

Photo courtesy of The Adirondack Museum



## LIVING OFF THE LAND

### ————— *The Lives of the Adirondack Settlers* —————

A Sense of Place Curriculum | Adaptable for grades 7 - 12

In support of NYS Learning Standards in Social Studies, Art, Language Arts & MST

A Project of  
Adirondack History Center Museum & Essex Community Heritage Organization  
Prepared by Bonnie MacLeod





## LIVING OFF THE LAND

*Living Off the Land* is a joint project of the Essex Community Heritage Organization and the Essex County Historical Society. The publication was written by Bonnie MacLeod, Education Director, Essex Community Heritage Organization.

This publication was designed for use in teaching local history at the middle and secondary levels. While it is especially useful for social studies classes focusing on New York State history, it is relevant to teachers in other academic areas, as well. The background narrative serves to provide educators with a basic understanding of the topics covered. However, the author strongly recommends that teachers avail themselves of the many local resources that exist for broadening their knowledge in this subject area. A partial listing of these resources can be found under *Teaching Aids & Resources*.

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## LIVING OFF THE LAND

### Objectives:

- Students will understand how early settlers of the Adirondack region survived by making use of the area's natural resources.
- Students will be able to describe the primary industries that supported early Adirondack settlers.
- Students will become familiar with the industrial history of their own community from past to present.

### Standards Addressed:

Social Studies: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 3.1, 3.2, 4.1

Language Arts: 1,2,3

MST: 6.5, 7.2

Performing Arts: 1

## Background:

The long, harsh winters, short growing season, mountainous terrain and rocky soils made habitation and farming in the Adirondacks difficult. As a result, this area of New York State remained largely unsettled until after the Revolutionary War. Prior to this time only small settlements existed. These revolved around logging, milling, mining and iron production to support the war effort. And although the Iroquois (Mohawk) and Algonquin tribes fought over the region as a hunting ground, neither found it an inviting place to live year round.

During the War of Independence the colonial government in Albany unsuccessfully attempted to give away land in the Adirondacks to soldiers who would defend the Canadian border from the British. After the war pioneering individuals, mostly from Vermont and later from Canada, settled the region. They came in search of land that was free or inexpensive and they endured great hardships in order to establish their homesteads.

Many of the first settlements occurred along Lake Champlain because it was the primary transportation route for people and goods. Settlement of the region's interior occurred gradually as roads and railroads made access to these areas possible.

The majority of early settlers of the Adirondack region came with little more than a dream for a better future and a willingness to work hard to realize it. Most settlers cleared the land and established subsistence farms. They hunted, trapped, fished, and made maple syrup. These rugged individuals had little or no money to purchase goods and so they learned to become self-reliant, making most of the items they needed including clothing, tools, candles, soap, bowls, carpets, furniture and bedding.



*Photo courtesy of The Adirondack Museum*





## SHELTER FROM THE WILD: THE LOG CABIN

The first settlers who arrived on the shores of Lake Champlain found a forested and foreboding landscape stretched out before them. There were no maps to guide their way, only crude sketches. They travelled by wagon, on horseback, and on foot. Roads were few and those that existed were narrow, rough pathways chiselled out of the wilderness. Once these pioneers found the land that was to be home, creating a shelter was the first order of business.

Settlers needed to construct a shelter that could be made quickly by one or two men. The structure had to be made from natural materials found on the land since the expense and difficulty of transporting construction materials was prohibitive. The log cabin, a structural form that originated in Scandinavia, was the answer. All one needed was a few simple hand tools and that which the land had to offer.

The first step in constructing a log cabin was to find a suitable building site, one that was dry, flat and relatively close to a water supply. After the site was cleared of trees and brush the builder needed to find trees that would make suitable logs. Spruce was commonly chosen because it was plentiful, a softwood, and its trunk grew straight. The trees were felled, limbed, and cut into logs of a standard size, usually twelve to fourteen feet in length. They were then notched at the corners and overlapped in an alternating manner to create two sets of parallel walls and a roof. Holes for the door and windows were cut as the logs were being assembled. The gaps between the logs were filled with *chinking*, a material that would fill and insulate. In the Adirondacks this material was often sphagnum moss, sometimes with the addition of mortar. No nails were used in the construction of a log cabin. Until the middle of the nineteenth century nails were handmade

individually and therefore, were expensive. This form of construction, which relied upon notching to join the logs was economical and provided a sturdy structure that would endure over time.

*Until the first water-driven lumber mills were built the settlers built their houses of logs. When a location was found the straightest trees were cut, the logs sized, notched, and shaped, and the walls raised. A real fancy cabin might be twenty-four feet long and eighteen feet wide. Rough poles served for rafters to hold the strips of bark for the roofs. A door, made of tough hand-split planks, was a fancy touch. More often an opening hung with a blanket served as a doorway. Greased paper covered the one or two window openings. The floor was of earth. The bedstead was built of poles. A slab of wood with holes bored for rude legs made the chairs. The fire was not built in a fireplace but on the ground at the end of the cabin. Smoke wandered up to a hole in the roof. Chinks between the logs were closed by cedar wedges from the inside and moss and clay from the outside. It was important to keep the fire going. Matches were not invented until 1827. Animal fat or pine knots served for light at night. [1]*

Using only an axe, a pioneer could make shakes, splits, clapboards and shingles. He could also flatten a log by scoring and hewing it, thereby creating what was called a *puncheon*. This was the method of creating flooring before sawmills were widely available.

