Life in the Ledges
An Environmental History

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Preface

When I first saw the Lake in the Ledges in Bedford, New York, I assumed that it was a natural phenomenon. By that, I mean that I didn't suspect it to be the result of any person's actions or intentions. My assumption itself was certainly natural, because, on first glance, the lake and much of the surrounding land appear quite wild and untouched. Most of the lake’s perimeter is overhung with a thick tangle of trees and brush, from which emanates a motley chorus of bird, frog, and insect calls. Turtles, fish, and visiting waterfowl ripple the surface of the lake; hawks and vultures soar above; fleeing deer flash their shock-white tails. Amid this nearly constant activity, what one most feels on coming to the lake is an absence and a quietude, especially if one’s journey began in New York City forty miles to the southwest. The place not only looks and sounds but feels like the original work of natural forces.

A closer look would confound this view, however. Old gray stone walls criss-cross the land, threading between oaks, birches, and maples, signifying if no longer enforcing human boundaries. This lattice of stone arose when the land was cultivated and organized for fertility, but it has since fallen into disuse and disrepair. One section of it
crumbles as it runs directly and seemingly inexplicably into the waters of the lake, as if driven to despair in the absence of the people and activities that once gave it meaning and purpose.

Of course, this absurdity is really a clue to the history of this place. Across the lake one can view another stone wall descending into the water, but this time with a discernible purpose. This wall holds the lake in place; it is a dam built by William Jackson in the mid 1930s. The lake is thus the result of a new era of human influence on this land. As the forest returns, the land is yet being cultivated, now for its ability to appeal to our sense of beauty and to accommodate our recreation. What appears to be unalloyed nature is in fact something much more complex, as this history will explore.

The Lake Today

Most visitors’ first view of the Lake in the Ledges is from West Lodge, more often just called “the lake house,” which was built on the western side of the lake in the mid-1950s. From here, the opposite edge of the lake is only a quarter of a mile away, but the lake appears larger than this distance suggests. One reason for this appearance is the highly irregular shape of the lake. The view of the opposite shore is framed by an echelon of rocky, tree-covered fingers of land projecting out into the water that heighten one’s sense of distance and intimate the lake’s many hidden coves. This crowded arrangement might actually make the lake seem smaller, however, if not for another essential element

Figure 2 A stone wall, visible through bare winter trees
of the view: West Lodge is built fifty feet above the lake, on the highest of the many surrounding rocky ledges. From this angle, the surface of the lake is not a horizon but a shimmering expanse in which tree and sky are reflected. Much of the character of the lake comes from this view, and one can imagine how different the place would feel had West Lodge been constructed elsewhere, out on the tip of a peninsula, say, or tucked into a narrow cove.

And yet, the placement of West Lodge is only one of innumerable events in a long dialog between this land and its human visitors and inhabitants. This study will explore that dialog from a historical and ecological perspective, attempting to see how this land contributed and responded to larger natural and human contexts. I hope that by investigating this story, the present visitors to the lake – myself included – will recognize the agency of the land in producing its own history. The placement of West Lodge is a good example of this: the house’s location on the highest ledge, with its commanding view over the water, seems purely the result of human desire, but that aesthetic desire is operating within the topographical constraints of the land. In other words, were the highest ledge somewhere else around the lake, West Lodge would likely be somewhere else, too. Michael Pollan’s observations about the reciprocal influence between humanity and plants could be broadly applied to the natural landscape as well: humans transform landscapes, but existing landscapes guide the actions by which we change them.
The Tankiteke: Farming, Foraging, and Fire

The earliest known human residents near the Lake in the Ledges were an Algonquian-speaking group of Wappinger Indians called the Tankiteke. Like other Wappinger groups, the Tankiteke lived in bands governed by a sachem and a council of elders. They spent part of the year in villages near Wampus Pond in North Castle as well as in present day Bedford and Katonah (Hodge 1910).

Following the Land

The Tankiteke relationship with the land was largely one of adaptation to natural rhythms and cycles. Like other native peoples in the region, they relied on agriculture for as much as two thirds of their food (Cronon 1983, 42). Corn was the main crop, but it grew in a densely tangled polyculture of squashes, beans, tobacco, and other plants, not at all resembling the neat, monocultural rows of European farming. Such tight knit gardens preserved moisture, discouraged pests, replaced soil nitrogen, and provided a high yield of different foods to meet nutritional needs (Cronon 1983, 44). Tankiteke agriculture was conducted entirely by women, who were able to tend to crops, camp, and children simultaneously while providing the majority of a family’s food (Brown 1970, 1075). Fish migrations and the leafing of certain trees provided the signals for planting to begin, which brought a shift from reliance on stored grain – now needed for seed – to the men’s catches of migrating fish and birds (Cronon 1983, 44). After planting, women moved their households to other places to gather wild plants while men spent more time hunting on lengthy trips away from camp.

