

Massachusetts Contributions to National Forest Conservation

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TOWARD THE END of the nineteenth century, Massachusetts forests helped inspire and launch what later became known as the environmental movement. When the implacable processes of modernization and industrialization reached a certain point — replacing older powers of wind, water, and muscle with coal, petroleum, steam, and electricity, and pulling rural residents from their farms into burgeoning urban centers to work in shops and factories — a few individuals in Massachusetts and elsewhere began to rethink the assumptions underpinning modern progress. Balancing the gains and losses, these re-thinkers increasingly focused on the heedless wastes and unintended, baleful side effects of their era's general rush to industrialize. Some aspects of the natural world, they accordingly urged, should be guarded from the relentless whoosh of modernity. In particular, dedicated friends of Massachusetts trees and woodlands helped create a national movement for forest conservation: both to protect some trees absolutely from human use, and to advocate more prudent commercial forestry and timber cutting. By slow degrees, and just in time, Massachusetts forests found their defenders — with rippling effects on forest policies at the national level.

This chapter highlights four individuals and two organizations, all bred and based in Massachusetts, that were active in forest conservation from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. Many other significant people and conservation groups could have been included here; the state has produced a long, honorable line of conservationists. But for this chapter the roster has been winnowed by the dual criteria of originality and national influence. Everyone discussed here was immersed in the creation of something unprecedented, and these pioneers' work eventually had impact beyond Massachusetts in conservation affairs around the

country. By standing apart from the dominant currents of their times and looking beyond the immediate priorities of everyday life, they helped invent a new reform movement. Alongside the colonists who had come ashore at Plymouth Rock, the revolutionaries at Lexington and Concord, and the Garrisonian abolitionists who insisted on eradicating the evil of chattel slavery, these early forest conservationists took their positions on the distinguished roll of Massachusetts idealists and reformers of conscience.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

In the spring of 1845, as the forests of Massachusetts were yielding ever more products to the swelling hum of nineteenth-century industrial progress, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) turned around and repaired to Walden Pond in Concord for his two-year experiment in simplified living. At age 28, Thoreau was just beginning one of the most distinguished, eccentric careers in nineteenth-century American literature. He was still very much in process, seeking his particular place and voice, unsure of where he was headed. Retreating from his own recent life of quiet desperation, he went to the Walden woods — a moderate walk from Concord center — for selfish purposes, to pare everyday living down to essentials and examine them without flinching. By degrees he folded himself into the natural landscape, finding there a “sweet and beneficent society in Nature . . . an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant.” From the railroad track at the western end of the pond, the piercing locomotive whistle sounded like the scream of a hawk: but it only intruded briefly. Safe for a time in these woods, and even though absorbing the sought “tonic of wildness” with all his senses, Thoreau still accepted the prevalent notion — familiar to any contemporary carpenter or lumberman — of trees for human uses. Even at Walden, nature was yet assumed to serve a man’s intentions.¹

In the few remaining years of Thoreau’s life after he left Walden, he moved fitfully toward a more heretical notion of trees for trees themselves. As he shifted between these two propositions — nature for itself versus nature for humans — Thoreau unconsciously anticipated an essential tension that would stretch across future efforts in forest con-

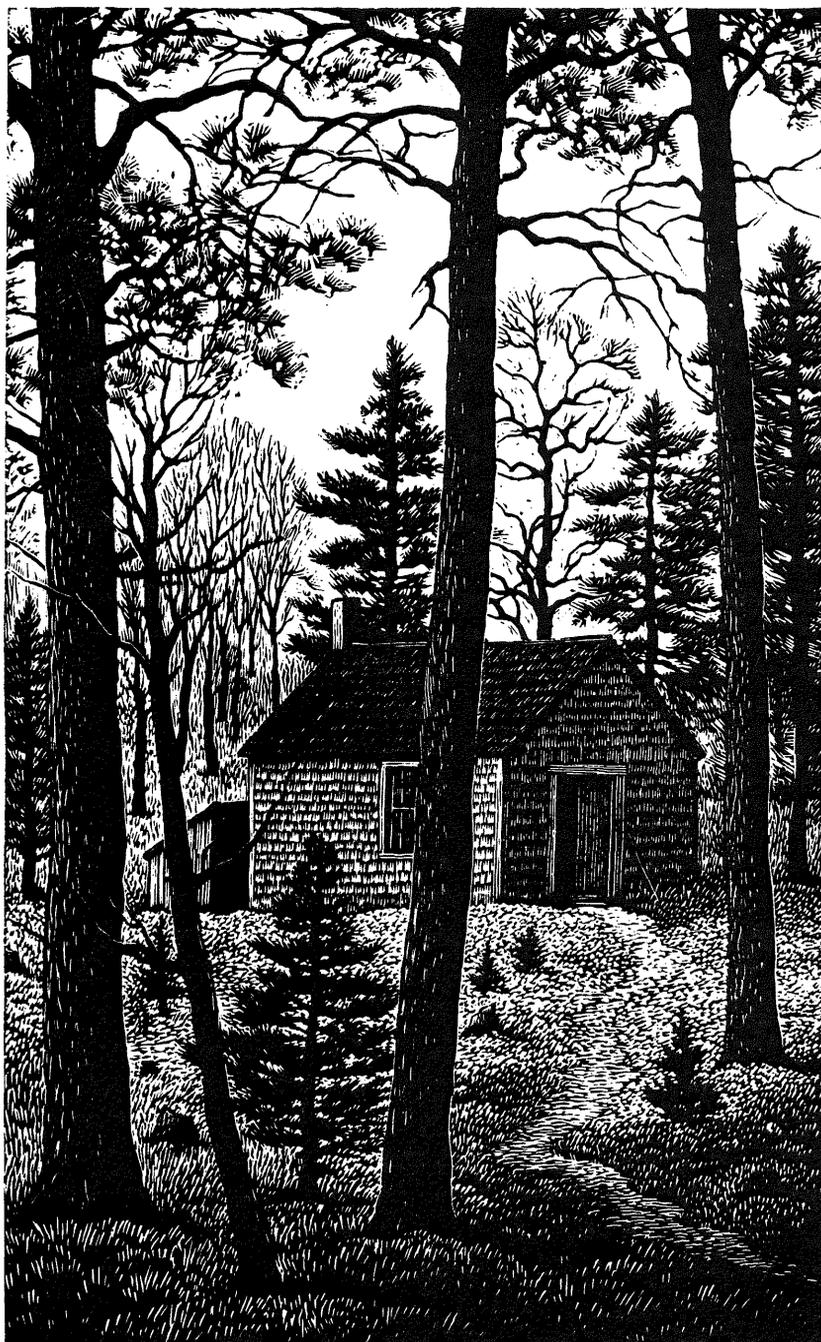


Figure 7.1. Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond, Concord. Illustration for *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau (New York: The Heritage Press, 1939). Boston Public Library, Print Department, by permission of the estate of Thomas Nason.

servation and, ultimately, the entire environmental movement. In his Walden phase Thoreau most valued human freedom, independence, and the inward declarations of his own individual voice. The later Thoreau turned more toward an outward-looking systematic study of nature, especially trees, with emphases on fecundity, generation, and interconnectedness. Alongside his older themes of humans drawing sustenance from nature, he increasingly focused on the internal processes of nature's self-cultivations, and a corresponding need to protect some of nature from human intrusion.²

This proto-conservationist Thoreau surfaced in his essay "Chesuncook," published by the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858 and posthumously in *The Maine Woods*. Though he traveled mainly within Concord, Thoreau had made three forays into the seemingly endless forests of northern Maine. These woods left him with a surprising sense of their vulnerability to human misuse — and a dawning recognition that pine trees had their own purposes beyond any human intentions. "The pine is no more lumber than man is," he wrote, "and to be made into boards is no more its true and highest use than the truest use of man is to be cut down and made into manure." Veering toward a pagan animism, Thoreau declared his love for "the living spirit of the tree," not its human-derived products after death: "It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still." In conclusion, Thoreau recalled the royal forests of England, protected for the king's hunting. "Why should not we," he asked, "who have renounced the king's authority, have our national preserves . . . for inspiration and our own true recreation? or shall we, like the villains, grub them all up, poaching on our own national domains?" The first national parks and forests in the United States were not established until decades later.³

