How the Weeks Act benefited the lowcountry of South Carolina is a tale with a twist. Lumber companies were cooperating with the Forest Service on fire control and other issues two decades before the federal government purchased its first acre of land under the Weeks Act. Not surprisingly, when it came time to buy land, the Forest Service turned to those same companies first.

ESTABLISHING THE FRANCIS MARION

NATIONAL FOREST HISTORY IN SOUTH CAROLINA’S LOWCOUNTRY, 1901–1936

At the end of the nineteenth century, the center of lumber production was shifting from the Northeast and the Great Lakes states to the vast southern pine belt that stretched in a crescent from Virginia to Texas. The big industrial timber corporations had begun running out of merchantable timber in the North and turned to areas with seemingly inexhaustible lumber resources, the Pacific Northwest and the South.¹

Though logging and lumber milling had occurred in South Carolina throughout the nineteenth century, the turn of the twentieth century marked the commencement of large-scale industrial logging in the coastal plain pine belt. Funded by northern capital, the Atlantic Coast Lumber Corporation, the E. P. Burton Lumber Company, the A. C. Tuxbury Lumber Company, and the North State Lumber Company began building mills and buying up land and stumpage in the coastal lowcountry around 1899. Within a decade these companies controlled most of the forestland in Berkeley, Georgetown, and upper Charleston counties along the coast. By 1913 their mills had a cumulative annual production of more than 300 million board feet of lumber, and Atlantic Coast Lumber was considered one of the largest producers on the eastern seaboard.²

When timber companies left the Great Lakes states, they left behind hundreds of thousands of acres of depleted lands, almost completely denuded of timber. Implicit in the growth of the South Carolina lumber companies was the possibility that the same cycle would be repeated. However, the U.S. Bureau of Forestry (predecessor to the U.S. Forest Service) assured Americans that industrial logging could safely continue under the guidance of scientifically trained professionals. Profitable use of the forests still could be possible if the timber corporations took steps to prevent waste and plan rationally for future use.³

Under Gifford Pinchot’s leadership, the Bureau of Forestry sought ways to work cooperatively with private landowners...

BY AL HESTER
and the timber industry to accomplish these goals.

Federal cooperative forestry began in South Carolina in 1901 when the bureau sent a field party to make management recommendations for 60,000 acres of cutover and fire-damaged longleaf pine lands owned by the Okeetee Gun Club in Beaufort and Hampton counties. One year later, Burton Lumber requested assistance with its 39,000 acres of pine forest and swampland in Berkeley County; Pinchot described the land as “one of the most promising with which the Bureau has yet had to deal.” The resulting cooperation marked the beginning of a relationship between the Forest Service and South Carolina that would culminate in the establishment of the Francis Marion National Forest in 1936.

In winter 1902–1903, Charles S. Chapman, Coert DuBois, and four other assistants worked under the supervision of Frederick E. Olmsted to examine the Burton tract from the company’s temporary camp at Limerick plantation north to Bethera and the Hell Hole swamp area. Burton had begun its logging operations on the Limerick tract in 1899 and had worked northward, and though some areas had been cutover, Chapman found that the lands were already recovering and that loblolly pine lands reproduced plentifully as long as fire was kept out. Work progressed well and enjoyed the support of the Burton general manager, Harrison W. Blake, who arranged for the party’s expenses to be paid by the company.

During the next year and a half, the bureau continued cooperating with Burton and began developing connections with other companies in the area. As Chapman prepared a working plan for the company, the Yale University forestry school repeatedly sent students to report on the Burton forests. Between 1902 and 1906, George L. Clothier, Samuel N. Spring, R. C. Hawley, John E. Keach, and Fred E. Ames photographed and documented all aspects of land conditions, logging methods, and attitudes toward forestry in the Berkeley, Charleston, and Georgetown county areas. Clothier found that “loblolly pine makes an enormous growth on the lands of the Burton Company,” and that the biggest obstacle to conservative forestry was “the inefficient and irresponsible nature of the native population upon who the Company must largely depend for labor.” In contrast to Burton, Hawley discovered, Atlantic Coast Lumber cut the forest over completely, seemingly with no idea of ever returning again, trusting rather to their ability to buy up more land or stumpage as needed.

Meanwhile, Pinchot and his assistant, Overton Price, corresponded regularly with Burton’s vice president, E. W. Durant, Jr., who showed great enthusiasm for conservative forestry and even asked to accompany a field party in the summer of 1903 to observe their work. When Chapman completed his working plan, he traveled again to Charleston, from where in December 1904 he wrote to the Washington office that Durant and the Burton family wished to “follow out the recommendations of the Bureau…almost to the letter.” In fact, Chapman was already in the process of implementing the plan before Christmas.

