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FOREVER *Wild* FOR ALL

A Harlem thespian helped
save the Adirondack forest.

BY BRAD EDMONDSON

*View of the Flowed Lands
and the MacIntyre Mountains
in the Adirondacks*

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Fredrick O'Neal spent most of his time in the theater world, co-founding the American Negro Theatre in Harlem, which launched the careers of Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, and Ruby Dee. His own career included four decades of steady gigs on Broadway, in film, and on television as a character actor. He called Harlem home and rarely, if ever, ventured upstate.

So how did this thespian end up being one of the pivotal leaders in saving the Adirondack Park?

"Fred had never been north of Glens Falls in his life," according to George Davis, a staff member of the state commission which included O'Neal. "He did not have the foggiest idea of what the Adirondacks even looked like at the beginning of things, but he believed very much in the job."

"He was a quick study and a shrewd judge of people," added fellow commissioner Peter Paine. "He knew how to hold an audience. He had a presence."

In September 1968, in response to developers' plans to subdivide private lands within the park, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller organized the Temporary Study Commission on the Future of the Adirondacks (TSC). He hired its staff and ordered eleven men to review data on the park and recommend a long-term plan.

Rockefeller, a Republican, needed the votes of New York City Democrats, so he used two of the commission seats to reach out to Black New Yorkers, who claimed a fifth of the state's population in 1970. Almost all of them lived in cities, according to the US Census, and many were strongly pro-environment.

The Governor appointed two Black men to the TSC. One of them was a no-show; the other was O'Neal, an actor with no experience in natural sciences or land use planning. O'Neal was also a trade union leader newly appointed to the executive council of the AFL-CIO, important in a state where a third of workers were unionized.

O'Neal plunged into the TSC's demanding schedule of meetings and field trips. Davis remembers him showing up for a hike in the Hudson Gorge wearing a suit and Oxford dress shoes. The Harlem thespian read drafts of technical reports that exceeded 800 pages, including analyses of forests, wildlife, land ownership, transportation, and economic activity. Within a few months, O'Neal was an expert on the Adirondacks. "He never missed a field trip," Davis says. "He always went."

As an urban Black commissioner of the TSC, O'Neal brought a different perspective on the Adirondack Park to the commission in 1968, but the groundwork had been laid by another Black activist, Dollie Robinson.

Fred O'Neal co-founded the American Negro Theatre in Harlem.





DOLLIE LOWTHER ROBINSON was appointed Secretary of the New York State Department of Labor in 1955. In this position Mrs. Robinson shares actively in administration of social legislation which, as a rank and file member of the organized laundry workers, she helped to bring to reality. A Brooklyn College graduate, she also holds an LL.B. degree from New York Law School.

Rarest Beauties

Robinson lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and as far as we know, never went camping.

Robinson organized for a number of labor unions in her early adulthood and completed her law degree at NYU. Later, she was appointed to several government positions, including assistant to the director of the Women's Division of the Department of Labor during the Kennedy Administration. She

was an important player in the campaign to pass the Equal Pay Act of 1963.

The campaign that culminated in the Adirondack Park Agency began when the New York State constitutional convention opened on April 4, 1967. And it got a big boost when Robinson, a delegate to the convention from Brooklyn, befriended another Brooklyn lawyer, David Sive, widely considered the founder of environmental law.

One section of New York's state constitution adopted in 1894 puts severe restrictions on the use of state-owned land within the Adirondack and Catskill parks. That amendment, Article 14, includes the "forever wild" clause.

A convention bypasses the rule that makes changing the state constitution a difficult, multiyear process. Convention delegates can propose changes to the state constitution and if those proposals pass in September, they go directly to voters in November. In 1967, Sive and his allies focused on stopping an amendment proposed by delegate and retired

judge Charles Froessel that sought to clear up the legal status of state campgrounds in the forest preserve, which had amenities like electric lights and flush toilets that clearly violated the forever wild clause of the New York State Constitution. This clause guarantees that "the lands of the state, now owned or hereafter acquired, constituting the forest preserve as now fixed by law, shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be leased, sold or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, nor shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed." Environmentalists worried that Froessel's amendment might allow additional construction in the forest preserve. Robinson took the floor on July 31 to speak against it:

"I speak for myself and some who have not yet heard a loon, or seen the morning mist rise from Spruce Lake, or intimately known the forest that has escaped from highways, smog and overpowering noise. Perhaps some of us in many corners of this state and of many different heritages are still overwhelmed by the struggle to leave some rural or urban ghetto, and we have not yet had the time to feel as personally and as deeply as those of you who have picked the blueberries atop Mount Colden, which has so enriched your lives.

