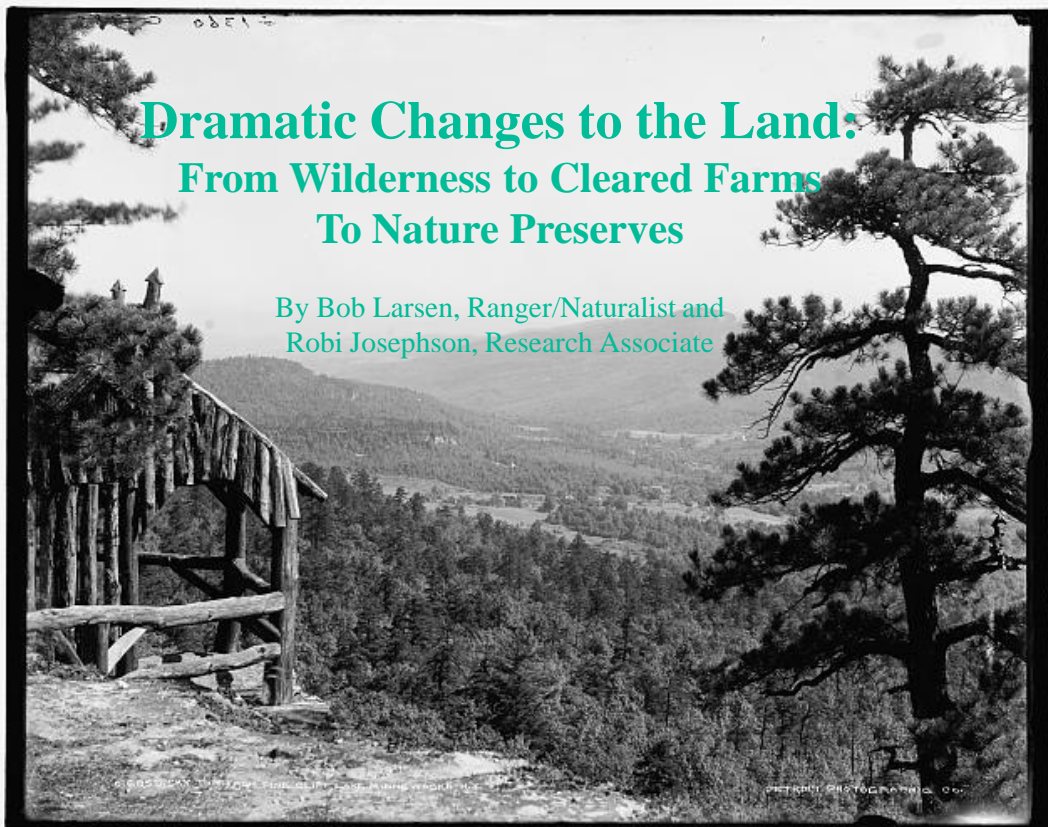


## Dramatic Changes to the Land: From Wilderness to Cleared Farms To Nature Preserves

By Bob Larsen, Ranger/Naturalist and  
Robi Josephson, Research Associate



Early 20<sup>th</sup> century photograph of the Trapps Mountain Hamlet with cleared acreage visible from Pine Cliff at Lake Minnewaska. (Photo courtesy Library of Congress, No. LC-D4-16853.)

*“The woods are lovely, dark, and deep...”* Robert Frost

**Y**ou are walking in the deep woods along the Trapps Hamlet Path. Up ahead, a tumbling stone wall lies straight through the forest. At the bridge, the stream runs through an old, unused abutment. Finally, an abandoned road leads you to the Van Leuven Cabin. Who built these, what are now, relics of history? What happened here long ago?

It's a story of dramatic changes to the land — land used by generations of people in very different ways.

When European families by the names of Burger and Van Leuven first arrived in “the Trappen” in the late 1700s, they found a landscape little altered by the American Indians. These settlers had journeyed up from the villages of the Rondout Valley, west of the Shawangunks, to begin new lives in an isolated land of virgin forest and rocky terrain.