While the log cabin provided a quick, affordable solution to the need for shelter it was only the first step to home ownership for the early residents of the region. The log cabin as a romantic symbol of a simple rural lifestyle was a perception of the well-to-do. People who lived in these crude structures wanted more. When they could manage it they built a frame house. Unlike the log cabin it was easily altered with dormers, windows, doors and additions. It was also a symbol of coming up in the world. [2]



Photo courtesy of The Adirondack Museum





## MAKING A LIVING OFF THE LAND

Early inhabitants of the Adirondack region were drawn to the area because of its wealth of natural resources - timber, water, wildlife and later, iron ore. They were farmers, trappers and the labor force for large and small logging, mining and tanning operations, which collectively formed the spine of the region's economy. These pioneers extracted a living from the landscape, often working a patchwork of seasonal jobs in order to sustain themselves.

*Human labor drew tribute from the forests in a dozen or more sustaining industries. From first to last the forests have furnished logs, timbers, lumber, fuel, fencing, tanners bark, charcoal, ashes for potash, ashes for fertilizers, furs, animals and birds for meat, sugar, vinegar, and, in later years, railroad ties, telephone poles, pulp for paper, and fuel for boats and trains and to produce power. [3]*







## Timber Industries

The most plentiful resource in the Adirondack region was timber. The virgin forest seemed endless to early settlers and they used their muscle and ingenuity to take full advantage of the wealth it offered. Trees were cut for milling into boards and burned for the production of potash and charcoal. Hemlocks were stripped of their bark, which was used for tanning hides into leather. As time progressed, trees were turned to pulp for the production of paper.

Initially, trees were cut by hand with simple axes. Felled trees were transported to sawmills by horse drawn wagons on primitive roads. But transporting timber long distances in this manner was not feasible. Therefore, loggers were restricted to cutting the timber that was in the vicinity of the mill. Once the nearby timber was exhausted, the mill was of no use.





In 1813 an Adirondack logging firm discovered it could transport logs by floating them downstream in a local river. This practice opened up new territory to loggers and allowed the timber industry to expand.

By necessity, the softwoods became the choice of loggers because they floated. The hardwoods (maples, beeches and birch) were less valuable because they could not be transported. The lumber industry wanted large straight trees. Loggers first cut the giant white pine. Some of these trees had grown to be 200 feet tall and six feet in diameter. When the forest was thoroughly depleted of pine lumbermen turned to spruce. In the mid to late nineteenth century the value of a plot of land was determined by how plentiful it was in spruce.

Logging was done in the late fall and early winter. Thirteen-foot logs were dragged through the woods by horses or oxen and piled onto a pair of logs supported by a frame, called a *skidway*. They were then loaded onto a sled and transported to the nearest riverbank where they sat until the spring thaw. The turbulent waters carried the logs to a downstream destination and on to market. In the Adirondacks logs were transported by way of the region's lakes and rivers to the Hudson River for markets to the south and to the St. Lawrence River for those to the north.



Photo courtesy of The Adirondack Museum



Photo courtesy of The Adirondack Museum





Loggers lived in camps that were quickly constructed of logs, some with roofs of bark. Once the timber in an area was cut, the camp - also called a *shanty* - was sometimes broken down and moved to another location. The loggers' camp was a small and temporary community that often included a main building, stables, equipment sheds and perhaps a commissary where basic supplies could be purchased. In the main building one would find the kitchen (where the women - if any had been hired - worked), a dining room and a men's room where the loggers retired after their meal to sharpen their axes and fraternize. Their sleeping quarters were hard bunk beds in the attic of the main building or in a bunkhouse. Loggers slept on makeshift straw mattresses, often using their boots as a pillow. The accommodations were rough. The rooms of the camp were either overheated, poorly ventilated and smelled bad or they were drafty and cold.



Loggers worked long hours for little pay. Their day typically began well before dawn, working by the light of lanterns. Each logger chopped between forty and seventy trees before quitting work at sundown. When the crosscut saw was introduced at the end of the 1800's a logger could cut one hundred or more trees a day. While living conditions were difficult, food was plentiful. It was not uncommon for a lumberjack to consume a dozen eggs *and* a dozen flapjacks for breakfast. [4]



In the spring timber bound for the saw mills was released into the icy waters of tributaries to the Hudson, AuSable and Saranac Rivers where they would be guided downstream by men called *log drivers*. Many rivers in the Adirondacks were legally declared to be public highways for this purpose. The men held long poles called *pike poles* to herd the logs and prevent jams. Some rode the logs; others positioned themselves on rocks at key points. Still others were sent to break up a log jam. When a jam did occur a special crew of men in a small boat rowed to the location and unjammed the logs. This was done manually or with dynamite.

Log drivers traveled with a cook and set up temporary camps along the way. It was cold, wet work and it was treacherous. No matter the task, lumbermen risked their lives every day in the course of their work. Those who wielded the axes could be crushed by the falling trees. Loggers who drove the log-heavy sleds down icy mountain roads to the riverbank could lose control of the sled and be killed. Log drivers risked drowning or being crushed in an onslaught of logs.

One sure sign of a logger was a gnarled hand (from rheumatism) or the absence of a couple of fingers, a leg, or an eye. Accidents were frequent ... Many a man walked or limped on a badly patched leg, once, twice, or more often broken. [5] Beginning in 1851, logs that originated in the southeastern Adirondack mountains were floated down the Hudson River to Glens Falls where they were sorted for sale at the Big Boom, a barrier created by chaining together lengths of logs. At its peak in the 1870's, the Big Boom corralled over one million logs destined for the mills. [6]



Photo courtesy of The Adirondack History Center Museum / Essex County Historical Society



