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### Community Forests: A Perspective

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**COMMUNITY FORESTS - A PERSPECTIVE**  
Missoula, Montana. June 16-19, 2005

**Introduction**

This perspective is organized into three parts, hopefully achieving a balance between information and argument - although that can sometimes be a moving target. When information becomes a little overbearing, we in historic preservation sometimes try to disguise it as context.

**HISTORY AS FRAMEWORK.** The first segment is an outline of the history of community forests in New England, establishing a perspective from which continued exploration can occur during the next several days. History as structural framework.

New England towns offer a beginning point, and the word "town" means a specific unit of land, often roughly six miles square, whose residents engage in self-government (at least they like to call it that). Towns differ from townships, the latter familiar units in various areas of the country; in turn, towns and townships differ from counties. Yet all can provide a nucleus for community, a word that has many different meanings in various parts of the country, encompassing land areas of vastly different size and unconfined by artificial political boundaries. That, too, is an important starting point.

To some degree, it's possible to extend this historical framework to other regions of the country. However, I do that cautiously for several reasons, including my own unfamiliarity with forest history in mid-western and western states.

Nevertheless, New England's long tradition of communal forestry suggests a number of relevant themes that warrant consideration during the coming days, and I'll try to isolate those themes.

**CRITIQUE.** Second, within that structural framework, I will also offer a critique, venturing beyond New England's borders to emphasize a single aspect of this history, the period between 1938 and 1949. During that decade, the U.S. Forest Service developed a program in community forestry, initially with the help of Nelson Brown, a faculty member at the New York State College of Forestry at Syracuse and friend of Franklin Roosevelt. However, the decline of that program after World War II represents an opportunity lost, one that we are just now trying to reclaim, at least if events over the past several years, including gatherings such as this, are any indication.

**GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE.** Third, critique of the past can be an empty exercise, and so I'll try to peer into the dim future. The importance of history lies in its ability to point us toward promising horizons and away from the snares into which others have already stumbled. We can identify at least one of those horizons, what I would describe as an interdisciplinary, humanistic approach to land-use quandaries. This strategy seems to work best in small, carefully defined land-units, by another name, communities. And, in the process, explain why someone from the tiny state of Vermont, who teaches in the field of

historic preservation, is standing before you here in Missoula, Montana.

Clearly, our discipline does have something to offer yours, as yours does ours. For those who champion historic preservation, history is visual and tactile, something we can see, touch, and feel. When that occurs, history comes alive, and it matters little whether we are speaking of important buildings, of engineering landmarks, or of the ancient traditions of forest stewardship still visible in New England town forests.

### **Part 1. History of Communal Forests**

We can identify five categories of community forests in New England, six if we include lands owned or administered by local conservation commissions, popular after 1960. We can also add a separate category, preceding European settlement, if we consider Native American practices as communal, which indeed they were. Many of these categories also can be found elsewhere around the country, at least in partial form.

**1. COMMON LAND (1630-1700).** These lands represent cultural traditions transplanted from England, where, under a feudal system of land tenure, those who worked the property of overlords gained common rights to arable fields, pastures, or woodlands, the latter typically used for grazing or for wood fuel. Rights to timber, distinct from wood, were less freely given.

In a more formal, legal sense of the word, those who own land in common each own an undivided right to use the whole

subject to restrictions against waste and abuse, and this rule became part of English common law.

New England town proprietors borrowed both concepts and, in the planning of New England towns during the early 17th century, relied extensively on the common ownership and use of woodlands. Unfortunately, by the end of the 17th century, most of these common lands had been transferred to private ownership. Other than in planned utopian settlements, few communities elsewhere in America were rooted in common land.

**2. PUBLIC LAND (1630-1900).** This is an important category, also beginning with the country's early 17th century towns, but distinct from common land. In New England states, and elsewhere, town charters for newly planned towns required proprietors to set aside public lots to sustain community institutions such as churches and schools, or to pay for the ministers and teachers who served those callings.

