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Mapping the Changes to Yellowstone National Park's Boundary

Although the history of the exploration and establishment of Yellowstone National Park is well documented, the roles that maps have played in the depiction of the Park's original boundary, and in the explanations and justifications for adjustments to that boundary, are less well known. America's oldest national park was established by the U.S. Congress and President Grant on March 1, 1872, as a "public park or pleasuring-ground", and was to be located near the headwaters of the Yellowstone River. The park boundary was not formally surveyed at the time, and the earliest map of the park from the 1871 Hayden expedition shows a simple rectangular border that enclosed the park's main geologic wonders. During the 1920s, Presidents Coolidge and Hoover appointed commissions to study a number of proposed boundary changes. Maps included in these commission's reports clearly show the role that topography played in the decision-making process as the straight eastern boundary was now proposed to follow the crest of the Absaroka Range, and a greatly expanded southeastern boundary would include the Thorofare Plateau and the actual headwaters of the Yellowstone River. Ultimately, some boundary additions and subtractions were approved to the northwest, northeast and eastern boundaries in 1929, with a later small addition at the north boundary near Gardiner, Montana, in 1932. The southeastern Thorofare addition to the park was never approved by Congress primarily due to opposition from local hunters and guides. In addition to the maps made for politicians, tourist maps depicting both the proposed and the final boundary changes were made for National Park Service brochures, railroad company advertising and promotional materials, and the Haynes series of guidebooks. In addition to the maps, the authors of these publications provided the reader with vivid descriptions of the important new sites that tourists could visit within these new park boundaries. Persuasive cartographic products were instrumental in the final deliberations and decisions by Congress regarding the boundary changes. These maps also helped the public to understand how park additions would enrich their travel experiences in America's Wonderland, Yellowstone National Park.