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The Estabrook Country:

A Rediscovered Great Wild Tract

Stephen Ells

There still is a place in Concord, Massachusetts, that is as essentially wild as it was in the days of Henry Thoreau. This is the uninhabited fifteen hundred acres called the *Estabrook country* (its older name) or the *Estabrook Woods*. Though it was not wilderness even in Thoreau's time, it was his first-named "great wild tract." Few people know of it, and many of those who visit do not visit again because the landscape is not charismatic. Now modestly wooded and intimate, it is not as starkly beautiful as it had been in Thoreau's day. Naturalist J. Walter Brain describes Estabrook as it is now:

"Through forest succession, the great wild tract has further reverted to a more primitive and pristine state, constituting today an unbroken mosaic of moist, rocky and boulder-strewn woods, hills, and swamps laced with brooks. If Walden is Concord's hill and wold country of forested prominences among glacial ponds, the Estabrook is its moor and heath country, run wild and rank, a tract to stalk and trudge through, repository of Concord's richest living legacy."

Not being famous has protected it. Still often empty and with a beauty that must be teased out, Estabrook Country is not hard to get lost in, not hard to be surprised in. One can find a seventeenth-century cellar hole that has teased a poet's imagination, or a stone honoring the Minute Men who in 1775 hurried down the old Estabrook road to the North Bridge. People experience it differently: Ralph Waldo Emerson called it "the savage fertile houseless land," but his daughter Ellen called it "dear Easterbrook."



Thomas Estabrook's cellar hole, built in 1683, gave its name to this country which in 1844 George William Curtis described as "the woods and the great silent fields." Photo by Stephen Ells.

Remarkably, more than fifty people over three centuries have left us writings about their experiences in these woods. These include farmers and their wives, a philosopher and his children, poets, naturalists, schoolchildren, Revolutionary War soldiers, a college president, a suburban wife, a grocer, walkers, scholars, and ne'er-do-wells. Some tell of the passage of the seasons; some tell about what this place has meant to them; and some tell how this landscape (and by extension potentially any landscape) can connect to science and to the human spirit. This short essay will give a glimpse of this place and what it has become. Here are some of their words:

o British officer Walter Laurie, who was at Concord's North Bridge on April 19, 1775, wrote of the movements of the colonial minute men as the American army-to-be made its very first advance in ranks-out of the Estabrook Country and into history:

"The Country people retired at a great distance to the [Estabrook] Woods," then they returned "with Shouldered Arms to the Number of about Fifteen hundred and then moved down on me in a Seeming regular manner . . . I determined to repass the [North] Bridge."

o Ornithologist William Brewster of nearby October Farm wrote in 1892 that the winter scene on the Estabrook road was "simply one of bewildering beauty . . . The forest had put on an ermine robe. Not a tree or bush of whatever species that was not clad wholly in purest white" (Feb. 4, 1892).

o During the 1840s, farmer Daniel Clark sparsely chronicled in his diary four years of life on his Estabrook-edge farm. He writes wrote that he laid stone wall, "chopt" wood, took dry cattle to summer pasture in New Hampshire, pulled out peach trees, hauled manure, went to

singing school, borrowed a horse, split rails, skinned a cow, drove a team of oxen, went on the "iron road" to Boston once, swapped labor with neighbors and family, picked cranberries, won a hand of cards on Christmas eve, helped haul the Thoreau cabin from Walden to Estabrook Woods, heard lectures at the Lyceum, cut and stacked peat for fuel, and mowed hay over the old Indian corn hills.

o Estabrook in September seemed to make Emerson exultant; he wrote in his 1860 journal,

"Fine walk yesterday with Ellery [Channing] to Estabrook Farm. Finest day in the year, & best road, almost all the way 'through the lots.' Birds singing; –got over their summer silence – sunlight full of gnats; crickets in full cry; goldfinches . . . on the thistle . . . Boulder Field: cooper's hawk: rock of Sinai . . . wonderful hedges, barberry, apple, elder, viburnum, ivy, cornel, woodbine, grape, white thorn, the brook through the wood–. Benzoin. The big birch. Largeness of the estate . . . A cornucopia of golden joys" (Sept. 11, 1860, Emerson, *JMN*, 14:357).