Unlike common lands, however, these lots often remained in public ownership, and some survive today. Such public lots are extremely important remnants of New England's early history of town planning, and produced income from a variety of timber products.

Different types of public lands continued to be set aside during the nineteenth century in some regions of the country. Poor farm woodlots are examples, often making profitable use of timber products, and these public lands are also part of the history of community forests.

**3. TOWN FORESTS. 1900-1977.** Town forests, sometimes called municipal forests, are a statutory class of community-owned woodlands authorized by state enabling legislation enacted in three New England states between 1913 and 1915: New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Vermont; New England's three remaining states were slow to enact similar laws (1927, 1929, and 1939). However, Pennsylvania, in 1909, and New York, in 1912, both preceded New England's efforts, and each state developed thriving programs. Several mid-western states - Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, also developed substantial programs.

Town forests were established principally for the cultivation of timber, a means to reclaim idle, cutover wasteland. Nevertheless, other factors such as recreational, educational, ecological, and aesthetic benefits often influenced community intentions. Following passage of conservation commission enabling legislation between 1957 (Massachusetts) and 1977 (Vermont), New England's town forest movement declined. However, many of these forests survive and are actively managed and used.

**4. MUNICIPAL WATERSHED PLANTATIONS (1895).** These woodlands are owned and managed principally by public or public-service utility companies to improve and protect both the quality and amount of surface drainage collected for municipal reservoirs. Professional water works engineering begins in New England in 1882 with founding of the New England Water Works Association. Many of the region's municipal reservoirs were built between 1880

and 1930, and these projects typically involved the acquisition of surrounding watershed lands.

Companies began reforestation projects during the mid-1890s (Concord and Nashua, New Hampshire), and had begun to implement forestry management plans by 1901 (New Haven, Connecticut). Municipal watershed forests became the region's best managed and most economically profitable community woodlands, and a large number were eventually classified as town forests.

**5. FOREST PARKS (1860-1940).** In contrast to town forests, forest parks are devoted principally (and sometimes exclusively) to recreational purposes and are frequently traced to gifts of land from benefactors who often specified such intentions. Some are also described as forest reservations.

Forests as parks provided opportunities for quiet recreation without the expensive planting and landscape design associated with America's pleasure grounds, inspired by New York's Central Park. In many ways, too, forest parks provided a more authentic model for the country's romantic period of park planning. Lynn Woods in Massachusetts, formally established in 1888 but actively used much earlier, is among the region's first examples of a public forest park.

In purest form, forest parks are patches of woodland with little more than narrow footpaths to accommodate human use; Indian Ridge in Andover, Massachusetts (1897), and Battell Woods in Middlebury, Vermont (1901), are two of the region's best examples. Other woodland parks have gradually succumbed to

extensive improvements to encourage public activity, often to the detriment of forest cover. Forest Park in Springfield, Massachusetts, begun in 1884, is one such example. New England towns continued to acquire forests as parks until the late 1930s, and the Children's Woods in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, is an example from this later period.

**6. THEMATIC CONTINUITY.** Although framing categories by period and general characteristic has organizational value, the themes that weave and tie these various categories together are even more revealing. One is the simple continuum of community forestry over a period that now spans five centuries in New England. That well established tradition extends to many other regions, as well. Another is the evidence of stewardship throughout this continuum - a very direct relationship between the use of forest resources and community welfare. These traditions of stewardship have evolved over time, reflecting the changing cultural attitudes that partly define these different communal forests.

A third is the influence of European practices, whether in the traditions of woodsmanship transplanted by 17th century English colonists, or in the borrowing of forestry science from Germany at the close of the 19th century. In 1890, Prussian-born Bernard Fernow, as head of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forestry Division, urged the inauguration of a movement to establish community forests in America, observing that citizens in many German communities, rather than paying taxes, instead



received dividend checks at year's end from the sale of communal timber. Fernow also pointed to Zurich's Sihlwald as a model for community forestry.

