

Land Use History

The following narrative attempts to explain how human decisions have influenced the land cover of the Berkshire School's landscape.

The habitats in which animals and plants reside are not only determined by an area's climate, topography and soils, but also largely influenced by the disturbances caused by nature and human land use. Forest compositions of most areas are strongly influenced by disturbances, since natural and human disturbances occur in all forests and tree species generally have longer potential life spans than the intervals between large disturbances. The landscape surrounding Berkshire School has responded significantly to many such disturbances over the last four hundred years. Indians hunted and gathered food, Dutch settlers sowed the land, and Seaver Buck founded a school. The natural legacy that remains is rich with history. The land is a defining component of Berkshire School's identity.

The slopes of Mt. Everett border a glaciated, limestone belt with soils that are generally well-to-excessively drained and loamy in texture. Intermittent brooks flow southeast into the wetlands surrounding Willard Brook. The forests are part of larger temperate biome with a seasonal climate. The winters are cold ($\gg 24^{\circ}\text{F}$) and the summers are moderately warm with occasional hot spells ($\gg 66^{\circ}\text{F}$). The precipitation is well distributed throughout the year with an annual rainfall of about 43 inches and an annual snowfall of about 71 inches. These parameters provide conditions for a healthy mixture of hardwoods and softwoods. Before the European colonists arrived, the local forest would have looked much more homogeneous than it does today, dominated by a mix of chestnut, elm, oak, maple, birch and hickory.

The Housatunnuk Indians' winter quarters and hunting grounds during the late 1600's included the slopes of Mt. Everett. Many found a spot in a little valley just west of Black Rock to build bark dwellings and stone huts to store winter supplies. They hunted deer, wild turkeys and other smaller mammals among a forest of largely deciduous trees. They gathered nuts from the oak, chestnut, and hickory trees, bark from the paper birch, and sap from the maple trees.

A small village called Tachanack, located not far from Mt. Everett at present-day Copake, New York, was obtained in 1685 by scurrilous means from two Indian chiefs, Nishotowan and Testamashatt. Englishman Robert Livingston drove Indian refugees from Tachanack and Mt. Washington village toward Black Rock. The small Indian settlement in the valley just northwest of Berkshire School's property continued to grow. In short time, Dutch settlers followed the Indians' footsteps from Tachanack to the Housatonic River Valley. They cut a road that followed the current Elbow Trail from Berkshire School to the Appalachian Trail, extending northwest in a straight line to the old Patent Farm located in the saddle of the mountain and descending north of Lake Undine. The old road can be traced on USGS maps by following the elbow trail to the Indian trail; however, the latter is no longer maintained and has blended into the forest.

One courageous Dutch settler, Johannes Spoor, acquired land in the Housatonic River Valley from the Indians and built log huts by what is now called Glen Brook as early as 1691. He didn't stay long, returning to his homestead in Coxsackie, New York, to continue his wheelwright and leather working trade. His cabin may have been the first built in Berkshire County. In 1724, the land of Sheffield was purchased from a man named Konkapot and twenty other Indians for four hundred and sixty pounds, three barrels of cider, and 30 quarts of rum. Captain John Ashley and Captain Ebenezer Pomroy were sent by the settling committee to survey and lay out lots of land. The town of Sheffield was incorporated on June 22, 1733.

Johannes' son Direck Spoor and grandsons Nicholas, John, and Abraham returned to Glen Brook to build the Decker House in 1762 and the Spurr farmhouse between 1762 and 1764. The Decker House is known today as Chase House and the Spurr farmhouse was razed in 1967. A number of chestnut trees that once dominated forests along route 41 were felled for lumber. Unfortunately, further expansion was delayed, as nine of the Spoor family were called to battle in the revolutionary war and Direck's son John and wife Christie were claimed by the small pox epidemic in 1776.

It wasn't until the early 1800's that Direck's family cleared the land and developed pastures that extended north and west up the Mt. Everett watershed. They fenced the pastures with stone walls and dug half-dozen wells. The original stone walls are largely intact through much of the forested landscape that surrounds Berkshire School. The Spoor's proceeded to set out apple and pear orchards, grow their own wheat and rye, tap maple trees, and burn charcoal to be hauled to iron furnaces in Salisbury. As late as 1825, the Spoor's were careful not to plow alone without muskets, afraid that embittered Indians might return. The old Indian trail was still the chief means to get supplies. One sole pear tree still remains on the southern border of the school's property. A living witness to when the land was first sowed.



