

The White Mountain National Forest
An Administrative History
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The White Mountain National Forest will celebrate its 100th Anniversary on May 16, 2018. The story behind the creation of this crown jewel of New England is fascinating. Coming from the cut over and blackened lands that nobody wanted to a recreational paradise is dramatic. The White Mountain is one of the most popular national forests in the nation to visit and today covers 12 percent of the land base of New Hampshire. The forest is also an economic engine for the region.

The question arises today if we truly fathom what a treasure we have. When we look up at the green-carpeted mountainsides do we value that scenery? It was the headwater streams of four major rivers that the battle for conserving this land was fought over. I fear that we may have become complacent and we take the clean water in our streams and the wildlife in the forests as normal. We sometimes overlook the careful work of land managers operating with the consensus of the citizens. We sometimes overlook the work of volunteers who maintain our trails in our dash toward the mountaintops.

The Story Behind the Scenery

The challenge of creating an 800,000-acre National Forest in New Hampshire and Maine by purchasing private land from willing sellers was an enormous undertaking. First you needed the support of the public and local and state governments and then you needed Congressional approval to enable the expenditure of public funds for the public good.

The Weeks Act Centennial in 2011 provided the story of how citizens convinced our representatives to support this conservation effort. The Weeks Act succeeded not just in New England but in the southern Appalachians as well and continues to be the enabling legislation for new acquisitions today.

The Background

A decision was made by NH Governor Harriman and the NH legislature in 1867 to sell off the last of the public domain lands in the White Mountain region. The price was 15 cents an acre in 1867, or about \$2.36 in today's money. The money was used to pay for public schools. Unfortunately the legal title of the land was not settled and the cost of court cases over disputes cost more than the value of the sale.

Starting in the 1890's there were repeated calls to conserve and protect the lands in the White Mountains. Citizens of New England were aware that in 1891 then President Harrison began to designate "Forest Reserves" from public domain land because of the need to protect the watersheds from over harvesting and over grazing. A growing chorus asked for similar protection in the populous eastern

United States. The difference though was that in the west the land belonged to the federal government and in the east was largely private ownership.

The Broadside that launched the White Mountain Conservation Movement

The spark that touched off the fierce campaign for protecting the White Mountains came from an unlikely source. It came from an Episcopal minister, who titled himself as the “Missionary for the Head Waters of the Merrimack River”. The writer was the Reverend John Edgar Johnson of North Woodstock, NH. Johnson published an inflammatory broadside called the “The Boa Constrictor of the White Mountains” on the symbolic day of July 4, 1900 against the NH Land Company.

The broadside had the desired effect. The timing was right and the stars were aligned. A group of well-connected citizens organized the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests in 1901. They hired a young forester by the name of Phillip Ayres who led the effort to create a White Mountain National Forest. Ayres was an effective leader and galvanized support from many other like-minded groups including the WODC and the Federation of Women’s Clubs, The Grange and leaders of industry.

Philip Ayres and others worked tirelessly with a Massachusetts Congressman by the name of John Wingate Weeks. Weeks was born in Lancaster, NH and new first hand what was going on in the mountains. Weeks and Ayres were helped by the American Forestry Association and joined forces with similar groups in the southern Appalachians who also desired national forests for their mountains.

The battle for passage was long but in 1910 the House approved the bill followed by the Senate in early 1911. The legislation was given the title of the Weeks Act for its floor manager, Rep John W Weeks (R-MA). President Taft signed the bill on March 1, 1911. The Weeks Act allowed for the creation of Eastern National Forests and unlike the western forests has taken nearly a century to acquire meaningful amounts of land.

The Streamflow Controversy

The land acquisition stage could not start until the “Streamflow Controversy” was settled. The issue was whether floods and low summer flows were caused by denuded hillsides that covered a large area of the White Mountains. At one corner stood the forestry leaders including Gifford Pinchot and Philip Ayres and at the other corner were the Army Corps of Engineers and US Weather Bureau.

A fascinating study was made using ten stream gaging stations in the White Mountains. Some of the stream gages were in Waterville Valley and others were in the Pemigewasset Valley watershed. Remains of some of these the stream gages still stand a century later, somewhat forgotten shrines and overgrown with moss and

vegetation. Benton MacKaye worked as a forester studying the stream flow problem and later became famous for proposing the creation of the Appalachian Trail.

