemite Valley. It commemorated natural history professor and Muir’s close friend Joseph LeConte who died in 1901. The stone building with its steeply pitched roof is an early exemplar of what came to be known as National Park Rustic architecture. It was designed by architect John White, Bernard Maybeck’s brother-in-law.

Maybeck almost certainly had a hand in designing the lodge in Yosemite for at the same time he was supervising the construction of a far more ambitious stone castle for his patron and friend Phoebe Apperson Hearst on an estate she owned near

³ Freudenheim, Leslie M. *Building With Nature: Inspiration for the Arts & Crafts Home*. Salt Lake City Gibbs Smith, 2005. 20.

⁴ NPS Director Horace Albright recalled that Muir “made an enormous impression on me with his discussion of the Hetch Hetchy problem in Yosemite” at a meeting of the Sierra Club. Albright, Horace M. and Schenck, Marian Albright. *Creating the National Park Service: The Missing Years*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999, 15.

⁵ Thompson, Daniella. “Sierra Club pioneers lived near pre-stadium Strawberry Canyon:” http://berkeleyheritage.com/eastbay_then-now/sierra_club_leaders.html

Mount Shasta. Hearst was a discriminating patron of architecture for whom Maybeck had already concocted a remarkable lodge-like structure of unpainted redwood which Mrs Hearst used for receptions a few blocks south of the university. At the same time Maybeck also designed a faculty club next to the creek that bisects the campus. It, too, resembles a rustic mountain lodge. Both buildings clearly showed Maybeck's affinity for Arts and Crafts detailing and furniture as well as tall cavernous spaces.

In 1906, Maybeck created a clubhouse for the Hillside Club in a growing residential district north of campus. He and Annie founded the club with their neighbors in 1898. The Club grew out of a Ruskin reading group and was devoted to preserving the town's hillsides from brutal street grading and inharmonious buildings. Its bible was a book titled *The Simple Home* written by poet, naturalist, and Muir friend Charles Keeler. The slim volume was "dedicated to my friend and counselor Bernard R. Maybeck" and contained Keeler's the architect's prescriptions for designing in harmony with nature. The Club's *Yearbook* in 1906-7 summarized its credo as "Hillside Architecture is Landscape Gardening around a few rooms for use in case of rain."⁶ Berkeley's benign climate as much as Muir's presence and the Hillside Club's suasion produced a plethora of brown shingle houses, sleeping porches, patios, and even an open air school to indoctrinate the town's children in a proper reverence for nature.

The excitement occasioned by the building of an ideal bayside city for the San Francisco's Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) in 1915 may have enticed Herbert Maier to enroll in UC's Department of Architecture. UC alumnus Stephen Mather took the opportunity of the fair to sponsor a three-day conference of national park superintendents, concessionaires, and politicians at the University. President Woodrow Wilson had recently appointed former San Francisco Attorney Franklin K. Lane as his Secretary of the Interior and Lane in turn appointed Stephen Mather his assistant. Both men were near classmates and proud alumni of the University of California. Mather was also a friend of Muir (who had died the precious year) and an ardent conservationist who sought to create an agency to oversee the expanding network of national parks and monuments with a cadre of rangers modeled on the Canadian Mounties. The spring conference in Berkeley led the following year to the creation of the National Park Service with Mather as its first Director.

Although Herbert Maier's life was to be inextricably bound to the NPS, it is unlikely that the young man attended that conference of dignitaries. He would, however, have partaken of the studio camaraderie in the Department of Architecture then

⁶ Freudenheim, Leslie M. *Building With Nature: Inspiration for the Arts & Crafts Home*. Salt Lake City Gibbs Smith, 2005. Keeler, Charles. *The Simple Home*. Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc. 1979.