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Two decades later, other land practices altered the species' richness and diversity just north and west of the Spoor's farm. Deposits of manganese were discovered near the brook that entered the property to the northwest. The ore was mined for a number of years, though its low grade dissuaded the industry from building a railroad to the source. At about the same time, a Frenchman named "Little John" made a living burning wood for charcoal in the forest around his family's cabin. His family lived just northwest of the ski run made by Art Chase and his trail squad in the 1940's and 1950's. Little John would carry chopped logs to charcoal pits, cover the wood (25 cords at a time) with layers of sod, leave a small hole at the base of the pile to light a fire, and allow it to turn to charcoal within 3 to 4 weeks. Charcoal was the only fuel available to smelt iron at the time. Little John would sell his product to the iron foundry at Sage's Ravine, approximately five miles away.

The small gaps created by Little John increased growing spaces for other trees in the surrounding forest; however, little sunlight reached the forest floor of these gaps. Thus, shade-tolerant hemlocks became much more common in the forest. **The hemlock's thick canopy and acidifying needles prevented the development of fast growing competitors in the understory.**



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During the 1800's, ownership of the farm traded hands several times. By the end of the 19th century, Mr. and Mrs. Bryant Glenny maintained the farm. The couple came from Buffalo, purchased the estate from a race horse trainer named Wilson, and named it Glenanna farm. Bryant had distaste for the timber rattlesnakes that spent their winters at Black Rock. He even tried to blast Black Rock in attempt to destroy the rattlesnakes' habitat. His wife did social work with black people in Sheffield. Glenny House, the Glenny's residence, was built in 1899. Glenanna was not a commercial dairy farm, as were so many of the local farms in Sheffield. There were two apple orchards, chickens, horses, and cows. The fields were planted with alfalfa and the driveway from Route 41 was lined with stone walls. Then, in 1907, Seaver Buck came for a visit.

Seaver Buck opened Berkshire School on Bryant Glenny's estate with six boys and four young college graduates as faculty. One of those boys, Robert Munson, later stated in the 1913 edition of the *Dome*, "Well, friends, to be frank, the outlook wasn't brilliant. Three houses and a barn!" Decker House became the residence of faculty member Mr. Grove. Spurr House held classrooms and dorm rooms for older boys. Glenny House was both a student dorm and residence for Mr. Buck. Ice hockey was organized that first year, with the boys skating on Spurr Pond just down the road. The old barn was transformed into a gymnasium in 1909 and a football field was plowed in 1910. Finally, Allen House, Gibson House, and an infirmary were also built in 1910. The Gibson House, now known as Birch Glade, still houses faculty members and is located near the beginning of the Elbow Trail, near the infirmary, which is presently known as Senior House and is now a boys' dormitory. The land slowly lost its agricultural uses. The boys still milked the cows and collected eggs during the early years; however, education was to be the primary land use. Seaver Buck was a visionary who established the foundations for an institution that would enrich lives of thousands over the next century.



The fields and forests that surrounded Mr. Buck's school were very different than those of today. The fields covered a larger surface area and their biotic composition was not controlled with pesticides. Chestnuts accompanied the acorns on the forest floor. The grasses, nuts, and farm products attracted many more mammals than today. Seaver Buck wrote in the Fall, '24 issue of *The Dome*,

One of the most interesting features of those early days, now passed into history, was Mr. Gibson's 'coon-hunting. Before the chestnut blight destroyed the millions of chestnuts in Berkshire County, all our hillsides offered a wonderful feeding ground for the festive 'coon...

One year later, in the Spring '25 issue of *The Dome*, Seaver Buck wrote,

Skunk hunting in those early days was not infrequent pastime, for the polecat frequently visited our chicken-house, and some among our older boys undertook a crusade in the interest of fresh eggs.



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Although even the timber rattlesnake population was much greater in the early days, it was the heavy poaching of the 1970's that lowered the numbers. The Nature Conservancy believes that the population has dwindled from approximately 300 to a current estimate of only two dozen. One of the early faculty members, "Dutch" Wood, was known to hunt for the rattlesnake every fall in the 1920's. The 1925 issue of *The Green and Gray* reported that "every year there are always a few fellows in the school that get permission from home to hunt reptiles, and seemingly have a great time doing it." The early poaching apparently was small enough not to endanger the rattlesnake den.

Buildings were constructed and athletic fields were tended. The landscape was greatly influenced by Buck's vision. Many of the fields that bordered the forest were abandoned. Eastern white pine took advantage of this decision. The fall 1915 issue of *The Dome* indicated that,

Where the forest above ended its downward sweep from Black Rock....there were growing a multitude of seeding pines...It bordered the wild forest and was part of it; also it was part of the farm below...



