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**Rocking the Cradle:  
Gifford Pinchot and the Birth of American Forestry**

**Char Miller<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract.**--The celebration of scientific forestry's centennial in 1992 may be late. It was neither first introduced on George Vanderbilt's Biltmore estate in 1892, nor was its implementation there by Gifford Pinchot an unqualified success.

**Additional keywords:** History of forestry, centennial celebration, Deitrich Brandis, Bernhard Fernow, Frederick Law Olmsted.

Historians have an odd relationship with centennial celebrations. We love them, naturally, a rich appreciation that is easy enough to understand: they provide us with steady work. Indeed, all historians need to do is to figure out the centennial calendar--which shouldn't be that hard to do; we are masters of the backward glance, after all--begin our work earlier enough, and we can then deliver celebratory speeches until the millennium; that is, until the end of time (and history).

The current rage over Christopher Columbus is a case in point. What I find so fascinating about the media blitz is how long it has taken to unfold--now more than two years--and how much longer we have to go before it is over; remember, all this hoopla surrounds but the first of the Great Navigator's four voyages. My colleagues are going to be busy.

They aren't the only ones who will be hard at work, as anyone interested in forestry's influence upon the American landscape can attest. Commemorative moments highlighting the establishment of this august profession in the United States kicked off last year with the 100th anniversary of the National Forests, and before it is all over this centennial might well set a endurance record: there are events planned up to, if not beyond, the year 2005, which will mark the creation of the U. S. Forest Service itself. Imagine, fourteen years of non-stop celebrating. I can hardly wait.

But such unchecked frivolity should also give us pause. What exactly are we celebrating during a centennial? Does it become simply an emotional outpouring over some distant event we

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cannot possibly remember? A bit of historical play-acting that masks our inability to recognize the precise relationship between that past world and our own? Why is it important that we acknowledge Columbus' landing in the New World or the only slightly less seminal moment, Gifford Pinchot's arrival at Biltmore?

I won't speak to the former, but as to the latter, one answer is spelled out in the brochure that announced the annual meeting of the Appalachian Society of American Foresters. There we learn the dating of the centennial--"In February of 1892 the profession of forestry was born when Gifford Pinchot...was hired by George Vanderbilt to manage his newly acquired Biltmore estate nestled in the mountains of western North Carolina." The historical significance of this birth is not simply that Pinchot was here--that he even slept here--but that many "believe this event marked the first time private forest lands in America were placed under scientific management by trained foresters."

But what does the profession's birthday really have to do with its now, more aged self? Here, too, the brochure offers some guidance. "We, a new generation of foresters assemble to reflect and celebrate our proud root--to pay homage to the individuals who lit the torch of our profession, the torch we carry today." And it then closes with an evocative plea: "Foresters come home to Biltmore."

This imagery of "coming home" is as provocative as it is fascinating. It suggests, for instance, a direct link between foresters new and old, between the present, formidable position of contemporary professional forestry and that of its unheralded beginnings at the turn-of-the-century. Gifford Pinchot, in effect, is alive and well in Asheville. But if that is true, then what we are really dealing with is another kind of celebration, one more religious than historical. Biltmore is not just forestry's home, it is its shrine, and those who travelled to it for the profession's centennial embarked perhaps on a kind of pilgrimage.

Perhaps. But making obeisance to the first chief of the Forest Service will not take us very far in any serious effort to understand what exactly he sought to establish here 100 years ago. Nor will bows in his direction truly tell us how vital were his early efforts on behalf of the then-fledgling profession. To accomplish this will instead require the development of an alternate reading of the importance of the introduction of forestry at Biltmore, specifically of the role that Pinchot played in it, a reading that suggests his work might not have been as important as he later claimed.

