

“Mr. Forest Service”: Wilbur R. Mattoon and the Reforestation of the South

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Wilbur Reed Mattoon always seemed to be in motion. During his nearly 40-year career as a forest inspector, administrator, researcher, extension agent, and educator for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, he crisscrossed the country. But he especially focused his energies on the Southern States, and his impact there was outsized in part because of his peripatetic approach to his work. “He had to travel a great deal,” Elwood L. Demmon, former director of the Southern Forest Experiment Station recalled in 1959, “because that was part of his job” (Maunder 1959: 28). Mattoon’s position was not just an occupation but a calling to expand knowledge about and application of forestry to abandoned and despoiled forest lands across the South; it was not by happenstance that he characterized his 1918 field trip to South Carolina as “missionary work for farm forestry” (Yale Forest School 1919). Mattoon’s proselytizing was facilitated by his gregarious and outgoing nature. Demmon—who called him “Mr. Forest Service”—said that he did not know of anyone more friendly (Maunder 1959: 28). These personable qualities, when combined with his willingness to speak at any conference or demonstration site anywhere, meant that Mattoon gained “a lot of influence in getting forestry started where there had been no previous forestry program” (Maunder 1959: 27).

For all his visibility during his career, the formerly high-profile forester has all but disappeared from the historical record. The two best studies of the Federal agency for which Mattoon worked—Harold K. Steen’s *The U.S. Forest Service: A History* (2004) and James G. Lewis’ *The Forest Service and the Greatest Good: A Centennial History* (Lewis 2005)—make no mention of his pioneering work on large-scale forest regeneration on private lands or his hands-on advocacy of small-scale, farm-lot forestry. He is similarly absent from the best synthesis of the history of southern forestry, *Forestry in the U.S. South: A History* (Carter and others 2015). State-level studies of southern forests and forestry, notably James E. Fickle’s monographs on Alabama (Fickle 2014) and Mississippi (Fickle 2001), identify other crucial influencers on reestablishing longleaf, shortleaf, loblolly, and slash pine (*Pinus palustris*, *P. echinata*, *P. taeda*, and *P. elliottii*, respectively) woodlands, but Mattoon, who was an indefatigable proponent of reforesting the region, garners no acknowledgment. Even internal Forest Service histories in which his activism is identified qualify its importance. Philip C. Wakeley, in his posthumously published memoir about his 40-year career in the Forest Service’s Southern Research Station, noted that Mattoon’s very mobility complicated his legacy. “Men like W.W. Ashe and W.R. Mattoon of the Forest Service and H.H.

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The members of the Yale Forest School class of 1904 were a high-achieving group. Wilbur R. Mattoon is in the third row, sixth from the left. (Courtesy photo by Yale University Library, Manuscripts and Archives [RU 748; photographs of events, activities, and individuals, School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Yale University])

Chapman of Yale were, to be sure, doing invaluable work in the South, but as transients, not as permanent residents” (Wakeley and Barnett 2016: 11).

There was nothing impermanent about Mattoon’s impact, however, regardless of his residence, as a close analysis of his life and career reveals. Born in Harwich, MA, in 1875, the first-born son of a Methodist minister, Mattoon expected to follow in his father’s footsteps. To that end, he attended two Methodist-funded institutions: the Cazenovia Seminary in upstate New York and Wesleyan University in Connecticut, graduating from the latter with a bachelor’s degree in 1899. Yet his ministerial aspirations evolved while teaching high school in Michigan. After a 3-year stint in the classroom, he enrolled in the New York State College of Forestry at Cornell University, the Nation’s first university-level program, then under the direction of Bernhard E. Fernow, former Chief of the USDA Division of Forestry. Although Mattoon was fascinated by his silvicultural and dendrological studies, the school closed after he completed his first year there following a controversial college-sponsored logging operation that led the State’s Governor to pocket veto the State appropriations to the fledgling program (Hosmer 1950). With that, Mattoon transferred to the Yale Forest School, the Nation’s first graduate program in forestry.