Chapman recommended that the company increase efficiency by leaving loblolly pines to act as seed trees and minimizing damage caused to them by the steam skidders. He also suggested that stumps be cut lower to reduce waste, and that fire be kept out of the woods completely to allow loblolly to reproduce to its full potential. Additionally, he advised that longleaf pine and hardwoods be eliminated and replaced with loblolly whenever possible, mainly because loblolly enjoyed such rapid growth and good reproduction. All of this work was best supervised by a trained forester, who could be employed directly by the company for a modest cost. It was Chapman’s feeling that any forester employed in this capacity would be able to practice forestry more fully than would be possible anywhere else. But most importantly, Chapman explained, if the company wished to continue production at the same level (about 20 million board feet annually), it would have to take measures to achieve sustained yield. Although greater efficiency was a part of this, true sustained yield could be accomplished only by purchasing more forest; Chapman estimated that an additional 53,000 acres would have to be acquired.
Burton managers quickly complied with most of the recommendations and asked the bureau to supply a forester who could fully implement the plan. Gifford Pinchot’s choice was Max Rothkugel, a German forester who had worked as an agent for the bureau and, whom Pinchot felt, had the necessary experience and would get along well with the loggers. Rothkugel soon arrived at Conifer, the new company town in Berkeley County, and began work under the guidance of Chapman, whom the bureau had asked to remain and spend another Christmas in the Hell Hole tract. By January 1905 Rothkugel had begun to prepare firebreaks and mark timber, and like others before him, he was impressed with the potential of the land. In early 1906, he wrote to a colleague in Washington that “you ought to see the reproduction of loblolly, Limerick is colossal.” Of the four large companies working in the area between Charleston and Georgetown, Burton was the only one to employ a forester at this time, and the only one to request and adopt a bureau working plan. Unfortunately, Rothkugel lasted only 14 months as the Burton forester, quitting in April 1906 after a disagreement with logging superintendent J. R. Hardison. Chapman was once again called down, this time to fill in and train a new man for Rothkugel’s job.

Clearly the U.S. Bureau of Forestry had accomplished a lot in cooperation with Burton Lumber. Chapman’s plan and Rothkugel’s work helped reduce timber mining in the area and may have mitigated damage; when the Forest Service later acquired this land, its condition was likely better than it would have been otherwise. But the cooperation was a major failure in another regard. The company never purchased the additional land necessary for achieving sustained yield and ceased its operations in 1916 holding the same acreage it had owned in 1903. In effect, despite the best efforts of bureau staff, Burton had failed to implement the crucial ingredient of Chapman’s plan, and as a result, long-term protection of South Carolina’s coastal pine forests would have to wait for more direct federal intervention. Fortunately, this cooperative work, carried out in the early part of the twentieth century, created a link between the Forest Service and South Carolina’s lowcountry, thus sowing the seeds for later national forest establishment.

“TIMBER MINING” REACHES A PEAK

Economic conditions favorable to lumber production during World War I caused logging activity in the southern pine belt to reach a crescendo by 1918. As demand for lumber and prices soared during the war, South Carolina lumber companies like Tuxbury, North State, and Atlantic Coast probably reached the apex of their production. Atlantic Coast, which Ralph C. Hawley predicted in 1903
had enough forest to support logging for only 25 years, was beginning
to cut over its holdings. Across the South, land conditions
deteriorated and deforestation loomed, and once again timber
depletion caused concern in the Forest Service. By this time, the
Forest Service realized that the forest problem was really part of
a larger land-use issue that was possibly too big for individual
landowners to handle alone. The question was not just how to keep
the lumber industry going. Though policy did not yet reflect
it, foresters were beginning to see forest industry as a part of a vast
land problem in which water, agriculture, soil, fire, labor, hous-
ing, and other industries were all interconnected. Not only were
forests being depleted, but the communities dependent on the
timber industry were suffering as land was cut over and mills shut
down. As historian Henry Clepper noted, “The end of the South’s inexhaustible timber was in
sight. As the tide of logging swept onward, it left in its wake hundreds of thousands of acres, cutover and burned over, that nobody wanted at any price. The little sawmill towns disintegrated among the charred stumps.” By the mid-1920s most southern pine belt lands were completely cut over, “a blackened fire-scorched world, dominated by millions of stumps.”