The traditional version of how forestry came to Biltmore, and from there, to the United States writ large, is fairly straightforward, and relies heavily on Pinchot's version of events as depicted in his Biltmore Forest (1893a) and his

autobiography, Breaking New Ground (1947). That telling of the story was then fully delineated in a series of biographies about Pinchot (McGeary, 1960; Pinkett, 1970), and in many of the standard texts about the history of forestry in America (Clepper, 1971; Clark, 1984). Harold Pinkett (1970) argues, for instance, that Biltmore provided a "unique" opportunity for Pinchot to develop "a management plan without any precedent." His new standards of American forest management began with topographical surveys and selective cuttings, led to the establishment of the profitability of forestry, and branched off into later experiments with the natural reproduction of forests and other silvicultural techniques. In each of these developments, Pinchot was a central player, and each taught him important lessons about the future of professional forestry in the United States. About the significance of these lessons, most scholars conclude as did the forester himself in a letter to his valued mentor Sir Deitrich Brandis, the famed German forester who had transplanted European forestry methods to the Indian subcontinent. If the "Biltmore forest is a success," Pinchot (1892a) confided, "I need not fear to undertake the management of any piece of forest land that I have seen in the United States." Whether as prospect, or in retrospect, Pinchot's labors in Asheville laid the foundation for the creation of American forestry.

But was Biltmore as important as all that? Or to put it another way, were Pinchot's accomplishments his alone, as implied in his easy use of the first person singular in his letter to Brandis?

The historical record, I think, is a bit more complicated than that. There had been, after all, a number of other, often idiosyncratic attempts to introduce principles of forestry to the American landscape since the beginning of European colonial settlement (Steen, 1970). Moreover, those efforts had escalated in number and seriousness in the two decades immediately prior to the introduction of scientific forestry to the Biltmore environs. In Illinois, for instance, the owners of the hunting preserve known as Blooming Grove Park undertook the establishment of practical forestry on its grounds as early as the 1870s (Reiger, 1986). It was such pioneer efforts that led Pinchot's colleague and good friend Harry Graves (1947) to acknowledge that although he and Pinchot were "the first Americans to take up forestry as a profession...we often are given too much credit for initiating the national forestry movement. In point of fact the swift advance in forestry in the nineties...would not have been possible if there had not the background of activities by scientists, educators and other public spirited citizens over a period of 20 or 25 years before we came on the ground."

Pinchot was rarely, if ever, so generous, though he too knew how much his work depended on that of others. He knew because one of his predecessors would not let him forget it. Bernard E. Fernow, third head of the Division of Forestry in the Department of Agriculture, and one of the driving forces behind the American

Forestry Association, took great delight in reminding Pinchot of those who, including himself, had helped clear the trail that Pinchot ultimately would tramp down. A long-time advocate of the application of forestry principles to land management in this country, Fernow was one of Pinchot's favorite sparring partners; for most of their long and distinguished careers the two foresters denigrated one another's work and professional accomplishments. Indeed, their correspondence in the early 1890s established the ground rules for their longstanding feud, and the rules were simple: no holds barred. In the summer of 1893, for instance, Pinchot wrote to Fernow wondering if his work at Biltmore was unique (Miller, 1991). Fernow, who considered himself the younger man's mentor--a status Pinchot rejected--happily toyed with the young man's insecurities. Fernow (1893) conceded that Pinchot was innovative in his use of French and German forest management practices, practices he had absorbed while studying in Europe during the late 1880s. Pinchot, in short, could stake his claim.

But in the same letter Fernow undercut this concession by noting that he was nonetheless familiar with "several [earlier] attempts to thin out judiciously and advance the crop" in the United States, experiments that employed methodologies similar to Pinchot's. The unkindest cut of all then followed. Biltmore could not claim precedence, Fernow observed, for the "proposition and first steps taken towards bringing a large forest area under management belong historically...to the Adirondack League Club," an announcement designed to blunt some of Pinchot's quest for glory. The Club, he pointed out, which controlled thousands of mountainous acres in northern New York, had hired Fernow in the 1880s to develop a forest management plan for its wooded lands, which he had done, and which the organization was slowly putting into practice. Pinchot was not the first on the ground.

