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Figure I.1 Pennsylvania state foresters, 1908. With Mira Lloyd Dock, Ralph Brock, and Joseph T. Rothrock in Rothrock's office, State Capitol building. (Courtesy: Franklin County Historical Society.)

Cradle of Conservation

A Preview of Dr. Allen Dieterich-Ward's New Book Release

By Dr. Allen Dieterich-Ward

As Ralph Brock rose to give his presentation on "Fertilizers for Renewing Nursery Soils," the 25-year-old forester had reasons to be proud of his accomplishments. Two years earlier, in 1906, he was part of the first graduating class from the Pennsylvania State Forest Academy, which was among the nation's earliest forestry schools. A native of West Chester, Brock's academic success had attracted the attention of Dr. Joseph Rothrock, a botanist at the University of Pennsylvania and the state's first forestry commissioner, who secured the young man's appointment as a student forester. His skills must have been evident to everyone around him, because even before graduation Brock began serving as student superintendent of the school's

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tree nursery, a position he then formally assumed after finishing his studies. In early March 1908, Rothrock's successor, Robert S. Conklin gathered the first two graduating classes along with the four other members of the State Forestry Reservation Commission for an inaugural convention of Pennsylvania foresters and it was here that Brock was about to speak.

The offices of the seven-year-old Department of Forestry were in Pennsylvania's magnificent new Beaux Arts Style state capitol building. When Brock and his fellow foresters arrived that morning, they would have walked up the steps on which President Theodore Roosevelt, himself a well-known conservation advocate, had given a speech dedicating a building he described as the "the handsomest state capitol I have ever seen." "Pennsylvania's soil is historic," Roosevelt declared in an address that praised the commonwealth's role in the Seven Year's War, American Revolution, and Civil War, before turning to a fiery Progressive-era denunciation of corporate greed, political graft, and a narrow interpretation of federal power. The massive bronze doors of the capitol's western entrance would have had special significance to Brock and his contemporaries with their depiction not only of William Penn, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution but also of the mining and agriculture that along with forests defined the state's environmental history. As they entered the building and walked toward their meeting room, Moravian tiles on the rotunda and hallway floors evoked natural and industrial history with colorful depictions of foxes, turkeys, cows, and bears along with a spinning wheel, beer mug, and Conestoga Wagon.



Figure 1.3 The landing of Penn at Dock Creek, Philadelphia, ca. 1830. (Credit: Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Meyer P. Potamkin, The State Museum of Pennsylvania.)



Figure 5.3 New Jersey Zinc Company, Palmerton Plant, Carbon County, Pennsylvania. Placed on the Superfund program's National Priorities List in 1983. (Courtesy: Library of Congress, Historic American Engineering Record.)

It is fitting, then, that the story of Pennsylvania as the figurative "cradle of conservation" begins here with Ralph Brock and his very real nursery at the dawn of the conservation era. No one recorded their impressions of Brock's presentation or the subsequent discussion on what were rather mundane and technical matters related to seedling propagation. The circumstances and location of his talk, however, allow us to begin exploring a few key ideas that will shape the rest of my new book, *Cradle of Conservation*. While most of the people in the room were White men, Brock was Black; indeed, he was the first African American formally trained as a forester. Also present was Mira Lloyd Dock, the first woman in the world to serve on a forestry commission and the first in Pennsylvania to hold a statewide office. The prominent position of these two figures at such an important moment highlights the fascinating, complex, and often untold stories of the state's environmental history.

Though I did start by talking about forestry, by now it should be clear that environmental history is not just about trees. The term "nature" is often used as shorthand to refer to those elements of the world distinct from human "culture," but, of course, the two are always inextricably linked. After all, paving over a forest to create a freeway does not remove natural processes from the equation, but merely changes them into different forms, with black bears and wolves giving way to automobiles as apex predators, for example.



Figure 4.2 Aerial view of Levittown, 1952. (Courtesy: Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center, McDowell Evening Bulletin Collection.)

I use the concept of “working landscapes” to emphasize the ways in which the natural world and human culture combine within integrated environments. There are all sorts of working landscapes throughout Pennsylvania’s history – barns, cornfields, and horse-drawn implements in eighteenth century Lancaster County; immense forests, smoke from charcoal fires, and the clank of iron furnaces in nineteenth century Pittsburgh; and diesel fumes, honking horns, and truck stops on the twentieth century Turnpike. As societal needs and cultural values evolved over time, so too did the ways in which human activities manifested as changes in the physical environment. Each succeeding generation was not presented with a blank slate of unblemished green space, but instead found their activities often constrained by their ancestors’ use (and abuse) of the environment.

