

Walking Home

My life changed when I was seven. That summer we moved across town from a house modeled in pink Miami stucco into a recently built constellation of two-storey apartment buildings, cut as if from Monopoly hotels and trimmed in grass and spindly maples. Home was the New York suburbs, and Westchester County in 1966 represented the new pinnacle of middle-class America. Each evening our fathers returned to Port Chester from Wall Street and Madison Avenue, on the New York and New Haven line's 8:51 express. The short ride west from station to bedroom carried one along Westchester Avenue, over a long, mound-shaped slope, barely noticeable in a new V-6 Chevy Impala. Before descending again, one turned north onto North Ridge Street, and finally a quick turn west, into the entrance of the Avon Circle Apartments. A moment's coast down the steep, banking hill of the U-shaped complex allowed for one final sigh of exhaustion and rest before bottoming out and walking through the door. On a go-cart or bicycle, you could coast from North Ridge Street almost to the midpoint of the U.

The children of these professionals, my playmates and I transformed the grounds of Avon Circle. We built forts and tunnels in the scalloped mountains of plowed snow, and in summer took to cajoling the lifeguard to stay late for night swimming. We played tag and four-on-four football in my backyard. More maples, planted barely a decade before when the complex was built, served as end zone markers and goal posts for our wayward extra-point attempts.

There was a fence, too. Its most immediate utility was to mark the edge of the Apartments and our football field, scoring a sharp line of burnished steel running east-west to Mr. Basceglia's backyard. From there it angled sharply to the south along concrete patios and freshly cut rock outcroppings until it hit the pool and Westchester Avenue. Along its entire length lay the Woods, a tract of forest that, even on a map as intimate as a 7.5 minute topographic map, hardly bears mention today (Figure 1). That its areal extent barely reaches fifty acres surprises me, for in its day it was large enough to become a world apart. And what mattered most was entering.

A gate interrupted the fence not fifty feet from my patio door and served as portal. Here also a south-flowing brook, little more than a dozen feet wide, left the woods and entered the new, early successional

