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“Let it be a Woman’s Park”: Gender, Identity and the Battle over Mesa Verde

In 1882, Virginia McClurg, a young correspondent for the *New York Daily Graphic*, arrived at Mesa Verde with instructions to investigate “Colorado’s wonderful lost cities and buried homes.”¹ Accompanied by U.S. troops because of a recent “Indian outbreak,” McClurg found the abandoned buildings of the ancestral Puebloans both captivating and disheartening. Although enchanted by the mysteries of the ancestral Puebloan civilization, the unchecked looting of the cliff dwellings horrified McClurg.² When she left the Mesa Verde that year, she vowed to return and ensure Mesa Verde’s preservation. McClurg’s interest in landscape conservation was not unique for a politically active woman during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Adam Rome writes that “women in the Progressive era devoted more energy to environmental issues than any other public concern, with the possible exceptions of temperance and children’s welfare.”³ Indeed, women rallied for the establishment of several national parks, notably Redwood National Park and Everglades National Park.⁴ Mary Belle King Sherman, leader of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, campaigned so fiercely for the National Park Service (NPS) during the 1910s that many referred to her as the “National Park Lady.”⁵ Although conservation and National Park histories have acknowledged female

¹Mrs. Gilbert C. McClurg, “The Colorado Cliff Dwellings Association,” ms, in Geographic File, Stephen H. Hart Library, Colorado Historical Society,

²According to McClurg, the uprising began when unprovoked cowboys shot and killed several Ute Indians who had wandered on their lands to hunt. After several Utes shot and killed a Colorado homesteader for retribution, federal troops arrived to protect the settlers. However, as Smith notes in *Mesa Verde National Park*, McClurg’s timeline must be faulty, because Ute trouble occurred in both 1881 and 1885 but not 1882.

³Adam Rome, “‘Political Hermaphrodites’: Gender and Environmental Reform in the Progressive Era,” in *Environmental History* 3 (2006)

⁴However, these Progressive Era women’s organizations were not as successful as the Colorado Cliff Dwellings Association in gaining federal protection of their respective landscapes. Although, the Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs helped establish the Royal Palm State Park in November of 1916, Royal Palm did not become Everglades National Park until 1947. Likewise, California Federation of Women’s Clubs established Save-the-Redwoods League in Humboldt County, California, in 1919, but Redwoods National Park was not established until 1968.

⁵Polly Welts Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman’s Voice: A History*, (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 32

contributions during the Progressive Era, they have not fully and fairly captured the nature of the gender politics that underlay the creation of parks such as Mesa Verde.

In an effort to more fully explain how gender shaped early environmental reform in the United States, this paper examines McClurg's attempt to establish a state or national park at Mesa Verde that would be under the direction of women. When McClurg's unprecedented aspirations for Mesa Verde became public in 1906, she was quickly denounced by several Colorado newspapers. In the nasty, public, and highly gendered debate that followed, newspapers declared McClurg and her fellow CCDA members unfit to manage the site. Unfortunately, neither Congress nor the public was any more sympathetic to her cause. When Mesa Verde became a national park later that year, park officials took steps to obscure McClurg's role and diminish the CCDA's legacy, aligning it more closely with the mission of other national parks, such as Yellowstone. This paper demonstrates that an unrealized, alternative future more attuned with feminine ideals existed both for Mesa Verde and the National Park Service, which was established in 1916.

McClurg returned to the cliff dwellings in 1886 and campaigned tirelessly for Mesa Verde for the next two decades. An expert in public relations, she published sketches of her trip and was the only woman to give a presentation in the Anthropological Building at the Chicago World's Fair. In 1900, she officially established the Colorado Cliff Dwellings Association (CCDA) and began to seek political allies. McClurg met with Colorado senators Henry Teller and Edward Wolcott to discuss political strategies and wrote to President Theodore Roosevelt.⁶ McClurg also sent her vice regent, Lucy Peabody, to Peabody's former hometown of Washington D.C. to lobby Congress for support of the cliff dwellings. Unlike McClurg who

⁶Duane A. Smith, *Mesa Verde National Park: Shadows of the Centuries*, revised ed., (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 2002), 57.

avored a state park for Mesa Verde, Peabody felt strongly that only a national park backed by federal funds could adequately preserve the cliff dwellings—an opinion that would later alienate these two women from one another and divide the CCDA. In 1905, Colorado Representative Herschel Hogg submitted the first Mesa Verde national park bill to survive committee. Despite her preference for a state park, McClurg gave her blessing as well. It seemed that Hogg and Peabody had come up with an agreement that had satisfied all parties and ensured the continued preservation of Mesa Verde—that is, until February of 1906 when McClurg suddenly denounced the plan.