There is considerable irony, here, too, because during the 1880s and 1890s Americans began looking to Germany for models of communal forests, long after New England had given up its ancient common lands. England, too, abandoned its common land systems more readily than in Germanic countries, despite the fact that communal societies developed in both parts of Europe from similar roots.

A fourth theme is also very important, namely that community forests are as much a part of urban and village history as they are part of forest history; such places are, and always have been, important pieces of community structure. Today, we organize our towns by names such as Main Street, residential neighborhood, greenbelt, strip, interchange, or mall. In 17th and 18th century New England communities, counterparts were village center, meetinghouse hill, wharf, landing, cow common, ox pasture, minister's lot, or cedar swamp. In each case, the names in both historic and modern communities signify important relationships between land places and human needs, and today's town forests continue that tradition.

More importantly, whether we regard these places as cultural or natural resources seems unimportant. In truth, the two merge to the extent that distinctions become unnecessary. And, we should pay close attention to the potential benefits that can

flow from interdisciplinary accord between the stewards of the built and natural environment.

## **Part 2. Town Forests and the U.S. Forest Service**

With our structural outline carefully assembled and tied together thematically, we can begin to focus more intently on certain aspects of this history. In particular, the town forest movement is worthy of close scrutiny. This campaign achieved its most successful period of activity during the 1920s, at least if we consider the number of communities setting aside parcels of land as town forests.

Moreover, if we look backward in an effort to identify when New England communities first began a comprehensive campaign to reclaim the common lands long ago given up to private ownership, we start with the town forest movement.

The Massachusetts Forestry Association, led by its Executive Secretary Harris Reynolds, helped to place New England in the fore of this campaign. The period extending roughly between 1913 and 1930, represented the movement's plantation phase, when towns were encouraged to acquire and plant parcels of land with fast-growing coniferous types, typically white, red, and scotch pine, or spruce and fir. Existing stands that had grown to maturity from farmland abandoned half a century earlier were often harvested to show local officials that economic returns were indeed possible.

To advance the cause, the MFA strategically appealed to the public in the broadest possible ways, touting a long list of benefits: reclamation of idle lands; concerns about regional timber scarcity; the failure of private industry to act as stewards of forest resources; profitable use of lands protecting watersheds; revenue; employment; support for local wood products industries; and public welfare.

Underlying all was a desire to educate the public about proper forest management - forestry for the people as Harris Reynolds described it. Recreational and aesthetic benefits were also part of this mix, but the town forest campaign was built upon a plan to cultivate timber. This is a fundamental aspect of its history.

Nevertheless, by the end of the 1920s, those who championed town forests had developed concerns about the ability of local governments to manage small tracts of woodland profitably. Political, administrative, and economic obstacles to effective forestry management had begun to surface, ranging from fickle town governments, to competing local interests, and to the typically poor quality of cut-over lands acquired. Many citizens also voiced objection about loss of tax revenues, an unfortunate complaint that continues to surface today.

By the late 1920s, the MFA and others had begun to emphasize the critical need for silviculture - weeding, thinning, pruning, and releasing. However, efforts to provide technical assistance in these areas were often negated by concern about control by

state foresters. As a result, skepticism about the commercial productivity of local forests began to grow, opening the way for greater emphasis on recreational and aesthetic benefits as the principal reasons for towns to acquire woodland.

This important contest between commercial and recreational values of town forests establishes a context for U.S. Forest Service participation in the country's town forest movement, sporadic at best before 1933. Gifford Pinchot, Fernow's successor, had expressed reluctance at becoming involved in local matters, but a few of his foresters at least inspected important community woodlands, Maine's Brunswick Commons, for example. Worth mentioning, too, is the publication of Forest Worker beginning in 1924. That newsletter often cited progress being made on town forests in various parts of the country. Nevertheless, these efforts amounted to only marginal support.

