The Evolution of the Great Lakes’ Forests: Terror to Treasure

Camden Burd

Abstract

The story of the Great Lakes, as defined by those who sought to control it, is one ranging from terror to treasure. Man’s approach with the American natural world has been a continual change throughout the past two centuries. In no area is this more apparent than the in Great Lakes region of the United States. First offering opportunities of cheap farmland for settlers, the land later provided for a greater demand for lumber. As settlers tried fit the land to their needs, their ideas and perceptions about that land changed. Originally the wilderness inspired sentiments of terror. As time and technology progressed those sentiments were transformed into exploitation and ultimately conservation. The need for conservation was required to protect the economic stability the landscape had defined for its inhabitants.

This essay identifies and approaches the major themes and changes in environmental perception. Using the environmental histories of the Great Lakes region, as well as Thomas Cox’s This Well –Wooded Land: Americans and their Forests from Colonial Times to the Present and Michael Williams’ Americans and their Forests, as well as various journal entries of original pioneers, including Alexis de Tocqueville’s first-hand experience in the Michigan wilderness, this paper argues the human experience in the Great Lakes landscape has changed drastically over time. As the needs and perceptions of the inhabitants change, so too, does the use of the land. The Great Lakes region is a complex story of the land and its people. Their ideas have changed from terror of isolation to an attempt to treasure valuable economic resources. Ultimately, the Great Lakes landscape is scarred by the ideas and goals the inhabitants attempted to impose on the land.

Camden Burd is a recent graduate of the University of Utah where he studied in history. He is currently preparing to apply to graduate schools.

Camden is a member of the Alpha Rho chapter of Phi Alpha Theta.
Man’s approach in regards to the American natural world has been a continual change, throughout the past two centuries. In no area is this more apparent than the Great Lakes region. First offering opportunities of cheap farmland for settlers, the land later provided for a greater demand for lumber. As settlers moved into the region, they tried to shape the land to their needs, their ideas and perceptions about that land changed. Early emotions of terror towards a wild and untamed landscape transformed to an ideology of economic growth and exploitation. As the resources of the region were exploited, both the United States government, and those that inhabited the region, sought change. Exploitation came in the form of over chopping and increased chance of massive fires. Forest fires and excessive chopping affected official policy towards the nation’s forests. Exploitation also threatened tree regeneration and the future of the forests. Ultimately, the need for conservation was required to protect the economic and aesthetic importance the landscape. The landscape of the Great Lakes region is reflective of the beliefs the inhabitants held towards their environment. As the beliefs have changed overtime likewise, the policies and uses of the forests have changed. The story of the Great Lakes forests, as defined by those who sought to control the land, is one ranging from an emotion of terror to an economic treasure.

In the early 19th century, American pioneers first moved into the Great Lakes region. Upon settlement, settlers were defining the seemingly untouched landscape with prior Judeo-Christian beliefs. In the eyes of an early pioneer, The Great Lakes’ wilderness resonated a terrifying atmosphere for settlers. Pioneers spoke about fear of isolation in the midst of the forested landscape. One account, of an early pioneer’s experience in the Michigan frontier, exemplifies the concerns regarding the wilderness:

The trees must fall though they held their sheltering arms over our house, because danger lurked in their very shadow and we must have breathing space and sunlight around our house. The trees were an obstruction, an enemy of extirpate, not a thing of beauty of a friend to be cherished.1

It is evident that wilderness was a feared enemy to be conquered. The woods that resonated emotions of terror also held great economic opportunity. Pioneers, equipped with axes, cleared the lands and saw its abundance. Fertile land, constant supply of water, abundance of wildlife, and endless wood resource provided settlers with economic opportunity. As settlers dropped their original fears of the wilderness, they became attached to new ideas of prosperity. The wooded foe was an enemy to the early pioneer and the practice of clearing lands to create sustainable farms was the settler's plan to conquer the forests of the Great Lakes region.