### *Lumber & Pulp*

In 1845 there were, by some estimates, 2,000 sawmills throughout the Adirondack region. By 1850 New York led the Union in lumber production. [7] But by the end of the century the greatest number of trees were cut for the production of pulp for the paper industry. Poplar trees were the first choice of the paper industry because the species was quick to reforest. However, spruce soon became the favored timber. Pulp logs were shorter (four feet) and because trees were eventually ground into a mash, the size of an individual tree was of no importance. That opened logging to softwood saplings. Vast acres of forest were clear-cut to feed the pulp mills. When the railroads were built new areas became available to loggers and hardwoods could also be cut and transported by rail. These circumstances accelerated logging in the Adirondacks in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1905, alone, approximately 3.5 million trees were logged in the Adirondacks. [8] “By 1885 at least two-thirds of the entire Adirondack forest has been logged at least once. Some said more than 90 percent or close to 100 percent had fallen under the loggers axes.” [9]

The rate and manner of extracting timber resources forced New Yorkers to more carefully consider the impact of this cutting on the Adirondack forest. Timber resources, which had been abundant were not limitless. In *The Story of Three Towns*, historian Morris Glenn notes:

*The forests which surrounded Whallons Bay (Essex) were, to the early settlers of Essex, successively, obstacles to settlement, raw material for potash, and finally, as mills and men increased, an apparently unlimited source of wealth. The whole region was so vast that lumbermen proclaimed that the wood would last for centuries, and they proceeded forthwith to destroy the supply in a single human life span. It required little more than sixty years to destroy the great primeval woodlands of the Champlain Watershed. [10]*



In 1885, the New York State Legislature responded to concerns from business interests regarding the impact of deforestation on commercial waterways by creating the Forest Preserve, which protected state-owned lands from logging. Even with this legislation and the creation of the Adirondack Park in 1892, a significant portion of the forest remained in private hands and thus, unprotected. The absence of adequate regulations, coupled with increasing rail access to the interior of the region, allowed the paper industry to flourish, cutting the greatest number of trees from 1895 into the first decade of the twentieth century. Today, the Adirondack paper industry plays a far less significant role in the region's economy. In addition, a greater percentage of the Adirondacks is protected and sustainable forestry practices have become more commonplace.



Photo courtesy of The Adirondack Museum

### *Potash*

Potash was such a valuable product that it came to be used as a substitute for money. Most pioneering families made potash from the trees on their land. Potash was produced by burning hardwood, leaching the ashes with water, and boiling the leachate in large iron pots (pot-ash) to produce potash - or lye. This residue was then shipped to distant markets for use in the production of soap, glass, fertilizer and explosives. Thirty cords of wood made a ton of ashes and one sixth of a ton of potash, worth ten to twenty dollars. [11] Remember, the timber had to be cut by hand and markets were sometimes far away and difficult to reach by road. In the early years of settlement, potash was a major export product in New York State.

Out of the sales of (potash) most farmers paid taxes, hired labor, bought clothing and tools, and might have a little left over for small purchases at the general store. [12]



### *Charcoal Production*

Timber was also a source of charcoal, an essential source of fuel for the production of iron, which became a major Adirondack industry in the early and mid-nineteenth century. One forge, alone, could consume one hundred bushels of charcoal per hour - a blast furnace, more - about an acre of forest per day.

*To make a ton of iron required as much as five hundred bushels of charcoal, or about ten cords (of wood). In 1864 the forges in the (Adirondack) park consumed 6,658,000 bushels of charcoal ... The best charcoal woods were maple, birch, and beech, but virtually everything could be and was used. Ancient giants, saplings, underbrush, fallen twigs; it all went into the kiln ... Charcoal makers were the first to clear-cut in the Adirondacks ... In all, probably a quarter of a million acres were clear-cut to make charcoal for the mining industry ... [13]*

Charcoal was made by the slow and steady burning of great piles of wood. Charcoal makers, called *colliers*, preferred hardwood but virtually any timber could be used. Small charcoal operations were conical piles of wood covered with dirt and damp leaves with an opening at the top and small openings on the sides to draw in air to keep the fire burning. The piles were lit and burned for ten to fourteen days under the watchful eyes of the colliers. Most burning was done in the spring through the fall, avoiding the harsh winter weather. More significant charcoal production occurred in large kilns. [14]





## Tanneries

Tanning is the process of turning perishable animals hides into leather. Until about a century ago the agents used in the process were derived from the nuts and bark of various trees. In the Adirondacks this was the bark of the hemlock tree. Early settlers tanned their own hides but in the nineteenth century tanning became a major industry in the Adirondacks. The leather from these tanneries was primarily used in the manufacture of shoes and boots. Cattle hides imported from Central and South America were processed in tanneries that ringed the region and then shipped for sale via in railroads, canals and roads. While some tanneries operated

in the center of the region, most were located at the edges where hemlock was plentiful and transportation routes were accessible. According to Barbara McMartin, the tanning industry in the region was as important a source of revenue as the lumber industry. [15] Numerous communities such as Schroon Lake, Wevertown, North Hudson, and Minerva owed much of their growth to local tannery operations.

Roads were built in order to reach large stands of hemlock. Homes, saloons, stores, schools and churches sprung up around tannery operations, which offered employment and spurred the local economy. But by the late nineteenth century the Adirondack tanning industry had vanished. The supply of hemlock bark that could be accessed profitably was exhausted and tanners could not



afford to harvest it where it stood. Some tanneries went bankrupt; others simply moved their operations elsewhere. Tannery towns declined or disappeared all together.

Like the lumber and iron industries, tanneries depended upon huge quantities of timber and water for their operations. Hides were first salted, soaked and softened. Through a series of processes, they were then cleaned of all flesh and blood. Hair was removed by treating the hides with lime and scraping them with blunt knives. Finally, they were placed in large wooden vats with hemlock bark and water. The water leached tannin from the bark and produced a tanning liquor in which the hides remained for six months before they were dried and prepared for shipment to market.



