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CENTENNIAL MINI-HISTORIES OF THE FOREST SERVICE

Forests, Parks, and State Forestry

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Support for forest conservation in the late 1800's arose in response to all-too-frequent forest destruction—by fire and wasteful timber harvesting practices—and a growing belief that forests were important for the protection of watersheds. A history of conservation action is found in the steps taken by citizens' groups and States in response to these threats to the forests.

The same day of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the Peshtigo Fire (named after a local river) swept rural Wisconsin. It is still regarded by many as the worst fire in the history of the United States—over 1,200 people died and 2,400 square miles of forest were burned. The fire was started by careless burning to clear farmland.

Loggers were considered pioneers, opening farmland for settlers in the Great Lakes States during the late 1800's. In just a few decades, however, they had left vast stumplands that, when sold to waves of homesteaders, proved to be unsuitable for agriculture. The notion of managed forests emerged during this time as a reaction to this “cut and run” lumbering.

Many who saw how rapidly the forests were destroyed also began to fear for future timber supplies. Michigan lumber production peaked in 1889 at 5.4 billion board feet (64 percent white pine). As early as 1872, conservation activities began to appear—the first Arbor Day was celebrated in Nebraska to encourage tree planting. It soon became popular nationally, and **J. Sterling Morton** (1832–1902), a leading advocate, went on to serve as Secretary of Agriculture under President **Grover Cleveland** (1837–1908).

In 1872, a New York State commission was appointed to study the merits of establishing a forest preserve in the Adirondack Mountains. Watershed protection was the primary incentive, with recreation and wilderness concerns important secondary reasons. That same year, Congress enacted legislation to reserve 2 million acres for the "Yellowstone Park." In 1876, **Dr. Franklin B. Hough (1822–1885)** was authorized by Congress to describe what was happening to the forests of the United States and what other countries were doing in terms of forest practices.

This growing interest in conservation exemplified by Arbor Day and the beginnings of national and State parks was important, but it was not enough to ensure long-term forest conservation in the United States. What was needed was the appearance of forest managers, who either came from Europe or started to be trained in the United States. Minnesota is credited with organizing the first State forestry association (1876), and horticulturalists were instrumental in the formation of the American Forestry Association (1875).

The next step in the development of the conservation movement was the Federal emulation of this trend, with the creation in 1891 of the first reserves.

Reference

Dana, Samuel Trask. 1956. *Forest and range policy: its development in the United States*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.