One such story is with the early settler Dexter Briggs. Briggs was an early 19th century pioneer near Plymouth, Michigan. He first settled Michigan on his 80-acre plot, looking to create a profitable farmland. Briggs used the normal methods to clear the forest from his land (girdling\(^2\), burning, and chopping) and cleared all but a small portion of trees in the corner of his plot. The pioneer appeared to have succeeded at frontier dreams, creating a small plot to create a profitable farm. In his mind, wilderness had been conquered. However, as he had finished battling the wooded nemesis that flourished throughout the Great Lakes region, a new economic opportunity sprang up. The trees that once proved a hindrance soon became a source of income for many who lived in the Great Lakes.\(^3\)

Alexis de Toqueville, in his 1831 trek through the Michigan forests, noted the dense and seemingly untouched forested landscape:\(^4\)

\begin{quote}
Here not only man is missing, but even the voices of animals are not heard.
The smallest of them have left the regions to go nearer to human habitation...
one would say even the Creator has turned his face away and that the forces of nature are paralyzed...
Uselessly do you climb the hills, everywhere the forest seems to go along with you, and this same forest stretches before you even to the arctic pole and the Pacific Ocean.\(^5\)
\end{quote}

---

\(^2\) Girdling: the practice of stripping away the bark layer of a tree in a ring around the main trunk causing death to the entire tree.

\(^3\) Barillas, 18.


While logging continued to run rampant in eastern states, the geographic isolation left the Great Lakes’ forests largely untouched. Without railways, logging in Great Lakes was almost entirely a winter vocation. Pathways were flooded to create ice-covered trails and allow accessibility into hinterland forests; however, as technology advanced in the region, the abundant resources then became accessible.

In the last half of the 19th century the logging industry arrived in full force to the Great Lakes. As a result of increasingly accessible canals and technological advances, the logging industry that was previously dominated by the eastern states, finally made its way to the region. The last half of the 19th century opened up the logging industry in one of the growing nation’s richest and most abundant supply timber. Within those forests were various trees, but none as valuable as the white pine. White pine was most valuable for its durability, but also its straight and towering size. Logging became the staple industry that developed, especially in the northern Great Lakes regions, where white pine was most abundant. The geographic environment suited the lumbermen for the deforestation of the region. Relatively flat lands throughout the Great Lakes landscape made transportation of lumber more manageable than the hilly geography of the Appalachians. Railroad expansion also sped the process of deforestation by decreasing the cost of moving large quantities timber. Accessibility to the environment and the economic demand for virgin timber, such as the white pine, contributed to the Great Lakes’ massive logging endeavor.

Farmland no longer defined the Great Lakes region, rather the landscape was known for its forests of white pine. Settlers and pioneers soon realized their crop wasn’t the sole source of income, but the timber that was present on their land also provided profits. To access this money settlers put down their hoes and grabbed their axes. Dexter Briggs, the early pioneer who had battled the forests to earn a living on his small 80-acre plot, struggled to find profit in his crop. His land was dry from over exposure to the sun and subject to erosion. That small patch of forest he once saved in the corner of his plot, years before, was far more valuable than his struggling land. Outside demand for lumber from furniture

---

producers allowed Briggs to sell a single whitewood tree for one-hundred-dollars; the exact price he had paid for his 80-acre plot years before.\(^7\)

The destruction of forests did not come without consequence. The practice of selective cutting caused remaining fallen trees to become fuel for large-scale fires. The last half of the 19th century saw an increase in massive fires sweeping through the Great Lakes region. On September 5, 1881 one massive fire struck in the “thumb” of Michigan caused by months of draught and large quantities of underbrush left behind by the clearing of forests. Onlookers described the destruction as a wall of flame. Contained mostly in the Huron, Salinac, and Tuscola counties; thousands of acres burned throughout Michigan’s thumb region. The speed and scope of the fire burned many of villages and took many lives. Accounts reported between 138 and several hundred people were killed in the fires. When Michigan authorities determined the official causality count to be 262 victims, the reality of forest destruction set in. Fires had always been an expected risk of clearing forests; however, the Thumb Fire of 1881 illustrated just how terrible that potential had been in the area.\(^8\)

