



Arthur Hill, the Saginaw Forest, and a Critical Examination of UM's Historical Foundations

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Overview

- Although Arthur Hill (1901-1908 UM Regent) is widely recognized as the benefactor behind Hill Auditorium, his legacy is also rooted in dehumanization and displacement
- Hill's donation of the Saginaw Forest, an 80-acre environmental classroom operated by SEAS researchers in West Ann Arbor, exemplifies this complicated history

A MOST GENEROUS GIFT
REGENT ARTHUR HILL MAKES THE UNIVERSITY A PRACTICAL PRESENT OF 80 ACRES TO BE KNOWN AS "THE SAGINAW FORESTRY FARM"

Excerpt from the Ann Arbor Daily Times celebrating Hill's donation of the Saginaw Forest
("A Most Generous Gift," Ann Arbor Daily Times, December 28, 1903.)

Research Questions

- To what extent did treaties enable lumber barons like Arthur Hill to acquire Indigenous lands, contribute to industrial deforestation, and subsequently financially and physically contribute to the University of Michigan?
- How did rapid deforestation of Michigan in the late 19th century necessitate the creation of the University of Michigan's School for Environment and Sustainability?
- To what extent should the University of Michigan publicly acknowledge its history of environmental exploitation and its connection to treaties?

Argument

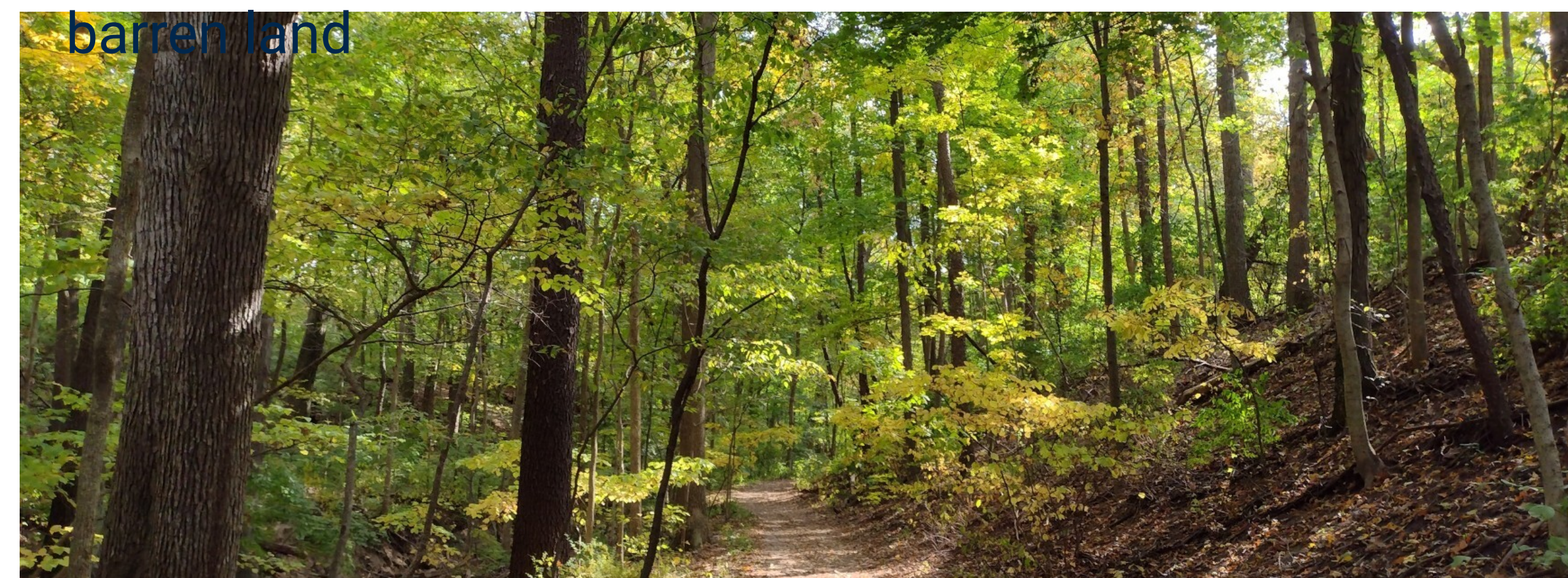
While the invaluable contributions of former Regent Arthur Hill helped create the physical and intellectual foundations of UM, it is important to critically examine the extractive practices that made such philanthropy possible. Taking a closer look at both Hill's fortune and Indigenous communities' displacement, we can understand how exploitative land treaties and subsequent large-scale deforestation enabled him to build his wealth.

Hill's Life & Philanthropy

- Arthur Hill, a wealthy lumber industrialist, business leader, and politician whose success in the lumber industry made him one of the most influential figures in Michigan
- Hill was known for his generosity, donating \$200k to the construction of Hill Auditorium and \$500k (\$16 million today) of "public bequests," to education, health, and environmentalist efforts

A History of Saginaw Forest

- 2026: the Saginaw Forest is an 80-acre parcel of land of plantations, Third Sister Lake, and surrounding wetlands frequented by UM students and researchers
- 1903: Arthur Hill donates the Saginaw Forest so UM Forestry Department (now SEAS) students can gain hands-on learning experience through restoring and repurposing



Photograph of the Saginaw Forest (University of Michigan)

- 1807: The Treaty of Detroit cedes this area and most of southeastern Michigan to the United States, displacing the Anishinaabeg people. What is now Washtenaw County is the traditional territory of the Potawatomi people



Photograph of Michigan's barren landscape following mass deforestation in the early 20th century (National Forests in Michigan)

Before the Saginaw Forest

- While Saginaw Forest is not in Saginaw, Michigan, passages from "A History of Saginaw County, Michigan" reveal the dehumanizing narratives that justified the displacement of indigenous communities through exploitative treaties
- The rhetoric depressed land values, allowing lumber barons to profit from the displacement for extremely low prices

upon himself for retaliation. Blood for blood was the rule, and the relatives of the slain man were bound to obtain bloody revenge for his death. This principle gave rise, as a matter of course, to innumerable and bitter feuds, and wars of extermination where such were possible. War, indeed, rather than peace, was the Indian's glory and delight,—war, not conducted as in civilization, but war where individual skill, endurance, gallantry and cruelty were prime requisites. For such a purpose as revenge the Indian would make

Excerpt from "A History of Saginaw County, Michigan" dehumanizing Native Americans as violent, bloodthirsty individuals. (Michael A. Leeson, History of Saginaw County, Michigan, 1881)

Conclusion

- While Hill's donations were incredibly generous, it is important to note the unfavorable conditions that enabled him to make such a donation
- While this information does not detract from Hill's generosity, it is pertinent to critically examine the conditions that contributed to his rise to prominence
- To critically engage with its history and legacy surrounding land dispossession and indigenous displacement, the University of Michigan should take steps toward acknowledgment, accountability, and restorative action

References

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