

## “A Broken Unpracticable Tract”



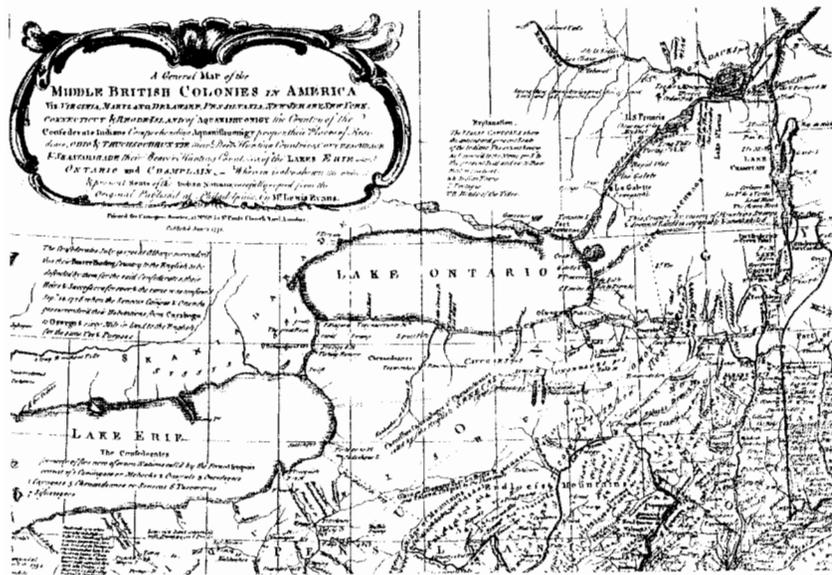
The earliest stories about the Adirondack landscape were undoubtedly told by Native Americans—hunters, warriors, or traders who traveled through the region’s forests or navigated the rivers and lakes. But what the Adirondacks as a place meant to these people has not survived. In any case, these narratives were, largely, tales told by transients, for while parts of the Adirondacks appear to have served as hunting grounds for various Native American cultures living in the nearby river valleys, no serious evidence suggests that Indians lived permanently in the central Adirondacks. Wildlife would have more plentiful and agriculture more productive in the surrounding lowlands of Lake Champlain and the Mohawk, St. Lawrence, and Black rivers, where better soils, longer growing seasons, and a warmer climate offered a more secure life than did the cold and steep Adirondacks. Archaeological finds indicate that Indians routinely passed through the Adirondacks, but year-round settlements were apparently rare.<sup>1</sup>

The place that would later be called the Adirondacks entered the European-American consciousness relatively late. The same characteristics of climate and terrain that discouraged Native Americans also delayed the arrival of Europeans. And when the Adirondacks began to appear on or in the first European-American narratives—early maps and exploration accounts—the dominant story involved not so much what the Adirondack country *was* but what it was *not*. Both cartographers and explorers were looking for land that appeared suitable for agriculture. Eighteenth-century Americans were mostly an expanding population of farmers, and as the coastal plains became cleared and

settled, a constant pressure for new arable lands developed. Throughout the British colonies, land subject to cultivation was valued, while land that resisted cultivation was often dismissed as worthless.<sup>2</sup> Hence the first encounters of Europeans with the Adirondack region emphasized the inaccessibility and ruggedness of a mountainous, swampy country.

In 1755, Lewis Evans, one of the first great English cartographers in North America, released his *General Map of the Middle British Colonies in America*. This was the most detailed map of its day, yet in the commentary accompanying it Evans was able to say more about the Ohio Valley, where the lay of the land appeared promising for agriculture, than about the Adirondacks. Of the country lying between the Mohawk and St. Lawrence rivers Evans wrote, “[I]t is entirely impassable by Reason of Ridges and Hills, not being yet broken, to drain the vast drowned Land and Swamps.”<sup>3</sup>

Sir William Johnson advanced a similar impression in the 1770s, writing that the southern Adirondack country was “so verry [sic]



This detail from a 1771 edition of Lewis Evans's map shows the minimal knowledge of northern New York acquired by Europeans by the mid-eighteenth century. Adirondack Museum Library.