Some or all of these subsistence activities are likely to have taken place at the Lake in the Ledges. The swampy ground contained peat and was relatively fertile
agricultural land, and wild sources of food still live and grow there. Dutch settlers in the area reported that local natives hunted “many thousands” of deer each year with the latter remaining “incredibly numerous” (Shonnard and Spooner 1900, 112).

By relying on a variety of food sources from many different places, the Tankiteke provided for themselves year-round without depleting the land’s ability to provide, and native notions of property facilitated this fluid and practical lifestyle. For the Tankiteke, ownership consisted of agreed-upon rights “not to possess the land as a tradable commodity, but to use it as an ecological cornucopia.” Individuals and groups had established patterns of land-use, but these patterns were not codified in strict ownership rules (Cronon 1983, 67).

Controlling the Land with Fire

Despite the popular portrayal of Native Americans as having tread lightly on the land, the Tankiteke certainly altered their landscape, most notably through the use of fire. They used fire as a technology to modify the landscape around the Lake in the Ledges to better suit their agricultural and hunting practices. The Tankiteke did not fertilize their agricultural plots, requiring that new clearings be found or created once previous ones lost their fertility. Fires set at the base of trees or in holes bored through trunks allowed easy felling, after which women burned the fallen trees to make room for planting. Cronon quotes a New England Native American who declared that “An industrious woman, when great many dry logs are fallen, could burn off as many logs in one day as a smart man can chop in two or three days time with an axe” (Cronon 1983, 48). Periodic ground fires kept the plot clear year after year.

Even after an agricultural plot had been abandoned, the Tankiteke continued to
maintain such clearings for hunting and gathering purposes. Strawberries, blackberries, and raspberries grew well on burned ground, and Fire was even used to clear brush for easier acorn gathering (Williams 2003). The Tankiteke also used fire to manage game. By maintaining clearings within the forest, they created areas that simulated boundary regions between forest and grassland. Such regions are unusually attractive to many species of wildlife, a phenomenon known today as the “edge effect.” Periodically burning forest undergrowth also ensured a constant supply of young growth, on which deer and other game would feed. In other cases, the Tankiteke may have burned moss and other food sources in order to discourage deer from unfavorable hunting areas. These sparse woodlands were also easier places for the Tankiteke to hunt, and scorched paths were burned to facilitate travel between and within hunting grounds.

Direct evidence of burning is not apparent today, and is unlikely to be so because of the impact of later inhabitants on the land. During this period, the Lake in the Ledges was a swampy lowland, more or less impervious to burning anyway. As such, it may have provided a safe haven for deer, but the surrounding rocky ledges would have provided Tankiteke hunters with their own hideouts from which to stalk their prey.

Some indirect evidence of Tankiteke burning may exist, however, in the oldest hemlock stands in the nearby Mianus River Gorge. These trees, which would not have survived continued Tankiteke burning, were estimated in 1967 to be about three hundred years old. This places their origin at about the time when European Settlers arrived on this land, and, as we will see, the Tankiteke practices of land maintenance, including burning, proved incompatible with the presence of European society.
European Settlement: Mythology, Markets, and Mills

The story of why the Tankiteke burning ended begins in the 1640s when European settlers first arrived in the area near the Lake in the Ledges. To European eyes, which had previously gazed upon the cities of London and Amsterdam, this land lacked any familiar signs of civilization, but what seemed disorganized and inhospitable to Europeans was, as we have noted, the scene of a highly organized native lifestyle that involved extensive agriculture, game and wild plant management, and cooperation with seasonal cycles. That a place long inhabited by the Tankiteke could still seem virgin and untamed to the Europeans indicates a significant difference in the way these two peoples viewed and interacted with the natural world. Their different conceptions of nature formed the basis of their interaction with the landscape and with each other. The Tankiteke tendency to cooperate with the surrounding ecosystem made them a part of the natural world that settlers felt a need to dominate, and this domination would eventually force the Tankiteke people from the land.