Tanneries felled huge stands of hemlock trees, stripped them of their bark and left them to rot.

In its wake, the tanning industry left large tracts of forest decimated. It is estimated that during the life of the tanning industry, one to two million acres of forest (one sixth to one third of the acreage in the Adirondack Park) was cut for its hemlock bark. [16]

Tanneries were also infamous for the pollution of the waterbodies they exploited. Rivers, lakes and streams next to these industries became grossly contaminated with the by-products of tanning: salt, acids, flesh, tissues, blood and hair.

Labor in tannery operations involved long hours of hard labor for little compensation. As was the case with miners, many of the individuals who worked for tanneries were immigrants searching for a foothold in a new land. Tannery workers were primarily from Canada and Ireland. Since the pay was not sufficient to support a family, most of these individuals were single and given the culture of the times - they were almost exclusively men. Women worked in the office with one notable exception. Below is a glimpse into the life of Emeline Bruce, one of the teamsters who supplied the Horicon tannery with bark:

*... She had a family of five children and no one to help her take care of them. Did she go out on relief? No Sir! Not Em! What did she do? She hauled bark all winter - several winters in fact. She owned a team of black horses, and I have seen her more than once drive up to the old Horicon Tannery, sitting on top of a large load of bark, three or four cords. The first winter she hauled bark she had a baby boy about 15 months old. She had no one to leave the baby with so she made a wooden box just big enough to hold the baby. In the bottom of this box she placed straw and on top of that a large feather pillow. On this she put the baby and covered him with blankets. She made a wooden cover for the box with hinges on it, and this shut down tight. She bored two or three small holes in the side of the box near the top so the baby would have fresh air. In the morning when she was ready to start for the woods after a load of bark, long before daylight, with the thermometer perhaps 30 below zero, she would put the box with the baby in it on the sled and away she would go the length of Brant Lake, through the woods, across lake Pharo and then on still further, a distance of some 15 miles. [17]*





## Mining

Some of the earliest settlers to the Adirondacks were aware of its rich mineral resources. In the mid-eighteenth century iron ore beds in the vicinity of Port Henry supplied the forge at Whitehall, which produced iron for the Revolutionary War effort. After the war, when settlement of the region grew, mining became more prevalent and quickly developed into a major industry for the region. In the 1800's limestone, talc, zinc, ilmenite (Tahawus), graphite (Ticonderoga) and garnet (Gore Mountain) were all mined in large volumes in the Adirondack region. The vast mineral reserves of the Adirondacks also included vanadium, rare earths, and wollastonite.

The most abundant and sought after mineral was iron ore. Iron is a primary ingredient in steel and in the nineteenth century was used in the manufacture of everything from railroad ties and battleships to stoves, tools and horseshoes. It was in great demand and the Adirondack region was a significant source of this valuable metal. Deposits of iron ore were mined throughout the Adirondack region. The first mines were located in the Champlain Valley but as settlers moved into the interior reaches of the Adirondacks mining operations were established there, as well. Iron manufacturing reached its zenith in the mid-nineteenth century with more than 200 mines and forges in operation, producing almost one quarter of all the iron ore in the U.S. [18] At that time the Adirondack region was a major manufacturer of iron in the northeastern United States



### *Iron Production*

Iron was manufactured in forges and blast furnaces. The forge was a large open hearth, about seven square feet at the base with a twenty-foot stack as a vent and a bellows that fed air to the fire. In a forge charcoal was ignited, stimulated by blasts of air that resulted from water falling. Iron ore was added directly to the charcoal fire and eventually became a pasty mass that was removed and forged into a long rectangular bar of iron called a billet.

The blast furnace was an improvement on this technique of iron production. The furnace was a pyramid-shaped structure made of stone, brick and heavy timbers. Utilizing a taller stack, the blast furnace produced hotter conditions, causing the iron ore to separate from the less desirable minerals that were part of the mined ore. The higher temperature of the furnace also caused the iron to melt, thereby allowing it to be poured into molds. The resulting product was called *pig iron*. The blast furnace method made the production of new products possible and greatly expanded the iron market. While a few mining companies utilized the blast furnace, most iron operations in the region were forges.

Both of these operations relied upon large volumes of charcoal and water power for fuel. Paul Schneider estimates that as much as 250,000 acres were clear-cut to produce charcoal for the iron industry. [19]

Iron ore was mined in every county in the Adirondack region. Many of the smaller operations were short-lived, having exhausted their supply of ore or trees for charcoal. In some cases the ore was not profitable due



to impurities. Some of the more significant mining operations took place in Tahawus, Moriah, the AuSable District and Lyon Mountain.

### *Tahawus*

In 1826 a small band of Scottish entrepreneurs led by an Indian guide was searching for silver on a tract of land south of North Elba. Although silver was nowhere to be found, they did discover exceptionally rich iron ore deposits and proceeded to purchase a 100,000 acre tract of land from New York State in order to mine the valuable mineral. The town that grew up around these mining operations at the north end of Lake Sanford was known as Adirondac - a company town that existed solely to support the mines. In 1854 the Adirondac Iron Works owned four furnaces, various mills, storehouses, kilns and machine shops, as well as a boarding house, dwellings for its workers, a school house, a store, and a 300 acre farm.

Eleven miles south of Adirondac, the company developed another town ... Tahawus. Operations in this area were referred to as the Lower Works to distinguish them from those in Adirondac (the Upper Works). Tahawus boasted a substantial dam created by the company owners to provide water power, a dock and crane for loading and unloading freight, a blacksmith shop, saw mill, boarding house, school, worker residences, and a lime kiln.