A member of the class of 1904, Mattoon quickly learned that his classmates shared his enthusiasm for the new science of forestry and the tantalizing prospects of the emerging profession. For many, Mattoon included, advancing forestry was a secular mission and judging from the arc of their careers, they proved able missionaries. Among other notables, in this 1904 Yale cohort was William B. Greeley, a future Chief of the Forest Service; Fred Besley, who became the first State forester of Maryland; Paul Redington, who would become California’s regional forester; Stuart Flintham, who was tapped to be the inaugural chief of Los Angeles County’s forestry and fire department; and Herman H. Chapman and Ralph C. Hawley, who became prolific researchers and influential professors at the Yale Forest School. Like most of his fellow graduates, Mattoon’s first gainful employment was in the Forest Service. Like them, too, he rose through the ranks quickly, beginning as an assistant forest inspector, then inspector, forest examiner, and forest supervisor. Much of his early work was in District (now Region) 3 and included setting up and managing New Mexico’s Fort Bayard Nursery, serving as the head of the regional silvics office and subsequently as supervisor of the Manzano and Zuni National Forests (both were later absorbed into the Cibola National Forest) and of the Tusayan National Forest (now part of the Kaibab National Forest, which abuts Grand Canyon National Park to the south) (Yale Forest School 1913).

In the latter half of 1907, Mattoon served as the acting supervisor of the Wichita National Forest in Oklahoma. The Wichita had been established as a forest reserve under the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1901 by President William McKinley; in 1905, it was transferred to the Forest Service (DeSpain 2000). While overseeing the Wichita, Mattoon launched his first investigation into the life history of the shortleaf pine, research that led him to conclude that this species might be critical to the reforestation of the oft-burned terrain in western Arkansas (Mattoon 1908). When he made this claim for shortleaf pine’s ability to regenerate once-wooded landscapes, Mattoon did not know that he had hit upon the central theme of his subsequent work in the region. The South’s seemingly unlimited potential for reforestation would define his professional activism until his death in March 1941.

That future began to be formulated in 1912, when Henry Graves, the founding director of the Yale Forest School before becoming the second chief of the Forest Service, brought Mattoon to Washington as a key member of the office of silviculture, with a focus on the South. This decision also worked out for the region because it would have been hard to miss the crying need for forestry and foresters in the South. After all, the post-Civil War era had witnessed the liquidation of ever-larger portions of the region’s wooded estate, from Virginia to Texas. This unrestrained harvest was fueled in part by northern investors such as Frederick Weyerhaeuser who sought a new source of wood after having clearcut the Upper Midwest. Investors were attracted by the South’s bargain-priced timberlands, often available for as little as \$1.25 per acre (Healey 2013). Their access to these timber stands was facilitated by an ever-expanding railroad network, more sophisticated milling technology, and a rising demand for wood nationwide. Civil War antagonisms seemed not to matter in this context: “As for these investments of northern capital,” one Tennessean noted, “the South is glad to have them. We welcome the skilled lumberman and noisy mill” (Fickle 2014: 52).



A 1916 picture of longleaf pine lands near Vredenburgh, AL, where a heavy cut was made 3 years prior; because of annual fires, no seed trees remained. (USDA Forest Service photo [negative # 26846A] taken by Wilbur R. Mattoon)

Noise is what the South got, as loggers cut through vast tracts of old-growth pine and hardwood forests. Between 1880 and 1890, for example, regional output doubled, and by 1900, “the Gulf South was producing more than five billion board feet a year,” writes historian Thomas R. Cox (Cox 2010: 252). Alabama was one of the epicenters of the new forested economy: in 1899, the State had 738 active sawmills and produced an estimated 1.1 billion board feet. Over the next decade, the South’s productivity soared to more than 9.5 billion board feet (Cox 2010). Alabama kept pace with the regional output: in 1909, the State had 2,100 sawmills churning out 1.6 billion board feet of lumber.

