

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Clerk of Superior Court
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Ralph Elwood Brock

(February 15, 1881 – December 9, 1959)

“First Black Forester in the United States”



Ralph Elwood Brock was born in February 1881, near Pottsville, Pennsylvania. His father was a Civil War Veteran, a school-teacher, and a minister and his mother was a homemaker. Ralph graduated from Howard High School in Wilmington, Delaware, the class of 1900. His father died one year later in 1901 at the age of 57.

That same year, Ralph's high school principal, Professor Addison Jones, wrote Pennsylvania's first commissioner of forestry, Dr. Joseph T. Rothrock, inquiring about placement for Ralph in the newly forming State Forrest Academy.

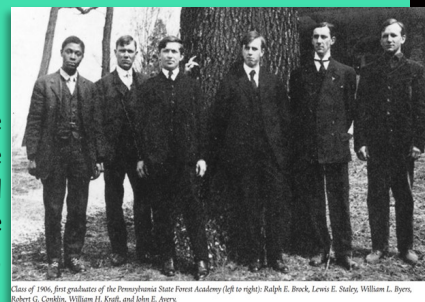
In April 1902 Ralph accompanied George H. Wirt, Pennsylvania's first state forester, to Mont Alto, PA (now Michaux State Forest) to establish the Commonwealth's first forest nursery. The Pennsylvania Department of Forestry had recently purchased a tract of 22,000 acres of forestland, and needed foresters to manage and care for the land.



In May 1903 the State Forest Academy was established by act of legislature and approved by Governor Samuel W. Pennypacker. The first class at the Mont Alto State Forest Academy began with 13 members in September 1903 - ten new students and the three student assistants, including Ralph. The academy trained foresters who would ultimately care for the lands that the state purchased for forestry purposes. Students learned to preserve natural resources and maintain a tranquil environment of flora and fauna in wooded areas. Only three forestry schools existed at that time in the United States; forestry graduates were scarce and most were headed to federal service or were not practical enough for Dr. Rothrock's liking.



In 1906, Ralph was one of only six graduates of the first class of foresters at Pennsylvania State Forestry Academy, and the only black student. Ralph was immediately hired as a supervisor by the academy after graduation. Not only did Brock manage students in the academy, but his technical reports and other writings were also collected by the Department of Forestry. Ralph abruptly left the academy in 1911, after years of racism and disrespect from incoming white students, who refused to accept his expertise, experience and seniority. Ralph began a new career as a forester in Philadelphia and Chester County, where he worked in private gardens and orchards in country estates.

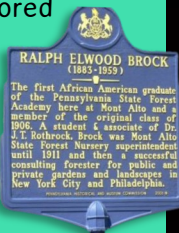


In the early 1920s, Ralph and his wife Pauline moved to Cleveland, Ohio where he worked in the nursery business. From 1928 to 1937, they moved to New York and became the private gardener of the Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartment complex in New York City's Harlem, the Harlem River Houses. Ralph also worked at the city's Riverside Park and Radio City Gardens in Rockefeller Center.



Ralph retired in 1957 and two years later, Ralph Elwood Brock died on December 9, 1959. He was 78 years old. He was buried in his home town of West Chester, PA.

In February 2000, the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources honored Ralph Brock by renaming a seed-production orchard after him. The South Mountain Seed Orchard in Franklin County, was renamed the Ralph E. Brock Seed Orchard. In April 2003, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission's Division of History approved an historical marker to introduce Ralph Elwood Brock and his historical significance to the general public. The roadside marker is placed near the entrance to the Penn State Mont Alto campus, along Route 233. George Wirt was also recognized with a historical marker nearby.



Ralph Brock at the Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments, New York City, 1931.