

IDEAS

A century before the first Earth Day, there was the Forest Festival in the Middlesex Fells

A 19th-century precursor to today's environmental movement thrived, then fizzled out. Today's activists should take note.

By **Dan McKanan** Updated April 9, 2022, 3:00 a.m.



A photograph of the Northern High Service Middlesex Fells Reservoir in Stoneham, circa 1900. WHITNEY & SON/BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

On Oct. 15, 1880, climate activists and citizen scientists gathered atop Bear Hill in what is

the Middlesex Fells Reservation for the Boston area's first Forest Festival, with

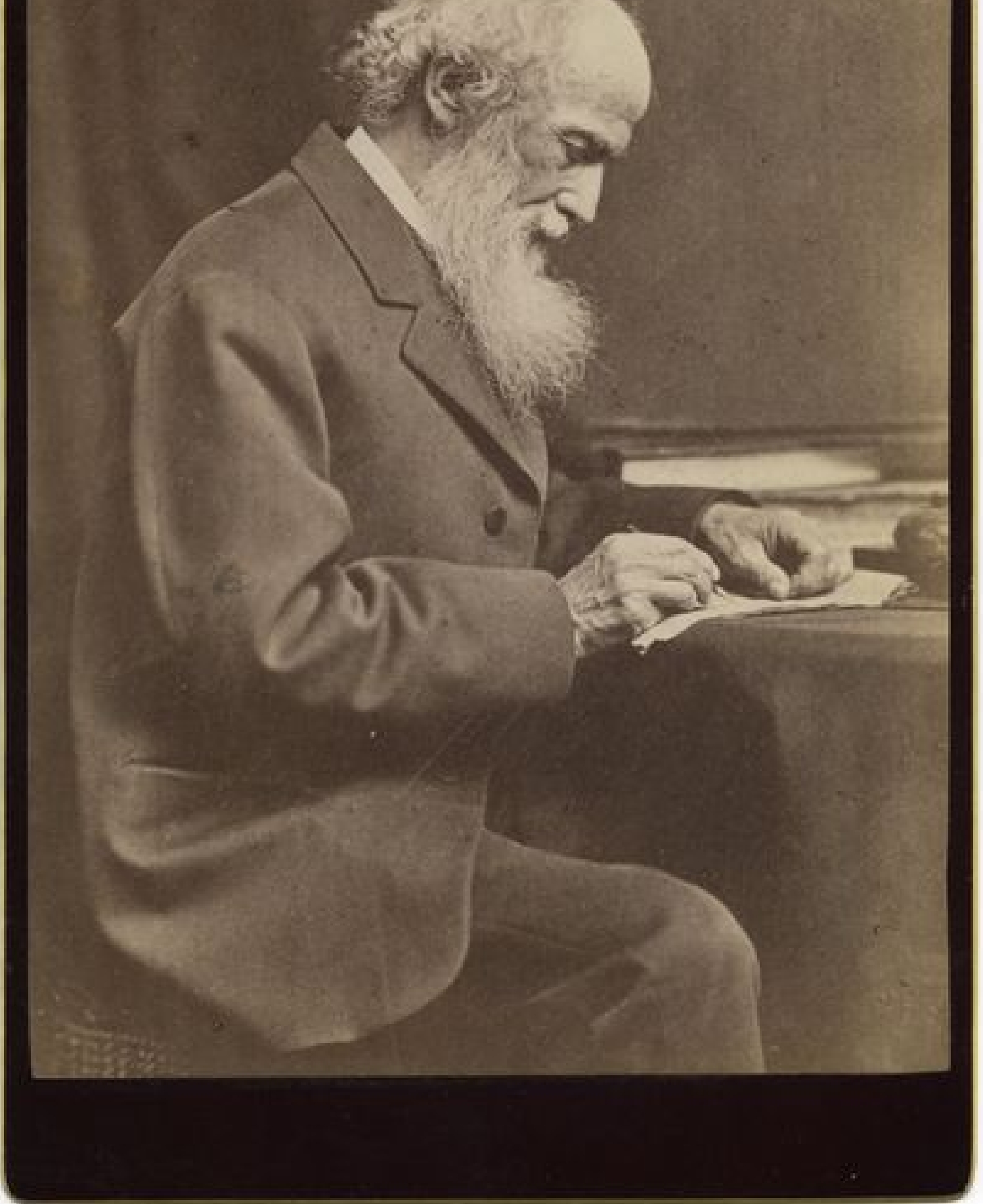
U now the Middlesex Fells Reservation for the Boston area's first Forest Festival — a 19th-century precursor to Earth Day. Over the next five years, the Forest Festivals would

galvanize metropolitan Bostonians to protect many of the green spaces that we all enjoy today. Yet after those initial victories, responsibility for Massachusetts forests passed from citizen activists to park professionals. For environmentalists today, the Forest Festivals are both an inspiring model of movement building and a reminder that we cannot save the planet without the commitment of ordinary people.