mountainous & barren that it is worth nothing. The Snow was 5 feet deep on these Mountains the 30th of March.”<sup>4</sup> And in 1784 Thomas Pownall composed a lengthy *Topographical Description* to be published with a reissue of Evans's map. Pownall noted that he possessed more “Ignorance” than “Information” about the region we know today as the Adirondacks, reporting only that it was

called by the Indians Couxsachrage, which signifies the Dismal Wilderness or Habitation of Winter, [and] is a triangular, high mountainous Tract, very little known to the Europeans; and although a hunting Ground of the Indians, yet either not much known to them, or, if known, very wisely by them kept from the Knowledge of the Europeans. It is said to be a broken unpracticable Tract; I own I could never learn any Thing about it.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the very first story told about the Adirondacks by Europeans emphasized the region's mystery, wildness, and unsuitability for agriculture. At the beginning of European-American efforts to construct a narrative about the Adirondacks, the key elements in the story were established by people—Evans, Johnson, Pownall, among others—who did not live or work there and who saw the land exclusively in terms of those natural characteristics that resonated, or failed to resonate, with their needs, in this case the eighteenth-century inclination to see land in terms of its agricultural potential. The first Adirondack story was of a land of mountains, swamps, and bad weather.

At about this time, scattered trappers and hunters were pursuing mostly solitary lives in the northern wilderness. Probably the first whites to see the central Adirondacks were trappers, who may have been sources of information for cartographers and geographers like Evans and Pownall. Among the best known of these early trappers were Nicholas Stoner and Nat Foster, both of whom began trapping in the southern and southwestern Adirondacks after the American Revolution. They trapped beaver, otter, and muskrat, selling pelts at settlements to the south.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after Pownall's lament about the scarcity of accurate information, at least one Native American family was taking up permanent residence in the central Adirondacks. Sabaël Benedict, a Penobscot Indian from Maine, who had fought for the British at the battle of Quebec in 1759, became the first known permanent settler in what is now



*Sabael Benedict, first known settler in Hamilton County, portrait by unknown artist. P. 218.*

Hamilton County. At about the time of the American Revolution, he settled on the shore of Indian Lake (which subsequently received its name from Benedict's presence there) with his wife, three daughters, and a son. There they lived, hunting and trapping.<sup>7</sup>

The son, Lewis Elijah Benedict, played a prominent role in the gradual process by which downstate New Yorkers slowly learned about this vast, largely unmapped region in the northern part of their state. In 1840, geologist Ebenezer Emmons hired Benedict to guide him through the central Adirondacks. Emmons, a professor at both Williams College and the Albany Medical College, was working for the New York Natural History Survey. Beginning field work in 1836, the Natural History Survey examined the state's geology, botany, zoology, mineralogy, and agriculture. This was part of a nation-wide effort to identify and exploit natural resources.<sup>8</sup> Emmons led the first recorded ascent of Mount Marcy, reaching the summit on a chilly August morning in 1837. And it was Emmons who proposed the name "Adirondacks" for the entire mountainous region and "Marcy" for the premier summit.<sup>9</sup>



*Geologist and explorer Ebenezer Emmons led the first recorded ascent of Mount Marcy and proposed the name Adirondacks for the region of the high peaks. Reproduced from Harold K. Hochschild's Township 34.*

Emmons's annual reports to the legislature—submitted from 1837 to 1841—along with his monumental final report, *Geology of New-York, Part II: Comprising the Second Geological District* (1842–44), advanced important new elements in the nascent story of the Adirondacks. All the reports were published, and while they hardly became best sellers, they were perused by the educated and inquisitive of the day. Henry David Thoreau, for example, ruminating over them in Concord, Massachusetts, was astonished to learn that Emmons was unable to find his way through the tangled Adirondack wilderness without an Indian guide, and he remarked admiringly on the persistence of so much wild land in so civilized and developed a state as New York: "New-York has her wilderness within her own borders; and though the sailors of Europe are familiar with the soundings of her Hudson, and Fulton long since invented the steamboat on its waters, an Indian is still necessary to guide her scientific men to its head-waters in the Adirondac [sic] country."<sup>10</sup> What struck Thoreau and many others of the time was the

fact that so large a piece of New York state, as late as the 1830s and '40s, remained in a frontier or even less settled condition. The Adirondacks, in other words, were fundamentally different from the rest of New York.