Reclaiming the Garden

Like the Tankiteke, European settlers relied on myth to make sense of the world, but European myths, influenced by Christian traditions, took a very different form. Wilderness, to many settlers, was a savage place into which Adam and Eve had fallen after their defiance of the Christian god, and the work of redemption for this defiance involved reclaiming humanity's dominion over the natural world. This reclamation was understood as a grave and dangerous struggle, a feeling expressed by the Puritan minister Cotton Mather when he wrote in 1693 that “the Wilderness thro' which we are passing to the Promised Land, is all over fill'd with Fiery flying serpents” (Mather and Mather 1862,
This attitude towards the natural world did not prepare the settlers to comprehend the Tankiteke way of life. Upon its discovery by European explorers, the New World was declared to be under the reign of European monarchs. The right to purchase or own land was not independently enjoyed by white settlers but was rather granted by their respective governments, whose power was in turn derived from the Christian god (Shonnard and Spooner 1900, 32). European notions of ownership, therefore, emulated the omnipotence and omnipresence of that god: what was owned was owned in “complete and final” terms, and everything was eligible to be owned (Cronon 1983, 68). Permanent settlements based on this theory of ownership obliged settlers to take their livelihood from the same piece of land all year round. To do so throughout the seasons required a new kind of transformation of the land, which included the construction of houses and barns and the clearing of forests for farmland, building materials, and fuel. Settlers recognized such transformations as the improvements that hallmarkled civilization.

**Owning the Land**

Differing relationships with the land complicated the relations between settlers and the Tankiteke. Settlers, although usually acting in good faith and seeking to deal amicably with natives, purchased land from the Tankiteke with metal goods like kettles,
spears, knives and hatchets, and with woven items like blankets and clothes, the value of which was far below what would have been exchanged between two European parties. These transactions illustrate a fundamental difference in the parties' systems of valuation of the land. To the Tankiteke, write Shonnard and Spooner,

it was purely a bargain of friendly exchange for mutual convenience and welfare. The Indians did not understand...that it meant a formal and everlasting alienation of their lands; on the other hand, they deemed that they were covenanating merely to admit the whites peaceably to rights of joint occupancy...[T]hey seldom realized that the mere act of signing over their lands to the whites was a necessarily permanent release of them (1900, 32).

Moreover, while natives valued the land for its *existent* uses and goods, settlers had in mind the tremendous *potential* uses and goods that would result from transformative development.

These transactions imply that the Tankiteke owned the land, but neither party really took this to be the case. European-style ownership was a wholly new concept that the Tankiteke did fully not understand, but their confusion was also a result of the limited way in which they were allowed to exercise ownership rights. Europeans granted ownership to natives in order that this ownership might be transferred, but not just to anybody. Individual settlers had no right to purchase land from natives; that right was reserved to the government of the first discoverer. For the natives, then, ownership of their land was not an invitation to a free market but an obligation to sell their land to a particular buyer. To most settlers, “purchase and recompense instead of seizure and spoliation” was a more pleasant way to acquire land, but the legal-economic structure in
which they lived offered little real freedom to the natives (Shonnard and Spooner 1900, 32).

The Dutch settlers who purchased land from the natives in Westchester were generally more interested in expanding their government’s domain than in immediate development. Natives thus often continued to live on the land that they had sold, further confirming their understanding of the transactions as diplomatic pleasantries. This, combined with vaguely defined borders between native areas, often led to the same land being sold multiple times, giving rise to confusion and tension between native and European groups. These tensions eventually led to war between 1643 and 1645, in which the Tankiteke and settlers attempted to eject the other from the land. In one attack on Nanichiestawack, a native village near the Lake in the Ledges, two hundred Dutch and more than five hundred natives were killed. Most of the natives died when the Dutch surrounded and set fire to the village at midnight (Kelley 2004).

Two days before Christmas of 1680, twenty-two farmers from Stamford purchased land near the Lake in the Ledges from local Indian chiefs for twelve coats, six blankets, two yards of cloth, six yards of cotton, and money, all of which was valued at 43£, 10s, 6d (Bolton 1848, 8). At this time, the land was called the “Hopp Ground” because of the wild-growing hops found in the area. The Bedford town seal, adopted in 1898, is decorated with hop vines for this reason (Bianco and Stockbridge 2003, 4).