In addition to the increased risk of forest fires, massive deforestation led to increased erosion. Waterways were becoming polluted with the runoff of dirt and sediments from lands cleared from the axe. In a growing effort to protect the forest resources, as well as the waterways, the beginnings of forest conservation began in 1891. The Division of Forestry was established to make large tracts of land, once readily available to private ownership, publicly owned and protected. The main objective was to protect the resources and the landscapes they inhabited. In 1905 Gifford Pinchot became the first Chief Forester of the newly created United States Forest Service. Conservation was the official policy. The original goals of the Forest Service were to create a sustainable and manageable practice of production. Pinchot’s belief was to efficiently manage cutting and maintain a sustainable yield. At the dawn of the 20th century the logging industry was the 4th largest sector of the United States economy and the United States Forest Service sought to manage its sustainability rather than see the industry boom and bust. As the government began to

---

The Evolution of the Great Lakes’ Forests: Terror to Treasure

redefine and manage the forest resources of the Great Lakes region, the general public also formed new opinions towards the woodlands.9

As economic and industrial growth continued in the early 20th century, forests began to take on deeper meaning for those who sought refuge from an industrially inclined world. Northern forests of the Great Lakes were outlets of recreation for visitors from bustling metropolises such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cincinnati. Northern Michigan, in particular, was littered with towns preaching the beauty and pristine nature of the forests. One pamphlet talks about The Grand Travers Bay region;

The Grand Traverse region is a summer land, which once visited is never forgotten... The region is rich in all that goes to make a magnificent and beautiful out of doors. It is a land where clean air, sparkling water, pure sunshine, virgin forest... and an intelligent people unite to make a crowning glory of mundane perfection.10

The pamphlet describes a landscape greatly different from the scene Alexis de Tocqueville reported during his trip just eighty years before. The forests once feared and battled by early pioneers, acquired a recreational tone. Summer resorts took on names that celebrated the pristine, natural settings. The Pines, Birchwood, and the Cedar Lodge were just a few of the many summer resorts in close proximity in the Grand Traverse Region that were a short drive or train ride from major metropolises. For many, Great Lakes forests were valued more as a location of leisure and vacation than as an economic commodity.11

Minnesota lawmakers also saw a great potential by establishing roadways into forest regions. As tourism grew into National Forests and Parks began to grow state policy makers saw tremendous potential in increasing accessibility into distant forests. Superior National Forest was one such location proposed. However, as an increased number of citizens began to value the forests as an outlet for recreation and leisure, greater pressure was exerted on the Forest Service to protect tracts of land as strict wilderness areas. Roads and resorts took away the wild sense visitors were often seeking. Citizens and newly created environmental agencies

10 Grand Traverse Region (Traverse City: Herald and Record Company, 1914), 6.
11 Grand Traverse Region (Traverse City: Herald and Record Company, 1914), 7-8; Western Michigan: The Land of Fruit with Flavor (Monroe: Western Michigan Development Bureau, 1915), 11.
demanded that certain lands be protected so that they could be enjoyed in their pristine setting as opposed to the resort-like approach that had sprung up in the Great Lakes region.¹²

Advocates largely opposed Minnesotan lawmaker’s plans to build roadways into Superior National Forest. As pressure increased, the agency had finally blocked off a tract of land known now as a “primitive” area, in 1929, where backpacking and canoeing primarily took place. As time passed, more tracts of wilderness had been protected. The United States Forest Service mainly chose places where forested sections held little value for timber. Regardless, the public’s push to create a wilderness where they could escape to, represents a radical shift from a century before. Writings throughout the 20th century began to acquire romantic and nostalgic tones regarding the wilderness areas. Sigurd F. Olsen composed some thoughts on Superior National Forest:¹³

