

# Biographical Portrait

## JOHN W. WEEKS

(1860–1926)

by Iris D. Baird

The Forest Reserve Act of 1891 empowered presidents to set aside federal public lands as forest reserves. The first president to really make use of it, Theodore Roosevelt, encountered stiff opposition from many westerners, who argued that the federal government had no business withholding public forestlands from private development or for aesthetics purposes. Conservationists wanting to preserve eastern forestlands had no federal land to set aside. Between 1900 and 1910, encouraged by conservation groups, federal legislators sponsored 40 bills authorizing the federal government to buy and preserve forested lands in the East as either national parks or national forests. Their opponents came from all regions of the country and offered objections that ranged from not wanting to spend money for scenery to questioning the constitutionality of such use of federal power. The chief obstructionist was Speaker of the House Joseph Cannon, who famously said, “Not one cent for scenery!”

How then did John Wingate Weeks, a fiscal and political conservative from Boston, end up with his name on a progressive law under which major federal expenditures would be made for land mostly in the South?

### THE MAKING OF THE MAN

The Weeks family came to the New Hampshire village of Lancaster, north of the White Mountains, in 1787 from the



*Although considered a reliable conservative Republican, John W. Weeks put forth several measures in Congress that were progressive, including the Weeks Act.*

southern part of the state. Like most early settlers, James Brackett Weeks, John’s grandfather, was a farmer, and like all the Weeks men, he took an active role in the organization and governance of his community.

John’s father, William Dennis Weeks, was also a farmer, and a businessman and public official as well. He held local and state offices and was appointed judge of

probate. A glimpse of his character emerges from an incident involving the Lancaster Starch Company, of which he was a leading investor. The company made starch from potatoes and bought only those of the highest quality for their higher starch content. After the starch mill burned in 1869, some investors quickly sold out to avoid being liable for losses to creditors. Weeks, considered by contemporaries to be one of the town’s most honorable men, believed “that in all business enterprises involving risks their creditors must not suffer by the failures of their ventures”; he suffered heavy losses trying to repay his creditors.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, William Weeks found himself in reduced circumstances and without funds to send John, who had received basic instruction in Lancaster’s one-room schoolhouse, to college. Thanks to the efforts of a local minister, John was offered an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy but hesitated out of concern that his father might not be able to spare him from the farm. After a family discussion, it was decided that John’s younger brother could do the labor.

At the academy, John Weeks was neither a star athlete nor a top student, though he held his own in both areas. What distinguished him was his general leadership qualities and his ability to make peace and resolve differences among his fellow classmates. They and academy offi-

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*Weeks's Mt. Prospect home in the White Mountains, seen here in an undated photo. When his children deeded the summit to the state in 1941, the deed of gift included a requirement that the estate be used for the practice and demonstration of forestry as a memorial to John Weeks.*

cialists regarded him as the “best balanced man” in his class.<sup>2</sup>

After graduation in 1881, he served as a midshipman on the U.S.S. *Richmond*, flagship of the Asiatic station, and cruised from Panama to Yokohama. Just two years after Weeks had become an officer, Congress authorized a reduction in the size of the navy, and he and the other youngest officers were honorably discharged. Nonetheless, Weeks remained a loyal supporter of the service. He wrote his class history and arranged for class reunions, and when the naval militia was organized, he was among the first to join. He was commander of the Massachusetts Naval Brigade until 1900.

In 1883, Weeks and a classmate went to Florida, which was then in the midst of a real estate and business boom. Making use of the surveying skills he had learned at the Naval Academy, he worked for the Orange County land office. Later he was land commissioner for the Florida Southern Railroad. While in Florida he met John Sinclair, a New Hampshire native who owned Florida orange groves and was involved with hotels up north. Weeks mar-

ried Sinclair's daughter Martha in 1885, and they moved back north soon thereafter.

