

The Creation of the Walpole Town Forest, 1916

The Walpole Town Forest will be celebrating the 100th Anniversary of its creation on May 1, 2016. This article is the fourth in a series describing subjects pertaining to the Town Forest, from the first recorded deed in 1659 to modern times.

This article describes the events leading up to the creation of the Town Forest and its dedication in 1916. I have chosen to split this topic into two components: The Land and The Idea.

The Land:

In the previous article I discussed the Blackburn property, some 69 ½ acres along the east bank of the Neponset River near White Bridge. Several buildings were constructed on this parcel to house the family's textile equipment manufacturing business. The business went bankrupt in 1890. J. H. Blackburn passed away in 1900 leaving his granddaughter, Eva Caldwell, as executor. She sold 50 acres to Horace Briggs, who later sells the land to George A. Plimpton.

Plimpton was a wealthy businessman who split his time between Walpole and NY City. (His family established Plimpton Press, a textbook publisher whose plant in Norwood employed over 1,200 people at one point). He owned several hundred acres around what is now the High School, Town Forest and Water Department. In fact, in 1907 Plimpton donated the land to the Town on which the high school resides.

The remaining 19 ½ acres, including the Blake Estate which stood near White Bridge until the 1970's, was kept as rental property.

The Idea:

Charles Sumner Bird, Jr. was born into the wealthy Bird family of East Walpole in 1883. He attended Harvard and traveled through Europe extensively at his father's request.

He was also a member of the Walpole Town Planning Committee. In fact, so strong was his interest in the nascent field of Town Planning that he and his committee actually published a book on the subject: Bird, C.S. Jr. (1917). "Town Planning for Small Communities", New York, NY: Appleton & Co.

The chapter in that book entitled "Town Forests" describes Bird's observations on community forests throughout Europe. Here, the land is owned by the town, the expenses are paid by residents, but income also goes back to residents. It is clear that he wants to see that model established in the US, but especially in Massachusetts. He provides arguments for- and the benefits of establishing municipal forests.

Around the turn of the 20th century, all of New England was recovering from the clear cutting that was practiced in the later decades of the 1800's. The environmental consequences of clear cutting, such as massive soil erosion and the flooding of riverside saw and grist mills, led to some of the earliest environmental laws enacted in the US. For more information, search for the "Weeks Act", which created the US Forest Service. Also, the eastern US was realizing that in the time after the clear cuts, before the next generation of forest products came in, that for the first time pulp wood and lumber would need to be imported from Canada.

Bird traveled through Europe in the early 1900's at the request of his father to research equipment and techniques for papermaking. The Bird Company was forced to reinvent itself from being a manufacturer of fine writing papers to building materials after a massive factory fire. Paper manufacturing uses wood as its raw material, so as Bird visited the companies that built paper-making equipment, he also visited the forests that supplied the wood.

Here he heard of the almost complete deforestation of the Black Forest in the 1800's. What was once a 2,200 square mile mixed forest of deciduous trees and fir was replanted with spruce, which had commercial value and grew quickly. The first forest management practices were developed in the Black Forest, for example where select small areas are forested and then replanted, as opposed to being clear cut and left to nature to reforest.

Another feature of these communal forests was their economics. Bird learned of some 1500 towns in Germany where forest products brought in sufficient income where there were no income taxes levied. Also in some 500 of those towns, residents actually received income of a few hundred dollars per year.

Though much of the forests in Europe were managed to produce forest products and income, another benefit which observed Bird was the use of the forests for watershed protection and for recreational uses.

Many communal forests also had an active role in the local economies, providing jobs for lumberjacks, transporters, saw mills, raw materials for artisans and goods to be marketed by shops. The forests also provided jobs for people in difficult economic times or in the winter, when some seasonal jobs disappear.

What Bird envisioned for the state as a whole was a vast network of communal forests. He cited the loss of potential income to towns due to "waste land", which was basically land that was once clear cut then left to reforest naturally with scrub vegetation of no commercial value. Bird reasoned that for a minimal investment in saplings, in one generation's time hundreds of thousands of acres in the state could be reaping sustainable income. He didn't want to rely on private ownership, because the long term commitment of time could not be assured.

Such was the value that he saw in the communal forests of Europe, the Old World, and this is what he wanted to bring to the New World, to the state and to his home town of Walpole, in particular.

In 1913, the state passed a law allowing towns to create their own communal forests. The role of the Bird family in helping to influence the law is not documented, but C.S Bird Sr. had twice run for governor and was very well connected. The first place to act was the city of Fitchburg, home of the first municipal forest in the state. Walpole is home to the first Town Forest in the state.

Bird was also a member of the Walpole Park Board. In 1914 the Board developed a plan for the creation of a Town Forest in Walpole. The plan was created by John Nolen, a recent graduate of Harvard's new School of Landscape Architecture (Nolen would later go on to design Memorial Park across from Town Hall and Bird Park in East Walpole).

While crafting the Plan for the Town Forest, Bird no doubt met with his father's pal George Plimpton about the idea of a town-owned forest that could provide wood and income to the

Town. Plimpton agreed to donate the first 51.1 acres for the new Town Forest. The Town Forest was created with an appropriation of \$500 at the April 1916 Town Meeting. The Town Forest was originally planned to be dedicated in 1915, but World War I made it impossible to get saplings to plant.

Bird was said to have wanted a 600-1,000 acre town forest on both sides of the Neponset. In addition to wood and income, it would provide employment; provide watershed protection and recreational opportunities.

The Town Forest was dedicated in a grand ceremony on May 5, 1916. In addition to Bird and Plimpton, Lt. Gov. Calvin Coolidge was on hand for the event. Some 900 young children were on hand to plant the first acre of white pine saplings. Using the children were Bird's idea because of the long range view that forest managers held in Europe. These children would be the beneficiaries of the wood, the beautiful park, the jobs and the income that the new forest would provide. Having them plant the trees would forge a connection to the forest. Really, it was a brilliant idea.

And so it was that Charles S Bird created the Walpole Town Forest, the first Town Forest in the state, based in large part to the practices he observed in Europe.

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The Town Forest Committee is still looking for your memories (stories, photos) of the Town Forest. We have created a website for your photos taken in the Town Forest and stories of your Town Forest memories. Please go to walpolematownforest@gmail.com. If you need help scanning your photos, contact Gary Riggott through the Town Forest website.