A scientific study of this magnitude should have taken many years but the public was impatient. The preliminary results determined that at the Burnt Brook site near Thoreau Falls found “that cutover and burned over areas melted snow faster in the spring and thus stream flow could be affected”. The preliminary and somewhat weak results were enough for Congress and they began appropriations to acquire land in the White Mountains.

The White Mountain Forest Reserve

The US Forest Service set up headquarters in Gorham, NH in 1912 at what is now Libby's Restaurant on Main Street. Forester William Logan Hall led the effort to acquire land from willing sellers. The first tract of land was acquired in January 1914 in Pike, NH. Soon other tracts of land including a large tract on the Northern Presidential Range were acquired.

In four short years starting in 1914 the hard working team of government land appraisers and surveyors acquired over 360,000 acres of land. This made the forest reserve sizable enough to manage as a national forest. President Woodrow Wilson signed Proclamation Order 1449 on May 16, 1918 establishing the White Mountain National Forest (WMNF).

The early organization of the WMNF focused on continued land acquisition, forest protection and restoration. The forest headquarters remained in Gorham and four ranger districts were soon created to help administer the land. The ranger districts were named for towns and included the Bartlett, Gorham, Twin Mountain and Woodstock Ranger Districts.

Forest Guards were hired to conduct on the ground management. Their title implied that they were there to protect the forest. Forest protection was the primary work in the early decades and forest guards also fought forest fires, built trails, dealt with poachers and prevented timber theft. Guard Stations were established by 1915 at Swift River, Glencliff, Woodstock, Gale River, Israel River, Peabody River and Wild River. By 1942, there were 14 guard stations usually staffed by two men whose job it was to protect the forest and provide recreational opportunities to the public.

The use of guard stations slowly ended after World War 2 because of the availability of motor vehicles, better roads and the desire to be home at night with the family. Only two guard stations remain and they are the 1923 era Fabyan Guard Station on the Cherry Mountain Road and the Cold River Guard Station at the former Brickett Place in Evans Notch.

In 1936, Forest Supervisor Clifford Graham renamed the Ranger Districts using the historic Indian names for important rivers. The Bartlett District became

the Saco and moved to a facility in Conway. The Gorham District became the Androscoggin, the Twin Mountain District became the Ammonoosuc and the Woodstock District became the Pemigewasset and moved to Plymouth.

The 1930's were also the time of the Great Depression and the Civilian Conservation Corps, with a total of 16 camps operating on the National Forest. An additional three camps were working on state forest and parks and two more worked on private forestlands nearby. Each camp was designed to employ 200 men aged 18-25 and were run by the military with the US Forest Service providing technical supervision. The crews completed many major projects including campgrounds, trails and other facilities.

America's entry into WW2 ended the need for a CCC program although three of the camps were put to other uses. The Stark CCC camp was converted to a Prisoner of War camp for German soldiers captured in North Africa and Europe. The Peabody and Thornton CCC Camps were converted to Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps. The CPS enrollees were opposed to war for religious reasons but wanted to serve their country in other ways. The American Friends Service Committee, commonly called Quakers ran the CPS camps. The CPS crews were able to do much of the work of the Forest Service staff that were off fighting in the war.

Post World War 2 Era

After the war the demand for timber increased. Building homes for the returning GI's called for increases in the timber harvesting. In the 1960's the Forest Service made a decision to increase the amount of even-aged forest management. A number of large clearcut units over 200 acres in size caused a break in the usual harmony between the Forest Service and local citizens and conservation organizations.

The late 1960's were marked by the rise of the Environmental Movement brought about in large part to the Cuyahoga River in Ohio catching fire several times and oil spills off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. The pressure had been building for several years over air and water pollution. Books such as Silent Spring by Rachel Carson alerted citizens to the dangers of pesticides. The 1960's and early 1970's period was also marked by the Anti-War Movement over Viet-Nam and the Civil Rights Movement sparked by killings of civil rights workers and leaders in the South.

The Establishment of Scenic Areas and Wilderness

The White Mountain National Forest served then as now as a place where people could get away from the troubles of the world and backpack on the many miles of trail. But even here the demands for wild areas grew louder. Several Scenic Areas were designated in 1961 on the 50th Anniversary of the Weeks Act where motorized recreation and timber harvesting were prohibited. The Great Gulf became a Wild Area in 1963. In 1964, landmark legislation was enacted called the

Wilderness Act where Congress had the power to designate Wilderness and the Great Gulf Wild Area was automatically designated as a Wilderness with just over 5,000 acres.

