

A Biographical Portrait of Gifford Pinchot

Gifford Pinchot was one of America's leading advocates of natural resource conservation at the turn of the twentieth century. Much of what he achieved in this area came through his work for or on behalf of the United States Forest Service.

The oldest son of a wealthy New York merchant who made part of his fortune in land speculation and lumbering, Gifford Pinchot was born on August 11, 1865, in Simsbury, Connecticut. He was one of the first scientifically trained foresters in North America, the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service, and founder of the Yale School of Forestry and the Society of American Foresters. During his twelve years as the federal government's chief forester, he transformed a small office of ten that controlled no forests of its own into a national forest service with a staff of more than 2,500 and direct management of 172 million acres of national forests. He made utilitarian conservation, or the regulated use of natural resources, the cornerstone of his long public career, which also included serving two years as Pennsylvania's Commissioner of Forestry (1920-22) and two terms as governor of that state (1923-27, 1931-35).

Pinchot became an outdoor enthusiast and fisherman as a child and remained one throughout his life. He received most of his early education in private schools and from tutors in Paris and New York before entering Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire to prepare for college. While attending Yale, his father encouraged him to study forestry at a time when there were no American forests under management and no forestry schools in North America. Though he did not excel at academics, he made many lifelong friendships there that he would later draw upon to help him in his chosen career. He graduated from Yale University in 1889 and set out for Europe to study forestry. His knowledge of forestry was so scant that he thought he would simply buy some forestry textbooks, seek advice from their authors on how to establish his career, and take in a forestry exhibit at the Paris World Exposition of 1889.

Shortly after arriving in Europe, Pinchot met Sir Dietrich Brandis, a leading figure in German and British forestry, who helped arrange his studies and mentored Pinchot until the latter's death in 1907. Pinchot spent the next eighteen months studying at the French Forest School in Nancy, and examining model forests in France, Germany, and Switzerland, while at the same time gathering input on how to introduce forest management to the United States. He disregarded the advice of Brandis and others to stay longer and complete his training. Instead, he returned home fully intent introducing forest management and influencing federal forestry policies, the very definition of a young man in a hurry.

Through his father's connections, he became the private forester for George Vanderbilt's Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, where he initiated the first large-scale systematic forest management in America in 1892. His book, *Biltmore Forest* (1893), which documented and promoted his work on the sprawling estate, was the first of many publications on forestry and conservation. His claim that he made "forestry pay" at the Biltmore was dubious but he learned important lessons there: the importance of publicity for promoting one's work, the value of personal and professional connections, how to select and manage a staff, and the destructiveness of American farming and lumbering practices. Building on that success, he opened an office in New York City as a consulting forester in December 1893. Over the next four years he and his friend Henry Graves prepared management plans for extensive privately owned forested estates in the Adirondacks and central Pennsylvania, examined the principal forest districts of New Jersey, and developed outlines for academic forestry instruction. Furthermore, he continued writing articles on the need for forest management in America.

His work in New York and his writings brought him national attention among forest conservation leaders. In 1896, Pinchot served on the National Forestry Commission, which was established by the National Academy of Sciences to formulate a national forest policy. Its work eventually led to the passage of the Forest Management (or Organic Act) of 1897, which outlined the conditions for management of the federal forest reserves then under the control of the Department of Interior. His service on the commission and the following year as a special agent for the Department of Interior to study the public forests and

make further recommendations allowed him to help shape a national forest policy. Pinchot then accepted appointment in 1898 as chief of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Division of Forestry (later called the Bureau of Forestry and since 1905 called the Forest Service), and had his position renamed "Forester," a clear indication of the new direction he envisioned for the division and for federal forestry.

As chief forester, Pinchot immediately launched a government cooperative program to assist private forest owners, began his successful efforts to transfer control of the federal forests to his agency, established the foundation of the present National Forest System, conducted a nationwide publicity campaign to educate Americans about the need for forest conservation, and introduced policies of conservative and regulated use of national forest resources that have influenced federal management of other natural resources. With President Theodore Roosevelt's strong support, Pinchot's efforts led to the creation of the U.S. Forest Service in 1905, and made Pinchot the most influential bureau chief before or since. He used his position and access to Roosevelt to lead a national conservation crusade with forestry as its focal point. To help staff the Forest Service, the Pinchot family founded the Yale Forestry School in 1900 by donating \$150,000 and persuading Henry Graves to serve as its dean. Pinchot also established the Society of American Foresters in order to give the new foresters immediate professional credibility and standing, and ran the meetings out of his home for several years in order to better control the direction of the profession.

