

## VIBRANT, VISIBLE, VALUABLE

By Gordon Peery

Whether you live in the Monadnock Region or are just passing through, sensing the vibrancy of this area is unavoidable.

We are rich in culture, replete with artists, musicians, actors, writers, and craftspeople. Eclectic venues and organizations abound, alongside innovative industries. There are strong business and civic leaders, effective social services agencies, and dynamic communities. Our forests, too, make unique and valuable contributions to our lives.

Our first settlers no doubt noticed a transition from the woods of southern New England, populated by oak, chestnut, hickory, hemlock, and stands of white pine, to the northern forests of yellow birch, beech, maples, red spruce, and balsam fir. This merging created a dense Monadnock Region forest that offers a breadth of sylvan diversity.

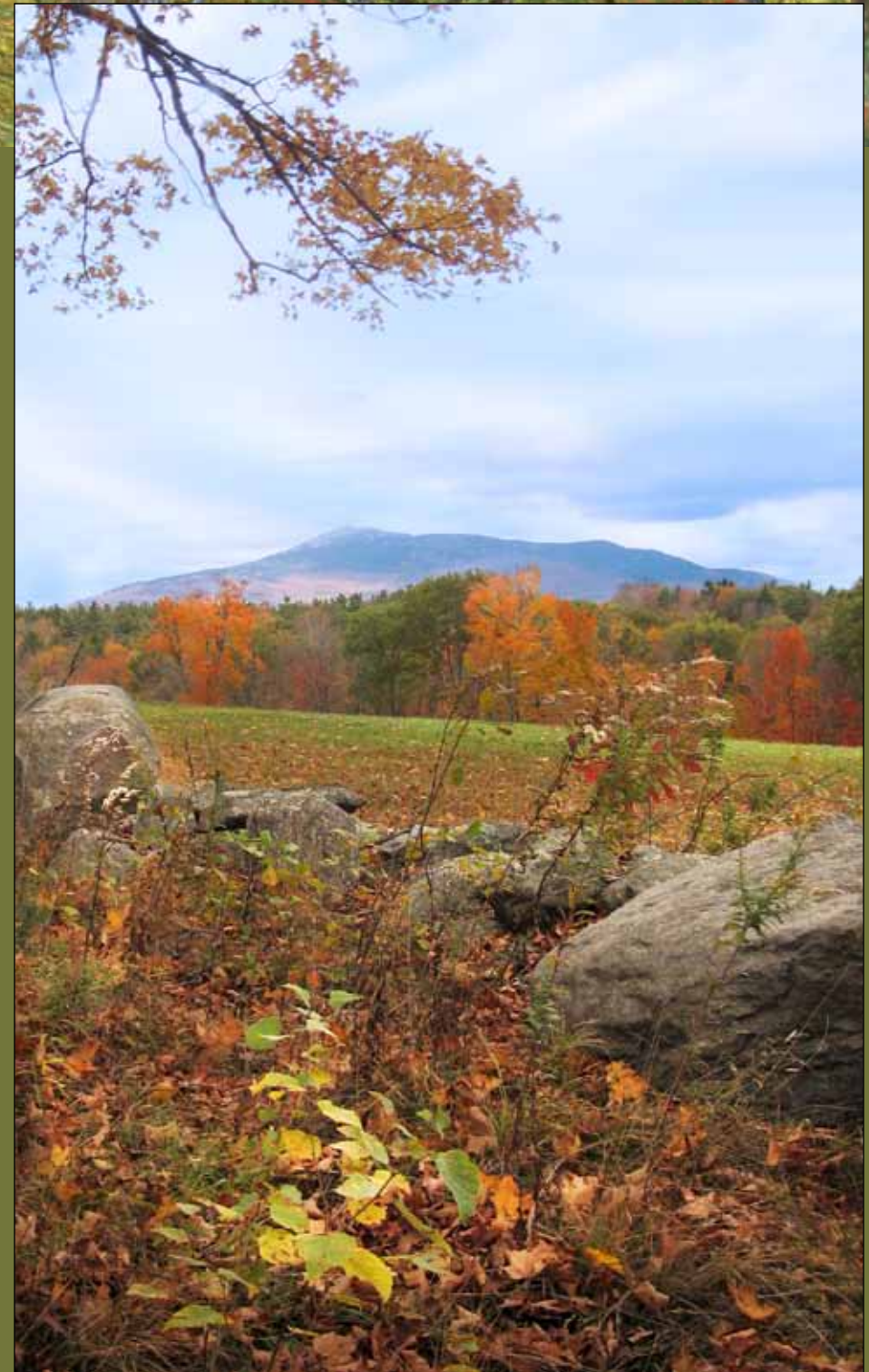
Coming to the New World from deforested England, the first travelers and homesteaders were awestruck by what appeared to be an endless supply of wood. Trees were felled to build cabins and houses, to provide warmth (a large New England home in later times could consume 30 to 40 cords of firewood in one winter), and, of course, to create farmland.

