

Hayes-Bohanan, James K. 2000. Marsh-Billings National Historic Park. America's Historic Sites. Pasadena, California: Salem Press.

Marsh-Billings National Historical Park (VT)

Date: Opened June, 1998

Relevant issues: art and architecture, cultural history, political history, western expansion

Significance: Marsh-Billings National Historical Park is the only site in the National Park system of the United States that is dedicated to an idea: that of the evolving conception of the conservation of natural resources. It is the only National Park Service property in Vermont.

Location: Immediately north of the town center in Woodstock, Vermont, approximately 90 miles south and west of Burlington.

Site Offices:

Marsh-Billings National Historical Park

54 Elm Street

Woodstock, Vermont 05091

Ph: (802) 457-3368

Web site: www.nps.gov/mabi

Billings Farm & Museum

P.O. Box 489

Route 12 & River Road

Woodstock, VT 05091

Ph: (802) 457-2355

Web site: www.billingsfarm.org

Visiting the Park

Marsh-Billings National Historical Park is open from late spring through early autumn. More than 20 miles of carriage roads are available for hiking; other uses are restricted. The houses and grounds of the park – including the collection of conservation paintings and prints – may be accessed only as part of guided tours. Separate visitors' centers at the NHP and the Farm Museum provide interpretive materials and special programs. Expect to spend a half day to a full day touring the house and grounds. Call the park and museum offices for information about seasonal park hours (the park is not open year-round), details of tour offerings, tour reservations (strongly recommended), and special programs.

Introduction

Marsh-Billings National Historical Park was created by a gift of the Rockefeller family in 1992 and opened to the public in 1998. The property includes the historic home of George Perkins Marsh, Frederick Billings, and Mary French and Laurence Spelman Rockefeller. The property includes the grounds associated with the mansion and a managed forest of about 600 acres. As the home of successive generations of Americans concerned with the conservation of natural resources, the NHP is the first National Park dedicated to the idea of conservation. Adjacent to the park is the Billings Farm Museum, an 88-acre working farm and educational institution operated by a private, non-profit foundation.

George Perkins Marsh

George Perkins Marsh was born to a prominent family in Woodstock, Vermont in 1801 and spent his early childhood in a family home nearby. The mansion that was to become the centerpiece of the Marsh-Billings NHP was built for his growing family during the period 1805 to 1807. Marsh learned to read as a young child, and read with such intensity that his physician

ordered him to stop reading at the age of seven, so that his eyesight might recover from the strain. During the four years that he was forbidden to read books, he learned to read the landscape, including the identification of all the native trees.

In 1820, Marsh graduated at the top of his class at Dartmouth College. He went on to practice law in Burlington, Vermont, but eventually turned his attention toward other pursuits, including raising sheep, investing in a woolen mill and railroads, and lecturing and writing on a variety of topics. He served in the Vermont legislature and in the U.S. Congress (1843 – 1849). In Congress, he worked for the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution and against slavery and the Mexican War.

From 1849 to 1854, he served as a diplomat in Turkey and Greece. On his return to Vermont, he began to speak about the consequences of unchecked logging activity and lamented the changes in the land and water that had resulted. In 1861, he became the U.S. Minister to the Kingdom of Italy, where he would serve until shortly before his death in 1881. In 1864, he published his most influential work, *Man and Nature: Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, in which he described the relationship between humans and the natural environment. He decried the destruction of the North American landscape and promoted a new ethic of responsible stewardship. The book became an important early work in American conservation thought.

Frederick Billings

Woodstock native Frederick Billings was born in 1823 and spent his early career in the American West. He made a fortune first as a lawyer in California during the Gold Rush and later as a developer of railroads. His railroads required a constant supply of timber to replace ties, and Billings began the practice of replanting trees along the railroads as they were used in order to create a renewable supply. This was both a prudent business practice and a progressive conservation practice for the time.

On returning to Vermont in the 1860s, Billings was alarmed to find that substantial clear-cutting had damaged the land, causing severe soil erosion and flooding. In 1869, he purchased the childhood home of George Perkins Marsh, deciding to make it a model of resource conservation. On the uplands of the property he planted selected species of trees and managed them for sustainable harvest. He opened more than twenty miles of carriage trails to make these forests accessible to the public. On the lowlands, he established a dairy farm to demonstrate responsible land stewardship. After his death in 1890, his wife Julia Billings and their three daughters continued the careful management of the entire property.

Mary and Laurance Rockefeller

In 1954, the property came into the hands of Laurance Rockefeller and Mary French Rockefeller, a granddaughter of Frederick Billings. Laurence Rockefeller's strong interest in conservation resulted in his appointment to environmental posts by several presidents. He is known both for his vacation resorts in areas of extraordinary natural beauty and for his gifts of land to the public in many of those areas. In Woodstock, Laurance and Mary Rockefeller continued the conservation practices of Frederick Billings on both the farm and the forest, which is one of the oldest continuously-managed forests in the United States. The Rockefellers also added to a collection of conservation art that includes paintings and prints by Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt and Asher B. Durand.—James Hayes-Bohanan, Ph.D.

For further information:

- Bridges, Peter. 1999. The Polymath from Vermont. *Virginia Quarterly Review*. 75(1): 82+.
- Harr, John Ensor and Peter J. Johnson. 1991. *The Rockefeller Conscience: An American Family in Public and Private*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Marsh, George Perkins (David Lowenthal , editor). 1973. *Man and Nature: Physical*

Geography as Modified by Human Action. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Winks, Robin W. 1997. *Laurance S. Rockefeller: Catalyst for Conservation*. Washington: Island Press.
- _____. 1998. *Frederick Billings: A Life*. University of California Press.

Back to [James Hayes-Bohanan's Environmental Geography](#) pages.