

A Brief History of the Northern Forest

Early Settlement

This brief history of the Northern Forest begins with Native Americans populating the region thousands of years after the glaciers of the last ice age receded and vegetation and wildlife established themselves. Iroquoian and Algonquian groups subsisted for centuries by establishing territories in the forests and trade routes along the rivers and coasts—gathering in areas of abundant food in the summer and dispersing into the forest in smaller family bands for the winter.

The arrival of European explorers and settlers in the 16th and 17th centuries brought radical changes to how these peoples lived. New attitudes toward the wilderness, a new economic system and new diseases that decimated the Native population set the stage for the development of new relationships between people and the Northern Forest.

Scattered French and English settlements developed in the 1600s as Europe’s demand for furs and then timber grew. In the mid-18th century, the French & Indian War fought in the Northern Forest reflected the struggle between France and England for control of the New World. The 18th and 19th centuries saw English and other European settlers move up rivers into the region, farming and logging where they went, gradually building communities along major travel routes and in places with abundant resources. The forest acted as a buffer, separating these new communities from more populated regions. Even as surrounding areas became more populated, the Northern Forest remained a wilderness frontier.

Rise of the Timber and Paper Industries

The lumber industry moved into the Northern Forest after old-growth pine and spruce was cleared from southern New England and New York. Powerful rivers, vast forests, innovation, technology, vision, investment and railroads combined to make the Northern Forest an industrial powerhouse. Jobs in sawmills, turning mills, paper mills and other industrial operations attracted workers from around the world. Communities that grew up around the mills became the region’s commercial and cultural centers.

Burlington, Vermont, and Bangor, Maine, traded the title “lumber capital of the world” during the 1800s as the Northern Forest supplied lumber to build the nation’s growing cities. Paul Bunyan appeared as America’s first mythological forest figure based on the exploits of the “Bangor Tigers” and other loggers from this era.

By the early 1900s, land ownership in the Northern Forest was dominated by large, regional paper companies, establishing the pattern that remained in place for a century. The experience and innovations of these companies—the Brown Company in Berlin, New Hampshire, Great Northern Paper in Millinocket, Maine, and International Paper in New York—paved the way for the modern paper industry that would spread across the country and throughout the world.

A New View of the Natural World

Even as economic demand for the region’s rich natural resources was growing, artists and intellectuals such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, James Russell Lowell, and Henry David Thoreau were visiting the region. Their works conveyed that the Northern Forest was a place for people to escape the congestion and pressures of city life, find spiritual renewal and reconnect with God.

“Not only for strength, but for beauty,” wrote Thoreau at the time, “the poet must, from time to time travel the logger’s path and the Indian’s trail, to drink at some new and more bracing fountain of the Muses, far in the recesses of the wilderness.” By the end of the 19th century the value of the woods as a place for retreat and renewal of the spirit was widely accepted, and growth of the tourism and recreation industries in the region was

well underway.

The rapid harvesting of timber to feed the growing number of paper and sawmills led some to express concern over the health and integrity of the forest and watersheds—sowing the seeds of the nation’s earliest forest protection actions, including the Weeks Act and the establishment of the White Mountain National Forest.

Change in the Industry & Land Ownership

The 20th century witnessed great changes in tree harvesting and paper making as well as increased demands for pulp, paper and timber. Beginning in the 1970s, much of the forestland and mills owned by regional companies were bought out or absorbed by larger multinational corporations. The end of the river drives, damage caused by spruce bud worm infestation and increased access to the region through new roads also had profound effects. As the forest economy became transnational, land and mill owners faced increased economic pressure. Many cut timber heavily, replaced workers with new machinery and sold off scenic properties for development.

Adding to these pressures was the presence of more than 70 million people within a day’s drive of the region. Proximity to major metropolitan areas encouraged the growth of regional tourism and second home development, further changing the nature of communities and peoples’ relationships with the land.

The Diamond Land Sale: Harbinger of Change

These pressures came to a head in 1988 with the sale of nearly 1 million acres of timberland by Diamond International Corporation. Though it was not unusual for large tracts of land to change hands within the forest industry, the “Diamond sale” was unusual because much of the land was auctioned off for subdivision and development. To people across the Northern Forest, this sale represented a radical shift in traditional patterns of land ownership and raised many questions about the region’s economy and traditional way of life.

In response to the Diamond sale, Congress directed the US Forest Service to conduct the *Northern Forest Lands Study* (1989-1990) to develop public policy alternatives to development of the Northern Forest. The Governors’ Task Force on Northern Forest Lands, appointed by the governors of the four states, worked closely with the study team. When the study was completed, the Task Force recommended a more intense, public process to develop specific recommendations for public policy changes.

In response, Congress authorized and funded the Northern Forest Lands Council (NFLC) from 1991 to 1994. Its members were appointed by the governors to represent the forest products industry, conservation, state government and local leaders. For four years, the Council conducted an intense examination of the region, including extensive public “listening sessions” and involvement by thousands of residents. The Council’s final report, *Finding Common Ground: Conserving the Northern Forest*, was released in 1994. The Council’s report included recommendations for maintaining the traditional pattern of land ownership that had served as a foundation for the region’s economy, its communities and its culture.

(See www.northernforestlands.org/history.htm for details on the NFLC process and recommendations.)

Conservation Action

From the mid-1990s through 2005, many of the region’s large land owners sold and resold their lands in huge parcels adding up to millions of acres. Most of these sales were between timber companies, but some prime recreational areas and lakes shores were sold for development. The threat that ongoing land sales would permanently fragment the forest and diminish its value for forestry, wildlife habitat and recreation spurred intensive conservation efforts that have protected more than 3 million acres through conservation easement and purchases.

Action for Community and Economic Sustainability

In 1997, Steve Blackmer founded the Northern Forest Center to create the regional collaboration necessary to build a sustainable economy and revitalize the region's communities in conjunction with ongoing conservation. Blackmer and the founders of the Center believed that the Northern Forest could achieve economic and community vitality alongside conserving the forest.

In 2004, the North East *State* Foresters Association convened a 10th Anniversary Forum to examine progress on the original Northern Forest Lands Council recommendations and review what had changed in the region over the previous 10 years. In addition to reaffirming the still-relevant NFLC recommendations, this group also developed new ones.

The 10th Anniversary Forum concluded that action was needed on four fronts. It recommended that the region:

- 1: Invest public and private resources to develop and implement community and economic development strategies across the region to reinvigorate the rural economies;
- 2: Continue public and private investment in the conservation and forest stewardship;
- 3: Support private forest landowners in practicing sustainable forest management and good stewardship, including encouraging public access for recreation, and
- 4: Create a collaborative regional effort to follow through and ensure the implementation of the report's initiatives. The Forum urged also urged the governors to focus on the challenges and opportunities common across the region.

Today, the Northern Forest Center's programs address these recommendations and other challenges as we mobilize people to build a sustainable economy, revitalize the region's communities and conserve the landscape.

Learn about our vision and goals at [About the Northern Forest Center](http://www.northernforest.org/vision-sustainability.shtml).

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Learn about our programs at [What We Do](http://www.northernforest.org/programs-overview.shtml).

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