Learning From the Past – Rhode Island Forest History

Early records indicate that upon the arrival of the first European settlers in the early 1600’s the area that became Rhode Island was probably more than 95 percent forested. (Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management) In upland areas, the Native American inhabitants periodical-ly burned the undergrowth, maintaining forests in an open condition, with large, widely-spaced trees. The burning tended to dry out the soil, encouraging the growth of oaks, hickories, chestnuts, and pines over the more moisture-dependent northern hardwoods that dominated much of northeastern New England. In wet, lowland areas red maple, swamp oak, alders, and willows grew and the under-growth remained thick. In addition, the Native Americans kept large areas cleared for agriculture and hunting, par-ticularly around Narragansett Bay.

Overall, the landscape was a patchwork of forests in many different stages of eco-logical succession, providing much “edge” habitat for deer, grouse and other game species. (Cronan)

Early European settlers cleared about two-thirds of the state’s forests for agriculture. By the time of the first state forest survey of 1767, only 31 percent of the state’s land area was forested. At the beginning of the nineteenth century a few thoughtful people began to become concerned about the loss of valuable for-est. In 1820, the prominent Rhode Island textile manufacturer, Zachariah Allen began what is believed to be the first scientific and carefully recorded silvi-cultural experiment in the United States at a site that is now part of Lincoln Woods State Park. (Society of American Foresters)

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Some RI Forest History Dates

Pre-settlement – RI more than 95% forested
Perhaps as many as 100,000 Native Americans occupied New England.

1691 Broad Arrow Act officially sets aside all white pine 24-inches and larger as property of the King & Queen of England

1767 First state forestry survey estimates that only 31% of the state’s land area is forested

1820 Prominent Rhode Island textile manufacturer, Zachariah Allen began what is believed to be the first scientific and carefully recorded silvi-cultural experiment in the United States at a site that is now part of Lincoln Woods State Park.

1835 RI 63% forested

1842 A major forest fire burns over 24,500 acres of forest land

1850 RI 64% forested: State’s timber volume stands at 281 million board feet

1905 Transfer Act of 1905 officially transfers over-31% of the state’s land area is forested

1910-18 Chestnut Blight decimates southern New England forests

1920 Arbor Day is founded by J. Sterling Morton in Nebraska

1930 Major forest fire burns 34,700 acres in western RI

1933 President Roosevelt signs into law an act estab-lishing the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). From 1933 –1942, 63 CCC camps were estab-lished on state forest and park lands and almost 100,000 men were enrolled in the pro-gram. CCC crews engaged in reforestation, timber stand improvement, fire suppression, insect and disease control , and the construc-tion of roads, bridges, fire lookouts, and recre-ational facilities that are still enjoyed today.

1935 Gifford Pinchot appointed first Chief of the Forest Service.

1938 Hurricane of 1938 causes blow down of large areas of timber. 80 million board feet of timber salvaged.

1939 RI 63% forested

1942 RI 60% forested

1950 RI 64% forested: State’s timber volume stands at 281 million board feet

1953 The era of urbanization and subsequent fragmenta-tion of the forest begins

1970’s Oil Embargo results in dramatic increase in fuelwood cutting across the state culminating in the harvest of an estimated 210,000 cords of fuelwood 1982-83, an increase of more than 29 times the 1972 amount (7150 cords).

1980’s RI 60% forested

1982-83 A major forest fire burns 34,700 acres in western RI

1985 RI 60% forested

1985 RI 65% forested

1986’s RI 64% forested: State’s timber volume stands at 281 million board feet

1986’s RI 65% forested

1989 RI 59% forested

1990’s RI 64% forested

1998 18,800 acres of forest land lost to suburban sprawl since 1985;

2018-19 RI 38% forested

2018-20 Chestnut Blight decimates southern New England forests

2030 Major forest fire burns 34,700 acres in western RI

George Washington Memorial Forest in Gloucester becomes the first state forest

Jesse B. Mowry appointed state’s first Forest Commissioner.

Jesse B. Mowry of Chepachet appointed state’s first Forest Commissioner.

The jurisdiction of today’s state forestry agency.

Rhode Island’s first Forest Commissioner, 1907

It is a fact well known to most of you that the timber which once covered our hillsides, ameliorating our climate, beautifying the landscape, protecting our watersheds, and constitut-ing one of the most valuable natural resources of the state, has now nearly all disappeared before the woodman’s axe. It follows, therefore, that the protec-tion and rapid growth of the succession of sprout and seedlings is a problem of interest and importance to the people.”

By the beginning of the twentieth century public awareness of the need for forest management had begun to take hold both nationally and locally. In 1906 the Rhode Island legislature established the Rhode Island Forest Commission, and the following year appointed Jesse B. Mowry as the state’s first Forest Commissioner. In his first annual report to the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1907, Mr. Mowry penned the following: “It is a fact well known to most of you that the timber which once covered our hillsides, ameliorating our climate, beautifying the landscape, protecting our watersheds, and constituting one of the most valuable natural resources of the state, has now nearly all disappeared before the woodman’s axe. It follows, therefore, that the protection and rapid growth of the succession of sprout and seedlings is a problem of interest and importance to the people.”

Mowry’s staunch advocacy helped initiate improvements in forest laws, for-est fire suppression, forest conservation and management. (Widner) In the early 1930’s Archie W. Hurford, the state’s first trained forester, further galvanized pub-
Our society is poised at a unique moment in history, and the decisions we make today will affect whether future generations will continue to enjoy the vast benefit of clean plentiful water.

Programs and activities are available to all persons without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation, or national origin.

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