

History of the North Carolina State Park System - Part 1: Introduction ^[1]

EXPLORING NORTH CAROLINA: NORTH CAROLINA STATE PARKS, TRAILS, LAKES, RIVERS & NATURAL AREAS

The North Carolina State Parks system was launched on March 3, 1915 when the General Assembly passed legislation appropriating funds to buy land for a park at Mount Mitchell. A year later, following the acquisition of 795 acres at the mountain's summit, Mount Mitchell became the state's first park and the first park in the southeastern United States. Today the North Carolina State Parks system covers 225,000 acres from the mountains to the sea.



Click here to explore the NCpedia State Parks Collection.
You'll find a list of all units in the North Carolina state parks system along with links to articles on individual parks.

^[2]

History of the North Carolina State Park System - Part 1: Introduction

by Alan Eakes, Lewis Ledford, and Don Reuter, 2011. [NC Division of Parks of Recreation](#)^[3], NC Department of Cultural Environment & Natural Resources.

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Part 1: Introduction; Part 2: [Birth of a State Park System, 1891-1933](#)^[4]; Part 3: [Expansion through Public Donations and Federal Public Works Programs, 1934-1941](#)^[5]; Part 4: [WWII and Post WWII Developments](#)^[6]; Part 5: [Growth through Donations and LWCF Assistance, 1956-1970](#)^[7]; Part 6: [Program and Park Expansion, 1971-1979](#)^[8]; Part 7: [Reservoirs, Re-evaluations and New Initiatives, 1980-1989](#)^[9]; Part 8: [Financial Resources Committed to State Parks, 1990-1999](#)^[10]; Part 9: [Planning for the Future and Growing Parks and Conservation in a Rapidly Growing State, 2000-2011](#)^[11]



Peek, Charlie. 2012. "South Mountains State Park - Henry Fork." NC Division of Parks and Recreation.

First came the miners. All they wanted were a few minerals

and there were plenty.

Then came the lumberjacks. All they wanted were a few trees and there were plenty.

Then came the railroad men. All they wanted was a little space to travel up the mountain and there was plenty.

Then came the mill. Lumber was needed for construction and the mill made plenty.

And then came the lumber camps, housing, and loggers by the hundreds. Lots of men were needed for labor and the camps provided plenty.

The economy was booming. It was the land of opportunity. And everyone thought there was plenty – except for a few, who were afraid that soon there would be none.

Trees were cut by the hundreds. Whole forests were destroyed. And, the few became outraged and appealed to the governor who insisted that it stop, and he convinced the legislature to establish the first state park. And then there was one.

That was in 1915. What started out as one small plot of public land has grown into 66 properties across the State. The 38


state parks and recreation areas, plus an additional 28 state rivers, lakes, trails and natural areas include 211,964 acres. The state parks system attracted more than 13.4 million visitors in 2007.

During 2007, the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation conducted a study^[12] that determined state parks are significant contributors to North Carolina's economy. Park visitors spent at least \$139 million annually; this sum includes money pumped straight into the communities surrounding the parks. State parks contribute \$289 million to local economies annually, as well as \$120 million to local residents' income according to the analysis conducted by North Carolina State University.

North Carolina State Parks Directors and Years of Service

Thomas W. Morse,* 1935 – 1961
Thomas C. "Red" Ellis, 1961 – 1974 Ronald D. Johnson, 1974 – 1977
James S. Stevens, Jr., 1977 – 1984
William "Wes" Davis, 1984 – 1989
Philip K. McKnelly, 1989; – 2003
Lewis R. Ledford, 2003 – present

*During the time Morse served in World War II, R.J. Pearce served in an acting role.

 ^[4]Keep reading > Part 2:[Birth of a State Park System, 1891-1933](#)^[4]

References:

Beanblossom, Robert. ed. 2011. *Histories of southeastern state park systems* Association of Southeastern State Park Directors.

NC Division of Parks and Recreation. 2008. "State Parks make Significant Contribution to Local Economies." Online at <https://www.ncparks.gov/about-us/newsroom> ^[12].

Image credit:

Peek, Charlie. 2012. "South Mountains State Park - Henry Fork." NC Division of Parks and Recreation. Original image file available at [NC Division of Parks and Recreation](#)^[3] Public Information Office.

Additional resources:

NC Division of Parks and Recreation, NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources. <https://www.ncparks.gov/> ^[3]

NC Division of Parks and Recreation. "Annual Report of the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation." NC Digital Collections: <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/documents?search=163578861&searchtypes=Metadata|Full%20text&applyState=true> ^[13]

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[Parks](#) ^[15]

Authors:

[Eakes, Alan](#) ^[16]

[Ledford, Lewis](#) ^[17]

[Reuter, Don](#) ^[18]

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[NC Division of Parks and Recreation, NC Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources](#)^[19]

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