

The Vanishing Landscape of the Piedmont Prairie



Close your eyes and imagine standing in this very place 400 years ago. What do you see?

As far as the horizon there are no trees, just a wide undulating landscape of grasses and wildflowers billowing in the breeze. If you look very carefully, you may catch sight of a buffalo or elk freely wandering and grazing in the late afternoon sun. Or you may detect the aroma of burning wood telling you that a village is not far away.

“Buffaloes ranged in droves on the Carolina Piedmont, feeding upon savanna morning and night, and in the sultry time of day retiring to the thickets of tall cane along rivers.”

Mark Catesby (1683-1749)

“We travell’d this day, about 25 miles, over pleasant savanna ground, high and dry, having very few trees upon it, and those standing at great distance.”

John Lawson, Davidson County, N.C., February 1701

Many of the vast grasslands or savannas that once covered the southeastern piedmont are now called “Piedmont Prairies.” These were the hunting grounds of the indigenous peoples who lived and farmed in this region for thousands of years before the arrival of the first European colonists in the 16th century. Many of the descendants of these original nations are still living in the Carolinas.



An 18th century French map of the Carolinas, which describes the area where Durham is now located as “Grande Savanne.” The first European explorers found grassland, not forests, here.

The Loss of Fire and Grazing

The indigenous nations of the southeastern U.S. created and maintained the Piedmont Prairies through fire and grazing. The regeneration of shrubs and trees was stopped by fire, and without the shade of trees, grassland communities flourished, attracting grazing herbivores such as bison and elk.

Thousands of years of fire and grazing maintained the biologically rich grassland communities of the southeastern Piedmont. The Piedmont Prairie habitat started to disappear with the removal of the indigenous peoples from the Carolinas in the 19th century.

Today, scattered remnants of this prairie habitat still exist throughout the Piedmont, with many of these unique grasslands under state protection.



Drawing by Ippy Patterson



Photo by Cathi Bodine



Learn more about these vanishing landscapes and the indigenous nations that created them.

The bison and elk that once roamed this landscape endure only in the writings of early explorers and the stories of the indigenous people who lived intimately with the plants and animals of this region.

The Blomquist Piedmont Prairie



The Blomquist Prairie was planted in 2015 with around 20,000 plants.

All plants were propagated from seed collected from more than 100 locally adapted native plant species, called local ecotypes. Many of these plants are rare and are found on roadsides or under powerline rights of way.

The prairie is a refuge for wildlife within the Blomquist Garden. During winter, the plants provide shelter and food for birds and other wildlife. Take a moment to look around you and listen. What insects do you see? What birds can you hear?



Photo by Stefan Bloodworth

Echinacea laevigata growing under powerline rights of way in North Carolina.



Read about the creation of the Blomquist Piedmont Prairie and see the list of plants growing here.

Photo by Annabel Renwick