The same pattern held for Mississippi. The celerity with which loggers descended on the Magnolia State, one observer reported, was akin to locusts gorging on a wheat field (Fickle 2001). Large milling operations turned out millions of board feet annually, a rate of production that boosted the State’s ranking among its national competitors. But its speedy ascent generated considerable damage on the ground. A 1908 U.S. Bureau of Forestry report captured the “wanton waste of raw materials”: “Inasmuch as cutting has been unusually severe...and since fire almost invariably follows lumbering, more than half the longleaf pine land of the State has been converted into a blackened and barren waste” (Holmes and Foster 1908: 3). The future implications were clear: “Over the larger part of the area there is little or no reproduction of the timber, which, when once gone, will not be replaced by a new growth which should now be coming on” (Holmes and Foster 1908: 3). This cut-out-and-get-out strategy also prevailed in the east Texas pineries. In 1869, the State ranked 24th in the Nation in terms of its timber production; a small number of mills managed approximately 107 million board feet. Less than 40 years later, it ranked third with nearly 700 mills producing more than 2.25 billion board feet. So quickly was the Piney Woods being harvested that, in 1904, University of Texas ecologist William L. Bray warned they would be logged out within a decade (Bray 1904). That worrisome data led him to advocate the implementation of national or State regulatory control of the Lone Star State’s remaining forests.

Similarly concerned was B. Lawton Wiggins, Vice Chancellor of the University of the South in Tennessee, who committed to managing the campus’s 10,000 forested acres to demonstrate that conservation paid, a commitment that gained credence in the 1903 U.S. Bureau of Forestry report, *Conservative Lumbering at Sewanee, Tennessee*. Noting that hitherto “lumbering at Sewanee has never been followed as a regular business,” the agency observed that the university “has not, therefore, received the benefit of the specialization and intelligent management which come with long practice” (Foley 1903: 28). Developing a more conservative and sustainable approach would reap significant economic, social, and environmental benefits.

Those advantages, local and regional, gained fuller expression in 1910 at the inaugural Southern Conservation Congress. Held in Atlanta, it brought together foresters, politicians, mill owners, lumber executives, and conservation activists. The conferees confirmed that getting out the cut had devastated southern forests, producing a splintered terrain that was the source of significant downstream flooding. Forester Gifford Pinchot, who delivered one of the keynote addresses, focused in part on this upland-valley dynamic, noting that the “question of erosion was one of vital importance to the South, which...suffers from the

loss of its soil to a greater degree than any other section of the United States.” Conservation—the “application of common sense to the common problems that confront the people at large”—could change that situation; rigorously applied, it would stabilize the land, people, and economy (American Lumberman 1910: 56). The next day, former President Theodore Roosevelt averred that conservation would ensure a permanent prosperity for the present generation of southerners and their progeny: “It is our business to see that no private individual is allowed to waste the public heritage, and the public as a whole is vitally concerned with the soil and forests and the water of the land” (Roosevelt 1910). According to noted historian William D. Bryan, Roosevelt and Pinchot urged attendees “to usher in a new approach to nature, one in which conservation was a key part of the calculus of development” (Bryan 2018: 17).

Because the South’s natural resources were invaluable to its rebuilding in the post-Civil War era, many business leaders, like those who convened in Atlanta in 1910, were drawn to the concept of permanence that was embedded in Roosevelt’s and Pinchot’s conceptions of conservation as ensuring an enduring prosperity. For many of the white elites in that audience, “profit and environmental quality” were not mutually exclusive (Bryan 2018: 3). Yet there was an exclusionary element to this vision for a New South. Conservation would help its proponents sustain the racial status quo, a criticism Black educators and intellectuals leveled against industrial capitalists who had secured much of the public land base in Southern States for their timber operations and by so doing cut their communities “out of the path of private land ownership, gutting the central promises of Reconstruction” (Bryan 2018: 30). Some timber company owners also exploited minorities and immigrant labor through a system of debt peonage linked to forest conservation (Reynolds 2013). African Americans paid a hefty price for a conservation ethos—permanence or sustainability of resources—that did not include them.