Franklin Roosevelt, however, was far more optimistic about community forestry, and his presidency marks a shift in policy. As governor of New York, Roosevelt had supported a vigorous municipal forest program in that state, and as president he asked Nelson Brown to assist the Forest Service in developing a national program. Brown traveled abroad to study European city forests, including the Sihlwald, and upon his return in 1938, compiled a monograph titled Community Forests, published by the U.S. Forest Service that year. Aided by Brown's work, the forest service began to distribute extensive educational materials, marking the beginning of focused federal participation in the

town forest movement. The forest service defined community forests broadly to include lands owned by schools, churches, and 4-H clubs as well as towns, cities, and counties. The service also focused special attention on town forests in Danville and Newington, New Hampshire, to demonstrate that small forests could produce substantial economic returns. This strategy foretold the program's principal contribution, public education.

Although he strongly supported community forestry, Roosevelt was also aware of concerns about commercial returns from these lands. In 1933, the year Roosevelt became president, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture issued a document titled A National Plan for American Forestry, known as the Copeland Report. The plan recommended increased public ownership of woodlands, including community forests, and recognized the potential educational and recreational value of these local woodlands. Yet the report also sounded a less optimistic note, considering these forests to be unprofitable in any larger plan for timber production.

In 1938, Congress finally picked up the pieces of the Copeland Report and established the Bankhead Committee to investigate American forests. That committee issued its report in 1941, recommending that Congress authorize funding for the expansion of public forests, including community forests. However, the Forest Service ultimately recommended deleting the provision regarding community forests, anticipating that the plan to subsidize these woodlands would not pay for itself. Roosevelt acquiesced, and failure of the Bankhead Committee proposal marked

a turning point in the forest service's program. It limped along until 1949, and the broader town forest movement lingered until the early 1960s, later in a few states such as Vermont. However, the death of Harris Reynolds in 1953 symbolically marked the end of any focused efforts to manage town forests for the cultivation of timber.

Today, it's worth examining Roosevelt's rejection of the Bankhead Committee's funding proposal. In one sense, it's unfair to judge that decision harshly without considering the full context, much of which has been omitted here. Yet the administration's narrow focus on the weak commercial value of community forests may have caused those who were involved to overlook another concern, namely the growing divide over forest use.

**Questions.** Looking back from our present vantage point, we can now see that this divide has represented a substantial impasse over the last half-century (or longer). Could the Forest Service have peered into the future a little more deliberately in 1941? If so, could they have recognized the special value of community forests as meeting grounds, places where a balance between commercial, recreational, and ecological uses could be achieved? If so, could they have recognized that, despite limited commercial value, these small parcels held potential as public demonstration forests? And, if so, would this have helped to increase public awareness about the prospects for balancing competing concerns about forest use? In turn, would larger

segments of the public have become engaged in meaningful debate about that subject, leading to enlightened outcomes?

If we review much of the progressive literature promoting town forests during the 1920s, particularly the many bulletins prepared by the Massachusetts Forestry Association, but also some of the Forest Service's own literature from the late 1930s, these seem to be fair questions.

And, we can ask one more important question, which leads us very directly to the present, and to the matters at hand. Had the forest service adopted a different course in 1941, would the federal, state and local partnerships necessary to implement these meetings of the mind, partnerships just beginning to take shape today, have occurred with greater frequency?

Partnerships, for example, such as that developed in Granby, Vermont, a small community in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. There, in 1990 the town acquired Cow Mountain Pond Forest from Champion International Paper Company, with funding assistance from the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program and from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, a state organization. The town's matching share came from cakewalks and potluck suppers.

The partnership is a complex one, but a balance of commercial, recreational, and ecological uses has been achieved.

The town controls the timber rights on the entire land and is the fee owner (absent development rights) of approximately 140 acres, including Cow Mountain Pond and a 200-foot buffer around

the pond. The U.S. Forest Service owns the majority of the land, 1660 acres, in fee title, and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and participating land trusts monitor compliance with the easement that conveyed development rights. The Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation reviews timber-sale activities and provides technical assistance for preparation and implementation of a forest management plan.