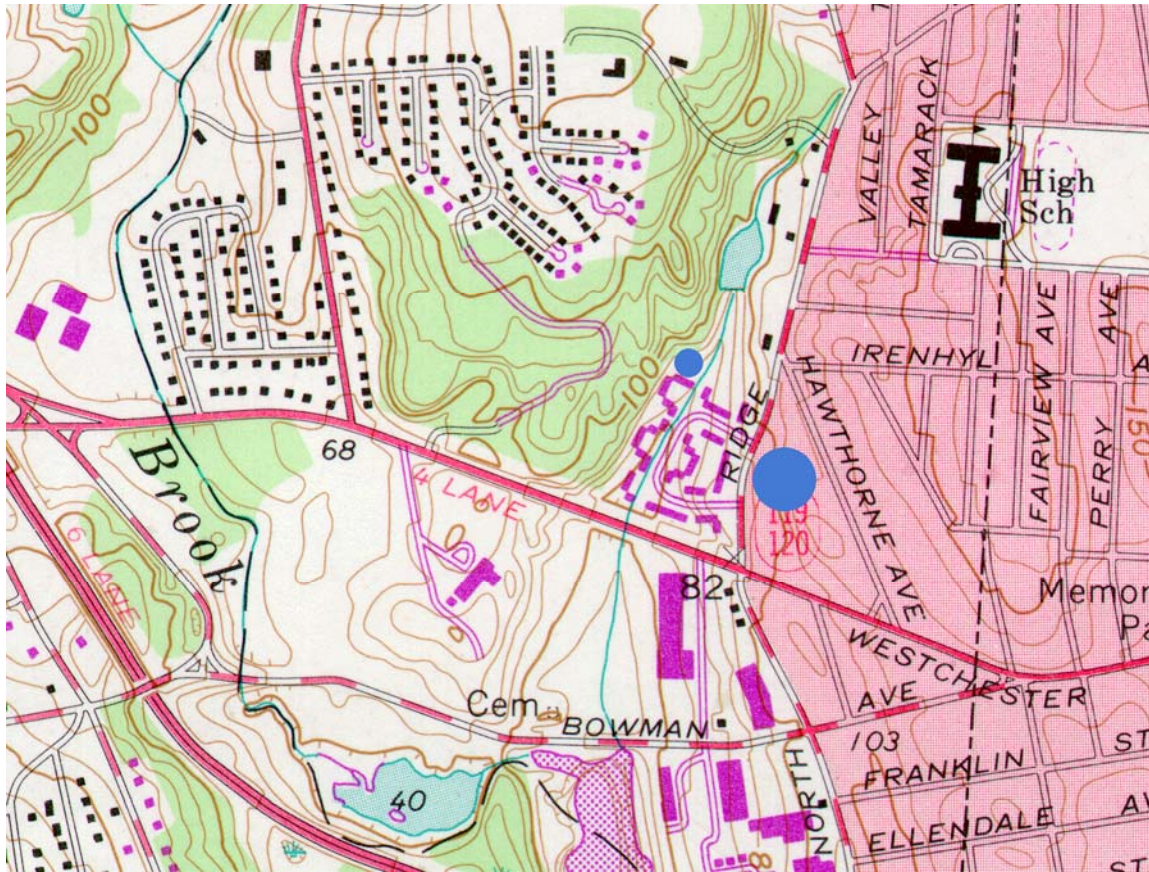


Figure 1. The large blue dot marks the Avon Circle Apartments; the small blue dot is my home, with the brook, dam and pond just to the north. North Ridge St. and Westchester Ave. bound the south and east. The junior high school sits just south of Westchester Avenue. The brook appears to flow through the complex, but does not. Note also the pink hue for the established development east of North Ridge Street, and non-suburban landscape to the street's west. Detail of 1960 7.5 minute Granville, Conn.-N.Y. quadrangle, photorevised in 1971. I have increased the scale to approximately 1:12,000, or one inch to 1,000 feet. The contour interval on all figures is 10 feet.

landscape of lawn and apartments by running under the complex as a culverted storm drain. It reappeared on the other side of Westchester Avenue as a canal in the playing fields of the new junior high school. More than once, my pals and I walked its length in boots and flashlights.

That I lived at this breach between the natural world and the human was a matter of good fortune. That the brook drained south was, by and large, a function of Ice-Age geomorphology. Up-slope from the brook, North Ridge Street wends north-south through southeastern Westchester County and bounds the eastern edge of the Woods. At this point it contours along a hillside, atop whose modest summit sits Port Chester High School (see map) and whose topography resembles that of a drumlin or esker. Such north-south trending drainages and elongated hillocks, large and small, dominate the county, especially as one

moves north. The Bronx River and the Saw Mill River trend north-south, as does the Harlem Valley, which roughly bisects the county; all served as major Algonkian routes before European settlement (Shoumatoff, 1979). Indeed, the entire county is a glacial landscape whose countenance includes Long Island, the great terminal moraine of the Wisconsin glaciation and which sits just to the south of the county. The Hudson River, the only fjord in the contiguous United States, marks the western edge of the county. Had I known to look, I probably would have found the scorings of glacial scour on the scattered flat outcroppings.

But the brook also flows straight because a wall of rip-rap forms each bank. Dull, dark gray, and faintly flecked with mica and quartz, these hand-placed stones line the banks. They begin at the concrete portal that marks the start of the culvert, and end abruptly about 150 yards north, at the dam. About twenty feet high and sixty feet wide, the dam sits jammed into a ravine that pinches into a steep V, which then flattens at the north end, home of cattails and muck. The dam, and the pond it contained, served as an axis for my peregrinations in the Woods. A path led from home across the dam, and I would cross it almost daily en route to Park Avenue School. In days of heavy rain, during November and March, a brown torrent breached the dam's notch.

That the path traversed a forest of young shagbark hickories and maples, ashes, beeches and a glade of eastern hemlock (Sutton and Sutton, 1985) belied a deeper history, for hidden beneath this young forest of mixed hardwoods lay more than three centuries of European agricultural land use. One author has noted that, by the start of the nineteenth century, the county, "which had been so rich with forests as to be almost impenetrable by early settlers, was now devoid of trees and virgin growth" (Comstock, 1983). Those same hand-placed stones of gneiss and schist found along the brook and cemented into the dam also appear in a stone wall that ran along the north edge of the Woods, the only wall I remember encountering. On those days that my father took me fishing in nearby Kensico Reservoir, our walks in the woods included paths that stepped through breaches in these walls, new England's equivalent to old England's hedgerows. The enduring stone walls represented a mosaic of metes and bounds property relations. Until the early twentieth century, the Woods and Westchester were farms, not forests.