"For those people who because of accidents of history have not yet achieved the measure of security which they perhaps need before they can know the rarest beauties of the

The forever wild clause puts restrictions on the use of land within the Adirondack Park.



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Fishing in the Adirondacks

Forest Preserve, for them especially and their children, I urge you to protect it..."

Robinson's speech was greeted with applause so loud that it is noted in the official transcript. She had rebutted the charge that the forever wild clause benefitted only the wealthy. She had linked the preservation of wilderness to the interests of low-income and Black voters, and she had done it with eloquence. Voters defeated the amendment in November.

Commissioner O'Neal

The TSC convened by Rockefeller to address development plans in the park began work in September of 1968 and by late 1969, after an intense year of research, the commission had developed two factions. Several commissioners wanted to get

rid of the forever wild clause and develop the Adirondacks in the style of a national park, with causeways, beaches, and hotels. They argued that this vision would serve the greatest number of New Yorkers, who preferred to drive to their fun. This was the plan favored by the governor's younger brother, Laurance, an important advisor and supporter of the National Parks system.

Fred O'Neal preferred a riskier, bolder vision. He agreed with Paine, Richard Lawrence, and other commissioners who wanted to strengthen the state's commitment to the forever wild clause. They based their arguments on "sustainability," a relatively new concept being developed by natural resource scientists. They favored a plan that would analyze natural characteristics in every acre of the park, rate each acre according

to its "carrying capacity," and write a land use plan. The plan would allow controlled development while maintaining or even enhancing the natural integrity.

A project like this had never been attempted before on such a large scale, and the commissioners knew immediately that regional zoning restrictions would be extremely unpopular in the North Country. But O'Neal loved the idea, and so did a majority of commissioners. And O'Neal had the other commissioners' respect, according to Paine. He did not speak often at TSC meetings, but when he talked, the commissioners listened.

"Fred was the key person in many ways," George Davis says. "The arguments would be going around and around. Everyone had their feet set and their heels dug in. Then Fred would sit back very calmly and

"The lands of the state, now owned or hereafter acquired, constituting the forest preserve as now fixed by law, shall be forever kept as wild forest lands."

When legislation establishing the Adirondack Park Agency was introduced a few months later, O'Neal gave the bill an important assist by drafting an endorsement letter signed by the state AFL-CIO president.

*Split Rock Falls along
the Ausable River*

ask to be recognized. He would only do this once or twice in every commission meeting. And when he spoke, everyone listened, because he was unbiased—all he knew was what he had just seen and heard and read. So he had a tremendous amount of clout. What he said very often coalesced the positions of the other commissioners.”

Stiffened Spines

The conflict came to a head when the proponents of forever wild replaced the original chairman of the TSC with their most powerful ally, Harold Hochschild. At their next meeting, Commissioner Henry Diamond, an assistant to Laurance Rockefeller, said that the commission had exceeded its authority. He urged the group to quickly issue a scaled-down report and close up shop, and everyone knew he was speaking for the governor’s brother.

“I remember the scene as if it were yesterday,” said Harold Jerry, the TSC’s staff director. “The room had been darkened for a slide show, so our faces were not visible to each other. Fred had this great big deep voice. He said, ‘I was not put on this commission to pull Nelson Rockefeller’s coals out of the fire.’ Then there was dead silence. No one said a word.” O’Neal had stiffened their spines, and the argument did not come up again.

