



# HISTORY OF PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST SKIT

*Students will read about the history of Pisgah National Forest, and then make a skit about its history to present.*

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## LESSON LENGTH:

- 1.5 hours

## GOALS:

- To understand the importance of forestry and National Forests

## OBJECTIVES:

Students will be able to

- Explain how Pisgah National Forest was founded
- Indicate key actors that helped develop forestry ideas and founded Pisgah National Forest

## MATERIALS & EQUIPMENT:

- Paper
- Pencils
- Highlighters (1 per student)
- History Readings

# LESSON:

## ENGAGE

- Ask students what they've learned about the Pisgah National Forest so far on the trip (can be anything - what animals live here, what types of rocks there are, not just history. Write answers on the board).
- Ask if anyone knows anything about the history of the forest.

## EXPLORE

- Divide students into two groups of four. Group 2 has the longest reading, so keep that in mind when choosing who is Group 1 and who is Group 2.
- Provide each group a copy of four different History Readings (labeled Group 1 and Group 2), and have each student choose one to read independently and highlight/annotate (10 minutes).
- When everyone has finished reading, have students share with their groups what they learned. Since everyone had a different resource, everyone should have something to contribute. (5-10 minutes)
- Instruct groups to **WORK TOGETHER** to write a short skit (to be about 5-10 minutes) to present to the other group and instructors about the history of Pisgah National Forest. Give them 20ish minutes to do this (longer if necessary). Encourage them to be creative/funny/goofy!

## EXPLAIN

- Present skits!



## Pisgah National Forest

by Michael Bonner, 2006



Pisgah National Forest was the first of North Carolina's national forests. It derived its name from [Buncombe County's](#) Mount Pisgah, named in 1776 by the Reverend [James Hall](#) during Gen. [Griffith Rutherford's](#) expedition against the [Cherokee](#). The biblical "Pisgah" was the peak from which Moses, though not allowed to enter, could view the promised land.

The genesis of the Pisgah National Forest was directly related to the forest holdings of George W. Vanderbilt, whose Biltmore estate near Asheville was completed in the 1890s. For a time, experienced forestry experts such as [Carl Alwin Schenck](#) and [Gifford](#)

[Pinchot](#) managed Vanderbilt's extensive lands, but Schenck's Biltmore Forest School, established in 1898 as the first professional forestry field school in the United States, closed in 1913. The Weeks Act was passed by Congress on 1 Mar. 1911, authorizing the federal purchase of eastern lands for conservation purposes. In 1915, the widowed Mrs. George Vanderbilt sold approximately 86,700 acres to the federal government at a nominal price. Despite the chance for vast material benefit, Vanderbilt realized that only the federal government could preserve the forest, which became the Pisgah National Forest and remains roughly the same size today.

Currently, the Pisgah National Forest lies in 15 [North Carolina counties](#). The forest is divided into three separate ranger districts according to geographic features. The Grandfather District includes Avery, Burke, Caldwell, Watauga, and McDowell Counties. The Appalachian District manages land in Haywood, Madison, Avery, Buncombe, Mitchell, and Yancey Counties. Finally, the Pisgah District covers parts of Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson, and Transylvania Counties. The total land amount in the early 2000s was over 510,000 acres.

### Update from N.C. Government & Heritage Library staff:

Following George Vanderbilt's death in March 1914, Edith Vanderbilt renewed the offer to sell the land to the federal government that had been made by the Vanderbilts the year before in 1913. A month after her husband's death, she wrote a letter indicating her interest in selling the 86,700 acres at a price of \$5 per acre, some \$200,000 less than the original offer.





## The Gift of the Pisgah National Forest

*By James Lewis On October 17, 2016*

*On October 17, 1916, the Pisgah National Forest was the first national forest established under the Weeks Act of 1911. Written by FHS historian Jamie Lewis, this post was originally published in the online version of the Asheville Citizen-Times on October 14, 2016, and in print on October 16 to mark the centennial.*

“When people walk around this forest ... at every step of the way, they’re encountering nature, some of which has been regenerated by the initiatives of those generations they know not—they know nothing about. And I think that that’s ultimately the greatest gift: that you’ve given to them beautiful, working landscapes and you don’t know where they came from.”