Such was probably the condition of the holdings of Atlantic Coast in Georgetown County, which were mainly upland longleaf pine lands. Not surprisingly, Atlantic Coast began making plans to sell its timber-depleted property as early as 1929. But not every part of the South suffered equally. Some areas, particularly those dominated by loblolly or slash pine, were in better condition because of natural reseeding. Most likely this was the case on the former Burton lands, now owned by Tuxbury and North State, where in 1927 logging continued but at a reduced rate. As Chapman had noted in 1905, these loblolly lands had phenomenal reproductive rates as long as forest fires were kept out. If Tuxbury and North State could find a way to protect their young, second-growth loblolly from fire, they might be able to continue profitable production for a while longer.

The timber companies became increasingly interested in forestry programs that centered on wildfire prevention and control. Though the Forest Service had not been active in the area for several years, its experts were ready to once again aid the companies. For example, in 1924, J. Given Peters met with numerous lumbermen interested in forest protection at a meeting of the Conservation Society of South Carolina. Lumbermen representing eight coastal timber companies attended; two of the most vocal were F. G. Davies of Tuxbury and G. J. Cherry of North State. The lands of these two industrial lumber corporations would later form the core of the Francis Marion National Forest. Possibly the Forest Service began to consider acquiring lands in Berkeley and Charleston counties at meetings like this one.

By the summer of 1927, four companies—Cooper River Timber Company, Myrtle Beach Estates, Inc., Tuxbury, and North State—committed $1,500 each of their own money for forest fire control. Davies wrote that his company, Tuxbury, had purchased a fire truck and was in the process of building a fire tower, but he was skeptical about its ability to stop the fires. The tower, a 100-foot-tall wooden structure, was built in 1927 on Tuxbury’s land in Berkeley County and is considered the first fire tower to have been built in South Carolina. It burned in a woods fire shortly after it was completed, and Tuxbury withdrew its $1,500 commitment. According to Davies, the company was “up against a hard proposition this year and must economize to the utmost.”

**ESTABLISHING THE FRANCIS MARION**

Though work continued with the Berkeley County landowners, it became increasingly doubtful that cooperative work could solve the forest problem, not to mention the wider issue of land use, and the Forest Service began acquiring land. At the third meeting of the South Carolina State Forestry Commission, Forest Service Chief William Greeley announced that it was “possible to secure a National Forest for some part of the Coastal Section of the South, an area between 50,000 and 100,000 acres.” The state Forestry Commission quickly responded that it would support this initiative. In the fall of 1927 the Forest Service sent staff to South Carolina to examine possible sites, and soon after, on February 18, 1928, the National Forest Reservation Commission
approved two new purchase units for South Carolina. The Black River purchase unit, located between Georgetown and Andrews on the Sampit and Black rivers, was approved at 75,000 acres. The majority of this unit was on Atlantic Coast lands, though some tracts were held by other private owners. The second purchase unit, the Wambaw, was on Tuxbury and North State holdings in Berkeley and Charleston counties—the same land once owned by the Burton company. In fact, the Forest Service decided to purchase the same amount of acreage that Chapman had determined was necessary for achieving sustained yield, about 100,000 acres. Like the Black River unit, the Wambaw also included property of Atlantic Coast as well as a number of small landholders. Most of the North State land was actually owned by a subsidiary landholding company, Dorchester Land and Timber Company, of which Cherry was also manager. Finally, a third unit southwest of Charleston was considered but never approved.

Even though the National Forest Reservation Commission had approved the purchase units, it still remained to actually acquire the land. This involved listing the available lands, collecting sales proposals from landowners, surveying the tracts, and negotiating prices and options. In July 1928, H. Norton Cope was designated as forest supervisor and given the responsibility for carrying out this work, from a temporary office in Georgetown. Arthur Riemer worked in Columbia examining land records. During the next year a small army of Forest Service clerks practically took over the South Carolina secretary of state’s office, copying original grants and plats and preparing a complete record of past landownership. Strangely, no lands were actually purchased in the five and a half years that followed creation of the purchase units. A Forest Service memo of 1933 suggests that the Black River in particular had been set up too hurriedly, with too little information about ownership and land availability. It is also possible that local land prices became inflated once approval for the South Carolina units was announced, as landowners held out for the highest possible price. By 1931 there was not enough funding to secure acquisition. Two more years passed before the Forest Service resumed negotiations, this time under a new forest supervisor and in completely different circumstances, the Great Depression and the New Deal.

Creation of the Francis Marion National Forest took on new urgency with the election of President Franklin Roosevelt and the push to put the country back to work through federal unemployment relief programs. Land acquisition needed to be consummated quickly to provide a place to work for the new Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) that the president approved in 1933. Many of the thousands of CCC labor camps were to be located on national forest purchase units like the Wambaw and Black River. The pressure was on forest supervisors to process sale proposals, make surveys, and secure options as quickly as possible. By June 1933, the CCC began developing two camps on the Wambaw purchase unit, one at Witherbee in Berkeley County and one at Awendaw in Charleston County. In response, the forest supervisor hurried his acquisition work, explaining that “the CCC camp F-4 is located on the Tuxbury property but there will be little possibility of using the men to advantage unless this case can be successfully closed.” Thus the creation of the CCC played a major role in the reopening of negotiations on the South Carolina purchase units.