The dam I knew so well served as structural support for a mill, and created a source of cheap and relatively reliable mechanical energy for processing many familiar crops, including corn, wheat and rye for subsistence and market, and for pressing apples into cider and vinegar. Over 3,800 farms covered Westchester County in 1855, most of which were probably between 50 and 500 acres in size (Comstock, 1983). Mill-dams butted against crimps in these glacial valleys, impounding water in order to serve the nearby farms. (We moved to Armonk, about fifteen miles to the north, in late 1970, and lived above another small brook. A quarter mile to the north still sits the restored Wright's Mill; a plaque marks the site as one of local Revolutionary War importance.) Besides processing farm crops, mills cut saw logs for lumber. Port Chester sits at the mouth of the Byram River; it was called Saw Pits until its incorporation in 1868, and served as the region's main ship-building site and port from which New York City received agricultural goods (Lederer, 1978). (Byram is a regionally important name; I attended Byram Hills High School in Armonk, probably a long day's journey from Port Chester in colonial days.)

I do not know the age of the dam and its vanished mill, but I can begin to guess the period in which their utility and meaning began to wane. By the mid-1800s, railroads began to reach north from New York (Shonnard and Spooner, 1900). Three main lines would eventually service the county: east to west, they are the New Haven, the Harlem, and the Hudson lines. The first of these began service to Port Chester in 1850, allowing market goods and passengers to trundle along the coastal outwash plain between Connecticut and New York City. The Harlem line bisects the county, working its way north along the Bronx River, towards Putnam County and passing through Harlem Valley, while the Hudson line followed the east bank of the Hudson River. Each line again took advantage of the same remnant structures carved by retreating glaciers for ease of access into the hinterland. The City, in population and in market demand, was expanding, and by the end of the nineteenth century, Westchester's remaining farmland would transform from producing mainly grains to producing higher value, more perishable dairy products. The railroad, as we have seen in the Chicago hinterland, changed time, space and markets.

New residents were also migrating from New York. One author points to demographic changes between 1846 and 1880. Of Westchester's twenty-two towns (each of which administratively contains several villages), twelve of the twenty-two increased in population by more than two hundred percent, and five more by about a third (Comstock, 1983). All of these towns appear on one of the three main train

lines. Rye, the town that contains the village of Port Chester, grew by about three hundred and fifty percent. What happened to the remaining five tells of Westchester's second great land-use transformation in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Beginning in the 1830s, a water-thirsty New York City began a series of legal takings in Westchester that enabled the City to build a series of dams and aqueducts (Shonnard and Spooner, 1900). For another seventy-plus years New York City would use takings laws in order to expand its hinterland water supply. The five remaining towns in Westchester—Lewisboro, North Castle, Pound Ridge, Somers and Yorktown—all lost significant acreage of prime farm and dairy land, especially rich bottomlands. All five experienced little gain or loss in population, probably the net effect of losing farm families, but gaining Irish, and later Italian, stone masons and dam builders (Comstock, 1983). With each new dam, New York also put in place an ecologically far-sighted, and transforming, law prohibiting virtually all human land-uses on New York City reservoir watershed lands. While this land-use transformation did not directly affect the Woods, forest succession on watershed lands was an ecological precursor to similar, broader-scale land-use changes in the region, whether by design or neglect. All these changes, including those in the Woods, took place because of the demise of agriculture in the county. For a time, small, obsolete mills and their ponds became the squatters' homes of dam-building immigrant workers. The ponds soon became public health hazards; many were drained and their dams removed for public safety reasons (Comstock, 1983). Why the dam in the Woods escaped such a fate surely points to an interesting story.

Thus far I have focused on a rather narrow part of the Woods, the eastern quarter, the location of the brook and the dam. The path from my home to the dam was not the only path through the Woods. Just after entering the Woods, the path forked left onto an old rutted one-lane road that climbed a slight hill and, within two hundred yards or so, came upon a piece of highway guard rail that served to mark a dead end. This was the edge of the Woods, for here began a housing development that was already in place by 1950, but probably not much before then (Figure 2). This location also marked the northeast corner of a modest plantation of pines, probably white pine, that stretched along a wooden fence-line for a hundred yards or so, and perhaps a hundred feet deep. Had they not been dutiful conifers and already undergone self-pruning of their under-story branches, the trees might have been climbable, an important concern for a ten-year old. Tall enough to provide an entrancing feeling during winter snowfalls, the trees were