Historian Char Miller closes our new documentary film, [\*America’s First Forest\*](#), by acknowledging those who labored to create the Pisgah National Forest, which celebrates its centennial on October 17. We chose that quote because it simultaneously summed up Pisgah’s history and looked to its future by implicitly asking who would carry on the work of the early generations in managing this national forest.

Miller is right. The Pisgah is a gift from many people—some whose names are familiar but many whose names are not. Most have heard of George Vanderbilt or his Biltmore Estate. His greatest gift, however, was not to himself but to the nation. He hired renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to design Biltmore’s grounds. Creator of New York’s Central Park and other urban green spaces, Olmsted saw in this project opportunity to give back to the nation and, through Vanderbilt, a way to do so. In 1890, Vanderbilt needed a forester. America needed forestry. Olmsted advised hiring a professional forester who would demonstrate to America that one could cut trees and preserve the forest at the same time.

Vanderbilt hired [\*Gifford Pinchot\*](#), who then crafted the first-ever sustainable forest management plan in the United States. Pinchot later gave back to the country in his own way: in 1905, he established the U.S. Forest Service, providing the nation with an institution to manage its national forests and grasslands. But before leaving Vanderbilt’s employ in 1895, Pinchot did two things: he facilitated Vanderbilt’s purchase of an additional 100,000



acres, which Vanderbilt named Pisgah Forest, and he recommended hiring German forester Carl Schenck to implement his management plan.

Schenck's "experimental" practices not only restored the forest but also improved its wildlife and fish habitat. This turned Pisgah Forest into a revenue source as well as a playground for its owner: a sustainably managed forest can provide all those things and more.

In 1898, Schenck established the Biltmore Forest School—the country's first forestry school—to educate men wanting to become forest managers or owners. Many of the nearly 400 graduates also served in the Forest Service. The impact of Schenck's gift is still seen on public and private forests today. Thankfully, Congress preserved the school grounds as the [Cradle of Forestry in America](#) historic site.



*Picture: On top, George W. Vanderbilt; next to him, his friend and physician, Dr. S. W. Battle; next, Mrs. Edith Vanderbilt in her riding suit; lowest, Miss Marion Olmsted, daughter of the famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. Photo taken in 1901 at Lookingglass Rock. (FHS356)*

These men are not the only ones to thank for the Pisgah National Forest. In 1899, Asheville physician Chase Ambler mobilized citizens to protect the region's scenery and climate. Pressured by conservation groups from the South and New England, Congress passed the [Weeks Act of 1911](#), which empowered the federal government to purchase private land for the Forest Service to manage. This legislative gift pleased not only preservationists like Ambler by protecting scenery and recreation areas, but also conservationists because the land remained available for logging and other extractive activities.

In 1914, George Vanderbilt's widow, Edith, [sold Pisgah Forest](#) for a fraction of its value in part to "perpetuate" the conservation legacy of her husband, and as a "contribution" to the American people. Pisgah Forest became the nucleus of the Pisgah National Forest, the first established under the Weeks Act, and Biltmore Forest School graduate Verne Rhoades became its first supervisor in 1916.



But that is the past. The future of the Pisgah National Forest (and its neighbor, the Nantahala) is being written now. The U.S. Forest Service is drafting a forest management plan to guide how it manages the forests for the next



dozen or so years. At public meetings, the Forest Service has been hearing from citizens and groups like the Pisgah Conservancy to help it craft the forest's future. Like Carl Schenck and Vern Rhoades before them, Pisgah's current managers face great uncertainties, only now in the form of forest pests and disease, climate change, and a place so attractive that its visitors are "loving it to death." Those who cherish the Pisgah for its "beautiful, working landscapes" can honor those who gave us that gift by

continuing to sustainably manage it. That can ultimately be our greatest gift to future generations.



## Pisgah National Forest

Written by North Carolina History Project

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Established in 1915, Pisgah National Forest remains the oldest national forest in North Carolina. The Vanderbilts sold the federal government 86,700 acres of forest land to help establish the approximately 500,000 acre forest. Today, Pisgah National Forest continues to attract tourists to the western mountains of North Carolina in Buncombe County.