Emmons was writing at a time when a variety of cultural factors were coalescing that would encourage an image of the Adirondacks as a place defined almost exclusively by natural, as opposed to social or cultural, characteristics. The romantic temperament, with its faith in the redemptive powers of nature, exercised enormous power among the American middle and upper classes and thus influenced profoundly the way that Emmons and people like him responded to and constructed narratives about the Adirondacks. Developing in Europe during the last decades of the eighteenth century and responding to the wrenching cultural, social, and environmental changes effected by industrialization, romanticism found modern (especially urban) life to be inherently stressful, corrupting, debilitating, and spiritually enervating. The antidote to these widely perceived evils of modernity was a retreat to nature. Where the modern city seemed a pit of iniquity and woe, nature was a fount of divine virtue and regenerative power. The romantic movement encouraged Americans to appreciate the beauties of their country in ways that their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ancestors had often ignored.<sup>11</sup> As a literate, culturally alert man of his day, Emmons was sensitive to the changes in American life that would inevitably accompany the shift from a rural, agricultural society to one that was largely urban and industrial. Emmons understood that America would follow western Europe down the path of industrialization, and he knew that the beauty and opportunities for spiritual renewal offered by the Adirondacks would be an invaluable treasure in a state where mills and smokestacks were even then beginning rapidly to replace forests and farms.

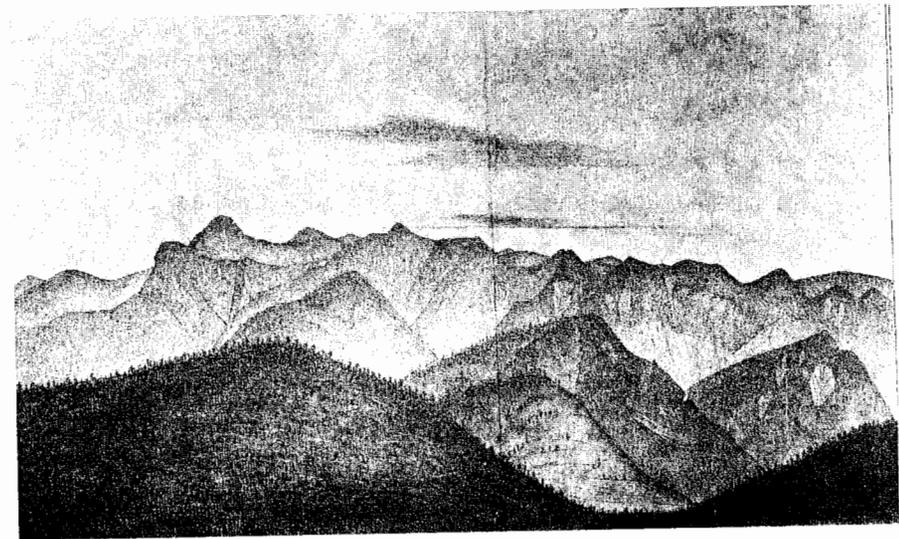
Emmons found the entire Adirondack region to be a land "unrivaled for its magic and enchantment," declaring,

It is not, however, by description that the scenery of this region can be made to pass before the eye of the imagination: it must be witnessed; the solitary summits in the distance, the cedars and firs which clothe the rock and shore, must be seen; the solitude must be felt; or, if it is broken by the scream of the panther, the shrill cry of the northern diver [loon], or the