A large number of relatively heavy wind-disseminated pine seeds had worked its way down through the sod to make contact with the soil. The presence of enough stored food in the seeds had developed seedlings large enough to compete with the grass. **The ability of pines and their ectomycorrhizae to obtain nutrients and water from the soil gave the pines sole dominance.**



Old-growth forests were influenced as well. According to the Spring 1921 issue of *The Dome*, "shack-building and shack-life" began in 1914 when two seniors built a lean-to-cabin with gray birch logs. By 1921, no less than twenty-two cabins were built on the mountain by students and faculty. The cabins were a place where students could escape the rigors of boarding school and enjoy nature's gifts. They were a mainstay of Berkshire culture until they were destroyed in the summer of 1976. In addition, the students collected firewood. In 1918, a shortage of coal caused an energy crisis that forced an increased need for firewood. These practices created gaps in the forest that promoted further cohorts of shade tolerant tree species, such as beech, hemlock, and mountain laurel, among the upland slopes. **The chestnut blight of 1914, an airborne fungus that eradicated chestnut trees from the United States, further encouraged the forest's multi-aged distribution of tree species.** This fungus entered tree wounds, grew in and under the bark, and eventually killed the cambium all the way around the twig, branch, or trunk. The chestnut tree presently only exists as sprouts from old stumps and root systems.

CLIMBING WORLD'S HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

Mr. Mallory Gives a Remarkably Fin
Account of the Expedition of 1921.
Illustrated by Lantern Slides

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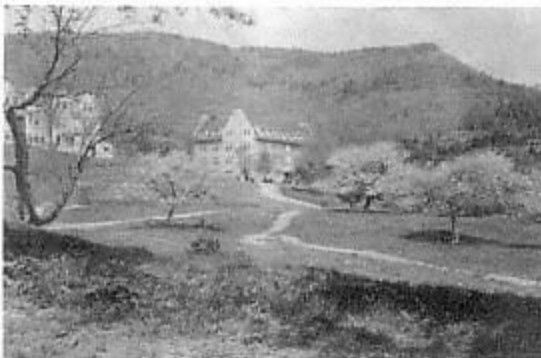
Berkshire School's influence on the landscape soon extended beyond the property's boundaries. In 1921, several students repaired the upper branch of the Elbow Trail after it was destroyed by an ice storm. One year later, Mr. Gibson formed an outing club in response to student interest to continue trail maintenance. In 1923, the club attended the annual New England trail conference in Boston. The students began building trails to "The Dome," Mt. Washington, Black Rock, Guilder Hollow, Jug End, and Race Mountain. They constructed a toboggan slide on the knoll behind Glenny House and erected a trestle for a ski jump. In 1924, the students helped the Appalachian Mountain Club complete the system of trails that extends from Alabama to Maine by connecting Jug End to the Dome and beyond. A trail network meandered through the forests, an extension of the cabins that were already drawing students into the backcountry. The student body had a curiosity for exploration, reminiscent of that of the original Dutch settlers. Seaver Buck then invited one of the world's most courageous mountaineers, Sir George Mallory, to talk to the student body of his first attempt on Everest in 1923. It was reported in the March 1923 issue of *The Green and Gray* that "Mallory gave a remarkably fine account of the expedition of 1921...plans for another expedition, to take place soon, are being made..." Sir George Mallory died on his attempt at Everest in 1924. His body was found in 1999 and it is still not known whether or not he reached the summit before falling. If he did summit, the accomplishment would have made him the first to climb the world's highest mountain.



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Before Mr. Buck retired in 1942, several other changes and additions were made to Berkshire School's campus. Glenny House was rebuilt after being destroyed by fire in 1918. Memorial Dorm was built in 1920 in remembrance of the alumni killed in World War I. The Grinnell sprinkler system was installed, using the senior pool as a reservoir, in 1925. A jigger shop and two cottages, presently called Dean and Keep House, were built in 1926. The Bourne football field and the field house were built in 1929 and 1930 respectively. Finally, in 1931, Berkshire Hall was constructed. Incidentally, topsoil was stripped from a small area just northeast of this building to grade the surrounding land. Eastern red cedar trees were one of the few trees that could take advantage of the shallow soil remaining with its very fibrous root system. **Juniper is a shrub that does extremely well in harsh, stressed environments where competition is lacking.**

In 1936, Seaver Buck's secretary, Marjorie Sweet, recalled Buck Valley: "An apple orchard in its dotage wandered pleasantly in and out of a gully; two pine-grooved hillocks separated this relaxing vista from three massive structures." Seaver Buck's dream was established. He created a learning environment that tied the students' experience intricately with the mountain. The students not only learned from their teachers, but they also learned from their interaction with the environment.



