Between 1923 and 1929, annual unemployment was at approximately 3.3 percent (VanGiezen and Schwenk). But by 1933, this figure skyrocketed, reaching about 25 percent (ibid.). This was the Great Depression. Faced with such high rates of unemployment, particularly among young men, Franklin Roosevelt had to address the daunting problem of finding a new source of work for the youth of the United States. As part of his attempt to solve this problem, Roosevelt founded the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which was ultimately responsible for the construction of Recreational Demonstration Areas (RDAs), of which Prince William Forest Park is an exemplar. By examining the history, motives, and effects of the establishment of both the CCC and the RDA program, it will be demonstrated that the principal historic factor behind the construction of Prince William Forest Park is arguably the Great Depression, since it served as the impetus for both founding the CCC and establishing the RDA program.

To fully appreciate the magnitude and extent of the project that was undertaken at the region now known as Prince William Forest Park, it will be worthwhile to explore some of the recent history of the region prior the parks construction. In the 1880’s, John Detrick discovered pyrite in Quantico Creek and, in 1889, established the Cabin Branch Pyrite mine (Cohen et al. 32). Mining pyrite was considerably lucrative during this period because of a combination of industrial development that occurred subsequent to the Civil War and a number of patents that had been established during the middle of the nineteenth century (“Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine”, Web). Sulfur, which can be found in pyrite, was used in things ranging from soap, rubber and gunpowder, to sugar and medicine (ibid.). The mineworkers worked six days a week, from anywhere between ten to twelve hours a day, earning only somewhere around $3.50 to $4.50 on a daily basis (ibid.). Moreover, it was not uncommon for mineworkers to be paid in scrip, which was redeemable only at company’s store which frequently sold goods at inflated prices (Cohen et al. 33).

Many of Cabin Branch’s workers came from the nearby towns of Hickory Ridge and Batestown, which collectively constituted the Cabin Branch Community (“Hickory Ridge and Batestown: Local Life Before the Park”). Residents of both towns were, to a large extent, self-sufficient (ibid.). They farmed, hunted, made their own clothing, and sold extra goods from farming at local markets (ibid). Hickory Ridge was founded after the Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine, and, unusual for the time, was home to both whites as well as African Americans (ibid.). Batestown, on the other hand, was settled subsequent to the Civil War by emancipated slaves and free African Americans (ibid.). In addition to farming, men harvested timber, and women who sought jobs outside of the town typically worked as domestic servants or teachers (ibid.).

The Cabin Branch Pyrite Mine finally closed in 1920 after a drastic decline in the price of pyrite and a strike for an increase in pay by 50 cents by mineworkers (“Cabin Camp Pyrite Mine”). By 1933, the Great Depression had peaked, and the Roosevelt administration needed to find a way to decrease unemployment, impart employable skills to the generally unskilled generation of young men between 18 and 25, and preserve natural resources. With these purposes in mind, Roosevelt founded the CCC (“The CCC and Prince William Forest Park”).

The RDA program, on the other hand, was developed my Conrad Wirth (Cohen 34), and was instituted in order to provide sites for underprivileged, impoverished children living in inner cities to partake in outdoor recreational activities (“The CCC and Prince William Forest Park”). Prince William Forest Park--originally known as the Chopawamsic Recreational Demonstration Area—served as somewhat of a prototype for the RDA program. The park served as a model to be emulated by states and local governments in their own attempts at developing RDAs (ibid.).

The CCC served as the source of labor behind the construction of the Chopawamsic RDA (Cohen 34). They built several cabin camps, lakes, trails, and dams (Cohen 37). The construction of Prince William Forest Park, then, provided a major source of work for a sizable number of young men. Moreover, the final product provided a refuge for disadvantaged children from D.C. The cabin camps were rented by educational organizations during the summer for a fee of $600 (Cohen 40). These organizations offered a number of educational opportunities, such as swimming and woodworking (Cohen 41). The camps also offered services that were relatively unavailable to inner city children, and combated the undernourishment and lack of medical care these children suffered due to the Great Depression (ibid.). Each camp, for example, was furnished with a nurse, and children were provided with three meals a day, something they were unlikely to get in the city (ibid.).

Thus, both the RDA program and the CCC were created with the intent of solving problems raised by the Great Depression. The RDA program was created in order to enable impoverished children affected by the Great Depression to experience the outdoors, learn new skills they would not have the opportunity to learn in the inner city, and gain access to food and medical aid they would not have otherwise been able to access. Moreover, the CCC was invented in order to provide jobs and educational opportunities to young men who could not otherwise find work due to the Great Depression. Consequently, a principal historical factor behind the construction of Prince William Forest Park is the Great Depression, since the institutions to which the park owes its existence—namely, the RDA program and the CCC—were ultimately undergirded and motivated by it.

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