Imagine how happy Fernow would have been to learn that Pinchot wasn't the first on the ground at Biltmore, either; that this ambitious young man was neither the first to recognize the impact that forestry could have on the estate, nor the implications that this might have for the nation as a whole. The credit for these insights belong to Frederick Law Olmsted, the brilliant landscape architect, who had designed Central Park in New York City, was instrumental in developing the Chicago's World Fair, is credited with elevating his profession to professional, among a host of other accomplishments. One of these, of course, was that, in collaboration with architect Richard Morris Hunt, he helped design George W. Vanderbilt's Biltmore estate (Roper, 1973; Newton, 1971).

It was in the early stages of that work, in 1889, two years before Pinchot came to work in Asheville, that Olmsted persuaded George Vanderbilt to consider restoring the surrounding mountains and valleys through reforestation. This restoration would be, he confirmed, "far more interesting to a poetic temperament than any of those commonly considered appropriate to a country-seat life"

(Roper, 1973). Whatever Vanderbilt's temperament, Olmsted was convinced that such poetics would have an enduring, practical outcome as well. Introducing forestry to this vast domain would be of "inestimable service" to the United States, he advised Vanderbilt, an emblem of a new, more rational form of land management at a time better known for its unrestrained resource exploitation. Biltmore, despite its own excesses, would serve as an antidote to the Gilded Age (Roper, 1973).

That's hard to imagine, I know, but Olmsted's hopes for Biltmore's instructive qualities--what he called its "semi-public" potential--lay not in its ostentatious architecture, not in its "granite pile," but in its surrounding terrain (Roper, 1973; Newton, 1971). And of that there was a great deal: Vanderbilt's estate would eventually encompass more than 125,000 acres. In Olmsted's mind, these lands would serve as a beacon for the rest of the country. At "stake was nothing less grand than the American national landscape itself," argued historian Frederick Gutheim (1976), "to be inspired and taught by the Biltmore demonstration."

What underlay this demonstration was Olmsted's firm belief that human beings required an orderly landscape within which to live, even when they when they found themselves within a wild nature. Frankly, he was less interested in designing the naturalistic vistas in and around Vanderbilt's massive house than he was in extending the lines of a rational and perceptible order out onto the acres far distant from that imposing edifice. He thus urged his twenty-six year old employer to lay out only "a small park into which to look from your house...and make the rest a forest, improving the existing woods and planting the old fields" (Roper 1973). Vanderbilt essentially agreed with this plan, and Olmsted commenced his work with an extensive topographical survey of the estate's 5000 acres and an evaluation of the lands to be reforested. It was at this point that he suggested that Vanderbilt hire Gifford Pinchot to oversee the implementation of the Olmstedian landscape vision. In the end, it was the working out of this vision that has led one architectural historian to conclude that the establishment of forestry was "the most successful and significant of Olmsted's contribution's to Biltmore" (Gutheim, 1976).

That conclusion will no doubt baffle those for whom Biltmore stands as Pinchot's first triumph, for it runs against most secondary accounts about who stands at the origins of forestry at Biltmore, and in the United States. But a close examination of Pinchot's correspondence during this period explains why landscape historians argue as they do. Moreover, these letters--and there are hundreds of them--suggest something further: not only did Pinchot implement Olmsted's landscape design, and adopt many of its architectonic assumptions, but he did so because he really didn't know what else to do.

His confusion was understandable. He was, after all, quite

young, a mere 26 years old when he arrived in Biltmore. His youth was compounded by his professional inexperience. He had had but a sketchy undergraduate course in science at Yale, and had only a year and half of training in forestry in France before arriving in North Carolina (Pinchot, 1947). He soon recognized how insufficient was his scientific preparation. In a letter to his mentor Sir Deitrich Brandis, Pinchot confessed, "the time has come, as you foretold it would, when I begin to feel the scantiness of my preparation" (Pinchot, 1893b). To fill out his deficient scientific education, he read as widely as he could, and fired off correspondence across the Atlantic to his former forestry professors in France, to colleagues in Germany and Switzerland, and to sympathetic Americans, seeking information about silvicultural practices, as well as much needed support and encouragement. The latter was a great help, but his studies and correspondence actually deepened his frustrations. Most of the scientific texts as well as the foresters with whom he consulted were European in orientation. Their insights were thus of little help in deciphering the characteristics of the forests of the western North Carolina mountains in which he was supposed to practice his new craft. Pinchot was as green as they come.