Maybeck's building burned in a 1923 wildfire and was rebuilt to a design by John White.

under the leadership of Professor John Galen Howard. As architectural historian Sally Woodbridge has written,

From the beginning, the department's atmosphere was intimate and informal. Because these juniors and seniors were not required to take courses in other departments, they spent most of their time working together in the architecture building. The eight students in Howard's first class called their self-contained world "the Ark." Howard was "Father Noah."⁷

The University's Regents had lured Howard from private practice in New York City to found the Department and to supervise the implementation of a grandiose master plan for the campus. The plan was the product of an international competition paid for by Phoebe Hearst at Bernard Maybeck's suggestion. Although Howard is best known for his monumental neoclassical buildings that comprise the campus core, he was equally adept at designing informal rustic structures such as the brown shingled "Ark" where Maier learned his craft as well as sensitive expansions to Maybeck's own redwood Faculty Club and an immense log cabin behind it built for the senior men's class in 1906. Howard was an early member of both the Sierra and the Hillside Clubs.

That Mather and Lane strongly identified with California and its public university assured that almost all the men who founded and steered the NPS through its formative years had passed through UC in the years that Berkeley was a leading center of the Arts and Crafts Movement.⁸ All of those men shared a love for Yosemite National Park and most were early members of the Sierra Club as well as the later Save-the-Redwoods League founded in 1918.

Herbert Maier was a private and modest man who left almost no record of what must have been his formative years at the University of California. We cannot know whether he met Bernard Maybeck who had been instrumental in founding the Department of Architecture but did not teach there. Little known outside the Bay Area until 1915 when his remarkable Palace of Fine Arts⁹ for the PPIE earned him international fame at the age of 53, the older architect did apparently leave a lasting impression on the student for his daughters recall that after his retirement he

⁷ Woodbridge, Sally B. *John Galen Howard and the University of California: The Design of a Great Public University Campus*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002, 94

⁸ As a successful businessman in Chicago, Mather founded and was President of a California Club there. Albright, *op. cit.*, 31.

⁹ Maybeck designed the Palace as a total integration of architecture and nature and expressive of the passage of time, both themes which Maier later expressed in his own park buildings and encouraged in his associates.

enjoyed driving them around Berkeley pointing out buildings that Maybeck had designed

Fluent in German, Maier enlisted in the Naval Reserve as a translator when the U.S. entered World War 1 and apparently never graduated from Cal. He paid for his college years by working summers at Camp Curry in Yosemite Valley. In an interview conducted in 1962 by his NPS colleague Herbert Evison, Maier attributed his lifelong love of nature, and especially for the Sierra Nevada, to that experience and to the high country trips he took with his Cal classmate and friend Ansel F. Hall.

Almost exactly contemporary with Maier, Hall graduated with a degree in forestry in 1917 and soon joined the fledgling National Park Service where he quickly climbed the civil service ladder and took Maier with him. He served from 1920 to 1923 as Yosemite Park's first Park Naturalist where he founded the Yosemite Museum Association and promoted the kind of interpretative programs that John Muir had advocated. Stephen Mather regarded Hall's work so highly that he made him Chief Naturalist of the National Park Service. Hall moved from Yosemite to Berkeley where the University gave him an office in the School of Forestry, further reinforcing the University's close association with the National Park Service that would grow into the on-campus Western Museum Laboratory that furnished interpretive displays for national parks across the country.¹⁰

In 1923 Hall invited Maier to a meeting with Stephen Mather and NPS Chief Landscape Architect Daniel Hull to discuss Hull's plan for a government center and museum in Yosemite Valley. Maier later recalled that the men met at San Francisco's Palace Hotel while President Harding was dying in the Presidential Suite upstairs.

Maier shared with his friend Ansel Hall and with Stephen Mather (as well as Muir and LeConte before them) a keen interest in and commitment to the educational role of national parks. Only nature education, the men felt, could instill in visitors the necessary appreciation and even reverence that would safeguard the parks from vandalism and excessive development. Hall subsequently obtained a grant from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial for Maier to design an interpretive museum for Yosemite Valley where Maier and Hall had spent their collegiate summers.

