

Swim for the River

ADIRONDACK PARK

Adirondack Park and the National Parks Movement
(U.S. and New York State History)

The Hudson River begins in the shadow of Mount Marcy, in the heart of New York state's immense Adirondack Park. The story of the river is linked inextricably to the story of the park, and the park is part of a national epic that played out over the nineteenth century, when most of the United States was mapped, settled, and populated.



Mount Auburn Cemetery and Park, 1847

The idea of a park, or land set aside for health and recreation, emerged in the 1800's. As urban populations increased, so did pollution, epidemics, and the stress of fast-paced city life. Travelers returning from Europe saw a potential solution in the public gardens of Vienna and London. The idea that nature was essential to humanity's physical and mental well-being took root and resulted in the creation of **city**

parks. The earliest parks in American cities were in cemeteries, where the available space served a dual purpose.

The boldest expression of the movement was the conception of New York's Central Park. In 1844, **William Cullen Bryant**, a poet who was also the editor of the *New York Evening Post*, observed that "commerce is devouring inch by inch ... the island [Manhattan], and if we would rescue any part of it ... it must be done now." The horticulturalist **Andrew Jackson Downing** lobbied for a park, which local businesses began to see as a way to raise the



Central Park opening ceremony

value of adjacent real estate. The pressure from these commercial interests eventually swayed the legislature, and in 1858 a partially completed **Central Park** opened in New York City with great fanfare.

Meanwhile the idea of national parks was gaining acceptance. They had first been proposed by the intrepid artist and adventurer **George Catlin**, who spent several years on the Western frontier painting landscapes and Indians in native regalia. Catlin envisioned a national park to showcase the wilds of the West and hold them in trust for future generations. At first



George Catlin

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Catlin was both literally and metaphorically a voice in the wilderness, but his idea grew in the hearts and minds of Americans.



Yosemite Valley, by Albert Bierstadt

In 1860, due largely to the new science of **wet-plate photography** and grandiose landscape paintings by **Albert Bierstadt** and **Thomas Moran**, Yosemite Valley captured the public's imagination. A bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate designating the area as a national park. After assurances that the land was unsuitable for development and that the bill would not cost the government money, it was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on June 30, 1864.

The first national park was created near the end of the Civil War. Perhaps Lincoln

and the men who had pushed for the legislation conceived of Yosemite (and parks in general) as a place of respite from death and devastation.

The unofficial chairman of the first commission overseeing Yosemite Park was **Frederick Law Olmsted**, one of the architects of Central Park. He wrote a **report** that would influence how Americans thought about parks. He maintained that parks should be created for two purposes. The first was the commercial value the government gained through preservation of a natural wonder. The second reason was more controversial.

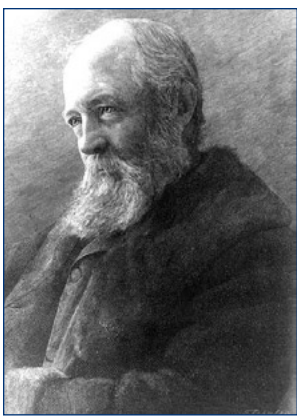
Olmsted wrote:

It is the main duty of government...to provide means of protection for all its citizens in the pursuit of happiness against the obstacles, otherwise insurmountable, which selfishness of individuals or combinations of individuals is liable to interpose to that pursuit.

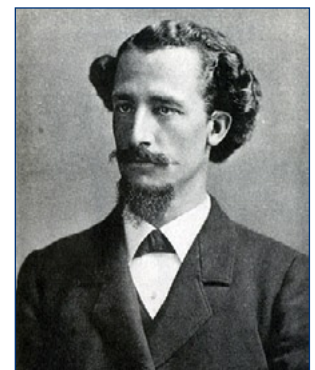
He went on to explain the healing qualities of nature and the dignity with which it should be maintained. Olmsted believed that intrusions into the landscape should be minimal. He proposed to build only structures that were absolutely necessary. Anything that detracted from the natural landscape he viewed as an act of destruction.

The **national parks movement** gained momentum. Within ten years Yellowstone Park had been created in Montana.

Meanwhile, in New York State, an adventurous cartographer named **Verplanck Colvin** fell in love with the Adirondack Mountains and made the first proposal for an Adirondack Park. Colvin understood that if the region were to be protected, the commercial benefits of preservation had to be demonstrated. His report to the New York Museum of Natural History in 1870 showed how deforestation was affecting water levels in the Hudson River and, consequently, commercial navigation. He concluded:



Frederick Law Olmsted



Verplanck Colvin

The remedy for this is the creation of an Adirondack Park or timber preserve, under the charge of a forest warden and deputies. The “burning off” of mountains should be visited with suitable penalties; the cutting of pines under ten inches or one foot in diameter should be prohibited.