*The lands cleared and cultivated at and near the village of Tahawus amount to three hundred and fifty acres. The shops and mills, the furnaces and forges, are all furnished with tools and apparatus complete for working each on a large scale ... The farms are well stocked with cattle, sheep, and hogs, 50 tons of hay and 2,000 bushels of grain ... The Company also owns several teams of oxen and horses, suitable for carrying on the business with the necessary wagons, carts, sleighs, etc. [20]*

In 1858, owing to a series of misfortunes, the company ceased all operations. A failed railroad project that would have improved trade routes was a significant setback since cost effective transportation to and from the remote wilderness area was challenging. Primitive means of transportation made it difficult for the company to offer its product at a competitive price. Other factors weighed in: the Financial Panic of 1857, two floods in 1856 that destroyed the company's dams and a saw mill, and the death of the company's leadership collectively sealed the fate of the Adirondac Iron Works. In 1858 the company suddenly ceased all operations. Soon thereafter, the village of Adirondac was completely abandoned save for the caretaker's family. It became known as The Deserted Village.

In 1941, the mines were purchased by the National Lead Company. National Lead was not interested in iron ore but rather in titanium oxide, which previous to World War II was considered a pollutant in the iron ore, detracting from its suitability for evolving steel production technology. But the war had blocked access to overseas supplies of the mineral (the pigment in white paint). The Federal government constructed a rail line into the mines and assisted National Lead with distribution. From 1941 to 1989, when the mines closed for the last time, National Lead had extracted 40 million tons of titanium. [21]

In 2003 The Open Space Institute, a non-profit organization, purchased 9,646 acres of the property for the purpose of preserving the land, which includes the headwaters of the Hudson River. [22]



### *Town of Moriah*

The Town of Moriah was home to the region's most productive ore beds and sophisticated processing operations. The ore beds in Mineville were first discovered in 1810 and contained some of the richest iron ore deposits in the world. [23] But mining began in earnest a decade later with the mining of ore in the vicinity of Port Henry and the construction of a blast furnace next to Lake Champlain. Prior to this time transportation of the ore from the inland mines to the lake was extremely difficult. Horse-drawn wagons had to haul heavy loads of ore a long distance over steep dirt roads.

In 1846 a hemlock plank road was built from Mineville to the wharves at Cedar Point that facilitated the movement of the ore to market. It is called Plank Road to this day and is a constant reminder of the treacherous journey that was emblematic of life in this community for the working class. As the lumber industry fell into decline, mining became a more important source of income. Mining operations expanded.

“From their development until 1869, it is estimated that Moriah mines produced 1,100,000 tons (of iron ore), one third of which was mined between 1863 and 1869. These ores were used in all the manufacturing districts of New England as well as the mid-Atlantic states and in the South and West ... In 1869, except for mines located in Sweden, those of Moriah represented the largest bodies of magnetite ore in the world.” [24] The ore from the Moriah mines were used to produce cast iron, wrought iron, and steel.

The development of the Town of Moriah primarily resulted from the jobs and wealth that were generated in mining operations. In the nineteenth century three mining companies were prominent in Port Henry: Port





Henry Iron Ore Company, Bay State Iron Company and Witherbee, Sherman, and Company. Eventually Port Henry and Bay State sold their interests and Witherbee, Sherman, and Company became the sole owners of the mining operations.



The individuals who owned and operated the mines and the blast furnaces built the Town. Their names are carved on street signs and buildings: Silas H. and Jonathan G. Witherbee, Thomas Witherbee, George Sherman, Wallace Foot, and George Pease. They lived in Port Henry and created a community with stores, factories, professional services, and religious, educational and cultural institutions. The workers were primarily immigrants, first from Ireland (1840's), then Italy (1890-1900's), and later the Eastern Europeans. [25]

In 1874 miners worked a ten-hour day for which they were compensated \$1.75, the equivalent of \$26.97 in 2005 dollars. [26] In contrast to the luxurious life style enjoyed by the mine owners and supervisors who lived in Port Henry, the laborers, most of whom lived in Mineville, endured a life of



hardship. Immigrants toiled long hours in the dangerous mines for compensation that was barely sufficient to meet their basic needs.

Workers were faced with numerous hazards in the mines, some of which were located hundreds of feet beneath the earth's surface. Blasting and drilling were the methods of extraction. Black powder, and later dynamite, were used to extract the ore. A blasting mishap, a cave-in, or the loss of control of an ore cart could and did result in the death of miners. A well-known occupational hazard associated with mining is silicosis, also known as Black Lung Disease. Before worker conditions improved in the twentieth century with the introduction of methods to wet down the ore, dust was a constant work hazard. Inhaling the fine particles on a daily basis resulted in many miners suffering from this degenerative respiratory disease.

Moriah was considered a company town. Laborers who were unhappy with working conditions had few alternatives. Very few employment opportunities existed that were not directly associated with the mine owners and most immigrants had no resources to relocate.

Substandard housing was provided, at a cost, to miners and their families. Accommodations

## TO THE MEN IN OUR EMPLOY

We are sorry to have to inform you that the prospects of the Iron Business are growing worse and worse, and the times look so bad that we are obliged to either close the mines or reduce wages. After much consideration we have decided not to close, but to reduce; and from and after DECEMBER 15th, the wages for a day of Ten Hours, will be as follows:

For Pit Foremen,	\$2,25
" Miners,	1,75
" Pit Men,	1,50
" Bank Men,	1,35
" Drill Boys,	1,00
" Drill Sharpeners,	2,00
" Machine Drill Men	1,75
" Assistant Drill Men	1,50

**Witherbees, Sherman & Co.**  
**The Port Henry Iron Ore Co.**

Port Henry, N.Y. Nov. 30, 1874.





for the poorest of these were four-family tenement houses, measuring 70 x 26 feet. These houses had no indoor plumbing, central heat or running water. Most families had a small garden and some raised a few animals. Some workers lived in flop houses. These were boarding houses where beds were rented in shifts. When one worker began a shift in the mines, another would be ending his and sleeping in the bed his co-worker had just vacated.

