

Queen's Laundry Bathhouse

RESOURCE BRIEF

Significance

On a sinter slope in the Lower Geyser Basin miles from any other structure, the bathhouse at Queen's Laundry Spring was one of two buildings constructed by Superintendent Philetus Norris in 1881. It is the only building that remains from the first era of civilian park administration (1872–1886) and the first building in a national park constructed by the government for public use. According to its National Register listing, the Queen's Laundry bathhouse represents the "earliest recognition that providing for visitor accommodation was a legitimate use of federal funds within a National Park." It also turned out to be the first step toward what became a conflict between accommodating visitors and leaving the park's thermal features intact.

History

When Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872, entrepreneur James McCartney had a tent set over a pool fed by water channeled from Mammoth Hot Springs, where he also operated a sod-covered log building that was the park's first hotel. Although visitor accommodations got off to a slow start, Norris's report for 1879 expressed optimism about a hotel and bathhouse proposed for "the Cold Soda Butte Medicinal Springs, traditionally famous for marvellous cures of jaded and saddle-galled horses and sick or wounded Indians, and now little less noted among the roving mountaineers as second only to the Arkansas Springs as a specific for the same diseases." Neither a hotel nor bathhouse was built at Soda Butte, but the use of bathhouses for the presumed therapeutic properties of adjacent mineral waters was well established in the 19th century. By 1875, what would become Hot Springs National Park had five bathhouses and many hotels for people coming to drink and bathe in the waters.

Yellowstone's second hotel was a primitive inn with two guestrooms in the Lower Geyser Basin that George Marshall opened in 1880. The popularity of Old Faithful shifted visitor facilities to the Upper Geyser Basin after motorized transport became available, but the limitations of horse-powered transportation made the lower basin, with its abundant grass and water, the first area in the park interior to be developed. While accompanying a road construction crew in 1880, Norris named a pool beneath "a great fountain" where they washed "the Queen's Laundry." The following year, he had an 8' by 19' bathhouse constructed with a wooden bathtub and a wooden trough



Remains of the Queen's Laundry bathhouse, 1995.

for conveying water from the hot spring. (It also retains the official name, Red Terrace Spring, given by a member of the 1878 Hayden survey.) Norris was replaced as superintendent the following year and the bathhouse was never finished. It had a sloping, earth-covered roof, but the walls were not chinked and the smaller of the two rooms lacked a doorway. The thermal feature itself had changed by 1886; the spring still produced steam, gas, and a large volume of water, but the "fountain" was gone.

Henry Banard Leckler, who stayed at Marshall's hotel with his wife in September 1881, left the only known record of someone using the Queen's Laundry bathhouse.

"...a most enjoyable bath I had. Getting dressed again was not pleasant, as the cold wind blew a gale through the wide openings between the logs—the house offering scarcely more protection than a mosquito net. The others also took a bath, but nearly parboiled, as we did not have time to wait for the water to cool. I am sure I never felt better after a wash; perhaps, however, I had never before been quite so much in need of it."

—H. Banard Leckler, "A Camping Trip Through Yellowstone," *American Field*, February 9, 1884.



A bridge across Cascade Creek, constructed 1881–1882 under Superintendent Philetus Norris.

PHOTO BY TWM/INGERSOLL

In his 1884 *Guide to Yellowstone*, Norris encouraged visitors to go to the Queen’s Laundry bathhouse he had constructed “or hopefully a better one” to “test for themselves the velvety feel and cleansing properties of these waters.” Better bathhouses were eventually available in the park along with other accommodations. When Henry Brothers opened the Brothers Bathhouse & Plunge across from the Old Faithful Inn in 1914, it had a swimming pool with hot water piped from Solitary Spring, which has been Solitary Geyser ever since because the disturbance caused it to start erupting. After a change of ownership and renovation in 1933, the Geyser Water Swimming Pool had 147 dressing rooms and “sand porches” for sunbathing, but it was razed after the concessioner’s contract ended in 1949. Those who opposed the facility from an aesthetic, sanitation, and ecological perspective brought an end to the manipulation of thermal waters for visitor enjoyment.



The Geyser Baths at Old Faithful, 1917.

Management Considerations

After examining the Queen’s Laundry bathhouse in 1961, Haines reported that it was in “remarkably good condition, “though most of the roof had fallen in. He found no trace of a trail or trash in the vicinity and noted that the bathhouse had not “suffered from the vandalism of the name-carvers.” His memo to the chief park naturalist also pointed out, “While construction of a better trail will result inevitably in some damage to the structure and the scene, it would seem that more people should have the privilege of gazing across that lush green meadow, past the jewel-like orange and white mounds of the Red Terrace, Flat Cone, and Steep Cone, to the distant, steaming rise where stands the weathered old bathhouse.”

Haines submitted a proposal to “show the primitive character of early public-use buildings in this area” by restoring the bathhouse to its “original condition” and “opening up a typical segment of the hot water conduit,” but neither the trail construction nor the restoration was

carried out. In 1964 when park managers considered removing the bathhouse, Haines objected that “there is something greater than the fate of one historic structure at stake here.” He believed that a “historic value of considerable magnitude is to be sacrificed for a mediocre thermal value, merely because thermal values are dominant in Yellowstone National Park,” and that “differing values can, and should, co-exist within the area.”

Current Status

The now roofless bathhouse is located on the edge of a travertine mound formed by the Queen’s Laundry Spring, where deposition from the pool’s run-off has engulfed it. The pine logs used to construct the building have been partially preserved by the silica and other minerals from the water that has permeated them. There is no evidence of a floor, but it may be buried beneath the silicon deposits.



Queen’s Laundry bathhouse, 1964.