

CHAPTER 12

HIGHLAND STREET FOREST

GENERAL INFORMATION: Sanderson Hill, one of the highest elevations in Weston, is located in the Highland Street Forest. During the American Revolution, this hill was the site of a signal beacon manned by a "Sergeant at the Beacon" and five men. The "Sergeant at the Beacon" was Jonas Sanderson whose home was on Highland Street near the corner of Love Lane. An old photograph of the Sanderson home and barns appeared in *The Weston Historical Society Bulletin*, Vol. IX, No. 2 (January 1973). The house burnt in 1897. Old maps indicate that the beacon was situated near the site of the present water tank. An archaeologist, employed by the Bicentennial Committee, was unable to locate any evidence of the beacon at this site. For a further discussion of the Beacon, see Harold G. Travis, "The Beacon on Sanderson Hill" which appeared in *The Weston Historical Society Bulletin*, Vol. XI, No. 1 (October 1974).

During Weston's estate era (1870 until about 1960), this land was a portion of the estate of General Charles Jackson Paine. General Paine was a grandson of Robert Treat Paine, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He served throughout the Civil War. After being mustered out of service, he turned his attention to business and took part in the management of several railroads, including the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe and the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy. In 1885, he was a member of a syndicate that built the America's Cup winner, *Puritan*. In the two succeeding years, he assumed the cost of two Cup winners, the *Mayflower* and the *Volunteer*.

General Paine married Julia Bryant in 1867. Within a year, he bought land in Weston for a farm. He owned about 700 acres most of which was located in the area from The Boston Post Road (Central Avenue) to the Turnpike and from Highland Street to Wellesley Street. A further interest of Paine's was trotting horses. He maintained two race tracks on the farm. The site of a half-mile track is a part of the Forest & Trail Association's trail system behind Regis College (junctions 1, 2, 3, and 4 are on this track). The Paine family lived on Louisburg Square during the Winter, in Weston during the spring and fall, and in Nahant or Chatham during the summer. After General Paine's death, his son John B. Paine winterized the Weston house and raised his family there. The house was abandoned about 1965 and torn down in 1971.

The first land purchased for the Weston Town Forest was 150 acres of the Paine estate. Since that time, there have been several additions including an 18 acre gift of Kenneth J. Germeshausen and Edward B. Hubbard and a 5 acre gift

with Highland Street frontage from the Paine family. The present area is about 200 acres.

PARKING: There are three convenient parking spots south of Route 20 along Highland Street.

- 1) At 0.5 mile south of Route 20, there is a pull-off on the western side of Highland Street. After parking, cross Highland Street to the sidewalk and walk south to the telephone pole where the sidewalk ends. About ten feet beyond the telephone pole, there is a path over private land which leads to the meadow at the northwestern end of Highland Street Town Forest.
- 2) At 1.0 mile south of Route 20, there is a pull-off by a large white pine on the western side of Highland Street at Sunset Corner. After parking, cross Highland Street to a stone staircase which leads to Sunset Corner Lookout on the west side of Highland Street Town Forest.
- 3) At 1.3 miles south of Route 20 on the east side of Highland Street is Wildflower Lane. Turn into this Lane. On the south side of the Lane is transformer MH 9841 opposite a light colored boulder. Park by the boulder. The description below starts from this location.

One may also park on the High School parking lot and walk to the corner of South Avenue (Route 30) and Wellesley Street. Cross to the northwest corner of this intersection. From here one can walk:

- 1) North along Wellesley Street. Just south of a stone wall behind the Spellman Stamp Museum, turn to your left, pass through a gap in the stone wall, and enter a path into the Highland Street Town Forest.
- 2) West along the north side of South Avenue (Route 30). Just before reaching the Farmer's Cemetery, turn right and follow the path into the hemlock grove. This path is mentioned in the discussion below.

RECOMMENDED WALK: This walk will start from Wildflower Lane, go down a valley, then to the top of Sanderson Hill before returning to the starting place. The time of this walk is about two hours.

Park by the large light colored boulder on the north side of Wildflower Lane. Enter the woods north of this boulder through a break in the stone wall. Head north along a foot path which runs under a mixture of black oaks, red oaks, red maples and white pine. Oaks are members of the beech family and belong in either of two groups, the black oaks or the white oaks. Black oaks

require two years to form mature acorns, have leaves with sharp lobes with pins at their end, and usually have dark bark. White oaks mature acorns in a single year, have leaves with rounded lobes, and have lighter bark. There are many oak species and many hybrids of these species in New England. To establish identification, one should look at tree form, leaves, buds, bark, and acorns. Oaks are an important source of food for wildlife. In years when the acorn (mast) crop fails, many birds and mammals have difficulty in finding enough to eat during the winter.

