

F. G. Wilson

Compiled by Emily Stanislawski, UWSP, 2022

[Click here for digital F. G. Wilson records from the Forest History Association of Wisconsin Biographical Files at the UWSP Nelis R. Kampenga University Archives, Collection 104A.](#)

Collection Summary

Fred G. Wilson spent his career serving Wisconsin as a forester. He was the 1st Extension Forester with UW System, Chief Ranger, and the Superintendent of the Cooperative Forestry Division for two decades.

Frederick Grover Wilson was born in 1887 in Iowa. However, he spent most of his childhood in Plymouth, WI. Wilson studied Forestry at Michigan Agricultural College (now Michigan State University) in East Lansing, Michigan. After graduating in 1911, he returned to Wisconsin. In 1911, Wisconsin held its first civil service exam for forest rangers. Wilson passed and was the only one formally trained in forestry. As a ranger, Wilson started his work at Trout Lake in Vilas County, which was the first nursery in the state and later the site of the forestry headquarters.

In 1915, after the resignation of the first chief forester, E.M. Griffith, following the loss of a critical State Supreme Court case, Wilson moved to Canada.¹ In British Columbia, Wilson worked as a forest engineer in the province.

In 1922, he returned to Wisconsin and became the first fire extension forester with the University of Wisconsin from 1922-1930. Wilson was also a crucial part of the 1929 Legislative Interim Committee. The report drafted from this committee, by Wilson, recommended that counties could claim delinquent lands to create county forests (there is a copy of this report in the UWSP archives FHAW SD 144. W8 W15 1929). These recommendations came to fruition in the 1933 rural zoning ordinance passed in the state that limited land's use to forestry. Wilson also advocated for fire protection initiatives and was appointed first chief ranger for fire control in 1930.

Wilson helped establish the Cooperative Forestry research program with the Wisconsin Conservation Department and the University of Wisconsin; he was the superintendent of this program from 1932 until 1952.

After retiring in 1952, Wilson continued to be highly involved in forestry. While spending some of his retired time living in Arizona, he still was present at forestry events and conferences, assisting with the state nurseries, giving lectures, and writing about forestry. In 1982, Wilson published, *E.M. Griffith and the Early Story of Wisconsin Forestry (1903-1915)*. This book is a comprehensive look into the early history of conservation in Wisconsin. Wilson died in 1991, at the age of 103.

Wilson received many honors for his dedication to forestry. While still living, he was honored in 1973 by the Natural Resource Board when the nursery near Boscobel, WI, was named the F. G. Wilson Nursery. (Today, this is the Wilson State Forestry Nursery.) Wilson was recognized at a ceremony in 1977 at the Trout Lake Nursery commemorating the billionth tree planted and Wilson's lifetime commitment to

¹ The State Supreme Court Case will not be explored here, but does have a section in the E. M. Griffith guide

reforestation. Wilson was also a member of the Society of American Foresters (SAF) for fifty years and received a Distinguished Service Award from the Wisconsin-Michigan section in 1968 and was again recognized in 1979 and given the rank of Fellow in the SAF. In 1984, Wilson was inducted in the Forest History Hall of Fame. A plaque of him is located on the UWSP campus in the Trainer Natural Resource Building, along with all the inductees into the Forestry Hall of Fame. Additionally, after his death, he was inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in 1998.

There is a timeline located at the bottom to better understand F.G. Wilson's long and involved career.

The resources found here were compiled from the UWSP Archives collections from the Forest History Association of Wisconsin – Biographical Files (Col. 104A), and the Wisconsin Hall of Fame (Col. 381). Additional sources were found in newspapers and books found in and outside of the UWSP Archives, as well as online resources. For access to the collection please contact the archives at 715-346-2586 or email archives@uwsp.edu.

Note: E. M. Griffith was the first chief forester of Wisconsin from 1905- 1915. Griffith was incredibly influential to early forestry efforts in WI and Wilson worked under him from 1911 until Griffith resigned in 1915. For more information on Griffith and the era of forestry in WI from 1905- 1915 see sources on the E. M. Griffith finding aid.

***Items that are available as digital file in the F. G. Wilson digital folder at UWSP Archives**

Wilson's Life, Career & Legacy

One Hundred Years of Wisconsin Forestry, 1904-2004, from Trails Custom Publishing in Black Earth, WI. This book is found in the FHAW books collection in the UWSP archives (SD144.W8 O64 2004), as well as in the UWSP library. It can also be found in many public libraries. This book was published in 2004 to celebrate 100 years of forestry. It provides a detailed explanation of forest history beginning in the late 1800s through 2004. Wilson is mentioned several times on pages 31-33 (Wilson is first pictured on pg. 23. For a full list of where he is mentioned see the book's index). This book is full of great information describing the policies, programs and people involved in Wisconsin Forestry. The information is detailed, there are footnotes for more information, as well as an index. It is a very beautiful book that is well worth checking out.

