

Cultural Resources in a “Natural” Park: Early Preservation Efforts at Menor’s Ferry in Grand Teton National Park

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Grand Teton National Park has long been celebrated for the grandeur of the Teton Mountains, and the Rockefellers, particularly John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and his son, Laurance S. Rockefeller, have long been recognized for their role in conserving that natural setting.

While their conservation work is unarguably important, my research at the Rockefeller Archives Center (RAC) in 2013 focused on another aspect of the Rockefeller’s involvement in Jackson Hole: their work with cultural and historical resources. Often overlooked and overshadowed by the majestic scenery, the cultural resources in Grand Teton National Park tell the stories of early American cultures, of the hardships of European settlement, and of the booming tourism industry greatly fueled by the establishment of the park in 1929 and expansion of the park in 1950. Specifically, I am interested in the large preservation effort undertaken in 1949 by Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., a Rockefeller non-profit, at Menor’s Ferry, and how that fit into the larger picture of preservation in Grand Teton National Park and other Western, stereotypically “natural” national parks.

Settled by Bill Menor in 1894, the Menor homestead was located on one hundred forty-eight acres on the western banks of the Snake River at a point where the braided river contracted into a single channel. Like most early settlers in the valley, Menor relied primarily on hunting,

trapping, and agriculture to survive. Improving his land, he constructed several buildings, including a cabin, barn, storehouse, and blacksmith shop, as well as an extensive irrigation system, garden and corrals.¹

Settling at a time when rivers limited travel through the valley, Menor also constructed a “reaction” or “current” ferry, charging passengers twenty-five to fifty-cents for a ride. The ferry consisted of a cable system that spanned the river, as well as a platform with two large pontoons. A windlass on the ferry would angle the pontoons to the current, which carried the boat across. One of only three Snake River ferry crossings in Jackson Hole, the ferry was hugely important both for those traveling through the valley as well as for homesteaders who used the ferry to transport harvested timber and hunted game across the river.²

In 1918 Bill Menor retired to California, selling his property and the ferry to Maud Noble, Frederick Sandell, and Mrs. Mary C. Lee. Noble and Sandell, who eventually bought out Lee, operated the ferry into the 1920s, carrying cars as well as horses and wagons across the river. As automobile travel increased, road improvements in Jackson Hole did as well, and in 1927 a steel truss bridge opened just south of the ferry, ending the era of Menor’s Ferry.³

In 1929, John D. Rockefeller, Jr.’s Snake River Land Company bought the Menor’s Ferry property from Noble and Sandell as part of their efforts to purchase and conserve valley land for inclusion in the newly formed Grand Teton National Park. Between 1929 and 1948 they leased the land, including Bill Menor’s homestead and a small cabin constructed by Maud Noble, to various tenants working in Moose, Wyoming.⁴

Little discussion as to the future of the property occurred between 1929 and 1942, although Harold P. Fabian, Rockefeller’s Teton representative, did have the foresight to rescue the abandoned ferry from the river in 1929, storing it undercover. In 1942, at both Laurance

Rockefeller and Harold Fabian's urging, Andrew E. Kendrew, the architect in charge of the Rockefeller-funded restoration at Colonial Williamsburg, was invited to spend two months in the Tetons to, "make a study of what should be done to certain of the old buildings to preserve them."⁵ As outlined in a letter to Fabian, Kendrew was to, "look at every single structure which we [Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc.] own."⁶ Specifically, he was tasked with drafting a maintenance plan for the JY Ranch, and creating a list of, "all the structures ... of an historic character."⁷

In his resulting report, Kendrew identified four properties with "historic character:" the Cunningham Cabin, the Manges Cabin, the Chapel of the Transfiguration, and the Menor's Ferry complex. Although Kendrew acknowledged that these complexes were, "well within the memory of many living persons," they represented a way of life quickly disappearing: that of the remote homesteader surviving life on the range in isolation.⁸ Developing restoration plans for each property, Kendrew proposed that they be interpreted and opened to the public as prime tourist attractions. The ferry in particular was already a popular destination, he wrote, and one of the more interesting of the properties identified. "The ferry business played a great part in the development of the whole Jackson Hole area, and was one of [the] enterprises which greatly aided settlement. The restoration of these buildings for exhibition or other purposes would be of much interest."⁹

