

New Jersey State Parks

History and Facts

Kevin Woyce

Photographs by the author

Kevin Woyce

NEW JERSEY STATE PARKS: HISTORY AND FACTS

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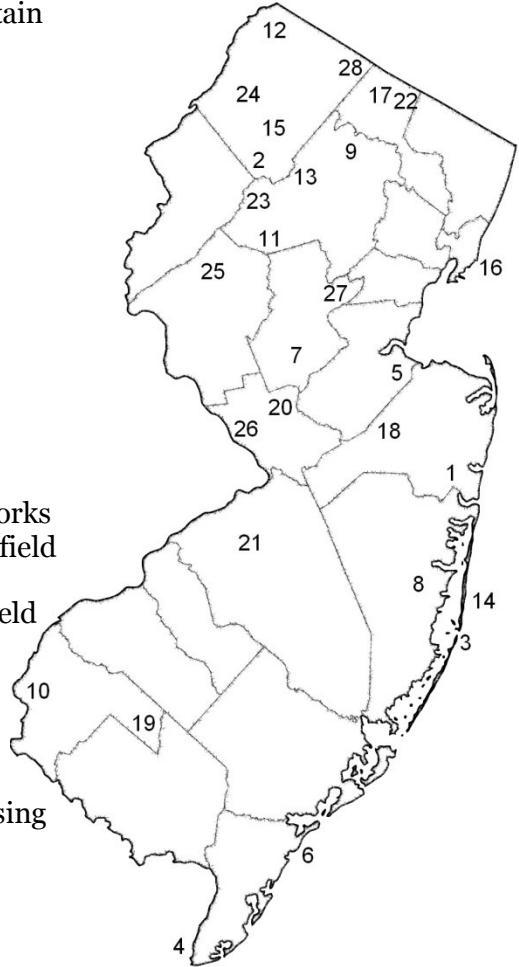
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Front Cover: High Point Monument

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NEW JERSEY STATE PARKS
(Approximate locations)

Introduction

New Jersey is known as the most densely populated state: 8.8 million people in 8721 square miles. It seems everybody has heard about our crowded highways, unsafe cities, and decaying factories.

Like most people who live here, I always knew there was much more to the Garden State. Still, I was surprised to discover that we had 28 state parks, totaling more than 110,000 acres (about 173 square miles). And the diversity! Our state might be small, but the landscapes of our parks range from ocean beaches to mountaintops, wetlands to Pine Barrens.

Until I began researching this book, I assumed that our state parks fell into two categories: obvious historic sites, such as Revolutionary War battlefields; and undeveloped land the State chose to preserve. The truth, of course, is more interesting. Most of our parkland was not bypassed by development. It was mined, quarried, farmed, and stripped of timber. Instead of hiking trails, picnic groves, and swimming lakes, there were iron forges, factory towns, canals, railroads, and private summer resorts.

This is not a guidebook, or a detailed survey of our parks. I have chosen instead to write about history: what occurred on our parklands before they were designated state parks; where some of them got their names; and how some very unlikely places were transformed.

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Swartswood State Park: Swan on Swartswood Lake.

Chapter One

State Parks

In the late 1890s, the New Jersey Palisades were being dynamited for stone to build the area's growing cities. One quarry operator near Fort Lee was removing 12,000 tons of rock *every day*.

Elizabeth Vermilye and Cecelia Gaines Holland, members of the Women's Club of Englewood, realized that if the quarrying continued, one of New Jersey's most recognizable landmarks would soon disappear. By 1899, they had created the New Jersey Federation of Women's Clubs, which petitioned Governor Foster Voorhees to stop the blasting.

Voorhees worked with Theodore Roosevelt, then governor of New York, to create the Palisades Interstate Park Commission in 1900. (Voorhees would later donate his 325-acre farm to New Jersey for a state park. Roosevelt became William McKinley's vice president, and was sworn in as president after McKinley's assassination in September 1901. The first conservationist president, Roosevelt quadrupled the size of the nation's forest reserves; used the Antiquities Act of 1906 to establish the first 16 national monuments; and encouraged conservation efforts by the states.)



