

A Transformative Place: Grey Towers and the Evolution of American Conservationism

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On a beautiful late September day, just 2 months before he was assassinated, President John F. Kennedy spoke from the front porch of Grey Towers, the Milford, Pennsylvania, estate of Gifford Pinchot (1865–1946), founding chief of the USDA Forest Service. His visit served two purposes. It kicked off the president’s 5-day, 11-state “conservation tour” during which he would deliver a series of addresses on the environment to buttress his conservationist credentials in a society shaken by the searing images of a poisoned nature depicted in Rachel Carson’s seminal *Silent Spring* (1962). His presence in Milford also marked the Pinchot family’s gift of Grey Towers to the nation, and the establishment there of the Pinchot Institute for Conservation Studies. “By its nature,” Kennedy assured the large and boisterous crowd, the Institute “looks to the future not to the past. And the fact of the matter is that [it] is needed. . . . more today than ever before, because we are reaching the limits of our fundamental need of water to drink, of fresh air to breathe, of open space to enjoy, of abundant sources of energy to make life easier” (Kennedy 1963).

Although the president did not know it, his dedication of Grey Towers as a critical site for the dissemination of conservation education in America—a task it has successfully carried on since 1963—was in keeping with an earlier dedicatory moment held at the estate, this time on Aug. 11, 1886, Gifford Pinchot’s twenty-first birthday. The

family selected that date to celebrate the completion of Grey Towers, their summer home, and did so in a manner that signaled their escalating focus on conservation. One sign of this was the birthday present they purchased for their oldest child, Gifford, and that was given to him by his younger brother Amos—a gilt-edged copy of George Perkins Marsh’s book, *Man and Nature* (1864); this was the key nineteenth-century text warning humanity that it must adopt comprehensive principles of land stewardship if it hoped to survive. His argument had a powerful impact on those, like the Pinchots, who lived in and profited from, the early stages of the American industrial revolution (Miller 2001). Putting word to action, the senior Pinchots had committed themselves to repairing the denuded hillside on which their home had been constructed, planting trees and laying out gardens. As Gifford advised his mother several months earlier: “there are already enough trees planted on the place to take away any feeling of bleakness” (Pinchot 1886). Land restoration has continued at Grey Towers, such that its once-logged over and badly eroded terrain has been replaced by magnificent forest cover, an enduring testimony to the Pinchot family’s long-standing conservationist ethos.

Planting the Seeds

Now a National Historic Landmark, the physical structure of Grey Towers is laden with symbolism. Designed by Richard

Morris Hunt and built in the robust style of a French country chateau, the mansion recalls the Pinchot family’s French heritage, and their unflagging loyalty to Napoleon that resulted in their exile to America. The Marquis de Lafayette still has an honored place at Grey Towers, where his bust occupies a niche on the outside of the building, facing East toward La Belle France. Inside stands a 7-ft bronze statue of Napoleon himself, created for James Pinchot by the renowned nineteenth-century sculptor Launt Thompson, which is currently on a long-term loan to Grey Towers from the Smithsonian Institution.

After Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo, members of the Pinchot family, including Gifford’s great-grandfather and grandfather, fled to New World, arriving in the French Huguenot community of Milford in 1816. In part, they built their fortune through the lumber business. Using practices typical of the period, these first two generations purchased tracts of forestland in eastern Pennsylvania, stripped them of merchantable timber, and rafted the logs down the Delaware River selling them in Easton, Lumberville, New Hope, Trenton, and Philadelphia (Miller 1999).

James Pinchot later recognized the impact that such practices had had on the region, and it was through his reading of Marsh’s *Man and Nature*, and its account of Mediterranean deforestation, that he understood their potential consequences on his native land. Rehabilitating Grey Towers was

a local corrective, but more significant was educating Gifford to make conservation his life's work so that he could extend Marsh's precepts, and Grey Towers' example, to the nation.

