A Peopled Wilderness: A new exhibition explores Adirondack history

By Rachel Galvin

“Ladies, even invalids, can penetrate the wilderness for scores of miles without making any exertion which a healthy child of five years cannot safely and easily put forth,” wrote Rev. W.H.H. Murray in 1869.

Murray may have greatly exaggerated the accessibility of the Adirondack region, but he did speak to nineteenth-century America’s growing interest in wilderness as a place of respite from urban living. His promotion of the Adirondacks contributed to the region’s growing reputation as a health resort and artistic retreat. Its mountains, lakes, and forests in upstate New York eventually drew not only the city’s wealthiest—the Astors, Morgans, and Vanderbilts—but also ordinary middle-class families.

That is only part of the history of the Adirondacks. People have worked its rich sources of iron ore and lumber, farmed its hills, and trapped beavers there. In the process, they altered the land.

“What appears to be a wild landscape is actually a special kind of cultural landscape that human activity has shaped and continues to shape to the present day,” says Jackie Day, director of the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake, New York.

People’s perceptions and uses of the region are explored in “A Peopled Wilderness,” a new NEH-funded exhibition at the Adirondack Museum. First-person accounts, paintings, photographs, and arts and crafts illustrate the history of the densely forested region, which gained protection as the Adirondack Park in 1892. The first section of the exhibition, which opened recently, focuses on the impact of human settlement and the use of the Adirondacks during the nineteenth century.

The region’s first known permanent settlers were the Iroquois and Algonquin tribes. In fact, it is the Iroquois’s disparaging term for the Algonquins?“Rontaks” or “tree eaters”?that gives the region its name.

In the 1820s, European American settlement began in earnest with the increased demand for natural resources. Adirondack iron, valued for its purity and distinctive luster, was used for stoves manufactured in Troy and Albany and for cables for the Brooklyn Bridge and for the Golden Gate Bridge.

“The mines are of easy access, profusely scattered, and exceedingly rich. You find beds of iron in the mountains, and also bog ore in almost every place you visit,” wrote John Todd, a summer visitor to the Adirondacks, in his 1845 book Long Lake. “When these mines are worked, and these forests used in smelting the ore, what an inexhaustible amount of iron may be made here!”

Logging, which was equally important, drew large numbers of French Canadians, New Englanders,
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Germans, African Americans, Poles, Italians, Russians, Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Eastern European Jews, and Irish immigrants straight from the docks in New York City. By 1890, over a third of them had been born in countries other than the United States. Poorly paid, they risked their lives to run logs down river to city markets.

Industry and hunting had a deleterious effect on Adirondack ecology. Hundreds of thousands of acres of timber were stripped, causing soil erosion and endangering the watershed. Native animal populations of moose and beaver were destroyed.

The harmful repercussions of logging and mining on the Adirondacks became apparent after the Civil War. “The land is cleared simply and solely for the value of the timber which stands upon it,” scolded Harper’s Weekly in 1884. “The work is done, not by settlers, but by speculators, and when it is completed, its scene will be a rocky desert.”

With activists predicting a tragic outcome—that the water supply for New York’s canal system would be jeopardized, affecting commerce and possibly even New York City’s water supply—a conservation movement grew. It included a heterogeneous collection of businessmen, loggers, journalists, and recreational visitors, almost none of whom were year-round residents. “The movement to protect the Adirondacks stemmed not from public appreciation of wilderness per se, but from the need to protect the commercial and industrial might of New York State,” explains Day.

The New York State legislature responded by establishing the Adirondack Forest Preserve in 1885. Conservationists pushed in 1894 for a “forever wild” clause to the New York State Constitution, which banned logging in the Forest Preserve. The Adirondack Park, which includes the Preserve, covers six million acres, making it the largest park in the continental United States.

The conservancy legislation ushered in an era of regrowth. “This recovery has been so complete that in many places the old scars of mining, logging, and agricultural activity have completely vanished,” says Day. Today, both moose and beaver populations have returned. “It is only through conscious effort and human intervention that the land looks the way it does today.”

In part, the struggle to preserve the park in the 1880s arose from the notion of the Adirondacks as wilderness that had blossomed in popular imagination. Literature and art first fueled people's conceptions of the Adirondacks early in the century. The publication of James Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans in 1826 and Charles Fenno Hoffman’s Wild Scenes in the Forest and Prairie in 1839 popularized the Adirondacks with their tales of adventure. The novels’ characters, such as the Adirondack guide, became icons of the wilderness. Last of the Mohicans guide Natty Bumppo set the standard for Adirondack folk heroes.

