

History - Hoosier N.F.



USDA Forest Service

Hoosier National Forest

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The area which is now the Hoosier National Forest was used and inhabited continuously from as early as 12,000 years ago, first by Native Americans, and later by European and African Americans. Each group of people used the land in different ways, and each had an influence on the land.

The earliest inhabitants traveled through the area as bands of hunter/gatherers in a time when mastodons, elk and bear roamed the land. They established trails, temporary camps, and quarries to extract stone for their tools. They probably cleared or burned over some areas to improve their hunting and gathering opportunities.

Later, Native American cultural groups established seasonal camps and villages. They had a more patterned life and exercised more direct control of their natural environment. They continued to hunt and gather; but they also began to cultivate native seed plants.

As time passed the inhabitants became more sedentary, established permanent villages, developed pottery, continued to hunt primarily the white-tailed deer, developed elaborate social, economic, and governmental systems, and cultivated the now familiar crops of corn, beans, and squash. People farmed with hand tools, and selected the lands easiest and most fertile to cultivate - the river bottoms and terraces. Fields were farmed until they were no longer productive; then new fields were cleared. When all the fields around a village became depleted, the whole village moved to a new location.

Native American populations grew throughout their long period of occupation of the area. The increasing number of people had a great impact on the Forest by harvesting its many natural resources, establishing camps and trails, burning and clearing the land, farming, and building villages.

Explorers, traders, and adventurers came into what is now Indiana in the late 1600's. However, it wasn't until 1816 when Indiana became a state that European American settlement began to intensify. Early reports about the composition of

the Forest at that time are incomplete, but they indicate primarily hardwoods with many large clearings in which the Native Americans had grown their crops.

Early settlements were concentrated along water transportation routes such as the Ohio River and other major rivers and streams. The Buffalo Trace, a wide path beaten down by migrating buffalo from the Falls of the Ohio at Jeffersonville/ New Albany to Vincennes was another major access route across the frontier. Old Indian trails were also used to access the interior of the forest.

As European Americans acquired land, one of their first concerns was to clear the land of trees. The forest was an obstacle to be conquered. The settlers harvested timber to use as building material or fuel, or simply cleared fields to provide farmland for crops and pasture. Southern Indiana boasted some of the finest hardwoods in the world. With the advent of the sawmill in 1860, extensive commercial forest clearing operations began.

During the period following the Civil War, thousands of sawmills operated in Indiana. In 1899, Indiana led the nation in lumber production. Though most of the good farm land had been cleared and settled in the early 1800s, the steep hills and valleys which today make up most of the Hoosier National Forest, was harvested between 1870 and 1910. Cut over lands sold for approximately \$1 per acre.

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Early production records show oak comprised approximately 80 percent of the total hardwood production in Indiana during the period 1869 to 1899. Considering the marketability and utilization standards of this period there must have been many oak trees over 24 inches in diameter (DenVyl, 1954). The estimated total cut of hardwood sawtimber during the period of 1869 to 1903 was approximately 30 billion board feet. This means an average yearly cut of about 800 million board feet. The records of lumber cut are conservative because some operating sawmills did not report their cut.

The type of cutting that occurred in the late 1800's had a profound effect on the composition of the present forest. The high quality trees were cut off first: black walnut, tulip poplar, black cherry, and white oak. Later cuts removed every other marketable tree left on the land. The residual stands consisted of cull trees, small trees, and species not desirable for market use. The areas were often burned repeatedly to clear the brush (DenVyl, 1954).

The land was converted to agricultural uses and settled. Population during the 1800's peaked in the 1890s, and then, in the Forest area, began to steadily decline. By 1930, the population had decreased to just 57 percent of the 1890 population.

By 1930, most of what would one day be Forest Service lands contained small farms devoted to crops or pasture with a few acres in woods. Times were hard, and many of the settlers gave up and moved on. The Great Depression sealed the fate of the small farmers in south central Indiana. After 100 years of wear on land never suitable for farming, the steep hills were eroding; and the soil was depleted of nutrients. Crop prices were low, and droughts occurred several years in a row. Though many families left their unproductive lands, a few returned to raise food they could not get in the cities.

As many of the farmers moved out in the 1930's, generally just abandoning their farms and homes, local officials became concerned about the growing amount of tax delinquent lands on the tax rolls.

Indiana's governor, Paul V. McNutt, and the 73rd Indiana Congress in June, 1934, asked the Forest Service to buy this land for the eventual creation of a National Forest. Chapter 29 of Senate Bill 39, formally approved this action on

February 6, 1935:

An Act to empower the United States of America to acquire lands in the State of Indiana by purchase or otherwise, for establishing, consolidating, and extending national forests, and to grant to the United States all rights necessary for proper control and administration of lands so acquired, and legalizing certain acts and proceedings connected therewith.

The first parcels were purchased in 1935, and the land base gradually grew over the next few decades. The Forest Service's immediate goals were to rehabilitate the damaged land and control wildfires. The Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) Program of the 1930's provided jobs for the unemployed and manpower to begin reforesting the hillsides and controlling the massive erosion problems.

Throughout the prehistory and history of the Forest area, people have lived and sometimes prospered. They had an impact on the land through repeated clearing or burning, depletion of soil fertility, erosion, and extraction of natural resources. They all left evidence of their passing.



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