In the late 1850s Thoreau became fascinated by the process of forest succession — and thus came to render his major contribution to what later became the science of ecology. Concord's farmers had long observed that a white pine lot, if cut down, was usually followed by a stand of hardwood, and vice versa. Popular explanations for this incongruous succession of one species by another ran to dubious theories of spontaneous generation. Through patient observation over many seasons, Thoreau learned how seeds were dispersed by nature's own planting devices of wind, water, squirrels, and the eating habits of birds and

other creatures, and why different seedlings then prospered under knowable circumstances. Recording the details in his journal, comparing the systematic husbandry of nature with the heedless practices of local farmers, Thoreau interpolated exasperated remarks on the urgent need for better forestry. Fieldwork led him on to conservation. Thus, on finding that one Concord farmer had burned over young pine-succeeding oaks to plant a rye crop: "What a fool! Here nature had got everything ready for this emergency, and kept them ready for many years . . . and he thought he knew better. . . . So he trifles with nature. . . . He needs to have a guardian placed over him. A forest-warden should be appointed by the town. Overseers of poor husbandmen." Here Thoreau again suggested that humans should yield on occasion to nature's own intentions. Trees, in short, by and for themselves.⁴

A strange irony: the tree studies that had sustained Thoreau and preoccupied his last years helped kill him. Late in 1860, while counting tree rings and measuring growth at Fair Haven Hill in Concord, he caught the cold that — along with tuberculosis — led finally to his death 17 months later. He left behind the draft of an undelivered lecture, "Huckleberries," which urged the preservation of the Concord River's banks for public walks and the conversion of some town property into a protected forest of 500 or 1,000 acres, "where a stick should never be cut for fuel, a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation." This early call to forest conservation stayed among Thoreau's papers, unread and unheeded. When finally exhumed and published years later, "Huckleberries" seemed ahead of its time — but also very much of its time, given that nobody thought it worthy of notice for a long while.⁵

CHARLES SPRAGUE SARGENT

Charles Sprague Sargent (1841–1927), a central figure in American forestry affairs of the 1880s and 1890s, was not much influenced by Thoreau. Born on Beacon Hill in Boston and raised at the family estate in suburban Brookline, Sargent came of intellectual age at a time when Thoreau had disappeared from the literary landscape, not to be revived for decades. Instead Sargent owed his tree career to reading George Perkins Marsh. A desultory student at Harvard and then a rich, aimless young man, Sargent remained unfocused until he picked up Marsh's

Man and Nature in the early 1870s. “If I have done nothing else but make you acquainted with George P. Marsh,” Sargent later told a forestry colleague, “I shall feel that I have not lived in vain.”⁶

For Sargent, a man not given to overstatement, the book became a conversion experience of nearly religious intensity. *Man and Nature*, published in 1864, was the first important call for forest conservation in America. Marsh — an authentic nineteenth-century polymath, a native of Vermont who lived abroad for much of his life — ranged across the entire ecological history of the Northern Hemisphere to show the dangers of wasteful lumbering and forest destruction. Droughts, erosion, floods, climatic disasters, even the declines of empires and civilizations of the old world had followed, and soon would threaten the new world as well. “Let us be wise in time,” said Marsh, “and profit by the errors of our older brethren.”⁷ Absorbing the lesson, Sargent started tree work on a modest local level and steadily broadened his activities outward in concentric circles — rather like a cross-section of one of his especially beloved white pines. (Large and robust in stature, he conveyed a white pine’s ramrod presence, endurance, and persistence, and some of its stubborn imperviousness as well.)

Having learned techniques of English landscape gardening in travels abroad, Sargent began by managing the opulent family spread in Brookline. From there he helped found the Arnold Arboretum in conjunction with Harvard University. In this lush public park, designed for both scientific purposes and “artistic effects,” Sargent first planned to include every variety of tree and shrub that could be grown in Massachusetts. Later this design was cut back to include mostly North American species, with some outsiders, mainly from Asia. The plan remained ambitious. True to his white-pine nature, Sargent thought in the long term: His tax-free lease with the city of Boston ran for a thousand years — and was then renewable for another millennium.⁸ He remained very much in charge of the arboretum for the next half century.

In 1876 Sargent prepared a report for the state Board of Agriculture on the Commonwealth’s trees. As a botanist and horticulturist, he approached forest conservation as a matter of planting and cultivation rather than of sustained-yield forestry as long practiced in Europe. Drawn to young and growing trees, he preferred not to think about harvesting or reducing them to board feet. In that spirit, he urged the

Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture, a private group, to encourage tree planting. In 1878 Sargent served on — and no doubt dominated — an award committee for the society that offered cash prizes totaling \$1,400 for the best plantings of white pine, white ash, Scotch pine, and European larch. Intended “to increase the knowledge of arboriculture,” the competition drew in only 12 tree planters across the state. When the results were assessed 10 years later, 8 of the 12 had withdrawn because of crop failures or inattention. Of the remaining 4, only one met the competition’s stringent requirements. Thomas H. Lawrence of Falmouth received \$100 for the best acre of European larch.⁹ Forestry was as yet a very hard sell. The general supply of trees still seemed abundant; the American frontier yet beckoned, offering the promise of endless virgin land out west or up north; and the prevailing ethos, the late-nineteenth-century barbecue of laissez-faire economics and government, left little place for government regulation or even admonition.

On the federal level, Sargent nonetheless hoped to move from fact-finding surveys to informed policy recommendations to, eventually, some sort of government protection for forests on the public lands of the West. His preliminary survey in 1879 of forests in central Nevada led to his undertaking a major study a year later for the Interior Department. Sargent’s *Report on the Forests of North America*, issued in 600 large pages as part of the 1880 census, was his first major publication and the first substantial study of the subject. It described 412 tree species, with details on their taxonomy, distribution, and characteristics in use, and concluded with dire warnings about the nation’s shrinking forests. All across the West, Sargent declared, trees and humans dependent on them were threatened by wasteful cutting methods and simple, imprudent greed. Sargent stacked his argument by not counting trees under a foot in diameter, and so exaggerated the extent of forest depletion — as his critics in the lumber industry soon pointed out.¹⁰

The *Report* led to other federally appointed surveys by Sargent. After poking around the northern Rocky Mountains in 1883 and noting the unchecked depredations of miners, lumbermen, and stockmen, he published an article in *The Nation* magazine urging the creation of a federal reserve in the region of what later became Glacier National Park, in northwestern Montana. A political conservative, he disapproved of federal regulation of business affairs except on behalf of trees. “The

fewer government officials we can have and the less machinery of that sort the better," he wrote an associate in 1883. "Still without government interference, Federal or State, I don't see how our mountain forests can be saved from entire extermination." Trees mattered more than any abstractions or political theories to Sargent.¹¹

Though temperamentally unsuited to the task, Sargent saw the urgent need for patient public education about forest conservation. The only national organization in the field, the first American Forestry Association, had been founded in 1875 by John A. Warder, a physician and horticulturist from Cincinnati. After 1882 it was led by George B. Loring of Salem, Massachusetts, a farmer, a Republican politician, and a former United States commissioner of agriculture. The AFA held annual meetings, sponsored Arbor Day celebrations, and urged more prudent forestry practices by private owners, but made no significant appeals to government. The AFA's membership remained small, only a few hundred, and its real influence slight. Newspapers and public commentators often agreed that forestry sounded sensible, but the matter went no further. "There is a great deal of talk about forestry in this country, but I cannot find out that we have much of the thing itself," said J. B. Harrison of the AFA in 1889. "Forestry in the United States is a matter of talk, of Arbor Day oratory and essays at Forestry Congresses. We shall build nothing valuable on a basis of unreality."¹²

