

Florissant Fossils Beds

History of the Florissant Fossil Beds

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Florissant Fossil Beds
National Monument



The modern history behind Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument spans a century and a half. This history has involved many influential players – tribes, homesteaders, ranchers, scientists, developers, activists, politicians, and lawyers – who have helped settle, study, and preserve this place.

History of Scientific Discovery

Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument was established to research, preserve, and interpret the excellently preserved insect and plant fossils and geologic sites at the Florissant lakebeds. Our knowledge about the importance of Florissant's fossils follows from decades of scientific research. Beginning in the 1870s, Samuel Scudder described more than 600 species of fossil insects while Leo Lesquereux studied the first fossil plants and E.D. Cope described the fossil fish. In the early 1900s, T.D.A. Cockerell excavated and described additional species of fossil insects, plants, and mollusks. Harry MacGinitie made important excavations and revised the fossil plants beginning in the 1930s. In the decades that followed, other scientists have expanded our knowledge about fossil pollen, mammals, paleoclimate and paleoelevation. Scientific research is still a leading objective at Florissant, and the monument's paleontology and interpretive divisions work to make this knowledge accessible to promote public understanding for people ranging from school kids to professional scientists.

History of Land Use

Prior to settlement of the West, Native Americans hunted and gathered food in the Florissant valley for thousands of years. Homesteaders filed claims with the government to settle and eventually own public land in the 1870s. One of the homesteaders, Charlotte Hill (right), helped collect fossils from her land for scientists.

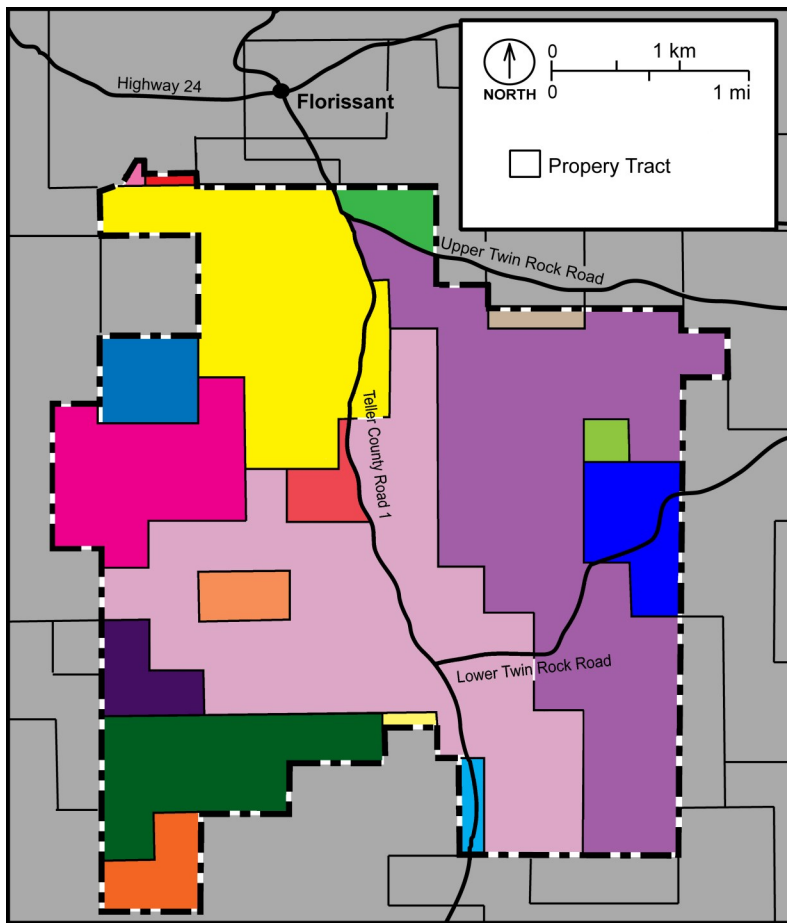


Two of the properties within Florissant's petrified forest have transferred ownership several times. The area of the Hill's homestead, including the Big Stump, first sold to members of the Colorado Museum Association, which included Charlotte's brother John Coplen. They attempted to cut the Big Stump into pieces to send it east for the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. Coplen later assumed full ownership in the early 1920s and developed the Coplen Petrified Forest as a tourist attraction. Later it was sold to the Singer family in 1927, operating as the Colorado Petrified Forest for more than 40 years.

The area near the petrified Redwood Trio has a similar history. In the early 1920s, the Henderson family discovered and excavated more stumps and developed the Henderson Petrified Forest. This was later purchased by John Baker, who changed the name to the Pike Petrified Forest.

In the 1960s, some land owners sold to developers who wanted to subdivide and sell the property. Other land owners, such as the Singer family, were concerned about the theft of petrified wood and wanted to sell their property to the federal government for protection. These events led to a fiery court battle in 1969 that culminated in the establishment of the national monument.





Above: The 18 parcels of land that were bought to make the national monument.

Establishment of Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument

The National Park Service developed the first proposal for a national monument in 1962, and Congress drafted the first bills beginning in 1964. As interest in Congress increased through 1969, real estate developers rushed in to buy the proposed park property in hopes of turning a quick profit. Dr. Estella Leopold, daughter of the pioneering conservationist Aldo Leopold, caught wind of the brewing battle with developers. She had studied Florissant's fossil pollen and recognized that the priceless natural resource had to be safeguarded. As the situation came to a head in 1969, she was joined by Dr. Betty Willard and other concerned citizens. They established the Defenders of Florissant to rally against the developers, and hired lawyers Victor Yannacone of New York and Richard Lamm of Colorado.

In July of 1969, the Defenders of Florissant and their legal team went to court against the land developers, who had already hired bulldozers to begin development. As time was running short, environmental activist Vim Wright took a group of women to Florissant, ready to sit in front of the bulldozers. That same day, Yannacone succeeded in convincing the court to place a temporary restraining order to halt construction, which allowed Congress more time to act. In the days that followed, both the House and Senate passed bills to create the national monument. On August 20, 1969 the bill was signed by President Nixon. Yannacone's successful arguments to the court for protection of the Florissant fossil beds established one of the first landmark environmental cases in the United States, and he is considered one of the founders of environmental law.

The land was purchased from 18 private owners over the following five years to create the monument. The small museum on Baker's former property was operated as a visitor center for many years until funding finally became available for a new visitor and research center, which opened in 2013. The new facility provides storage for fossil collections and exhibits for the public.



From left to right: Dr. Estella Leopold, Dr. Betty Willard and Vim Wright during the 25th anniversary of the monument in 1994.



Left: The old Baker museum turned into a NPS visitor center that lasted until 2013.