

Pennsylvania Environmental Heritage Program

James Henry – One of Pennsylvania’s Early Forest Conservationists
(Submitted by Jim Wilson)

“Man’s moral dependence on, and affinity to, nature are nowhere more apparent than in those captivating influences exercised upon him by the tree.” These are the words of James Henry in the introduction of his first book on forestry, which he wrote in 1886. In all, James wrote nine books on forestry in the 1880s, and scores of articles and other papers on the subject throughout his literary life. While gunmaking was his appointed vocation, forestry was his chosen avocation.

While the Henry family, in general, embraced a strong environmental ethic, James, in particular, was most passionate about nature. So passionate, in fact, that James Henry drafted a forestry bill in 1883 that was successfully lobbied through the state legislature in the 1884-’85 session. “An act to encourage the planting of trees over the springs and water courses of this Commonwealth of Pennsylvania,” James Henry’s bill, sponsored by Senator Hay from Northampton County, became Pennsylvania’s first public law dealing with the reforestation of stream corridors and wetlands across the Commonwealth, by establishing a state nursery system.

With a mind and a heart toward conservation, James Henry saw the desperate need to reforest the state’s waterways, which had been utterly denuded in the lumbering heyday of the 19th century, resulting in tremendous environmental impacts from the uncontrolled storm water erosion and sedimentation. He knew the onus for restoring the state’s forests and water quality rested with the Commonwealth itself. In a letter urging the State Senate to support his bill, James wrote, *“The protection of our streams and springs should be our first avowed object of arboriculture in our state, and the great work naturally falls on the State, it being the proprietor of the waters as it is of the game and the fish.”* And in a letter to the State House of Representatives seeking support of his bill, he wrote, *“The establishment of nurseries for the cultivation of useful forest trees, and offering these for gratuitous distribution to the landholders of our State, is to bring about the recuperation of our woodlands.”* James Henry was a man for his time...and a man ahead of it as well. More than 120 years after James’ forestry bill became public law, the conservation of streamside forests – our link between land and water – is today a subject of community concern and greenway initiatives throughout Pennsylvania.

In addition to his legislative feats in state forest conservation, James Henry also lobbied for the establishment of county councils of forestry for each of the counties of the Commonwealth. He also lobbied for the establishment of schools of forestry in all the state colleges and universities in Pennsylvania and across the nation. And he was a councilman for both the Pennsylvania Forestry Association and the American Forestry Congress. To be sure, James Henry was a quintessential and proactive conservationist. In a letter to the American Forestry Congress dated August 23rd, 1884, James Henry wrote, *“I speak for Pennsylvania when I say that our wooded domain is rapidly diminishing.”* And he did something – many things in fact – about it. While names like Rothrock and Pinchot are all too synonymous with our state’s forest conservation history, it would appear that our own James Henry is a genuine, unsung hero of Pennsylvania forestry.

Editors note: The preceding article was written by Jim Wilson for *The Jacobsburg Record*, the newsletter of the Jacobsburg Historical Society (May/June 2002, Volume XXIX, No. 3), and reprinted with permission. Mr. Wilson is a naturalist and the cultural resource interpreter at Jacobsburg Environmental Education Center, a State Park located in central Northampton County (northeast of Nazareth). In an earlier newsletter article (May-June 2001), Mr. Wilson wrote about a section of Jacobsburg State Park commonly known as Henry's Woods. The following three paragraphs about Henry's Woods are an appropriate testament to the strong conservation ethic of the Henry Family. (also reprinted with permission)

Anyone who has ever walked through Henry's Woods knows what a special place it really is. But most folks don't realize it's one of the last standing, honest-to-goodness, "old-growth forests" in the northeastern United States! In the forthcoming book *Sierra Club Guide to the Ancient Forests of the Northeast*, Henry's Woods is listed among 160 old-growth forest sites in the northeast corner of the US. Author Bruce Kershner defines an ancient or old-growth forest as "*a natural community that has been in continuously forested condition since before European settlement, and which has a large proportion of canopy trees with ages of 150 years or older.*" According to Kershner, an environmental scientist, forest ecologist and national authority on old-growth forests, not only does Henry's Woods fit that bill, but he declares it to be "*one of the most significant natural treasures in eastern Pennsylvania*".

Ironically, the soils in Henry's Woods are poor in nutrients due to hillside and streambank erosion and periodic flooding of the Bushkill Creek. Because of this, the trees there do not amass much girth each year. A stroll through Henry's Woods does not reveal colossal trees. Most are moderately large, 30-40 inches in diameter. But even many of the small hemlocks are ancient. Kershner measured a six-inch diameter hemlock at an astonishing 225 years of age! It was next to a 36-inch hemlock whose age we can only wonder at. Other enduring veterans in Henry's Woods include red, white and chestnut oaks, white pine, sugar maple, and yellow and black birch.

Despite the demands their gun and iron industries placed on the natural resources of the local environment, the Henry family managed to set aside 40-acres of the upper Bushkill Creek watershed as a natural preserve. In *Sierra Club Guide to the Ancient Forests of the Northeast* (published by *Random House* and slated for release in 2002), the author credits the Henry family with the foresight and stewardship in preserving Henry's Woods for us today, and for generations to come. He has recommended that Henry's Woods be designated as a state natural area, and recognized for its significance. It seems the Henry family has left us with the oldest historic site at Jacobsburg, and perhaps in all of eastern Pennsylvania – Henry's Woods.