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At the Creation: The National Forest Commission of 1896-97

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Among the central forces in the creation of the legislation necessary to establish federal forestry was the National Forest Commission. Its members included some of the leading conservationists of the 1890s, including Charles Sprague Sargent and Gifford Pinchot; John Muir was an unofficial member. Its final report advocated the establishment of a national forest system and served as the basis for the so-called Organic Act, which cleared the way for active management on federal forests and grasslands. Unlike the other articles, this one contains several excerpted documents interspersed with exposition.

AT THE CREATION

THE NATIONAL FOREST COMMISSION OF 1896–97

The year 2005 marked the centennial of the USDA Forest Service and of the national forests under its care. How did the agency come into being? One of the key, short-term sources was the National Forest Commission of 1896–97; its reports and findings—like the men that constituted its membership—

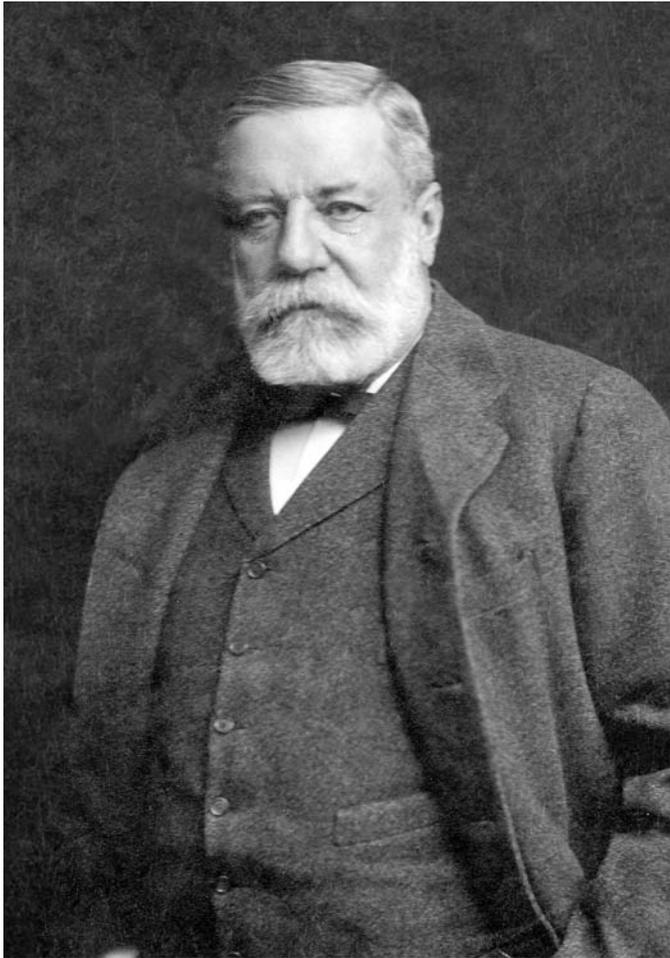
were of considerable significance in creating a strong federal role in forest-land management in the American West. The commission was itself an outgrowth of decades of argument and debate over the need for a federal bureau of forestry, and although such a body was created in the mid-1870s, it had but a tiny budget, a small and untrained staff, and no forests under its care; the Division of Forestry was located in the Department of Agriculture, while the nation's woodlands were then under the jurisdiction of the General Land Office in the Department of the Interior. Bringing together the office with the resource was one of the central concerns of forestry advocates who, by the mid-1890s, had succeeded in establishing the first national forest reserves, and were now lobbying Congress to establish a scientific panel or commission to make recommendations to the President of the United States about whether to maintain, reduce, or expand the size of the forest reserve system. As early as 1894, forester Gifford Pinchot had pushed for just such a forest commission, and the next year, Robert Underwood Johnson, as editor of the widely read *Century Magazine*, also proposed the formation of a committee to investigate the reserves, assess their

needs, and recommend how best to manage them. Even the 1895 *Report of the Secretary of the Interior* recommended a national forestry commission to study the wooded lands of the U.S.

The pressure intensified: that June, Charles Sprague Sargent, head of the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard, Wolcott Gibbs, president of the National Academy of Science (NAS), Pinchot, and William Stiles, editor of *Garden and Forest*, met in Brookline, Massachusetts, to lay out a plan to study the western timber lands under the aegis of NAS. Once formulated, they carried their plan to the Secretary of the Interior, Hoke Smith. On February 15, 1896, he asked Gibbs, in his capacity as president of NAS, to convene a group of forestry experts to study the forest reserve situation and to answer the following questions:

1. Is it desirable and practicable to preserve from fire and to maintain permanently as forest lands those portions of the public domain now bearing wood growth for the supply of timber?
2. How far does the influence of forest upon climate, soil, and water conditions make desirable a policy of forest conservation in regions where the public domain is principally situated?

BY GERALD W. WILLIAMS AND CHAR MILLER



Charles S. Sargent, long-time advocate of federal forestry and a national forest service, favored using the U.S. Army to populate a national forest service.