Today, the value of recalling history lies, not in critique of the federal program or in regret for what might have been, but, rather, as an aid in seeking prospects similar to that in Granby. We can gain from history when it reveals that opportunities once lost can still be reclaimed. Granby's model thus points us to the future and, hopefully, to an explanation of why my field, historic preservation, may be of some value to the goals you seek here.

### **3. The Future of Community Forestry.**

As mentioned at the outset, town forests are important pieces of community structure, as much a part of urban and village history as of forest history; as much cultural resources as natural resources. Curiously, in America, the protection of cultural and natural resources has evolved separately. We might ask why, but the answers require lengthy explanation. Instead, we can simply observe that community forests hold potential, not just as places where competing forest uses - commercial, recreational and ecological - can be balanced, but also as places



where this divide between cultural and natural resource protection can be bridged.

Benton MacKaye, writer, philosopher, and conservation planner summarized this relationship well in a 1929 essay titled "A New England Recreation Plan." Underscoring the need to combine both the primeval and the mechanistic, he writes:

"And so the forest is the root of man's society as the city is its head and flower. A civilization without its city would be a headless one; and a civilization without its forest is a rootless one.

Forest and city must grow side by side in any balanced civilization."

More than seventy years have elapsed since that writing, but this integration of cultural and natural resource protection continues to prove elusive.

Perhaps surprisingly, your hopes of pointing to community forests to show the viability of balanced forest use are in perfect harmony with our goal of preserving history. Clearly, community forests can become public demonstration lands for each of us, with many common benefits. In truth, we in historic preservation may be better allies than you realize.

For instance, if we erase the history of timber cultivation in town forests, we lose a fundamental aspect of these cultural resources. In New Hampshire, the Warner Town Forest is one of New England's best examples. Established in 1919, the forest today is criss-crossed by hiking trails, but the town provides

leaflets for self-guided walks, pointing to the commercial value and typical uses of various tree species. Old scout or logging-sled trails are also identified. Understanding the complete story of that forest in turn gives us greater insight about the town itself. Indeed, the forest explains much of the town's economic, social, political, and physical history.

What a shame it would be to lose that history, to lose that very intimate connection between community and forest. And, it matters little whether that loss occurs as the result of ignoring the history of timber cultivation, or as the result of poor management, an abandoning of the long traditions of stewardship that also characterize those woodlands.

In either case, we in historic preservation describe this as loss of historic integrity. Our overall sense of history is weakened; history becomes less tactile; less visible; our understanding is incomplete. And, if our understanding is incomplete, we lack awareness as we ponder the future and the inevitable decisions that confront us. I suspect that those of you who look into these forests but instead see nature might sense very similar concerns.

Today, as we try to peer into the future with deliberation, the need for models to develop community consensus becomes imperative. Only an interdisciplinary approach can succeed, one that engages as many aspects of community structure as possible. In turn, this means establishing alliances, or at least working relationships, with the many disciplines that contribute to

community: housing, commerce, transportation, education, social services, public utilities, conservation commissions. The list is a long one, and nothing less can be expected to really solve human problems.

In truth, we simply can't escape the human aspect of resource conservation, and this is true whether we speak of natural or cultural resources. For those who cling too closely to a nature apart from humankind, the certainty of human influence inevitably becomes clear. For those historians who cling too closely to the past, the indomitable nature of change invariably must be confronted. Certainly, this is one direction that discussion during the coming days can take.

#### **4. Confronting Change**

That said, let me conclude by quickly focusing on a few steps that may lead toward greater collaboration between our two disciplines. It seems to me that one important question concerns the degree to which history or nature can be altered without compromising integrity for all human and non-human species. Historic preservation has struggled long and hard with part of that question, and the National Park Service has adopted very specific models, called standards, to measure the subtleties of change that take place. Many of these models assume that a fusion of past and present is necessary.