Sargent found common cause among the horticulturists and landscape gardeners of the AFA but deemed the group inadequate. In 1888 he launched his own weekly magazine, *Garden and Forest*, aiming to reach and expand the AFA's constituency on a national level. "Conducted" and apparently underwritten by Sargent, the magazine was published and edited in New York by a veteran journalist, William A. Stiles of the *New York Tribune*. *Garden and Forest* offered readers the carrot of soothing horticultural pieces along with the stick of stern calls to what was at first called "forest-conservancy," an uneasy combination, as it addressed different audiences in different tones. But it well mirrored Sargent's own twin priorities of both studying and saving trees. "In no other civilized nation of the world are forests so recklessly managed," the magazine declared in 1888. "As a consequence of this wanton and hideous waste of our national resources, millions of our people will be compelled to live on a lower plane of civilization."¹³

Sargent was a practical man. Within the Arnold Arboretum, his

absolute domain, he could make and remake his environment, moving plants and people around as he wished. He took definite steps; he expected tangible results. Accordingly, in January 1889 he announced a three-part program in *Garden and Forest* for rescuing the beleaguered forests on the public lands of the West: withdrawal of all such lands from sale pending more study; protection of those lands by the United States Army from further unlawful pillaging by settlers and railroad and mining companies; and appointment of a federal commission of experts (like himself) to examine the public forests and recommend steps for their preservation and management, including a government-trained corps of professional foresters. Sargent's grand design was soon endorsed by the AFA and many newspapers around the country. Again, however, this was just talk. As a shrewd *Garden and Forest* editorial pointed out in October 1889, the best friends of forests and forestry lived far from the western lands, had no driving selfish stake in the matter, and operated only from tree-love and principle: "This interest may be a sentimental one, but it is none the less real." Against them were men who lived near and from the forests — lumbermen, stockmen, hunters, miners, all "despoiling what others would preserve" — pushed by the sharp, hardheaded goad of threatened livelihoods and profits. "These various interests are well organized; and the men who live on this accumulated wealth of the nation can afford to pay handsomely to preserve government indifference."¹⁴

Given such political and economic realities, parts of Sargent's program were carried out by subterfuge and presidential whim, not by the open democratic process so vulnerable to rich, self-interested lobbyists. The first national forests were authorized by an obscure amendment to a general land law that Congress passed unnoticed in March 1891; the amendment allowed the president to create "forest reserves" by withdrawing federal land from the public domain. Without needing congressional approval or the support of public opinion, President Benjamin Harrison — responding to discreet lobbying by Sargent and a few others — in two years established 15 reserves, a total of about 13 million acres. His successor, Grover Cleveland, added 7 million more acres by March 1896. As commanders-in-chief, presidents could simply order the army into guard duty on the new reserves; Congress had no power to object to the policy. As for the proposed forest commission, Sargent and his cohorts — notably Robert Underwood Johnson, an

editor of the influential *Century* magazine — at first approached Congress, were rejected, and so instead persuaded the National Academy of Sciences to authorize the scheme at the request of a friendly secretary of the interior. With the Forest Commission, which also came to be known as the Sargent Commission, already under way they could then extract a congressional appropriation of \$25,000 to fund it in 1896.¹⁵

For Sargent these developments played out between the poles of his new friendships with John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. These two men embodied the tension in Thoreau: nature for itself versus nature for humans. After working with Sargent for a few years, Muir and Pinchot split, bitterly, and came to define a philosophical schism within conservation that has persisted ever since. Muir, the Scotch-born, California-based naturalist and writer, helped found the Sierra Club in 1892 and served as its president for the rest of his life. His odd alliance with Sargent united quite different personalities: Muir, full of jest and whimsy, poetic and darting; Sargent, growling and irascible, always intent on his work to the exclusion of anything else. Hiking through a forest wilderness together, Sargent would barge ahead quickly, unswervingly, to collect ever more specimens, while Muir liked to saunter along, taking time to savor the rocks and flowers. They found common ground only in their love for trees. Sargent also knew that Muir, with his lyrical literary gifts, could reach and move audiences that were beyond his own more sober style. “Unlike you, I am not a poet,” Sargent once told him, “and have to stick to dry and uninteresting facts displayed in uninteresting language which I cannot believe any one cares to read. You know how to do the trick and I don’t, and that is the difference between us.”¹⁶

Gifford Pinchot was the first American-born forester with a background of professional training in Europe. (His father, the owner of large forests in eastern Pennsylvania and a former vice president of the American Forestry Association, had suggested such work to his son.) Sargent, drawn to the young man’s eagerness and personal qualities, provided crucial mentoring for his budding career. From 1890 to 1896, *Garden and Forest* ran 11 articles by Pinchot — among his first important publications — on forestry practices in Europe and the need for forestry training and forest protection in America. The magazine also praised Pinchot’s forestry work on the Vanderbilt-owned Biltmore estate in North Carolina. Sargent gave Pinchot another major break in

national forestry circles by adding him to the six-man Forest Commission, though Pinchot was much the youngest and least established of the group and the only nonmember of the National Academy of Sciences.¹⁷

The members of the commission all set forth in the summer of 1896 on a fact-gathering tour of the West, with Muir along in an ex-officio capacity. For months they examined forests along the northern Rockies to Washington, then down the coast, east to Arizona, and back up to Colorado, tolerating unpredictable transportation and lodgings. "I enjoyed Sargent ever and ever so much," Muir reported to Underwood Johnson, "— the only one of the Com. that knew and loved trees as I love them." Sargent wrote Muir, "It was the best trip I have ever made, and the pleasure and profit I got out of it was largely due to you." In drafting its report, however, the commission split into hard factions. The Sargent-Muir majority endorsed army patrols in the reserves and a total ban on outside commercial uses. Pinchot and another commissioner preferred regulated commercial use and the creation of a civilian, professional forest service. Sargent won on most points, though the final report did allow for some lumbering and mineral exploration. In February 1897, in the last days of his administration (thereby evading the lobby-driven political consequences), President Cleveland approved the Sargent Commission's request for 13 new reserves of 21.4 million acres. Sargent, it seemed, had carried the day.¹⁸

The ensuing political storm blew Sargent out of forestry work and started Pinchot on his ascent within the federal bureaucracy. Congress and the new administration of William McKinley suspended all but two of Cleveland's reserves and opened the existing reserves to mining and grazing — "so that the mining corporations can lay in a good supply of stolen timber," Sargent told Muir, "and squatters can acquire rights to what the mines do not want." Pinchot then enraged Sargent's faction by accepting appointment as a special agent of the Interior Department to make yet another study of the reserves, under the revised rules. "It was a great misfortune that he was a member of the commission," an ally wrote of Pinchot to Sargent. "The trouble is in his head and, it would appear from recent developments, in the lack of appreciation of proprieties usual among gentlemen." Sargent was humiliated. Having advanced Pinchot's career, he now felt betrayed by an ambitious, ungrateful former disciple who was helping dismantle his fondest

hopes and plans. "One feeble part of the Forestry Commission," Muir wrote in exasperation to Sargent, "has thus been given the work that had already most ably been done by the whole, without even mentioning what had been done. For a parallel to this in downright darkness and idiotic stupidity the records of civilization may be searched in vain."¹⁹