Between 1942 and 1949 Kendrew and Fabian corresponded frequently, often discussing the Menor's Ferry proposal. Although the restoration plan seemed to fall to the wayside after 1942, it is more likely that during this period the board of Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. was more preoccupied with the establishment of the Jackson Hole National Monument by President Roosevelt and the possible expansion of Grand Teton National Park, events that occurred in 1943 and 1950 respectively. Despite the lack of interest on behalf of Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc.,

Fabian's interest continued. Writing to architect Jan Wilking in 1947 he stated, "I hope we can persuade them to do [something substantial], because the old ferry is a really historic spot."¹⁰

In December 1948 Fabian's efforts were finally rewarded: "my recommendation to install the Ferry and restore the Bill Menor place has been approved and authorized, and we will go ahead with that project next summer," he wrote excitedly to Jackson old-timer Buster Estes.¹¹ With Kendrew tied up at Colonial Williamsburg, Jan Wilking, a Casper, Wyoming architect of the firm Goodrich & Wilking Associate Architects, who had consulted for Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. on previous projects, was assigned to lead the restoration efforts. Kendrew continued to consult throughout the restoration, however, often guiding major decisions.

The restoration of Menor's Ferry was divided into four parts. The first part was the restoration of the ferry, which included reconstructing the vessel based on historic photographs and the deteriorating pontoons, and consulting with engineers regarding the cable and anchor system. Second, was the reconstruction of all the fencing, corrals, and the general layout of the grounds. In order to accomplish this, Fabian and Wilking consulted with National Park Service landscape architects, as well as valley old-timers to determine where the old fences were located. The third part of the project was the restoration of the berry patches and gardens which were replanted with further assistance from locals familiar with the historic landscape. Finally, the project was to address the restoration of the buildings themselves. With, "the advice of Mr. and Mrs. Estes, Jim Budge and his mother, Cora Barber and two or three other old-timers who knew the place, we should be able to get this pretty accurately," Fabian boasted to Kendrew.¹²

With funds provided by Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., in the summer of 1949, the ferry was reconstructed using Kendrew's 1942 drawings. Discussions for the restoration were initiated in June, and on August 20th a dedication, attended by former Wyoming governor Leslie

A. Miller, Jackson town mayor Harry Clissold, Harold Fabian, C.E. Menor (grandnephew of Bill), and a throng of locals, took place. The dedication celebrated the launch of the reconstructed ferry boat. The next year, under the guidance of Harold Fabian, his wife Josephine, and Wilking, the Bill Menor homestead buildings were restored.

The dedication and restoration drew national attention: the *New York Times* covered the project with the article, “Ferry of Wyoming Pioneers Once More in Service.” “Probably nowhere else in the West will the casual sight-seer or the serious student of the America-that-was be able to feel so close a link with the era of pioneer migration,” reporter Jack Goodman noted.¹³ Similarly, *Popular Mechanics* published an article about the engineering of the reaction ferry, while the magazine *Antiques* heralded the restoration of, “a ferryboat [that reminds] of a custom which, though not gone long, [is] gone forever.”¹⁴

In addition to the national coverage, the Menor’s Ferry dedication was carried on several local radio stations and newspapers throughout Wyoming, Montana, Utah, and Idaho. “Every resident of Jackson Hole has an interest in the restoration of Menor’s Ferry,” the *Jackson Hole Courier* published.