The new plan was to concentrate on establishing the Wambaw, moving on to the Black River unit only when the work was done in Berkeley and Charleston counties. Soon after his arrival in Charleston that summer, the new forest supervisor, H. M. Sears,
began receiving updated sale proposals from the big lumber companies, including offers from Tuxbury and Dorchester. Survey parties examined the timber company lands and by September had submitted acquisition reports to the regional forester in Washington. The gist of these reports was that the appraised value of the land was substantially less that that claimed by the lumber companies: the Tuxbury lands, for example, were appraised at $4.12 per acre, versus the company’s proposal of $5.75 per acre. The regional forester recommended that the Tuxbury property be acquired for $3.50 and the Dorchester tracts (worked by North State) for $3.50 to $4.00 per acre. The Forest Service appraisals were based on market conditions and thus deemphasized the potential, or speculative, value of the land.

The two companies drove a hard bargain. When he received the $3.50 offer, Davies declined to accept it, saying that Tuxbury believed the lands worth $7.50 per acre. According to Davies, Tuxbury had in the past endeavored to protect that value “by adopting conservative logging methods.” He went on to say,

_We do not wish to appear egotistical, but it is our best judgment that we have offered the best block of cut-over lands to be had in this vicinity. It is also conceded that lands located along the Atlantic Coast of the Carolinas produce yellow pine timber which has the most rapid growth of any timber in the country._

Meanwhile, Cherry was holding out for $6.00 per acre for the Dorchester and North State lands, for similar reasons. He demanded a face-to-face meeting with higher authorities in Washington, and on October 2, Cherry and Forest Supervisor Sears went north to meet with Ira Yarnall, the regional forester. It was Sears’s belief that the companies were collaborating in their negotiations with the Forest Service to get the highest sale price possible, and he suggested that the government divide the companies by handling one sale at a time. This tactic, combined with the fact that Dorchester was the most desperate of the three companies, resulted in Cherry’s signing an option selling 48,000 acres at $4.00 per acre on October 10. After stubborn negotiation, Tuxbury followed, selling a total of 44,000 acres at the same price late in December of 1933. These sales broke the land acquisition deadlock that had existed since 1928, and in the two years following 1933, many of the remaining landowners sold their land to the government as well.

To the north, the Black River purchase unit still enjoyed enthusiastic support among local residents, and during the summer of 1933 Sears also corresponded with Georgetown County property owners on the Black River. At least 10 Georgetown landowners made offers in 1933, some of whom also negotiated with Forest Supervisor Cope in 1928–29. In addition, U.S. Congressman Thomas S. McMillan and Senator James F. Byrnes wrote letters expressing their constituents’ support of the project. At least one editorial in the _Georgetown Times_ described the sentiment of the business community in particular: “It should be our aim to cooperate to the fullest extent with Mr. Cope and those who assist him in this important work…. We feel that this section is most fortunate in securing one of these Forest areas, and that the dream of an industrialized county will surely materialize.”

But despite local enthusiasm for the Black River unit, the Forest Service never acquired any land in Georgetown County, and the National Forest Reservation Commission rescinded the unit in October 1934. As Cope and Sears conducted preliminary surveys, it gradually became clear that the Wambaw lands were superior to those in the Black River, and consequently, the Forest Service recommended that the Wambaw unit be extended to embrace other promising lands to the west, in Berkeley County. As a memo to the National Forest Reservation Commission explained, “Opportunities for purchase in Black River are less favorable than those on the enlarged Wambaw unit, [and] it is proposed to…drop the Black River unit from further consideration.” Another possible reason was that the Forest Service needed to spread its CCC camps more evenly across South Carolina, particularly to the Piedmont area. The federal government was also interested in addressing the submarginal land problem, which was especially intense in the sand hills and the Piedmont. Abandoning the Black River unit allowed the Forest Service to use its financial resources more effectively. After all, Georgetown County could benefit from the nearby Wambaw, which now had a gross area of over 400,000 acres.