3. What specific legislation should be enacted to remedy the evils now confessedly existing?

To answer these and related queries, Gibbs selected a remarkable collection of individuals whose skills, experience, and expertise well-qualified them for the task at hand. Chair of the commission was Charles Sargent, who in addition to his arboretum work at Harvard was author of the 14-volume *The Sylva of the United States* (1891–1902) and publisher of the influential *Garden and Forest*. Joining him was General Henry L. Abbot, retired from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who, earlier in his career, had been involved with the U.S. Pacific Railroad surveys in the West in the 1850s; Alexander Agassiz, a curator at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, and son of the eminent scientist, Louis Agassiz; William H. Brewer, on the faculty at Yale University, and who doubled as state botanist for California and served on that state's Geological Survey; Arnold Hague, a distinguished geologist with the U.S. Geological Survey; Gifford Pinchot, who recently had studied forestry in Europe, was tapped to be the secretary of the commission on the strength of his organizational skills and consulting forestry experience; and Wolcott Gibbs was an ex-officio member of the commission.

The commission would produce many important documents, and its recommendations about the ultimate need for a full-fledged national forest system, and an agency to manage it, proved instru-

mental in the subsequent legislation that sanctioned forest management on public lands. The USDA Forest Service also owes its origins to the commission's work, not least because its founding chief, Gifford Pinchot, was an active member of its deliberations. But we can understand those consequences only in retrospect: the commission members could not know the future outcomes of their labors, and so their proposals and discussions are doubly important for they provide clues as to what they hoped would happen, what they thought might occur, an uncertainty and immediacy captured in the document below and additional discussions that follow it.

The document is an intriguing letter Arnold Hague and Gifford Pinchot sent to Gibbs on May 16, 1896. The two men had been appointed as a Special Committee a month earlier to make a preliminary report and recommendation to the commission. They updated Gibbs on their documentary research and the interviews they had conducted with legislators and scientists about existing and future forest reserves. They also outlined in some detail the conditions of the lands the commission would later evaluate, estimates of their extent and character, and identified who had petitioned for their inclusion in the forest reserves. Most striking is the letter's sketch of a plan for active federal management of the reserves that took into account the needs of local communities in which the forests were located, articulated some of the state and national politics that would shape any managerial activity, and raised questions about who should protect the forests—trained foresters holding civil service positions or the U.S. Army. Finally, Hague and Pinchot explored the economic prospects of large-scale forestry in the west, and the implications this had for the success of their plan. The letter begins on the following page.



Gifford Pinchot, the only forester on the National Forest Commission, served as the commission's secretary, a position that gave him a great deal of influence.

REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE¹

BY ARNOLD HAGUE AND GIFFORD PINCHOT, MAY 16, 1896

Gentlemen:

The committee appointed at the last regular meeting to gather information from the General Land Office, the Geological Survey, and other sources, and to prepare it for presentation to the Commission, begs leave to report as follows....

In connection with the papers loaned to the Commission by the President, it should be mentioned that a persistent attack on the Cascade Reserve by Senator [John H.] Mitchell² and others of the Oregon delegation in Congress, acting as the spokesmen of large sheep owners and others, makes it most necessary to ascertain the possibilities of the forest in this region for systematic management, and to formulate a plan for the utilization of the area as soon as possible. It seems probable that the mere publication of such a plan would be of great value in strengthening the resistance, already of very considerable force³, to this organized attack. As the result of a conversation with the President it may be stated that danger to the integrity of the Cascade reservation from executive action does not exist....

While recognizing that it is far too early to formulate a definite plan of forest management for the government, your Committee wishes to submit for your information the opinions expressed in personal interviews by President [Grover] Cleveland and others who have given the subject much attention. The definite plans proposed by Lt. Gen. [John] Schofield, who dictated and revised the statement given later on, and by Hon. E. A. Bowers, formerly Assistant Commissioner of the Land Office, are worthy of especial attention.

The President has expressed to a member of your Committee his feeling that it is of great importance that the report of the Commission, in so far as it deals with a plan of management for the forest lands of the Government, should be completed by November 1st of this year [1896], so that it may be possible for him to examine it, and refer to it in his annual message. He spoke with enthusiasm of the personnel of the Commission; and after saying that he desired to cooperate in its work, he made the following suggestions in answer to a request for his advice, and to specific questions:

Take up the organization of a forest service first, and then the question of more reserves. Let the plan be one that looks small, and at first costs little, and yet has in it the elements of growth; let it avoid points liable to attack by reaching its object, if possible, along other lines. To that end, the bills necessary to carry out the plan should be prepared in consultation with some one thoroughly familiar with the temper of Congress.

In answer to a question, the President said that the indications seemed to him to point to the use of the Army, and he spoke of the possibility of employing soldiers as guards in the summer as a substitute for the usual summer march. At the same time he emphasized as indispensable the employment of trained men for the technical work.

The following plan, proposed by General Schofield, seems the most practicable one which has brought to the attention of the Committee.