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Several years after Seaver Buck retired, a new era at Berkshire School began. John Godman, headmaster from 1951 to 1970, became known as the "master builder". He always strove to improve the standard of living of his students, concentrating greatly on the condition of the physical plant. A chronological list of his accomplishments is shown below.

1954 Buck Dorm, Buck Valley

1956 paved roads and paths, maintenance shed

1957 upper fields

1958 Rovensky Field House, rifle range (presently Undermountain Day Care)

1960 Stanley Dorm, lower soccer fields

1963 Eipper Dorm

1965 science wing added to Berkshire Hall

1966 DeWindt Dorm, Spurr infirmary (presently Spurr dorm)

1967 Godman Dorm

1969 first girls admitted to the school

Art Chase, affectionately (and sometimes fearsomely) known as "The Bear," was a faculty member at the school from 1938 to 1973. While Mr. Godman was providing the necessary facilities, Mr. Chase was developing students' character by strengthening Berkshire's union with the outdoors. The outdoor club of the 1920's had grown smaller as the years passed and disappeared by the time Art Chase joined the faculty. Most of the forest had been explored and a fine network of trails had been established; however, Mr. Chase saw manual labor as an excellent opportunity for growth. His work ethic was contagious and soon had students clearing old trails. After he returned from World War II, he began the Trail Squad. In 1949, students bought their own axes from the Jigger Shop, and Mr. Chase purchased a chain saw for \$565.00. His squad then laid siege to the mountain creating the Joel Coffin Trail in addition to several new trails for skiing. A ski tow and tow hut were completed in 1951. In 1953, Mr. Chase's squad built the Warner ski slope, bridged the "manganese wash," built the Appalachian shelter at the top of Glen Brook, and placed drains beneath the elbow slide (AKA Elbow Trail). In 1959, the trail squad cleared the dead trees that succumbed to the Dutch elm disease (DED). This disease wiped almost all the elms from the school's property. The DED fungus grows and reproduces in the water conducting parts of elm branches and stems. The fungus blocks water movement to tree leaves which causes the leaves to wilt and turn brown. Elm bark beetles then use the weakened trees to reproduce. Beetle offspring emerge from diseased elms and fly to healthy elms to feed. However, before leaving diseased trees, spores of the DED fungus attach onto them. When these fungus-infested beetles feed on healthy tree branches, they make small wounds in the wood, and the fungus enters the branch directly through these wounds.



Though Mr. Chase motivated many underlings in his trail squad, he may have inspired even more through the Maple Syrup Cooperation founded in 1948. Sugar maples are shade tolerant, moisture sensitive trees whose growth had been encouraged since the Spoors started tapping the trees in the early 1800's. Mr. Chase's trail squad collected the many cords of wood needed to boil tree sap. His crew produced a record 135 gallons of syrup in 1964. Mr. Chase was well aware of the mark he made on the land through his actions. In a poem, he wrote,

*The firelight picks out the old maple
With buckets dangling from the iron spiles.
Its bark is twisted and tormented, marked
By a score of drills,
New growth just closing over last year's scars.*

His corporation didn't change the richness or diversity of the forest's species. He just used the land in a way that educated his students through physical labor and responsibility.

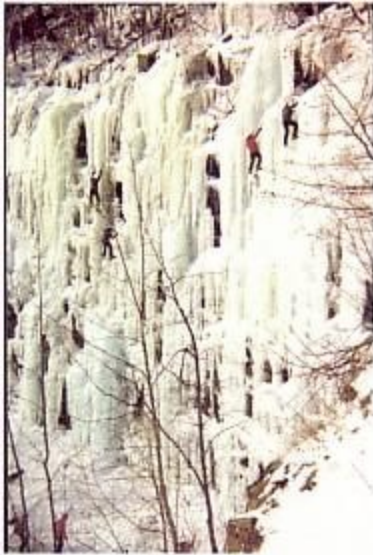
Other land use changes during that time period included the installation of an artesian well in 1947 that pumped 75 to 100 gallons of water every minute. The Geier Gymnasium, presently used as a library, was constructed in 1950. A fishing club, though only lasting a few years, was created in 1953. The Berkshire hatchery stocked Glen Brook in early spring with one hundred 8 to 9 inch trout; club members caught the fish and ate their fill at "Fulty's Fish Fries" on Sunday mornings. In the early 1960's, Bruce Gullion of the Massachusetts State Forest Department System of Forest Management worked with Art Chase to extend the Coffin ski trail 200 feet to the Elbow Trail. Mr. Gullion also implemented a management plan that included a series of selective cuts and thinnings to collect marketable species and stimulate the growth of red oaks on the property and up the slopes of Mt. Everett. These sivicultural treatments increased the amount of growing space available to the oak trees and encouraged the development of long tapered boles. **The effects of the logging created a monoculture of large red oaks on the plateau just east of Black Rock.** One of the landings used in the logging operation, located next to the outer loops of the cross-country trails, is now dominated by a contrasting mix of hardwoods that include chestnut oak, black cherry, white ash, red maple, and paper birch. While trees were being logged, the large open pit used to collect the school's sewage was excavated and replaced by a 30,000-gallon septic tank and leaching field system. The excavated material was dumped in a small area northeast of Berkshire Hall. Big tooth aspens, rapid growing pioneer trees, established themselves in this area and reproduced through root suckering. **All the trees in this small aspen colony might share the same root system. The colony is an attractive home for ruffed grouse.**