The Reverend James Hall is attributed as the first person to call the region “Pisgah.” During General Griffith Rutherford’s march to eradicate the Cherokee in 1776, Reverend Hall remarked about the mountains of Buncombe County. In reference to the Biblical peak where Moses viewed the promised land, Hall called the place Mount Pisgah, and the area retained the name ever since.

When George Vanderbilt constructed his iconic Biltmore home in the 1890s, he sought to create a forest reserve as part of the estate. Vanderbilt enlisted Carl A. Schenck and Gifford Pinchot to foster the reserve at the Biltmore. Despite efforts to establish a forestry school, Schenck’s Biltmore Forest School, founded in 1898, failed to survive past the 1910s.

On March 1, 1911, the United States Congress authorized the Weeks Act, allowing the National Park Service to buy up land on the eastern seaboard for conservation and public use. By the mid-1910s, George Vanderbilt had passed away, and upkeep of the Biltmore Estate fell in the hands of his widowed wife. Four years after the Weeks Act, Mrs. Vanderbilt sold about 86,700 acres of land to the federal government. Mrs. Vanderbilt could have sold the land at a much higher price, but, according to William S. Powell, she “realized that only the federal government could preserve the forest, which became the Pisgah National Forest and remains roughly the same size” (p. 889).





At 500,000 acres, Pisgah forest encompasses 15 North Carolina counties, and due to its large size, the park is divided into three separate districts: the Grandfather District, the Appalachian District, and the Pisgah District.

### Sources

“Pisgah National Park.” William S. Powell, ed. *Encyclopedia of North Carolina* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, NC 2006).



### *Celebrating 100 years of Pisgah Forest*

*Posted on 03/04/2014 by Judy Ross on Open House: The Official Blog of Biltmore*

May 2014 marked a significant milestone for both Biltmore and Pisgah National Forest: the **100th anniversary** of Edith Vanderbilt selling part of the estate to the U.S. government to create the first national forest east of the Mississippi River.



George Vanderbilt acquired Pisgah Forest under the direction of his forest manager, **Gifford Pinchot**, as part of his land holdings which eventually totaled 125,000 acres. Pinchot, who later served as the first chief of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, developed a forest management plan for the property. In 1895, **Dr. Carl A. Schenck** succeeded Pinchot and continued to expand the plan over the next 14 years. Dr. Schenck founded the Biltmore Forest School—the first school of forestry in the U.S.—graduating more than 300 of the nation’s first professionally-trained foresters.



In addition to its educational opportunities, Pisgah Forest was also a favorite camping site for George and Edith Vanderbilt and their friends. They traveled to the area to enjoy the spectacular scenery of Looking Glass Rock in Transylvania County, along with the Pink Beds known for dense areas of rhododendron and mountain laurel.

While the Vanderbilts originally had offered to sell 86,000 acres of Pisgah Forest in 1913, the offer was rejected. After her husband’s death in March 1914, Edith Vanderbilt resumed negotiations with the Secretary of Agriculture, David Franklin Houston.

In her May 1 letter, she stated her family’s interest in preserving the property:

*“Mr. Vanderbilt was the first of the large forest owners in America to adopt the practice of forestry. He has conserved Pisgah Forest from the time he bought it up to his death, a period of nearly twenty-five years, under the firm conviction that every forest owner owes it to those who follow him to hand down his forest property to them unimpaired by wasteful use.*



*I keenly sympathize with his belief that the private ownership of forest land is a public trust, and I probably realize more keenly than anyone else can do, how firm was his resolve never to permit injury to the permanent value and usefulness of Pisgah Forest. I wish earnestly to make such disposition of Pisgah Forest as will maintain in the fullest and most permanent way its national value as an object lesson in forestry, as well as its wonderful beauty and charm; and I realize that its ownership by the Nation will alone make its preservation permanent and certain...*

*I make this contribution towards the public ownership of Pisgah Forest with the earnest hope that in this way I may help to perpetuate my husband's pioneer work in forest conservation, and to insure the protection and use and enjoyment of Pisgah Forest as a National Forest, by the American people for all time....*