Clearing the rocky, forested land for farms was backbreaking work. The men logged for lumber and harvested for hemlock bark to be used in tanning leather. As early as the 1810s, dozens of tanneries in the Shawangunks, Catskills, and Adirondacks bought large amounts of tanning bark taken from the then predominately hemlock forests. Trapps men hauled

hemlock bark to the McKinstry Tannery in nearby Gardiner. Later, the young, second growth hardwoods were burned for charcoal.

Countless stumps were burned and dug out. The shallow soil that was left made for hardscrabble farming. Yet in a century's time by 1880, the Trapps Hamlet peaked with about 50 homes and some 200 residents. Descendants of the first families and new arrivals had cleared or “improved” more than 1,000 acres for farms, leaving scores of acres “unimproved” to cut over for logging.

According to the New York State Census of 1865, Trapps resident Ben Fowler had 100 improved acres, with 29 in pasture, 28 in meadow, 4 in oats, 8 in buckwheat, and 2 in winter rye, plus 61 unimproved acres. Fellow farmer, George Davis, had 60 improved acres, with 38 in pasture, 12 in meadow, 3 in Indian corn, 4 in buckwheat, and a half acre in potatoes, plus 1,840 unimproved acres.

The extent of the forest clearing was so great that each house in the hamlet was visible from the others. The Van Leuven Cabin, today in deep woods, was seen from most vantage points in the community. The late Hal Bittner, former resident of the





Typical farm scene from the Trapps – note the cleared land and primitive house on the right

Trapps, remembers being able to see across open fields and the Coxing Kill to the cabin as recently as the 1920s. In 1930, the cleared areas and hamlet were traversed by the first paved modern highway over the mountain, Route 44/55.

After the Civil War ended, some Trapps families left for better farmlands in the newly opened Western Territories. The tanning industry had closed down by the 1880s. This coincided with the arrival of brothers Albert and Alfred Smiley, who opened the mountain hotels at Mohonk and Minnewaska Lakes. Many Trapps families turned to the Smileys for steadier employment. The men gained work building the new hotels and carriage roads. The women worked in housekeeping, the kitchens, and dining rooms.

As more families sold their lands to Mohonk and Minnewaska, farming in the Trapps declined. Cleared areas regenerated into second growth woodland. The 1,840 unimproved acres owned in the Trapps by George Davis became the core lands of Lake Minnewaska Mountain Houses.

Between the 1920s and 1940s, subsistence work, such as berry picking, nut harvesting, barrel hoop making, and charcoal burning, had slowly died out. Without the income from these cottage industries, the community could no longer sustain itself. Ben Fowler's Tavern had shut its doors. Schoolhouse #8 had closed and then burned down in the 1960s. The Trapps Chapel, too, had been abandoned. The last Trapps resident, Irv Van Leuven, died in 1956. The mountain hamlet and its people were gone.

**Look for the grand opening of the Van Leuven Cabin mid-year 2000!**



Trapps men working a shale bank for building carriage roads for the "new" mountain houses

photos on p. 5 courtesy of Joan Wustrau, Enderly descendant

Beginning in 1963, Mohonk Mountain House transferred the lands it owned in the Trapps to The Mohonk Trust, now the Mohonk Preserve; during the 1980s, the State of New York purchased the Minnewaska resort lands, which were added to Minnewaska State Park Preserve. After these ownership changes, the lands became protected from disturbance and today are managed as nature preserves.

The late 20th century has brought other changes as well. New vegetation has almost totally closed over the rocky terrain, returning the land to much as it was when the Indians hunted here. More white ash and maple trees have now reached maturity. Forest residents – deer, coyotes, and pileated woodpeckers – have come back. Layers of leaves gently cover the old cellar holes. The woods are lovely anew.



berry picker by Ilka List