Sargent and his friends could only commiserate among themselves. A year later Pinchot was named head of the Agriculture Department's forestry division. As Pinchot's career took off, Sargent withdrew in muttering defeat. At the end of 1897, following the death of his editor, William Stiles, Sargent stopped publishing *Garden and Forest* after 10 insolvent years. "It is useless," Sargent concluded, "to expend more time and money on a publication which cannot be made financially successful." The Pinchot version of forestry, with its emphasis on professional training and a more politically marketable, utilitarian, for-human-use approach, was taking over. Each new Pinchot success registered on Sargent like a kick in the face. "Clearly it is time to begin another crusade," Sargent wrote Muir early in 1899, trying to convince himself as well, "but who has the time and strength to do it and what good is coming out of it all? I confess I feel discouraged. . . . Of course Pinchot and his gang are largely responsible for this condition of things." The original forestry impulse, of dedicated amateurs working through voluntary organizations, was yielding to the Pinchot forestry of paid professionals in government bureaus.²⁰

Despite the ethical slips of his early career, Pinchot turned out to be an effective conservation publicist, advocate, and administrator. With the advent of his friend Theodore Roosevelt as president in 1901, Pinchot became a favored member of the so-called "tennis cabinet" grouped around TR, an inner circle that engaged in vigorous manly exercise while discussing any topic on the boss's mind. As the most prominent conservationist in America, Pinchot made forestry seem practical, carefully limited, a matter of sensible efficiency and good political tactics. "We understand now that Forestry is a business," he told the annual meeting of the National Wholesale Lumber Dealers Association in 1903. "It is all based on the primary question, Will it pay? . . . If a forest is of no use, then it is useless." (That is, useless unless reduced to human purposes.) In 1905, Pinchot, with Roosevelt's support, was mainly responsible for creating the U.S. Forest Service

within the Agriculture Department. As its founding chief forester, he ran his agency along standards of honesty and professionalism that lasted for years after his departure. Ever since then, his version of conservation and its origins has dominated most historical accounts, to the point that to most historians, “forestry” and “conservation” and “Pinchot” have become virtually interchangeable terms.²¹

For the remaining quarter century of his life, the vanquished Sargent played no significant part in national forestry matters. He finished compiling his sequoia-sized magnum opus, *The Silva of North America*, in 14 substantial volumes, and his enthusiasm for collecting botanical specimens remained undiminished. But his conservation work was over — and not only because of Pinchot’s triumphs. Sargent’s retreat was so sudden and total, such an abrupt break from the ferocious, effective activity of earlier years, that it demands comment. Safe within his arboretum, Sargent was an absolute monarch who permitted no argument and little discussion. But the more complicated outside world punished such rigidity. Even among his closest friends, Sargent remained imperiously difficult, selfishly fixed on his own purposes. In 1903, on a botanizing world tour with Muir, he grew impatient when Muir contracted ptomaine poisoning in Manchuria. “He never seemed to think of me sick or well or of my studies,” Muir confided to his journal, “only of his own until he feared I might die on his hands and thus bother him. He was planning another botanical trip.”²² In the same spirit, Sargent could only participate in forestry as a dominant player. After the advent of Pinchot, wounded by his betrayal and refusing to share any power or responsibility, Sargent simply picked up his marbles and went home.

APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

Over the course of the twentieth century, the history of conservation has become more a record of organizations and bureaucracies than of individuals. Massachusetts contributed two bellwether groups, the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Massachusetts Audubon Society, which helped define the voluntary-organization sector of forest conservation on a national level. In counterpoint to the growing professionalization of forestry at the turn of the century, the older amateur roles still persisted in private groups outside government. The amateurs usually

championed “preservationist” conservation to protect nature more absolutely from human damage and intrusion. Countering their utilitarian colleagues, they argued that nature had aesthetic and recreational as well as economic uses, indeed had uses beyond human purposes. The amateurs by definition did not make their livings as conservationists and thus were free to take controversial positions unrelated to salary or career matters; by the same token, however, they often lacked the technical knowledge and staying power of the professionals. Conservation as a livelihood generally extracted more sustained effort than it did as a hobby. All through this century, the amateurs and professionals have pursued common conservation goals, with some mutual suspicion, yet together achieving what neither camp could have accomplished alone.

The Appalachian Mountain Club, the first permanent organization of hikers and mountaineers in the United States, was founded in Boston in January 1876. Most of its organizers were college professors — a physicist, an astronomer, life scientists, geologists, civil engineers — whose indoor work pushed them outside to pursue recreation and natural beauty. “The study of natural science inevitably led man face to face with nature,” said Charles E. Fay, an early AMC leader, in 1879. “Our Club stands as perhaps the sole representative on this continent of the interests of aesthetics as related to the realm of science.” As time passed, the AMC became more aesthetic — in the broadest sense — and less scientific, more inclined to enjoy mountains and forests than study them. Enjoyment then implied protection: as early as 1879, a committee was appointed to help preserve “natural scenery” from encroaching progress. “The work of our Club is to a certain extent play-work, yet to a certain extent serious,” an officer said in marking the AMC’s tenth anniversary. “We are not bound down by the considerations of market values.” Not a large organization, with average meeting attendance of about a hundred people, the AMC wielded influence beyond its numbers because its membership included prominent Bostonians of the day: John Greenleaf Whittier, Alice Stone Blackwell, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Lucy Larcom, Lincoln Filene, Edwin Markham, Percival Lowell, and many others. Along with its blend of literally high purpose, scientific inquiry, and social contacts, the club tapped into the waning reform impulse that had so animated Boston for most of the nineteenth century. “It seems to me,” said Higginson as

president in 1885, "that if anywhere there is a universe in need of administration, it might well be turned over to the Appalachian Mountain Club." The idea was then dispersed beyond Massachusetts. In 1892 the AMC served as the organizational model for launching the Sierra Club in California, with John Muir as its focus and best recruiting device.²³

Charles Eliot, a landscape architect and the son of Harvard's legendary president of the same name, joined the AMC in 1887. As head of the club's Topography Committee in 1890, he pushed the organization toward a novel idea: to own and protect patches of wild land and forest. "Opportunities for beholding the beauty of Nature are of great importance to the health and happiness of crowded populations," Eliot declared. "These opportunities are rapidly vanishing." With AMC help, Eliot first established a newly incorporated private group, the Trustees of Public Reservations. Then in 1894, in what the club's journal, *Appalachia*, called "the most important step since its organization in 1876," the AMC obtained from the state legislature the right to hold, tax-free, mountain and forest properties. Within a decade this concept had spread to private and public bodies in New Hampshire, New York, Maine, and Rhode Island, and onward from there. The first AMC acquisition, the Snyder Brook Reservation in New Hampshire, was bought in 1895 to save 36 acres of ancient White Mountain forest from logging. The Parsons Reservation (1897) protected 40 acres of Massachusetts mountain land, largely wooded, on Mount Grace in Warwick. The 10-acre Carlisle Pines Reservation in Massachusetts, acquired in 1902, included 100 great pines, up to 120 feet tall and 42 inches in diameter, believed to be the largest in southern New England. By 1913 the AMC held in trust 16 properties of 1 to 300 acres in three states.²⁴

These reservations reflected and provoked a growing club interest in forestry, further extending the AMC's purposes from science to beauty to calls for political action. In 1892 the group gave \$184 to assist lobbying efforts in New Hampshire toward preserving forests in the mountains and at the headwaters of principal rivers. A general AMC meeting in June 1893 heard a lecture on European forestry schools and techniques. Later that year, in discussing the New Hampshire forests, president Charles Fay called the club "an instrument of public good." This new emphasis continued through the decade. In 1899 a retiring club president addressed the question of "what we as Appalachians may

do for our country.” He blamed land abuse, flooding, and erosion on “indiscriminate” lumbering and “the influences of trusts for the cutting of timber and the manufacture of pulp and paper.” By degrees the club was joining the nascent conservation movement of the reform-minded Progressive Era. To codify this drift, in 1900 the AMC’s “Exploration” Committee was renamed “Exploration and Forestry,” with an expanding emphasis on the latter aspect.²⁵