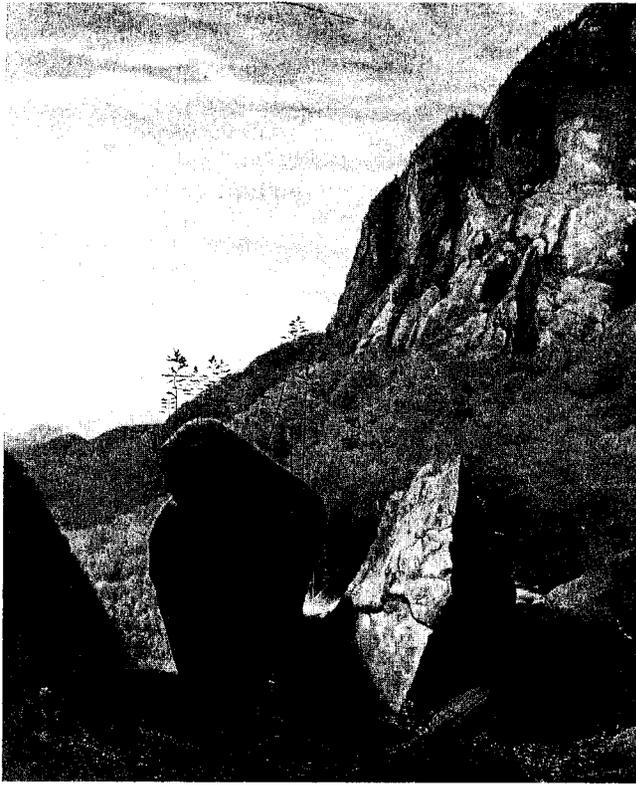
shout of the hunter, the echo from the thousand hills must be heard before all the truth in the scene can be realized.<sup>12</sup>

Emmons's account of the natural beauty of the Adirondacks reflected an American aesthetic of nature that was focusing intensely and increasingly on wild scenery. The same landscape that had seemed rugged and difficult to Evans or Pownall now appealed to Emmons because it reminded him of the romantic canvases of painters that were becoming popular even as he wrote and would later be recognized as the Hudson River School.

Indeed, Charles C. Ingham, a New York city artist (whose career had mostly been dedicated to painting portraits of the socially prominent), accompanied Emmons on the expedition of 1837 that completed the first ascent of Marcy. Ingham's painting of Indian Pass, "The Great Adirondack Pass—Painted on the Spot" (first exhibited in 1839 and one of the earliest oil paintings depicting an Adirondack scene) illustrated



*This sketch of the high peaks by Ebenezer Emmons was among the earliest pictorial evidence of the grand scenery of the northern mountains. Lithograph by John H. Bufford for Emmons's report to the legislature for 1837. 58.321.2 (168).*



*Charles Cromwell Ingham's The Great Adirondack Pass (1837) typified the romantic fascination with sublime scenery. 66.114.01 (138).*

well an important feature of the romantic fascination with the American landscape, its inclination to search out striking scenery.<sup>13</sup> Wild American nature, it was widely believed, would become the subject of a great national art, an art that would erase the nagging sense of cultural backwardness that many Americans felt when they compared their country with Europe.<sup>14</sup> The towering cliffs and summits of the Adirondack high peaks and the magnificent lakes of the central plateau appeared providentially consonant with this hope.

The fact that Ingham was part of the 1837 expedition was but one important way that Emmons promoted and refined the first great nar-

rative attempting to define the Adirondacks—a narrative that has exercised enormous power ever since. In this view the Adirondack country is "nature," a place of wildness, a place defined by non-human attributes. In its emphasis on an unpeopled landscape, it is descended from the picture of the Adirondacks advanced by Evans and Pownall, though it finds positive characteristics where they found negative. The most important version of this story combined the love of the merely pictorial features of wild scenery with a personal search for recreation and rejuvenation amidst the very mountains and lakes that furnished the scenery.

In June of 1840, Emmons met zoologist James DeKay, also employed by the Natural History Survey, at Lake Pleasant, where they began a lengthy and mostly water-borne tour of the Adirondacks. They trekked by foot to Lewey Lake near Indian Lake, where they rendezvoused with Lewis Elijah Benedict. From Emmons's account of their subsequent adventures, it is hard to tell whether Benedict's skills as woodsman or his trusty canoe were more vital to the success of their mission, which eventually carried them all the way to the Saranac lakes, with a side trip to Old Forge. Emmons was immensely impressed with Benedict's

birch canoe [which] gave us a safe transport through the wilderness for at least one hundred miles, together with our camp equipment, as tents, pork, bread, fish, guns, traps, hammers, and various objects caught by the way, making, in the whole, a tolerable load for so frail a bark, considering that it must necessarily pass over stones and sandbars and against rocks and logs, and overcome the various obstructions incident to a wild and unfrequented country.<sup>15</sup>