Organizing the Land for Production

In 1681, settlers began to reorganize the land for participation in the technological and economic systems of the colonies. In October, the proprietors of the Hopp Ground agreed to allow additional inhabitants onto the land and to establish a town. All
inhabitants were given an equal share in the land for the price of forty shillings. They appointed a committee to begin laying out a cart way to the Hopp Ground, and construction began two months later on the town’s first dam and grist mill, two miles north of the Lake in the Ledges. In the following year, the Hopp Ground was officially renamed Bedford.

While war with the Dutch devastated native power and presence around the Ledges, settlement activity was changing the land in ways that were incompatible with the Tankiteke way of life. By building permanent settlements, settlers often unwittingly interrupted established patterns of Tankiteke land use, and when claims were made by or on the part of Native Americans, they were denied because the Native Americans had not “improved” the land in any way that the settlers recognized. Moreover, this lack of improvement made the Tankiteke—especially the men, for whom time spent in camp was a time of rest and recuperation between strenuous hunting trips—appear “fettered in the chains of idleness” to many settlers, who were further emboldened by this to ride roughshod over Native American territory (Cronon 1983, 55).

Not only did settlers bar native people from the land on which they depended, they also changed the character of the land itself by clearing the forests. While Tankiteke fires and agriculture did involve forest clearing, Native American forest burning maintained a patchwork mosaic of habitats for a variety of plant and animal species. European settlement, by contrast, involved completely clearing large areas and planting only a few species of crops. Tankiteke burning practices were interrupted by European land ownership, so even the forests that survived the latter went unmaintained by the former. The region thus became a far less hospitable place for wild species, and for the
Tankiteke in turn.

Many of the Tankiteke migrated west to join other Algonquian-speaking groups. The final Tankiteke exodus from the Bedford area happened in 1756, when the last large groups left to join the Nanticoke and Stockbridge-Munsee tribes. In doing so, these native people accepted – at least implicitly – that the environs of the Lake in the Ledges are uninhabitable without European-style development. Indeed, the land no longer was inhabitable in the way it had been for generations. The Native American conception of nature, founded as it was on that inhabitability, could no longer be usefully relied upon in a land transformed by European civilization. This transformation of the land, from one in which Native American views of nature were valid into one in which only the European view made sense, should caution us that our ideas about nature are not only shaped by the natural world; they are a force that can powerfully reshape the natural world itself. In this case, the European myth of exile from the Garden of Eden engendered a way of life that both assumed nature to be uninhabitable and caused it to be so - for themselves and the Tankiteke.

Under Euroamerican cultivation, however, the region proved very useful. An 1848 history of Westchester County describes Bedford as “broken by small hills, and valleys,” but having “very little waste ground” (Bolton 1848, 33). The praise continues:

“The arable pasture and meadow lands, are in very just proportion for a good farming country, and the whole is well watered by springs, brooks, and rivulets, the latter of a good size for mills; the summits of the hills afford many extensive and interesting prospects, but the hills are stony and hard to till though they yield good crops of grain, grass, and all the common fruits.”
Even if the reality was not quite as rosy as this picture, the settlers worked hard to bring as much value out of the land as possible.

The history quoted above also makes an observation that is a clue to how the settlers’ attitude towards the land differed from the Tankiteke. “The mills,” it notes with pride, “are numerous and more than equal to the wants of the inhabitants” (Bolton 1848, 33) To a Tankiteke native, this fact would be confusing at best and derisible at worst. Despite their considerable effect upon the land, the Tankiteke way of life, with its peregrinations in search of wild food, was crafted to minimize work. Within the logic of European market economies, however, settlers worked the land – and themselves – far beyond what was needed to fill their own stomachs. The European goal, and the agenda through which they interacted with the land, was not subsistence but maximal production.

As the land around the Lake in the Ledges was drawn into European production systems, the land itself placed restrictions on just how it could be used. Although the region immediately around the Lake in the Ledges may have been fertile, the swampy lowland where the lake now stands was probably too overgrown with brush to be workable. The young hemlock stands to the northeast of the lake that were returning with the cessation of the Tankiteke fire regime also would have discouraged farmers, who often used tree species as a guide to soil types (Cronon 1983, 115). The land to the west of the Lake was suitable for agriculture, however, as evidenced by the stone walls that still exist there today. Because of it did not fit the requirements of European period land use, this may have been the least amount of human activity that the land had seen in thousands of years.
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Overall, this period saw region cleared of more trees than it has been since or had been for thousands of years before. Throughout the 1800s, seventy-five percent of the land around the lake remained cleared for agriculture (Bianco and Stockbridge 2003, 77). The memoirs of one nearby resident from the 1880s hyperbolically describe being able to sit on a high hill and watch the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge over forty miles away.