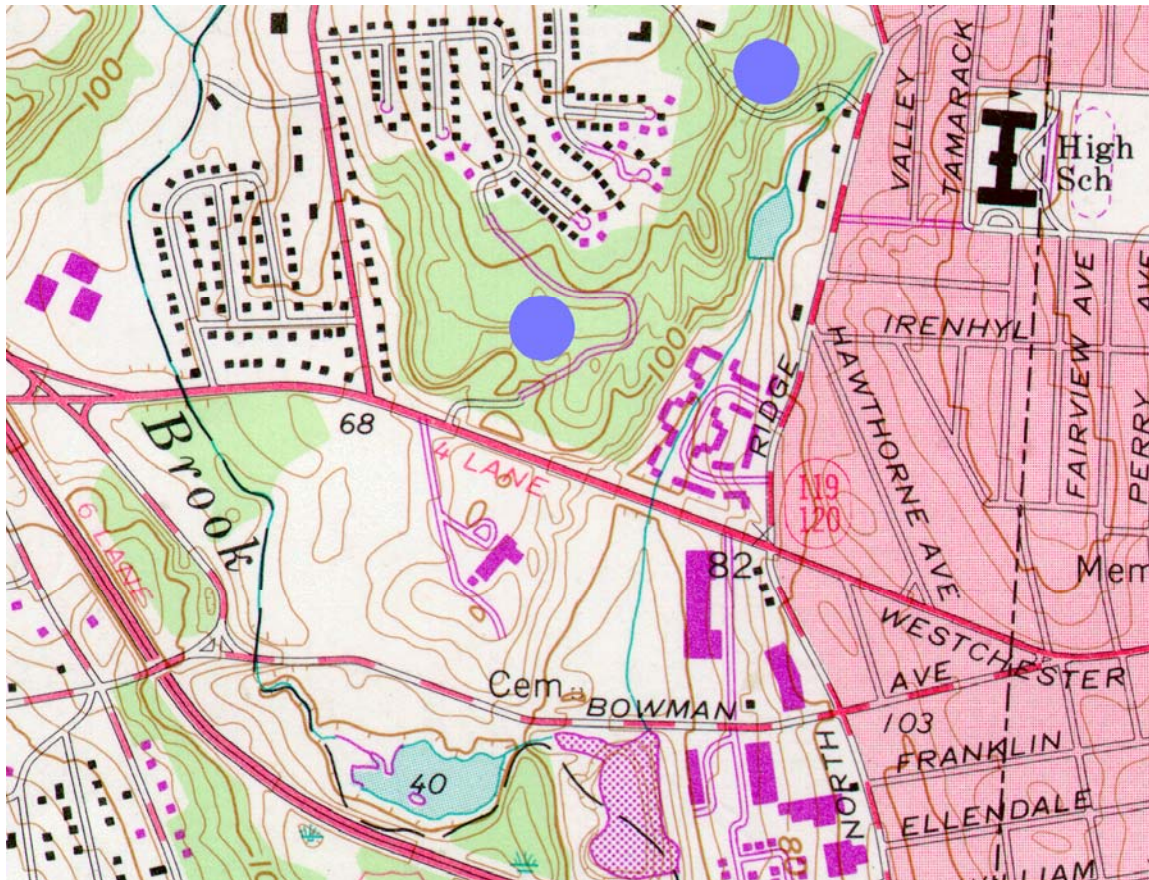


Figure 2. The blue dots mark the two roads that may have been connected before the construction of the subdivision at top, center, and left. The L-shaped and rectangular structures just to the northwest of the upper dot are the haunted houses. The lower blue dot marks the location of the Rye Town Hilton. More magenta buildings south of Westchester Ave. along North Ridge Street represent a shopping center. Detail of 1960 7.5 minute Granville, Conn.-N.Y. quadrangle, photorevised in 1971.

probably at least thirty years old. Were they planted as a CCC project? Were they older, and so perhaps a woodlot for small saw logs? Who planted them? A look at the map might reveal the answer.

