

WHO WAS HIRAM M. CHITTENDEN?

By Rick Magee

“For one man to be a good army officer, a top-drawer engineer, and a competent historian concurrently is an unusual phenomenon, and indeed Hiram Martin Chittenden was a man of unusual and considerable talents” -*Richard Bartlett (1964)*



Hiram M. Chittenden (1858 – 1917) was a native of the Finger Lakes Region of New York, a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, and an officer of the Corps of Engineers. As an engineer he served on the Missouri River Commission for much of his career, surveyed the irrigation potential of the western states, and studied flood control needs in Pennsylvania and Ohio. He was responsible for surveying the boundaries of Yosemite and Mount Rainier National Parks, served briefly as Commander of the Saint Paul District and ended his army career as Seattle District Engineer. There he planned the Lake Washington Canal linking Lakes Washington and Union with Puget Sound. Seattle’s Chittenden Locks are named for him. He retired in 1903 with the rank of Brigadier General. Hiram Martin Chittenden was nationally renowned in his day as an author, advocate, engineer, and historian.

Young Lieutenant Chittenden was assigned to the young Yellowstone National Park. Arriving without a budget or staff, he decided to survey visitors as to what they thought was needed in the Park. As a result, he designed the system of tourist roads still in use in Yellowstone today, obtained funding from Congress, and oversaw their construction. Among his most remarkable works are the Roosevelt entrance arch near Gardiner, Montana, a graceful bridge over the Yellowstone River above Yellowstone Falls, and the viaduct through the Yellowstone Canyon. During a subsequent assignment in Yellowstone, then Captain Chittenden campaigned to protect Yellowstone and other National Parks for future generations from vandalism and corporate encroachment.

H.M. Chittenden’s studies of the irrigation potential in the Rocky Mountain West led to the establishment of the Bureau of Reclamation to bring about his vision. Chittenden may be said to be the father of flood control in the former Ohio River basin because of his study of flooding. Originally opposed to government efforts to reduce the risk of flooding, Chittenden changed his position based upon his research. During the Spanish-American War Chittenden was given a command of a unit of Volunteers and the temporary rank of Colonel. He and his unit were sent to Huntsville, Alabama, for training. Chittenden found that the local water supply was severely lacking, and in his spare time designed and began a municipal system for the community. Thank Chittenden for safe, clean water the next time you have training in Huntsville.

Hiram Chittenden was an important historian of the American West. He wrote *The Yellowstone National Park*, *History of Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River*, *Life and Letters of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S.J., 1801- 1873*, and *The American Fur Trade of the West*. His books on Yellowstone National Park and Fur Trapping are still in print. *The American Fur Trade* is considered the definitive work on the subject. He also contributed articles to many national magazines and newspapers.

Hiram Chittenden’s interpretation of the importance and grandeur of Yellowstone was important in the development of the National Park ideal in the decades just prior to the formation of the National Park Service. He also contributed greatly to the understanding of the exploration of the American West. Hiram Martin Chittenden was indeed a man of unusual and remarkable talents.

“The greatest service which official authority can render to posterity is to maintain and transmit this possession as it came from the hand of nature.” -- *Hiram Martin Chittenden*