

# Arbor Day

## History

Arbor Day, the tree planters' holiday, has its roots in Nebraska. The story began in 1855 when the 23-year-old J. Sterling Morton and his bride Caroline moved to a 160-acre claim near Nebraska City, in southeastern Nebraska.

The Mortons, like many settlers before and after them, missed the forests and lush vegetation of the east. Before long, the Mortons began planting; trees, shrubs and even an apple orchard graced their claim by 1858.

Morton realized that the plains, though treeless, had a climate and soil favorable to tree growth. The settlers in the new territory were sorely in need of trees for building homes, fences and farm buildings. They needed trees for fuel and for windbreaks. In his newspaper, Morton often wrote about the trees best suited to the plains, encouraging the pioneers to plant trees on their homesteads.

In 1872 Morton, who was then a member of the Nebraska State Board of Agriculture, proposed that a day be set aside annually for tree planting.

Part of Morton's resolution stated that \$100 would be awarded to the county which properly planted the largest number of trees, and a farm library with \$25 would be awarded to the individual who did the same.

The first statewide Arbor Day in 1872 was a huge success -- over one million trees were planted in a single day.

Shortly after this first observance, other states passed legislation to observe Arbor Day each year. Kansas and Tennessee passed resolution in 1875 (Arkansas passed a resolution in 1873). In 1885, the Nebraska Legislature made Morton's birthday, April 22, the official Arbor Day date in Nebraska.

Morton had a chance to see his holiday become successful in many states. In 1882, the first American Forestry Congress sponsored a tree planting ceremony before 50,000 people in Cincinnati.

By 1920, more than 45 states and territorial possessions were celebrating Arbor Day. Although several U.S. Presidents have proclaimed National Arbor Day in April (most recently President Nixon, in 1972, the 100th anniversary of Arbor Day), many states **continue** to celebrate the holiday at different times. Differing climates in such a large country makes planting time vary from January and February in the South to May and June in the most northerly states. States often observe Arbor Day on the last Friday of April with programs emphasizing the ideals of trees; while doing the actual planting on the state Arbor Day.

Morton died in 1902 and a memorial to him at his home, Arbor Lodge, was dedicated by President Grover Cleveland in 1905. One of Morton's own phrases adorns the marker, "Other holidays repose upon the past - Arbor Day proposes for the future."