

FRED W. BESLEY



Fred W. Besley, 1872-1960

The father of Maryland forestry, Fred W. Besley was appointed Maryland's first State Forester in 1906. He was handpicked for the job by Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service, and President Theodore

Roosevelt's advisor on conservation issues. Maryland was only the third state in the union to create such a position, and their forestry program soon became a model for other states to follow.

At the time of Besley's appointment, Maryland's forests were in deplorable condition. Forest cover had been reduced due to changes caused by over 250 years of settlement, agricultural expansion, and industrialization.

For the next 36 years, Besley worked tirelessly to stem the tide of forest destruction by educating the general public, especially private woodlot owners, on the merits of forestry and forest conservation.



PHOTO: MARYLAND DNR

A forest fire near Beltsville, MD burned over 1000 acres on April 17, 1926.



A denuded forest landscape near Cumberland, MD

In addition, Besley and his staff conducted an exhaustive statewide inventory of forest resources; devised methods to detect and fight forest fires; inaugurated a program of reforestation, including the establishment of a state tree nursery in 1914; and pioneered the popular Champion Big Tree Program, now a celebrated nationwide contest.



Watering seed beds at the State Nursery, May 1926

Besley's greatest legacy is perhaps the system of multi-purpose forest reserves he left behind. During his tenure, Maryland's public lands grew from a paltry 2000 acres in 1906 to over 100,000 acres in 1942, forming the backbone of today's network of parks, forests, and other natural areas.

After teaching briefly at West Virginia University, Besley spent the remainder of his life applying the same scientific forest management practices used throughout his career to several thousand acres acquired after his retirement in 1942. The forest on the road before you demonstrates those practices. This tract of land, and four others acquired by the State of Maryland from Besley & Rodgers, Inc. in 2010, is dedicated to the memory of Besley's career and his extraordinary accomplishments.

"We are no longer so rich that we can afford to waste our heritage." – Fred W. Besley