Pinchot was at the pinnacle of his power during the first two years of Roosevelt's second administration, starting with the 1905 American Forest Congress he organized to pressure Congress to transfer the forest reserves. Over the next two years, as he organized the Forest Service into six districts for better management, he oversaw the expansion of the forest reserves from 60 units covering 56 million acres to 150 national forests covering 172 million acres by 1910. He had a strong hand in guiding the fledgling organization toward the utilitarian philosophy of the "greatest good for the greatest number." Pinchot added the phrase "in the long run" to emphasize that forest management consists of long-term decisions. Furthermore, "conservation" (an idea he popularized) of natural resources in the broad sense of wise use became a widely known concept and an accepted national goal.

But the administration's aggressive conservation policies angered many in the western states who opposed the withdrawal of public land from future private development. In response, Congress repealed the president's ability to create new national forests in six western states and reasserted its authority. Undeterred, Pinchot continued his efforts to promote conservation. He organized the Governors Conference on Conservation (1908), and served on the Commission on Country Life (1908) and the National Conservation Commission (1909), the latter of which under his direction prepared the first comprehensive inventory of the country's natural resources.

Pinchot also ran afoul of John Muir and the fledgling preservationist wing of the conservation movement with his support of the construction of a dam in Yosemite National Park. To this day, the name Hetch Hetchy, where the dam was built ostensibly to provide water and electricity to San Francisco following the 1906 earthquake, still provokes strong emotions from both sides of the issue.

Pinchot founded the National Conservation Association in 1909 to advance his national conservation agenda and served as its president and principal financier until its demise in 1925. The NCA gave Pinchot a platform from which to continue his crusade after his dismissal by President William H. Taft in 1910 for a disagreement over conservation policy with Secretary of the Interior Richard A. Ballinger. Pinchot was replaced by Henry Graves. Much has been written about this controversy, which originated over leases of Alaskan coal lands in the public domain. That debate over Alaskan coal became an excuse for Pinchot to attack what he perceived as Taft's break with Roosevelt's conservation policies. Pinchot quickly penned *The Fight for Conservation* in 1910 to put his conservation policies before the public. The public outcry against Pinchot's firing and his continued popularity undeniably influenced his thoughts on running for political office.

After 1910, Pinchot remained active in forestry matters through the Society of American Foresters. He fought the Forest Service over the need to secure federal regulation of private forestry, but also battled on behalf of the agency to prevent its transfer from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of

the Interior or a proposed Department of Conservation. From 1920 to 1922, he served as commissioner of forestry for Pennsylvania and established a forest program that in many ways resembled his best work as Forest Service chief.

Also after his firing in 1910, Pinchot and his brother Amos became involved in Theodore Roosevelt's failed bid for the White House in 1912 as the candidate for the Progressive Party, commonly known as the Bull Moose Party. Gifford had three unsuccessful bids for United States senator from Pennsylvania (1914, 1926, and 1934) but two effective terms as Pennsylvania's governor (1923-27 and 1931-35,) in which he carried out Progressive policies such as regulating utilities and creation of an old-age pension and the Sanitary Water Board, the first anti-pollution agency in the country.

Pinchot worked toward making conservation the foundation of world peace after retirement from public office in 1935. He also set about solidifying his legacy and his place in history. With help he organized his personal papers, which were housed at Grey Towers in an outbuilding called, appropriately, "The Letter Box," and began work on his personal history of forestry and conservation—what would become *Breaking New Ground*. Ten years in the making, the posthumously published autobiography served perhaps to settle a few political scores, but mostly to explain and defend his policies. It has gone through numerous reprintings since it first came out in 1947, a testament to his place in forestry and conservation history. Other writings that Pinchot had authored included a dozen monographs on forestry subjects, a popular book on his journey to the South Seas, and approximately 150 published articles, reports, bulletins, lectures and addresses.

On October 4, 1946, at the age of eighty-one, Gifford Pinchot died in New York City of leukemia. But more than sixty years after his death, Pinchot continues to be the subject of much interest and discussion among historians, especially for his role in launching and shaping the conservation movement.

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Further reading:

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