For nine years Maier devoted himself to working for the American Association of Museums and the Smithsonian Institution designing museums for the national parks. The structures he built for Yosemite, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, and for Bear Mountain State Park on the Hudson River display not only his own sympathy for nature but his affinity for the Arts and Crafts ethos and aesthetic as well, I believe,

¹⁰Smith, Harvey L. *Berkeley and the New Deal*. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2004, 107-112.

for the late work of architect H.H. Richardson¹¹ and perhaps as well for the Californian architects Greene and Greene.¹²

Maier saw his own buildings as regrettably necessary incursions into the parks he loved, and he sought to make them as unobtrusive as possible. He wrote that “even the finest building... is somewhat of an intruder” when advising other park designers in 1935 to err towards modesty.¹³ His buildings typically featured battered walls of massive local boulders often supporting an upper story of equally massive rough logs and unpainted wooden shakes. Working closely with his UC classmate Thomas C. Vint and other talented landscape architects, Maier strove to integrate his buildings into their unique environments by sensitive siting, expansive terraces that accommodated landmark trees, and meticulous attention to color. His buildings hugged the ground; he championed what he called “the horizontal key.”

The National Park Service’s Landmark Theme Study for the four museums Maier designed for Yellowstone Park summed up the architect’s intentions:

Maier saw his museums as "not mere passive repositories of 'exhibits' but active interpreters and guides to the national and cultural features and historical associations of their parks. They are laboratory manuals...for use not only by the qualified student but by anybody and everybody." Maier saw the museums aiming to "interpret," not just to provide cold facts. To him, "the great thing is to get people to go and see; intelligently, if possible; but by all means to see. And nothing conducive to that end is to be disdained." Maier's buildings were among the first to house that new concept of "interpretation"--the "revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact"¹⁴

¹¹Specifically a gate lodge Richardson designed of massive stone boulders for an Ames family estate in North Easton, MA. Although Richardson never visited California, he was a close associate with landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted who first proposed that Yosemite Valley be protected as a public park and who designed the first campus plan for the University of California while spending two years in the state during the Civil War. Leland and Jane Stanford commissioned Richardson to design their eponymous university with Olmsted in 1885, but Olmsted’s successors took over the job when he died prematurely of gluttony. Ansel Hall worked closely with Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. to produce a model plan for a system of California state parks as well as the East Bay Regional Park District. See Brechin, Gray. “Forgotten Foundations: The New Deal for Bay Area Parks.” *Bay Nature*, January, 2008 (<http://baynature.org/article/forgotten-foundation/>)

¹² Linda Flint McClelland suggests the influence of Greene & Greene designs in Pasadena and Carmel.

¹³ https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/harrison/harrison20.htm

¹⁴ibid.

In this his creations recalled the immensely influential writings of John Ruskin whose mission he felt was to teach his readers to see and understand divine truths within and behind nature as well as to appreciate and practice handicrafts. Through those whom Ruskin inspired — men such as Olmsted, Muir, Maybeck, Worcester, and Keeler — Maier sought to enrich the perceptions of the many who visited his tutelary creations.¹⁵

Maier's buildings were expensive. The onset of the Great Depression after the market crash of 1929 stanching funding from the Rockefeller Memorial fund and might easily have spelled the end to such meticulously detailed and constructed buildings. As the economic crisis deepened, however, millions of Americans abandoned their faith in an unregulated market that had brought them such grief. Candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt promised them a New Deal to overcome the calamity, and his administration delivered soon after his inauguration on March 4, 1933.

Among the first of Roosevelt's alphabet soup agencies — and always among his favorites — was the Emergency Conservation Work (ECW) program later and more popularly called the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). President Roosevelt announced his intention to Congress on March 21, 1933:

I propose to create [the CCC] to be used in complex work, not interfering with abnormal employment and confining itself to forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control, and similar projects. I call your attention to the fact that this type of work is of definite, practical value, not only through the prevention of great present financial loss, but also as a means of creating future national wealth.

