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John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s Contributions to American Conservation and Historic Preservation

By Janet Rocap

American environmental history is replete with the contributions of men and women of many vocations: philosophers (like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau), scientists (like George Perkins Marsh and John Wesley Powell), political advocates (like Gifford Pinchot and Stewart Udall), and crusaders (like John Muir and Rachel Carson). John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was none of these, yet he has earned a place of distinction as one of the great benefactors of the twentieth century movement to conserve national resources. One of America's greatest philanthropists, Rockefeller donated \$474 million to a variety of interests between 1916 and 1959, including generous gifts to several national parks and historic restoration projects, like Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. The wisdom and shrewd timing of his funding, together with his love of beauty and nature, made his contributions important ones, insuring that the Rockefeller legacy will provide to generations of Americans the opportunity to appreciate this nation's scenic lands and unique heritage.

Rockefeller's life-long love for the out-of-doors began in his childhood. He was born on January 29, 1874, in Cleveland, Ohio, the fifth child and only son of wealthy industrialist John D. Rockefeller, Sr. and Laura Celestia Spelman. From the age of four John enjoyed summers at the family home-
stead at Forest Hill, Ohio, which were full of country pleasures, including boating, swimming, horseback riding, hiking, picnicking and bicycling. His father was enthusiastically undertaking

landscaping projects on the hundreds of acres of rolling woodlands. John must have been fascinated by watching the building of paths and roads, the planting of trees, and the construction of a lake, because he developed an expertise in groundskeeping which enabled him, by the age of sixteen, to become responsible for much of such work at Forest Hill. From the age of ten he enjoyed traveling with the family to areas of scenic beauty such as Yellowstone National Park. During the winters, his father's business interests brought the family to their New York City home, and led to their establishing an estate at Pocantico, New York, which gave John an opportunity to explore the Hudson River Valley. The national parks of the west, as well as numerous sites along the Hudson became favorite places for Rockefeller, and he would return to them many times as an adult, often funding projects.

His deep commitment to philanthropy was also rooted in childhood. John would never know the loose and lazy life of a rich man's son. Strict Baptists, the family followed a church-centered life which stressed duty to God and fellow man. Daily Bible reading was a devout ritual that Rockefeller would keep throughout his life. Temperance, thrift, and charity, the forceful opinions of the household, were both preached and lived. These virtues remained important tenets of his adult years.

Rockefeller's philanthropic endeavors were no doubt motivated in part by a desire to vindicate the Rockefeller name. Rockefeller, Sr. was frequently maligned for his Robber Baron suc-

cesses with Standard Oil Company. Both father and son shared the belief that the Rockefeller fortune was the worthy fruit of the work of a Christian gentleman. Rockefeller worked hard throughout his life so that his many gifts made in the public interest would overcome the hated specter of "tainted money." Efficient and well-conceived giving became Rockefeller's vocation, and his genius for philanthropy earned much praise for the family name.

His philosophy toward his inherited wealth was revealed to friend and biographer Raymond B. Fosdick:

I was born into [wealth] . . . It was there like air or food or any other element . . . The only question with wealth is what you do with it. It can be used for evil purposes or it can be an instrumentality for constructive social living.

Rockefeller studied economics and sociology at Brown University, and after graduation in 1897, joined his father's office in New York City. Although he showed no great talent for business, he became acquainted with men who would help him further his own interests. One such man was Frederick T. Gates, a former Baptist minister who handled various Rockefeller charities. Rockefeller would later credit his influence as having taught him much about philanthropy.

Among Rockefeller's duties for his father's organization was the repair of properties such as the home at Forest Hill. He was a perfectionist, very concerned with detail, who liked to deal personally with craftsmen, such as carpenters. Rockefeller was fond of

carrying a four-foot rule in his back pocket, which he used often throughout his life as he toured his various projects. His acquired expertise in construction techniques served him well on later restorations.

In 1901 Rockefeller married Abigail Aldrich, daughter of Senator Nelson Aldrich of Rhode Island. Their forty-seven year marriage included a special compatibility regarding philanthropy. Mrs. Rockefeller was a great patron of the arts. She worked closely with her husband on projects such as The Cloisters in New York, a museum and fine architectural restoration.

The year 1910 would be identified later by Rockefeller as a turning point in his life. At the age of thirty-six he began to move away from the business world, where his high positions in companies like Standard Oil brought him little satisfaction. The next decade would see him play an increasing role in conservation activity, which must have provided him a welcomed haven from the unpleasantness of business.

