

NATURALLY: From private land to park land: Cook Forest and White's Woods

- By JOAN MALOOF Special to the Gazette
- January 29, 2026 6 hrs ago

Sixty-five miles from White's Woods is the most famous forest in Pennsylvania — Cook Forest. Many readers of this column have likely visited Cook Forest State Park and hiked the trails that wind beneath its towering trees.

White's Woods and Cook Forest weren't always parks. They were once private land that someone treated gently enough, for long enough, that those with the eyes to see and a mind tuned to the future, eventually suggested that they become parks. From the idea of a park to the actual establishment of it takes a great deal of work. In the case of Cook Forest, it took 16 years from the first talk of a park until it came to fruition. Many people were against it becoming a park, arguing that the harvesting of the timber in the forest would be the best course for the local economy. Today we see how wrong those advocating for the timber economy were. The recreation economy has been much more long-lasting and lucrative. These days the town closest to the park, Cooksburg, hosts a multitude of vacation homes and abundant recreational opportunities. The park gets more than half a million visitors a year — all boosting the town's economy. Meanwhile, in other Pennsylvania towns, where the forests were all cut, the economy is declining.

Historical accounts tell us that John Cook was the first permanent White settler in the Cooksburg area. He first explored the region in 1826, as a surveyor working for the government, and when he saw the exceptional forest, he decided to return, buy property, build a timber mill,



Joan Maloof, founder of the Old-Growth Forest Network.

and settle there. In 1828 he purchased 765 acres and moved to the area with his wife and 10 children.

He cut much of the original old-growth forest, but a good portion of it he purposefully left uncut. Not because he had visions of it becoming a park someday, but simply because he admired the beauty of the forest. It is unlikely that he could even imagine that almost 200 years later an organization would be formed to help preserve the small percentage of older forests left in the nation. In 2012 that organization, the Old-Growth Forest Network, recognized the Forest Cathedral area of Cook Forest as the first forest in the Network and the representative forest for Clarion County. Today the Old-Growth Forest Network includes more than 300 forests in 39 states.

Thomas White purchased and settled on his land in Indiana County about the same time that John Cook settled in Clarion County. Serious talk of protection of White's Woods began 55 years ago, in 1970. Although White Township is now listed as the owner on the deed, turning that private land into park land was a collaborative effort, and eventually the township, Indiana Borough, the state and the federal government all got involved. As Richard Stephenson notes in his 1977 history of White's Woods, "a Nature Center is for all people regardless of their age and physical or mental abilities. It is a relatively undisturbed area left by local people to preserve some of the representative natural habitats of plants and animals that are native to the area."

In that same document, Stephenson notes that "public ownership doesn't automatically ensure the woods will still be there in future years." His words ring true, because even though White's Woods has been an important green space to the community for decades, there have been ongoing threats to the forest.

It is in everyone's interest for the township to continue its recent efforts to protect the forest, devoting energy to preserving White's Woods so that it can mature essentially in its natural state.

To ensure that the woods will always be there, it is time for the township to respond to the call of its citizens (determined by opinion surveys) and put appropriate protections in place. A no-commercial timbering easement is one way this can be accomplished. When permanent protections are in place, White's Woods can be recognized as Indiana County's representative in the Old-Growth Forest Network — a growing national network of open-to-the-public, protected forests. The day that happens will be a day of celebration for those who have worked long and hard on keeping this forest standing. It will be a gift to future generations of citizens as well as to the plants and animals that inhabit the forest.

To see all the forests in the Old-Growth Forest Network, including the 40 Pennsylvania forests, visit www.oldgrowthforest.net.

Joan Maloof, professor emeritus at Salisbury University, founded the Old-Growth Forest Network to preserve, protect and promote the country's few remaining stands of old-growth forest as well as mature second-growth forests that can become old growth. She spends her time lecturing, writing, visiting forests, assisting private landowners, and supporting local groups trying to protect community forests. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.