



SFHM RESEARCH PAPER-1

HENRY HARDTNER, FATHER OF FORESTRY IN THE SOUTH



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An online publication of the
Southern Forest Heritage Museum and Research Center
P.O. Box 101
Long Leaf, LA 71448
Website: forestheritagemuseum.org

2021

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Cover photo:

Henry E. Hardtner, President of the Urania Lumber Company, early in his career.

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Abstract:

Henry Hardtner was a lumberman who had no training in forestry, but he had a love for trees and spent time observing and studying their growth and development. Leaving the operation of his sawmill to his brother, Q.T. Hardtner, he began to promote the idea that it was economically feasible to grow another pine forest. While at first his claims were ridiculed, he persisted and slowly began to convince others of this potential. To overcome the bureaucratic obstacles caused by the level of taxation on land with harvested stands, he was elected and served in the Louisiana legislature as both a representative and senator. He was responsible for groundbreaking legislation that favored forestry management. These efforts resulted in him being given the distinction as the “father of forestry in the South.”

How to cite this publication:

Barnett, James P. 2021. Henry Hardtner, father of forestry in the South. SFHM Research Paper-1. Long Leaf, LA: Southern Forest Heritage Museum and Research Center. 7 p.

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James P. Barnett

Until the end of the 1800s, Louisiana's pine forests remained virtually untouched. But, as the harvest of the northern white pine forests were exhausted, northern and eastern industrialists moved to the South to invest in the rapidly developing lumber industry. Expansion of railroads made transportation to national markets feasible. The period from 1900 to 1920 was one of big mills. These two decades became a "golden period" for investors, mostly out-of-staters who reaped profits with a cut-out and get-out approach. They had little concern for leaving the forests as barren cutover stump wastelands, and they were not concerned about land and resource conservation.

Few native Louisianans had the resources to become involved in this lumbering industry. At age 21, however, Henry E. Hardtner of Pineville entered the lumbering scene in 1892 with \$1,000 capital. Hardtner developed a small sawmill 30 miles north of Alexandria. In 1896, Hardtner established a mill at a site that he named Urania because to him it was a "heavenly" place (Morris 2019). An investment of \$5,000 by the steel tycoon William C. Edenborn allowed him to purchase additional tracts of timber and build a logging railroad (Barnett 2021). Although it was only 8 miles long, Hardtner listed the "Natchez, Urania and Ruston Railroad" on his letterhead (Burns 1987). As president of the railroad this provided him pass privileges on other lines.



Log train of the Natchez, Urania and Ruston Railroad Company, the railroad development of the Urania Lumber Company. (photo courtesy of the Forest History Society)

Hardtner began to recognize that cutover lands were a serious problem. He enjoyed the woods part of the company's operation and began thoughtful observation of the cutover stands. His growing belief that a second crop of trees could be grown profitably after the virgin timber was cut was ridiculed by others. However, he began a practice of leaving trees smaller than 12 inches in diameter and he insisted on leaving 4 seed trees per acre. Gambling that cutover lands could be brought back into production, he began to buy cutover tracts at \$1 per acre. As his belief grew stronger, he initiated a primitive fire protection system and began to fence young longleaf pine stands to protect them from the rooting of open range hogs (Hardtner 1935).

AN ADVOCATE FOR FOREST MANAGEMENT

Although Hardtner had no formal forestry training, he read widely about forestry and soon began crusading for the forestry cause. He sought professional forestry advice, the first lumberman in Louisiana to do so. In 1909, the U.S. Forest Service began sending W.W. Ashe, and later W.R. Mattoon, to assist Hardtner (Barnett 2011). It is interesting to note that Hardtner ideas on reforestation were ahead of the professional knowledge. However, Ashe and Mattoon gave credibility to Hardtner's actions.



Hardtner (right) with Carl Schenck, Head of the Biltmore Forest School at Ashville, NC, the first forestry school in the United States.