The general disposition of the War Department is not to seek any kind of duty outside of the military profession. While to the individual officer of the army the duty of guarding the reservations would be exceedingly pleasant, the principles upon which this disposition rests would make it unwise to burden the War Department permanently with the work of a forest service. No part of the line of the army should have any but military work as its permanent occupation.

The care of the forest reservations should be assigned to the head of one of the civil Departments of the Government. Officers of the army should then be detailed to act under his instructions, with sufficient force to execute their orders and with civil assistants expert in forestry to advise them in respect to their duties and the execution of their instructions. After the military officer detailed by the War Department for this duty has reported to the head of the civil Department responsible for it, he receives all his instructions directly from the head of this Department without reservation from the Secretary of War.

This disposition should be regarded as a temporary one. A permanent force in charge of the forests of the Government is most desirable, but this temporary arrangement might be allowed to continue for a considerable time [as was the case in the Army's protection of the National Parks]. Under the circumstances, and by a possible arrangement between the Secretary of War and the Secretary in charge of the forests, officers specifically fitted for the work might be assigned to this duty and troops of cavalry be employed in such a way as to give the forests many of the benefits of a permanent corps. In the event of the military being called away from forest work by war, Congress would probably make adequate provision for civilian administration, and would do it more readily than in time of peace.

The object of management under such an organization would not be primarily to produce revenue, but, while protecting the reservations against fire and depredations, by judicious cutting to improve the Government's property, enhance the value of the forest for the purposes for which it is reserved and furnish settlers and others with the timber they need.

The objection to civil employments already stated, the small number of officers to be employed in the forest service, and the over-crowded condition of the course of study at West Point, make it advisable to consider the addition of instruction in forestry at the Military Academy.

The relations of the Army officers with the better class of settlers have been very friendly. It is consequently to be expected that no serious local objections would be raised on the score of military control of the reservations. At the same time, since it would be difficult for officers to enforce the law against settlers within the reserves, it would be better not to consider opening any interior

part of them to entry. This objection would not apply to any portion along the border of timber reservations which might for agricultural purposes be opened to entry.

Mr. Edward A. Bowers, formerly Assistant Commissioner of the Land Office, and Secretary of the American Forestry Association, and long interested in this subject, gave the Committee, in conversation, the following outline, which he believes to be a practical and attainable scheme for the management of the forest lands of the Government, both reserved and unreserved.

The first step is the recognition that the timber on forest lands should be made to bring its market value by means of competitive bids. The ground itself should be retained and the timber cut off under regulations looking to the reproduction of the forest. There should be a size limit below which no timber should be cut. The revenue from all sales of timber should be devoted to the extension of the systems and to the exploitation of the reservations under really scientific forest treatment.

The sale of all Government timber for \$2.50 per acre is the evil most open to attack. When the Government timber brings its market value it will yield revenue to carry on the work of management.

The appropriation sought for the first two years should be small. The Forestry Division in the Department of Agriculture should be merged in a new Division in the General Land Office, to the use of which money now appropriated for protection against timber depredations, as well as that for the present Forestry Division, should be devoted. That is to say, the appropriation for the new Division should be asked for in lieu of the older ones, which would no longer be required. It might be possible to get \$100,000 a year for the forest work.

The head of the new division should be responsible in all of his work directly to the Secretary of the Interior, and in name only to the Commissioner of the Land Office. Once the timber matters were turned over to him he should deal with them independently, although it would be necessary for him to be known officially as a subordinate of the Commissioner. His records should form part of the general records of the Land Office. And the records of the latter should be accessible to him for the work of his Division.

The first steps in the care of the reservations should be protection against fires, to be carried out with the aid of the military.

A Superintendent, with assistants, should be appointed on each reservation, and at the same time an attempt should be made to introduce systematic and profitable forest management on some one reserve. That proposed by Lieut. [George P.] Ahern⁴, in Montana, so far as present information goes, is conspicuous among the areas which have been considered as well suited for this purpose. Immediate action on this reservation is urgent. Companies engaged in supplying the Anaconda and other large mines just south of the proposed reservation are now cutting very near its boundary. As soon as they have crossed the divide the opposition to the setting aside of the reservation, already very strong, will be much increased. Montana Senators now oppose it. Opposition at Columbia Falls and Kalispell is very strong. Senator [Thomas H.] Carter is believed to have done more than any one else to defer the action of the Secretary [Hoke Smith] on the papers, which are now before him.

The best plan which could be devised, in the opinion of Mr. Bowers, for the treatment of the public timber lands, reserved

and unreserved, may be outlined as follows; with the distinct understanding that it is far too good to be attainable. It contemplates a practically independent sub-division of the Land Office, with an Assistant Commissioner, independent of the Commissioner and responsible directly to the Secretary in the manner just described. The Division dealing with the public timber lands is now in the Land Office and that is therefore the natural place for the new work. Timber lands to be segregated from other lands, and reports of same to be made directly to the Secretary. The Assistant Commissioner [is] to bear some such title as "Director of Forests," and to be the head of the work; to hold office during good behavior; appointment strictly non-political. The clerks of the timber branch of the special service division of the Land Office, a specially educated force, should be turned over to the new Division, and a first rate lawyer should be attached to it with a title indicating his importance.