The acreage having been acquired, it still remained for the Forest Service to make good on its promises of restoring the land and providing employment through sound management and conservation. Working under the forest supervisor and district rangers, the CCC erected numerous steel fire towers on Francis Marion land; constructed hundreds of miles of roads, truck trails, and firebreaks; and laid telephone lines that facilitated fire detection and control. The enrollees planted pine seedlings and developed recreation areas. The CCC also fought fires, spending many days and nights in the woods, sometimes equipped only with longleaf pine saplings to beat down the flames. But since most fires in this area were caused by residents, education about the importance of fire control probably furthered Forest Service conservation policy more than any other act. The first district ranger on the Francis Marion, W. A. Garber, focused his energies on carrying out an educational program with local residents. Supervisor Sears was convinced that Garber “more or less independently converted large interior populations to the principles of fire control. During his administration…the number of annual fires was reduced from some 275 in 1935 to less than 60 in 1937.” Garber and the CCC, supported by the Forest Service and massive New Deal funding, were able to accomplish what the private lumber companies never did.

In connection with forest protection, the Forest Service also helped sustain the community by providing opportunities for work. The CCC program was a crucial part of this effort, and the camps on the Francis Marion provided an income for at least 1,200 enrollees, not to mention their families, who automatically received about 80 percent of their pay. At first, in 1933, the CCC camps at Witherbee and Awendaw did not employ local people but were occupied by two “companies” from out of state, and most of the enrollees were from New Jersey. A CCC camp inspector reported in 1934 to the director of the CCC that this arrangement was not satisfactory:

_It is my impression that much of the trouble that exists between the foremen and the enrolled men lies in the fact that the foremen are unused to directing white labor of foreign extraction, but instead are more familiar with working Negro labor. Lack of understanding between foremen on the one hand and enrolled men on the other tends to promote friction._

The CCC responded by transferring the New Jersey companies and replacing them with local African-American men, many of whom were from the coastal area of South Carolina. In 1935,
Awendaw, Witherbee, and a new camp near McClellanville all received segregated black companies. Job opportunities were especially scarce for African Americans in coastal South Carolina at the time, and the good pay and benefits of CCC enrollment probably made a real difference for families in surrounding counties.43

It is difficult to determine the degree to which local residents not directly employed by the CCC benefited from the work of the Forest Service. In 1936, there were approximately 9,000 residents living in or immediately around the Francis Marion, most of whom struggled to support themselves through subsistence farming, woodwork, moonshining, or a combination. During the Depression, living conditions were particularly difficult. Ex-CCC enrollee Henry Smith, of the Witherbee camp, recalled how some local residents were desperate, especially for food. When the lunch truck arrived to bring hot lunches to the CCC men working in the woods, suddenly whole families would appear from the forest to ask for food. Woodwork had declined significantly for most of these residents, and it was not until 1936 that the Forest Service offered its first timber sale on the Francis Marion. The contract, awarded to Tuxbury, probably provided some work for the locals, but even then, only about 400 individuals were gainfully employed by the forest industry that year.44 The policy of the Forest Service was to provide for continuous woodwork through sustained yield, but first the land had to be restored.

Finally, in the spring of 1936, enough land was acquired to ensure project success, and a presidential proclamation on July 10 designated the Wambaw purchase unit as the new Francis Marion National Forest, named for the American Revolutionary War hero also known as the Swamp Fox. Three days later, Franklin Roosevelt formed the Sumter National Forest from two piedmont forest areas, the Long Cane and Enoree purchase units. In less than three years, pressured by the crisis of the Depression, the Forest Service had acquired almost 400,000 acres in South Carolina.45 Despite the apparent rapidity with which the Francis Marion grew, the process of its establishment had actually begun 35 years previously. The seeds sown by Chief Gifford Pinchot, who had initiated cooperative forestry on the lands of the Francis Marion back in 1902, had developed into an enormously productive national forest. Possibly it was this productivity that inspired former Forest Supervisor Sears to explain in 1953, "I still believe that the old Francis Marion is one of the best pieces of property that the Forest Service ever bought."46

NOTES
2. George C. Rogers, Jr., The History of Georgetown County, South Carolina (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 499; Thomas Fetters, Logging Railroads of South Carolina (Forest Park: Heimburger House, 1990), 14; R. C. Hawley, "A Report on the Lumber Industry in the Coastal Plain Region of South Carolina," December 1903, 4–5, Mudd Library, Yale University, New Haven; Francis Marion National Forest, 1936 Management Plan, appendix, 4–5; Records of the Forest Service, RG 95-64, Box 269, National Archives, College Park, Md.

Al Hester is the Historic Sites Coordinator with South Carolina Parks Recreation and Tourism. Thanks to Robert Morgan of the U.S. Forest Service for bringing this article to the attention of Forest History Today.

In 1932, when this photograph was taken, the Tuxbury Lumber Company was still using draft animals to haul and bunch logs.