McClurg reversed her position on the bill once she learned that it did not include any of the major cliff dwellings, a logistical error that could be easily fixed by an amendment. However, even after the error was discovered and corrected, McClurg, in a move that baffled contemporaries, still refused to back the Hogg Bill.⁷ This caused the CCDA to break into factions, with one faction supporting McClurg and the other supporting Peabody. Once the press learned of the schism, it dramatized the conflict, further exacerbating tensions within the CCDA. Although McClurg had more support within her organization, the press clearly favored Peabody. Newspapers accused McClurg of being a “narrow self-seeking person” who was “loath to relinquish the prestige she has gained.”⁸ In addition to attacking McClurg, Colorado dailies tried to convince the public that the CCDA, a mere women’s organization, could not preserve the cliff dwellings.

On February 23, 1906, the *Denver Post* published an editorial that scolded McClurg as if she were a child, and told her to “put all that tremendous energy of yours into the fight to get Uncle Sam to take up this wonderful bit of ancient, ancient history and preserve it for the wonder

⁷Smith, 60-70.

⁸*Rocky Mountain News*, March 11, 1906, p. 9-11 and *Rocky Mountain News*, p. February 13, 1906, 3.

and pilgriming of the whole world.”⁹ By invoking Uncle Sam in this way, the *Post* clearly meant to imply that a male controlled Congress was far better equipped than any woman’s organization—even one led by an unusually determined and tenacious individual—to handle Mesa Verde’s preservation. A day later, the *Post* published a political cartoon which illustrated its patriarchal attitude. In it, a young woman, identified as Miss Colorado, harmoniously hands over a model of the cliff dwellings to the grandfatherly figure of Uncle Sam, and says “they’ll be safer in your care, Uncle!” Obviously, the *Post* expected McClurg and the women of the CCDA to dutifully and happily surrender Mesa Verde over to a paternal government that knew best.¹⁰

McClurg thought this utterly preposterous, and quickly reminded the public of the initial ineptitude of Hogg to even draw proper boundaries around the park. Never a fan of Washington politics, she did not miss the opportunity to expose bureaucratic ineffectiveness. She wrote “the women who you slur, have at least this consolation...[that] the grasp of their subject and work is certainly clearer than that of Colorado in the clubroom, educational societies, commercial bodies and journals, who ask they know not what.”¹¹

However, the *Post* was relentless. Disregarding McClurg’s notable accomplishments, the *Post* insisted that if the government were to leave Mesa Verde in the hands of women the results would be disastrous. “What would have become of the ruins of Pompeii or of Herculum, if some society of Italian ladies had been alone responsible for them ever since they were discovered,” asked the editorial. “Where would our own Yellowstone Park be today if we depended on some Ladies Aid Society to keep it in condition?”¹² Once again, McClurg was not without a retort; for at the time of the Mesa Verde conflict, Yellowstone had its own set of problems. Aware that

⁹*Denver Post*, Feb. 23, 1906.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Rocky Mountain News*, March 11, 1906, p. 9-11.

¹²*Denver Post*, February, 23 1906

squatters and poachers had plagued Yellowstone since its establishment as a national park in 1876, McClurg wrote that she did not want Mesa Verde to have “squatters, and merry go-rounds and shoot the chutes command the approaches of the park.” Moreover, she did not approve of the government’s decision to send the U.S. military under the command of Captain Moses Harris to the park in order to suppress these illegal activities. Since Harris’ arrival in 1886, local residents of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho had complained about soldiers’ unchecked cowboy antics and other ““venal and corrupt’ features of the army’s management of the park.”¹³ Shuddering at the idea of having her otherwise peaceful cliff dwellings overrun by rowdy soldiers, McClurg wrote “the Yellowstone has not been a government success—we refer to the four states from which it was made up as witnesses.”¹⁴ She maintained that such a fate was entirely inappropriate for Mesa Verde and not wanting to see her beloved cliff dwellings become incorporated into this highly masculinized system, she stated “let [Mesa Verde] be a woman’s park.”¹⁵

The *Post* remained unconvinced of McClurg’s abilities and continued to deride the CCDA based on the gender of its affiliates, “think of turning the Yosemite over to the custodianship of any band of the best meaning and the cleverest women, or men, either, in the world! Women die and women get married and lose interest in political life. So do men. The government of the United States lives!”¹⁶ Here, the *Post* tries to downplay its misogynistic attitude by claiming that even the “cleverest...men” get busy and lose interest politically, but their attack suggests that women’s domestic duties keep them from being meaningfully involved in democratic life. At a time when the women’s suffrage movement was gaining momentum,

¹³Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature, Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservationism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 110