All lands fit for timber reservations should be withdrawn. A special fire force of a most elastic nature should be organized, capable of easy expansion and reduction, since for more than half the year there would be nothing to do in that line. Extra forest guards to be furnished by details of troops during the summer, who would take this service as a substitute for the usual summer marches. A protective force would be required to guard against [timber] theft in the localities where stealing is going on.

Public timber [is] to be open for the use of settlers under a license system with nominal charges. Under the license the settler [is] to have some responsibility regarding fire, etc., and to be given a direct interest as against large corporations. The local Superintendent [is] to have the right to issue licenses and to be required to do so on application. The present permit system is too complicated and slow.

Since, in the opinion of your Committee, a considerable portion of the information desired is of a technical forest character, it is regarded as essential that the employment of at least one assistant of suitable training be authorized, and as many others, from time to time, as the disposition of funds may justify.

The special forest information to be obtained for the report of the Commission should include, so far as possible, descriptions of the silvicultural and economic character of the forest in the several regions visited; its powers and rate of reproduction; the rate of growth of its various species; the productive power and commercial value of the forest; its adaptability for management, and the kind of management to be applied; the sources of demand, and the means of transportation; the danger and preventability of fires; the character of the forest floor and other matters pertaining to the water supply; and many other similar facts.

While it will be impossible to apply refined methods of management in these forests for many years to come, such data are needed for the discussion of even the broadest lines of policy, which often depends on matters of this nature. Further, this information will be indispensable when the Commission is called upon to justify its recommendations, and to answer the questions of what a forest service will do when it is constituted, and how the reserves are to be used. It appears to your Committee, furthermore, not only that information of the kind should properly find a place in the discussion of the general question by the Commission, but that the questions specifically submitted to the Academy by the Secretary cannot be answered in its absence. Moreover it is important that Members of Congress and others



Naturalist John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, joined the National Forest Commission for several weeks as it toured western forests. Charles Sargent encouraged Muir's break with Gifford Pinchot over forest policy.

who have much to do in carrying out the policy suggested should clearly understand its value from the economic state. A treatment from this point of view seems all-important if we wish to attain any practical result....

In this connection it may be added that the clause appropriating \$25,000 to be used by the Secretary of the Interior for the purposes of this Commission has passed both houses of Congress, and may be considered as practically safe, though the Civil Sundry bill has not yet been approved. The appropriation will become available July 1st, and no expenditures whatever made before that date can be made from these funds, under the present arrangement. Secretary Smith has offered, however, to present a bill in Congress next winter to allow him to repay whatever expenditures may be made by members of the Commission before July 1st from the unexpended balance of the appropriations. He said there would be no difficulty in having such a bill passed.

After careful consideration your Committee desires to bring the following questions before the Commission as the basis for a discussion on the work of the coming summer. These questions are so worded that an affirmative answer, in each case, is that which the information so far collected would seem, in the opinion of the Committee to indicate.

1. Shall the Commission proceed to a study on the ground of those forest regions which it shall deem of chief importance to its work, and of their approximate boundaries?
2. Shall it be regarded as a fundamental proposition that recommendations should be made which are not based on some personal examination by members of the Commission in the field, or upon personal investigation of documents and interviews with persons well informed upon the points at issue?
3. Shall the Commission endeavor to report to the Secretary of

the Interior by Nov. 1st, [18]96, the outline of a rational forest policy for the forested lands of the United States, in order that the Secretary may report it to the President and the latter to Congress?

4. Shall the Commission endeavor, in consultation with some one thoroughly familiar with the temper of Congress, as suggested by the President, to formulate a bill or series of bills embodying the main features of the policy which it believes should be adopted?
5. Shall the Commission consider and report upon the feasibility of selling all Government lands at their market value instead of at \$2.50 per acre?
6. Shall the Commission, in view of the reports on the area and the expressed desire of the Secretary, submit a special report upon the proposed Reservation in Montana, at once upon the completion of the examination?
7. Shall the areas in Montana, Idaho and Oregon be regarded as of special importance, and the examination of them be proceeded with as soon as practicable?

Finally, your Committee wishes to express its keen sense of the courtesy which has been encountered in the course of its investigation, and especially to recognize its obligations to the Director of the Geological Survey, Mr. [Frederick H.] Newell, Mr. [Walter] Weed and Mr. Griswold, of the Survey, Mr. Bowers, of the Treasury, Mr. Jones, of the General Land Office, and to Dr. [Charles Hart] Merriam and Mr. [Frederick V.] Coville, of the Department of Agriculture.