*"Wilson, Frederick G. Oral History Interview, 1974," This is the transcript of an interview located in UWSP Archives in FHAW (Col. 104A). An interview was conducted in 1972, when Wilson was 87. Wilson describes his upbringing (1-2) and passing the exam to become a ranger (2-3, 7). Wilson was the only formally educated forester and after 6 months of field work Griffith selected Ellis Weaver to be head ranger (5). Wilson describes Griffith and his life (7-10) and the State Supreme Court case that caused Griffith's 1915 resignation from chief forester (17-19). Wilson talked about the Trout Lake nursery, tensions with lumber companies (27-28), as well as zoning, (28-30). In this almost 40 page interview transcript Wilson describes much of his career, and he talks about Griffith and the troubles of early forestry.

*Wilson Forestry Hall of Fame Induction Materials- These materials are found in the UWSP Archives in the Wisconsin Hall of Fame Collection (381), in Box 6. This folder contains materials related to Wilson's

1984 induction into the Forestry Hall of Fame. There is a photo of him that was used to create his plaque, the plaque inscriptions, biographies, and his obituary. There is also the induction speech about Wilson that was given by Herbert Fleischer.

*“History of State Forestry in Wisconsin,” This document is located in the UWSP Archives FHAW collection (104A) “Publication – “History of State Forestry in Wisconsin,” Original Manuscript, E.M. Griffith, 1917.” The cover of this document attributes it to E.M. Griffith in 1917, however the final page says 1955. This document was likely written in the 1950s and not by Griffith. Despite the discrepancies, it is an interesting document that covers Wisconsin’s history of forestry, starting in 1634. Wilson being appointed in 1911 is mentioned on page 11 and several times in that section. Wilson became the first extension forester in WI in 1925 (pg. 19). In 1930, Wilson became chief forest fire warden (20) and hired an engineer to make better fire lookout towers (26). Cooperative forestry is discussed, and Wilson became the superintendent in 1932. Wilson retired in 1952 (40).

Note: This publication is the same one located in Box 7, Folder 18 titled “History of State Forestry in Wisconsin, Manuscript, Wisconsin Conservation Dept., 1955”

*“One Billionth Tree Planting, 1977 (Frederick G. Wilson)” This document is located in the UWSP Archives FHAW collection (104A). There are 21 pages on the event in 1977 to commemorate the planting of the billionth tree, at Trout Lake Nursery, and celebrate Wilson’s lifetime of service to forestry. The folder includes correspondence, a biography for Wilson, the news release on the celebration and article clippings. There is an article from the Wisconsin Natural Resources magazine from June 1978, titled “A billion trees: the legend of Fred Wilson.” There are also newspaper clippings from several papers on Wilson planting the billionth tree.

Biography from the Wisconsin Society of American Foresters <https://www.wisaf.org/wisconsin-forestry-hall-of-fame/1984-frederick-g-wilson/>

Biography from Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame (there is also nice photo of Wilson)
<https://wchf.org/frederick-wilson/>

Biography pdf from WCHF website, similar document to the ones in the induction material folder [Frederick Wilson Biography](#)

“Frederick Wilson Legislative Citation” Certificate from state legislature on Wilson’s 1997 induction into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame [Frederick Wilson Legislative Citation](#)

Newspaper Articles

*July 27, 1911, *Rhineland New North* “Forest Rangers are Now Active” This article mentions how there are several rangers listed where they are from, many are from Northern Wisconsin cities like Rhineland, Eagle River, and Crandon. Wilson, of Plymouth, is included in the list of federal forest rangers.

*November 9, 1928, *Janesville Daily Gazette*, “Learn of State Forest Progress” Wilson is advocating for more of a focus on conservation in schools with the Wisconsin Teacher’s Association. Forestry has grown more popular and understood by the public, but Wilson wants a larger focus on it yet.

*March 4, 1928, *Capital Times*, "14 local Men On Forestry Meet Program" Article ahead of the forestry conference that mentions the importance of forestry and some prominent people that will be there. Wilson is mentioned as a presenter.

*March 29, 1928, *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, "Faster Rate of Reforestation Asked in State" There is a list of recommendations that come out of the Commercial Forestry Conference, these include more trees planted and better fire protection. Wilson is not mentioned in this article but was present at this conference, based on the above newspaper article, and the conference proceedings (*scan of conference program located in digital folder).