> The singing wilderness has to do with the calling of the loons, northern lights, and the great silences of a land lying northwest of Lake Superior. It is concerned with the simple joys, the timelessness and perspective found in a way of life that is close to the past. I have heard the singing in many places, but I seem to hear it best in the wilderness lake country of the Quetico-Superior, where travel is still by pack and canoe over the ancient trails of the Indians and voyageurs.¹⁴

While visitors valued the spiritual and recreational aspects of the natural forests of the Great Lakes region, the wooded landscape has continued to act as an economic source of timber for the logging industry throughout the 20th century. Due to population growth, and late 19th century logging practices, certain Great Lakes resources remained scarce. As a result of the destruction of forests and the intensive fires, the ability for White Pine to regenerate in the forests faltered. After excessive chopping, the land and chances for sapling growth were both diminished. The Bad River Reservation of northern Wisconsin acts as a display for this phenomenon. The study of the white pine of northern Wisconsin examines the forests of northern Wisconsin and the lands struggle to reforest the landscape to its former shape. The Ojibwes, of the Bad River Reservation, saw a possibility in the financial growth in the forests. The Ojibwes maintained

¹³ Hays, 89.
a stable yield of chopping their forests longer than surrounding privately owned company lots. As a result, their White pine held tremendous value in the region. White pine provided economic strength for the Indians at the Bad River Reservation, but protecting those interests became a concern.  

The value of the forests was dependent on the Ojibwes ability to regenerate their valued commodity. Also conscious of the destruction of forests, seed retention became an enforced practice of logging law. Loggers were required to retain 5% of White pine forests to protect the stability and ability to maintain the forests. The protection of saplings helped encourage future regeneration of forests. During the attempts to protect the white pine, new invaders sought to destroy the tree. The blister rust disease spread amongst trees of the Great Lakes endangering the Ojibwes’ livelihood. President Franklin Roosevelt and his CCC program implemented actions to protect the White pine. With a regular workforce, proper science to combat blister rust, and federal funds forests of white pine survived. White pine growth eventually spread throughout northern Wisconsin as a result of the constant attempts to protect Ojibwes’ economic and environmental interests. However, throughout the 1960’s the federal funds dried up and the Ojibwes of northern Wisconsin had to find a new way to protect the forests that sustained them.

As federal programs were reduced, funds to maintain the forests deteriorated. The need to maintain a healthy and sustained logging industry became the main concern on the reservation. The Bad River Reservation adopted a policy of planting acres of aspen birch. Although not as valuable as white pine, aspen birch was easier to grow and protect. Aspen birch also satisfied the ever-constant demand of paper for consumers. The reservation adopted strict regulations of deforestation by requiring plot rotation on a 35-50 year cycle. The Ojibwes recognized the wealth that trees could provide for the reservation; however, they differed from the economic interests of lumbermen of a century before.

---

16 Adams, 625-626.
Where ideas of infinite supply and careless cutting once prevailed, new ideas of conservation and sustainability surfaced. The trees could continue to provide wealth for those who sought the wood, but only through conservation would the ideals of protecting this economic treasure be possible.\(^\text{17}\)

The Great Lakes region is a complex story of the land and its people. The actions people took on the land represented the ideas and economic goals of the time. Early goals of settlement brought about ideas of terror. Wilderness was an enemy to the pioneer looking to find economic success through homestead farming. As time progressed, inhabitants of the Great Lakes dropped the hoes and picked up axes. As the logging industry redefined the region, the forest was more prey than predator. The logging industry brought about economic and political change. The same forests rapidly cut for profits, were later protected for both their economic sustainability and recreational value. Wilderness was no longer a feared entity but rather a celebrated and sought after refuge. Forests once chopped down and burned, were protected and valued for alternative forest resources.

Today, the Great Lakes landscape doesn’t resemble the environment settlers first encountered. The time when fear was associated with seemingly endless forests is over. The landscape of the Great Lakes region resembled the needs and perspectives of its inhabitants, whether viewed with terror or viewed as an economic and recreational treasure.

\(^{17}\) Adams, 621-622.
Bibliography


*Grand Traverse Region.* Traverse City: Herald and Record Company, 1914.