The historic project, brought to realization by Laurance Rockefeller and the Jackson Hole Preserve, will add materially to the tourist attraction in the Hole ... But more than this, the restoration of the famous ferry ... will pay a lasting tribute to the memory of two respected men. Bill and Holiday [Bill’s brother] Menor will always be remembered personally by those who share their acquaintance, and now, by all others through this very worthy plan.¹⁵

As evidenced in the *Courier* article, the local response was definitively positive. At a time when Laurance Rockefeller had launched a “friendship campaign” in an attempt to counter the significant distrust that had grown between locals and the National Park Service and Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., the positive reaction of valley residents was significant.¹⁶ Talk of the expansion of Grand Teton National Park and the final implementation of the Jackson Hole Plan

was at the forefront of national and local politics, with passionate articles both for and against the expansion. The restoration of Menor's Ferry soon became a rallying point for the good intentions and efforts of the Rockefeller family in Jackson Hole.

The project changed the complexion of things, as Harold Fabian explained in a letter soon after the dedication: "I have been amazed at the interest the old people in the valley are taking in this job. There is a helping hand for me at every turn, and they look upon this work almost with reverence."¹⁷ This sentiment was reiterated later in a chronology of Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. projects that stated simply: "1949—JHP, Inc. restored Menor's Ferry—made local friends in process."¹⁸

The significance of the local interest was not lost on *New York Times* reporter Jack Goodman who wrote, "the favorable reaction among local residents to the reconstruction may mean speedy action on other contemplated projects nearby."¹⁹ "The restoration marked the completion of a major phase of the multi-million dollar project sponsored by the Rockefeller Family under which the Jackson Hole Region flanking the Grand Teton Range is being returned to its pioneer aspect," Goodman wrote in a draft to his managing editor.²⁰

Despite the relatively young age of Menor's Ferry, Laurance Rockefeller and Harold Fabian had the foresight to recognize the significance of Menor's Ferry, acknowledging through their preservation work that bridges and roads had changed the valley, ending the era of ferry transportation forever. They also realized the impact such an effort would have on the local community, gaining the support of many skeptical locals through their work.

While my research at the RAC focused on Menor's Ferry, my research will ultimately attempt to place the preservation project into the larger context of early historic preservation in the United States, and specifically in western national parks touted more often for their natural

wonders than equally significant cultural heritage. In Grand Teton National Park and Jackson Hole country, the work at Menor's Ferry was not necessarily unique at the time; the Rockefeller family and Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. had taken many steps to balance the natural wonders with the human landscape in the past. As Struthers Burt, a local dude rancher and supporter of the park expansion explained in 1944, Rockefeller goals in the valley were, "nothing more than an intelligent proposal *to zone properly* one of the most famous counties in the world ... and to keep a proper balance between the various interests of the valley ... Cattle, big game, scenery, history, and geology ... Kill one and you injure the other ..."²¹ The family took many steps in the 1930s and 1940s to ensure that ranching and grazing activities were retained once land was transferred to the Park Service, and had previously identified and dedicated funds for the preservation of Cunningham Cabin. Unfortunately, much of this recognition was abandoned from the 1970s through the 1990s as park management focused increasingly on restoring the "natural" landscape. Only in recent years has the interest and efforts to preserve the cultural heritage been renewed.

Understanding where the Menor's Ferry project stands in relation to other Western preservation projects in the middle of the twentieth-century has been more difficult. "The preservation of historic landmarks is not particularly characteristic of westerners," Josephine Fabian wrote in 1949. "They feel the country is new, and they are so busy, it is only recently they have become at all conscious that they are making history."²² The significance of the work at Menor's Ferry is impossible to deny: Kendrew, the man in charge of arguably the most significant restoration project in the United States, was a key player, and the project gained national recognition in influential newspapers like the *New York Times*. It was compared to Henry Ford's Greenfield Village in one newspaper article, and called out by the preservation focused *Antiques* magazine as one of two significant preservation efforts west of the Mississippi

in 1949.²³ Whether the buzz was related to the rarity of a major preservation project itself or was due to Rockefeller involvement and the 1950 park expansion, however, remains to be fully comprehended.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ John Daugherty, Stephanie Crockett, William H. Goetzmann, and Reynold G. Jackson, *A Place Called Jackson Hole: A Historic Resource Study of Grand Teton National Park*. Moose, Wyoming: Grand Teton National Park, 1999, p. 95 and p. 104; Frances Judge, "Mountain River Men: The Story of Menor's Ferry," *Campfire Tales of Jackson Hole*. Moose, Wyoming: Grand Teton Natural History Association, 1960, p. 82.

