

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ARBOR DAY

“Arbor Day is not like other holidays. Each of those reposes on the past, while Arbor Day proposes for the future.”

~ J. Sterling Morton

Most holidays commemorate something that has already happened. On the date of observance we are asked to pause and focus our attention to something or someone worth remembering or celebrating from our past. Arbor Day, on the other hand, is a day set aside to reflect with hope and wonder on our future. It calls on each of us to act for a healthier, growing, and better tomorrow. The simple act of planting and caring for a tree expresses this hope. It is founded in the belief that the tree has immeasurable value and will grow to provide both current and future generations with the benefits of clean air and water, reduction in pollutants and CO₂, erosion control, improved wildlife habitat, and overall healthier individuals and communities worldwide just to name a few.

Arbor Day was first celebrated in Nebraska in 1872. J. Sterling Morton, a Nebraska newspaper editor originally from Michigan, was deeply impacted and concerned by the lack of trees across the windswept plains of the Nebraska Territory. As editor of the state's first newspaper, the Nebraska City News, Morton began advocating for trees and devoted many editorials to encouraging individuals, landowners, and civic groups to plant trees. Morton proposed a tree planting holiday called “Arbor Day” to the State Board of Agriculture on January 4, 1872. The Board agreed with Morton's vision to re-tree Nebraska and the first Arbor day was scheduled by the Board for April 10, 1872. To publicize and aid in the replanting of Nebraska on Arbor Day, the State Board of Agriculture developed a contest in which individuals and counties could win prizes based upon the number of trees that were correctly planted. It is estimated that over one million trees were planted across Nebraska during the first Arbor Day observance. Soon the tradition began to spread and in 1882 schools across the country began to participate.

In 1883, agriculturalist Birdsey Northrop introduced the concept of Arbor Day to Japan and went on to influence the creation of Arbor Day across Europe, Canada, and Australia. President Theodore Roosevelt stressed the importance of Arbor Day in his “Arbor Day Proclamation To the School Children of the United States” in 1907. By 1920, more than 45 states and territories were celebrating Arbor Day. Mississippi officially recognized Arbor Day observance in 1926. However, it wasn't until 1970 that Arbor Day received nationwide recognition through the efforts of President Richard Nixon.

Today, Arbor Day is celebrated by all 50 states and many countries around the globe. Each year communities and individuals gather to celebrate trees and plant for a greener tomorrow. Though nationally Arbor Day is observed on the last Friday in April, many states observe Arbor Day during other months coinciding with the best planting times for their region. In Mississippi, we observe Arbor Day on the second Friday in February each year.

As we celebrate Arbor Day, take a moment to reflect upon the value, benefits, and importance of trees. Trees are an invaluable resource for our state that either we protect for future generations of Mississippians or allow to perish within our own. How can you, your family, your fellow students, your school, or your community help in growing a better tomorrow?