Palisades Interstate Park: The Lenape Indians called these cliffs *Weehawken*, “rocks that look like trees.”

Roosevelt appointed George W. Perkins president of the Commission. His first task, raise enough money—mostly through private donations—to buy the quarries. Perkins, a vice president of the New York Life Insurance Company, appealed to banker J.P. Morgan... and on Christmas Eve, 1900, the Palisades Interstate Park Commission bought out the quarry owners. (Perkins became a partner in Morgan’s company in 1905, and helped Roosevelt organize the Progressive Party in 1912.)

The modern park stretches from Fort Lee to Bear Mountain. The first section, from Fort Lee to just north of the New York state line, opened in 1909. By 1919, a million people were visiting every year. In April 1929, the Commission dedicated a stone monument, shaped like a small castle, to the NJ Federation of Women’s Clubs.

State-owned parks were a new idea. When the National Conference on State Parks met for the first time, in 1921, only 19 states owned parks. (There are now state parks in all 50 states, for a total of more than 6,000; the oldest is Georgia's Indian Springs State Park, established in 1825.)

The conference was suggested by Stephen Mather, first director of the National Park Service. (We have had National Parks since 1872, when Yellowstone opened, but the National Park Service was not created until 1916.) By the 1920s, every state wanted National Parks for the tourists they attracted. But Mather believed the mission of the NPS was to save places with unique scenery of *national* interest, and to make these places accessible by railroad and highway. Each state, he felt, should then work to preserve sites of more local interest, or to provide recreation areas for its citizens.

Edward Stokes was New Jersey's governor from 1905-1908. He fought to limit the power of railroads and utility companies, worked to improve public education, and recommended that the state begin buying and preserving its dwindling forests. In October 1905, the new Forest Park Reservation Commission made its first purchases, two tracts totaling 970 acres. A 1907 purchase, 5432 acres in Sussex County, became the nucleus of Stokes State Forest.

These woodlands were not "parks" in the modern sense, although visitors were welcome to hike, camp, hunt, or fish. The reservations were expected to pay for themselves, by producing valuable timber year after year. The Commission managed cutting and reforestation efforts, and fought to control—or better still, prevent—the wildfires that consumed thousands of acres annually.

The State began buying parklands in 1914.

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Swartswood Lake, in western Sussex County, was named for Anthony Swartwout, who once owned a farm in the area. A captain in the New Jersey Frontier Guard, Swartwout was killed, along with his family, when the French and Indian War spilled into New Jersey from Pennsylvania in 1756.

The hilly land around the lake remained sparsely settled well into the twentieth century. Newton—originally spelled “New Town”—was founded in 1761, and later became a major stop on the Sussex Branch Railroad. The lakeshore town of New Paterson appeared in 1824. By 1852, when the people of New Paterson decided to rename their town after the lake, the lake’s name was spelled “Swartswood.”

Swartswood became a summer resort in the late 1800s. Entrepreneurs built hotels in the hills around the lake, and their guests launched boats from George Emmons’s picnic grove to go fishing.

Newark factory owner Andrew Albright built a lakefront estate in 1888. Ten years later, he began charging fishermen a dollar a day to use the lake. Those who refused to pay, he took to court for trespassing, claiming he owned all the property *underneath* the water. The resort industry began dying in 1900, when Albright successfully defended his property rights in the Court of Errors and Appeals.

In 1906, Governor Stokes recommended that all 108 of New Jersey’s freshwater lakes “be set apart as public parks and correctly preserved for the use of the people of the state.” To make this possible, a 1907 law authorized the Forest Park Reservation Commission to purchase any land surrounding, or covered by, freshwater lakes or ponds.

Albright died in 1906. His son and daughter sold Swartswood Lake to the state in 1914, the first time the Commission bought land solely for use as a park. Two