o Poet Ellery Channing's 1853 pocket diary contains this poem fragment, written in a winter fog as he sat amidst granite boulders in an Estabrook pasture:

"The rocks for age, gray with time,
Their soft rounded outlines wear away
Whole races of men. What time! What time!
Mysterious was the boulder-field in the fog. I might have lost myself here. Here loom the great boulders, silent as the past. Here they loom, here they lay, mysterious as eld. Here might you sit your long, lone life away."

o The Appalachian Mountain Club has been walking in Estabrook Country for at least one hundred ten years. Botanist-grocer Alfred Hosmer's diary tells of walking with the "Appalachian Club" on June 21, 1890. And in 1897–1900, a guidebook was published for the AMC that gave trail directions in the woods, called the Estabrook road "one of the favorite summer drives," and described the view from Punkatasset Hill (then still mostly open) as encompassing Wachusett, Monadnock, and "a shadowy outline of Boston." (The AMC currently leads two walks in Estabrook Country each year.)

Very different voices such as these connect this landscape to its various histories. Author John Hanson Mitchell has said "There is no place on earth where the *sense of place* is better documented." By far, however, the most memorable voice from the Estabrook Country is that of Henry Thoreau. As Walter Brain says, "Although Thoreau never got to writing a book or essay on the Estabrook Country, it was in the *Journal* that, for over twenty years, he tracked its poetry of place." (Often derived from his journals, there are Estabrook passages scattered in his "Wild Apples," "Succession of Forest Trees," "Dispersion of Seeds," "Huckleberries," *Walden*, *Faith In A Seed*, *Wild Fruits*, and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.) These more than fifty thousand words, only recently compiled, tell a vivid story about what Thoreau called his "Easterbrooks Country." They also tell much about Thoreau the man, the writer, the transcendentalist, and the naturalist. They capture the tensions that were hidden both in Estabrook's landscape and in Thoreau's inner terrain. Was Estabrook wild, lonely and barren, a place of druids, Titans, brute life, and fabulous, mythological phenomena? Or was it fruitful and friendly, a paradise for walkers and teachers, a place of berry-picking, picnics, and hints of dalliance?

Estabrook Country was (and is) both, and the tension between these sets of powerful images is often as explicit as it is in his exuberant "What a wild and rich domain that Easterbrooks Country! Not a cultivated,

hardly a cultivatable field in it, and yet it delights all natural persons, and feeds more still" (*Journal*, Oct. 20, 1857). In the eighteen-fifties, as Thoreau had begun to look again at the countryside of Concord with post-Walden eyes, what had he seen in the landscape of Estabrook? Initially he found it different, thus interesting:

"There is a tract of pasture, woodland, orchard, and swamp in the north part of town, through which the old Carlisle road runs, which is nearly two miles square, without a single house and scarcely any cultivated land in it, - four square miles" (*Journal*, June 5, 1853).



A walker crosses a dam on Sawmill (or Wigwam) Brook. John Hanson Mitchell describes Estabrook Country as "an incredibly worked piece of land," as colonists once gathered energy from even the smallest brooks. Thoreau's father had a mill a few rods downstream to cut Estabrook's pasture cedars for the family's pencil business. Photo by Stephen Ells.

Though the moor-like sweep of Estabrook's high rocky pastures had initially caught Thoreau's interest, his journals soon pictured a more complex mosaic of woods and swamps: - one where a robin sang in the woods in the rain with "sounds to make a dying man live"; or one where he could sit under dark hemlocks as if in the gloom of night, and the birds would come to a small pond in front of him. He called it "a centre to them" just as he called Walden "this centre" for himself. The white pines of Estabrook were great harps on which the wind made music; open oak groves were "handsome and cool and bosky"; ferns were tropical; and yellow birches were "great vegetable chandeliers . . . stand[ing] in the swamps."