Allen Chamberlain was the club’s most persistent advocate of forestry. A reporter for several Boston newspapers, in 1895 he switched to freelance work, specializing in historical, outdoors, and conservation subjects. His writing often appeared in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, the favorite newspaper of the old-stock Yankee class that sustained the AMC. From his base in the club, Chamberlain became a tireless, articulate exemplar of the dedicated amateur in conservation, donating his time to many good causes around the country. “As a common or garden citizen,” he wrote a Pennsylvania colleague in the fight to save Niagara Falls, “you will find me always ready to do what I can, and as a newspaper man I shall be glad to lend a hand.” In 1898 Chamberlain and Joseph S. Nowell, another AMC leader, started the Massachusetts Forestry Association to lobby for forest legislation and better forestry practices on private land, especially by the state’s farmers. This organization helped establish a state fire warden law, the office of state forester, and state forests and town forests; on a federal level, it worked hard for a decade to pass the Weeks Act of 1911. Described by Chamberlain in teasing irony as “the mildest and the sanest piece of socialistic legislation that has been drafted in a long time,” the Weeks Act authorized designation of the White Mountain National Forest and other such forests in the East for the overt purpose of protecting the region’s headwaters. (Later on the MFA’s name was changed to the Massachusetts Forest and Park Association.)²⁶

Within the AMC, which had larger and more diffuse purposes, Chamberlain kept urging the need for prudent forestry. As head of the Exploration and Forestry Committee in 1902, he assured members that he favored no limits on legitimate timber cutting. “A proper use of the forests is wholly desirable, and will tend to their perpetuation,” he wrote in *Appalachia*. “It is to the ruthless waste of material, and to the stripping of the timber from those lands which are of little value for anything but forest growth, that we should stoutly object.” Pointedly

doing as well as talking, club members demonstrated good forestry practices on the AMC holdings. In 1905 a fire belt 20 feet wide was created around the border of the Carlisle Pines Reservation, and hardwoods and the smaller undergrowth were thinned in favor of young pines. On the Rhododendron Reservation in Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire — a stand of 300 acres donated in 1902 to save an enclosed 12-acre natural bed of rhododendrons, the largest in the area, from logging — club volunteers toiled to remove great heaps of slash, a fire hazard left behind by old logging operations. As Chamberlain reported in 1908, the worst five acres of slash were horse-hauled into 47 piles for burning, and further reductions were planned. All this for rhododendrons: the AMC, like other amateurs in forest conservation, still insisted on aesthetics. "Our friends the conservationists, that is the professionals, are exceeding loath to recognize this point of view," Chamberlain noted in 1909. "Nothing short of a wide public sentiment will ever bring them round, I fear."²⁷

MASSACHUSETTS AUDUBON SOCIETY

The women of Massachusetts Audubon never lost sight of such aesthetic aspects. Their group, founded in 1896, was the first of the state Audubon societies and led within a decade to dozens of others and to an umbrella national organization based in New York. The Audubon movement became one of the most successful and durable players in national conservation affairs. Massachusetts Audubon, the key to the whole structure, always remained among the largest and most activist of the state groups, essentially free of commercial corruptions and true to the vision of its founders of protecting birds and their habitats. Bird protection thus eventually became part of the larger struggle for forest conservation.

The two key founders, Harriet Lawrence Hemenway and Minna B. Hall, came from long, eminent traditions of patrician New England reform. Hemenway's father, Amos A. Lawrence of the wealthy Boston textile family, had been a militant abolitionist who supplied guns and money to John Brown. He also founded two colleges and supported black education and political rights after the Civil War; his instincts for philanthropy and good works were passed on to his daughter. Harriet and her cousin Minna Hall grew up on the family's country estate in the



Figure 7.2. Turn-of-the-century editorial cartoon reflecting the growing public opposition to commercial clear-cutting. These attitudes helped persuade the National Academy of Sciences in 1895 to create the National Forest (Sargent) Commission, the precursor of the system of national forest reserves and the U.S. Forest Service. Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management.

then-rural Longwood area of Brookline, near the corner of Beacon and Essex streets. Harriet's first memories of birds — a childhood imprinting typical for most bird-lovers — were the sounds and sights of many orioles nesting high in the trees around the house each spring, and flocks of bluebirds among the apple blossoms in the orchard. The nearby land offered woods, meadows, and a pond, all teeming with plants and wild creatures. Children would gather collections of birds' eggs, although — Hemenway later insisted — they would take only two

from a clutch, leaving the rest, and then exhibit the eggs in open little boxes covered with transparent muslin. Minna Hall, who lived across the street, never married; for her entire life she kept as her main residence the house in which she was born, eventually turning the grounds into a private bird sanctuary with houses and baths (and cats prohibited). In 1896 both women were in their late thirties, with time and money on their hands, and prodded by their Brahmin consciences to contribute to society.²⁸

High fashion brought them to bird protection. The smartest women's hats of the day were lavishly adorned with bird feathers, sometimes with entire stuffed birds, uniting the trades of millinery and taxidermy. By one estimate in the mid-1890s, 5 million American birds of about 50 species were annually slaughtered to supply these needs of fashion. One day in January 1896 Hemenway read a gruesome article about the hunting of snowy egrets for their plumes in the Florida Everglades, with the untidy residue of gore and body parts and young birds left to starve in their nests. She told her cousin what she had read, and together they went through the rarefied *Boston Blue Book* to find sympathetic society women who might join them in foregoing feathers to save birds. "We then sent out circulars," Hall recalled, "asking the women to join a society for the protection of birds, especially the egret. Some women joined, and some who preferred to wear the feathers would not join." They enlisted William Brewster of Cambridge, a prominent ornithologist, to act as president, and held the first meeting of the Massachusetts Audubon Society at Hemenway's home on Clarendon Street in the Back Bay in February 1896. Charles Sprague Sargent agreed to be listed as one of the honorary vice-presidents on the letterhead.²⁹

It was logical that women should spearhead a crusade for birds. Men had already taken up the larger aspects of conservation: trees, mountains, rivers, fish and wildlife, big-game hunting in the West. Many of these elements included troublesome, long-term commercial implications that had to be addressed. The comparative backyard scale of birding, its relative freedom from commercial aspects, even the aesthetics of birdsong and the flash of color on the wing: all attracted women in the late 1800s. Male birders at that time collected specimens with shotguns; women preferred to use binoculars. Even before the Audubon groups were launched, some of the most respected and

widely read contemporary writers about birds were women such as Olive Thorne Miller, Florence Merriam Bailey, and Mabel Osgood Wright. In 1897 Bailey helped found the tenth Audubon group, in the District of Columbia, and for years she led its bird classes to instruct schoolteachers in basic ornithology. Wright helped start Connecticut Audubon in 1898 and served as its longtime president. As an editor of the national Audubon journal *Bird-Lore*, launched in 1899, she wrote up news of the multiplying state societies. "We are all in excellent fighting trim," she wrote an Audubon ally in New York in 1901. "Our Society is flourishing. . . . Connecticut may be slow about its laws but it's doing a deal of thinking." On the state level women dominated most of the early Audubon groups. In Massachusetts, William Brewster lent his name as the presidential figurehead while women such as Harriet E. Richards, secretary-treasurer for the first two decades, did most of the actual work.³⁰

To save bird populations, the Audubon groups at first focused on specific measures to limit hunting for sport or business. The first federal legislation, the Lacey Act of 1900, outlawed the interstate shipment of any birds killed in violation of state laws. Audubon members worked toward the necessary state legislation and prowled their local retail outlets, looking for illegal merchandise. Another federal law, passed in 1913, protected migratory birds across state lines, by empowering a bureau of the Agriculture Department to regulate hunting seasons, and safeguarded some species entirely.³¹ These steps limited the most immediate threats to birds. For the longer term, Audubon groups by degrees shifted to a more ecological, more complex, and more challenging emphasis on preserving bird habitats. Since that usually meant preserving trees as well, the Audubon movement came to include forest conservation among its purposes.