**Industrialization: Rail, Reservoirs, and Romantics**

As it did elsewhere, rail transportation transformed the economy of the Lake in the Ledges area when it arrived in 1847. The achievement of the railroad, as identified by Karl Marx, is “the annihilation of space by time” (Marx 1993, 524). One of the primary constraints on production near the Lake in the Ledges was the distance that goods had to travel to buyers. Produce was brought by cart to a port at Sing Sing – a distance by road of almost twenty miles – where it was loaded onto boats for a long journey down the Hudson River to New York City (Bianco and Stockbridge 2003, 37). By rail, however, goods could be transported to markets in the city with little damage or spoilage, effectively removing distance from farmers’ considerations.

**Cow Country**

This new connection to city markets caused a shift in how farmers used the land. Fresh dairy products, once impossible to bring to markets before they spoiled, were now...
a highly lucrative export, and many farmers entered the dairy business. Middlemen transported milk from local farms to the railway station – sometimes adding a little water on the way – from which the insulated milk train made daily trips from what was then called “cow country” to the city. Bedford Station, as the area near the rail depot was known, quickly became an economic center with a post office and many businesses, but as people and places gained prestige within the local economy, the region itself became subsumed in the vast economic hinterlands of New York City.

Reservoirs

“DESTRUCTION TO KATONAH,” begins a *New York Times* headline from April 7, 1893 (*New York Times* 1893). The town of Katonah, named for a Wappinger Indian chief from whom the land was purchased, was settled near Bedford Station soon after the coming of the railroad. The technological progress that created the town, however, now required “its removal from the face of the Earth.” The *Times* article opens with a description of Mr. Daly, the New York Public Works Commissioner, standing before “the solemn faces of a little group of leading citizens,” on a snow-covered bridge and, “with a sweep of his arm,” condemning the town of Katonah to flooding for the expansion of the nearby Croton Reservoir: “There he stood, a plain American citizen, calmly and deliberately ordering practically a whole town out of existence.” The great benefits bestowed upon the region by its new connection to New York City did not come without a cost.
As New York City grew, fueled in part by the increased production of milk and other goods around the Lake in the Ledges, it found new needs for which that land would again be transformed. Chief among these was a need for large amounts of potable water from inland reservoirs. Reservoir construction was nearly constant throughout the late nineteenth century; two were constructed north of the Lake in the Ledges in 1873 and 1878, and construction began in 1892 on a reservoir expansion that would lead to the demise of Katonah and other nearby towns (Bianco and Stockbridge 2003, 49).

Although humans had been altering the landscape of the region for thousands of years, these reservoir projects forced an acknowledgement of humanity’s transformative impact on the land. “The geography of the country will have to be reconstructed,” said the Times, “and even the topography will be altered.” While marveling at humanity’s power to transform nature, however, the Times also compared the project to “the exciting embrace of a Kansas tornado.” Anthropogenic changes in the land were now becoming equated with natural events: impersonal, inevitable, destructive, but with the promise of new growth.

William Jackson

Around 1906, an eighteen year old boy named William Jackson was working as a “rod man” on survey teams in the Catskills. The New York City Water Supply Board sent these teams to plan new reservoirs and tunnels that would quench the city’s growing thirst. Jackson enjoyed civil engineering work, but life in the Catskills exacerbated his asthma. His health became so bad that, on the advice of his doctor, he left his job with the Water Supply Board, but this would not be his last experience shaping the land of southern New York (Jackson, et al. 2009).
Jackson boarded a train and began a long stint of travel that took him across the southern United States. He worked on various construction projects as he passed through New Orleans, Fort Worth, and San Francisco. After hitting the west coast, he caught the farthest-bound train he could afford, which took him north to Calgary, where he found work surveying the prairie for the Canadian government. While there, he earned a degree in civil engineering from the International Correspondence School in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Returning to the Eastern United States, Jackson began a career in landscape architecture. He found employment at C.W. Leavitt, a construction company in Lorretto, Pennsylvania, where his first job was as the landscaping supervisor of a new football stadium at Lehigh University. In the course of this work, he met Charles M. Schwab Esq., the president of Bethlehem Steel and a local philanthropist, who hired C.W. Leavitt to landscape the farm buildings at his Loretto estate (House & Garden Magazine 1920, 29). Although the founding genius of American romantic landscape architecture, Frederick Law Olmstead, had died in 1903, farming and pastoral scenes were still de rigueur for the estates of wealthy industrialists like Schwab. This landscaping style is as industrial as it is natural, both in its use of the methods of civil engineering and insofar as it is a reaction to the urban conditions of life in early twentieth century America. Its
product was a scene that, although highly stylized and controlled, gave an impression of unconstrained naturalness.

