History of the New Hampshire State Park System (1881–1990)

Early Beginnings (1881–1909)

The roots of the New Hampshire State Park system trace back to 1881, when a Board of Inquiry was appointed by the Legislature to investigate indiscriminate timber cutting. The Board recommended forming a permanent forestry commission.

In 1893, the State Forestry Commission was established. By then, the state had acquired its first park property: **Miller State Park** in Peterborough. The Commission promoted forests as multi-use areas—valued for both timber and recreation.

In 1909, the State Forestry Department was created in cooperation with groups like the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests. Land acquisition focused on forestry, preservation, and scenic enjoyment, though public access was limited.

The Great Depression and Federal Involvement (1930s)

During the 1930s, federal programs like the **Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)** and **Works Progress Administration (WPA)** improved ten state forest properties by building shelters, bathhouses, and trails.

The Forestry Commission was renamed the **Forestry and Recreation Commission**, and in 1935, **Russell B. Tobey** was appointed administrative assistant in charge of parks.

By 1935, the system included:

- Forest Lake State Park (Dalton)
- Franconia and Crawford Notches
- Beaches in Sutton, Bristol, Wolfeboro, Laconia, and Hampton
- Mount Monadnock (Jaffrey)
- Bellamy Park (Dover) and Kingston

In 1936, the first supervised campground opened at **Moose Brook**.

Growth and Reorganization (1935–1945)

Between 1935 and WWII, the system expanded through gifts, purchases, and transfers. In 1937, nominal user fees were introduced. By 1940, fees covered two-thirds of operating costs.

A 10-year fiscal plan was developed to support growth, including the **Franconia Notch tramway**. The plan projected eventual reimbursement to the General Fund and a $250,000 reserve for large-scale projects.

WWII halted expansion. Attendance dropped, parks closed or operated part-time, and maintenance was deferred. Only **Bear Brook State Park** was added, via federal transfer.

Post-War Reorganization and Expansion (1945–1960s)

After WWII, the Forestry Department was reorganized. Russell Tobey became **Park Director**, leading the new **Division of Recreation**. The Division oversaw design, development, and maintenance of recreational facilities.

By 1945, parks offered swimming, hiking, fishing, and camping. Skiing was added at **Weeks State Park**. In 1950, the Division took over the **Shore and Beach Preservation Committee** and **Cannon Mountain Tramway Commission**.

In 1948, ski runs and a chairlift opened at **Mount Sunapee**, marking the start of year-round operations and commercial ventures.

Modernization and Funding (1960s–1970s)

In 1961, the Forestry Department became the **Department of Resources and Economic Development (DRED)**. A $9 million bond was passed to improve and expand parks.

Parks were classified as:

- **Recreation areas**: for financial return
- **Resource areas**: for preservation

The **Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (1965)** provided matching grants. Early projects included:

- Chairlift and slopes at Mount Sunapee
- 2,739-acre acquisition at Pawtuckaway
- Silver Lake acquisition

- Franconia Notch master plan and snowmaking
- NH Outdoor Recreation Plan update

Major openings: **Greenfield**, **Clough**, and **Pawtuckaway** State Parks. Major acquisitions: **Mount Washington summit** and **Pisgah State Park**.

Service Orientation and Challenges (1970s–1980s)

By 1971, the system had:

- 33 parks
- 5 historic sites
- 10 wayside areas
- Hampton Sea Shell

Under **George Hamilton**, interpretive programs began at **Odiorne Point** and **Monadnock**. Trails were added for motorbikes, snowmobiles, and hikers. New beaches opened in **North Hampton** and **Rye**.

A **naturalist** and **therapeutic recreation specialist** were hired. Programs were launched at **White Lake**, **Greenfield**, **Pawtuckaway**, **Franconia Notch**, **Mount Washington**, and **Robert Frost Farm**.

Budget Cuts and Recovery (1980s)

In 1981, budget cuts eliminated key staff. Parks operated part-time, fees increased, and seasonal staff were cut.

A 1985 self-assessment revealed widespread deterioration. The **1985 Report on the Condition and Trend of the State Park Properties** cited reduced staffing as a major issue.

The **"Parks 90"** initiative aimed to restore the system by 1990. The Legislature approved increased budgets for 1986–1987.

A legislative review supported the system's direction but raised concerns about financial self-sufficiency. The park system was reaffirmed as a steward of natural, recreational, and historic resources.