

The Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest Turns 100!

By Jim Bokern

Rooted in Wisconsin's early journey of settlement, commerce and environmental stewardship, the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest (NHAL) continues to evolve and serve the public. Its natural resources have been prized by many generations, and its creation in 1925 was a turning point in the history of Wisconsin's public lands.

For centuries, abundant natural resources from the region nourished Ojibwe communities of Trout Lake, Lac Vieux Desert, Wisconsin River, Turtle Portage and Lac du Flambeau.ⁱ Even though land cessions from 19th century treaties limited the formal footprint of these Ojibwe communities to reservations, tribal sovereignty and treaty rights ensure continued Ojibwe access to hunt, fish and gather within the state forest.ⁱⁱ

As former Indigenous lands and resources were sold by the government to miners, loggers, land speculators and farmers, the Wisconsin legislature in 1878 set aside 50,000 acres in the Northwoods with the intention of creating a large Wisconsin state park.ⁱⁱⁱ Although these lands were subsequently sold, the legislative action revealed an interest in preserving unique natural resources.

The profession of forestry was established in Wisconsin with the creation of the Wisconsin Department of Forestry in 1903 and the hiring of E. M. Griffith as Wisconsin's first Chief State Forester in 1904.^{iv} Griffith's intellect, determination and scientific methods led to quick and dynamic actions. He envisioned a Wisconsin forest reserve with two million acres of managed forest in Vilas, Oneida, Iron and Forest counties safeguarding river headwaters and supporting the timber and paper industries, while offering recreational opportunities to the public.^v In 1911, Griffith established the forest headquarters and tree nursery at Trout Lake and hired the first professional foresters to model how to restore the cutover region.^{vi} Private forest landowners and counties could learn from the state model, creating more well-managed forests for the future.^{vii}

By 1910, Theodore Roosevelt's plans of managed forestry based on conservation ethics were being challenged nationally. In Wisconsin, Griffith and his forest reserve plans also met political opposition.^{viii} Farmers, newspapers, politicians, land speculators and UW County Agriculture agents launched political challenges while promoting "boosterism" of the "amazingly productive farmland" available throughout the cutover of northern Wisconsin.^{ix} Ignoring Griffith's land quality analysis and a positive legislative review of practices in the forest reserve, the Wisconsin State Supreme Court declared Wisconsin's state forest reserve unconstitutional in 1915.^x In response, Griffith resigned, his 1913-1914 State Forestry report was shelved, and the Department of Forestry was absorbed by the new State Conservation Commission. For a decade, the state forestry limited expansion, focused on fire control and decentralized a diminished forest ranger force.^{xi}

The Wisconsin Constitution was amended in 1924 to clearly allow state forest funding, creating a new pathway for state public lands.^{xii} The 1878 vision of state legislators would be realized in 1925 when 92,000 acres of Griffith's forest reserve properties became the Northern Forest Park. In 1937, the property was renamed the Northern Highland Forest.^{xiii}

The Wisconsin's Veterans Bureau, on behalf of the American Legion, received authorization to purchase Camp Minne-Wawa in 1924, located on a beautiful isthmus between Lake Tomahawk and Big Carr Lake in Oneida County. Camp American Legion opened in May of 1925, providing a wilderness location for veterans to receive important services through outdoor recreation.^{xiv} In 1929, despite Oneida County

objections, the Wisconsin Legislature added 36,000 acres to state public lands, creating the American Legion Memorial State Park and Forest Preserve.^{xv} By 1931, the property became known as the American Legion Forest. In 1968, the two forests were combined, creating the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest.

Northwoods agricultural “boosterism” was challenged in 1925 by Wisconsin Secretary of Agriculture Jardine at a speech in Sayner, Wisconsin, “...northern Wisconsin could accomplish more for itself and for the Nation by reforestation than by agriculture!”^{xvi} Even before the Great Depression deepened in the 1930s, environmental and economic realities left many northern Wisconsin farmers with foreclosed land and no buyers. State properties like Northern Forest Park and American Legion Memorial State Park marked a political shift toward reforestation and the scientific management of forest resources. Consequently, Wisconsin authorized its counties and the national government to also create new forests to help transition more northern cutover lands into multiuse forests.^{xvii} In 1928, the first Wisconsin county and national forests were established, and today the public enjoys 2.3 million acres of county forests and 1.5 million acres of national forests in Wisconsin.