The Forest Service came up with the concept of wilderness and primitive areas as far back as the 1920's. Internally the idea of taking land out of production was an anathema to some in the Forest Service. An insight into the divergence of opinions is a 1926 Inspection Report of the White Mountain National Forest by Assistant Regional Forester R. M. Evans who expressed surprise that over 100,000 acres of land had been taken out of the timber base. Evan's view about national forest management was more utilitarian than those on the working on the White Mountain National Forest. Evan's expressed his concerns and went on to say that *"it would be unwise to let it be publicly known that we had anything in mind, for each local organization or individual would immediately put forth his own pet wild area."*

Forester William Logan Hall wrote to the Chief of the U. S. Forest Service in 1919 describing his efforts. *"Acting under your instructions, I have endeavored to work out a practical plan for retaining the original forest growth on the crucial area of privately owned land in the White Mountain Purchase Unit. On the remaining private lands in the White Mountain Purchase Area, in view of the probability of their subsequent acquisition by the Federal Government, in view of the essential nature of their forest as watershed cover, and in view of their recreational importance, a determined effort should be made to retain the original forest growth on areas of considerable size."* What Hall was describing was his strategy to acquire lands that retained the original forest.

In the 1920's informal agreements were being made by WMNF foresters to prevent logging or road building on several especially scenic areas that had been acquired for the WMNF. These informal agreements worked for four decades until official designations and formal management plans were made starting in 1961. These informal agreements to protect certain scenic and old growth forest areas were what R. M. Evans was expressing concern about.

Nine Scenic Areas were designated on the WMNF with the last one being the 6,100-acre Mount Chocorua Scenic Area coming about as a result of the 1986 Forest Management Plan. In addition to over 17,000 acres of Scenic Areas the WMNF has 148,000-acres of Congressionally designated Wilderness. Controversy remains as to how much is enough and this shows no sign of abating.

The Greatest Good Controversy

Gifford Pinchot was the first Chief of the US Forest Service. In 1905 he advised how the new national forests should be run. He said that national forests *"should be managed for the greatest good, for the greatest number, in the long run."* Defining what is the greatest good is the hard part that managers have constantly struggled with. How many ski areas, trails, timber harvests, roads or Wilderness

should there be? Society is not unified in answering these questions. The use of public involvement and forest planning tries to answer these questions but never to the full satisfaction of those involved.

Future Challenges

The earliest challenges in managing the WMNF involved protecting the forest and restoring the land from the disastrous fires of 1903. Fire towers were built, telephone lines installed and access trails built. Improving forest stands for future use became a priority. As recreation use grew, new campgrounds were established and on a very limited budget. The CCC was able to accelerate development of facilities.

Starting in the 1970's challenges were made regarding harvesting timber on public lands. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 or NEPA provided for substantial public involvement. New types of forest specialists were hired including archaeologists, biologists, botanists, hydrologists and soil scientists. The NEPA documentation required for a timber sale, now termed "vegetation management" became onerous. This led in the 1990's to what was termed "analysis paralysis" and the loss of traditional allies in the forest products industry.

The NEPA work remains but even bigger challenges have arisen. The new challenges relate to the effects of climate change, motorized recreation demands, and a budget that fails to meet the needs of the forest.

Climate change is probably the biggest challenge that the Forest Service faces. The effect of climate change on forest health is more severe than most people are aware of. Visiting a western forest will show you what is happening. Millions of acres of forest are dead or dying due to insect pests such as the mountain pine beetle that are ravaging trees stressed by a warming and drier climate. Forest fires are increasing in intensity and the cost of fighting these now consumes over half of the US Forest Service budget.

The WMNF is not immune to the effects of climate change. The lack of early snow is allowing forest fires to start later in the season. The 2004 Lucy Brook Fire and 2016 Covered Bridge Fire were burning in November when decades ago we typically had snow on the ground.

The WMNF and much of the northern forest region also have insect pests, some of which are overlooked by casual observers. The WMNF is in the midst of an outbreak of the balsam wooly adelgid, an invasive exotic insect killing balsam fir trees. This aphid like insect appeared in the early 1990's and now is killing off one of the most common trees on the WMNF. Our winters now lack the prolonged periods of cold weather needed to suppress these insect pests.

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