Philip C. Wakeley was a Reforestation Pioneer

The period from 1900 to 1920 marked the “golden” era of lumbering in Louisiana; an era when native forests were harvested with a “cut-out and get-out” attitude. Large and small sawmills harvested these forests with no thought of reforestation. Many of these companies abandoned their cutover lands, and ownership of them reverted to the State when taxes were not paid. However, a few individuals began to see the economic potential of reforesting the cutover land, and it was Henry Hardtner of the Urania Lumber Company led this effort.

Hardtner’s efforts at Urania focused on leaving a few trees per acre for natural regeneration. His efforts caught the attention of the Great Southern Lumber Company at Bogalusa. The Great Southern Lumber Company was one of the largest mills in the South, running four eight-foot band saws that could produce one million board feet of lumber every 24 hours and did so for more than two decades. Great Southern hired J.K. Johnson, thought to be the first industrial forester, to begin efforts to reforest some of their cutover land by seeding and planting techniques.

The U.S. Forest Service established the Southern Forest Experiment Station in 1921. Its headquarters was New Orleans. Reforestation was recognized as one of the greatest needs in the South. Three years later, the Southern Station recruited Philip C. Wakeley. Wakeley received a forestry degree in 1923 from Cornell University—the first four-year school of forestry in the United States. Upon arriving in New Orleans, the New York native was assigned to Bogalusa to establish a cooperative reforestation program with Great Southern Lumber Company.

The cooperative effort between Phil Wakeley and Great Southern was very productive. Great Southern developed an operational nursery that also served as a research facility. Not only did J.K. Johnson and his Ranger Red Bateman provide local technical support, but they helped acclimate Wakeley to the South. In order to give Phil an experience with chiggers, Bateman led Phil to sit on the ground to eat his lunch. So, on his first day in the field, Wakeley was able to get acquainted with redbug bites.

The Great Southern staff and Wakeley worked together for about 10 years. During this time, Wakeley was able to develop and compile rudimentary guidelines for producing and planting pine seedlings. With the onset of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, the Great Southern Lumber Company went into receivership. About the same time, the Kisatchie National Forest and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) established the Stuart Nursery north of Alexandria near Pollock. The reforestation emphasis shifted from Great Southern to the Stuart Nursery.

Wakeley documented his preliminary research into a USDA Agriculture Technical Bulletin that was used extensively across the South in the reforestation programs carried...
out by the CCC during the 1930s. Moreover, the availability of labor from the CCC program at the Stuart Nursery allowed Wakeley and his colleagues to conduct additional large scale research outplantings. Nearly 700,000 seedlings were planted in research studies on the Palustris Experimental Forest that was established by Wakeley for this purpose.

In 1954, Phil Wakeley published the results his reforestation work into the book, “Planting of the Southern Pines.” This publication provided the information necessary to establish successful reforestation programs. It is probably the most frequently cited forestry publication in the South, and is still cited today though having been out of print for decades.

Phil Wakeley was a keen observer and keeper of meticulous records. Even after retirement, he could be called upon to provide specific locations to individual studies or trees from genetics outplantings. His career covered 40 years, all with the Southern Forest Experiment Station in New Orleans. He was recognized by a number of awards: USDA Superior Service Award, and elected by Society of American Foresters as Fellow and for the Barrington Moore Award for Biological Research. Phil is recognized across the South, as well as nationally and internationally, for his contributions to restoration of southern forest ecosystems. He probably contributed more to the reforestation of the South than any other individual. His work facilitated the change of the face of the South from cut-over desolation to productive pine forests.

(Philip C. Wakeley’s unpublished 1964 document “A biased history of the Southern Forest Experiment Station through fiscal year 1933” was used as a resource for this article)