[signed]
Arnold Hague

[signed]
Gifford Pinchot

WORK OF THE FOREST COMMISSION

On June 11, 1896, the Congress authorized \$25,000 to cover expenses of the Forest Commission but its members served without compensation. The nation would get its money's worth, for the commissioners traveled throughout the west that summer and early fall, a quick but essential survey that allowed them to conduct on-site investigations of public forested lands, interview local citizens and power brokers, and test out their ideas for how to best regulate the nation's publicly owned resources. That said, the commission did not always travel together. Pinchot, in fact, got a several-week head start on the others when on June 1, 1896, he and his college friend, forester Henry Graves—who would become the second chief of the Forest Service in 1910—headed for the northern Rockies and then to Oregon's Cascades Mountains, where Graves' task was "to see parts of the Reserve we had missed, study the rate of growth of the Douglas fir, that most wonderful tree, and make himself familiar with the effect of sheep grazing on the forest," generating what Pinchot described as "original firsthand information."⁵

The rest of the commission, minus Gibbs and Agassiz, who never joined the tour, assembled in Chicago near the end of June. The main party, along with the renowned naturalist John Muir, arrived in Montana on July 16th. They spent several weeks traveling through the Black Hills, Yellowstone National Park, forest reserves in the northern Rockies, and the forest areas along the Great Northern (old Northern Pacific railroad grant land) line. They visited the upper Flathead River country, went down the Kootenai River, then on to Spokane, Washington.

Although not an official member of the commission, Muir was a much-sought-after interviewee, and while in Portland spoke to a reporter from the *Morning Oregonian* about the tour of western forests for an article published on July 26, 1896. Muir stated:

There has been a good deal of volunteer work done in the line of trying to preserve our forests. In fact, about all the work done in this line heretofore has been volunteer...Simply withdrawing timber lands from [homestead] entry is only the first step. Something must be done to preserve and perpetuate the forests, for the timber must ultimately be used. The forest must be able to yield a perennial supply of timber, without being destroyed or injuriously affecting the rainfall, thus securing all the benefits of a forest, and at the same time a good supply of timber. The establishment of national parks and [forest] reserves is only the beginning of the work necessary to secure these lands...I consider the appointment of this commission and its setting out to look personally into the condition of all forests left to the government as really the first step that has been taken toward placing the forestry question on a permanent working basis.

The article continued:

Mr. Muir is a lover of forests. He says the destruction of the forests by the sheepmen and lumbermen would be an inexpressible calamity, as those forests protect the sources of rivers. Every sawmill is a center of destruction, owing to the wasteful methods of lumbering practiced, by which the old trees and saplings alike are

destroyed. No civilized government under the sun leaves its forests to be destroyed without care, except the United States government. What the commission above spoken of says in regard to forests will doubtless have weight in Congress, and with the public. Said a friend of the members yesterday: "It will be no use for lumbermen or sheepmen to speak of the members as cranks, [Muir asserted,] who want to reserve all the forest lands in earth. They have the interests of the country at heart, and will advise for what they deem best, without fear or favor, and fully understanding what they are doing."

THE WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY RESERVES

Not all members of the Forest Commission got along, and they differed markedly on who they believed should manage the forest reserves, by what means and to what ends, differences that troubled their post-trip consultations and the crafting of the final report. Pinchot and Hague, for instance, argued that a civilian corps of well-trained foresters must be responsible for the management and regulation of the national forests. Chairman Sargent disagreed, and he and others pressed their case that the military should defend the reserves, and that the lands themselves not be managed for the resources that they contained. But this disagreement did not ultimately derail the development of the commission's report, though Pinchot and Hague threatened to write a minority report (a threat they did not carry out); but it delayed its submission, with their final recommendations reaching the president's desk just before he left office in 1897.

Where the commission achieved consensus was over the need to expand the number and size of forest reserves, swelling their extent by 21,279,840 acres. On the basis of a draft report, Interior Secretary David R. Francis wrote a letter on February 6, 1897, to President Grover Cleveland recommending that 13 forest reserves be established and suggesting that they be proclaimed on February 22, George Washington's birthday. President Cleveland agreed, and, just before he left office, announced the so-called "Washington's Birthday Reserves."⁶

The 21 million acres of new forest reserves, when combined with the existing 13 million acres already set aside, created a forest reserve area as large as the state of Illinois, a mark of the National Forestry Commission's ambitions and clout. But not all agreed with the president's actions, most notably the western states themselves. "News of the [Washington's Birthday] reserves, which came simultaneously with the report's recommendations that grazing be eliminated from the forests, caused predicted furor in the West," and an immediate demand that the new administration of William B. McKinley cancel Cleveland's actions. Most vociferous were the livestock interests who, according to historian William B. Rowley, did not "command broad based support outside their region. Rather, they spoke for a narrow, but highly organized user group whose activities inspired suspicion on the part of conservationists." But their "political power...compelled attention."⁷

Because President McKinley did not rescind Cleveland's proclamations, congressional delegations from Washington, Idaho,

Oregon, California, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado began working hard to defeat the Washington Birthday Reserves. Capturing the range of opposition was the American Forestry