Figure 2 highlights two small sections of road and two buildings. Only occasionally did I venture to the north part of the Woods, for these two buildings, partly hidden behind a concrete wall, were known as the haunted houses. Both were old mansions, and both, as I recall, had great, Tara-like sweeping staircases, a central chandelier, and no small amount of cobwebs and frightening nooks. Who built them and why, though, was always a mystery. Perhaps some of the new money in New York in the late 1800s tried to mimic the grandeur of the robber barons (Comstock, 1983). I recall similar mansions on great estates along North Ridge Street and its parallel roads, King Street to the east and Purchase Street to the

west. Ward's Castle, now the Museum of Cartoon Art and surrounded by sub-division homes, was the most prominent. Today, many of these former estates serve as corporate headquarters.

The dirt road driveway that provided access to the mansions from the northeast was usually how I entered the area. At the southwest of the Woods is another S-shaped dirt road that wends north and then enters the circa-1950 housing tract. (Figure 3; also, compare with Figure 2.) Again, this doesn't explain the rise and the fall of the property, but it does provide a basis for why the Woods, as I knew them, existed in the first place. By the late 1960s, a suburban landscape encased the Woods. The Avon Circle Apartments and the new junior high school to the south of Westchester Avenue; the housing tract at the

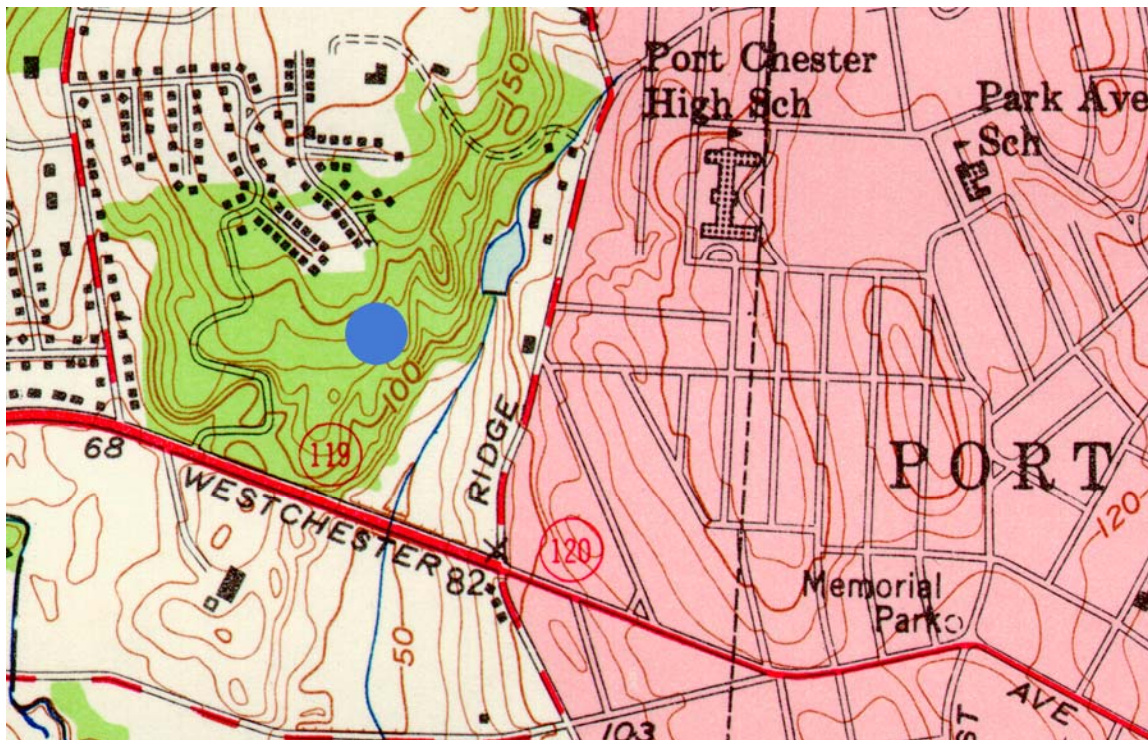


Figure 3. Compare the two manorial roads as they appear in this figure and Figure 2. Imagine the two sections of drive connecting. In the latter figure, the southern part of the road appears in magenta, indicating a new feature on the landscape. In 1971, this "new" road was the driveway into the Rye Town Hilton, then still under construction. Detail of 1950 7.5 minute Granville, Conn.-N.Y. quadrangle.

north and west, and North Ridge Street and its 1930s suburban homes to the east had surrounded the property. The haunted houses and their encasing concrete wall (a part of which still stands) were not in danger of being condemned; in retrospect, it seems to me that these two structures had been abandoned

no more than ten years earlier. But someone was holding onto the property for some reason, and I, in a small window of great fortune and protective neglect, was blessed with being able to make it all my own.