In the depths of the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) brought armies of men dedicated to environmental reclamation of United States forests. In 1933, the CCC empowered NHAL forest rangers with hundreds of workers stationed at Camp Mercer, Camp Crystal Lake, Camp Blue Lake and Camp Star Lake.^{xviii} For nine years, the efforts of CCC enrollees proved transformative to forestry, fishery and wildlife management. Ninety years later, the collaborative results of the CCC and state forest rangers are showcased throughout the NHAL forest.

In 1942, CCC camps closed as part of the national movement to redirect labor and resources to winning World War II. Wisconsin forest products proved vital to the war efforts and evidenced how managed forests delivered positive outcomes. Post-war demand for forest products and recreational destinations spiked, ushering in the modern era of the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest.

The 2025 celebration of the centennial of the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest marks the attainment of many 1878 state park and forest reserve stewardship goals. The property is a model for sustainable forestry with its 236,000 acres, earning forest certification by independent, third-party auditors. Protecting the headwaters of the Wisconsin, Flambeau and Manitowish rivers was a driving factor for establishing the state property, and protecting the water quality of the rivers, streams and the 900+ lakes throughout the forest continues to be a high priority. Today, the NHAL supports local economies in Vilas, Oneida and Iron counties through tourism and the forest industry.

Balancing the shifting demands for forest products, forest recreation and environmental best practices continues to be a subject of spirited public debate, revealing how much folks love Wisconsin’s unique natural resources and public lands. Throughout its history, the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest has demonstrated a strong commitment to maintaining Wisconsin’s forest heritage while ensuring a vital resource for future generations.

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- ⁱⁱwww.mpm.edu. "Ojibwe Treaty Rights | Milwaukee Public Museum." Milwaukee Public Museum. Accessed January 9, 2025. <https://www.mpm.edu/educators/wirp/nations/ojibwe/treaty-rights>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ"Map of Wisconsin, 1881, Showing Land Grant Limits, Wisconsin Central Railroad." 40 x 39 cm. Map. Wisconsin: Wisconsin Central Railway Company, 1881. <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/maps/id/1051/rec/3>.
- ^{iv}Griffith, Edward, M. "Report of the State Forester of Wisconsin for 1909 and 1910." *University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries*. Madison, Wisconsin: Democrat Printing Company, 1910. <https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AHBJ5O624LX7IK8C>.
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- ^{vi}Griffith, Edward, M. "Report of the State Forester of Wisconsin for 1911 and 1912." *University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries*. Madison, Wisconsin: Democrat Printing Company, 1913. <https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/A6NUPYTDVEA4IE8S>.
- ^{vii}Griffith. "Report of the State Forester of Wisconsin for 1909 and 1910.", 110.
- ^{viii}The Vilas County News. "Committees Report the Summary of the Report of the Special Legislative Forestry Conditions in Northern Wisconsin===Report Should Be Read to Be Appreciate by Those Interested." *The Vilas County News*, February 17, 1915.
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- ^{xi}State Conservation Commission of Wisconsin. "Biennial Reports of State Conservation Commission of Wisconsin. 1917-1918." *University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries*. Madison, Wisconsin: Democrat Printing Company, 1918. <https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/ANZL5NEPEL65JM8O>.
- ^{xii}Wilson, E. M. *Griffith and the Early Story of Wisconsin Forestry (1903–1915)*.
- ^{xiii}Iron County Miner. "State Parks Show Bigger Attendance." *Iron County Miner*, August 21, 1925.
- ^{xiv}Iron County Miner. "Legion State Camp to Open June 17." *Iron County Miner*, May 22, 1925.
- ^{xv}Stevens Point Journal. "Forest Preserve Is Ordered Made in Oneida County." *Stevens Point Journal*, June 27, 1929.
- ^{xvi}Marshfield News Herald. "Is Northern Wisconsin on the Right Track?" *Marshfield News Herald*, July 18, 1925., 2.
- ^{xvii}Wilson, F. G. "Forestry and Idle Land." *Rhineland Daily News*, February 19, 1929.
- ^{xviii}Civilian Conservation Corps, U.S. Sparta District, Wisconsin. *Sparta CCC District, Sixth Corp Area Annual*. Direct Advertising Co., 1937. <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/tp/id/28084/>.