

History of the North Carolina State Park System - Part 2: Birth of a State Park System, 1891-1933 ^[1]

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by Alan Eakes, Lewis Ledford, and Don Reuter, 2011.

[NC Division of Parks of Recreation](#) ^[2], NC Department of Cultural Environment & Natural Resources.

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In 1891, the Geological Survey was established to examine the mineral and timber resources of the state. The survey's reports brought attention to the permanent injury of our natural resources resulting from the denuding of the southern mountain slopes. These reports planted the first seeds of the conservation effort in North Carolina.

Mount Mitchell – the First State Park

Early in the 20th century, efforts to preserve natural resources mounted when poor timbering practices alerted citizens to the devastation of Mount Mitchell. Logging was not only destroying a well-known landmark – the highest peak east of the Mississippi – it was also damaging the water quality as soil was washed in the streams and rivers.

Concern over this destruction led outspoken citizens to contact [Governor Locke Craig](#) ^[11] who went to [Mount Mitchell](#) ^[12]. Horrified by what he saw, he convinced the loggers to cease their operations until he could meet with the General Assembly. Upon his return to Raleigh, the governor began a campaign to save Mount Mitchell.

Appeals to preserve this glorious mountain were finally successful when, on March 3, 1915, the General Assembly passed a bill establishing [Mount Mitchell](#) ^[13] as North Carolina's first state park. In accordance with this bill, the governor appointed a commission to buy as much land as it could for \$20,000.

Towering 6,684 feet above sea level, Mount Mitchell, a national natural landmark, was the site of much botanical research in the 18th century. Its climate and vegetation are more like Canada than North Carolina.

A Two-Park System

Interested in expanding state parks, in 1923, the General Assembly authorized the director of Forestry to investigate the possibility of securing the Fort Macon Military Reservation. In September 1923, the federal government turned 410 acres of land and the fort over to the state for the sum of one dollar. When [Fort Macon State Park](#) ^[14] opened in 1924, North Carolina acquired its second state park, with representation in the mountains and on the coast. Beautiful beaches along with a fascinating [Civil War history](#) ^[15] make Fort Macon unique among North Carolina state parks.

Creation of a New Department

In 1925, the General Assembly created the Department of Conservation and Development and charged it with assuming the work of the Geological and Economic Survey. State forests and parks were assigned to this new department.

State Lakes Legislation

In 1911, the General Assembly decided that all lakes containing 500 acres or more in the coastal plains counties of Bladen, Columbus and Cumberland “shall always be and remain property of the state of North Carolina for the use and benefit of all the people of the state.” The Public Laws of 1929 expanded upon this legislation stating that “all lakes now belonging to the state having an area of 50 acres or more should be administered as provided for other recreational areas now owned by the state.” These acts transferred [Jones](#) ^[16], [Salters](#), [Singletary](#) ^[17], [Phelps](#), [Waccamaw](#) ^[18], White and Black (now called Bay Tree) lakes to state parks.


These lakes are members of a series of elliptical depressions called [Carolina bays](#) ^[19]. Running parallel to one another in a northwest-to-southeast orientation, most are overgrown with swamp-like vegetation. Though the state took control of

these unique bay lakes in 1929, land acquisition around most of them did not take place until much later.

Reliance on Donations

Another action taken by the 1929 General Assembly was the enactment of a law (Chapter 282) which established that future acquisition would not be funded by the state; rather, expansion of state parks would rely upon “public spirited citizens” to donate land.

The addition of Fort Macon and the state lakes expanded the parks system but since the initial appropriation for Mount Mitchell, no money had been appropriated for new land.

Keep reading > [Part 3: Expansion through Public Donations and Federal Public Works Programs, 1934-1941](#)  ^[4]

References:

Beanblossom, Robert. ed. 2011. *Histories of southeastern state park systems* Association of Southeastern State Park Directors.

Additional resources:

NC Division of Parks and Recreation, NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources. <https://www.ncparks.gov/> ^[2]

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