Mattoon contributed to this troubling ethic during his numerous travels across the South advocating conservation and reforestation. There is no evidence, for example, that he ever crossed the “color line” by addressing Black farmers, social organizations, or colleges, though he frequently spoke to their whites-only analogues. Nor is there any mention of the plight of rural Black southerners in his many articles and books; these same texts, by word and image, assume whites are their only audience.

Circumscribed, too, was conservation’s on-the-ground application, at least in this respect. Mattoon’s initial approach to the problem of reforestation on private lands in the South revolved around the large logging and milling companies that were responsible for some of the greatest damage. His goal, then, was to convince these entities that their future would require a very different land-management strategy if they expected to sustain their presence, profitability, and permanence—an approach consistent with historian Bryan’s insights about which southerners would be most sympathetic to conservation. One who proved sympathetic to Mattoon’s pitch for sustainability was lumberman Henry E. Hardtner of Urania, LA. The two met in the mill town in the early 1910s and quickly developed a strong working relationship. Hardtner knew that the rapid liquidation of the State’s pineries could not last, and he was therefore receptive to the ideas of foresters W.W. Ashe and Mattoon about how reforestation—natural



Bronze tablet memorial dedicated May 15, 1939, in Hardtner Memorial Park, Urania, LA, to honor Henry E. Hardtner (1870–1935), known as the “father of reforestation.” (USDA Forest Service photo, courtesy of the Forest History Society, Durham, NC)

and artificial—could sustain his Urania Lumber Company. In collaboration with the Forest Service, Hardtner launched a series of experiments in 1912 reseeded or planting seedlings on cutover land. He erected fences to keep out rooting hogs and established fire safety measures to protect his reforestation efforts. Perhaps most compelling and generative, Hardtner invited Yale foresters to establish a summer camp on his holdings to facilitate the training of its graduate students and encouraged the Forest Service’s Southern Forest Experiment Station to create a substation in Urania (see also Chapman and others 2023). Professor H.H. Chapman, one of Mattoon’s classmates at Yale, wrote admiringly about Hardtner following the lumberman’s death in 1935: “His interest in forestry was not confined to immediate profits but sprang from a deep and genuine concern for what he termed his ‘baby pines,’” a commitment to stewardship that “differed from practically all other southern lumbermen of the period” (Chapman 1939: 759).

Hardtner’s land became a research and educational hub that Ashe, Mattoon, Chapman, and others utilized in their ambition to propagate the idea of forestry across the South. Mattoon, for example, used the successes at Urania to engage with other major players in the region’s industrializing economy. Each field season, as he traversed the South, he encouraged the land departments of the very railroads on which he traveled, notably the Southern Railway System and the Seaboard Air Line Railroad, to adopt the conservation agenda of sustainable reforestation. By the 1920s, these and other railroads, as well as several larger lumber companies, were managing second-growth plantations of longleaf, shortleaf, and slash pine. To accelerate this transformation, Mattoon was also engaged with southern universities. For example, Mattoon sent slash pine seedlings to Clemson University’s experimental station on the South Carolina coast for the first such demonstration plot (Mattoon 1916). The Georgia Forest School, established in 1906 by the University of Georgia as the first university-level program in the South, received slash pine seed that Mattoon and colleagues had gathered for germination in its nursery (Mattoon 1916).

These educational initiatives dovetailed with Mattoon’s interactions with state-level agencies. In 1917, he was appointed to co direct the new States Relations Service in the USDA and was given an expansive portfolio. An agency press release announced that,