While at Yale, and at his father's urging, Gifford had begun to consider forestry as a possible career, but because the profession did not exist in the United States, after graduation, Pinchot went to Europe in October 1889. Studying at L'École Nationale Forestière in Nancy, France, and working with famed German forester, Dietrich Brandis, he returned home a year later full of evangelical zeal for sustainable forest management. He demonstrated its principles first on private forests such as George Vanderbilt's Biltmore estate in western North Carolina (Pinchot 1893). He then went public with his activism when, in 1898, he was tapped as the fourth head of the Division of Forestry in the Department of Agriculture; over the next 7 years, he set in motion the creation of a full-fledged National Forest system under the management of the Forest Service, located in the Department of Agriculture.

Forestry's Foundation

Although much is made of Gifford Pinchot's role in introducing "scientific forestry" from Europe to the United States, his greatest contribution to conservationism was his genius for organization: articulating a compelling and persuasive vision of the future, and inspiring people to apply their diversity of talents and energy to fulfilling that vision, he helped to establish a range of institutions needed to educate foresters (the Yale Forest School in 1900); to promote cooperation and professional development (the Society of American Foresters in 1900); and to hire those well-trained foresters (the Forest Service in 1905). Each of these organizations, in different ways, demonstrated the value of sustainable forest management of the nation's woodlands, public and private; influenced the development of the scientific knowledge necessary for good forest management; and disseminated vital information to communities, government forestry agencies, and private landowners. That innovative and interlocking network of ideas and institutions, law and policy, stands as Gifford Pinchot's most important legacy.

Consider his role in the Transfer Act of 1905 (16 U.S.C. 472), which shifted jurisdiction over the federal forest reserves from the U.S. Department of the Interior to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, without

which there would have been no Forest Service or National Forests. To bring about this much-desired end, Pinchot became involved in complex negotiations within the executive and legislative branches from the moment he was hired in 1898. The final push, supported fully by President Theodore Roosevelt, occurred in January 1905, when the president hosted the American Forest Congress, an event Pinchot largely underwrote and scripted to demonstrate to Congress the broad-based public and professional support for his ideas. The conferees came from local, state, and national governments, including commercial timber, mining, grazing, and irrigation interests, as well as conservation activists. The combination of White House pressure and intense media attention led to congressional support for the Transfer Act; its passage transformed the executive branch, insured long-term forest management on federal lands, and reflected, once more, Pinchot's political acumen and organizational skills.

Home Base

During these hectic early years of his fight for conservation, Pinchot often returned to his family retreat at Grey Towers; along the Sawkill River, which flowed through the property, the ardent angler fished to his heart's content, as he would throughout his life (Pinchot 1993). Hikes through its woods, and engaged conversations indoors and out with family, friends, and colleagues re-energized Pinchot after long months devoted to Washington's legislative politics and bureaucratic maneuverings. Grey Towers proved even more essential during his tumultuous years as chief of the Forest Service, particularly during the grueling Ballinger-Pinchot controversy that erupted in 1909 when Pinchot challenged Interior Secretary Richard Ballinger over a sweetheart deal involving the virtual giveaway of some federal coal reserves on public lands in Alaska. The brawl turned ugly and became such a cause célèbre that President William Howard Taft eventually fired Pinchot for insubordination, a public martyrdom that firmly established him as a national leader in the ongoing struggle for conservation (Miller 2001).

As a private citizen, Pinchot divided his time between his home in Washington, DC., and Grey Towers, and continued to play a prominent role in environmental debates through the National Conservation Association, which he had founded while

embroiled in the grueling battle with Ballinger (Miller 2001). Pinchot and his wife Cornelia made Grey Towers their permanent home in 1919 so that he could enter Pennsylvania's electoral politics. He served as the commonwealth's Commissioner of Forestry, was Governor for two terms, and, as its chief executive, passed legislation protecting watersheds and water quality, among a series of environmental regulations. He ran repeatedly, if unsuccessfully, for the U.S. Senate. He never lost touch with national conservation issues, and until his death in 1946, Grey Towers was the scene of innumerable discussions and debates over natural resource policy, involving many of the leading conservation thinkers and activists of the time.