By the time my family moved out of the cramped two-bedroom apartment to Armonk, about fifteen miles north on the new interstate (still another road that trended north through glacially cut terrain), the western half of the Woods, including the pine forest, had been sold. That summer, while my family was in California and just before we returned in order to move north, workers began construction of the Rye Town Hilton. Tucked behind rock and forest, it still stands today, visible from Westchester Avenue only after the hardwood forest has shed its leaves.

EPILOGUE

Mom waited in the car. I got out, opaque afternoon light gilding a foot of fresh snow and casting heavy shadows into the glade of trees before me. I faced north and, through the bare, dormant forest, I could see the dam, about fifty yards ahead. Water spilled over the notch, and a shower of ice, opalescent and spiny-ended, hung as an encasing shell over the falls. The brook emerged from the base of the cascade, its water cold matte black and quicksilver in color. Behind me, probably another fifty yards away to the south, I could see the Apartments, and, if I had tried to find it, the patio to 19 Avon Circle, Apt. B. Home. But I did not think to look; I was too stunned at how small, how close and how open everything looked. A pocket stone hurled with well-placed aim in either direction might have chinked the ice-fall, or fallen onto the snow-covered lawn of the apartments.

I was standing on a machine-made berm, fat and tall, whose trapezoidal proportions compared with those of an imperial palace wall in Ming China. One could walk its length in less than a minute, but this new feature of the landscape was essential, for it allowed commuting residents to cross from North Ridge Street and into Hidden Falls, the development of key-hole cul-de-sacs and houses that stood before me. The berm's official name is Long Ledge Road, and after crossing the brook it wends its way through the central and northwest part of the Woods. The dam, pond and the remaining trees, which comprise what I can now call little more than a riparian sliver, serve as a visual anchor for the modest-sized houses, pressed so tightly together that they do little more than engender a turn inward toward suburban privacy.

I crossed the two-lane drive atop the berm and, in a moment's thought, descended the steep face of fresh snow to the brook. I was now down in shadow, with the prow of a concrete foundation bearing down on me. I stood just above the brook on a framing of concrete, peered over the edge, and then climbed down to its side. I watched the brook disappear into its dark maw, and I wondered to myself if the kids in the development ever played in it. Just then I noticed a second tunnel, higher up the hillside, and one which served to keep flood-stage water from ponding. This, too, was big enough for kids and stooping adults, but on this Saturday of cold sun and fresh powder snow, all I saw were the paw prints of a neighborhood cat that had entered the culvert. His tracks, and the absence of others, answered my question about who now used the Woods.

I had gone back to the Woods without expectations. From time to time I had passed through Port Chester and along North Ridge Street, and so I knew of the general changes in the area. I had also learned long before, as a young adult, just what values and convictions the Woods had engendered in me. More shopping centers, wider roads, and huddled houses were still temporary features on the landscape, and could not undo how the Woods had created the most fundamental part of my identity and values. But this time, I saw more, perhaps because geography and ecology have taught me to see more. And this time, I wondered if the Woods hadn't lost something. Its soul was missing, or maybe it was my relationship to its soul, for what I saw was a landscape of visual domestication. Here was a remnant strip of forest, rock and water existing on behalf of a reified and vacuous conception of what nature should be and how it might serve millennial Suburbia. My first geography professor would have characterized such a landscape as "the vandalism of improvement"; bucolic plague comes to mind, too. But such name-calling is just another attempt in a lifetime of making sense of a how a modest place transformed my life and my soul. I came of age witnessing the rise of the ecology movement, Earth Day and the humbling images of Earth from space in the late 1960s. Today, the Woods continue as a profound and original source in my experience of and relationship to Creation, the numinous, and the damned.

Bibliography

Several works provided information for the larger forces at work in this glimpse of three hundred years of history I have presented. I also should note that I did not mention, beyond a passing phrase, pre-Settlement peoples and their landscapes. In this light, the mixed hardwood forest that dominated the Woods might also have been the result of a catastrophic fire that got out of hand from Algonkian burning. Hickory and American Chestnut, game and perhaps a beaver dam may have marked the landscape. Additionally, while Indians may not have made settlements in the Woods proper, the broad flats of the junior high school represent a possible seasonal farming or dwelling site. But this is the subject of another story.

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