

OUR FORESTS AS OUR FOUNDATION THE HISTORY OF PENN'S WOODS

Wood has had a profound influence in our state's and nation's histories. Pennsylvania means "Penn's woods," named after the Quaker founder, William Penn. When the state was founded (1681), Penn's woods included more than 28 million acres of forest.

Early forests in Pennsylvania were a mix of softwoods and late-successional hardwoods such as beech, birch and hickory. But this mixture was altered as Native Americans and European settlers cleared forests for agriculture and other purposes. Large-scale commercial timber harvesting in the 1800s and early 1900s accelerated this trend and remade the forest landscape almost entirely.



For early settlers, wood was necessary for building, heating and furnishing homes. Later, wood was used commercially for mining timbers, shipbuilding, fuel, tools, and furniture and housing construction.

The development of wood by-products also spurred commercial timber harvesting. Tannin, extracted primarily from hemlock bark, was used to tan and soften leather and dye fabrics. Charcoal was used to fuel the iron furnaces in the 1700s and mid-1800s before coal was commercially available. Wood alcohol was the primary distillation product of the "chemical wood industry," which produced chemical compounds from wood combustion for a variety of uses.

By the early 1900s, most of Penn's woods had been cut over, leaving an estimated 35 percent to 45 percent of the state in forestland. Harvested areas also burned frequently due to the accumulation of dead vegetation in proximity to industrial sources of ignition, and the occurrence of lightning strikes.

From these profound changes to the forest, a conservation ethic emerged that viewed the forest as a renewable natural resource that could be managed sustainably for multiple uses and future generations. Key historical figures in this change were Joseph Trimble Rothrock, the first Pennsylvania Commissioner of Forestry (1895); and Gifford Pinchot, the first American-trained forester and chief of what is now the U.S. Forest Service, and a two-term governor in the 1920s and 1930s.

Founded in 1884, the Pennsylvania Forestry Association was the first state organization devoted to forest conservation. Later, Maurice Goddard, state Secretary of Forests & Waters (1955-1979), promoted multiple-use management of forest lands and created the Bureau of State Parks.

As industry attitudes, harvesting and processing techniques all improved, and public policy and attitudes changed -- the forest rebounded. Today, Pennsylvania's forests cover nearly 60 percent of the state and are mostly even-aged, having matured uniformly over the past 80 to 100 years. Cherry, oak, maple and other early-successional species -- which thrive in open areas with abundant sunlight -- dominate today's hardwood forests.