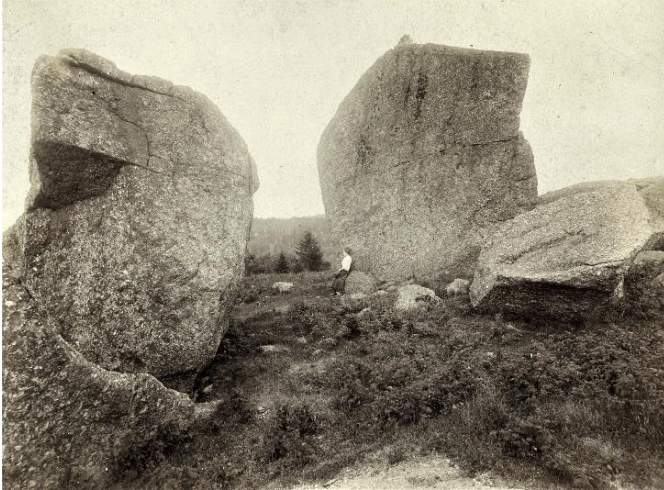


Land Conservation Aids in Social Distancing by Alan F. Rumrill

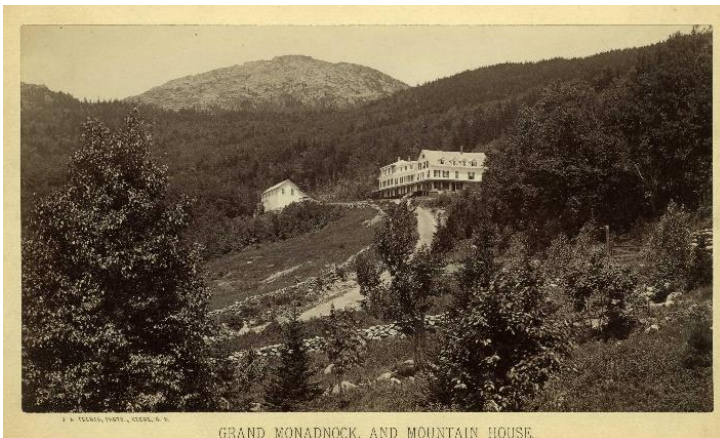


Over the past three months hundreds of thousands of people in New England and beyond have turned to the outdoors as a safe space for social distancing. Hiking in forests, parks, fields, and other open spaces has allowed individuals to exercise and to experience the positive and soothing impact of sunshine, fresh air and surrounding wildlife without coming in close contact with other people. The Monadnock Region has tens of thousands of acres of land that have been conserved over the past 150 years that are available for public enjoyment today.

Why has the conservation movement been so successful in the southwestern corner of the state? Several factors have influenced that success, chief among them being geography, economics and people.

In 1884 the Town of Jaffrey acquired 200 acres on the summit of Mt. Monadnock. The selectmen expressed their thoughts on the acquisition with the statement that they “believed it to be the wish of the town that Mt. Monadnock be forever free to the public as a place of resort for pleasure.” This was one of the first formal efforts at land conservation for the benefit and enjoyment of the public in the region. Yellowstone, the world’s first national park, had been created only 12 years earlier.

Mt. Monadnock had already been the focus of writings by authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and paintings by artists like Alvan Fisher and Amos E. Dolbear for a generation. Their works fired the imagination of the general public across New England. The desire to visit the natural paradise known as Monadnock was made easier with the arrival of the railroad in Cheshire County in the late 1840s. Visitation increased and the region’s tourist industry was born. The input and impact of authors, artists, tourists, and local residents all combined to show the town fathers of Jaffrey the importance of the preservation of nature for the well-being and enjoyment of future generations.

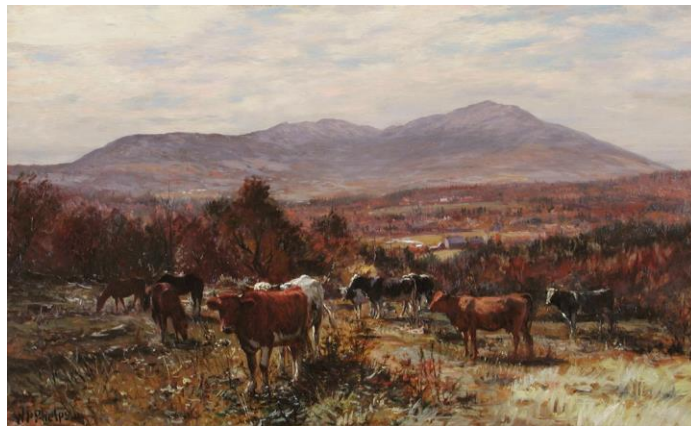


GRAND MONADNOCK, AND MOUNTAIN HOUSE

Since that beginning in 1884, Mt. Monadnock has become a model of cooperative land conservation. The mountain is one of the most successful collaborative land conservation efforts in the country and has been designated a National Natural Landmark. Today more than 12,000 acres of public and private land are conserved on the mountain.

