

NATURE NEXT DOOR: CITIES AND TREES

In the American Northeast

Ellen Stroud

Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2012. xx + 207 pp.
paper, ISBN: 978-0-295-99208-2

Reviewed by Bryon Middlekauff

Department of Environmental Planning and Geography,
Plymouth State University
Plymouth, NH

When presenting to a community-group or an early career Geography and Environmental Science class, that New Hampshire and New England were up to 80% deforested in 1840 and today, in many cases, more than 80% forested, my audience is more than surprised; they are actually taken aback. Stroud relates in Chapter 1 that a Philadelphia lawyer, Herbert Welsh, who each summer in the early part of the twentieth century, would depart Germantown, and walk from his home there to Lake Sunapee, New Hampshire, where his family had a summer cottage. His walk traversed a “continuously populated region where the trees were new”. *Nature Next Door: Cities and Trees in the American Northeast* tells part the story about how this reforestation evolved between about 1890 and 1930. Stroud relates that “trees came back because time and ecology gave them favor, but they were also protected and encouraged by choice.” She also emphasizes that the forests in the individual states returned differently in response to varying conditions of land use, tourism, tax policy, preservation campaigns, and replanting programs.

Welsh and other forest advocates felt that people of the cities needed forests for recreation, aesthetics, clean air, timber and fuel. Joining with the newly emerging professional foresters, these advocates brought the realization that forests fulfilled these roles, and were also essential to the provision of fresh, clean water to cities.

The book is divided into five chapters, four of which focus upon individual states with a final chapter devoted to the future of northeastern forests. Following an introduction, she tells the stories about how forests returned to Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine; each story is unique. She emphasizes that the return of forests to the region is one of ecology, that it is difficult to prevent the trees from returning. But modern technology, erupting in the late nineteenth century, played a role too, allowing for food to be imported to the region, industry to thrive, farmland to be abandoned, transportation to bring timber from far afield, logging to become less important an industry, and for trees to return in great number. The nineteenth century also saw the maturation of science, as the disciplines of hydrology, forest biology, and geography leaped forward, leading to vastly improved understanding of how landscapes evolve.

The story of forest return in Pennsylvania relates that early pioneers cleared land with abandon for farm fields in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the mid and late nineteenth centuries, mines and mills required much more land clearing and the forests there seemed

“doomed.” But urban activists began to realize that jobs, clean water, and flood prevention hinged upon a healthy forest cover. This message was carried to industrialists, women’s societies, and businessmen. As a result of forest advocacy, scientific forestry, hydrology, and geography, and changing technology, forests began to be protected in Pennsylvania. Ideas and concepts developed there spread to other northeastern states.

New Hampshire’s forests became protected due to a series of interrelated events. As railroad lines were pushed north out of Boston, Northeasterners were able to enjoy their summers in New Hampshire and became alarmed at the impact of destructive logging. Steep, rocky, small holdings were abandoned as railroads opened more productive lands to the west. Old fields soon regrew fire cherry, aspen, yellow birch, hemlock and white pine. Increasing tourism, the need to preserve views, and outdoor recreation, and the desire by textile entrepreneurs to maintain water flow led to cooperative efforts to increase awareness of the value of forests.

Vermont has a very different geology compared to New Hampshire, and by the late nineteenth century had more than 80 percent of its land area cleared for farms. Extension of the railroads into Vermont allowed for milk to be transported rapidly to New York and Boston. Farms persisted in Vermont on the better soils. Farm tourism developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which called for preservation of forests and woodlots there. Vermont differed from New Hampshire. While both states offered “a refuge from city life for urban tourists”, New Hampshire was rough and rugged while Vermont’s image was more bucolic than wild.

Maine is more remote from large cities compared to Pennsylvania, New Hampshire and Vermont. “Cities protected forests elsewhere, but couldn’t reach far enough into Maine.” Much of Maine remains in timber company ownership and is heavily logged today. Though forest advocates worked diligently to protect forested landscapes there, only Baxter State Park and Acadia National Park are significant in terms of public land holdings.

Nature Next Door is carefully documented, thoroughly researched, well written, and very interesting. I find the most interesting theme to be that each state has an individual story about how and why trees returned. It is appropriate for undergraduates and graduate students alike and would be an excellent choice as supplemental readings in a class focusing upon urban and rural landscapes, landscape history of the northeast, or forest history.