If only the land itself had been as green, but its deforested condition contributed greatly to Pinchot's professional dilemmas. Vanderbilt's vast properties were "far from rich, with a disproportionate amount of young wood," he noted in Biltmore Forest (1893a). This condition clearly hindered his reclamation efforts. So bad was it that when Bernhard Fernow came to inspect Pinchot's work, he could not determine where the improvement cuttings had been made (Fernow, 1892). That was embarrassing, of course, but no less so was the fact that if Pinchot could not reclaim the land, then it would be all that much more difficult to turn a profit, thereby undermining his chance to demonstrate practical forestry's money-making capacity to a skeptical American audience. Ultimately, he would solve that conundrum by a bit of creative bookkeeping. He claimed, for example, to have made a profit after the first year at Biltmore (Pinchot, 1893a), but failed to include his own salary into the calculation of expenses, a failure that might have fooled the public but did not escape the sharp eyes of Fernow and Brandis. "You will remember...that I expressed my grave doubts as to your ability under the conditions then existing...to establish the profitableness of forestry," Fernow wrote after reviewing Pinchot's financial accounts. "I have seen no reason for changing my position in that respect and agreed with Mr. Brandis when he called the experiment "verfehlt" [a failure]--from that point of view (profitableness) only!" (Fernow, 1894).

It is no wonder that Biltmore challenged Pinchot's sense of professional success and maturation. One year after arriving in North Carolina, for instance, Pinchot acknowledged that he was "just a beginner," having "done little in the work of my profession" (Pinchot, 1893c). His was a becoming modesty that if not entirely accurate nonetheless captures the sense of

incompleteness that he felt about his work at Biltmore. He masked some of this when in the spring of 1894, he proclaimed Biltmore a success, left North Carolina to hang out his shingle as a "consulting forester" in New York City, laid plans for Vanderbilt to hire a full-time European-trained forester in his stead, so that he could pursue what he called "larger and more useful work" (Pinchot, 1894; McGeary, 1960).

About that, Pinchot was quite right. His work in subsequent years was as large and useful as he dreamed it would be. This was particularly true when, between 1900 and 1905, he helped legitimize the profession of forestry in one fell swoop. It was then that he helped establish its professional organization (the Society of American Foresters), created, underwrote and taught in one of its premiere graduate schools (the Yale School of Forestry), and, of course, oversaw the development of the United States Forest Service itself, serving as its first chief. Of such triumphs are great careers made.

Biltmore didn't exactly point the way to these triumphs, however, though Pinchot clearly learned a great deal from his years in this sylvan environment. It was, after all, during his many and extended hikes through the North Carolina mountains that he came to understand just how beautiful and complex American forests could be. No where in Europe had he encountered a forest such as the 20,000 acre area known as the Pink Beds, which he described as "a great bowl with mountains for the rim, and in the middle, in their seasons, the white and rosy blossoms of impenetrable thickets of Laurel and Rhododendron" (Pinchot, 1947). Neither had his studies abroad prepared him for the virgin forests of Appalachia in which frequently he would stumble upon a fallen tree, the dimensions of which were astounding, such as the Tulip whose stump suggested that it once measured perhaps "thirty-three feet in circumference, breast high, while it stood" (Pinchot, 1892b; Pinchot 1892c; Pinchot, 1892d). It was at such moments, at once humbling and exhilarating, that Pinchot first discovered both his profession's limitations and its prospects. Surely that's a discovery well worth a centennial celebration.

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