In the 1920's Witherbee, Sherman & Company constructed a new state-of-the-art blast furnace north of its Cedar Point Furnace on the shores of Lake Champlain. Unfortunately, the heyday of Adirondack iron mining was drawing to a close as other national markets became more competitive. Witherbee-Sherman sold the company to Republic Steel Company in 1938. Improvements were made in workers conditions and salaries and the town was hopeful that the new enterprise would re-enliven mining operations. The new owners kept the mines busy through World War II by supplying the war effort. But operations were less lucrative, thereafter. One of the reasons was the need to burrow further and further into the earth to find new veins of ore. Finally, in 1971 Republic Steel abandoned the mines in Moriah and they have never been re-opened.

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Today, the mining of minerals in the Adirondack Park is limited to wollastonite (NYCO Minerals, Inc., Willsboro) and garnet (Barton Mines Company, Gore Mt.). However, in the northwestern Adirondacks, zinc (Balmat Edwards District) and talc (Gouverneur Talc Company) are still being mined. Nonetheless, it is clear that a regional economy that in the nineteenth and early twentieth century depended almost exclusively upon resource extraction, long ago embraced tourism as the foundation of its economy.



## Agriculture

As previously stated, the Adirondack region did not lend itself to large-scale farming: thin, rocky soils, a short growing season, harsh winters and mountainous terrain were not conducive to agriculture. Nonetheless, there was a strong agricultural presence in the Adirondacks throughout the 1800's and well into the twentieth century. Hay, grains - particularly wheat, corn and some fruit (mainly, apples) were major crops in the region. Some of these crops were used locally; others were exported. Less significant crops included potatoes, beans, and tobacco. Maple syrup was produced in every county and became known as a distinctive regional product.

Farmers also raised livestock - dairy and beef cows, horses, hogs, sheep and chickens. Of these enterprises dairy farming was the most prevalent commercial enterprise. Before rail transportation to urban markets in the 1920's, raw milk, and farm-made cheese and butter were sold door-to-door. Milk was also sold to local creameries. In 1900 there were 11,266 dairy cows in Essex County, alone. [27] But the dairy industry experienced a steady decline in the twentieth century and is virtually non-existent today.





The 1875 New York State Census indicates that there existed more than four million acres of farm land in the Adirondack region at that time. Gross sales from all farm products reached in excess of \$27 million, the equivalent of more than \$444 million dollars today. So, although only a small portion of Adirondack lands were suitable for agriculture, farmers managed to raise a variety of crops and contributed significantly (about 25 percent) to the state's total gross sales for agricultural products. [28] Today, little farmland exists in the region. In Essex County, for example, there were 2,752 farms (294,264 acres) in 1879 and in 1997 there remained only 197 (48,196 acres). [29]

*Four Stages in the Making of a Farm* [30]



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22. Open Space Institute. <[http://www.osiny.org/press\\_list.asp](http://www.osiny.org/press_list.asp)> (2003).
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24. Smith, Murphy, Engelhart, *Reconnaissance Level Survey of Historic Resources in the Town of Moriah*, (1989) 30-31.
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26. Rosenquist, *The Iron Ore Eaters*, 26.
27. Don Cunnion, *Essex County Agriculture: A Brief History* (1991) 3.
28. *New York State Census, 1875*. The Adirondack Museum. <<http://www.adirondackhistory.org>> (2003)
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- Cunnion, Don, *Essex County Agriculture: A Brief History*, 1991
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The Adirondack History Center Museum, Elizabethtown, N.Y.<<http://www.adkhistorycenter.org>>

The Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, N.Y. <<http://www.adirondackhistory.org>>

The Iron Center, Port Henry, New York, Field Visits, 1998-2005

White, William Chapman, *Adirondack Country*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.: reprint, Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1985



## THE LESSON:

### 1. Explore students' knowledge of the local economy.

Lead a discussion that explores their knowledge of:

- how the residents of their town presently earn a livelihood
- how the residents of their town have earned their livelihood in the past
- present and past industrial activity within their community
- specific processes/technology/products associated with these industries
- the changes that occurred to alter the local economy
- the conditions/events that led to these changes
- the effects these changes had on life in their town - its culture, economy and environment

### 2. Challenge students to inspect the phrase *to earn a living*.

Lead a discussion that explores the following questions:

- What does the phrase *to earn a living* mean?

Investigate more than one definition

Ask them to describe what it means to them, personally; what criteria would they need to satisfy to feel they were making a living?

- What are the different ways in which people support themselves?

Compare and contrast:

- wages (employer/employee)
- fees/profit (self-employed)
- investments (real estate, stocks, bonds, etc.)
- inheritance
- barter (exchange of services and/or goods)
- other

- How do people survive when they do not earn a living?

- public assistance
- charitable assistance (private organization, direct support from individuals)
- family support/inheritance
- pension/retirement funds
- barter
- other

### 3. Discuss the lives of early settlers in the Adirondacks.

Ask students to imagine their town without buildings, motorized vehicles, roads, and utilities.

Ask them to describe what the landscape must have looked like before these amenities were constructed.