² Edward M. Frost, Wyoming Recreation Commission, "Menor's Ferry," National Register Nomination, 1969.

³ Daugherty et al., p. 188; Judge, p. 88.

⁴ Daugherty et al., p. 214.

⁵ Memorandum from Chorley to Albright, May 6, 1942, Folder 247 Jackson Hole Western Trips—Kendrew 1942-1943, Box 28, Kenneth Chorley Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY (RAC).

⁶ Letter from Chorley to Fabian, May 22, 1942, Folder 247 Jackson Hole Western Trips—Kendrew 1942-43, Box 28, Kenneth Chorley Papers, RAC.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Report for Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., by A.E. Kendrew, August 1942," Folder 814 JHPI Reports, 1942-1945, Box 87, RG 2 Offices of Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Cultural Interest Series, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Letter from Fabian to Wilking, July 29, 1947, Folder 469 JHPI-Menor's Ferry Restoration, Moose Development 1946-1947, Box 48, Harold P. Fabian Papers, RAC.

¹¹ Fabian to Buster Estes, December 13, 1948, Folder 470 JHPI-Menor's Ferry Restoration, 1944-1948, Box 48, Harold P. Fabian Papers, RAC.

¹² Fabian to Kendrew, May 31, 1949, Folder 471 JHPI-Menor's Ferry Restoration, January-July 1949, Box 48, Harold P. Fabian Papers, RAC.

¹³ Jack Goodman, "Ferry of Wyoming Pioneers Once More In Service." *New York Times* (April 23, 1950), p. 19.

¹⁴ *Antiques*, July, 1950, Folder 490 JHPI-Menor's Ferry Restoration-Newspaper Articles, 1949-1977, Box 50, Harold P. Fabian Papers, RAC.

¹⁵ "Dedication of Reconstructed Menor Ferry to Be Held Saturday Afternoon at Moose." *Jackson Hole Courier* (August 18, 1949), p. 1.

¹⁶ Fabian to Guy Robertson, March 29, 1949, Folder 471 JHPI-Menor's Ferry Restoration, January-July 1949, Box 48, Harold P. Fabian Papers, RAC; Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Members of the Board of Trustees of Jackson Hole Preserve, Incorporated, November 15, 1948, Folder 382 Board of Trustees-Agendas, Minutes, and Correspondence, 1940-1949, Harold P. Fabian Papers, RAC.

¹⁷ Fabian to Kendrew, July 7, 1949, Folder 471 JHPI-Menor's Ferry Restoration, January-July 1949, Box 48, Harold P. Fabian Papers, RAC.

¹⁸ "GTLG Chronology," Grand Teton Lodge Company Records, Box 10, Folder 110.

¹⁹ Goodman, "Ferry of Wyoming Pioneers Once More In Service."

²⁰ Day Press Rate Collect, story filed by Jack Goodman, *New York Times*, Folder 472 JHPI-Menor's Ferry Restoration August-December 1949, Box 48, Harold P. Fabian Papers, RAC.

²¹ Struthers Burt, "The Jackson Hole Plan." *Outdoor America* (November-December 1944), Folder 819, Jackson Hole Wildlife Park 1945-1954, Box 88, RG 2 Rockefeller Family Archives, OMR, Cultural Interests, RAC.

²² Mrs. Josephine Fabian to Mrs. Menor, August 13, 1949, Folder 472 JHPI-Menor's Ferry Restoration, August-December 1949, Box 48, Harold P. Fabian Papers, RAC.

²³ Newspaper article, 1949, Folder 472 JHPI-Menor's Ferry Restoration, August-December 1949, Box 48, Harold P. Fabian Papers, RAC.