*In the event that my offer is accepted, I shall be glad for the Government to assume control of Pisgah Forest as soon as it may desire. In the same event, it would be a source of very keen gratification to me if the tract retained, as a national Forest, the title of "Pisgah Forest," which my late husband gave it."*

*Very truly yours,*

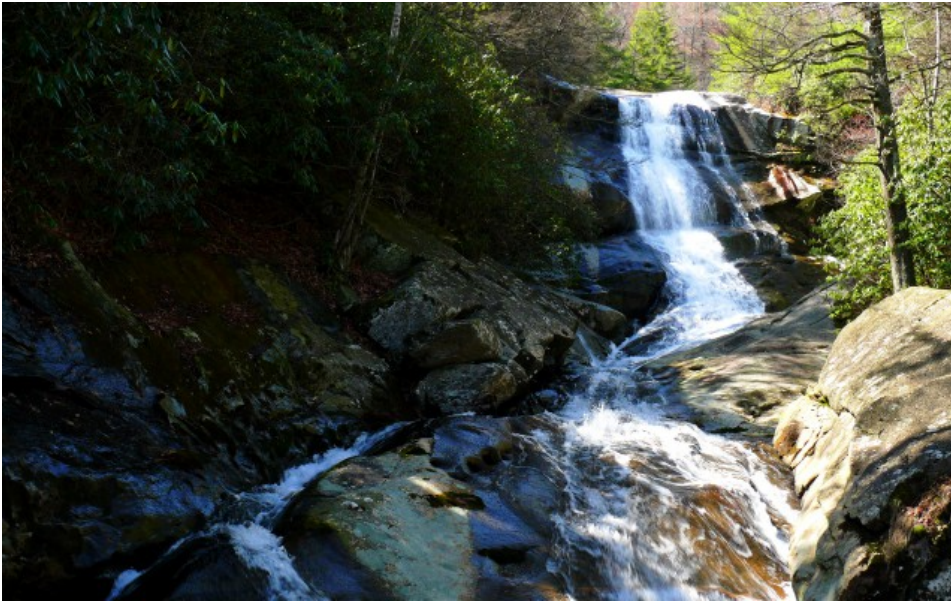
*Edith S. Vanderbilt*

Pisgah National Forest was dedicated to the memory of George Vanderbilt in a 1920 public ceremony attended by Edith Vanderbilt and her daughter Cornelia, N.C. Governor Locke Craig, and George S. Powell, secretary of the Appalachian Park Association.

Today, the Cradle of Forestry is a 6,500-acre Historic Site within Pisgah National Forest, set aside to commemorate the beginning of forestry conservation in America and the lasting contributions of George Vanderbilt, Gifford Pinchot, and Dr. Carl Schenck.



**Pisgah National Forest:** Essay by Timothy N. Osment, Director of Cashiers Historical Society



Pisgah National Forest, founded in 1916, covers much of North Carolina's northwestern mountains. Pisgah was the first national forest created from purchased land rather than from the public domain. Many of its half-million acres were purchased from the widow of the Biltmore Estate's creator, George W. Vanderbilt. Its name comes from its landmark feature, Mount Pisgah, on the Blue Ridge Parkway

south of Asheville, that in turn was named for the mountain from which Moses saw the Promised Land. The Forest includes such notable attractions as the Linville Gorge and Falls and the Cradle of Forestry, the site of America's first school of forestry. Pisgah offers a wide variety of outdoor pleasures including outstanding hunting and fishing and excellent hiking and camping with 138 miles of the Appalachian Trail.

For hundreds of years, the stunning, rolling geography surrounding the confluence of the Swannanoa and French Broad rivers near present day Asheville has been one of the most vibrant regions of the southern Appalachians. Early Native communities dotted the area's low hills and deep valleys, thriving off an abundant variety of fish, wildlife, and agriculture. Later, European settlers introduced a centralized, Christian, commercial culture from which sprung town halls, churches, and drover's trails. The modern era, characterized by the challenges of population growth and the connectivity of both the railroad and the interstate highway, brought with it exploitation – and thus the need to intentionally create a manmade balance positioned somewhere between both preservation and progress. One example of that intention is truly a regional treasure and a natural monument to both the region's past as well as its future, the 500,000 acre Pisgah National Forest.