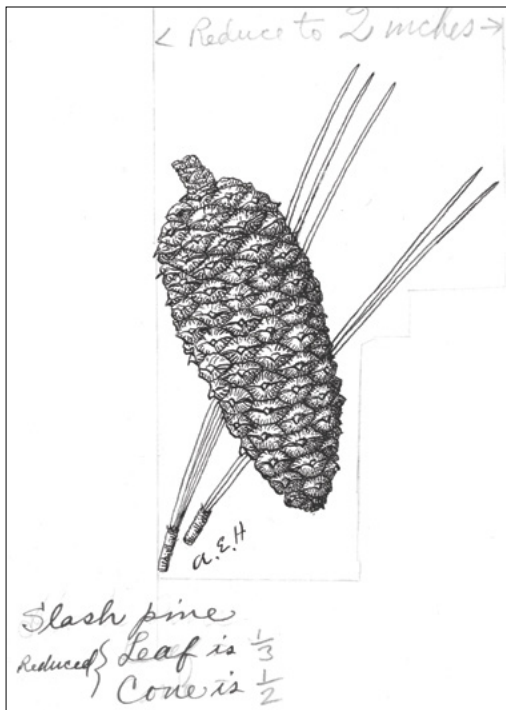
Mr. Mattoon will supervise, inspect, and stimulate the foresters employed by the States Relations Service in the various states, develop new lines of effective demonstration...and extend co-operation among the various organization and agencies which can be of service in the general movement for the better development and more profitable utilization of the forest resources of the country. (Yale Forest School 1917).

That ambitious agenda was one reason why he traveled so much and so consistently; in his first year of this work, he reported visiting 15 States (Yale Forest School 1918). It is also why Mattoon is often credited with helping create a groundswell of support for the legislative establishment of forestry departments, and by extension, state foresters, which could and did emerge as additional centers of conservation activism (Yarnell 2021).

These scaled-up and top-down initiatives, innovative as they were, did not constitute the sole thrust of Mattoon’s educational mission or the people he sought to reach. He balanced these applied interventions with a steady stream of publications in professional journals, departmental bulletins, newspapers, and magazines that expanded and reinforced his pragmatic approach to the conservation of the South’s natural resources. And these texts were aimed at the plight of small farmers, not the profitability of major corporations—the poor, not the well-to-do. It was this class that had borne the brunt of impermanence and paid a heavy price for unsustainable practices in agriculture and logging—a price exacted in damaged soils, eroded terrain, lost forest cover, ravages of floods and dust, and battered communities left behind when timber companies pursued a cut-out-and-get-out business strategy. The bottom-up solution to this top-down negligence, Mattoon wrote again and again, was to focus on those people left behind when mills shut down, or who tried to survive tilling soils stripped of their nutrients. These people and the vulnerable landscapes they inhabited were the subject of Mattoon’s relentless promotion of small-scale reforestation—farm-lot forestry—on private property across the South.



Two rows of slash pines 6 to 8 inches in diameter and 30 to 35 feet tall in 1926, planted in Hampton County, SC. (USDA Forest Service photo taken by Wilbur R. Mattoon, courtesy of the Forest History Society, Durham, NC)



This ink drawing of slash pine by Annie E. Hoyle appeared in several of Wilbur R. Mattoon's *Common Forest Trees* guides. (USDA Forest Service photo, courtesy of the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA)

One reason for Mattoon's remarkable record as an author, publicist, and advocate, Demmon noted, was his ability to translate scientific knowledge to the public, to "take the findings of a research organization and put them into simple language that a farmer could understand" (Maunder 1959: 29). That is why Mattoon, although never formally attached to the Southern Forest Experiment Station, nevertheless proved vital to its mission. Consider Mattoon's series of articles in the *Forestry Quarterly* (which in 1917 was renamed the *Journal of Forestry*) in which he shared with other foresters the scientific data he had gathered about the silvicultural qualities, growth rates, and adaptability of slash pine, and the economic value it provided those who planted this hardy, fast-growing species in the "poorest, sandy soils and very poorly drained lands" (Mattoon 1916: 587). A number of these early success stories led Mattoon to conclude in 1916 that second-growth plantations of slash pine "point strongly to the profitableness for private capital of this form of investment on low-priced lands" (Mattoon 1916: 587).

