

# This Week in Saratoga County History

## The Father of New York's Forest Rangers

Submitted by Stephen Williams May 24, 2023



*Col. William F. Fox Memorial Tree Nursery, Dept of Environmental Conservation*

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Driving by the Saratoga Tree Nursery, just south of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, most of us barely notice the state tree nursery's rustic entrance sign – and you need to squint to see that its full name is "Colonel William F. Fox Memorial Saratoga Tree Nursery."

The state Department of Environmental Conservation, which owns the nursery, considers Fox the "father" of today's DEC forest ranger program, as well as the guy who believed the state should raise young trees for later replanting.

Yet the story of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ballston Spa native, who also served with valor in the Civil War, is little-known to the general public.

William Freeman Fox was born in the village on Jan. 11, 1840, the son of a Baptist minister who also served in the State Assembly. As a young man, Fox studied engineering at Union College in Schenectady, graduating in 1860. Soon the nation was roiled by the start of the Civil War, which quickly proved more protracted and bloodier than either side expected. Fox enlisted in the Union Army in Elmira, where his family then lived, in 1862.

Fox entered the army as with the rank of captain and commanded C Company of the 107<sup>th</sup> New York Infantry Regiment, assigned to the Army of the Potomac. The young officer saw his first action at Antietam, where he was wounded. He was promoted to major and was wounded again

at Chancellorsville in the spring of 1863. He was a lieutenant colonel by the time he was wounded a third time, at the Battle of Resaca, in Georgia, after his regiment was reassigned to Gen. William T. Sherman's Georgia campaign. Fox was discharged from the Army in July 1864 but was known as "Colonel Fox" ever after. In the years afterward, he wrote several books about the war.

Fox returned to a lumber business the family had started before the war, and over a couple of decades he became prosperous. In an era when many lumbermen practiced indiscriminate clear-cutting, Fox became a proponent of the new science of "conservation forestry," which sought to use selective cutting to create a sustainable forest resource.

Meanwhile, a debate was on in the New York State Legislature over the future of the Adirondack and Catskill forests – timber interests coveted the lumber, and merchants the free-flowing streams that could be diverted to maintain canal flows. Some of the wealthiest saw their value for wilderness recreation. In 1883, the Legislature prohibited the sale of any more mountain lands to private lumber companies.

In 1885, a new Forest Commission was created to oversee the state's forest lands. Fox became assistant secretary and advisor to the commission. He recommended state land acquisitions that expanded the Forest Preserve from 715,000 acres when he took office to 1.6 million acres by the time of his death in 1909.

The debate over the future of Adirondack and Catskill forests was settled in favor of keeping state forest lands "forever wild," and in 1892 the Adirondack Park was created. Fox was named superintendent of state forests.

With the reduction of logging and increased popularity of wilderness recreation, a new problem emerged – wildland forest fires. In some years, hundreds of thousands of acres burned. The state appointed fire wardens to try to control them, but they worked only during emergencies, and local communities were expected to pay their expenses.

Fox spent much of his career advocating for a more robust response. In 1899, he wrote to then-Gov. Theodore Roosevelt urging "the organization of an adequate force of forest rangers who should be assigned to districts of a suitable area, which should be patrolled constantly and thoroughly." In addition to detecting and fighting fires, the rangers could enforce laws against poaching and investigate illegal logging on state lands, he argued.

A system that became today's forest rangers was established in 1909, following exceptionally bad fire years in 1903 and 1908. That's also the year that Fox died, on June 16. He is buried in the Ballston Spa Cemetery.

The name "forest ranger" for the professionalized fire wardens was officially established in 1912, after the Forest, Fish and Game Commission was reorganized and named the Conservation Department. That department became the Department of Environmental Conservation in 1970.

“Considered by many the ‘father’ of DEC’s forest rangers, Colonel William F. Fox is arguably one of the most important people in the long-storied history of New York State forest lands and forest management,” DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos said when the Saratoga Tree Nursery was named for Fox in 2019.

The state tree nursery, founded in 1911 and the first of its kind in the nation, grew out of another idea Fox advocated, that the state should take responsibility for planting new trees on burned-over lands.

Sources: state Department of Environmental Conservation; “The Forest Rangers: A History of the New York State Forest Service,” by Louis Curth; author interviews.