

Increase A. Lapham 1811-1875

With his career occurring in the 1800's, the accomplishments of Increase A. Lapham do not readily fit our current WHOF nomination form. However, this does not diminish his early contributions toward forest conservation and utilization in Wisconsin.

Increase A. Lapham was born in Wayne County, New York in March 1811, the son of a canal engineer. He came to Wisconsin in 1836 as chief engineer and secretary of the Milwaukee and Rock River Canal Company. This venture eventually failed due in a large part to the expansions of the railroads (2). He stayed on until his death, becoming Wisconsin's premier scientist. He was self-made, largely self taught and often worked without compensation. He was a man of tremendous energy and broad scientific diversity and his fields of expertise were many – archeology, geology, antiquities, weather, birds, plants and mammals, etc. Among these was a major interest in forest conservation and utilization.

Increase has been called “the father of forest conservation in Wisconsin” (1). Early on, he witnessed the flooding and silting of rivers in southern Wisconsin and was urging farmers to plant trees. He “began to agitate for the preservation of our forest wealth far in advance of anyone else” (1).

Lapham's first effort to interest the public in forest conservation was published in 1855 in the Transactions of the State Agricultural Society. It was an article on forest trees in Wisconsin and the desirability of conserving this resource. At this early date he stated, “Though we have at present in almost every part of Wisconsin an abundant supply of wood for all our present purposes, the time is not far distant when, owing to increased population and increased demand from neighboring states, a scarcity will begin to be felt...and sooner or later commence the cultivation of wood for the purposes of fuel, lumber, timber, etc.”

In 1867, he prevailed upon the legislators to create a special forestry commission, which he chaired. Their charge was to report to the legislature “facts and opinions relating to the injurious effects of clearing the land of forests upon the climate, the evil consequences to the present and future inhabitants, the duty of the state in regard to the matter, what experiments should be made to perfect our knowledge of the growth and proper management of forest trees”. The result of this was a 100-page report, “On the Disastrous Effects of the Destruction of Trees...in Wisconsin”.

As we know, the warnings in the report were largely ignored but it does indicate an early public awareness of the importance of Wisconsin’s forests. The report is considered the beginning of Wisconsin’s conservation movement. It was republished in 1967 as the basis for a Conservation Centennial Symposium at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Dr. Lapham continued to pursue his scientific research until his death in 1875. He is buried in the family plot at Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee.

Source Materials:

1. Increase Allen Lapham, Father of Forest Conservation – M.M. Quale in the Wisconsin Magazine of History, Wisconsin Historical Society, September 1921
2. An Appreciation of Increase Allen Lapham by Walter E. Scott, The Wisconsin Academy Review, December 1975