Congress authorized the agency by voice vote just ten days later.¹⁶

Deeply committed to conservation since boyhood on his family estate at Hyde Park, Roosevelt wanted his new "tree army" to remediate not only damage caused by heedless exploitation to the nation's lands but the physical and psychological damage the Depression had wrought on its youth. No nation, he said, was so rich as to afford to waste its human and natural resources, and "More important... than the material gains, will be the moral and spiritual values of such work... We can eliminate to some extent at least the threat that enforced idleness brings to spiritual and moral stability."¹⁷

The CCC would also, he might have added, short circuit crime, suicide, and the danger of

¹⁵ Eagles, Stuart. *After Ruskin: the Social and Political Legacies of a Victorian Prophet, 1870-1920*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. In his book Eagles demonstrates the degree to which Ruskin's ideas influenced even those who never read him.

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilian_Conservation_Corps

¹⁷ Brinkley, Douglas. *Rightful Heritage: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Land of America*. New York: HarperCollins, 2016, 172-3.

revolution born of despair among millions of chronically unemployed young men.

The ambiguous term "and similar projects" embedded in Roosevelt's message to Congress proved usefully elastic, and the CCC's remit for work on public lands grew along with enlistments that ultimately totaled over three million. As a civil servant, Herbert Maier used that enormous army of cheap labor to vastly expand what he had begun in the 1920s with private funding. He, the professional staff he assembled, and the CCC 'boys' left the nation a vast panoply of handcrafted buildings and sensitive landscaping in the process.

In 1933, Mather's successor as NPS Superintendent Horace Albright hired landscape architect Conrad Wirth as chief land planner for the NPS. Wirth quickly and deftly established connections with local governments to promote more state parks and to provide design assistance and planning that the CCC could implement. At the same time Albright appointed Maier NPS District Officer for the Rocky Mountain District based in Denver as well as CCC regional officer in the Southwest. Although his increasing administrative workload meant that Maier had little time for design, his roles straddling the rapidly expanding state and national park networks as well as the CCC put him in a unique position to implement design work on a scale unimaginable in the 1920s. Like other NPS District Officers, he employed a corps of park inspectors who became his circuit riders reporting conditions back to him while advising CCC camp supervisors in the field. Each CCC camp had its own complement of landscape architects and other professionals as well as local experienced men (LEMs) employed to impart their expert knowledge of stonemasonry, carpentry, blacksmithing, forestry, and other valuable skills to the recruits. Maier's team of design professionals further propagated his ideas.

A premium was given to fine craftsmanship not only to better harmonize structures with their surroundings but to instill self-respect and lasting pride in the men of the CCC. Their excellent stonemasonry, in particular, has endured for eight decades and remains a hallmark of the CCC's presence in the parks as well as a tangible expression of the Arts and Crafts Movement's recrudescence in the New Deal.¹⁸

In 1934, Maier assembled a patternbook that he called his Library of Original Sources combining photos of his own park buildings with other state project structures he admired. The Library, says historian Ethan Carr, became "a powerful tool for quickly introducing

¹⁸ E.g., Eleanor Roosevelt was an advocate of handicrafts and ran a crafts cooperative called Val-Kill Industries on the Roosevelt estate at Hyde Park. See Brechin, Gray. "Necessitous Men Are Not Free Men: Bridging Ruskin's Thought and the New Deal." 2014 Ruskin Lecture for the Guild of St George, Sheffield, U.K. and Waithe, Marcus. "Ruskin and Craftsmanship." 2015 Ruskin Lecture for the Guild of St. George, Sheffield, U.K.

new state park planners to the basics of Park Service landscape architectural design.”¹⁹

Maier in 1935 addressed the first conference of state park officials organized by Conrad Wirth in Washington as the preeminent authority on proper park development. He told the attendees that the NPS had launched an ambitious research project to identify and document the “close to one hundred types of indigenous frontier construction,” and recommended them as exemplary: “We find that construction which is primitive in character blends most readily with primitive surroundings and is thereby less outstanding and has an intriguing craftsmanlike appearance.”²⁰ His emphasis on a deliberate return to primitive materials and means of construction and to manual craftsmanship once more recalls the Arts and Crafts Movement. Such advocacy ran counter to the rising tide of Modernism in the 1930s.²¹