While the Tongass National Forest in Alaska is the largest and Yellowstone is recognized as the oldest, the Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina is likely the most significant – for it is here that the modern art of forest management in the United States traces its origins. In the last half of the 19th century, George Vanderbilt was building his magnificent home, Biltmore, just outside of Asheville. His dream included being able to comment, as he gazed west from his estate’s sweeping balconies, “I own everything the human eye can see.” Thus he began purchasing huge expanses of mountainous forestland. One tract contained Mt. Pisgah, a dominant peak visible from miles away.

Vanderbilt hired one of the nation’s first professional foresters, Gifford Pinchot, to manage the more than 100,000 acres on his estate. It was here that the young Pinchot honed his skills, developing methods to maximize sustainable timber production while simultaneously protecting the natural waterways and other abundant natural resources. So successful was Pinchot in the Pisgah Forest that he was recruited by the federal government to coax to life Teddy Roosevelt’s vision of a national forest service managing vast tracts of wilderness throughout the country. Eventually, Pinchot became regarded as the “father” of modern forestry for the practices he first initiated in the mountains of western North Carolina – effective, structured management of natural resources combined with conservation (an idea he popularized). When Pinchot left the mountains of North Carolina for Washington, D.C., Dr. Carl Schenck replaced him as chief forester at Vanderbilt’s Biltmore Estate. It was there where, in 1898, Schenck founded the first forestry school in the United States, The Biltmore School of Forestry. Not long after that, in 1905, the U.S. Forest Service was established, and Gifford Pinchot was named its first director. Without question, the momentum and enthusiasm to both manage and preserve natural wildernesses was growing.

Several years after the founding of the Forest Service, the United States Congress passed the Weeks Act. The 1911 legislation appropriated 9 million dollars to purchase 6 million acres of land in the eastern U.S. and gave the federal government the authority required to designate specific areas “National Forests.” The Act’s primary goal was the rescue of rapidly disappearing watersheds. Unregulated exploitation of the land had eroded the terrain and depleted the natural protective canopy of forested areas. Navigation, wildlife, plant life, and water quality had suffered as a result. Almost immediately, an acquisition was made in McDowell County, NC – which eventually became recognized as the first purchase reserved for what would become the Pisgah National Forest. Another notable tract was carved out of the Biltmore Estate, 87,000 acres sold to the Forest Service following the death of George Vanderbilt. It was this vast acreage that contained Mt. Pisgah, the obvious source of the forest’s name.





Officially organized in 1916, the Pisgah National Forest grew to include woodlands in 12 western North Carolina counties and can lay claim to the fact that it was the first National Forest designated in the eastern United States.

Pisgah is one of four National Forests in North Carolina. With many elevations reaching over 6,000 feet, it includes some of the highest mountains in the eastern United States. Pisgah National Forest is divided into four Ranger Districts. The Appalachian/French Broad Ranger District straddles the North Carolina / Tennessee border, adjacent to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The Grandfather Ranger District lies southeast of the Blue Ridge Parkway from Asheville to Blowing Rock and contains the popular Linville Gorge. The Appalachian/Toecane Ranger District lies northwest of the Blue Ridge Parkway from Asheville to Blowing Rock and boasts the important wildflower habitats at Craggy Gardens and Roan Mountain. The Pisgah Ranger District is dominated by Mt. Pisgah and is noted for Looking Glass Rock and Devil's Courthouse as well as dozens of beautiful and accessible waterfalls. It is located roughly between the towns of Asheville, Brevard, and Waynesville. This district also contains the Cradle of Forestry. A National Historic Site, the Cradle of Forestry is located on the grounds of the old Biltmore School of Forestry. Its 6,500 acres commemorate the beginning of forestry conservation in the United States. Here, visitors interact with local craft workers that are recreating the skills that would have been required for survival at the turn of the 20th century.