During World War I Jackson worked in a DuPont gunpowder plant – his asthma prevented his being drafted – but after the war he returned to the landscaping business, where he continued to gain experience in large-scale projects. Lewis and Valentine, a Long Island landscape design firm run by five brothers of the Lewis family, found that Jackson fit their requirement that applicants be “of good character and not afraid of hard work” (Smithsonian Horticulture Services Division n.d.). Such men were needed because Lewis and Valentine specialized in the strenuous process of moving and replanting large, fully-grown trees. Adult trees – as much as one hundred years old – were carefully uprooted along with surrounding soil – as much as twenty tons of earth – and transported by truck to project sites. Charles M. Schwab, who remembered Jackson’s previous work for him, hired Lewis and Valentine to landscape his country estate in Loretto, Pennsylvania. Jackson performed well and gained the respect and friendship of the Lewis brothers.

Jackson’s success at Lewis and Valentine eventually led to his fortuitous acquisition of the Lake in the Ledges. The firm offered Jackson the presidency of a Lewis and Valentine subsidiary in Rye, New York in the 1920s. While managing this new company, Jackson was hired by the Westchester Women’s Golf and Tennis Association
to construct a nine-hole golf course in Banksville, New York, just over a mile west of the Lake in the Ledges. Construction had only just been completed, however, when the stock market crashed and the nation began to descend into a depression. Bankrupt and unable to pay for the completed work, the women’s association gave Jackson the golf course outright. At first, he hoped to sell it, but he found little interest in the depressed economy. Having surveyed the real estate market as a seller, he decided to enter it as a buyer, seeking to purchase inexpensive land that would increase in value once the depression lifted. In 1931, he struck a deal with a local farmer to purchase the land on which the Lake in the Ledges now sits.

**Hilltoppers**

As farmers converted to dairy production, the open land in Bedford was converted from crop rows to pastureland. This new green-hilled landscape and its ruminating occupants fit perfectly into the romantic aesthetic, and the rail connection that spurred these changes also brought in wealthy urbanites who subscribed to that aesthetic. Thus, land once valued as capital for the production of agricultural commodities became an aesthetic commodity itself. Architects and landscapers converted the accoutrements of farm life into the elements of luxurious country estates. Farmhouses became mansions, barns became stables, and the land became a life-size pastoral diorama (Duncan Jr. 1973, 337). The most coveted estate locations were at the tops of high hills, and their owners became known as “hilltoppers” (Bianco and Stockbridge 2003, 61). Hilltoppers managed the local landscape collectively as well as individually. Garden clubs and other social organizations provided a means of establishing and enforcing landscape conventions, and
Bedford zoning laws passed in the late 1920s imposed minimum lot sizes to preserve open space (Duncan Jr. 1973, 336).

Despite the hilltoppers’ interest in preserving the landscape, or rather because of the nature of that interest, they allowed the land to change in new ways. Unlike the farmers, whose prerogative was to clear and capitalize as much of the land as possible, hilltoppers could afford to maintain the farmland’s appearance without actually continuing the agricultural activities that originally produced it. Land that was not enlisted in the reproduction of the romantic aesthetic was allowed to lie fallow, and forests returned to the region. Forests could be tolerated within the romantic aesthetic; indeed, as they returned they became yet another component of it. Among this newly forested land was that which William Jackson acquired in 1931.

**The Lake in the Ledges**

Despite the depths of the Great Depression, William Jackson quickly began imagining how his experience in construction and landscaping could be applied to his new land in Bedford. His son, William M. Jackson, remembers visiting the swampy land on camping trips beginning in 1931. During a walk on one such trip, the Jacksons’ collie dog wandered ahead of them and began to sink into a thick, black muck. After rescuing the dog, Jackson recognized the substance as peat, a potentially valuable commodity. He again had the notion to turn a profit from the land, but again he was faced with a disinterested market.

Perhaps during one of those journeys through the wet lowlands, Jackson realized that it might be possible to turn the small valley into a lake. He hired a surveyor to investigate the idea, and it is now a fondly told story in the Jackson family that the
surveyor reported back (the story varies as to whether this was in person or by telephone) saying, “William, you’ll be a damn fool if you don’t build a lake there.” Jackson immediately began drafting plans for development on the land, centered around the as yet uncreated lake.

