

Ahwahnee History

Fact Sheet

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The Ahwahnee stands today thanks to Stephen T. Mather, first director of the National Park Service. Following creation of the National Park Service in 1916, Mather embarked on an aggressive campaign to increase support and funding for the national parks. Yosemite National Park was Mather's favorite and here he sought to upgrade the park's concession operations and accommodations. In 1925, he ordered the new park concessionaire, Yosemite Park and Curry Company (YP&C Co.), to build a first-class hotel that would be open year round to attract people of influence and money.

In July of 1925, Gilbert Stanley Underwood was chosen as the architect for Yosemite National Park's new luxury hotel. Underwood headed his own firm in Los Angeles and was the consulting architect for the Union Pacific Railroad. He earned his Masters in architecture at Harvard and was fresh from designing the lodges at Zion and Bryce Canyon national parks. A few members of the YP&C Co. Board of Directors felt Underwood lived too far away to give the project the attention it needed. Underwood countered that the project offered him the opportunity of his life and, if necessary, he would move his entire business to Yosemite National Park.

Underwood's original design showed an impressive building consisting of a central tower seven stories high, with three extending wings. The north wing contained an entry lobby and two floors of private rooms; the south wing contained a Grand Lounge, meeting rooms, and three floors of private rooms; and the west wing contained an enormous dining room. To reduce the hotel's vulnerability to fire, the structure contained little wood. The primary building materials were steel, granite, and concrete. The exterior was to be granite and concrete, which would be stained to look like redwood. Today, the main building is 150,000 square-feet and contains 99 rooms, seven of which are suites. On the grounds east of The Ahwahnee are eight bungalows containing an additional 24 rooms.

Mather approved the project in March 1926. Three months later, James L. McLaughlin was chosen as the contractor for the project. He proposed building the hotel "for a maximum guaranteed cost of \$525,000, including our fee...on or before December 15, 1926." Site preparations began immediately and the cornerstone was laid on August 1, 1926. At the same time, trucks were hauling one thousand tons of structural steel, 5,000 tons of building stone, 30,000 board feet of timber, \$25,000 worth of kitchen equipment, and 60 percent of the furnishings over primitive roads to the site, seven days a week. (McLaughlin was not allowed to take any of his building materials from within Yosemite National Park because all natural resources were, and still are, protected.) The *Stockton Record* reported, "because of the variety and size of the task...[the project was] one of the most remarkable accomplishments in California automotive history."

Unfortunately, along the way, promises were made that were not kept. After McLaughlin joined the project, 18,000 square-feet were added to the plans. When McLaughlin protested this addition, the YP&C Co. Board of Directors threatened to sue him "for damages and all moneys in excess of the contract price." The project climbed to an unbelievable one million dollars and was seven months behind schedule. Still, in the midst of all the bickering and finger pointing, an amazing building was being erected.

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On October 12, 1926, The Ahwahnee finally received its name. Local Native American history fascinated YP&C Co. President Donald Tresidder and his wife, Mary, and they wanted the hotel to have a Native American theme. Ahwahnee, which means "land of the gaping mouth," was the name the first residents gave to Yosemite Valley. These first people, in turn, called themselves the Ahwaneechee (the people of Ahwahnee).

As the hotel exterior took shape, YP&C Co. hired Drs. Phyllis Ackerman and Arthur Pope as the hotel's interior decorators. They were a husband-and-wife team nationally known as art historians and experts. Interior work began in December 1926 and continued until opening day.

The Ahwahnee's grand opening was finally set for July 16, 1927. However, ten days before the scheduled opening, workers preparing rooms in the east wing noticed strong fumes coming from delivery trucks parked below near the original entrance. (The original entrance to the hotel is now The Ahwahnee Bar, adjacent to the entry lobby.) A week and a half and \$10,000 later, just in time for the hotel's first guests, a hastily constructed covered walkway and timber porte-cochere became the new entry. The final price tag for the construction of The Ahwahnee was \$1.25 million.

Although the official grand opening was slated for July 16, 1927, The Ahwahnee held a private complimentary celebration and entertained its first guests on July 14. The guests dined on stuffed squab, boned bass, and chicken quenelles, and that night slept on linen sheets under hand-loomed blankets. The next day, after the special invitees left, the staff noticed many pewter ink stands, Indian baskets and even bedspreads missing. Although petty theft in hotels was not new, no one could believe the amount of The Ahwahnee's opening night loss. Fortunately, it has never been equaled.

During World War II The Ahwahnee played host to the United States Navy. In 1943 the Navy converted The Ahwahnee into a rest and relaxation hospital for Naval personnel undergoing treatment. The Great Lounge became a dormitory for 350 men, with rows upon rows of bunk beds. The sixth floor was turned into the commanding officer's quarters, the fifth floor housed nurses and the mezzanine rooms became offices. The Sweet Shop was converted into the commissary, the Gift Shop became the personnel office, and the dining room was transformed into a mess hall. Over two-and-a-half years, 90,000 service men and women relaxed in Yosemite National Park, while 6,752 patients were treated at The Ahwahnee. Shortly before Christmas in 1946, following a \$400,000 renovation, The Ahwahnee reopened to leisure guests.

In July 2002, The Ahwahnee celebrated its Diamond Anniversary, and despite many changes, some things remain the same as opening day. The original big oak tables, secretaries, and wrought iron chandeliers are still found in the Great Lounge. Original rugs hang on the hotel's walls, unique and individual Native American designs are still found above each guest room door and rubber mosaic tiles in the entrance lobby continue to greet each Ahwahnee visitor.

DNC Parks & Resorts at Yosemite is honored to be a part of The Ahwahnee's history and is committed to preserving the rich history embodied in this magnificent hotel. To learn more about The Ahwahnee and its history, join one of our free historic hotel tours (inquire at the Concierge desk), or purchase one of the many books and videos on the hotel in The Ahwahnee Gift Shop.

For reservations call (559) 252-4848 or visit our website at www.YosemitePark.com.

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