Massachusetts Audubon was incorporated in 1915, which gave it the right to receive and manage property. A year later a wealthy physician, George W. Field, offered the society his estate in Sharon as a bird sanctuary: 225 acres of meadows and forests, crosshatched with brooks and a pond. The society hired a warden to live on this first Moose Hill Bird Sanctuary to protect the land and distribute Audubon literature to the thousands of visitors it drew each year. A didactic "Nature Trail," with explanatory signs and tags, was added to the property in 1927, and conducted a walker along an encircling path for about a third of a mile.

The tags identified trees, flowers, and shrubs, explaining that birds especially liked wild or rum cherries, that chipmunks lived in an old stone wall, hibernating through the winter and bearing four to six young in the late spring. A walker's attention was directed to the six kinds of oaks, four of hickories, and three of birches along the trail, with more information about each species as it was encountered. An enormous dead chestnut, brought down after more than a century by bark disease, still provided shelter for squirrels, nuthatches, and woodpeckers, along with many insects and fungus growths. Under a pitch pine, the detritus of chewed cones and tips of branches was explained as the work of the red squirrel, "tyrant of the forest."³²

Moose Hill and the other sanctuaries that followed it embodied the expanded purposes of Massachusetts Audubon, defined in 1931 as the protection of "useful or beautiful wild life." Those adjectives combined the ends of utilitarian and preservationist conservation. The stated definition of "wild life" was also revealing: "birds, beasts, forest, wild flowers."³³ Almost everything, that is, that lived in the woods. The original goal of bird protection and appreciation had broadened into more general conservation work. Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall stayed active in Massachusetts Audubon to the ends of their long lives, justifiably pleased with what they had started.

BENTON MACKAYE

From their neighboring bases in small-town Massachusetts, Benton MacKaye and William P. Wharton (the subject of the next section) played crucial roles in national forest conservation during the three decades from 1920 to 1950. They differed in their respective forest values and priorities, they belonged to separate wings of the conservation movement (MacKaye was an impoverished Democrat, Wharton a wealthy Republican), and they never worked together to any substantial degree. Yet they shared and were informed by common histories. After difficult, unstable early childhoods, both boys were brought to live in villages in northwestern Middlesex County. To both, the nearby enveloping forests opened and beckoned, offering a friendly, known context that stayed reliable, year to year, even after schools and maturity took them away for long intervals. Woodlands gave them the surest, steadiest touchstones they had yet known. No matter how far MacKaye and

Wharton later went, the Massachusetts forests still endured when they came home, reminding them of why they spent their lives in conservation. They knew viscerally what they so often preached: the restorative powers of the woods. Both men looked and behaved like ancient swamp Yankees, barked and rooted in the Massachusetts woods for generations. But they were in fact relative *nouveaux*, acting with the zeal of recent converts to save forests that had once — in a long, slow, barely perceptible process — saved them.

MacKaye (1879–1975) came from an artistic family, gifted and dreamy, ambitious but impractical. His father, Steele MacKaye, was a noted playwright-director-producer of the 1880s; as a young man Steele MacKaye had known Emerson and Thoreau, and a hint of the more feckless aspects of transcendentalism, of Brook Farm and Bronson Alcott, stayed with him. The family moved around chasing thespian success, pursued by bills and creditors. By the age of 10 Benton had lived in at least seven homes, from New Hampshire to the District of Columbia. The MacKays summered in Shirley Center, Massachusetts, a farming village of 71 people. This little time capsule, a stop on the railroad to Fitchburg but otherwise untouched by the nineteenth century, drew the boy into its steady simplicity: a few houses, a town hall, church, school, general store, and the surrounding forest. Benton and his young friends formed a secret Rambling Boys' Club "to give to the members," they explained, "an education of the lay of the land in which they live, also of other lands, taking in the Geography, Geology, Zoology, and Botany of them." After the death of his father in 1893, Benton, then 14, came to live year-round in Shirley Center with a sister and his Aunt Sadie. He became a Yankee by glad adoption, clicking into the unchanged folk rituals of small-town life, and gaining a surrogate father in a local farmer and political figure named Melvin Longley. MacKaye did chores on the Longley place and eventually was even allowed to drive the horse at haying time.³⁴

In his teens MacKaye explored the land within walking distance of home, a radius of about four miles, taking special pains to map the forest ("my first stunt in forestry"). From Mulpus Brook, where he had learned to swim and noted a kingfisher in flight, he ventured on to the Squannacook River and saw a swimming muskrat, and then to Hunting Hill, the junction of the brook and river. He kept careful notes on these "expeditions," the start of a lifelong habit of self-recording. After his

freshman year at Harvard he took his first real wilderness trip, into the southern edge of the White Mountains of New Hampshire. MacKaye and two companions waded the Swift River and struggled through a thicket of blowdown: "And it was hell. A scrambled mess of fallen broken trunks and boughs, a choking chaos impossible to describe." But he got through it and climbed Tremont Mountain, feeling at the summit his first mountaineer's weary satisfaction after a tough ascent.³⁵

A career in forestry naturally followed. After graduation from the Harvard Forest School in 1905, he spent a dozen years in and out of Gifford Pinchot's Forest Service, sharing in that agency's early missionary zeal of proclaiming and practicing utilitarian conservation. MacKaye's postings around the country — down to Kentucky, out to Minnesota and then Puget Sound, back to the bureaucracy of wartime Washington — broadened his grasp of forestry on a national level, especially issues of acquisition and cutover land colonization. This professional life did not preclude volunteer efforts for aesthetic conservation. (Trees were MacKaye's vocation and avocation.) In 1908 he surveyed the Appalachian Mountain Club's Rhododendron Reservation; Allen Chamberlain noted the AMC's gratitude to MacKaye, "who, although not a member of the Club, has given his time, energy, and professional skill entirely without compensation to aid us." Later, in Washington, he conducted Sunday hikes along the abandoned Chesapeake and Ohio Canal towpath out to Great Falls, with running commentary on the dangers posed by automobiles and timber barons.³⁶

In 1920 MacKaye quit government service and returned to Shirley Center for a long spell of freelance thinking and writing. In his early forties, he felt profoundly out of step with the main tendencies of his time. Though he called himself "an amphibian as between urban and rural life," most of modern industrial civilization offended him: its pace, noise, danger, clutter, waste, all in pursuit of trivial values of money and success, "an iron web of industry that threatens to strangle us." Spurning the popular culture of radio, movies, and screaming tabloids, he preferred folk music and dances he had first enjoyed as a boy in Shirley Center. "I would not 'go back' to the *old* school of color and melody," he made clear, "I would 'continue on' with the *eternal* school thereof — after its preposterous interruption by the machine-made forces of jazz and imbecility." Seeking a political alternative, he

had joined the Socialist party in 1920 and — along with some 920,000 others of his progressive generation — voted for the socialist Gene Debs for president that fall. But he knew that Marxists shared the same modernist superstitions as capitalists, envisioning an identical, starkly mechanical urban future. As an antimodernist, MacKaye took his political cues mainly from the pre-Marxian utopian socialisms, spiritual and hopeful, of nineteenth-century New England; but here again he found few sympathizers among his contemporaries.³⁷

MacKaye offered only fragments of these attitudes in his published writing. In print he dithered around — making his points with loose analogies, posing questions instead of answering them — and burying his arguments in thickets of soft verbiage that cried out for editing. By all accounts, he was more effective in person, impressing people with his vivid personality; widely if not deeply acquainted, he would bring diverse groups of his friends together and catalytically steer the conversation from gossip into serious matters. He carried himself like a stage Yankee: tall and lean, strong in the nose and mouth, smoking a pipe and spinning dry, pungent little homilies. Frugal and ascetic by taste or necessity, he kept his old house in Shirley Center free of electricity, indoor plumbing, and central heating. “He figures for me as Thoreau’s latest continuator,” his friend Lewis Mumford said later, “a Yankee of the Yankees, tart as a wild apple, sweet as a hickory nut.” His vaulting idealism was usually grounded and tempered by a hard New England skepticism.³⁸