Artists of the Hudson River School, such as Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, idealized the landscape and contributed to the Adirondacks’ image as a retreat into the beauty of the wilderness. Some painters of this school were opposed to industrialization and sought to conserve the wilderness. “Landscape painters publicized vistas of the Adirondacks that very few people were privy to,” says
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Kenneth Myers, cultural historian and consulting curator at the Adirondack Museum. “They held up the region as an example of the beauty of natural landscape and as an expression of God’s approbation of humankind.”

The region inspired Ralph Waldo Emerson and other nineteenth-century New England Transcendentalists, who believed that divinity permeated nature and all humankind. “In the wilderness we turn to reason and faith,” Emerson wrote in his essay “Nature.” Emerson and some of his intellectual circle spent a month fishing and hunting at Follensby Pond in the central Adirondacks. The visit was memorialized in William James Stillman’s 1858 painting “The Philosophers’ Camp” and in Emerson’s poem “The Adirondacs.”

All day we swept the lake,
searched every cove,
North from Camp Maple, south
to Osprey Bay,
Watching when the loud dogs
should drive in deer,

. . . . Or, listening to the laughter of
the loon;
Or, in the evening twilight’s
latest red,
Beholding the procession of the
pines;
Or, later yet, beneath a lighted
jack,

In the boat’s bows, a silent night
hunter
Stealing with a paddle to the
feeding grounds
Of the red deer.


“Murray’s Rush” was aided by new railway access and by economic changes in American society. A growing middle class sought new forms of leisure and recreation. As society became wealthier, the number of individuals able to vacation increased.

The expanding middle class “used wilderness appreciation both as a marker of class identity and as a
means of confirming received values and beliefs,” explains Myers.

The kind of vacation a person took indicated social class and identity. The very rich built large estates; the middle class stayed in hotels. The hotels themselves were divided by class: Middle- to upper-class lodgings forbade alcohol, adopted a high moral tone, and offered religious services; lower-class lodgings allowed alcohol and had fewer restrictions.

The old system of scattered boardinghouses was transformed into a complete tourist economy supported by magazines, guide books, and advertising. Commercial photographers produced stereo cards and yearly guidebooks. Photographs and artwork appeared in the print media, democratizing access to images of the Adirondacks. Anyone who bought a Harper’s Weekly could have a view of the Adirondacks. “America read the sublimity of the national landscape as a sign of national prestige and virtue, thereby confirming the sense that America itself was an important nation,” says Myers.

Seasonal visitors had preconceptions of the region that were often alien to the reality of year-round residents. Juliet Baker Kellogg helped her father run a hotel. In her August 1885 diary, she mentions sportsman and artist Eliphalet Terry, who spent his vacations in the Adirondacks. Terry’s itinerary of fishing, hunting, and painting contrasts with Kellogg’s domestic occupations.


Aug 5: Showers. A load from Ft. Edward. 9 here to dinner and overnight, and Mr. and Miss Hislop came. I got Mary Bennett to help me.

Aug 6: The people went in the woods. Bill with them. I cleaned up.

Aug 7: I got Mr. Brace’s team to draw in hay. Bill come back with the whole crew. Mr. Terry come. I cooked all day.

Aug 8: Cooked. Bread and pies. The men went fishing.


As the region’s popularity increased, locals expanded the summer business to handmade pack baskets, rustic furniture and other goods.

“Struggling to make a living amid intense competition for the vacationer’s dollar, local people helped construct an image of the region that conflated a series of symbols—the guide, the Native American, the hermit, the guide boat, the open camp, the pack basket—into a shorthand for the region,” says Day.

Even the log cabin of settler days became part of commerce. “As the region became a vacation paradise among relatively affluent city people, the log cabin became a romanticized symbol of the Adirondack
wilderness and of the homely but colorful guides, hermits, and innkeepers who inhabited it,” explains Day.

“Many people think the beauty or meaning of a physical environment is somehow intrinsic or natural,” says Myers. “But the meaning we find in places like the Adirondacks is socially constructed and changes all the time. How we interpret and experience a place changes from generation to generation, as people construct ways of defining the region and themselves.”

By the twentieth century, paved roads and the rise of the automobile provided easier access and enabled working and middle-class people to tour inexpensively. The Adirondacks became a vacation spot accessible to everyone.

“Even people who have never been to the Adirondacks have a strong sense of the area as very romantic, very charged, and precious,” says Day. “But the story that is not known is the human story of the people who settled the area. We’re trying to express their individual voices and show how people valued this place, how they perceived it, and how they used it.”

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The Adirondack Museum has received $250,000 in support from NEH to plan and create “Using the Wilderness.”

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*Humanities*, July/August 1999, Volume 20/Number 4