

BIRDSEY GRANT NORTHROP AND HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO ARBOR DAY

Everyone who is familiar with Arbor Day is familiar with the story about J. Sterling Morton (1832-1902), the former Governor of the Nebraska Territory. Governor Morton is generally credited with initiating an annual day of tree planting in his home state. He saw the vast soils of Nebraska being depleted of moisture and nutrients, and recognized that trees would serve as a means of conserving soil moisture and as a windbreak.

You might not be as familiar with Connecticut's Arbor Day founder, Birdsey Grant Northrop. Among Mr. Northrop's contributions was the involvement of schoolchildren in this annual event. Mr. Northrop also turned Arbor Day into the ceremonial event that laid the foundation of this now well-established tradition.

Mr. Northrop was born in Kent, Connecticut, July 18, 1817 and educated at Yale and Yale Divinity School. In his diverse career he was a clergyman, educator, state official (in both Connecticut and Massachusetts), author, and lecturer. He published extensively on forestry education and town planning, and was a prominent lecturer in his day. Mr. Northrop is also credited with establishing several village improvement societies, such as the Village Improvement Association of Wethersfield, begun in 1883. Above all else, however, throughout his entire life, Mr Northrop was a lover of trees.

In 1877, during his tenure as Secretary of the Connecticut Board of Education, Mr. Northrop traveled to Europe to study schools. His report on trees in Europe, published in 1879 as "*Forestry in Europe*", gained the attention of the State Board of Agriculture in Connecticut. The State Board then requested an investigation and report on promoting forestry in Connecticut. As a result of this investigation, the State Legislature declared in 1886 that "The Governor shall annually, in the spring, designate by official proclamation an Arbor Day, to be observed in the schools and for economic tree planting".

The first official Arbor Day celebration occurred the following year, on April 29, 1887, led by Governor Phineas C. Lounsbury. Arbor Day celebrations have continued on an annual basis since then, held initially anywhere between the first a week of April and the second week of May. In 1970, President Nixon established the last Friday of April as the official "National Arbor Day". Connecticut followed the President's lead shortly thereafter.

In 1883, Northrop retired from the State Board of Education and spent his retirement years promoting his Arbor Day and Village Improvement message to other states and even foreign countries. In that same year, the American Forestry Association made Northrop the Chairman of the committee to campaign for Arbor Day nationwide.

At the spry age of 78, Northrop took his message to Japan. While there he convinced the Japanese Minister of Education to adopt the Arbor Day concept. He also brought his enthusiasm for Arbor Day to Australia, Canada and Europe.

Three years later, in April 28, 1898, Birdsey Grant Northrop passed away at the age of 81 in Clinton, Connecticut. Recognized in his day as a major leader in forestry education and tree appreciation, the contributions Northrop made live on to this day.

- tish carr -