In 1916 he donated five thousand acres near his summer home at Seal Harbor, Maine, to help establish what would become Acadia National Park, the first national park east of the Mississippi River. The following year he was granted permission to build and maintain roadways on the island, which resulted in sixty miles of well-built roads.

The following year he offered fifty-six acres in Upper Manhattan to New York City for Fort Tryon Park. The gift would not be accepted until 1930. This was the first of several times in Rockefeller's career when he would have to hold a donation in trust until legal and political barriers were overcome. Across the Hudson River, he was acquiring acres along the cliffs of the Palisades for later presentation to the state of New York.

Twenty-five miles up river the thirty-five hundred acre estate at Pocantico had become an "experiment in conservation" under Rockefeller's guidance. Carefully designed landscaping and roadways satisfied his sensitive appreciation of nature. "The impulse to build enclaves of quiet harmony was a deep-seated one" in Rockefeller.

By 1921 the bulk of Rockefeller,



John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

Sr.'s fortune, \$500 million, had been transferred to his son, who was forty-seven years old. The vastness of these financial resources enabled Rockefeller to pursue very large-scale projects. While other families among the nation's most wealthy were generous with gifts to museums, hospitals, alma maters, and foundations, Rockefeller's philanthropy was characterized less by a sense of noblesse oblige and more by a systematic approach to undertake projects designed to serve the public interest. Particularly appealing were worthy causes which might gain initial success due to an infusion of Rockefeller money but could later become independent of his funding. One such stone National Park.

In 1924 Rockefeller, along with his wife and three of their sons, toured several wilderness areas of the west. Yellowstone, a place of fond boyhood memories, was in an appalling condition. For over five decades the nation's first national park had suffered from a lack of administrative and financial attention. The fledgling National Park Service, established in 1916, was struggling to care for the magnificent areas under its jurisdiction. Many public lands had been nearly ruined by irresponsible use, caused in part by having been overseen by a variety of agencies, including the Army. Rockefeller was moved to fund an immediate clean-up of Yellowstone roadways.

Rockefeller believed that when the

United States Congress failed to act upon vital national interests it was up to private initiative. During a visit to Mesa Verde, Colorado, Rockefeller asked Superintendent Jesse Nusbaum how much money had been appropriated by the government for a museum there. Upon hearing the reply, "Nothing," Rockefeller stated, "I want to contribute and help you demonstrate the merits of your museum project, with the understanding, of course, that it is properly a government responsibility."

Returning west in 1926, Rockefeller toured Jackson Hole Basin in the Grand Teton Mountain area. His guide was Yellowstone Superintendent Horace Albright, who would serve later as head of the National Park Service. This meeting was the beginning of a thirty-year association which would see them often collaborating on conservation projects. Albright purposely led the Rockefellers past views cluttered with run-down shacks. His scheme to interest Rockefeller in acquiring and preserving the area worked: the result was a gift of over thirty thousand acres to Grand Teton National Park. Legal hassles and negative publicity delayed the presentation until 1950.

More gifts followed. That same year Rockefeller initiated what would become a \$2 million bequest to establish Redwood National Park in California. Several large gifts, also in 1926, benefited parks farther east, including Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, and a \$5 million memorial donation to Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee as a tribute to his mother. Two years later he offered to match all government funds that would add to the forested acres of Yosemite National Park in California. This resulted in an addition of fifteen thousand acres at a cost of \$1,750,000.

In the 1950's Horace Albright reflected upon Rockefeller's contributions to the conservation movement. Remembering the difficulties of creating the National Park System, Albright credits Rockefeller as one who "quietly stepped in at critical times and turned the tide when everything seemed to be going against us."

A Phi Beta Kappa banquet held in New York City in February 1924 was

the spark which would revolutionize historic preservation in the United States. The address, a proposal that the Society build a memorial hall at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, was delivered by the Reverend Dr. W.A.R. Goodwin, rector of the town's Bruton Parish Church. Goodwin, a charismatic visionary, had dreams of rescuing the small town from its shabby modern trappings and restoring it to its colonial grandeur. Rockefeller's polite expression of interest in Williamsburg spurred Goodwin to present a restoration proposal to the Rockefeller organization four months later. He was turned down. A similar proposal to the Henry Ford organization was also refused.