At Raquette Lake Emmons visited the rough compound established by that lake's first settlers, a pair of rugged men named, amazingly, Beach and Wood. After admiring their vegetable garden, Emmons went on to display more precisely his prescient vision of the region's future. He described Raquette Lake in detail:

The waters are clear but generally ruffled with the breeze. It is well supplied with lake trout which often weigh twenty pounds. The neighboring forests abound also in deer and other game. Hence it is finely suited for the temporary residence of those who are troubled with *ennui*, or who

wish to escape for a time during the months of July and August from the cares of business or the heat and bustle of the city. To enable the traveller or invalid to make the most of the situation, a supply of light boats are [sic] always on hand for fishing or hunting, or for exploring the inlets and neighboring lakes which are connected with the Racket [sic].<sup>16</sup>

Emmons and DeKay did not know it, but they were helping to establish what would become the major elaboration of the story of the Adirondacks as a romantic landscape. They were outsiders who came to the Adirondacks to see the wilderness, and they needed both the woodcraft and the small boat of a local man to get them from place to place and to keep them fed and healthy. The men (and a few women) who followed Emmons to the wilderness were usually not scientists. They came just to fish, hunt, and restore body and soul amid the scenic and recreational glories of the Adirondacks, but Emmons and DeKay set the pattern for these increasingly popular camping trips. The Adirondacks became that nature to which middle- and upper-class gentlemen from outside the region repaired to recapture the vigor of body and soul weakened by the stresses of modern life. These visitors, as Emmons foresaw, would be "temporary," and the success of their visit would depend on the resources of the year-round residents, whose existence in Emmons's picture of the future was elided into the equipment ("supply of light boats") they furnished the tourists.

Obviously, in antebellum America, the people most in need of an escape from the miseries of overwork, the wage slaves of the North and the actual slaves of the South, were denied access to the sort of bourgeois vacation that Emmons envisioned on Raquette Lake. Likewise, those Americans who lived and worked in the countryside—farmers and loggers, for example—were unlikely to be reading Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature" and meditating on the salutary influences of a life in the wilderness.<sup>17</sup> But to the growing managerial and professional class, that is, to those Americans profiting from the new economy and culture developing around the nation's rapidly expanding cities, a retreat to the seacoast or the mountains became increasingly appealing and available. The loci of these vacations ranged from the opulent and cosmopolitan, as at Newport or Saratoga Springs, to the rustic and isolated, as at Maine's Moosehead Lake or the central Adirondacks.<sup>18</sup>

Emmons thus predicted what would become a prominent feature of the Adirondack story. As he so eloquently announced, here was a re-

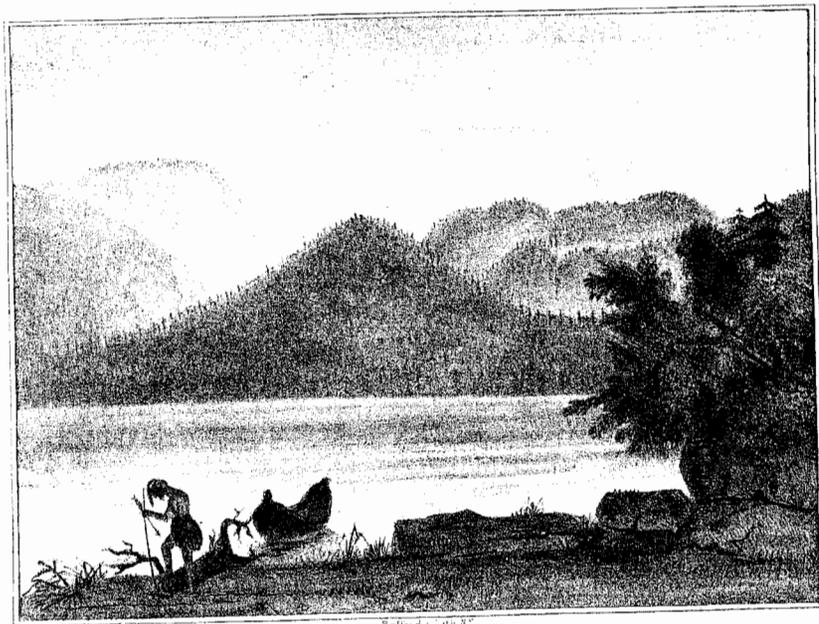
gion whose recreational opportunities appeared limitless. The tourist seeking an escape from the drudgeries and distractions of modern life would find solace and rest amidst the scenic lakes of the central Adirondacks. All the tourist needed was a boat and a guide, preferably one as "safe and intelligent" as Lewis Elijah Benedict.<sup>19</sup>