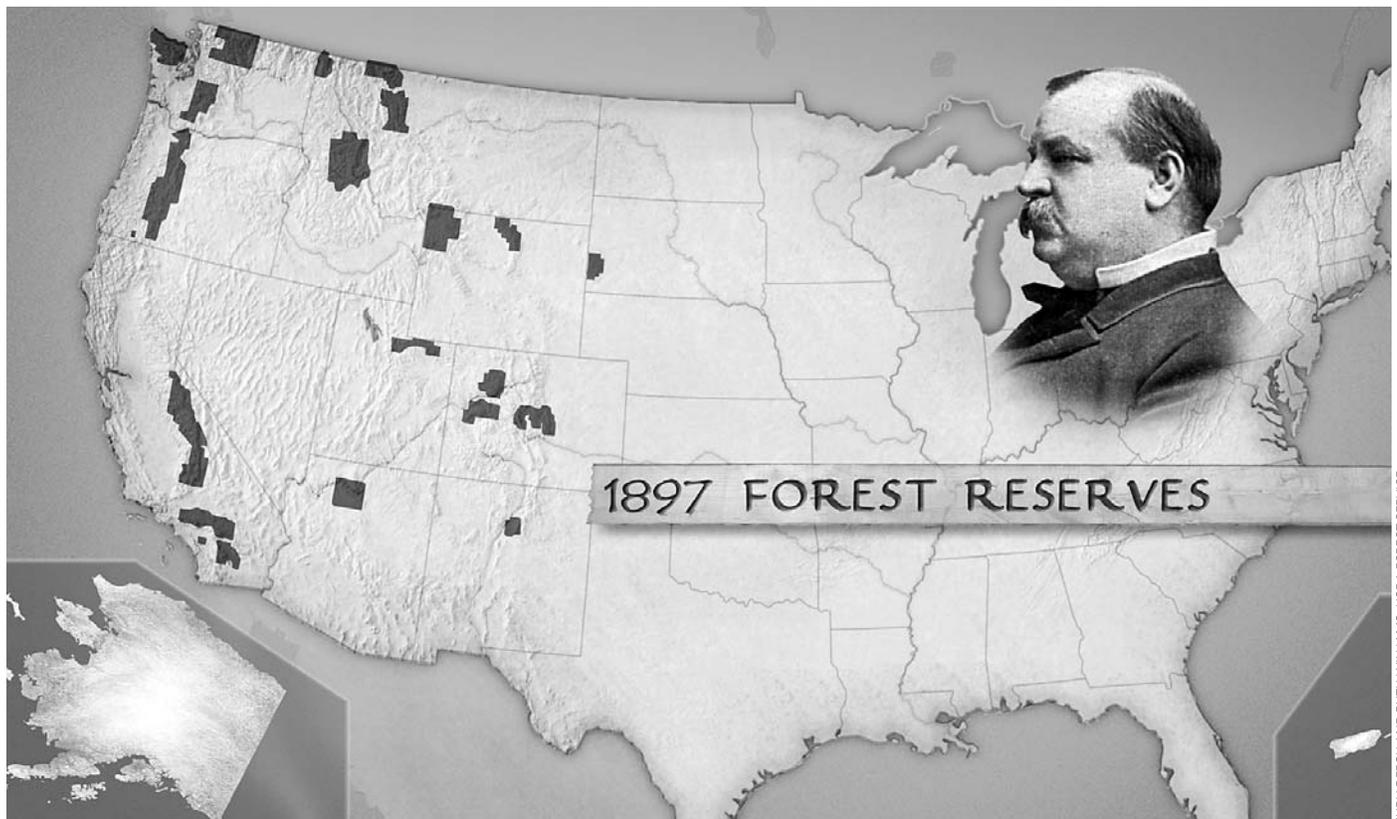
Association's publication *The Forester*, which in May 1898 summarized the sources for western anger:

(a) *Unnatural irritation at the idea that Eastern influences are*



JUDY DERSH AND RUTH WILLIAMS. USDA FOREST SERVICE.

The national forest reserves in 1893, when President Harrison (above) left office, and in 1898 (below), shortly after President Cleveland created the Washington Birthday Reserves. The new reserves increased the total from 13 million acres in 1893 to 34 million acres.



JUDY DERSH AND RUTH WILLIAMS. USDA FOREST SERVICE.

- presuming to assert themselves in regard to the Western states.
- (b) Natural irritation at the manner in which the reservations were made, without consultation with Western Representatives.
 - (c) Reasonable objection to the inclusion of agricultural lands within the bounds of the reservation.
 - (d) Unreasonable objection to the whole forest reservation idea as impeding licentious use of the public domain by everybody.⁸

Cleveland's actions did something that the National Forest Commission, on its own, could not: for the first time, historian Charles Wilkinson has argued, "federal forest issues [were brought] to the front and center in a complex milieu that included the perceived western birthright to plunder federal land and resources, the growing desire of western towns and cities for unspoiled watersheds for their water supplies, the need to preserve timber stands for future consumptive use to replace cutover stands in the Great Lake States, the forestry profession's belief in the value of professionally managed public forests, the need of individual settlers for timber, and the nuts and bolts desire to get some funding for [managing] the reserves."⁹

Who controlled the West? That question was at the heart of western opposition, many of whom recognized that the economic advantage they had enjoyed by free grazing and timber harvest was coming to an end, and although the "tradition" of unregulated access of western public lands was generally not more than ten or twenty years old, for them the idea that the federal government might close off the public domain was understandably unacceptable. Hoping to restrict or eliminate the federal government's newly asserted regulatory authority, as reflected in the Washington's Birthday Reserves, western lobbyists and legislators attached a rider to the Sundry Appropriations Act for 1898 that would have restored the entire forest reserve system to the public domain where the timber lands would have been available for patent under various homestead acts, the Timber and Stone Act, and several mining acts. Outgoing President Cleveland took up the challenge to his authority and responded in kind: on March 4, 1897, his last day in office, he pocket vetoed the appropriations bill, which meant that the government on July 1st would have no money to operate.