And it was at his Milford home, beginning in the 1920s, that he and his staff gathered together the vast trove of documents and voluminous correspondence associated with his extensive career in forestry and politics, and housed them in the Letter Box, a free-standing building on the Grey Towers grounds that functioned as a library and office during Pinchot's tenure as governor. These extraordinary records, which on Pinchot's death were donated to the American people and relocated in the Library of Congress, became the documentary evidence on which was based his posthumously published autobiography, *Breaking New Ground* (Pinchot 1947). Now in its fourth edition, the book captures Pinchot's continuing significance: "That more than 50 years after his death we continue to wrestle with his ideas about the meaning of conservation. . . would please him no end. But he would not have been surprised," for *Breaking New Ground* was written to "convey his concerns about how best to balance the preservation and use of our natural resources, and he recognized that this issue would be central to the political debates of the future" (Miller and Sample 1998).

Future Conversations

The close attention Pinchot paid to nurturing the varied institutional, legal, and policy frameworks through which conservation can be accomplished on the ground continues at Grey Towers today, thanks to the generosity, and the vision, of subsequent generations of his family. Recognizing the iconic importance of Grey Towers to the history of conservation in the United States, Gifford Bryce Pinchot, the only child of Gifford and Cornelia Pinchot, donated the

mansion and 100 acres of surrounding woodland to the public, to be administered by the Forest Service as Grey Towers National Historic Landmark. But the family did not intend for Grey Towers simply to be a memorial to Gifford Pinchot's lifelong activism or for it to continue on merely as a historic-house museum, but instead it was to serve the conservationist cause so closely associated with the family's name. Its retreat-like setting, grandson Peter Pinchot avowed, has been the perfect venue for "convening deep, contemplative discussions about how we can bring our modern civilization into balance with the rest of nature" (USDA Forest Service 2002).

The need to resolve this particular and crucial environmental concern has accelerated since the mid-twentieth century due to the rapid and fundamental changes that have confronted the United States since the Pinchot Institute of Conservation was launched in 1963. The environmental worries that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* touched off nationally found local expression downstream of Grey Towers when citizens halted the proposed Tocks Island Dam on the Delaware River because of potential environmental impacts, setting the stage for the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (42 U.S.C. 4321) a few years later. It was in the mid-1960s, too, that the Wilderness Act was being debated in Congress and throughout the nation, an act that became law in 1964; and the Forest Service was being buffeted by the first rumbles of public concern over the effects of commercial timber harvesting on other National Forest resources. None other than Gifford Bryce Pinchot, a founding director of the National Resource Defense Council, helped ignite the intense argument over agency land management when in 1972, after touring a clearcut in Montana's Bitterroot Valley, he decried in the name of his father the Forest Service's actions (Miller 2001).

President Kennedy did not live to see these changes emerge full blown, but he gave them inchoate expression in his 1963 dedication speech at Grey Towers when he urged his listeners to act as Gifford Pinchot and his generation had done to save pristine seashores, clean up rivers, harbors, and lakes, and scrub the air clean. "I think there is evidence," Kennedy asserted, that "the nation can take action, action for which those who come after us will be grateful, which will convert killers and spoilers into allies" (Kennedy 1963). Since then, the bewildering

array of challenges facing scientists, policymakers, and activists have only become more tangled, and the need to rise above partisan sniping and political gridlock more pressing. Meeting that challenge from the start has been part of the Pinchot Institute's mission, allowing it to play a unique role in setting conservation policy—regional, national, and international. Through technical analysis and research, it has provided legislators, resource professionals, and concerned citizens with data that will lead to more informed and sustainable resolutions of environmental problems; through workshops and conferences, often held at Grey Towers, it has pulled together a full range and diversity of perspectives to probe vital issues in land-use management.

This integrative approach shaped the Institute's first conference, held in 1965. The question it addressed, "What Needs Doing in Conservation Education During the Next Decade," was as ambitious as its focus, which institute director Matthew J. Brennan defined as the "P, problems. . . people, population, pesticides, pollution, and poverty." Bringing together policymakers, teachers, and curriculum specialists, this conference encouraged the construction of a more interdisciplinary program of environmental studies in schools and universities that would blend the natural sciences with social sciences and the humanities. "Only a very few of man's conservation decisions are made [solely] on the basis of scientific knowledge," Brennan argued; most are "socially desirable, politically expedient, economically feasible, or esthetically pleasing" (Brennan 1965).