That Benedict was an Indian undoubtedly also appealed to Emmons's romanticism. Intellectuals of that era, especially in the East, projected a host of associations onto the very idea of Native Americans, and in Emmons's case this led to an especially lasting vestige of his imprint on the Adirondacks, the name that he proposed for the high peaks and that subsequently came to identify the entire region. In the annual report to the legislature in which he discussed the field work for 1837, Emmons suggested a name for the mountainous country he was exploring:

The cluster of mountains in the neighborhood of the Upper Hudson and Ausable rivers, I propose to call the Adirondack Group, a name by which a well-known tribe of Indians who once hunted here may be commemorated.

He went on to assert that the "Adirondacks or Algonquins in early times held all the land north of the Mohawk," admitting, significantly, that "whether this is literally true or not" was not known.<sup>20</sup>

By the time Emmons named the Adirondacks, Native Americans were seldom seen in the eastern United States, except on reservations. No longer an obstacle to American "progress" (of which the Natural History Survey was manifestly a vehicle), they could be romanticized in, by, and for the popular imagination. That these Indians were thought to have "once" hunted in the Adirondacks was a telling detail of Emmons's rationale for choosing the name he did. It was part of the popular American inclination to sentimentalize Indians. The best known example of the eastern American romanticization of Indian culture in the antebellum era was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), itself based on a collection of Ojibwa tales compiled by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and published in 1839, just a couple of years after Emmons named the Adirondacks.<sup>21</sup> Emmons was not the last white man to project the romantic symbolism of Indian associations onto the Adirondack landscape, but his was certainly the most important regional example of this widespread cultural project.



*Emmons's impulse to create Indian associations for the Adirondacks appears in this engraving of "View of the Indian Pass from Lake Henderson." Lithograph by John H. Bufford for Emmons's report to the legislature for 1837. 58.321.2 (171).*

Nowhere is Emmons's romantic conception of the Adirondacks more clear than in the name he bestowed upon the high peaks that he was among the very first to explore and climb.

So pervasive was this need to establish Indian associations that Emmons was in fact criticized for naming mountains (e.g., Marcy and Seward) after European Americans. People of his era wanted to believe that features of the Adirondack landscape had once possessed authentic Indian names, even though there was absolutely no evidence that this was the case. The popular outdoor writer Charles Lanman blasted Emmons for his "folly . . . in attempting to name the prominent peaks of the Adirondac [sic] region after a brotherhood of living men. . . . A pretty idea, indeed, to scatter to the winds the ancient poetry of the poor Indian, and perpetuate in its place the names of living politicians!"<sup>22</sup>

Alongside Emmons's romanticism—sometimes contradicting it, sometimes complementing it—was a keen awareness of the potential for economic development. To Emmons, the Adirondacks seemed capable of providing both beautiful scenery for the tourist and wealth for the businessman; that these two expectations might eventually generate conflict did not occur to him. Nor should we be surprised that it did not; the Adirondack region was an enormous, largely unexplored wilderness. That nature should be protected from exploitation would have been unimaginable to most Americans in the early nineteenth century.