He also wrote of the denizens of Estabrook and compared their quests with his own. For example, he met the solitary Brooks Clark who, like Thoreau, "had been out to see what nature had for him." This cheery, feeble old man, on the edge of poverty, foraging for wild food, had, said Thoreau, learned to live as he approached

death:

"I had gone but a little way on the old Carlisle road when I saw Brooks Clark, who is now about eighty and bent like a bow, hastening along the road, barefoot, as usual . . . When he got up to me, I saw that besides the axe in one hand, he had his shoes in the other, filled with knurly apples and a dead robin . . . His old tattered frock coat was hanging in strips about the skirts, as were his pantaloons about his naked feet . . . If he had been a young man, he would probably have thrown away his apples and put on his shoes when he saw me coming, for shame. But old age is manlier; it has learned to live, makes fewer apologies, like infancy. This seems a very manly man." (*Journal*, Oct. 20, 1857)

And he raged over the old Kibbe cellar hole, imagining that grinding poverty had denied the long-dead inhabitants their humanity:

" Here was the cider mill & there the orchard & there the hog-pasture—& so men lived and drank & passed away.— like vermin. Their long life was mere duration . . . But if I could know that there was ever entertained over their cellar hole some divine thought which came as a messenger of the gods—that he who resided here acted once in his life from a noble impulse—rising superior to his groveling and penurious life—if only a single verse of poetry or of poetic prose had ever been written or spoken or conceived here beyond a doubt—I should not think it in vain that man had lived here.— It would to some extent be true then that God had lived here." (*Journal*, Sept. 21, 1851)

Estabrook's strongest magic, however, was its ability to transform itself from a barren place to one flooded in season with wild fruits. Thus, wild Estabrook could be full of people participating in communal rituals, walking, or harvesting berries, nuts, and fruits. For example, he wrote,

"Road—that old Carlisle one—that leaves towns behind; where you can put off worldly thoughts; where you do not carry a watch, nor remember the proprietor . . . It is an endless succession of glades where the barberries grow thickest, successive yards amid the barberry bushes where you do not see out. There I see Melvin and the robins, and many a nut-brown maid *sashé*-ing to the barberry bushes in hoops and crinoline, and none of them see me . . . There I go searching . . ." (*Journal*, Sept. 24, 1859)

Though Walden-less, the Estabrook Country had for Thoreau its own spiritual metaphor—the old Carlisle road as a pilgrim's way. This dirt track (now the Estabrook road) was and is the spine of the Estabrook Country experience. On one equinox, Thoreau wrote of personal renewal:

"The earth is uninhabited but fair to inhabit, like the old Carlisle road. Is then the road so rough that it should be neglected? Not only narrow but rough is the way that leadeth to life everlasting. Our experience does not wear upon us. It is seen to be fabulous or symbolical, and the future is worth expecting. Encouraged I set out once more to climb the mountains of the earth, for my steps are symbolical steps, and in all my walking I have not reached the top of the earth yet." (*Journal*, March 21. 1853).

In his study of nature, Thoreau went from describing *things* to trying to understand, through observation and reflection, both the *process* that drives and disperses life and the laws that lie behind nature. In Estabrook, he recorded the flowering and seeding of species upon species year after year; he took the temperature of springs to understand groundwater; he noted the alignment of the strata of Curly Pate Hill; he puzzled out a century and a half of a woodlot's history; he reported on Estabrook's lynx; he climbed trees to study nests; he speculated about watersheds and the physiography of the hills; and he wrote about how humans connected to the landscape. Above all, in his last months he studied forest succession and the dispersion of seeds in a

landscape of change. Henry Shattuck's woods were a demonstration of seed dispersion. Perez Blood's primitive oaks were a touchstone for climax ecology. And the prodigality of the acorns was part of a world that Thoreau hoped could redeem us literally and spiritually. It was after an afternoon immersed in nature in the Estabrook Country that he wrote one of his boldest statements-"our schoolhouse is the universe":

