

The Primeval Forest

‘This is the forest primeval.’ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow uses this line in his poem *Evangeline* referring to woods untouched by humans. That short sentence gives me goosebumps. I’m not sure why. Perhaps it is the emphasis on the word primeval. It conjures up something unimaginable.

When I walk in our woods I often think what it must have been like in Greene before the settlers were here. What was the old growth forest like? Did our land look different thousands of years ago?. New York State was covered with ice that was more than a mile thick in places 20,000 years ago. I have been on several hikes through Chenango County and have learned about eskers, moraines, kettles, kames and outcrops, all created by a glacier. It formed our landscape.

When the “Yankee farmers” from New England and other immigrants from Europe started to come into New York State, they began to transform the land. They felt that the endless forest had to be tamed and they cleared their lands of trees so they could plant crops. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s book *Little House in the Big Woods* describes the mindset at that time and has left an indelible impression in many of our heads.

When the roads were established, the deforestation occurred even faster because the potash industry was developed. Hardwood trees (elm trees were particularly sought after) were felled and rolled so they lay on top of each other. Branches were cut and piled around the logs. After drying, they were burned until ashes remained. Then the ashes were put into a vat where water was poured on top and liquid ashes drained off the bottom. This liquid was boiled in a huge pot until all the moisture was gone and the resulting “pot-ash” was called “black salts.” These black salts were taken to an ashery so they could be burned at high temperatures and created “pearl ash”. This was used in making soap, glass, dyes, ceramics, baking soda and was in great demand. It was ready cash for the pioneer and was easily shipped in barrels. The barrels were taken to Catskill or in the spring taken by raft to market. Asheries transformed the land. Now chemicals are used instead of ashes for the aforementioned industries and hardly anyone knows what an ashery is. It is interesting that the word potassium is derived from the word potash. In Greene, West Juliard Hill was called Potash Hill in the 1800s and was a favorite spot for sledding. According to Mrs. Folsom, there was an Ashery at the bottom of this hill and one on Mill Street in back of the Baptist Church.

Another industry that transformed the forest was tanning. In the early days, bark was used in the tanning process. The hemlock was prized for this because of its high tannic acid. The potash industry had used up the hardwoods but there were still evergreen stands available for the tanneries. There are many notices in the *Chenango American* about wagons coming through town loaded with bark on their way to the depot. The hides or skins of animals were soaked in water and tannins to cure them. Like the potash industry, tanning today is done with chemicals

and the days of using bark for tanning are gone.

Near my property is a stone quarry. I came upon it years ago and almost fell into it. The other day I walked over to it and went down to the bottom of it and was amazed again at how it has not changed in the last 150 years or so. There are some slabs lying around that look as if they had been cut yesterday. The book, *Roadside Geology of New York* by Bradford B. Van Diver, has a chapter on NY 12: Binghamton to Utica. He writes that around Greene the rocks are sedimentary, mostly sandstone and shale. 'Small cuts near Greene expose gray sandstone of the late Devonian Genesee group.' He also writes that there are many stone quarries in the Chenango Valley, especially sand and gravel pits.

In the early years, stone was not used to build houses here. The need to clear the land made wood the choice of building material. There were many quarries around Greene. Mrs. Folsom mentions several by name, one of the earliest being on the Cowles' farm west of the South Canal Street School. There were the Birdsall, Miller and Whitmarsh Quarries in the area to name a few. The quarry, owned by the Robert Starrs, that I can walk to was used for the building of the Chenango Canal. *From Raft to Railroad* mentions the following: 'The river-side bank of the canal at Cady's Mills for some distance south of the bridge required considerable stone to construct, and there is a similar fill near the Big Rock in the river, south of the Finnegan (Barton) home. This stone was quarried from the hillside nearby.' The quarry is across Route 12 from the Big Rock in the Chenango.

The stone used to be "quarried" by blasting it out or using hand tools and the market was almost all local. In 1863 a channel cutting machine was invented and after that, it was easier to get the stone out but big slabs were still too heavy to transport very far. When the railroad came to Greene in 1870, huge slabs began to be transported to the depot and shipped everywhere. Here's an item from the *Chenango American* on 12-Oct-1882: 'A large stone weighing 8 tons, requiring 10 horses to draw it, passed thru the village en route to the depot last Thursday for the New Produce Exchange Building being erected in New York City (see http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/fnart/fa267/19th/produce_exchange.jpg). Another item mentions that stone was sent to New York City for Grant's Tomb.

Another use for the stone was to lay the stone walks in the village. All through the late 1800s there are numerous news items in the *Chenango American* mentioning all the new sidewalks being laid in front of residences and businesses. Does a village stone walk remain?

Here is a *Chenango American* item that describes what life in Greene was like on 3-Nov-1881: 'Our R.R. Station does the most business of any between Binghamton and Utica, the R.R. men tell us. Teams hauling loads of lumber, bark, stones and farm produce stand in line every day, waiting their turn to unload.'

Now the old growth forests are gone, asheries and tanneries are no more and there is not a working stone quarry in the town of Greene that I know of, except for sand and gravel businesses. Standing in my hillside quarry with a dead tree hanging over the ledge and observing the area brings up the same inexplicable emotion I feel when I say to myself 'This was the forest primeval.' However, hope springs eternal. These vast forest tracts, nearly wiped out by the turn of the 20th century, are making a dramatic comeback in upstate New York.