Ask students to consider these questions:

- Why do people move to the Adirondacks today? Did the early settlers have the same or different reasons for moving here?
- Given the lack of amenities and harsh environment, why would people settle here? What did the area have to offer? (free or cheap land, timber, water and mineral resources)

Ask a student to read the following account of Mrs. Adolphus Sheldon, who moved to Ticonderoga in 1797:

*We came through from the head of Lake George on an awful cold day on the ice. No stages, no mail, hardly any travel so we had to track. The whole length of the lake the great pines stood all around on the mountains, one unbroken wilderness. On neither side was there any settlement except at Sabbath Day Point. Not an axe had been heard and hardly a gun to scare the deer. When we got to Ti it was all bushes. We had one cow and a yoke of cattle. We all went to cutting logs and when we got four walls locked together, half a roof and the chamber floor, we moved in. When we wanted groceries we had to cross the lake for them but oftener went without them. I remember once going to a mill and dusting up flour from behind the bolt that had worms in it, picking them out and so making bread ...*

*After I married we moved across the valley westward where we had to tough it. I had toughed it at my father's and now I had to tough it here. Only a half acre was cleared. There we lived for five years without a stove or fireplace. We absolutely had no chimney. We burned wood right against the logs of the cabin and when they got afire we put it out.*

- from William Chapman White's *Adirondack Country*

Ask students if the settlers had traditional jobs and what they would have been. In circumstances where they did not have employment or their compensation was insufficient how did they manage to meet their basic needs?

Hand out copies of the following excerpt from Flavius Cook's *Home Sketches of Essex County* (1858).



Ask one student to read it aloud.

*Men scraped their own axe-helves; and bent their own ox-bows; and smoothed their own whip-stocks; and braided their own whiplashes; and put handles to their own jack-knives; and peeled their own brooms out of white birch or sweet walnut, or braided them out of hemlock; and shaved their own barrel staves; and hooped their own beer-casks; and sewed up their own harnesses; and shaped their own horse-shoes; and run their own bullets; and tapped their own boots; and swingled their own flax; and hollowed their own wooden dishes; and ironed their own ox-carts; and mended their own bobsleds.*

*(The women) picked their own wool, and carded their own rolls, and spun their own yarn, and drove their own looms, and made their own cloth, and cut their own garments, and did their own making and mending ... and dipped their own candles, and tried their own soap, and bottomed their own chairs, and braided their own baskets, and wove their own carpets, and quilted their own coverlets, and picked their own geese feathers, and milked their own cows, and tended their own calves and pig-pens, and went a visiting on their own feet, or rode to meeting or wedding on ox-sleds with a bundle of straw for a seat, and at their backs two hickory stakes and a long chain.*

- from Paul Schneider's *The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness*

- Ask students to underline all of the terms that are unfamiliar. Divide the class into three teams. Give each team a number of terms to research. Students will share the results of their research with the class. As an alternative, assign each team one or more of the above tasks to research. The team must collectively prepare a presentation that describes the technology, materials and processes required for each task. The presentation should include images, which may be drawn, photocopied, or transferred to an overlay. If your school has power point technology the class could prepare a presentation that would expand upon and illustrate the above passage.
- Ask students to write a modern-day version of the above passage, taking into consideration advances in technology and our means of obtaining goods and services.

#### 4. Describe the major industries that sustained settlers to the Adirondacks.

Ask students if there remain vestiges of these industries in their community.

Ask students if they have relatives or acquaintances who worked in any of these industries. Suggest that they speak with these individuals and return to the class with personal details, stories, and artifacts about the industry's technology, worker conditions, or impact on the community.

## STUDENT LEARNING ACTIVITIES

(All projects can be completed by individuals, small groups or as a collective class effort.)

What's in a Name?

Expansion into the Great North Woods

Profile of an Industry

Portrait of a Settler

The Immigrant Experience

### *Teaching Aids & Resources*

(In addition to the bibliographical references cited in this document)

Images of early settlers, communities and industries (local and college libraries, museums, town historians).

Maps of the Adirondack Park

Sandler, Martin W., *Immigrants*, New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1995

The Adirondack History Center Museum, Elizabethtown, New York, ([www.adkhistorycenter.org](http://www.adkhistorycenter.org))

The Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, New York ([www.adirondackhistory.org](http://www.adirondackhistory.org))

Adirondack Park Agency ([www.apa.state.ny.us](http://www.apa.state.ny.us))

The Iron Center, Town of Moriah, Port Henry, New York

Town Historians, Town and County Clerks

Town and College Libraries

Sequential Aerial Photographs (U.S. Geological Survey, National Resources Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (formerly Soil Conservation Service, County Offices)

U.S. Census Data ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov))

New York State Census Data ([www.nysl.nysed.gov](http://www.nysl.nysed.gov))

Pok-o-MacCready Outdoor Education Center & 1812 Homestead Education Foundation, Willsboro, N.Y. ([www.pokomac.com](http://www.pokomac.com))

International Paper Company ([www.internationalpaper.com](http://www.internationalpaper.com))





## LIVING OFF THE LAND

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

#### *A Social Studies Exercise*

Settlement of the Adirondack region occurred as people found ways to make a living. The importance of local industries is reflected in the names of many communities. For example, Mineville is so named because it was the location of abundant iron ore mines. Witherbee, a community of miners, was named after one of the owners of the largest mining company in Moriah.

#### Task #1:

Brainstorm examples of communities within the Adirondack Park whose names are related to these early industries. Select two communities whose histories can be compared and contrasted. Write an essay that describes the settlement of each community, its industrial development and how its economy has changed over time. Make certain that your narrative includes information about:

- The area's natural resources (nature, quality, abundance)
- Access to the resources by water, rail or road
- Demand for the product
- Factors that led to changes in the industry or its demise

#### Task #2:

Research the early industries in your own community. Discuss the development of these industries and their ultimate fate. Be sure you cover all of the points listed in [Task #1](#). Next, take a look at the street signs and community buildings in your community. How did they receive their names? Which names were related to your community's industries or their owners?

