

Boxford State Forest: Nearly a Century of Visionary Land Protection

Boxford State Forest is nestled within over 2000 acres of uninterrupted protected woodland, also known as Bald Hill Reservation. The forest is a patchwork of properties that have been conserved gradually over the course of a century.

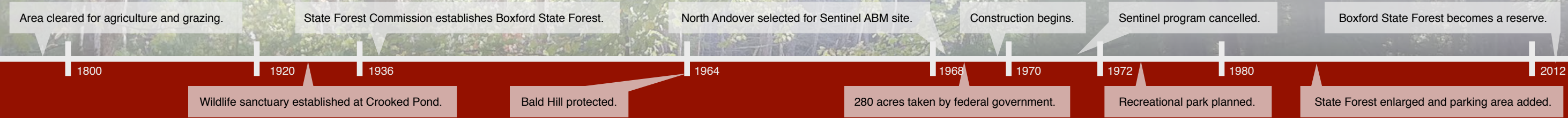
It began with a 200-acre bird sanctuary at Crooked Pond in Boxford, donated to the Commonwealth by preeminent naturalist Dr John C Phillips in the 1920s.

Fellow naturalist Laurence Fletcher followed suit in 1933, selling 460 acres of woodland, the former Towne estate, to the Commonwealth for use as a state forest. In 1936, the heirs to the Fuller estate added 114 acres in North Andover. At the time, the Massachusetts State Forest Commission was authorized to buy land for \$5 per acre for use as state forest. Most was “wasteland”, former agricultural land that had been abandoned, grown into forests, then logged, then re-abandoned.

The 1960s saw the addition of Bald Hill as state forest land. After developers were denied an access road by conservation-minded abutters, the Commonwealth acquired the 184-acre property as part of a broader effort to protect land along a proposed outer Emerald Necklace. The successful effort to save the hill led to the formation of the Essex County Greenbelt Association, a land trust that has since protected over two dozen abutting forest and cedar swamp parcels throughout these woods and conserved more than 14,000 acres county-wide. Other protected parcels are owned by the towns of Boxford and Middleton and the New England Forestry Foundation.

Reserve Status: Where Wildlife Can Get Away From It All

The BioMap2 program identifies this area as a "Forest Core", an interior forest habitat. Forest Cores supports many bird species that are extremely sensitive to the impacts of roads and development, such as the Black-throated Green Warbler and Scarlet Tanager. In 2012, DCR designated Boxford State Forest as a reserve. This means that while it can still be used for recreation, no logging will take place and no new trails will be created.



Sentinel Comes to Town

In 1968, this site was selected as the home of the first Perimeter Acquisition Radar (PAR) for the Sentinel Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense System. Over 280 acres, including almost all of North Andover’s portion of Boxford State Forest was taken by the federal government, and construction work began.

Designed to defend major cities against a nuclear strike from Russia or China, Sentinel was to be a vast network of radar stations and missile sites positioned throughout the country. During a strike, the system would have detected incoming warheads and then attempted to intercept them with a new generation of surface-to-air nuclear missiles.

The PAR was to be a cube-shaped structure, 120 feet tall, with an enormous fixed-position radar array across the front. In order to withstand the effects of a nuclear blast, the building was to be constructed with steel-reinforced concrete walls up to eight feet thick. Since the radar needed to continue operating after an attack, the installation also called for a self-contained, 14 megawatt underground diesel power plant. The radar’s job would have been to provide early warning by sensing incoming ICBMs up to 1000 miles away in the upper atmosphere. Once detected, other Sentinel sites, including a radar planned for Camp Curtis Guild in Reading, would have tracked the enemy threat and guide Sprint and Spartan missiles to intercept.



An aerial photo showing the construction site after suspension of work in March 1970.



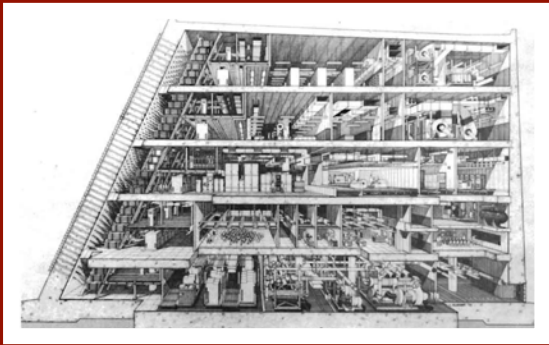
Water lilies, cattails, and red maple grow in the power plant excavation’s vernal pool, July 2013.

Controversy and Cancellation

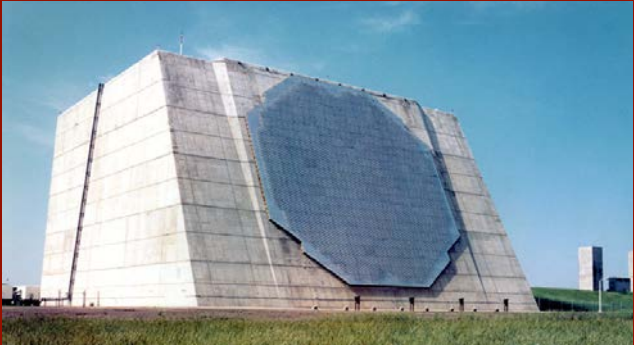
Plans for Sentinel were met with massive opposition from surrounding communities, including the successful recruitment of Senator Kennedy to the opposition cause. The program was also the subject of harsh criticism and debate nationally. Among the concerns were the astronomical cost and skepticism about whether it would actually work.

President Nixon suspended and then halted the Sentinel program, just a few months after construction began. By that time, contractors had already created an access road (now Sharpners Pond Road), reduced 40 acres of woodland to gravel, and partially excavated two massive square holes for the PAR building and underground power plant.

With Sentinel cancelled, negotiations regarding the fate of the \$8 million pit and "road to nowhere" dragged on for years. The army eventually agreed to complete the road and pay \$150,000 in reparations. In 1972, a \$1 million budget request laid out plans to construct a park on the site. It was to include gardens, stables, a swimming hole, picnic areas, toboggan runs and even a zoo. As you will notice, absolutely nothing was to come of this. The excavations remain, filled with water.



A cutaway view of the proposed radar shows five floors containing machinery and computer systems.



Only one PAR building was ever built. Located in No. Dakota, it's believed to be very similar to the planned North Andover facility.