Pine trees larger than 24 inches in diameter were reserved for The Crown, to provide masts and spars for ships in the Royal Navy. These long logs were hauled to Portsmouth and other ports along relatively straight wilderness traces still marked in some New

Hampshire towns today by the name Mast Road. While there are dramatic accounts of pine stands with trees 5 feet in diameter towering to 250 feet high, these tended to be scattered, having grown up where fire had cleared specific areas. Today, the largest stand of old pine in the Monadnock Region is in Thatcher Memorial Forest, off Old Dublin Road in Hancock, in the vicinity of Juggernaut Pond. These trees are estimated to be between 100 and 150 years old — not ancient by tree standards, but impressive nevertheless.

For a comprehensive view of regional forests (and everything else!), there's no place better than at elevation 3,165 feet atop Mt. Monadnock. In the early 19th century, farmers first set fire to the lower part of the mountain to clear land for pasture. Then, to purge the mountain of its wolf population, they basically burned the entire mountain. The top of the mountain never recovered from this, and today it remains without significant vegetation above 2,000 feet. This dearth of forestation not only facilitates mountaintop viewing, but also lends a dramatic appearance to the region's namesake.

With the arrival of sheep as an economic mainstay (starting around 1820), forests were



The Harris Center for Conservation Education actively conserves more than 17,000 acres in the Monadnock Region.

**Far Right:** Casalis State Forest and Marsh encompass 228 acres of forests, trails, ponds, and streams.



cut and burned to create grazing space. A view from Mt. Monadnock in the mid-1800s, when New Hampshire itself was about 80 percent cleared, not surprisingly would have shown mostly deforested land. This state was short-lived, though, and again it was economic forces that facilitated a change.

The viability of sheep farming subsided. The expansion of railroads led to an exodus by a good portion of New Hampshire's agricultural populace, who left their farms and took the train west for the more easily tilled soils of America's heartland. Oil and coal provided alternatives to wood for heat. In short, there was no longer a reason to prevent the trees from growing back.

Although the Hurricane of 1938 took down as many as a quarter of the trees in some Monadnock Region towns, New Hampshire's forests continued to expand until the late 1980s, eventually achieving about 80 percent of land-share — the exact inverse of their presence at the peak of the sheep era.

Some parts of the Monadnock Region have suffered from slow encroachment by development during the ensuing decades, but in general our local woods have benefited from a long-standing, time-honored, ongoing preservation movement that has resulted in thousands of acres of forestland specifically set aside.

Many towns have adopted one or more tracts of land as official town forests (requiring a vote of the town). State parks and forests protect additional lands, and organizations such as The

Nature Conservancy, The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, and the Harris Center for Conservation Education (above) have been designated as stewards for privately held land that has conservation easements.

While there remain no regional stands of "virgin" forest, Sheldrick Forest in Wilton offers an "old forest" experience to those who hike its 227 acres, where a rich underpinning of mountain laurel makes winter walks particularly enchanting.

When you are walking in Peterborough's Shieling Forest, it's hard to believe that you're just a mile or so from downtown. It's a tempting destination for an extended lunch break, where you can manage the trails over its 45 acres in a short time. But don't let the proximity to town fool you: Gnarly roots, a lovely stream bed, and intriguing boulders will have you thinking that you're in Tolkien's Middle-earth.

There are times today when our awe at the breadth and bounty of our beautiful forests undoubtedly matches or even exceeds that in which they were held by Native Americans and the first pioneers. Just as Mt. Monadnock itself has stood as our rock-steady, silent sentinel through the ages, so too have our abundant forestlands borne vibrant, visible, valuable witness to the ever changing life and times of our Monadnock Region.

**Gordon Peery** lives in Nelson, N.H., where from his home he can look out at City Hill, a now forested mountain that got its name from being densely settled in the early 1800s.