In 1935, Maier hired Ohio architect Albert H. Good to collaborate on the compilation and publication of the patternbook *Park Structures and Facilities* under Good’s name alone. Demand for the book proved so great that three years later Good published an expanded version in three volumes titled *Park and Recreation Structures*.²² In his 1962 interview with Maier, Herbert Evison began by noting that three out of five structures in the latter book “show distinctly the influence of Architect Herbert Maier.”²³

NPS Director Albright in 1937 reorganized the National Park Service into four regions. Maier retained his dual position as both Regional Director for the Southwestern States as well as Regional Director of the CCC. He moved from Oklahoma City to Santa Fe where architect Cecil Doty melded pueblo and hacienda sources in his NPS Region III Headquarters Building according to Maier’s precepts. Although he was no longer designing, Maier’s authority had grown so great that the other NPS districts looked to Region III, as well as to *Park Structures and Facilities*, for design cues.

¹⁹Carr, Ethan. *Wilderness by Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998, 281.

²⁰ This survey of sources recalls other New Deal initiatives such as the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Index of American Design.

²¹ In a letter to David Brower in 1956, Ansel Adams declared himself a “purist” in favor of the removal of all permanent structures from Yosemite Valley, but he was especially fearful of the Modernist structures that Mission 66 would introduce into the parks. Cohen, Michael P. *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892-1970*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988, 140.

²² Republished in facsimile as Good, Albert H. *Patterns from the Golden Age of Rustic Design: Park and Recreation Structures from the 1930s*. Lanham, MD: Roberts Rinehart, 1990.

²³ United States National Park Service. Interview transcripts conducted by Herbert Evison for the Regional Oral History Office, Bancraft Library, U.C. Berkeley.

Due to the support given them by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the Depression years were a halcyon period for the national, state, and local park systems. Following the war and FDR's death in 1945, tastes changed and without the President's advocacy and CCC labor, Maier's handcrafted and rustic style structures were no longer feasible. Maier nonetheless remained with the NPS where he was instrumental in implementing — perhaps with some remorse — the radical shift to Modernism ushered in with Mission 66.

In 1962 Maier left the Western Regional Office in San Francisco to retire to Oakland where he had been born almost 70 years before. In a letter to his successor Lawrence Merriam, he asked that no recognition be made of his retirement in the way of a party, solicitation of letters, or gifts. When soon afterwards he learned that he had lung cancer, he concealed his condition from his friends and family until it was no longer possible to do so. He died in an Oakland hospital on February 23, 1969.²⁴

Maier had grown from his beginning as an obscure Bay Area designer into one of the most influential architects of his time albeit in the constricted realm of park design. Unlike so many others of his profession, however, he was not afflicted with egomania and remained as self-effacing as his own buildings. He told Herbert Evison in 1962 that his opportunity to guide the CCC in the development of state parks “was an unusually rewarding program and has conferred long-range recreational benefits to the public during the ensuing thirty years.” At the time of his death, few outside the Park Service knew of his responsibility for so many handsome structures in the nation's parks, or even that he had designed the National Park Service's iconic arrowhead logo.²⁵ Like so many of those whom President Roosevelt inspired to enter government service, Maier devoted his considerable talent to the public for whom he worked and to the nature that he loved. He was above all a committed public servant whose work, park historian Linda McClelland asserts, “probably more than any other park designer... assimilated and perpetuated the principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement.”²⁶ As Berkeley had been so instrumental in creating the National Park Service, so did it transmit an aesthetic which defined the Service's formative years.

²⁴ See tributes by Herb Evison, Conrad Wirth, and Horace Albright in *NPS Alumni Notes*, April, 1969.

²⁵ Shankland, Robert. *Steve Mather of the National Parks*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970, 316.

²⁶ McClelland, Linda Flint. *Presenting Nature: The Historic Landscape Design of the National Park Service, 1916 to 1942*. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1993, 234.

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