**Piping Brook Park**

The earliest record of Jackson’s plans for the land is a 1932 landscape drawing entitled “Proposed Development of a Portion of Piping Brook Park.” Named after a nearby stream, the Piping Brook Park plans are remarkably detailed to have been drafted so soon after Jackson acquired the land. It is unclear whether he drew them himself, but they reflect a landscape aesthetic fully in step with the romantic trends of asymmetry and natural beauty that were current while he was learning his trade. In the plans, which include the future contours of the Lake in the Ledges, the property is divided into fourteen irregular parcels from 1.8 to 9.2 acres in area, all but one of which include a house and eleven of which include a horse paddock.
Jackson’s artistic vision and skill as a landscape architect are visible in the details of the plans, particularly his ability to foresee and control how the land’s natural features will appear to its residents. To enter Piping Brook Park from the adjacent road, one travels down a long, straight driveway, flanked at first by open field and then by thick woods. Proceeding down this grand entranceway would create a feeling that one is plunging deep into a natural space. This is the only straight path in the design; after entering the woods, the road branches into two flowing arms that meander around opposite sides of the lake. The road’s frequent curves and passages through stands of trees break up the interior space of the park, minimizing the conspicuousness of drivers and enhancing the perceived – and actual – distance traveled as one moves through the development. The houses are irregularly shaped, designed to accommodate and echo the rocky contours of the land. Each house around the lake has a view of the water framed by banks of trees that obscure other dwellings. The overall purpose of these design elements is to achieve the greatest density of people without decreasing one’s sense of being surrounded by non-human nature.

Residents of Piping Brook Park are not meant to live entirely in mutual isolation, but the design of Piping Brook Park allows residents to control and limit their interactions with one another. Bridle paths connect the park’s many horse paddocks to the road and to each other, providing residents the opportunity for leisurely horseback promenades through the park, but the path is mostly obscured when it passes close to the lake – in one case by woods and in another by its running at the base of a steep ledge. The notable absence of a dock or boathouse implies that the lake is not intended to be entered, except
perhaps by swimmers. These measures, combined with banks of trees that frame the view from each house, are designed to preserve the natural atmosphere of the park. By admitting only the distant presence of other residents, these subtle but highly effective methods of control give each resident the impression of living in a natural, relaxed, and uncontrived space.

Jackson never built Piping Brook Park, however. In 1934, he began construction of the dam and access roads, and by 1937 the lake was full. Before any additional construction began, World War II pulled Jackson away to other projects, including construction of an airfield for Republic Aviation and the construction of Stewart Airfield at West Point (Jackson, et al. 2009). By the end of the war, Jackson’s age – he was 57 in 1945 – as well as a back injury sustained during the war years discouraged him from entering into a new, expensive, and work-intensive development project like Piping Brook Park. The land remained without further development for nearly ten years.

**West Lodge**

Beginning in 1952, Jackson began paying his own Lewis & Valentine employees to construct a house at the Lake in the Ledges. Company projects occasionally put construction on hold, but West Lodge was completed in 1953. The exterior is partially brick, while the rest is sided with rough-hewn wood, a contrast resulting from Jackson’s frugality with building materials. Other features of the house seem to reflect an ad hoc design, including the placement of light switches, which are sometimes confusingly distant from the lights themselves.

West Lodge is decidedly intentional, however, in its ability to convey the presence of the lake to its occupants. As mentioned in the preface, West Lodge sits atop a
high ledge to the west of the lake, giving it a wide view of the water and the surrounding forest. The three social spaces in the house – the dining room, living room, and a small study area – are all on the eastern side of the house, and an array of picture windows gives the lake as much of a presence inside as outside. The access road leading to a dock on the lake is hidden behind trees, as are the dam and spillway. Though it is on a far smaller scale than Piping Brook Park, West Lodge draws on many of the same techniques that made the former a work of romantic art.

**Nature: The Future of Life in the Ledges**

Although Jackson may have had lingering hopes of further developing the Lake in the Ledges, West Lodge remains the only building around the lake. For the past five decades, the rest of the land has largely been left to be recolonized by wildlife. To say that the land has “reverted to a natural state,” however, would be to ignore thousands of years of human-mediated transformations: it has been cleared by fire and axe, divided by stone wall and title deed, repopulated by crop and cattle, dammed by concrete and steel, and nearly turned into an upscale suburban development. To contemplate this land’s identity without considering its long dialog with humans would be to deny something important – about the land and about ourselves.

