

Biographical Portrait **FRED BESLEY**

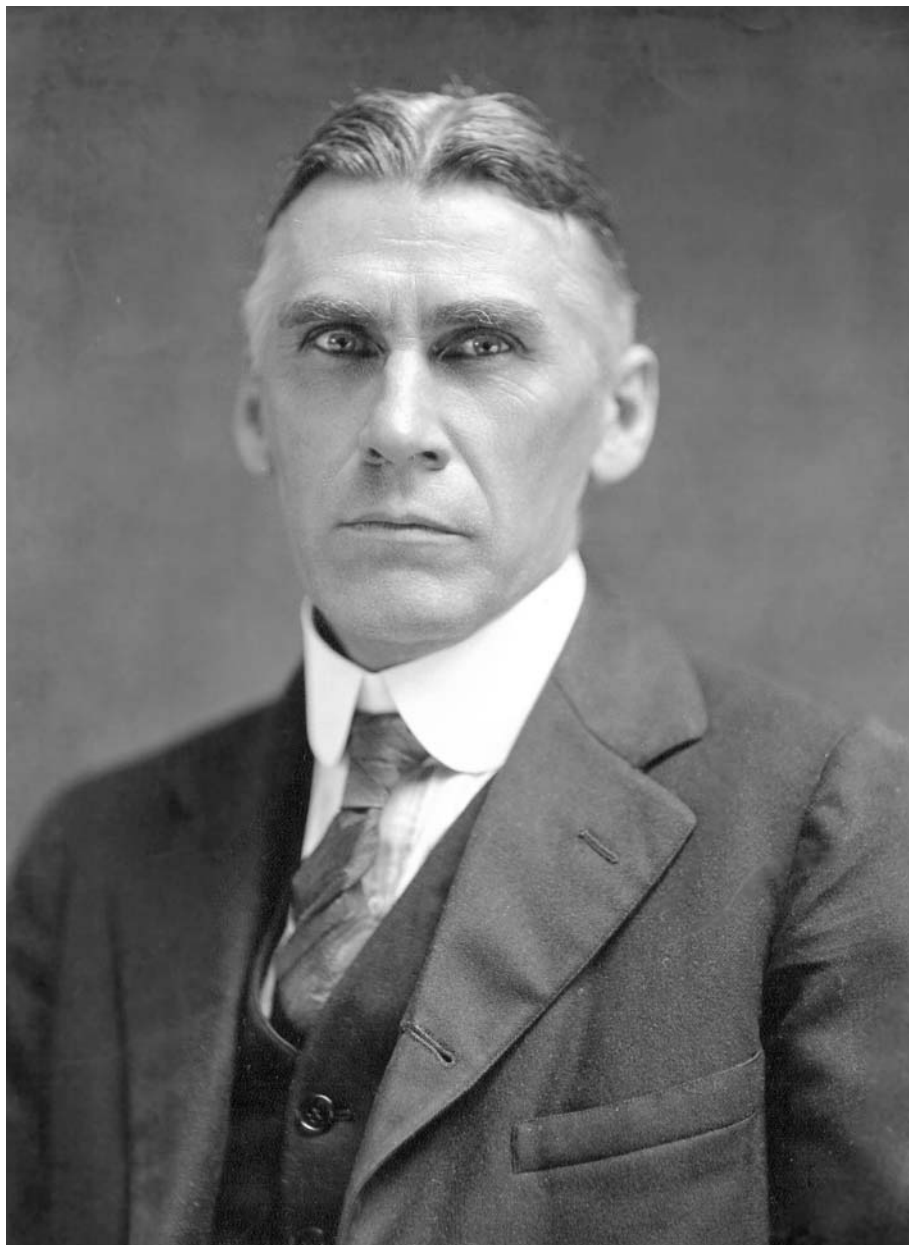
THE PIONEER OF FORESTRY IN MARYLAND (1872–1960)

BY ROBERT BAILEY AND FRANCIS ZUMBRUN

Few men better illustrate Gifford Pinchot's skill in exhorting converts to the principles of forest conservation than Maryland's first State Forester, Fred W. Besley. A man who ultimately dedicated 60 years of his life to practicing and spreading the gospel of scientific forest management, Besley expressed no interest in the subject until he was 27 years old. A chance meeting with Pinchot in 1898, however, was enough to convince Besley to pursue a life in forestry.