In Pisgah, a variety of recreational opportunities are available for just about any person of any age. Containing over a thousand miles of trails and wilderness areas, Pisgah National Forest is a year-round hiking destination. 138 miles of the Appalachian Trail weave through the Forest. Other activities include fishing, rock climbing, camping, mountain biking, hunting, skiing, leaf-watching, and whitewater sports. In addition, the region is the epicenter of the generations-old Appalachian folk arts and crafts tradition. All of this is complemented by some of the most dramatic scenery in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Without a doubt, whether one is seeking deep gorges, sweeping vistas, or lush forests, the Pisgah National Forest is a fulfilling destination. This gem within our mountain heritage is truly a monument to both nature's timeless splendor and mankind's role in its preservation.

Interesting lore: Mt. Pisgah is named for the biblical Mount Pisgah, from which Moses saw the Promised Land after wandering through the wilderness for 40 years. Legend credits the naming to Rev. James Hall, a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian minister who was part of Rutherford's 1776 expedition into the Cherokee Nation. Hall was



impressed by the natural beauty and bounty visible from the mountain and drew upon his knowledge of the Bible to name the peak.



(print 1 copy, give to Group 2)

## Biltmore Estate: The Birth of US Forestry

November 4, 2011

*By Hannah Ettema*

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*The largest home in America is also home to the early beginnings of American Forestry.*

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Today, the general public is welcomed into National Forests across the U.S. – our shared public estate. However, this wasn't always the case. Large tracts of forest land were once the moniker of the rich and famous, serving as private, exclusive playgrounds. But, it turns out that these private estates were also an important



component of early American forestry. And, in the case of the Vanderbilt family's Biltmore Estate, a portion of their private grounds is now incorporated into the Pisgah National Forest, free and open to the public once more.

The U.S. government has acquired the land for National Forests from a variety of

sources. What was once part of the massive Biltmore Estate grounds is now the Pisgah National Forest. Without the early management and leadership of the Vanderbilt family, American forestry would not have had its early beginnings.





George Vanderbilt decided to make Western North Carolina his home as a place where he could pursue his passions away from the city. Near Asheville, the [Biltmore Estate](#) was built over the course of six years from 1889-1895. For the construction of the mansion, the estate had its own brick factory, woodworking shop and a three-mile railway spur for transporting materials to the site.

Once completed, the mansion had four acres of floor space, 250 rooms, 34 bedrooms, 43 bathrooms and 65 fireplaces. The basement had a swimming pool, gymnasium with changing rooms, bowling alley, servants' quarters, kitchens and more. In addition to the lavish house, the estate included 125,000 acres of grounds designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, the creator of New York's Central Park and the father of American landscape architecture.

The grounds that Olmsted designed included a small pleasure ground and garden, a major arboretum and nursery and a systematically managed forest. He hoped that creating a managed forest would serve as an example for the rest of the country. The land purchased for Biltmore had previously been cleared for farming and timber. Olmsted prepared instructions and trained foremen to improve the existing woodland by removing poorly formed and damaged trees and reforesting eroded and worn out farmland. By 1881 he had planted 300 acres with white pine. As Olmsted executed his forestry improvements, he documented his work in one of the earliest known forest management plans, "Project of Operations for Improving the Forest of Biltmore."

In 1892 Olmsted hired a trained forester by the name of Gifford Pinchot, who would eventually go on to become the first Chief of the U.S. Forest Service. Pinchot implemented a management plan that improved the forest while returning a profit to the landowner, the first of its kind in America and served as a national model. After Pinchot left the estate for Washington D.C. to head the Division of Forestry, German forester Dr. Carl A. Schenck took charge of the forest, which in 1895 totaled more than 100,000 acres.



Shortly after Schenck arrived, he established the Biltmore Forest School—the first of its kind. During its fifteen years of existence, the school educated more than 300 students who would go on to becoming the first generation of American foresters.

In 1914, Edith Vanderbilt sold approximately 86,700 acres of the estate’s forested mountain land, known as Pisgah Forest, to the federal government, creating the Pisgah National Forest. Today the remaining forest at the Biltmore estate continues to be managed with the guiding principles set by Olmsted, Pinchot and Schenck.

In 1968, 6,500 acres of Pisgah were designated as [The Cradle of Forestry](#) in America. Visitors can visit this historic site within the [Pisgah National Forest](#) and learn more about these early pioneers of American forestry. Two trails at the Forest Discovery Center lead visitors back in time to seven historical buildings, a 1915 Climax logging locomotive and an antique portable sawmill.