THE ORGANIC ACT OF 1897

The new president, William B. McKinley, could not have faced a more difficult situation, and did the only thing he could, immediately calling Congress into extra session. Although western livestock interests had been enraged by the new reserves, others in the region, and throughout the country, were in favor of Cleveland's actions. Members of the National Forest Commission were particularly public in their support, and by launching a media-savvy campaign they began to swing public opinion in favor of their position. The impact in Congress was critical: legislators struck out the original wording in the Cleveland-vetoed appropriations bill that would have restored all the forest reserves to the public domain. Moreover, during the special session, rep-

resentatives responded to intense lobbying from forestry advocates and added a number of new provisions to the second Sundry Bill that would profoundly influence the subsequent century of management of the nation's forest reserves.

The revised bill—also known as the Pettigrew Amendment—contained amendments to the Sundry Civil Appropriations Act of June 4, 1897, that suspended the Washington's Birthday Reserves for nine months until March 1, 1898, in all the affected states except California. "The suspension clause was a clever tactic to overcome western demands for total elimination [of the new forest reserves]," notes Harold K. Steen, and during that suspension many thousands of acres of heavily forested land, especially in Washington State, were transferred from public domain status to private ownership.¹⁰ The portion of the Sundry Appropriations Act dealing with the forest reserves ever since has been referred to as the legislative origins of the USDA Forest Service. The Organic Administrative Act (1897) stated:

No national forest shall be established, except to improve and protect the forest within the boundaries, or for the purpose of securing favorable conditions of water flows, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of citizens...

This one phrase established a system whereby new reserves could be created if they met three criteria: to protect and improve the forests, provide watershed protection, and insure timber production. The act used language that, for the first time, stipulated that management of these and other natural resources were essential elements of the forest reserve system. With the final passage of the 1897 Sundry Appropriations Act, the National Forest Commission's work was brought to completion.¹¹

Its influence continued to be felt in the coming years, as the conservation movement gained power, and its proponents jockeyed for position. Some of the personal tensions that had emerged on the trip—particularly between Charles Sargent and Gifford Pinchot—escalated in the ensuing years, permanently damaging their once-close relationship. A consequence of this falling out was that the friendship of John Muir and Pinchot, which had deepened during their time together on the tour, suffered as Sargent began to urge Muir to distance himself from the ambitious Pinchot and the federal conservationism he espoused; Muir had shared Pinchot's belief that the resources in the forests and grasslands should be utilized under strict management—and that such an economic policy was essential if Congress was going to accept the establishment of large-scale national forests—but within a couple of years, and at Sargent's urging, he began to advocate the preservation of these landscapes, not their use.¹²

As important as these internecine struggles were in framing subsequent debates among conservationists, and the broader public, over the creation and purpose of the forest reserves, perhaps the most important ramification of the National Forest Commission's deliberations was that they occurred at all. Since the publication of George Perkins Marsh's seminal work, *Man and Nature* (1864), which had done so much to make Americans aware of the human impact on the environment, advocates of a national policy to restrain rampant agricultural and industrial exploitation of resources had written for such publications as *Garden and Forest*, lobbied legislators individually, or banded together in voluntary organizations such as the American Forestry Association to plead their case. Their well-meaning efforts had

only modest success, as the Division of Forestry in the Department of Agriculture remained badly under-funded, a mark of how much more work would be required. From this history, the National Forest Commission offered a sharp break. Not only was its membership of unquestioned distinction and scientific achievement—even the youthful Pinchot could claim to be the nation’s first homegrown professional forester—but its final report, and the impact it had on popular discourse and political debate, was unequaled. It reflected in important ways the new-found role of scientific expertise to shape public policy and congressional action, a landmark achievement. □

Gerald W. Williams, former national historian for the Forest Service (1998–2005), rebuilt the national history program and wrote more than 75 books, chapters, and articles, as well as 100 historical background papers for the Forest Service. He was employed as a sociologist and social historian in the Pacific Northwest Region of the agency for 20 years before going to the national headquarters.

Char Miller is professor of history and director of urban studies at Trinity University; he is the author of Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism and editor or co-editor of numerous collections, including American Forests: Nature, Culture, and Politics.