The working landscapes of the Mid-Atlantic underscore just how porous the boundaries are between nature and culture. Native Americans have occupied this area for at least ten thousand years and began integrating agriculture into their hunting and gathering lifestyle more than a thousand years ago. When Europeans began arriving on the coast, they described the forested woodlands as park-like, which they often interpreted as acts of God rather than recognizing the role of indigenous people in using fire to clear the undergrowth and provide nutrients for their crops. European diseases decimated Native Americans even as Eurasian animals from honeybees to horses, pigs, and cows reordered existing ecosystems. European settler colonialism

brought eastern North America into a trans-Atlantic marketplace that increasingly drove environmental change. Port cities of New York, Wilmington, and Philadelphia developed agricultural hinterlands that used human-, oxen-, and horse-power to translate water, soil, and sunlight into calories that powered an empire and then, following the American Revolution, an imperial republic. The combination of fertile soils with a climate too cool for growing tobacco (in large quantities) and cotton attracted large numbers of poor Europeans whose descendants valorized free labor as they grudgingly emancipated enslaved people of African descent. The region served as the nation’s population center, breadbasket, and workshop as transportation improvements from turnpikes to canals and finally railroads prompted fires of industrialization fed by untold acres of trees and tons of coal.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the degradation of industrial and urban environments increasingly concerned many residents. The national movement to conserve natural resources first gained traction among some of the wealthy civic leaders of Philadelphia and New York City whose families had made their fortunes from extraction: hence, the term “cradle of conservation.” Indeed, the Hudson River School of landscape painting that helped shape a more positive view of non-human nature and thus provided the cultural underpinnings for conservationism arguably originated along the banks of the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia where artist Thomas Cole began his professional career in the early 1820s. However, Philadelphia elites did not develop the same dominance over state politics enjoyed by New Yorkers, who moved in 1885 to assert control over a vast swath of the Catskill and Adirondack mountains to protect their water supply. Instead, Pennsylvania remained more balanced in terms of rural and urban interests, so conservationists here had to build a more diverse political consensus around a system of statewide forest reserves established in 1893.

Pennsylvania differed from New York and the rest of the Mid-Atlantic in one other crucial way – its wealth of carbon resources. Coal, oil, and natural gas transformed the state’s working landscapes, setting the stage for an industrial revolution in the late nineteenth century and a legacy of abandoned

wells with which we are still dealing. The vertical integration of industrial corporations made cities such as Pittsburgh, Johnstown, and Bethlehem symbols of both economic might and, by the mid-twentieth century, cautionary tales of how the fouling of air, water, and land could transform working landscapes from sources of wealth into zones of sacrifice. Like the burning of Cleveland's Cuyahoga River and Santa Barbara's oil spill, the infamous Donora Smog in 1948 endures as a symbol of hubris that led eventually to the rise of the environmental movement and, for Pennsylvanians, the 1971 constitutional amendment that ensures every resident that "right to clean air, pure water, and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment."

As Pennsylvanians continue to grapple with the regulatory balance between natural resource consumption and conservation, the crisis of climate change adds urgency to viewing history through an environmental lens. Even as many residents proved willing to embrace an ethic linking their own health and well-being to the rest of the natural world, since the 1970s an anti-environmental movement that questions additional regulation has gained momentum in the wake of deindustrialization. This has proven especially contentious in tandem with demands for "environmental justice" – an acknowledgement that discrimination based on race, class and other social characteristics has always shaped access to environmental amenities. The scientific consensus about the need to decrease the burning of fossil fuels has done little to dampen a new energy boom in the natural gas fields of the state's north and west. Unlike in New York, which effectively banned the high-volume hydraulic fracturing technology necessary to extract shale gas beginning in 2015, the relative power of the state's energy-producing regions forced a more limited approach to environmental politics. In the end, however, it is this very ambivalence toward environmental protection, particularly when it seems to conflict with economic opportunity, that makes an ideal case study for my new book, *Cradle of Conservation: An Environmental History of Pennsylvania*.

Pennsylvania Conservation Heritage Project

The Pennsylvania Conservation Heritage Project began in 2009 as a means to recognize the work of Dr. Maurice Goddard, considered to be the father of the Pennsylvania state park system. Since then it has grown to include oral histories; videos; educational materials; stories about the people, places and events that shaped conservation in Pennsylvania; and most recently, the release of the book, *Cradle of Conservation*.

To learn more about the project, to read about inspiring people who have made and continue to make a difference in Pennsylvania, and to suggest new stories, visit the website at PaConservationHeritage.org or scan the QR code associated with this piece.



You can purchase a copy of the book from the Foundations website, PaParksAndForests.org or follow this QR code. The book will be featured as the November virtual book discussion.



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