"I find that the rising generation in this town do not know what an oak or a pine is, having seen only inferior specimens. Shall we hire a man to lecture on botany. . . while we permit others to cut down the few best specimens of these trees that are left? It is like teaching children Latin and Greek while we burn the books printed in those languages. It is my own way of living that I complain of as well as yours, and therefore I trust that my remarks will come home to you . . . I think that each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres, either in one body or several, where a stick should never be cut for fuel, nor for the navy, nor to make wagons, but stand and decay for higher uses- a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation . . . All Walden Woods might have been reserved, with Walden in the midst of it, and the Easterbrooks Country, an uncultivated area of some four square miles in the north of the town, might have been our huckleberry field [Ed.: i.e., the wild and fertile in nature to nourish body and spirit] . . . We boast of our system of education, but why stop at schoolmasters and schoolhouses. We are all schoolmasters, and our schoolhouse is the universe. To attend chiefly to the desk or schoolhouse while we neglect the scenery in which it is placed is absurd. If we do not look out we shall find our fine schoolhouse standing in a cowyard at last . . . Live in each season as it passes; breath the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each" (Thoreau, *Wild Fruits* [2000], p. 235-238. See, *Journal*, Oct. 15, 1859).

Another history is suggested by this passage-Estabrook's inspiring but controversial *conservation* history. By happy chance, and through the care of some of its owners and the perseverance and generosity of many citizens, much of Estabrook Country remains undeveloped. Hermit thrush, goshawk, fisher, otter, beaver, and many state-listed rare species live there. Even a black bear was seen on Biodiversity Day in 1998. It is inspiring that, under the leadership of famed evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr and Concord's Thomas Flint, seven hundred acres of the Estabrook Country has been permanently dedicated by Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology as an ecology study area, its "Concord Field Station." This is *as Thoreau said it should be*-for instruction and re-creation. This research area is protected by four hundred acres of land and conservation restrictions held by the towns of Concord and Carlisle and by local land trusts. Thus, Estabrook Country is *not* a public park-its core is a research area. It is mostly privately owned, though public access is permitted on much for study, sauntering, and low-impact, traditional uses. The entire tract has also received national recognition from the state and US Forest Service as a "forest legacy area." Many millions of dollars have been spent to save it. As Director of the Museum, Ernst Mayr once charged the Field Station with this mission:

"We are in desperate need to know more about the dynamics of animal populations, about the turnover in plant communities and about the replenishment of living renewable resources. This is important for solving many of the practical problems that man faces every day. The Estabrook Woods will form the center of a balanced ecological study area . . . The entire outdoor laboratory would be available to other universities as well as the biology students at Middlesex School."



Middlesex School students parade for Estabrook Country. Concord's Musketaquid Arts Festival annually celebrates Estabrook protection. In 1998, these Middlesex School students, opposed to their school's development plans, carried puppets of endangered dragonflies and a banner with schoolmaster Henry Thoreau's exhortation about Easterbrooks Country, "We are all schoolmasters and our schoolhouse is the universe." Photo by Stephen Ells.

It is time to celebrate our success and to redouble efforts at protection, for controversy continues. The adjacent Middlesex School, a private preparatory school which was once a partner in Estabrook preservation, now proposes to develop 2000 feet or more into its part of the Woods, despite much citizen, graduate, and student opposition. The 1996 class valedictorian Nathan Kraft implored the school's trustees, "Be mindful of what lessons you teach your students," and Molly Tsongas, student body president in 2000, wrote to the school community of her opposition to her school's plans, "You see, it's like this. There is this big marble, and when you look into it, you are swept away with wonder. What you see is so complex and beautiful that you know that you could only be seeing visions of life itself . . . It must be passed along from hand to hand with care . . . This is our time, our moment with the marble, let us for once do something for the greater good." Many generations of Estabrook Country's friends join them in hoping the school returns to its tradition of honoring what its long-time headmaster Monk Terry called "our beloved Estabrook Woods."

Author invites comments: Stephen F. Ells, Lincoln, Mass.

<sfe@mac.com> and

<<http://home.earthlink.net/~steveells>>.

Other readings:

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[Return to [Estabrook Woods start page](#)] [To [Steve Ells' Home Page](#)]