



[Stewardship for White's Woods: restore old growth](#)

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Clearcut "Pennsylvania Desert," Pennsylvania Department of Forestry, June 1914.

White's Woods diary

By Sara King

WHITE TOWNSHIP — The [White Township Stewardship Committee](#) is now talking about [how to wrap up their plans](#) for White's Woods. The best option on the table, by far, for realizing the promise of this [Project 70](#) natural area, is to dedicate the [White's Woods Nature Center](#) to the [Old Growth Forest Network](#).

By 1920 almost all of the eastern United States original forests had been cut. Obliterated. Our state was so treeless that it was called the “Pennsylvania Desert.”

[Less than 1 percent](#) of original East Coast forests remain today.

The [Old Growth Forest Network](#) (OGFN), founded by Dr. Joan Maloof, is committed to protecting those small bits of virgin forest that remain. But as extraordinary as this goal is, the OGFN’s broader vision is far more ambitious. The network’s mission is to “[t]o create a network of forests across the U.S., with one in each county where forests can grow, open for visitors and never logged, and a network of people inspired to protect them.”

As Maloof explained in her virtual consultation with the committee In [October 2022](#), the goal is to protect some existing second-growth forests, last timbered 80-100 years ago, so that these forests may recover old growth characteristics.

[White’s Woods](#) (go to p. 6, top) is one of these second-growth forests, one that also contains at least one section of old growth.

WHAT IS THE POINT of trying to protect second-growth forests? [OGFN explains](#):

Majestic forests that supported abundant biodiversity were this nation’s inheritance. The vast majority of those forests have now been removed or radically altered (average loss is 95 percent in the West, greater than 99 percent in the East). It is time now to set aside a few forests and allow them to recover their old-growth characteristics. These “future old-growth forests” will be our generation’s gift to the generations coming after us. If we are able to reverse the decline in mature, native forests we will be the first generation to have done so.

[The Penn’s Woods Strategic Plan](#), the guiding document for the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) forest management, makes a commitment to “developing a strategy to promote old-growth forest systems on state forest lands.”

The 2016 [DCNR State Forest Resource Management Plan](#) takes this commitment a step further: “DCNR has long recognized the value and need for protecting old-growth communities. In addition to virgin tracts, the bureau recognizes the need to conserve evolving second- and third-growth forests where future old growth will exist,” (p.7). At least 20 percent of state forest lands are to be set aside to protect existing or developing old growth.

[By 2022, DCNR had 25 locations dedicated to the OFGN](#). One of these is the Creek Trail in the Boyd Big Tree Conservation Area, reported to have several oaks estimated to be 120 years old.

A recent White’s Woods Tree Diversity Inventory, conducted for Friends of White’s Woods by Dr. Marion Holmes, reports that trees on one north slope in the forest appear to have escaped timbering entirely. Some other sections are much younger, dating to the early 1900s, while others appear to reflect re-growth from around 1938.

In more ways than one, the White's Woods Nature Center belongs in the OGFN.

NO FOREST in Indiana County is yet committed to being set-aside to develop old growth characteristics.

[Citizens have fought timbering](#) plans for 28 years to keep this forest intact and let it develop via natural succession.

Over the past 28 years, nearly 5,000 citizens have taken the time to sign petitions, send letters, fill out surveys, send emails, and show up at public meetings to demonstrate their commitment to protecting this forest, which was purchased over 50 years ago with state taxpayer dollars to be used for "passive recreation," such as hiking and walking and left "largely in its natural state."

Joining the OGFN would put our region on the [OGFN national map](#) and put us in the mix for recreational tourism dollars.

Having a forest that is protected as developing old growth is one important way to declare our region's commitment to the sort of "quality of life" measures that make population retention and growth far more likely. Modern people value natural, public-access green space.



As late as 1870, close to two-thirds of the original forest in our region, stretching from the Allegheny Mountains to the Ohio River, remained. According to Roy Clarkson's book, [Tumult on the Mountains](#) (1965), one dominant hardwood tree in some areas of this vast forest was the tulip poplar. These trees, 120-140 feet tall, with diameters of 7-9 feet, were sometimes found in pure stands. Immense oaks, maples, sycamores, beeches, birches, and other hardwoods were also part of this region's forest. Sassafras trees grew as high as 60-80 feet.

Many people born after 1930 or so began to believe that our country's really big trees grew and grow only in the Western United States. Tell that to the single oak tree taken down not far from here that, by itself, filled an entire lumber train just over 100 years ago.

Tulip poplar, Mount Vernon, Va.

It will take hundreds of years to regrow our forests. But it is an important goal. And a legacy that future generations deserve.

ENVIRONMENTALISTS such as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau, beginning in the mid-1800s, argued that nature should be preserved simply because of its beauty and spiritual worth. But we have also learned that old growth forests are especially important to healthy ecosystems — not least because of their role in the earth's carbon cycle and in providing clean air and water.

A community with a developing old growth forest is a special community.

We need to protect our forest. The White's Woods Nature Center should be part of the Old Growth Forest Network.

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