

Michigan Department of Natural Resources

STATE PARKS CENTENNIAL

Stories, photos courtesy of Michigan Department of Natural Resources



What was Michigan's first state park?

As the DNR celebrates the 100th anniversary of Michigan state parks system, a natural question arises — what was Michigan's first state park? Well, the answer depends on how you interpret the question and isn't simple. The 2019 state parks centennial celebration is centered around the formation of the Michigan State Park Commission by the state Legislature on May 12, 1919. The commission was given responsibility for overseeing, acquiring and maintaining public lands and establishing Michigan's state parks system.

One of the state's earliest purchases was the site of Interlochen State Park in 1917. Although the land was purchased prior to 1919, Interlochen was the first public park to be transferred to the Michigan State Park Commission in 1920 and is considered Michigan's first state park.

However, many consider Mackinac Island as Michigan's first state park, which is also true.

Approximately 25 years before legislation established the state park commission, the federal government gifted the Mackinac Island property it owned to the state in 1895. The island was designated as Michigan's first state park under the Mackinac State Park Commission.

Because Mackinac Island is operated under the Mackinac State Park Commission and was not placed under the Michigan State Park Commission, there is more than one answer to the "first state park" question.

Interlochen State Park: The Michigan Legislature paid \$60,000 for the land that became Interlochen State Park, located southwest of Traverse City, in 1917.

As recorded in the Biennial Report of the Public Domain Commission for 1917-1918: "At the last session of the Legislature Michigan purchased one of the few remaining parcels of virgin pine timber to be found in this State, the same being Interlochen State Park, ... between two beautiful lakes in Grand Traverse County. Duck Lake on the east covers some 3 square miles and Green Lake on the west is of slightly less extent, the distance separating the two being but one-half mile. The property has a shoreline of three-quarter mile on the former and one-half mile on the latter, all of which is high and dry and very desirable for camping purposes."

Its location between two well-known fishing and swimming lakes, Green Lake and Duck Lake — Interlochen means "between the lakes" —

is one of the park's defining features. Another is its virgin pine forest.

"The timber is practically all old growth white and Norway pine in which it is said that no cutting has ever been done except to remove wind-falls and trees that have died," according to the Biennial Report. "Many specimens of the white pine two and a half and three feet in diameter, towering 175 feet or more in height, can be seen here and the Norway, tall and dense, is as fine as can be found anywhere."

Originally known as Pine Park, Interlochen State Park was created to preserve the land's virgin pine stand for the people of Michigan.

The Biennial report continues: "The object of the State in acquiring this tract was first of all to preserve to posterity at least one remnant of the virgin pine forest with which Michigan was so lavishly endowed by nature, where future generations may go and view the glories of the pine forest in all its pristine grandeur. Being always open to the public it will also provide a delightful summer recreation ground for those wishing to avail themselves of its advantages in this respect."

The Public Domain Commission transferred the land to the Michigan State Park Commission in 1920.

Today, the state park system that the commission started 100 years ago has grown to 103 parks that attract 28 million visitors each year.

Mackinac Island State Park: Mackinac Island — historically a gathering place for Native people and then French fur traders and missionaries and later the home of soldiers stationed at Fort Mackinac — had become a popular tourist destination by the late 19th century. "By the time of the Civil War, lake boats were bringing visitors to Mackinac to enjoy the 'healthy air' or explore the island's natural wonders," David A. Armour, who served as deputy director of the Mackinac Island State Park Commission for many years, wrote in his book "100 Years at Mackinac: 1895-1995."

Armour continues: "Such was the growing reputation of Mackinac Island that Thomas W. Ferry, a Mackinac boy who had grown up to become a U.S. Senator, spearheaded a move to have Congress designate the government land on Mackinac Island as a national park. He succeeded, and in 1875, three years after Yellowstone had become the United States' first national park, Mackinac became

the second. Set aside 'for the benefit and enjoyment of the people,' the 911 acres outside the 104-acre military reservation were to be maintained by the soldiers who garrisoned Fort Mackinac."

Almost 20 years later, the U.S. Army decided to close Fort Mackinac. At the time, the National Park Service didn't exist, and all national parks were under the umbrella of the War Department.

"While Mackinac was a beautiful and pleasant post enjoyed by the soldiers stationed there, it had no remaining military importance, and its troops were needed in Sault Ste. Marie to guard the canal there," Armour wrote. "Without the troops, who would care for the national park?"

In February 1895, Senator James McMillan — urged on by a group of Mackinac citizens who wanted the island's government lands kept in public ownership rather than sold — introduced an appropriation bill amendment that would turn the military reservation and the buildings and lands of the national park over to the state of Michigan for use as a state park.

"Congress passed the bill on March 2, with the added stipulation that the land would revert to the United States if it ever ceased to be used for park purposes," Armour wrote. "Michigan had no state park system, but the state Legislature acted quickly, and by joint resolution on May 31, 1895, created the Mackinac Island State Park Commission to manage Michigan's first state park."

The lands of the military reservation, Fort Mackinac and the national park were formally transferred to the state Sept. 16, 1895.

"The state had acquired a treasure," Armour wrote.

Today, Mackinac Island State Park includes the 14 original buildings of Fort Mackinac, which were built by the British military starting in 1780, as well as several other historic structures and about 1,800 acres of land.

More than 80 percent of Mackinac Island is state park property, managed by the Mackinac Island State Park Commission.