Determining how these varied factors shaped our understanding of land management was at the core of a 1990 Institute-sponsored workshop that attracted writers, scientists, philosophers and theologians, lobbyists, foresters, and farmers, and out of which emerged the Grey Towers' Protocols. They contained a series of interlocking provisions for enhancing the conservation of public lands (Sample 1991):

1. Land Stewardship must be more than good "scientific management"; it must be a moral imperative.
2. Management activities must be within the physical and biological capabilities of the land, based on comprehensive, up-to-date resource information and a thorough scientific understanding of the ecosystem's functioning and response.

3. The intent of management, as well as monitoring and reporting, should be making progress toward desired future resource conditions, not on achieving specific near-term resource output targets.
4. Stewardship means passing the land and resources, including intact, functioning forest ecosystems, to the next generation in better condition than they were found.

Since that conference, the Pinchot Institute has applied the moral imperatives and intellectual precepts embedded in the Grey Towers Protocols to its work on forest-certification pilot projects on corporate, tribal, and public lands. They have shaped, as well, its analyses of "regulatory takings" as a key factor in natural resource management (Stedfast 1997); they have framed the results of the Institute's comprehensive, 2-year study entitled *Evolving Toward Sustainability* that lays out strategies for how to achieve greater sustainability on the nation's woodlands (Pinchot Institute 1997); and they underlay its assessment of stewardship on the national wilderness preservation System (Brown 2001).

The Pinchot Institute's research agenda also has had local consequences. Initiating land stewardship principles on lands around Grey Towers through the Milford Experimental Forest, for example, has led to research in forest ecology and sustainable forest management that serves as a model for private- and public-land managers in the Delaware Highlands and Pocono Plateau.

From this work, too, has come an important international experiment in community forestry. When David Smith, who had worked on deer-management initiatives in the Milford Experimental Forest, joined the Peace Corps and was assigned to northwestern Ecuador, he sought the Pinchot Institute's collaboration on a local forestry project he conceived for the northern coastal plain of Ecuador. The Institute joined with the U. S. Peace Corps, the USDA Forest Service, and Fundación Jutan Sacha, the largest nongovernmental conservation organization in Ecuador, to work with rural communities to "sustain forestlands in that region and spark economic development." Establishing a pilot program in Cristobol Colon, a community of 300 families owning more than 100,000 acres, the partners are working on forest management, agroforestry, wood-product development, marketing, and business management; the pro-

gram's "ultimate goal is to help reverse the loss of forests in this region by providing the communities with the tools and skills to build a viable local economy based on sustainable management of their working forests" (Pinchot Letter 2003).

Through these manifold examples of the Institute's creative responses to the ever-evolving character of contemporary environmental dilemmas, Grey Towers National Historic Landmark has confirmed its resilience. Its claim of relevance, when set within the context of its 120-year existence, is all the more impressive: there has been no house, not even Aldo Leopold's "Shack," that has been more closely associated with the broad sweep of American conservationism. That is one reason why Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth indicated in his speech at the August 2001 rededication of the site, after a badly needed \$10 million rehabilitation of its main building, that "Grey Towers is more than a piece of our national heritage. It is also a piece of our future" (USDA Forest Service 2001).

By working to define, and redefine, that future, Grey Towers and the Pinchot Institute will continue to respond to a challenge from the past that President Kennedy identified when he spoke at Milford in September 1963: "I hope that in the years to come that these years in which we live and now hold responsibility will also be regarded as years of accomplishment in maintaining and expanding the resources of our country

which belong to all of our people, not merely those who are now alive but all those who are coming later." History, the president explored, will press us forward: "what Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt and Amos Pinchot, and others did in the first fifty years of this century, will serve as a stimulus to all of us in the last fifty years to make this country we love more beautiful" (Kennedy 1963).

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