When Art Chase retired in 1973, the school's connection to the mountain changed as well. Headmaster Robert Minnerly included a Haiku in his commencement remarks to "capture this moment of the man, the class, the school, the time." He stated,

*This empty mountain!
The trail we travel*

*Will be raveled in lonely mist.
School emblem is changed to "The Bear."*

The ski hill was abandoned in the early 70's. Light, abundant wind dispersed seed crops of black birch and red maple settled and germinated on the exposed soil. **These rapid growing trees presently dominate the area.** The hill is an attractive site for white-tailed deer because the red maples are a preferred food source and the thick canopy of the adjacent hemlocks provide them with excellent shelter from the weather. The pear thrip, a defoliating insect, threatened the health of sugar maples across the northeast in the early eighties and The Maple Syrup Corporation disbanded. The students still learned from the land, though differently than they did during the Buck or Chase years.



During Mr. Chase's tenure, students freely manipulated nature's resources, and after he left, groups tended to either protect nature's resources or use them to challenge themselves both physically and mentally. In the early 1970's, Sam Dibbins directed a group called Project Lifeline that was based on an Outward Bound philosophy that allowed people to learn how they and others would react when put in stress situations. Hilary Russell began the Fall Outing Club that included Indian poetry, trail clearing, wilderness survival, and ecology study. In 1979, Jack Shea tried a program called Outdoor Experience that included adventure sports, environmental awareness, and trail management. In 1980, Peter Kinne founded the Black Rock Environmental Association dedicated to environmental protection. Finally in 1993, the Ritt Kellogg Mountain Program (RKMP) was founded by Peter Kellogg and presently includes programs such as rock climbing with Frank Barros, mountaineering with Don Morley, and boat building with Hilary Russell.

Two new buildings were constructed during the latter part of the twentieth century; the present gym in 1981 and Benson Commons in 1992. A major flood at the end of the 1991 school year contoured the land after 5.9" of rain in fell in 120 minutes causing over \$100,000 in damage. The flood rivaled two earlier Berkshire floods. The old gymnasium was almost washed away by a flood on April 13th 1920. A second flood in 1955 caused between \$25,000 and \$30,000 in damage after 14" of rain fell in 24 hours. Perhaps the greatest recent impact on our local environment was in 1982 when the American Tree Farm Association logged pines over a twenty acre expanse of land on the northeast section of our property, unfortunately allowing for the invasion of honeysuckle, barberry, raspberry, and grape vines. A second phase of their management plans encouraged the growth of red and white oaks to the west and south of these twenty acres.

The land use has changed several times since the Housatunnuk Indians lived at the base of Black Rock in the 17th century. The mountain has always held a place in the hearts of those who lived on its slopes. This sentiment was reflected in 1989 when the students dedicated their yearbook to the mountain. The dedication reads, "This year's trail has an unusual, though significant dedication: to one that has been with us always and, with some care, can be with Berkshire forever." It's also interesting to note how the school's major literary publications are named after the mountain's

features. *The Dome* refers to the summit of Mt. Everett. *The Trail* refers to the many hiking trails that meander around its slopes. As for the Green and Gray, "Green stands for the beautiful mountain behind the school which provides free recreation and relaxation...Gray signifies the black rock high up on the mountain, overlooking and to the right of the school." People will continue to use the mountain in different ways. The plants and animals that live on its slopes will change as well. The land supports important natural resources that can be utilized, but should always be respected. The mountain gives Berkshire School a unique identity that will be prized by many to come if we continue to care for its well being.