The romantic temperament emerged in America during, and largely coexisted with, an era of feverish expansion and development. While the politicians of Emmons's day often disagreed with one another over the role of the federal government in promoting such aids to economic development as turnpikes and canals or assistance to industry through tariffs, there was widespread consensus that nature was a source of wealth, that the natural resources of the still relatively young nation were a divinely provided opportunity for rapid exploitation. The natural wealth of North America also offered, so went the prevailing wisdom of the age, a way for the United States to avoid the evils of the social system that condemned people to lives of class-bound poverty in Europe. In a society that was continually expanding economically and geographically, ambitious and entrepreneurial individuals would always have the opportunity to change their status.<sup>23</sup> The fundamental American ideology of individually achieved success was from the very beginning tied to widely shared convictions about the inexhaustibility of American nature.

All these impulses to settle the continent, extend American institutions from sea to sea, and exploit natural resources added up to what generations of historians have discussed as the doctrine of the "manifest destiny" of the American people.<sup>24</sup> Though the dominant focus of this notion was on the West, it operated in the Adirondacks just as powerfully as it did in the rest of the country. The only thing that distinguished the Adirondacks from western frontier regions was that exploitation of local riches—real or imaginary—did not involve the removal or slaughter of indigenous peoples.

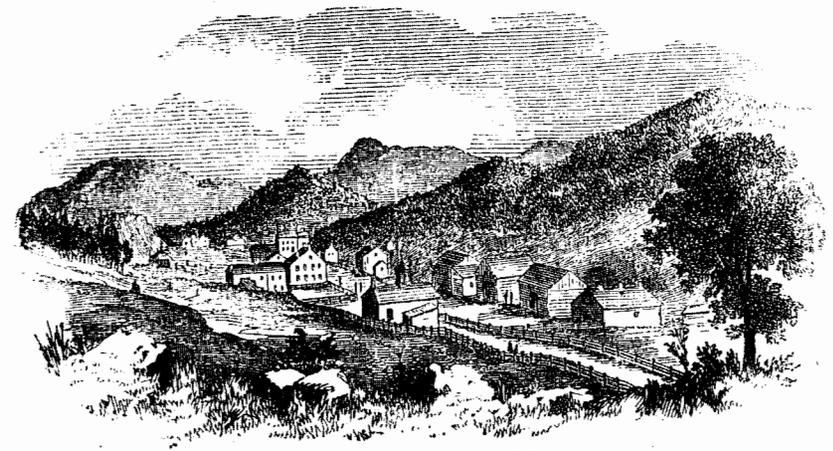
Otherwise, the idea that nature was an apparently endless resource to be exploited (which obviously contradicted the earlier image of the

Adirondacks as cold, forbidding, and resistant to human use) became an increasingly important element in the growing body of narratives defining the Adirondack landscape. Ebenezer Emmons, who promoted the romantic ideal of retreat to the land as antidote to the evils of modernity, simultaneously advanced the banner of economic exploitation. Thus, for Emmons and the many Americans who shared his views, the word "nature" and the physical landscape it described belonged to two quite distinct narratives: nature was a place of scenery, recreation, and rejuvenation, and it was also and at the same time a locus for utilitarian exploitation. As Emmons's fellow explorer, Farrand Benedict, wrote, "There is much in this region to draw hitherward the pleasure-loving, many inducements for the money-loving."<sup>25</sup> The contest between these two narratives has been fiercely engaged in the Adirondacks (and in innumerable other places) ever since Emmons's day.

The first utilitarian contribution that Emmons foresaw for the Adirondacks involved mining. Iron mining and smelting began in the Lake Champlain foothills of the Adirondacks in 1801 and was a prominent feature of the local economy for the rest of the century. By the time of the Civil War iron from the eastern Adirondacks was considered to be among the best in the world. While most of the Adirondack mines and forges were close to Lake Champlain, an important exception to this was the McIntyre development near Newcomb. There a company controlled by a group of downstate investors, the chief of whom was Archibald McIntyre of New York City and Albany, mined ore discovered in 1825 by Lewis Elijah Benedict.<sup>26</sup>

When Emmons set off for the summit of Marcy in 1837, his base camp was a small village at the McIntyre iron works on the upper Hudson. Emmons explored this area carefully and concluded that it held iron deposits of national significance: "The most extensive beds of this kind of ore in the district, and perhaps in the world, are found at Newcomb, in the vicinity of Lake Sandford [sic]." Emmons waxed eloquent about the ostensible potential of the iron deposits on the upper Hudson and predicted a rosy future of huge profits for the mine's owners.<sup>27</sup>

Like many Americans of his day, moreover, Emmons believed that agriculture was the best possible use of land and maintained high hopes that the Adirondacks would someday support a population of thrifty yeomen and their families. The wilderness that otherwise he



ADIRONDACK VILLAGE.