Lake Tear of the Clouds

In 1872 the New York legislature appointed Colvin superintendent of a state topographical survey of the Adirondacks. *Traveling over uncharted territory*, he traced the Hudson River to its source on Mount Marcy. There he discovered a small body of water he referred to as “a minute unpretending tear of the clouds ... shivering in the breezes of the mountains.” Colvin called this place Summit Waters. It was later renamed Lake Tear of the Clouds in accordance with his romantic description.

That same year New York created a commission to examine the possibility of a park in the Adirondacks. Among its members were Colvin and *Franklin Hough*, a proponent of scientific forestry. The commission’s first report, demanding that land be purchased and protected immediately, was widely ignored.

But by the early 1880’s the idea of the park was being taken seriously because, as Colvin had predicted, the Hudson River was indeed running dry. Businesses that relied on river water for power started clamoring for a timber preserve upstream. Hunters who saw their favorite game dying out rallied behind the periodical *Forest and Stream*, which pushed for the protection of the Adirondack hunting ground. Farmers and tourists watched sportsmen pursue game to the edge of extinction and demanded other restrictions. People wrote to *The Nation* and *The New York Times* lamenting the desolation of the northern wilderness.

Demand for charcoal and lumber continued to devour the forest. Train engines sparked fires that ravaged the Midwest. New Yorkers worried that a railroad built through the Adirondacks could cause equivalent or worse damage. The legislature reviewed many park proposals but enacted none.

It took a serious drought in 1883 to propel the passage of a law prohibiting the sale of state-owned land in the Adirondacks. Ten thousand dollars was set aside to purchase adjoining lands under disputed title, and \$15,000 was given to finance Colvin for locating and surveying detached state lands in those counties. But victory was short-lived. Unrestricted logging and hunting continued. The land wasn’t sold, but it wasn’t saved. Small committees set up by the legislature promoted the idea of a timber preserve, but conflicting *political currents* impeded progress.



Effects of logging in the nineteenth century

On May 15, 1885, a law was passed stating: “The lands now or hereafter constituting the Forest Preserve shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be sold, nor shall they be leased or taken by any person or corporation, public or private.”

Nevertheless, illegal logging continued and local townspeople refused to acknowledge the preserve. Wardens, commissioners, and inspectors often looked the other way or were unable to stop what they saw. Public officials were complicit in undermining forest preservation. In 1893, New York **Governor Roswell P. Flower** gave the Forest Commission permission to sell wood from the park. In 1894 17,468 acres of spruce were sold for \$53,400.

That same year there was a convention to revise the New York State Constitution. Proponents of the Forest Preserve saw an opportunity to set the land beyond reach of politicians. A reworded “forever wild” clause was submitted as part of the new constitution. After extensive debate and testimonials, the clause was approved by a vote of 112 to zero.

What became Article VII, Section 7, of the new constitution read: “The lands of the state, now owned or hereafter acquired, constituting the Forest Preserve as now fixed by law, shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be leased, sold, or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed.”

The final two sentences gave the park protection that cannot be overruled by any elected official, agency or legislation. Only a constitutional amendment can change it. The revised New York State Constitution, containing the **“forever wild” clause**, was approved by the people and went into effect January 1, 1895.

More than a hundred years later there are almost no traces of the human depredations the land once endured. Plant and animal life flourishes. Some industry continues in the privately owned sections of the park but is overseen by a state-funded planning and management committee.

Adirondack Park now contains nearly six million acres, almost half of which belongs to the people of New York. The Forest Commission expanded to include a staff of sixty and eleven board members. The park is protected by rangers and forestry staff.

The idea of a park is now widely accepted: whether a small patch of grass sprouting



Adirondack Park

among acres of asphalt or a stretch of majestic landscape pushing the boundaries of your vision, nature has been invited back into many cities and states. The degree of preservation, however, remains a swinging pendulum pushed by restraint and exploitation.

Do you have a local park? Find out what’s going on there and how you can become involved. Take a walk or go camping and imagine what it was like for early Americans to be enveloped in a world largely unshaped by humans. Nature sustains, feeds, and clothes us, and the more we understand it, the more we appreciate what we lose if we destroy it.