Hardtner's leadership in conservation began to be recognized. In 1910, as a Louisiana legislator he led establishment of a Commission of Natural Resources that proposed a six-point forestry program. Although it took three decades to implement all the recommendations, they became the "cornerstone of forestry in Louisiana."

One of the approved actions was the establishment of state reforestation contracts. These contracts for up to forty years, allowed assessment of cutover land at a low value for tax purposes if timber was grown and maintained on the lands. Tax liability was a frequent cause of abandonment of forest land. Hardtner signed the first reforestation contract in 1913, placing 25,719 acres of Urania Lumber Company's land under a 40-year contract (Burns 1978). This forest reserve became an experimental site where forestry reforestation practices were developed.

Elected to the Louisiana Legislature as both a Representative and Senator, Hardtner had great influence on the reforestation of cutover lands within the State and on the development of forest practices across the South.

Hardtner's practice of not cutting pines under 12 inches diameter and at least 4 seed trees per acre resulted in natural regeneration, and new forest stands quickly developed. He promoted his

success and began to convince others of the economic potential of growing another stand of merchantable trees.

In 1920, the president, A.C. Goodyear, manager William H. Sullivan, and the entire board of directors of the Great Southern Lumber Company of Bogalusa, LA, visited Hardtner at Urania. They became convinced in the potential of reforestation, but they had huge amounts of cutover land harvested with steam skidders that left no seed source for reforestation. They began an effort to develop the technology to grow nursery seedlings and outplant those on their cutover land (Barnett and Carter 2017). Hardtner's persistence was making a difference.

HARDTNER'S INFLUENCE ON DEVELOPMENT OF FORESTRY

Henry Hardtner's father was a shoemaker in Alexandria. Henry was quoted as saying, "I was born in the forests and have had close association with them since childhood. What I know about them cannot be learned in schools or colleges. To me they are as humans, and I know trees as I



Forest Lovers Visit Urania Forest and are
Conducted Through the Cut-over Lands to
See the Stages of Forestry.

This album photo of a group visiting Hardtner at Urania in the 1920s was to learn of his concepts of reforestation and forest management. This group was sponsored by the Society of American Foresters. (photo courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service)

try to know men." This desire to know more about reforestation potential of cutover lands led him to invite, in 1917, the Yale University Forest School to conduct its spring field course for

students in Urania. This association went on for decades and resulted in many of America's leading foresters receiving training at Urania. Urania became the location for persons interested in forestry and conservation lumbering to learn about forest management. The impact of the demonstrations and visits are impossible to measure, but they contributed to the recognition of Hardtner as the "father of southern forestry."

THE HARDTNER EXHIBIT AT THE SOUTHERN FOREST HERITAGE MUSEUM

Henry Hardtner died from an automobile accident in 1935 as a young and influential man, but his legacy continues. His home in Alexandria, LA, was donated by his family to the American Red Cross. His office and carriage house remained and to prevent its destruction, his grandson's Henry and Billy Blake arranged for the removal of the second floor and its move to the Alexander State Forest near Woodworth where it was stored for over 20 years.

In about 2016, Hardtner's grandsons donated the building to the Southern Forest Heritage Museum and funded its move and restoration. About half of the building is Hardtner's office and exhibit space. The carriage house portion has been developed into a historic Camp Claiborne exhibit based to the publication "Remembering the sacrifice, historic Camp Claiborne" which tells of nearby Camp Claiborne's role in the training of troops for World War II (Barnett and others 2015).



Henry Hardtner's office and carriage from Alexandria now houses two significant exhibits at the Southern Forest Heritage Museum. One includes Hardtner's office, typical of an early 20th century lumberman, and exhibit material about his contributions to forestry. The other, the Camp Claiborne History Center, has focus on the role of lumbering and forestry in the World War II effort. The building has been restored to help continue an understanding of Hardtner's legacy to the South.

The Southern Forest Heritage Museum’s mission is to preserve and interpret the history of lumbering and early forestry in the South. This exhibit makes an important contribution to this effort.

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