NOTES

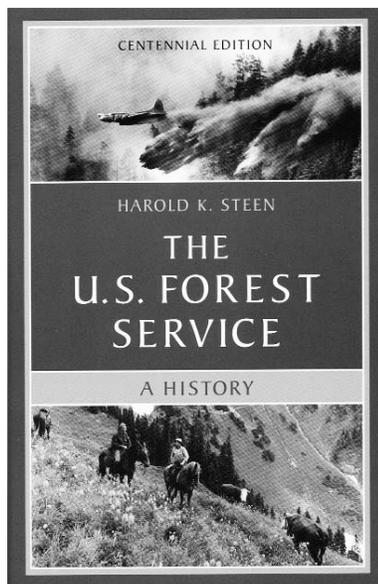
1. The original letter is located in the Gifford Pinchot Papers, Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
2. Mitchell would later be convicted of land fraud.
3. The “resistance” was led by the Oregon Alpine Club.
4. Ahern was in the 25th Infantry, and it was on this tour that he and Pinchot formed a life-long friendship.

5. Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, 4th. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1998), 102; Pinchot paid Graves’ expenses, as Congress had not authorized the commission to hire staff.
6. Pinchot submitted the final Forest Commission report on May 1, 1897, and it was printed by the Congress and the National Academy of Sciences soon thereafter. It proposed the creation of Mt. Rainier National Park in Washington State, a proposal that was finally acted on in 1899; called for making the Grand Canyon a national park, enacted in 1919; and advocated the creation of the following forest reserves, which were established on February 22, 1897:

San Jacinto	CA	737,280 acres
Stanislaus	CA	691,200 acres
Washington	WA	3,594,240 acres
Mt. Rainier	WA	1,267,200 acres
Olympic	WA	2,188,800 acres
Priest River	ID & WA	645,120 acres
Bitterroot	ID & MT	4,147,200 acres
Lewis & Clark	MT	2,926,080 acres
Flathead	MT	1,382,400 acres
Big Horn	WY	1,198,080 acres
Teton	WY	829,440 acres
Uintah	UT	705,120 acres
Black Hills	SD	967,680 acres

7. William B. Rowley, *U.S. Forest Service Grazing and Rangeland: A History* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1985), 24–27.
8. “War on the Forest Reservations,” *The Forester*, 4(5)(May 1898): 96.
9. Charles Wilkinson, *Crossing the Next Meridian: Land, Water, and the Future of the West*, (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1992), 123.
10. Harold K. Steen, *The U.S. Forest Service: A History*, Centennial Edition, (Durham, N.C. and Seattle: Forest History Society and University of Washington Press, 2004), 35.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2001), 125–144.

C E N T E N N I A L E D I T I O N



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Harold K. Steen is former president of the Forest History Society and currently teaches conservation history at New Mexico State University. Published jointly by the Forest History Society and the University of Washington Press, the book contains 432 pp., 34 photos, notes, bibliography and index.

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US Forest Service Centennial Congress

A Collective Commitment to Conservation

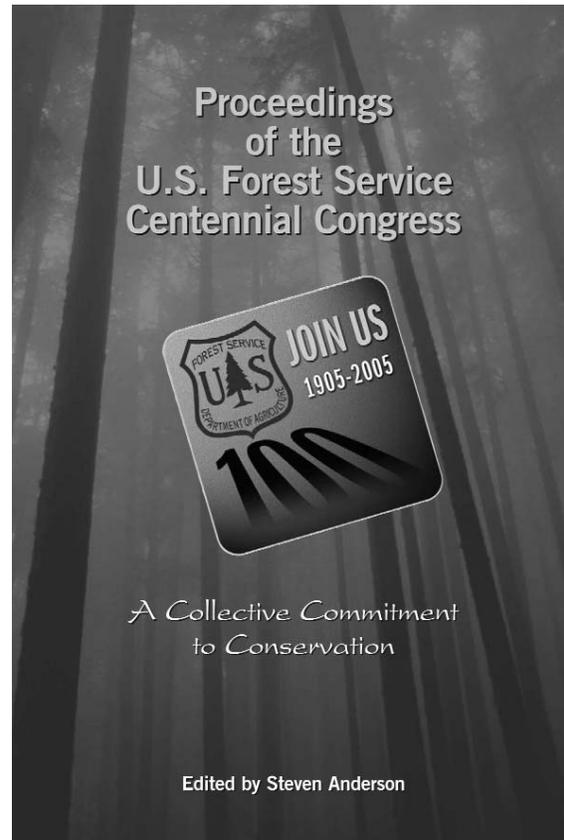
“This is a unique moment in time. This year, the Forest Service is a century old.... But this Centennial Congress is about more than just the Forest Service. What brings us together from so many different backgrounds is something we all have in common: our public spirit and our collective commitment to conservation. We sometimes have strong differences of opinion, but I see those differences as positive, partly because they reflect the same passionate commitment to conservation we all share. Every one of us here wants to do what’s right for the land and for the people we serve.”

This Centennial Congress is an opportunity for joint reflection on what that means. It’s an opportunity to recognize our successes, to celebrate our collective commitment to conservation, and to look to the challenges ahead. At this historic moment, I see a real opportunity to renew a national dialogue on the conservation idea.... Please take that opportunity and use it well.”

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