One is called restoration, by definition an effort to accurately return a resource to a specific period in its history.

Other terms, preservation and reconstruction, also have specific meanings and are achieved through different means; stabilization simply to prevent deterioration from advancing, in the case of preservation; rebuilding from records after a resource has been destroyed, in the case of reconstruction.

A single project can combine elements of all three, or even incorporate a fourth approach, rehabilitation. That describes preserving a resource by adapting it to a new and sometimes different use. Change is not only permissible, it is often recognized as the surest means to extend building life. This approach points to an important difference between our two disciplines: We can't abandon buildings to nature and expect them to survive. Instead, for all but a few unusual examples, we must find some economic use for those buildings. Yet we also recognize that change should not compromise the underlying historic integrity of the building; we must still be able to sense and touch the building's past, be capable of mentally separating those portions where changes have taken place. This concept of rehabilitation, or adaptive use as it is sometimes called, may have utility in your discipline, as well. Let's consider two examples.

**Hudson and Manhattan Railroad Powerhouse, Jersey City.**

Designed in 1908 by architect John Oakman, and supplied power to the Hudson River tunnels used by the Hudson and Manhattan RR, the subway line that connected New York and New Jersey. The powerhouse supplied power to both sides of the river, including

the Hudson Terminal in New York City, at the time the world's largest office and train-terminal complex. However, the railroad filed bankruptcy in 1963 and the Hudson Terminal was demolished to open space for the World Trade Towers. The tunnels now belong to the Port Authority Trans-Hudson Corporation (PATH), which continues to operate subways between New York and New Jersey, but the building is declining and water-front real estate is valuable. For a period, demolition seemed inevitable, but a developer recently proposed adapting the building to a large hotel.

**Questions.** Faced with such circumstances, we begin by asking a number of questions. Does the new use fit well into the old building? If not, changes inevitably will overwhelm the building's historic integrity. Would preservation's goals be better served by rejecting that opportunity and waiting for another proposal more sympathetic to the building's industrial heritage? What is the risk of loss during the interim?

**Essex Junction Village Forest.** For a long period, one of Vermont's most actively managed municipal forests. Acquisition of lands for watershed protection began before 1900, and a forestation plan had been implemented by 1923. By 1930, more than 400,000 scotch, white, and red pine seedlings had been planted, and in 1931 a detailed timber stand map was drawn by Charles Lockard and Huntley Palmer of the Vermont Forest Service. However, in 1978 the city of Essex Junction became part of the Champlain Water District, serving Burlington and surrounding

towns, and the Essex Junction reservoirs became obsolete. Much of the land was subsequently sold for commercial development, although large forested areas remain open to public use.

**Questions.** Here, we might ask a similar set of questions. Is this an acceptable adaptive use? Can we still sense and touch the forest's history? Is this type of new use wholly incompatible with our sensibilities? Or, is it a question of degree or careful design? Would it make a difference if the companies establishing offices here (some of whom may have deep pockets) contributed to a management plan for the remaining area? Guaranteed the retention of forest cover in perpetuity, notwithstanding increases in property values and lost tax revenue to the town? Here, too, we find another commonality - the worrisome tendency of incremental erosion - as true for buildings as forests. If we take this step now, does the resulting damage to integrity assure that subsequent erosion is almost certain to occur? And, occur with less resistance?

### **Conclusion**

I'm not sure that the answers to these questions are as important, here, as recognition that these models exist in our field and may have at least some utility in yours. Don't misunderstand me, they don't always work, and I'm often frustrated by our discipline's seeming inability to impose its standards with consistency and with satisfactory outcomes. The best examples are often those where community voice favoring

stewardship is loud and strong. And, in a field where many quandaries are unresolved, I remain certain about few truths. One, however, is that alliances among like-minded groups help to strengthen that voice, and an interdisciplinary, humanistic approach is the surest path to those alliances.

Robert McCullough  
June 17, 2005