Wilson gave a presentation at the conference titled "Progress in Farm Timberlot." More on this presentation can be found in the conference proceedings *Forestry in Wisconsin: A New Outlook*, in the UWSP Archives (SD 144. W8 W55 1928) pages 86-88. (Timberlots were also the focus of a 1929 publication by Wilson, listed below)

*July 18, 1929, *Stevens Point Daily Journal*, "Longest Wind Break Has 8,000 Seedlings." Wilson, UW Extension Forester, was instructing farmers in how plant a wind break to prevent soil erosion. This is a great example of work done by UW extension to help individuals. (Also, directly under this article, Wilson is mentioned helping with a camp program for young boys)

*June 6, 1945, *Rhineland Daily News*, "Forest Crop Law Report Reviewed." This article is written by Wilson, Superintendent of Cooperative Forestry. Wilson is responding to a report that was done on WI forestry, that recommended lowering the per acre tax rate and other changes. This is a longer piece that was written directly by Wilson.

*November 27, 1953, *Rhineland Daily News*, "Forest Leaders to Take Part in State Conference" There was a forestry conference in Milwaukee. It was attended by many prominent people in forestry in the state including F.G. Wilson, D.C. Everest, C.L. Harrington, and others. This conference was the second conference of this type the first one was in 1928. (*programs for both conferences are located in the digital folder)

*February 27, 1958, *Waunakee Tribune*, "Griffith Memory." This is a brief article that mentions that the very respected Edward Griffith was the topic of a biography from F.G. Wilson. This is interesting because when Griffith left in 1915, he was not accepted by all as an honored person. Also, it is unclear which book this article is referring to. Wilson published a book on Griffith in 1982, not 1958. It may be referring to that one and perhaps something happened to delay its publication or another publication.

*September 8, 1960, *Rhineland Daily News*, "Forest Protection in Wisconsin Has Moved Forward Steadily Since 1906." This is a longer piece that was written by Neil LeMay who was the Chief Forest Ranger at the time. The article describes forestry in the state, Wilson is mentioned in the 4th column. There is also information about the continued problem with fire control.

*June 22, 1965, *Madison Wisconsin State Journal*, "First Forest Fire Spotting Flight Marked" This day was the 50th anniversary of the first airplane flight used for fire detection, with pilot Jack Vilas and then chief forester E.M. Griffith. Wilson donated the certificate of this flight to the WHS. (it is available digitally and listed on the Griffith guide.)

*May 14, 1966, *Capital Times*, "Have you heard..." This piece is among a bunch of social piece and announcements on women's groups and weddings. It mentions how the current chief forester, John A. Beale, and his family will be traveling to the Sixth World Forestry Congress in Madrid and going sight-seeing in Europe. Beale was going to be seeing Wilson at the conference in Madrid. Wilson was very involved in forestry, even after his retirement; in 1966 Wilson would have been 79.

*March 20, 1974, *Eau Claire Leader Telegram*, "Boscobel Nursery Name a Natural." The Boscobel nursery name was change to honor Wilson and there was some backlash from the people in Boscobel, who did not feel they were consulted on the name change. The author of this piece speaks with great admiration for Wilson.

August 27, 1991, *Capital Times*, "Wilson, Frederick G." This is Wilson's obituary.

<https://madison.newspapers.com/clip/68891067/fred-g-wilson-obit/>

There are additional newspaper articles that mention Wilson included in this collection from FHAW "In the News." <https://www.foresthistoryassociationwi.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/FHAW-In-the-News.pdf>

Images & Maps

"At the Forestry Conference" This is a photo from a 1953 forestry conference, most of the men are not labeled but the man seated at the front left resembles F. G. Wilson.

<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM108555>

This most is the same conference mentioned on November 27, 1953 in the *Rhineland Daily News*, which was the Wisconsin Silver Anniversary Forestry Conference, which was November 30- December 1, 1953. This is likely the forest conference that this picture mentions, and F.G. Wilson was in attendance. (If looking for more information on this conference the proceedings are published as a book and located in the UWSP Archives SD 144. W8 W58 1953)

WHS has photos of trout lake, parks, trees being cut, rangers, forestry buildings, fire towers, railroads, etc. the below links use two different search terms that may help find relevant photos:

"Forest Conservation"

<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records?&facets=CATEGORIES%3a%22Wisconsin%20Historical%20Images%22%2cFacetSubject%3a%22Forest%20conservation%22>

"Forests and Forestry"

<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records?&facets=CATEGORIES%3a%22Wisconsin%20Historical%20Images%22%2cFacetSubject%3a%22Forests%20and%20forestry%22>