To make the case that reforestation could boost farm families' economic fortunes, Mattoon also wrote a series of bulletins (e.g., Mattoon 1922a, 1922b) aimed at those he hoped to convince, as the title of one of these documents declares: "Southern Pines Pay" (Mattoon 1939). These species' value was contingent on numerous biological, climatic, and environmental factors, all of which Mattoon explored in individual primers focused on loblolly, longleaf, and shortleaf pines (Mattoon 1926a, 1926b, 1931). These pithy booklets—only one was longer than 40 pages—were accompanied by Mattoon's photographs that provided visual confirmation of the devastation of the original pineries of the South, the opportunities that the replanting of the particular species could bring, and the economic and social advantages reforestation would generate. "One often hears it said that the land will never come back to pine," he wrote in a USDA bulletin about longleaf pine. "To a great degree this statement has been justified, and it will be true so long as the prevailing practice continues and the prevailing sentiment maintains that the woods 'just will burn and must burn' (Mattoon 1922a: 36). To protect longleaf seedlings from fire and feral hogs and preserve a sufficient number of seed trees for successful regrowth—that was the goal. To achieve that end, Mattoon concluded, "becomes largely a matter of educating people," which was the precise purpose of these public-facing bulletins (Mattoon 1922a: 36).

Teaching the public was the rationale for another set of Mattoon's writings. Between the 1920s and 1940s, he published 17 State-centered, pocket guides to common trees. These often were collaborative projects, written in association with State forestry associations and brilliantly illustrated with woodcut prints of cones, needles, and leaves by Forest Service illustrator Annie E. Hoyle (Daytonius 1930). Some of these manuals, like the one produced for Florida, emphasized that timber was growing in scarcity and value, and therefore there was a pressing need to better understand regional tree species (Mattoon 1925). These guides also detailed how the boom in recreation in the United States was increasing support for conservation. "The rapidly increasing interest in outdoor life, stimulated perhaps by good roads, the automobile, the 'scout' movement, and the widened outlook resulting from the spread of education," Mattoon noted in *Common Forest Trees of Kentucky* (Mattoon 1923: 2), "encourages the rational treatment of our trees and forests." This was critical so that

our forests may continue to furnish the material so essential to the maintenance of the industrial and domestic life of the State and Nation, protect our farmsteads and mountain streams, and provide places of pleasure and recreation for our people. Indeed, the trees may justly be regarded as ‘our best friends.’ (Mattoon 1923: 2).

He slightly modified that claim in the only urban-focused guide he published, this one about the city in which he resided, Washington, DC. That book’s purpose was to teach city folk about the trees they might encounter on a stroll in Rock Creek Park or along the banks of the Potomac River, or as pedestrians walking any of the district’s 300 miles of tree-shaded streets. His expectation was that these readers’ newfound knowledge would lead them to appreciate, as did James Bryce, a former British ambassador to the United States, that “trees are an inherent part of the life of the city of Washington” (Mattoon and Alburtis 1926: 2).

His skill as a writer and photographer was why “we were always glad to see Mattoon and to work with him because we knew that he would help get our research results into use quicker than if we had to depend only on ourselves” (Maunder 1959: 28). This routine generosity was manifest in Mattoon’s career-long willingness to meet people on their own terms and grounds, much as he did year after year at the countless demonstration workshops that annually filled his itinerary. One such moment is caught in a photograph of Mattoon taken in 1929. With his back to the camera, Mattoon faces a group of farmers in Macon County, NC, who had come to learn more about how to grow, thin, and harvest small stands of pine. Mattoon, as he often did, would have assured them that planting a similar grove would be a significant investment of their time and energy but one which would enhance their family’s economic well-being and life chances. “Farm woodlands have been, many times, the means of lifting a mortgage from the farm,” he noted approvingly, “or making the difference between profit and loss on the farm balance sheet” (USDA 1929). Face-to-face, peer-to-peer: this hands-on, grassroots approach was why Mattoon traveled as much as he did, though the real secret to his success, a colleague asserted, “was not so much the trees he planted as the thoughts he planted in the minds of common people” (Williams 1944: 242).

Wilbur R. Mattoon speaking at a woods meeting in North Carolina in November 1929. (Courtesy photo by North Carolina State University, University Archives Photograph Collection [image UA023.007]; Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, NC)



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