More than 800,000 visitors come to the island each year. The park features a variety of historic and natural resources, including historic landmarks, breathtaking vistas, spectacular rock formations, quiet forests and inspiring nature trails.

To learn more about Mackinac Island State Park, visit MackinacParks.com.

Supporting state parks: The Recreation Passport

Michiganders have always loved their parks. Initially, the state was dependent on gifts of lands by donors. However, by the 1920s, if expansion was to continue, there was a realization that the state would need a long-term funding source to purchase more land. Financing these lands was not always easy.

In 1957, the state Conservation Commission asked the Michigan Legislature's permission to set up a park fee system. There were 59 Michigan state parks by then, a majority of which were situated in southeast Michigan.

As automobiles and the interstate highway system connected parks and recreation areas closer than ever before, the state parks system was unable to meet the demand of growing attendance. In 1958, an estimated 17 million people were expected to visit state parks, an increase of more than 8 percent over the previous year. To keep up with demand, the state's parks system needed more funding. This was how the state park vehicle permit "sticker" was born.

When the stickers were first proposed, there was unanimous agreement that the parks system needed more revenue. In fact, the Conservation Commission based its recommendation on a survey of 4,700 park users, which showed that only one in 12 opposed charging a fee for using parks.

These "sticker" passes would allow unlimited access to state parks. Charged at \$2 a year, the stickers were to be valid for a vehicle instead of the previously charged individual entry fees. The annual motor vehicle permits were windshield stickers. For park visitors who only wanted to visit one park a year, the

charge could be up to 50 cents. Funds from the stickers were intended to help finance improvements to the parks system, as well as add more parks. Two of Michigan's neighbors — Minnesota and Ontario — pioneered similar sticker plans, which were the inspiration for Michigan's vehicle permits.

The road to the sticker, however, was an uphill one. In 1957, the Legislature unanimously passed the "sticker" bill, despite opposition from urban Democrats. The legislation was vetoed by Gov. G. Mennen Williams because he thought funds from the sticker would transfer the cost of park improvement to users.

In 1959, a second sticker bill was passed by the Legislature and vetoed again by Gov. Williams, justified along similar lines as before. In 1960, the Legislature passed yet another version of the bill, which was not vetoed. By 1968, the annual vehicle permits had become an important source of revenue supporting Michigan state parks.

By 2010, it cost \$24 to get an annual vehicle sticker. At the time, the parks system faced a massive infrastructure deficit. To ensure Michiganders could continue using their parks, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources devised the Recreation Passport, which was tied to the vehicle registration process and functioned as a vehicle permit. Priced at just \$10 and providing year-round access to all state parks, the Recreation Passport was a success, generating more than \$7 million in its first year. Today, the \$11 Recreation Passport helps fund maintenance and improvements at Michigan's 103 state parks.



State park memories: Babe Ruth

Babe Ruth, the famous New York Yankees slugger, was not as good a fisherman as he was a ballplayer. During the summer of 1926, he violated Michigan's game and fish laws by fishing at Island Lake Recreation Area before the fishing season officially had begun. Babe went fishing with teammate Pat Sexton from the porch of the Island Lake Hotel and was caught with 25 bass and bluegill before the official June 16 start of the fishing season. The game warden arrested both of them and seized their tackle, but not their catch. They were released and even made it back to the game in Detroit that afternoon.

In August 1926, Babe was summoned to appear in court in Brighton by A.B. Wilkinson, the conservation officer for Oakland and Livingston counties. Babe was charged with three violations: fishing without a license, fishing out of season and taking undersized fish from Island Lake. Wilkinson played a warrant for Babe when the latter came back to Detroit to play a game. Wilkinson even threatened to arrest Babe if he did not "make a satisfactory answer." On Aug. 5, when the Yankees came to Detroit from Cleveland, Babe went right to bed. He was awakened to be told that he might be arrested. Babe's response? Go back to bed, of course!

Evolving car industry drives state parks growth

Michigan's state parks system started out small. Between 1919 and 1921, the Michigan State Park Commission established 23 state parks. Initially, many of these parks had been wilderness areas or old industrial land — like Hartwick Pines — that were converted to park land. In many cases, railroads provided visitors access to the parks system.

Beginning in the 1920s, cars became an increasingly popular form of transportation — an especially important trend for park development, as people began to travel in their cars to state parks.

After World War II, when car ownership increased further, the interstate highway system brought people, cars and parks closer to each other than ever before. The impact of this accessible road network was significant.

The changes were evident on state road maps. In 1912, Michigan's highway department issued a free road map



of the state. In 1919, the state Legislature authorized the highway department to publish and sell a tourist map. By 1922, that map included state parks, and by 1923 the map also contained information on recreation sites, campsites and ferry schedules.

Needless to say, roads and cars had a big impact on park attendance. In 1922, state parks welcomed 220,000 visitors, but by 1930 — just eight years later — saw a 40-fold increase as state park attendance soared to more than 8 million people a year.

Michigan also was one of the first states to introduce roadside parks and recreation areas. This occurred after Herbert Larson, an engineer for the Upper Peninsula's Iron County Road Commission, had difficulty finding a picnic spot while on a vacation trip to northern Wisconsin in 1919.

With most of the state's population concentrated in the south and southeast, and parks located primarily in the north and northwest, automobile travel enabled easier access to parks.

Fishing wisdom. We didn't check the tackle box the night before, or get up before sunrise. But we did power the boat that would help him realize there's more to fishing than just catching fish. When the energy you invest in life meets the energy we fuel it with, beautiful things happen.

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