WHS also has many maps, many are from the Wisconsin State Conservation Commission

"forest and Forestry" Maps

https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records?&facets=CATEGORIES%3a%22Wisconsin+Historical+Images%22%2cFacetSubject%3a%22Forests+and+forestry%22%2cCONTENT_TYPE%3a%22Map+or+Atlas%22

From Wisconsin Conservation Commission

https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records?&facets=CATEGORIES%3a%22Wisconsin%20Historical%20Images%22%2cCREATOR_NAME%3a%22Wisconsin.%20Conservation%20Commission.%22

Works Written by Wilson

Note: This section includes works written/attributed to F. G. Wilson. Some of these works may only have value to those interested in the academic publications of Wilson, but an attempt was made to include as many of his publications as possible. There are also some letters that are included and are from the UWSP Archives; they were included here because Wilson talks about his book on Griffith and other projects in them. The works are listed by publication date.

“Forest Trees of Wisconsin: How to Know Them” This can be found in the FHAW Book collection (FHAW QK484. W6 W55). This is a pamphlet with brief descriptions and small photos of trees in WI and has been published since 1928. The UWSP archives has several copies from the 1960s. It was formerly published by the Wisconsin Conservation Department, now the WI Department of Natural Resources. The current version can be found online and is “dedicated to the memory of F.G. Wilson”

“Yield of Jack Pine in the Lake States” by A. E. Wackerman, Raphael Zon, and F. G. Wilson in 1929, by the College of Agriculture from University of WI. A copy of this book is available at UW-Madison and digitally accessible here: <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89098844947>

“The Farm Timberlot” by F. G. Wilson, 1929, published by Agriculture Experiment Station, UW. There is a copy in the UWSP Archives FHAW books (SD 387. W6 W57 1929). A digital version here: <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112019932901>

“What Forests Mean to Wisconsin,” by F.G. Wilson, published in 1935, no digital copy but according to the UW library database there is a copy at UW Milwaukee.

“Forest Manual” prepared by F. G. Wilson, the Superintendent of Cooperative Forestry, for the Wisconsin Conservation Department in 1936. This is a manual that is over 200 pages long, a hard copy is located at UW-Madison and digitally accessible here: <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89044411213>

“Thinning a Pine Plantation” by F. G. Wilson the Superintendent of Cooperative Forestry, for the Wisconsin Conservation Department in 1944 <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89053491858>

“Principles and Practices in Thinning” By F. G. Wilson, 1948 from Conservation Department, Cooperative Forestry Division. No digital copy found but UW Madison has a copy of this document

“Soils of Wisconsin in Relation to Silviculture” by S.A. Wilde, F.G. Wilson and D.P. White. This was published by the Wisconsin Conservation Department in 1949. There is a copy in the UWSP archives (FHAW S599. W6 W555). It is also digitally available here: <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89043700970>

“Zoning for Forestry and Recreation: Wisconsin’s Pioneer Role,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 41. No. 2, Winter 1957-58.

"Fifty Years From Seed: the Star Lake Plantation" by F. G. Wilson in Technical Bulletin No. 27 for the WI Conservation Department in 1963.

<https://www.wistatedocuments.org/digital/collection/p267601coll4/id/27768/rec/1>

*"Setting Resources Policy at the County Level: Wisconsin's County Forests, by Frederick G. Wilson, 1966" This report is found in FHW collection (104A). This article is a reprint from the Proceedings of the Society of American Foresters.

*"Correspondence from Frederick G. Wilson, 1974, 1978" These two letters are found in FHW collection (104A). Both letters were from Wilson to "Milt" (presumably Milton Reinke). The 1974 letter mentions a project on Stand Density. He did complete a report on stand density, and this may be what he is here referring to. (The date is unknown on the Stand Density paper, more on it is found below). He also mentions finishing the "Griffith Story." His book on Griffith was published in 1982. In the second letter from this folder, from 1978, Wilson mentions how they are in the editing stage of the Griffith book.

*"Correspondence from Frederick G. Wilson 1978" This letter is found in FHW collection (104A). This letter is also to "Milt" (presumably Milton Reinke) and mentions the continued work on the Griffith book. Wilson had learned that Griffith's grandson "graduated from the Air Academy" and was going to send him a copy of the flying certificate from when Griffith flew with Vilas when he was a forester. This document is mentioned in the letter to the in the WI Historical Society Archives. It is digitized and listed on the Griffith finding aid as well as more information on the flight.

*"Stand Density: Its Definition and Silvicultural Application, by Frederick G. Wilson, undated" This report is found in FHW collection (104A). This report is undated and 27 pages long. Based on the citations and data this report was written in the 1970s or 1980s. This report is very technical. The last seven pages contains graphs.