*Sketch of one of the two villages near the McIntyre iron development, from Benson J. Lossing's The Hudson, from the Wilderness to the Sea (1866).*

found to be the source of "truth" would be replaced by fields and gardens:

The axe has been laid at the foot of the tree, and ere long where naught now greets the eye but a dense, and to appearance impenetrable forest, will be seen the golden grain waving with the gentle breeze, the sleek cattle browsing on the rich pastures, and the farmer with well-stored granaries enjoying the domestic hearth.<sup>28</sup>

This vision of georgic prosperity derived from the same traditions that had led Evans and Pownall to disparage the Adirondacks as cold and useless; in either case, the land is understood only in terms of agricultural productivity. And the prevailing wisdom of Emmons's day had an answer to the old claims about the uncooperative Adirondack climate. It was widely believed, with some empirical evidence, that once the forests were cleared from a previously forested landscape, the climate would get warmer. This was the beginning of awareness of the potential for human activities to effect climate change.<sup>29</sup> Emmons himself asserted, "When the country is settled extensively, and the timber

and wood removed, there will be an amelioration of climate; it will become drier and less frosty, and the summer warmer and better suited to the raising of corn."<sup>30</sup>

In describing what he was certain was the Adirondack future, even when engaging in what seems like an almost supernatural faith, Emmons invoked a vocabulary—"golden grain," "rich pastures," "domestic heart"—that would have been familiar and of mythic significance to most Americans. Like Thomas Jefferson and many other eighteenth-century thinkers who helped establish this view in the national set of cultural values, most Americans believed the farmer to be the true exponent of democracy and the farmed landscape to be the best protector of republican virtue and Christian values. When Emmons constructed his narrative of rural wholesomeness, he was describing a future for both the American people and the American landscape that was unconsciously and nearly universally understood.<sup>31</sup>

As it turned out, Emmons underestimated both the severity of Adirondack winters and the relative thinness of the soil, and the dream of prosperous agricultural communities was never realized, though many a poor family had to learn the hard way that their labors in clearing the forest from a parcel of Adirondack land would never be adequately rewarded. Likewise, difficulties of transportation and impurities in the ore prevented Archibald McIntyre's iron company from achieving the financial success predicted by Emmons. But the importance of Emmons's picture of an intensely peopled and cultivated landscape is critical to what has been ever since a contest between competing narratives about the Adirondacks, both of which appear in the various pronouncements of Ebenezer Emmons about the region's future.

In one story the Adirondacks exist as a natural landscape, one to be defined and appreciated as the embodiment of all the goodness and virtue of nature, a nature that is defined as fundamentally outside the social world of commerce and industry. Here the Adirondack country is inhabited by fish and animals, the hillsides are forested, and people are either visitors or scattered residents who live close to nature in order to serve the needs of the visitors. In the competing story, the Adirondack country is just another American place where people go about the daily business of working, raising children, and engaging the



*For explorers and early settlers and tourists, the first Adirondack roads were little more than primitive tracks through the forest. Log Road in Hamilton County (1844) by Regis Francois Gignoux. 64.005.01 (92).*

national economy. There were at least two important and inherently conflicting variations of this latter story. In the first the dominant theme is the notion of sustainable frontier communities based on agriculture; in the other the critical theme is the extraction of natural resources capitalized by outside corporations. Emmons failed to distinguish between these, just as he failed to distinguish between the stories of the Adirondacks as nature or as locus for economic activity. In his ambivalence, we find the source of the confusion that has vexed New Yorkers ever since. Is the Adirondack region a landscape of wild nature treasured for its beauty, recreational potential, and immanent divinity? Is it a place where people live? Is it a place to make money? Can it be all of these?