Through his friendships with several New England businessmen, he was introduced to Henry Hornblower, who with his father had a brokerage house in Boston. In 1888, when the senior Hornblower decided to retire, Weeks was offered a partnership. At the time, the firm of Hornblower and Weeks occupied one room in the old Merchants Exchange Building, with one bookkeeper and an office boy. Hornblower represented the firm on the floor of the Boston Stock Exchange while Weeks managed the office. By 1902, the business had a net worth of \$800,000, six partners, and an office in New York City. His wealth freed Weeks to go into politics; his sterling reputation made him an attractive candidate and an effective politician.

The city of Newton, where Weeks lived, was a bustling and important suburb of Boston. Businessmen were encouraged to take an active part in civic affairs. Like his father and grandfather, Weeks ran for office and was elected alderman-at-large. Though meetings were often contentious, Weeks showed his skill at assessing the issues and

working out solutions—demonstrating the same talents that had earned him the epithet “best balanced man.” The clerk of the committee recalled that “Mr. Weeks would listen to the remarks and opinions of the other members, but not until he was asked directly by the Chairman would he enter the discussion. He would then leave his chair, and, walking up and down the Committee room, would give his reason for the action he proposed in such fashion that when he had finished he would have the entire Committee with him.”<sup>3</sup>

Four years later, Weeks was elected mayor. It was while mayor that he displayed what his biographer described as his noted “disregard for form and precedent. Once convinced that an object was desirable and the means of securing it proper, he was little concerned over any objection that it was novel and untried or that it was of doubtful constitutionality.” When the Boston and Worcester Street Railway Company wanted authorization to build its line through Newton, Weeks agreed, provided that the firm illuminate the railway's location, “knowing full well that it must light the street as well.” He





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*As secretary of War, John Weeks served on the National Forest Reserve Commission, which his 1911 law established.*

also called for compensation from public utilities for the use of public property.<sup>4</sup>

### MR. WEEKS GOES TO WASHINGTON

Elected to Congress in 1904, Weeks served four terms in the House. Speaker Joseph Cannon regarded him as a reliable conservative Republican—a “stand-patter”—and appointed Weeks to the House Agriculture Committee. Cannon would not block a forestry bill, he said, “if [Weeks] could draft one that he could support as a business man.” At the time, Weeks later recalled, he himself “was looking around for something of reasonable importance” with which he could “become connected and perform some kind of good public service,” a trait learned from his father.<sup>5</sup> Weeks assembled a bill that made no mention of scenery or location of the land to be purchased but instead focused on economics and other practical matters. By the time the House approved the bill in 1910, Weeks was no longer on the committee, but he had shepherded it through committee and onto the House floor, making strategic compro-

mises to get the bill through Congress and ensure it withstood judicial scrutiny.

The forestry bill was not his only contribution to conservation. Weeks sought federal protection for migratory birds because, a constituent informed him, insect-eating birds saved farmers millions of dollars each year. After three years of trying, the Weeks-McLean Act was signed on President William Taft’s last day in office. The law gave the Department of Agriculture the authority “to prescribe and fix the seasons when it would be against the law to shoot or capture” migratory game and insectivorous birds. As with the forestry bill, Weeks’s main contribution was guiding the bill through Congress rather than initially drafting it; the purpose of the bill, his political biographer asserts, had more to do with his love of business efficiencies than any personal conservation impulses.<sup>6</sup>

Weeks was also active in matters having to do with trade and tariffs, banking and currency reform, and the postal system. Through his thoughtful and extensive study of the issues and his knowledge of

banking and business, he gained a reputation that extended beyond what might have been expected from his conservative background. As he had done as mayor of Newton, he reached his conclusions on the merits of each case, with little regard for whether it was new and untried or of doubtful constitutionality. His command of domestic issues led to talk of his succeeding Cannon as House speaker in 1910 and of being the Republican candidate for president in 1916. Neither came to pass.

Reelected to the House in 1912, he ran for the U.S. Senate in 1913 to fill a vacant seat. After winning, he continued to draft legislation on tariffs, the currency, banking rules, and similar issues. His most significant achievement was his hard work on the many technical amendments to the bill to establish the Federal Reserve System.