Born in northern Virginia in 1872, Besley initially hoped to be an engineer. He received a bachelor's degree from the Maryland Agricultural College (now the University of Maryland) in 1892, but entered the job market at the onset of the economic panic of 1893. Left with few options, Besley accepted a teaching position with the Fairfax County, Virginia, public schools. Besley nevertheless demonstrated a tireless work ethic—a virtue that would serve him well as a forester—and became principal of a village school.

Dissatisfied with teaching, Besley visited the U.S. Department of Agriculture to research a career in the dairy business. While there, he met Pinchot, then chief of the U.S. Division of Forestry (the predecessor to the USDA Forest Service.) "Pinchot was so boiling over with enthusiasm about forestry," Besley later remembered, "that then and there I adopted forestry as my career."¹ Despite the pressures of having to provide for his wife and children, Besley nonetheless threw himself completely into his new career at the first chance. Besley served as a student assistant in Pinchot's agency from 1900 to January 1903, when he enrolled at the Yale School of Forestry. He graduated with honors eighteen months later.



Fred W. Besley, the State of Maryland's first state forester. His intense gaze reflected how he approached the job. Recreational time with his family meant cutting down illegal roadside advertisements while on their Sunday drive.

COURTESY OF BESLEY/RODGERS FAMILY.



COURTESY OF MARYLAND STATE ARCHIVES

State Forester Fred Besley (standing), giving a campfire talk to the Maryland Mountain Club at Green Ridge State Forest on June 22, 1941. Besley strongly believed in educating the public about the value of state forests and parks in order to maintain public support of his agency.

In 1906, the Maryland legislature created the State Board of Forestry to protect and manage the newly-established state forests and parks, as well as assist private landowners in managing their timber resources. The Board consulted Pinchot, who recommended that they hire Besley as Maryland's first state forester. At the time, Besley was planting pine seedlings in Pike National Forest in Colorado. "The offer came in a telegram from Gifford Pinchot," Besley later recalled, "and was delivered on horseback at our remote camp 10 miles from the nearest telegraph station and difficult to locate, adding to our surprise. The offer came from Mr. Pinchot, Chief Forester, who had been asked to recommend a qualified man and who was guaranteeing a part of the salary."²

Besley feared that the state forester would be subject to political influence. "My first reaction to the offer was no," he recalled years later. "I knew something about politics in Maryland and I didn't want a political appointment. When I was assured it was independent of politics, I accepted."³

As Maryland's state forester, Besley

zealously carried forth Pinchot's conservation ethic of "the greatest good." Besley served with distinction from 1906 to 1942. His vision and tireless dedication to his work laid the groundwork for the exceptional system of state forests and parks that Marylanders enjoy today.

Besley's success as state forester belied the challenges he faced.

Under Besley's leadership, Maryland's public forest and park land increased from an initial 1,917 acres in 1906 to over 117,000 by his retirement—a remarkable accomplishment considering that there was opposition to the creation and expansion of government-owned property in Maryland. Ironically, while Besley worked to spread the gospel of forest conservation in Maryland, for much of his career

he adamantly opposed the establishment of national forests in Maryland. After initially supporting federal intervention during his agency's nascent period, by the 1920s Besley argued that state's established and working forestry programs should not have to compete with federal agencies for resources. "Competitive bidding for the same land would be suicidal," Besley argued. "Unless 'spheres of influence' are agreed upon, trouble is likely to ensue."⁴

To better protect Maryland's public and private forests, Besley established a statewide network of 42 fire watchtowers, set up an effective system for fighting and controlling forest fires, and hired a force of over 300 fire wardens. To spread the gospel of "the greatest good" and the benefits of scientific forest management, Besley taught forestry courses at the University of Maryland, organized the nation's first Champion Tree Program in 1925, and developed a successful public relations campaign about the need for fire suppression and forest management. To educate the general public and garner widespread support, Besley and his staff gave dozens of lectures annually to

“improvement societies, scientific bodies, trade organizations, colleges, high schools, academies and church organizations.”⁵ These groups helped raise awareness about the importance of scientific forestry, as well as provided his agency with valuable allies in both public and private sectors. He also set up Maryland’s first public campgrounds.