MacKaye was always better at inspiration than execution. In the fall of 1921, in the unlikely venue of an architectural journal, he proposed a wild “Appalachian Trail” along the main divides and ridges of mountains from New England to Georgia. For a few years in the 1920s, MacKaye was intensely involved in a regional planning group with Mumford, Clarence Stein, and other American urban critics and architects inspired by the British visionaries Patrick Geddes and Ebenezer Howard. As an exercise in regional planning, the Appalachian Trail was only part of a larger MacKaye design for recreation camps, poised between rural and urban settings, which would replace “competition and mutual fleecing” with “cooperation and mutual helpfulness.” Arguing that the East, where most of the population lived, especially needed more camping sites, MacKaye envisioned a chain of camps connected by a walking trail and sustained by volunteer labor. For the

next few years MacKaye urged his idea on members of the Northeast's hiking community. As he explained in *Appalachia* in 1922, about one-third of the projected path already existed, mostly along AMC trails in New Hampshire and Forest Service trails through national forests of the South. The vast middle of the Appalachian Trail, through the most densely settled parts of the country, remained the knottiest problem.³⁹

MacKaye began to lose interest, but the scheme was revived after 1926 mainly through the dogged efforts of two indefatigable hikers, Arthur Perkins of Connecticut and Myron Avery of the District of Columbia. They pushed it along to eventual completion, shorn of the founder's utopian regional vision, while MacKaye remained involved (and critical) at a distance. "It is a real *trail* — a path and not a road," he told Avery's Potomac Appalachian Trail Club in 1930. "The foot replaces the wheel, the cabin replaces the hotel, the song replaces the radio, the campfire replaces the movie. It is the trail of the *new pioneer*, not the old pioneer." (Avery just wanted to finish the damn trail, even at the expense of its pure wildness.) "To know humanity we must know forest history," MacKaye insisted in *Scientific Monthly* in 1932. The Appalachian Trail, then two-thirds complete at 1,400 miles, offered vital lessons in geological processes and the mutual interactions of plants, animals, insects, and fishes. "The primeval forest is a balanced and independent society," so unlike human modernity, he concluded. "In unravelling the forest civilization we reveal the contrasts of our own." Or so MacKaye still hoped; yet most of the trail's actual builders and hikers probably just wanted to take a bracing walk in the woods. Motives aside, though, the completed path — declared the nation's first national scenic trail in 1968 — did preserve a precious green ribbon 2,100 miles long, and MacKaye deserves first credit.⁴⁰

The Appalachian Trail in turn helped spawn MacKaye's other major contribution to forest conservation, his cofounding of the Wilderness Society. Holding to his original vision of a truly wild trail, in the early 1930s MacKaye was appalled by suggestions for "skyline drives" and other motor-road intrusions into national parks and the Appalachian Trail. MacKaye found new allies in Robert Marshall, a young forester and mountaineer from New York who was endowed with great charm, energy, and personal wealth, and Harold Anderson of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club. "You and Bob Marshall have been preaching that those who love the primitive should get together and

give a united expression of their views,” Anderson wrote MacKaye in August 1934. “That is what I would like to get started. . . . The present craze is to motorize everything.”⁴¹

Marshall had met MacKaye in Washington during the Hundred Days of the New Deal; he was puzzled by him (“a grand fellow but very eccentric”) yet liked his commitment to wilderness. Marshall brought his own expansive range of contacts across the country, enlisting such notable forest conservationists as Aldo Leopold, Robert Sterling Yard, and Ernest Oberholtzer, and thus enlarged the small founders’ circle into a new national conservation group. After preliminary meetings they gathered in Washington in January 1935 and adopted a platform, drafted mainly by Marshall and MacKaye, which defined wilderness as “a human need rather than a luxury or plaything.” The leaders chose their associates in the Wilderness Society very carefully. “I have in mind a long list of people who should NOT be admitted. We want those who *already* think as we do; not those who have to be shown,” MacKaye emphasized. “There should be plenty of discussion and disagreement as to *how* and the *means* but none whatever as to ends.”⁴²

The society remained for years a small, tightly held oligarchy, sustained by Marshall’s money and the carefully shared values of its founders. MacKaye served as the first vice president and, from 1945 to 1950, as president; well into old age he helped shape its policies. The protracted battles of the 1950s over national parks and monuments took an enlarged Wilderness Society onto the national conservation stage. Formerly isolated by his peculiar ideas, MacKaye took legitimate pleasure in the Wilderness Society’s growing influence, which led finally to the landmark federal Wilderness Act of 1964.⁴³

WILLIAM P. WHARTON

A few miles northeast of Shirley Center, the town of Groton was home to William P. Wharton, a ubiquitous leader — one with exceptional range and persistence — in many private conservation groups. His contributions have largely been lost to history, even to specialists in conservation, because Wharton was so modest and self-effacing. Of slightly less than average size, quiet and reserved, he dressed and spoke plainly. He sat through meetings without saying much and so was easily underestimated. He worked quietly behind the scenes, in correspon-

dence and private discussions, never seeking credit — in fact, actively avoiding it. When the American Forestry Association gave him its Distinguished Service Award in 1955, Wharton sent somebody else to the ceremony to accept it. He seldom wrote for publication, even in the journals of the conservation groups he sustained so generously with his time and money. Twice married, he had no children, left behind no collection of personal papers, and, when he died, forgotten, at 96, after outliving his contemporaries, received few obituaries. During his lifetime conservation was professionalized and bureaucratized; Wharton remained a dedicated amateur in every sense of the word, and that also has contributed to his current obscurity.

Wharton (1880–1976) came from a daunting background of wealth and high achievement. His paternal grandfather, of the prominent Virginia branch of the large Wharton family, had married a Bostonian and thus became a Yankee by marriage. His father, William French Wharton, was graduated from Harvard and Harvard Law and then embarked on a sober career of Boston lawyering and public service. In 1877 he married well, to Fanny Pickman of Beverly, and their first child, William Pickman Wharton, was born in August 1880. But Fanny died two months later, apparently from complications of childbirth, and the motherless boy was raised by relatives and servants. He probably lived in the Beacon Street home of his paternal grandmother, along with his spinster Aunt Nancy and Uncle Teddy (who soon became the hopeless, wastrel husband of the writer Edith Wharton).⁴⁴

By the social conventions of his time and class, his father would have had little to do with his son's early childhood, and was quite busy anyway with his legal work and a rising political career that took him into the Boston Common Council, then to the state House of Representatives. Early in 1889 the father reached high federal office with appointment as an assistant secretary of state in the new presidency of Benjamin Harrison. His son, eight years old, went with him to Washington. The father remarried in 1891, to Susan Lay, the daughter of the American ambassador to Canada, in a private ceremony attended by seven ambassadors and two Supreme Court justices, among others. The family then welcomed two more children, born in 1892 and 1894. By his teens William P. Wharton had lost the mother he never knew; had grown up in one household only to be taken to another in a strange city far from familiar surroundings; had acquired a stepmother at age 10;

had spent 12 years as an only child and then quickly gained two siblings. Money and social status had not provided him a stable childhood.⁴⁵

In 1893 the family returned to Massachusetts and moved into a federalist mansion in Groton. The father commuted by train to his Boston law office while William was enrolled at the exclusive Groton prep school. After the upheavals and erratic schooling of his earlier life, he had to repeat his first year at Groton. Even the dullest Groton boys might still go on to Harvard, however. His college years passed with no great distinction. He then enrolled at Harvard Law School but left after one year. The young man still lacked a solid mooring. "I was one of those unfortunate fellows who didn't know what job they were cut out for," he wrote years later, "and just drifted along until something seemingly worthwhile turned up. A lover of the open spaces, I couldn't stand the idea of being shut up in city offices indefinitely, so took to the life in the open."⁴⁶