Goodwin's enthusiasm for his idea was matched by his persistence. A 1926 visit brought Rockefeller to Williamsburg. Goodwin made good use of the opportunity to guide his party on a tour of the town and captured Rockefeller's imagination. To his delight, Goodwin soon discovered that Rockefeller envisioned a restoration project on a larger scale than Goodwin had dared hope. Rockefeller's interest in restoring a large area of the town (or none at all) was characteristic of the man. "I'm only interested in ideal projects," he asserted.

Goodwin was authorized to begin purchasing Williamsburg properties, but was hampered by Rockefeller's insistence that his identity as benefactor be kept a secret. Not until 1928 was Goodwin allowed to announce the town's patron. The names, "Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr." were met with enthusiastic applause.

The restoration involved rebuilding more than one hundred colonial structures, forty of which were still standing in 1926. Painstaking care was necessary to accurately reproduce historic buildings which included the House of Burgesses, and the famed Raleigh Tavern, a meeting place for George Washington, George Mason, and Patrick Henry. The project required purchasing some two hundred parcels of property from private owners. The restoration, which opened to the public in 1936, cost far more than Rockefeller's original \$4 to \$5 million esti-

mate. The price of Colonial Williamsburg came to over \$100 million, half of which was Rockefeller money.

The project to restore the colonial capital of Virginia interested Rockefeller more deeply than any of his other projects. His personal involvement would last over thirty years. Until his death in 1960 he spent "twice-yearly sojourns at Bassett Hall, a fine colonial mansion on the edge of Williamsburg" in order to oversee the expansion and maintenance of the great undertaking.

The Williamsburg restoration became a school for historic preservation work. Rockefeller insisted on perfection in all aspects of the project, which required an extensive historical research. Authenticity was recreated in detail, from exact placement of buildings on their original sites to use of materials which replicated those of the colonial period. Rockefeller assembled a large staff of professionals whose methods would become the standard in historic preservation.

The fine work of dozens of archeologists and architects was integral to the restoration, and Rockefeller loved to work beside them. Among the many accolades bestowed upon Rockefeller for his involvement were honorary memberships in the American Institute of Architects in 1936 and the Society of Landscape Architects in 1938.

Rockefeller's funding of the Williamsburg restoration led the way for similar projects across the nation. Until Williamsburg, restorations were done on a much smaller scale, and the costs were often borne by the middle class. Besides developing the expertise which would be instrumental in other projects, the Williamsburg experience was a dramatic inspiration which captured public interest and helped to gain support for the growing historic preservation movement.

Rockefeller became involved in other restoration projects. He aided Versailles, Fontainebleau, and Reims in their recovery from damage sustained during World War I. Several sites of historic interest along his favorite stretches of the lower Hudson River were restored, including Philipsburg Manor, Van Cortlandt Manor, and Sunnyside, the former home of writer Washington Irving.

Rockefeller's identification with the conservation movement was the result of concerns he shared with others in the Progressive Era. Since the latter decades of the nineteenth century there had been a growing awareness among scientists and others that ever-increasing industrialization was a threat to the environment. The Progressive Era, which saw the advent of a variety of reform agencies in an attempt to solve society's ills with government solutions, also turned its attention to the stewardship of the land. A debate over what types of policy to implement split conservationists between two philosophies. One side sought maximum economic utility of resources, as espoused by the politically active forester, Gifford Pinchot. The goal of the other, in the tradition of naturalist John Muir, was aesthetic: to prevent human intrusion from spoiling nature. Rockefeller took a middle view. He argued that government should regulate designated areas, such as national parks, in the public interest. This meant providing visitors with sufficient amenities, like museums, to aid in their appreciation and recreational enjoyment of the area, while avoiding unsightly development, such as billboard advertisements and tawdry souvenir stands, which would detract from the beauty of nature. His position was attractive to the numbers of tourists who, with the advent of Henry Ford's automobile, took to the road in increasing numbers to view the scenic parks and historic shrines.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s role in the conservation and historic preservation movements of this century was the result of a keen interest in nature, an appreciation of the cultural heritage of America, and a sincere desire to serve the public interest via philanthropy. From the coast of Maine to California's redwood forests to the cobbled streets of Colonial Williamsburg, the United States has been enriched by his contributions. Historian Roderick Nash has written that a country's stewardship of its historic monuments tells as much about those who preserved it as it does about the original builders. In that case, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. has earned a hero's legacy within the field of environmental history. ■