*"Thinning as an Orderly Discipline: A graphic Spacing Schedule for Red Pine" This paper is located in found in FHW collection (104A). This is an article that Wilson published in the Journal of Forestry, Vol. 77, No. 8 in 1979. This article is on thinning forest growth on a tree plantation. Wilson mentions the Star Lake plantation and this article also contains graphs much like those found in the undated, "Stand Density" report. This article may be a later draft of that piece.

E.M. Griffith and the Early Story of Wisconsin Forestry (1903-1915) By F. G. Wilson published by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in Madison in 1982. This book can be found in the FHW book collection (FHW SD 144. W8 W53 1982). It may also be found in public libraries and is also available digitally from the FHW. It was published in 1982 by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in Madison. The book focuses on Griffith and the early years of WI forestry, but the intro pages also have info on Wilson. <https://www.foresthistoryassociationwi.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Griffith-and-Wilson-Wi-Forestry.pdf>

Additional Sources

Note: These sources may have good information but may have fewer specific mentions of F. G. Wilson.

Wisconsin's Amazing Woods: Then and Now, by Theodore F. Kouba, in 1973 by Wisconsin House, LTD., in Madison. This book can be found in FHAW Books collection (SD144.W8 K6), as well as in the UWSP library. While less common, it can also be found in some public libraries. Kouba's book provides information on forestry in Wisconsin beginning with the first white settlers and ending by mention the action of the 1970s with the environmental movement. F. G. Wilson passing the exam to become a ranger is mentioned on pg. 126. There does not appear to be other prominent passages that mention Wilson, but the sections on Griffith provide context to the forestry situation at the start of Wilson's career. (* the included scan was done originally for the Griffith guide and contain page 126, for more on this see the Griffith guide)

*"Conservations First Century in Wisconsin: Landmark Dates and People, by Walter Scott, 1967" This document is located in the UWSP Archives FHAW collection (104). This paper was written in 1967 for the Conservation Centennial Symposium by Walter E. Scott. This article has very specific information that may not be readily available on the internet and gives a run through of the entirety of conservation history from the late 1800s until 1967. Wilson is not mentioned in the body of the paper but there is a lot of great information on forestry. Wilson is included on the list of 100 hundred retired conservations on page 25.

Forrest History Association of Wisconsin (HHAW) YouTube Channel- There are no sources that explicitly focus on Wilson, but there are many great presentations on forestry. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQgc-pjhl9WkbCluEabLOiw/videos>

Timeline of W. G. Wilson Life and Career

Life 1887-1991

1887- Born in Iowa, spent most of childhood in Plymouth, WI

1911- Graduated from Michigan Agricultural College (now Michigan State University)

1911- After passing forest service exam, hired to work under E.M. Griffith as a ranger. Wilson was involved in building the forestry headquarters, the Trout Lake Nursery, and fire lookout towers

1916-1921- Moved to British Columbia, Canada and worked as a Forest Engineer under the British Columbia Professional Engineering Act.

1922- Returned to WI, became 1st Extension Forester with UW (until 1930).

1924- Wilson was involved in a change to the state constitution that made changes to tax policy to increase funding to forestry.

1928- Wisconsin Commercial Forestry Conference, Wilson gave a presentation titled "Progress in Farm Timberlot."

1929 Legislative Interim Committee which produced a report that led to policies that allowed the counties to make tax delinquent land county forests

1930- Appointed Chief Ranger of Fire Control

1933- Wilson helps WI create a rural zoning ordinance

1932-1952 Superintendent of the Cooperative Forestry Division

1952- Retired

1953- Wisconsin Silver Anniversary Forestry Conference, Wilson is listed as Professor of Forestry at Michigan Institute of Technology according to conference proceedings

1968- Wilson received a Distinguished Service Award from the Wisconsin-Michigan section of SAF

1973- Nursery in Boscobel was named after Wilson

1977- Celebration of one billionth tree planted at Trout Lake Nursery

1979- Wilson received the rank of fellow in the SAF

1982- Published his book *E.M. Griffith and the Early Story of Wisconsin Forestry (1903-1915)*

Awarded FHAW Distinguished Service Award

1984- Wilson was inducted in the Forest History Hall of Fame.

1991- Died at age of 103 (obituary can be found in newspaper section)

1998- Wilson was inducted in the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame

This timeline was made heavily relying on the sources from "Life Career & Legacy" section especially the billionth tree event info, interview transcript and induction materials. It is not an exhaustive list of every aspect of his career, but some highlights.