He went back to Groton, bought abandoned farmland and woodlots to grow trees, and became a gentleman farmer. Steadily adding to his land — which eventually exceeded 800 acres — walking his property each morning and soaking up the ongoing spectacle, he found in his fields and forests a permanent home. He planted white pine, then a small orchard. In 1912 he acquired Fiveoaks Farm, a spread of eighty acres, and ventured seriously into apples, dairy cattle, and hogs. Wharton's farming interests grew concurrently with his conservation work; again, Thoreau's tension between nature for humans and nature for itself. Travels along the Florida coast and to national parks of the West had sparked his concern for preserving wildlife and wild land. At home he banned hunting in his forest, protected birds, and deplored cats. He kept a shotgun to shoot red squirrels menacing bird nests. Once he found somebody hunting on his property, prosecuted the man, and then paid his fine. At Badacock Pond in Groton he planted wild rice for the ducks and built his beloved "shack," a small cedar-shingled cabin, where he would go to fish, think, and monitor his ongoing bird-banding project.⁴⁷

The growing farm finally threatened to monopolize his time; "this farming job," he lamented in 1920, "has so tied me to a cow's tail as to turn me into a hopeless stick-in-the-mud." But agricultural reversals, ill health, and the family trust funds that relieved him of having to earn a real living then released him to full-bore conservation work. "As a

farmer I haven't been much of a success," he reported with typical humility to his college classmates in 1928; but "my bird-banding hobby has proved a life-saver, and has given me many hours of pleasure and interest." He sold off his livestock and leased his orchard. Five years later, "Those wild life and forestry hobbies have practically become my occupation."⁴⁸

Transmuting hobbies into his lifework, he toiled for a dozen conservation groups at every level, from town to nation. He sat on the board of the Massachusetts Forest and Park Association for 59 years. On the national scene, he served most notably in three influential organizations: National Audubon, the National Parks Association, and the American Forestry Association. Birding had first drawn him to conservation, and it remained his most durable passion. Wherever he went, in any environment, he would notice the birds. Starting in 1915, he served continuously as an officer and board member of National Audubon for 28 years, traveling faithfully down to New York for regular meetings. He was also the organization's most generous financial angel. Like other enlightened birders of his time, he moved on from protecting birds to preserving habitats. "God gave us a heritage," he told a group of Massachusetts birders in 1932, "of woods and waters and great open spaces and wild life such as few peoples have been blessed with. What we have done and are doing to it, often unnecessarily, makes the true lover of nature shudder to behold it. Fortunately it is not too late to save considerable areas from the hand of the despoiler."⁴⁹

Wharton joined the National Parks Association upon its founding in 1919. For years he was one of its half dozen main supporters; after a crisis in 1935 Wharton stepped in, accepted the presidency, and became yet another group's principal source of income. He remained NPA president until 1953. The NPA guarded preservation practices in the national park system and urged the highest aesthetic standards in establishing new parks. At the same time — and with no sense of internal contradiction — Wharton was an influential director of the American Forestry Association, which had evolved into an adjunct of lumber industry trade groups; the AFA urged better private forestry practices with no government interference. To Wharton it simply depended on which trees were at issue, on which land. "Those things which on private lands and in national forests are essential material

resources, to be used wisely and with caution,” he explained in 1942, “in national parks acquire a sanctity comparable to great works of art. . . . People turn to the fundamental and immutable things to renew their courage and their hope. In the primeval parks and monuments these fundamental and immutable things can be found singularly unchanged.”⁵⁰

This catholicity was the most remarkable aspect of Wharton’s sustained conservation efforts. In the balkanized conservation movement of his time, specific groups mostly kept to their own purposes of forestry, wilderness, wildlife, or national parks. Few individuals had Wharton’s range because few as yet had fully heeded an ecological imperative: Aldo Leopold’s challenge to think at right angles to Darwin, to slice across the biotic pyramid and thus see many species in their complex, mysterious interdependence. As Wharton walked around his Groton woods, watching and listening, and then meditated at his shack, he intuited this broader perspective. It made him one of his era’s rare universal figures in conservation. “Whether man can adjust himself to [modern progress] in such a way as to keep his balance and his sense of values is a moot question,” Wharton wrote in 1953. “Often I wish that man’s brain could have directed his mental efforts into channels of deeper understanding of his proper place in a world where all life is worthy of consideration, and where the great gifts of the Creator should be used humbly for the good of all mankind.”⁵¹

Ceremonial citations like the American Forestry Association award to Wharton in 1955 often sound too fulsome and overstated to take literally. But this one seems hard earned and richly justified: “It would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a citizen living today who voluntarily has devoted so much of his personal time, energy, and means to conservation . . . as an outstanding example of a private citizen whose approach to conservation has been based solely on the rock of unselfish public interest. . . . No man has done more for conservation in his native state of Massachusetts. No man has done more in throwing full support to all phases of the movement nationally.”⁵² In honoring and keeping alive the older tradition of the dedicated amateur in conservation, Wharton provided a personal bridge between the voluntary origins of the movement and the explosion of citizen environmentalism after the 1960s.

FOREST CONSERVATION AND MASSACHUSETTS

A unique set of historical circumstances has combined to give Massachusetts special prominence in the invention of forest conservation: a large presence of distinguished colleges and experts, a tradition of nurturing and tolerating Thoreauvian eccentrics, a history of spawning new reform movements, and a responsible patrician class that felt obliged to give back some of its good fortune. Behind all these factors, linking them, was the land itself. The lush primeval forest passed through long cycles, of woods to pastures to croplands and — in the twentieth century — back to woods again. European immigrants and their progeny cut down the trees, used the land, then moved away and let some of the trees return. The residents of Massachusetts, one of the oldest settled states in the country, witnessed this process before most Americans did; so the notion of forest conservation came up sooner and more forcefully here. “Massachusetts is the state in which efforts to preserve forests and trees and to use them economically have probably been made since earlier times and with more consistency than in any other,” a national forestry journal noted in 1900. “Forest work can also be carried on more intensively there than in other states, and it is possible to give much more attention to aesthetic considerations.”⁵³

From the perspective of the 1990s, the state’s creative role in such matters appears to have been most significant before the midpoint of the twentieth century. But this is to some degree a problem of historical perception. In the early years, individuals stood out more because, with little established context, they were making things up as they went along. Pioneers are more visible when they are working virgin land. Once conservation acquired the critical mass of environmentalism after 1960, individuals tended to fade into a vast, anonymous structure of private organizations and government bureaucracies. Experts today often speak only to each other in esoteric jargons impenetrable to citizen outsiders. Contemporary innovators still no doubt live and work among us, but they’re harder to see now. The forest has come to obscure the trees.

Yet the “forest” remains the main point. The Massachusetts pioneers in forest conservation came in many forms: men and women, horticulturists, hikers, birders, hunters, professional foresters. Most

were old-stock Yankees of middle- or upper-class backgrounds. (As it happens, Thoreau, Sargent, MacKaye, and Wharton all graduated from Harvard College.) Challenged in the twentieth century by new ethnic diversities and the relative decline of their own cohort, in preserving local forests the Yankee conservationists were also, in a way, preserving themselves. Trees and Yankees were both clinging to an endangered present, and yearning for an older, perhaps better time. But on balance the conservationists' motives should not be made more complicated — or more selfish — than the historical record suggests. Beyond backward-yearning ethnic and class patterns, and of greater importance, were these conservationists' shared affinities for trees and woodlands, and their generally selfless concern to protect them. This story starts and ends in the woods.

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