**The Mianus River Gorge Preserve**

In 1953, around the time that William Jackson finished the construction of West Lodge, the Greenwich Water Company introduced plans to dam a section of the Mianus river about a half mile east of the Lake in the Ledges (Mianus River Gorge Preserve n.d.). The steep slopes of the Mianus River Gorge contain some of the only trees that were
spared by European settlers, so its forest is one of the oldest in the region. A group of local residents seeking to preserve what they saw as a precious natural landscape lobbied against this development. After negotiations, the parties agreed to a smaller dam that would preserve the northern end of the gorge. Very soon after this, however, the remaining section of the gorge was slated for a 60 acre development. The committee of preservationists rallied again and finally purchased the land in 1955 with a $7,500 loan from the Nature Conservancy (The Nature Conservancy n.d.). Nine years later, the gorge became the first registered Natural History Landmark in the US, and it operates today as a center for education and ecological research.

Although the gorge is ostensibly being protected from human interference, one can see the record of human activity even there. A main concern of the original gorge preservationists was for the protection of its stands of large hemlock trees (Mianus River Gorge Preserve n.d.). As mentioned earlier, a tree ring analysis of the largest living hemlocks conducted in 1967 found them to be around three centuries old, placing their origin at about the time that European settlers arrived and interrupted the Tankiteke practice of burning the forest. This correlation is explicable, because hemlocks cannot withstand repeated burning (Cronon 1983, 50). It also identifies these trees as a possible result of European settlement and development. Moreover, the very act of preserving them marks them as a symbol of cultural values. This is not to say that the trees are purely human artifacts or that they should not be revered and protected as natural phenomena, but rather that the distinction between the two is not, to use an apt phrase, clear cut.
Life in the Ledges

We can draw similar conclusions about the Lake in the Ledges. Parts of the land that Jackson originally purchased are now owned and protected by the Mianus River Gorge Preserve, and the lake itself is designated to eventually be donated to the preserve by the current youngest generation of the Jackson family. The land is now worth protecting as a habitat for trees and wildflowers, deer and fox, heron and wren, turtle and frog – protecting, that is, from human development. In this way, we must admit that some human activities are incompatible with what we value in nature, but that cannot be the end of our considerations. After all, the lake itself was constructed; it is as much of an imposition on the landscape as the nearby reservoirs. So while we may be restraining ourselves in order to protect the land, what we are protecting is something that we have had a hand in creating.

To insist on an unbridgeable gap between ourselves and nature is to deny our own agency within history. If we are only able to engage with the natural world by destroying it, then our freedom is as meaningless as that of the Tankiteke in their land dealings with European settlers. This way of looking at nature “represents a flight from history,” writes William Cronon. As a worldview, it is attractive because, if we are not free to decide how to relate to nature, then neither are we responsible for the consequences of that relationship (Cronon 1996, 79). However, if, as Bill McKibben has pointed out, there remains no part of the biosphere unaffected by human activity, then our ability to engage constructively with the natural world is something that we ignore at our peril (McKibben 2006).
This is the realization about ourselves that comes when we consider the Lake in the Ledges as both a natural and constructed phenomenon: we are capable of contributing creatively to the natural world. Just as Tankiteke fire technology enriched the landscape by promoting diverse populations of animal and plant species, the Lake in the Ledges is a technological artifact that has significantly increased local biodiversity. Jackson did not set out to promote the welfare of wild species, but intention is not the central issue here. The trees around the lake did not intend to reclaim the land as forest, but by living and dying they have created a space for themselves and other species to flourish. Similarly, human activities create opportunities for other species to express themselves in new places and new ways. The history of the Lake in the Ledges is important not because it provides an exact blueprint for an eco-utopian relationship with nature. It would be a betrayal of history to believe that plans and blueprints really amount to much. Rather, this history is valuable to the extent that it prepares us to ask further questions about our own lives. What attitudes towards nature have we received from our families? From our economic system? From our theology? Do the stories that we tell about ourselves have a place for our connection to the nonhuman world? And, just as importantly, do the stories we tell about nature have a place for us? They should. One of the great and lasting pleasures that environmental history offers us is the chance to walk through a landscape like that of the Lake in the Ledges and to know: we are a part of this, too.
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