The Forest Festivals were the brainchild of Renaissance man Elizur Wright and nature writer Wilson Flagg. Wright and Flagg shared a love for trees, birds, and the rocky hills surrounding Boston. They also shared a zeal for activism. In order to protect the land they had just begun to call the Middlesex Fells, they urged landowners to donate property, solicited endorsements from old abolitionist allies, wrote essays from the perspective of the trees, and offered free nature tours to anyone willing to take the train up from Boston. The Forest Festivals were large-scale gatherings designed to enlist hundreds of neighbors in the cause. As Wright [explained at the first festival](#), “we want a plan wide enough to interest everybody and bring everybody face to face with nature herself.”

The third festival, on June 17, 1882, embodied Wright and Flagg's vision. Jointly sponsored by the Essex Institute (precursor to the Peabody Essex Museum) and a short-lived Middlesex Institute, it exemplified what is now called citizen science. Ordinary people from all walks of life collaborated to amass data and observations, many of them subsequently cited by professional scientists. Hundreds of people turned out that year to observe flora and fauna at the base of Bear Hill before sharing a picnic at the summit and listening to speeches about the native trees of Massachusetts and the new science of Darwinian evolution.





Elizur Wright, cofounder of the Forest Festivals, in an undated photograph. MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION

Wright, in his speech, invited these citizen scientists to become climate activists as well. He called his audience's attention to the prospect of climate change and reminded those gathered that it is a

law of nature that “the animal life of this planet depends upon the vegetable — man’s upon that of the tree.” That sacred balance, he warned, was being disrupted.

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Wright’s speech built on the earlier work of George Barrell Emerson, the founding principal of Boston English High School and the president of the Boston Society of Natural History. After conducting an exhaustive survey of Massachusetts forests, Emerson warned in 1846 that deforestation would lead to desertification, because trees typically hold large quantities of water within ecosystems. Wright added a special concern about atmospheric carbon. Burning coal and chopping down trees, he worried, would produce air better suited for dinosaurs than for human beings. The former math professor buttressed his argument with complex calculations about the carbon stored in trees and coal. As an antidote to carbon’s ravages on the environment, Wright urged that a quarter of the nation be preserved as forest parks. Once an abolitionist newspaper editor, Wright linked his environmentalism to social justice, suggesting that urban laborers would suffocate unless they had access to pine forests “within a few minutes’ ride” of their factories and neighborhoods. And he hoped that annual observances of the Forest Festival would keep his vision alive.



A view of the Middlesex Fells in 1912. MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES

Few climate activists today realize that our concerns were first voiced in the 19th century. This is not because Wright and his companions failed to leave their mark. The Forest Festivals inspired the 1882 Public Domain Act, authorizing Massachusetts towns and cities to preserve their forests. Recognizing the limitations of that law, activists went on to craft the Metropolitan Park Act of 1893. It created Middlesex Fells, Beaver Brook, Blue Hills, and other reservations that spanned town borders and functioned as a template for the creation of state parks across the nation. So we can thank the Forest Festivals for our state parks and for the remarkable reforestation of the eastern United States. Because of them, [60 percent](#) of the land in Massachusetts today is forested.

With the Forest Festivals' successes came the seeds of complacency. In 1885, the last year of his life, Wright hosted the final Forest Festival and welcomed to Boston the National Forestry Congress, a new organization seeking to establish forestry as a profession. Eight years later, when the new Metropolitan Park Commission took ownership of the Fells, it relied more heavily on the

professionals of the Forestry Congress than on the citizens of the Forest Festivals to preserve the trees. When state-appointed experts took control of the forests, most citizen activists took a step back.

The creation of the National Park Service in 1916 also had the unintended consequence of leading many Americans to view forest preservation as something to be delegated to a large, official body of the federal government, rather than as something that requires ordinary citizens to take responsibility for their backyard woods. Around the same time, the professional managers of urban and suburban parks began prioritizing sports and other forms of active recreation over activities that would help ordinary people feel connected to nature.



Another blow to a burgeoning 19th-century ecoconsciousness was the advent of automotive recreation. Road trips to Yosemite didn't inspire people to take more care in preserving forests or staving off the catastrophic deforestation of the American West. With cars rendering citizen environmentalists mere spectators of passing scenery, local forests suffered. Interstate 93 was built directly through Middlesex Fells, and large segments of the Charles River that had been protected by the 1893 Metropolitan Park Act became neglected dumping grounds. There were few activists to protest these desecrations, and the link between forest preservation, a healthy climate, and social justice was all but forgotten for nearly a century.

Fortunately, the spirit of the Forest Festival is alive again today. People streamed to the woods during the pandemic, strengthening interest in protecting these public spaces. The Friends of the Middlesex Fells work with government leaders to ensure that increased recreation does not threaten preservation. [Earthwise Aware](#) encourages volunteers to collect data on the changing cycles of trees, insects, and amphibians, the better to track biodiversity. The Mystic River Watershed Association, growing rapidly in its 50th year, invites neighbors of all backgrounds to count migrating herring or remove invasive plants. And countless individuals take personal responsibility for a treasured patch of woods by removing trash or protesting against encroaching development.

As we reconnect with our disrupted and beautiful planet, we are called to find our own ways of taking action. By making every day a Forest Festival, we can build a new century of activism.

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