- Write a brief narrative describing the industries that have existed in your community. Include the time periods during which they thrived and declined.
- Create a chart that includes the following information:
  - Name of Street or Building
  - Association (Significance of the name)
  - Date Built or Named (If known)

Photo courtesy of The Adirondack History Center Museum / Essex County Historical Society



## LIVING OFF THE LAND

### EXPANSION INTO THE GREAT NORTH WOODS

#### *A Math, Science, Technology & Social Studies Exercise*

**Task #1:** Depict the progression of settlement of the Adirondack region using a map and chart.

**Step #1:** Select a county in the Adirondack region. Identify all towns within its boundaries that have a population of 1,500 or greater.

**Step #2:** Research the dates these towns were established. Create a graph that includes the following information:

- Name of the Town & Date Established
- Earliest Population Recorded (indicate date)
- Population Growth ( at 20 year intervals)
- Present Population

NOTE: Census data is available from the U.S. Census Bureau ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)) and the New York State Library ([www.nysl.nysed.gov](http://www.nysl.nysed.gov)), as well as through local and regional resources, such as county clerks, town historians, local libraries, museums, etc.

**Step #3:** Create a timeline that depicts the rise and decline of major industries/employers in the Adirondack towns. Did this affect population figures?

**Step #4:** Analyze the information you have gathered and prepare a presentation for the class that describes settlement trends in the region and the rise and decline of specific industries in the Adirondack Park. Consider the presence of natural resources, transportation routes and the time frames in which industries came and went. What does this suggest to you? If you were to research this further how would you design your study?





## LIVING OFF THE LAND

### PROFILE OF AN ADIRONDACK INDUSTRY

#### *An MST & Social Studies Exercise*

Using text, maps, charts, images and artifacts prepare a presentation on one of the major industries that fueled the early Adirondack economy - lumbering, pulp production, tanning, mining or agriculture. Your presentation should include:

- Visual representation of its presence in the region
- Statistical data that demonstrates its regional rise and decline
- Resource requirements
- Transportation requirements
- Technological description of the process (include changes in technology and how they affected the industry)
- Markets for the product
- Regional presence of the industry today

### Oral History/Interview

Brainstorm the names of individuals with personal knowledge of local industries. Interview an individual with knowledge of the industry. Record his/her responses on the interview form provided. Your presentation may include a photo and a narrative based on this interview. Or, you may want to invite this person to visit your school and be a part of your presentation.

# PROFILE OF AN ADIRONDACK INDUSTRY

## Interview Form

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Address\_\_\_\_\_

Title/Relationship\_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

1. What has been your relationship to this industry? How long were you involved?

2. Please describe a typical work day.



Profile of an Adirondack Industry *(continued)*

3. What were the occupational hazards associated with this industry?

4. Did you have friends and relatives who worked in the industry?

5. How did the industry influence your life?

6. How did the industry influence the community?

Profile of an Adirondack Industry *(continued)*

7. What changes in the industry did you see occur over time?

8. How has this affected your life?

9. How have these changes affected the community?

10. If you could make any changes to our community what would they be?





## LIVING OFF THE LAND

### PORTRAIT OF A SETTLER

#### *A Social Studies/Language Arts/Music Exercise*

Early settlers to the Adirondack region led hardscrabble lives. With few belongings, little money, and the harsh wilderness spread out before them they had to be tough and resourceful in order to survive. Your mission is to bring their story to life.

#### Project #1:

Use art to depict some aspect of pioneer life. Your work may be biographical (based on a true account) or fictional (based on your research). To be effective limit yourself to the retelling of a specific event - one that represents the daily hardships Adirondack pioneers encountered. Write and perform one of the following: a two-person scene, monologue, story, song, or poem.

Some of the resources available to you include: your local library, The Adirondack History Center Museum, The Adirondack Museum at Blue Mt. Lake, and your Town Historian. You should also identify individuals in your community whose ancestors helped to settle the region and interview them. Perhaps they have old photographs or original documents, such as letters, that you might review as part of your research.

#### Project #2: Teamwork

Using text, images and artifacts prepare a presentation on the life of early settlers. Your presentation should cover the following:

- construction of shelter
- diet/acquisition and storage of food/agriculture
- acquisition of clothing and household goods
- tools
- employment
- home life
- education
- religious life
- medical care
- recreation



## LIVING OFF THE LAND

### THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

#### *A Social Studies Exercise*

The Adirondacks were settled by immigrants - French Canadian, Irish, Italian, Russian, Eastern European. Many Americans can trace their heritage to ancestors who made great sacrifices to pay their way to America and establish a life here.

Choose one immigrant group to research. Using text, maps and images, prepare a presentation for your class on their experience as settler of the Adirondacks. Include the following:

- The conditions in their homeland that led these immigrants to seek a better life in America
- The process of immigration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
- The reasons they were attracted to the Adirondack region and the means by which they traveled to it
- The particular challenges they encountered as immigrants
- A description of their work lives:

Were they generally employed in the same locality/industry or throughout the region in different trades?

Did they bring with them skills they had developed in their homeland? Were they able to use these skills in the Adirondack region? How?

- An account of their personal lives:

Did they bring their families with them?

What were their living conditions? Were their basic needs (housing, clothing, food, medical care) met?

- A description of their religious and social lives:



What were their religious practices and social customs? Were they able to continue them in this country?

Did they encounter prejudice because of their language, dress or beliefs? If so, what form did it take?

Were there conflicts between ethnic groups? Describe.

- A description of the educational and recreational opportunities available to children of immigrant settlers.
- A discussion of their hopes and dreams:

What did these immigrants expect to get from America?

For the majority, did the benefits of life in this country outweigh their sacrifices?

- A discussion of the ways in which these particular immigrants influenced and contributed to the economy and culture of the Adirondack region.

### Suggested Readings

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