He lost his bid for reelection and retired to Mount Prospect, New Hampshire, where he had assembled a property consisting of several small farms. There, in view of the White Mountains, he began efforts to reforest the land. His children, Charles Sinclair Weeks and Katherine

Weeks Davidge, gave the mountain-top house and grounds to the state of New Hampshire in 1941. It is now managed as the Weeks State Park.

Retirement did not last long. He was called back to Washington in 1921 to serve in the Harding and Coolidge cabinets as secretary of War. As secretary, he was a member of the National Forest Reserve Commission, established by the Weeks Act to oversee the purchase of land for eastern national forests. In 1922, he was called to testify before the House Agriculture Committee about the proposed budget for the commission's land-purchasing program. He found himself explaining the purpose of the Weeks Act and arguing

for its constitutionality, as well as defending expenditures to continue buying land.

Failing health led to his resignation in 1925, and he returned to Mount Prospect, where he died on July 12, 1926, at age 66. His close friend and biographer Charles Walsh noted of his death: "His earnest wish had been gratified. He died in the spot dearer to him than any other. The towering peaks of the majestic Presidential Range, stood, almost like sentinels, at his bedside. He fell asleep in the land of his fathers."<sup>77</sup> □

*Iris W. Baird is the author of Looking Out for Our Forests: The Evolution of a Plan*

to Protect New Hampshire's Woodlands from Fire *and most recently* The Remarkable John Weeks.

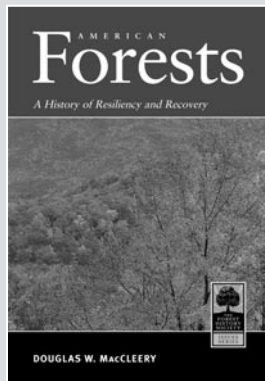
### NOTES

1. Rev. A. N. Somers, *History of Lancaster, New Hampshire* (Concord, N.H.: The Rumford Press, 1899), 388.
2. Charles G. Washburn, *The Life of John W. Weeks* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), 8.
3. *Ibid.*, 27.
4. *Ibid.*, 34.
5. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 76.
6. Benjamin Arthur Spence, "The National Career of John Wingate Weeks (1904–1925)" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1971), 67.
7. Washburn, *Life of John W. Weeks*, 296.

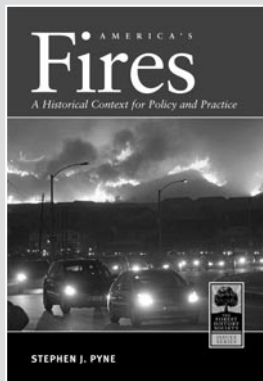
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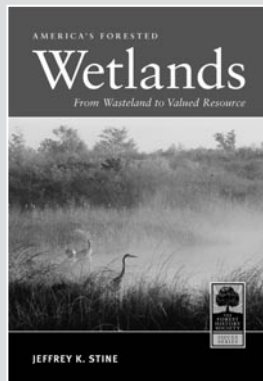
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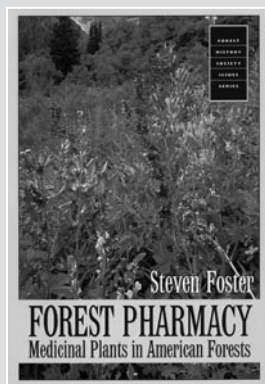
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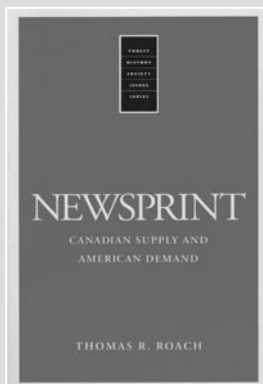
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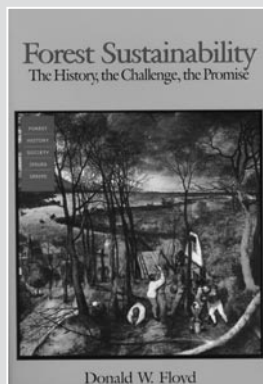
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