The TSC released a report with 181 ranked recommendations. Number one was for a state agency that would have “general power over the use of public and private land in the park.” When legislation estab-



lishing the Adirondack Park Agency was introduced a few months later, O’Neal gave the bill an important assist by drafting an endorsement letter signed by the state AFL-CIO president.

“You came knowing nothing about the Adirondacks but you were quick to learn and see where the real issues lay,” wrote Hochschild in a thank you letter to O’Neal. “You deserve a substantial share of the credit for the outcome.”

Environmentalists lobbied Rockefeller to put O’Neal on the APA’s founding board, but he was passed over in favor of another labor leader to whom the governor owed a favor. O’Neal remained active in labor and civil rights organizations for another eighteen years, but none were in the Adirondacks.

Fred O’Neal, following in Dollie Robinson’s footsteps, played a key role in the long campaign to “save” the park in

the 1960s and ’70s, making the case that the park belonged to everyone. Their stories illuminate how politicians and activists used each other to advance their agendas during an era when a symbolic nod to diversity was considered good enough. But Robinson and O’Neal were anything but tokens. They had a significant impact on the nature of the Adirondack Park.

Racial Disparity

Today, as the APA celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, the park is having a racial reckoning. The six-million-acre Adirondack Park is overwhelmingly white, with more than 90 percent of its 130,000 full-time residents describing their racial and ethnic background as “white, not Hispanic,” according to the Census Bureau. In 2019, 92 to 96 percent of tourists surveyed in three Adirondack counties were white. At the same time,

Hikers on the trail following the Opaescent River to Mount Marcy

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the non-Hispanic white population of New York State declined from 11.8 million in 2000 to 10.6 million in 2020, while the number of nonwhite and Hispanic New Yorkers increased from 6.5 million to 9.6 million. Because tourism is the park's largest source of jobs, North Country businesses now face a stark choice: embrace diversity or accept decline.

In the years since Dollie Robinson made her speech, civil rights, and environmental justice movements have emerged, while the economic and leisure opportunities available to minority communities in New York have increased. "Dollie's vision has been partially realized," said Aaron Mair. "Middle-class Black, Hispanic, and Asian New Yorkers are enjoying the Adirondacks."

Mair is part of a growing

movement to encourage diversity among wilderness users. He rose to become president of the Sierra Club in 2015, and was the first African American to hold that post. Mair joined the Adirondack Council in 2021 to direct the Forever Adirondacks Campaign, a long-term effort to protect clean water, create new jobs, and preserve wilderness in the park.

Mair is encouraged by new recreational groups such as Outdoor Afro, the Adirondack Diversity Initiative, and Girls Inc. "These groups, along with the inclusive hiring practices of legacy organizations like the Adirondack Council, have elevated the conversation," he says. "But our goal is the same as Dollie's was. We want all New Yorkers to be able to enjoy this unique wilderness experiment." ■

Don't miss our FREE Online Speaker Series

with Aaron Mair entitled "New York State as a Leader in Environmental Protection" on April 5 at 12:30 p.m. For more information or to register, see www.nysarchivestrust.org/events

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

Quotes from Davis, Paine, Sive, and Jerry are drawn from oral history interviews conducted by the author for the book *A Wild Idea: How the Environmental Movement Tamed the Adirondacks* (Cornell University Press, 2021). The book tells the story of the Temporary Study Commission and how its research informed the Adirondack Park Agency Act of 1971 and park land use plans adopted in 1972 and 1973. Transcripts are held at Adirondack Experience, The Museum on Blue Mountain Lake. Other sources include the *Frederick O'Neal Papers* at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; an oral history interview with Robinson conducted by July 1976 by Bette Craig for the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, University of Michigan-Wayne State; and *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of New York, 1967*, pp. 544-546. For a video on Frederick O'Neal produced by the Harlem Cultural Archives, see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFLhRZp0DPw

For more on the Adirondacks, see:

- "Hiking Partners, Mountain Stewards" by Suzanne Lance, Winter 2012
- "Brookside: An Integrated Adirondack Cemetery" by Sally E. Svenson, Winter 2018
- "Murray's Rush" by Terence Young, Summer 2018
- "View from Hurricane Mountain" by Peter Slocum, Summer 2019

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