As state forester, Besley enforced the nation’s first Roadside Tree Law. Intended to beautify Maryland’s highways by encouraging utilities and the State Roads Commission to plant and maintain roadside trees, this 1914 law served as a model across the nation. The legislation also called for the prohibition of unauthorized commercial advertising on public highways. For recreation on some Sunday afternoons, Besley enlisted his family, armed with hand-saws, to cut down commercial signs along roadways that violated the law.

Perhaps his greatest accomplishment, however, came in 1916 with the publication of *The Forests of Maryland*. The product of a thorough ten-year endeavor to catalog and map every tree stand in Maryland larger than five acres, *The Forests of Maryland* is widely regarded as the finest detailed forest survey to come out of the World War I period. Besley, who conducted the surveys largely by himself, later recalled, “I’d hire a horse and buggy at a livery stable and jolt out along the dirt roads as far as possible and then on foot follow the cow paths up through the woods until I tramped over every woodlot above five acres in every county.”⁶

Besley’s tramping also produced an extensive photo collection, a practice he acquired while in the Forest Service. While

he and his assistants traveled throughout Maryland, they photographed virtually everything of interest, including champion tree contestants, roadside tree improvements, campground recreation, forest industries, and mines. Many of these photographs, taken after 1920, are preserved as glass lanternslides and are archived at the Hall of Records in Annapolis, Maryland.

Besley’s success as state forester belied the challenges he faced. He initially confronted a limited operating budget, a small staff dominated by volunteers, and a government unenthusiastic about purchasing large tracts of forestland. Besley overcame these obstacles by appealing to, among others, Baltimore elites who sought to expand the state’s park land. Later, in the 1930s, Besley had to stave off attempts by the University of Maryland to hire his assistant foresters as professors. Despite his disdain for politics, Besley proved very skillful at keeping his agency afloat in a constantly changing and shifting political arena.

In 1942, Besley retired as the state forester with the longest continuous service as state forester in the nation. During World War II, Besley replaced his son (who was serving in the Navy) as a forestry professor at West Virginia University, where he also worked on forestry legislation for West Virginia.

Unwilling to purchase forest land while employed by the state, Besley decided to practice in retirement what he had preached for decades. Beginning in 1946, Besley bought swampy and cutover land on Maryland’s Eastern Shore for \$10 to \$15 an acre. Today this land is managed by the

Besley and Rogers Corporation—the largest private, non-industrial landowner of forests in Maryland (about 6,800 acres). Using the scientific forest management techniques for which he had advocated while state forester, he turned the neglected woodlands into profitable timberland. In many ways, Besley’s accomplishments after his retirement are as remarkable as his professional forestry career, and serve as ample testimony in support of the gospel he had long preached. Fred W. Besley died in Laurel, Maryland, at the age of 88. □

Robert Bailey is a historian for the Maryland Park Service. Francis Zumbrun is the forest manager at Maryland’s Green Ridge State Forest.

NOTES

1. “Maryland’s First State Forester,” *American Forests* (October 1956): 38.
2. “Partial Biography of Fred Wilson Besley,” unpublished, no date, 3. Copy of the manuscript in author’s possession. The unpublished manuscript was found by Besley’s grandson, who turned a copy of the manuscript over to Dr. Geoffrey Buckley, who is writing a biography of Besley.
3. “Maryland’s First State Forester,” 82.
4. F. W. Besley, “State Forests in Relation to the National Forest Program” (Annual Meeting of the Society of American Foresters, Madison, Wisconsin, December 17, 1925): 157
5. *Report of the Maryland State Board of Forestry for 1910 and 1911* (Baltimore, MD: 1911): 7.
6. “Maryland’s First State Forester,” 38.

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