¹⁴*Rocky Mountain News*, March 11, 1906, 9-11.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶“Make it a National Park,” *Denver Post*, Feb. 23, 1906, In addition the *Post* seems to have suffered from a convenient bout of amnesia; the *Post* fails to mention either Countess Deforia’s influential role in preserving the Italian ruins of Pompeii and Herculum or the problems facing the military at Yellowstone. Two facts McClurg also quickly pointed out in her rebuttal in the *Rocky Mountain News*.

editorials supporting traditional gender roles remained commonplace in major municipal presses.¹⁷

McClurg's tenacity and willingness to engage gossipy columnists in a mudslinging competition has led some historians to denounce her as petty and vain.¹⁸ However, such an analysis does not adequately represent McClurg or the complexities of the age. As I mentioned earlier, during the early stages of the progressive era, women reformers often helped establish preservation societies only to have those organizations taken over by men. This happened with the American Forestry Association (AFA). When it was first founded, the AFA encouraged women to become members and submit poems and other writings to the association's journal. However, by the early twentieth century, the AFA decided to ban all women from its ranks.¹⁹ It seems that men of the AFA, insecure about their masculinity, wanted forest reserves to be seen as places "away from the feminizing tendencies of civilization" where "a man could be a real man," and felt that a continued female presence would harm that reputation.²⁰ Rome argues that the 1906 debate over Hetch-Hetchy Valley strongly influenced the AFA's decision, for newspapers depicted males who supported the preservation of Hetch-Hetchy Valley as politically inept and effeminate because women's clubs were some of their primary supporters. The *San Francisco Call* even published a cartoon depicting the movement's leader, John Muir, as an old woman in a dress and apron sweeping up Hetch-Hetchy Valley.²¹ After preservationists lost the debate and Hetch-Hetchy was dammed, male preservationists stopped pursuing cross-gender alliances. Rome writes "to win future battles, they concluded, preservationists needed to use

¹⁷Despite the disapproval of many, women of Colorado and Wyoming received the right to vote in 1893.

¹⁸Smith, 69.

¹⁹Rome, "'Political Hermaphrodites': Gender and Environmental Reform in the Progressive Era," in *Environmental History* 3 (2006).

²⁰William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan., 1996), p 14.

²¹ Rome, "'Political Hermaphrodites': Gender and Environmental Reform in the Progressive Era," in *Environmental History* 3 (2006).

more masculine rhetoric... [and] many environmental reformers sought to maintain their manly authority by describing their goals in unequivocally masculine terms.”²² Therefore, McClurg’s campaign for a woman’s park took place during the time the very existence of a woman’s park in the American West threatened to topple everything male preservationists were hoping to accomplish. Thus, McClurg challenged the Hogg Bill not because she was “loath to relinquish the prestige she has gained” as her critics claimed, but because she was at the forefront of a debate concerning women’s role in politics, society, and the environment, and she, unlike many of her contemporaries, was unwilling to give into the demands of jingoistic politicians and relinquish the landscape she had worked for twenty years to preserve.²³

Even after the establishment of Mesa Verde National Park, McClurg, a woman who did not accept defeat easily, continued to look for ways to exert influence over the cliff dwellings. In 1907, McClurg wrote to the Secretary of the Interior, gave a detailed account of all the work that had been accomplished at Mesa Verde since the creation of the CCDA, and asked that the custodianship of the cliff dwellings be left to the CCDA and not handed over to a park superintendent.²⁴ After the Department of the Interior ignored her request and appointed Hans Randolph as park superintendent, McClurg wrote to Colorado Senator Charles Hughes asking him to help the CCDA secure a new superintendent for Mesa Verde and suggested that her husband, Gilbert McClurg, would be the best candidate for the job. Hughes refused and McClurg was effectively shut out of Mesa Verde’s daily operations, although she exerted some influence over the park until at least 1917. Despite its marginalized role, the CCDA continued to meet until McClurg’s death in 1931.

²²Ibid.

²³*Rocky Mountain News*, March 11, 1906, p. 9-11.

²⁴McClurg to the Secretary of the Interior, February 11, 1907, Virginia McClurg Collection, Colorado Springs Pioneer Museum, Colorado Springs.

In the years that followed the battle between McClurg and the *Post*, Peabody was given credit for the preservation of the cliff dwellings.²⁵ To Progressives, Peabody proved a more suitable heroine because she was a politically active woman who did not challenge male authority. Like the cartoon of Miss Colorado handing the ruins over to Uncle Sam, she happily relinquished control of cliff dwellings to federal government. As a result, until recently, McClurg's role at Mesa Verde has been marginalized and her character misunderstood.

²⁵Mrs. William Wells Price, ms, Virginia McClurg Collection, Colorado Springs Pioneer Museum, Colorado Springs