The town of Keene was becoming conscious of the need for natural areas that were available to the public at about the same time that conservation was getting underway on the mountain. This movement was inspired and led by Keene naturalist and author George Wheelock. He worked with the town's Forest Tree Society in 1851 to plant trees and fence the common on Central Square to beautify a the muddy patch of ground surrounded by church, courthouse, town hall, and business blocks. Today the City of Keene has 16 public parks containing more than 1100 acres of open space.

In the surrounding countryside there was little thought of land conservation in the late 1800s, however. The residents there were more concerned with supporting their families and surviving economically. By the time the Forest Tree Society planted trees to beautify the Keene common in 1851 many of the surrounding towns were struggling economically. The region's agricultural economy was in decline. Competition from western farms combined with the struggle to remain productive on the thin, rocky soils of much of the region resulted in many farm families leaving Cheshire County's hill towns. The result was thousands of tracts of land that were available inexpensively, or simply by paying back-taxes to the towns as a means of taking ownership of the abandoned farms.



These properties were not totally worthless, however, and that is where the conservation story begins. Logging companies and cattle drovers acquired large tracts inexpensively for their business pursuits, but it was recreation that brought many others to this suddenly available open land. Wealthy landowners began buying land for relaxation or recreation.

The end result was the presence of numerous large landholdings in the region as the mid-20th century arrived. Most of these properties were not conserved or protected in any way, however. The transition from one generation to the next or a change in business strategy, such as the Public Service Company's move from water power to fossil fuels and its subsequent sale of the shoreline of many lakes and rivers, might result in development of these properties and the permanent loss of irreplaceable natural areas at any time.

Luckily, a change in the public mind-set and a growing appreciation for the importance of the preservation of wild land in the 1960s and 1970s occurred at just the right time. Several factors combined to culminate in hundreds of conservation tracts in southwest New Hampshire. The first of these was the back to nature movement of the 1970s. Cheshire County seemed like an oasis to many people interested in this movement. At about the same time some parts of

southeast New Hampshire were experiencing rapid, unchecked, and in some cases totally unplanned, business and industrial growth. This caught the attention of residents from the southwestern corner of the state; if we wanted to maintain our rural heritage and have a say in what our communities would look like in the future, we had to plan ahead.

Furthermore, over the next decade several Monadnock Region farms were lost to development. The level and relatively rock-free farm lands were the best surviving spaces for residential development as the population of the county continued to expand. The Monadnock Region stood at a crossroads, and those who loved its small town character and rural heritage planned and worked diligently to preserve them.

Town conservation commissions were introduced, the state of New Hampshire acquired several parcels that were preserved as parks, forests or natural areas, and the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests worked diligently to protect natural areas in Cheshire County and across the state. Then, in 1971 the Forest Society negotiated its first conservation easement, changing the complexion of land conservation in the state. Such easements allow landowners to keep their land while preventing future development. The use of conservation easements exploded in the 1980s, here and across the country.

The Forest Society was soon joined by the State of New Hampshire, local town governments, the Harris Center for Conservation Education, Sweetwater Trust, Audubon Society, Land and Community Heritage Investment Program, Nature Conservancy, and other nonprofit organizations in the local conservation effort. The Monadnock Conservancy, for example, has permanently protected 21,000 acres in 29 towns throughout the Monadnock Region during its brief 30-year history.

Perhaps most importantly, the conservation success story in southwest New Hampshire would have been impossible without the support and passion of the private landowners who have donated land or easements on tens of thousands of acres of the land they love, from forests, fields, mountains, and brooks, to swamps, farms, ponds, and islands.

Today 1.8 million acres have been conserved in New Hampshire, or 30% of the land in the state. By 2003 the Ashuelot River watershed contained more than 63,000 acres, or 99 square miles, of conservation land. That was 23% of all the land in the region, and the number has increased dramatically over the past 17 years.

The end result of this drive and passion is that the Monadnock Region has experienced one of the most successful collaborative land conservation movements in the nation. Public and private interests have conserved more than 100 square miles of land in an effort to preserve the rural character and heritage of the region. Most of us have experienced stress and anxiety during the trying times resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, but many have found that a visit to some of these open spaces can help relieve those feelings. Today you can enjoy boating, fishing, hiking, or simply watching trees, waves, birds, and wildlife thanks to careful planning and protection of the land by our predecessors over the past 150 years.