

Biographical Portrait

CHARLES SPRAGUE SARGENT

(1841–1927)

BY KAREN HOVDE



PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES OF THE ARNOLD ARBORETUM (ACC. #11056)

Charles Sprague Sargent, circa 1923.

Charles Sprague Sargent, arboriculturalist and dendrologist, was born to Henrietta (Gray) and Ignatius Sargent, the youngest of three children. In an era when family position largely determined one's place and success in the social order, Charles Sargent arrived in the world with impeccable credentials. His father was a wealthy Boston merchant and banker, and the family was counted among Boston's elite.

There is scant information about Sargent's childhood years. He grew up on the family estate in Brookline, 130 acres of carefully planted parkland and gardens that were actively planned and tended by his father. He attended private schools, and entered Harvard College in 1858. He graduated four years later with an undistinguished record in classical studies. The Civil War claimed his next three years. He served as an infantry officer for the North, and was honorably discharged in 1865. Three years of European travel preceded

his return to Boston in 1868 and his marriage to Mary Ellen Robeson in 1873. They subsequently raised a family of two sons and three daughters.

It does not seem to be either a simple lack of information or a pervasive and persistent personal reticence on Sargent's part that leaves one with very little sense of his early primary interests and direction. Intellectual matters had not sparked him, although his college years had been marked by the advent of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Nor had the experiences of war moved him, nor an extended period under the stimulus of foreign travel. A true product of his time and place, Charles Sargent was concerned with order, particularly as it was represented in the natural world. When he returned to Boston in 1873, he came home to take on the management of the family estate (Holm Lea) and especially the feature thereof to which he was most drawn—its trees.

Estate horticulture was at this time a pursuit of wealthy individuals who had both the resources and the leisure to transform large areas of land into competitive showcases. Sargent's neighbors in Brookline were to serve as powerful mentors in his chosen endeavor, providing him with the network of contacts that he used both to initiate and sustain his career.

In 1872 Charles Sargent was appointed as Curator and subsequently, Director, of Harvard's newly endowed Arnold Arboretum. He was also named Director of the Botanic Garden in Cambridge, being initially hired into these positions to reduce the workload of the celebrated American botanist Asa Gray. Sargent gave up the directorship of the Garden in 1879, in order to devote his full energies to the Arboretum. The administrative, political,

and financial negotiations which preceded the first permanent plantings in 1886 were numerous, but Sargent's commitment and perseverance brought the Arboretum to the attention of a public that had a growing interest in trees. Through his efforts, the Arnold Arboretum collected, propagated, and studied all the trees and woody plants that could be grown outdoors in Boston, no matter where they originated.

On a larger scale, the early 1880s saw Sargent's appointment as coordinator of a census investigation of U.S. forests for



PHOTO BY I.W. TABER. PHOTO ARCH. OF THE ARNOLD ARBORETUM (ACC. #10802)

Portrait of C.S. Sargent, Francis Skinner and George Engelmann taken at a studio in Monterey, California during their trip in the summer of 1880 to examine trees and forests of the American West for the Tenth Census of the United States. Engelmann was an active physician as well as botanist, and he rarely had the opportunity to leave Saint Louis to work in the field. Nonetheless, Sargent found him an excellent traveling companion. Skinner was a Brookline neighbor who volunteered his assistance to the Arboretum on several projects. The branch held by Sargent is *Pinus radiata*.



Sargent in the Library at the Arnold Arboretum examining Quercus herbarium specimens. Photo taken by T.E. Marr in 1904.

the Department of Agriculture's new Division of Forestry. These investigations produced the 1884 *Report on the Forests of North America*. This, Sargent's first major publication, was well received, and provided not only a comprehensive, descriptive botanical reference, but also a much needed authoritative baseline from which conservationists and legislators could produce recommendations.

Other surveys in which Sargent took part were the Northern Pacific Transcontinental Survey of Northwest forests, and another of Adirondack forestland for New York State. While strongly aware of the need to secure federal protection for forest

resources, Sargent was discouraged by the political battles and often inauspicious outcomes of the legislative process. After a final, disappointing engagement in a Congressional Commission under President Cleveland to set aside 13 additional forest reserves, Sargent retired from the political fray in 1897, and returned his main attentions to the Arboretum.

Fortunately, the negative conservation experience had in no way blunted Sargent's enthusiastic and successful botanical investigations. His studies resulted in the 14 volumes of *The Silva of North America*, (1891-1902), *Forest Flora of Japan*, (1894), *Manual of the Trees of North America* (1905), and production of the weekly magazine *Garden and Forest* (1888-1897), which served to popularize forestry issues in the United States. Charles Sargent continued in his scholarly pursuits and in active direction of the Arboretum until the month of his death in 1927.

Strictly speaking, Charles Sargent's greatest contribution in the service of his beloved trees was neither as a conservationist nor as a botanist; but as a dendrologist. His many detailed, descriptive publications, and his successful management of the Arnold Arboretum as a natural platform for the public presentation of

information, brought forestry issues for the first time into the public domain. His work bridged the gap between the scientific theories of botany and the practical knowledge of the gardener, and was instrumental in establishing a critical initial assessment of America's forest resources. □

Karen Hovde is General Reference Librarian at Founders Memorial Library and Associate Professor at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois.

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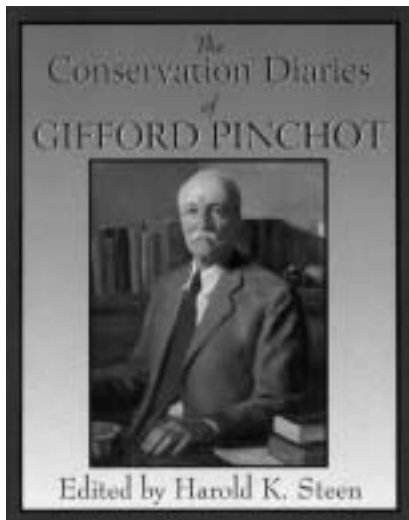
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Conservation Diaries of Gifford Pinchot, edited by Harold K. Steen



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