After entering the woods, avoid the path leaving on the right and go straight ahead (north) to junction 6. Continue straight ahead (north) along a fire road. This fire road passes through a stone wall and soon reaches junction 5. At junction 5, a foot path crosses the road. Take this foot path to the right (east). This path rises over a bedrock outcrop and continues down a stream valley. The path passes through an area of white pine with an understory of bracken or brake. Bracken has three triangular leaves at the top of a stem which is usually higher than a foot. Bracken is native to Africa, North America, Central America, Asia and Europe. For a primitive plant, it has many ways of defending itself. Its stem fibers may inflict deep cuts. Animals attempting to browse on bracken receive not only cuts but a dose of toxic chemicals that destroy reserves of vitamin B, that kill bone marrow and blood cells, and that may cause blindness.

Success of bracken and other ferns illustrates an important point. Long-term survival is not simply a case of being more evolutionary advanced than other forms of life. In each environment on earth, a certain set of factors works to promote survival while other sets fail. Nature refuses to limit its options to man's simplistic idea of evolutionary progress. Ferns using a cumbersome mode of sexual propagation which predates the efficiencies by propagation of seeds, have survived for 300 million years. Very few organisms have had such success. A hot topic in paleontology is the idea that mass extinction has occurred time and time again over geological time. No extinction gets more attention in the media than that of the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous Period. Before and after this extinction, the pollen of the angiosperms, the flowering plants, dominated the fossil record. Nevertheless, during the time of the extinction event, fern spores dominated angiosperm pollen. This fact suggests that ferns were best able to exploit the opportunity provided by the meteor impact, climatic change, or whatever else wiped out so many organisms, including the dinosaurs.

Another more recent example occurred in the gradual transition that resulted from a worldwide cooling during the glacial period that ended ten thousand years ago. The conifers, considered more primitive than the angiosperms, claimed the huge cold area of the earth's surface known as the taiga. Thus, we see that under certain stresses, ferns and conifers have proved

more capable of dealing with environmental change than the angiosperms. One may argue that the angiosperms dominate the most favorable climates. But consider a black spruce in a Labrador bog which finds the winters of Labrador to be perfection. To be anthropomorphic, it occupies the best set of conditions; and one can imagine it pitying the poor plants suffering the summer heat and smog of Los Angeles. To repeat, our ideas of primitiveness, success, and dominance are based on our biases more than the way Nature proceeds.

Avoid the trail which crosses our path and continue straight ahead into an area of beeches. Passing through a stone wall, you enter into a hemlock grove. I am told that this grove was completely uprooted during the 1938 hurricane. The windfall was salvaged for timber.

At junction **O**, continue bearing slightly to the right taking a foot path which passes through a stone wall. This path meanders through the hemlock grove trending to the east. You may note that the hemlocks form a dense canopy above you. One result of this dense canopy is that a hemlock grove is cooler and lacks the understory vegetation found in the surrounding woods. The path passes through another stone wall and soon reaches an intermittent stream. This crossing can be muddy. Just after crossing the stream, the path reaches a junction. The path going to the right goes to the Farmer's Cemetery on South Avenue (Route 30). You should take the path going to the left which returns upstream in the hemlocks. Soon the path passes through a stone wall and you should keep bearing left avoiding the path on the right which goes east to Wellesley Street. Our path heads west and then bears right to a junction and an opening in a stone wall. Avoid the path to the left and pass through a gap in a stone wall onto a fire road which is situated between two stone walls. Turn left and follow along this fire road. If you turn to the right, the fire road soon becomes a path which goes to Wellesley Street near the Spellman Stamp Museum. At junction **9**, keep to your right following the fire road. Just beyond this junction, there are many tall hemlock trees. As you leave the hemlock woods, the canopy opens allowing more sun to reach the woodland floor. Note the change in the amount of understory vegetation. The fire road joins another fire road at junction **1**. This fire road is one of the former race tracks which General Paine used to train trotting horses at the end of the nineteenth century and to race motor cars during the first decade of this century. Junction 1, 2, 3, and 4 are situated on this track which is a half-mile in length.

At junction **1**, turn to your right and continue along the former race track. Avoid the short trail to the right which leads to the parking lot at Alumnae Hall on the Regis College campus. Continue along the fire road avoiding a foot path and a wood road going to your right at junction **2**.

At junction 3, note that the canopy trees are predominately beech and maple. Ferns are mainly interrupted and royal fern. Interrupted fern (*Osumunda claytoniana*) is recognized by the fact that its fertile leaflets "interrupt" the sterile leaflets about the middle of the stem. Royal fern (*Osmunda regalis*) looks like a fern from a distance, but close inspection of its leaflets show that they resemble those of a locust tree. Royal fern is a primitive fern having its origin in the late Paleozoic Era, 250 million years ago. The combination of swamp maple and ferns indicates that this area is a wetland. Other plants near this junction are New York fern, low blueberry, and sassafras. New York fern has leaflets that taper to a point at both top and bottom. (New Yorkers burn their candles at both ends.) At junction 3, turn off the former race track taking the fire road to the right which leads towards Chestnut Street. This fire road was used during the timber salvage operation after the 1938 hurricane. Salvaged wood was taken to a sawmill on the Sudbury River in Wayland.

This fire road starts up a valley. For a short distance, you may be able to see the intermittent stream on your left. As you rise into a drier area of forest, the trees in the canopy change to white birch, hickory, and beech. White, paper, or canoe Birch (*Betula papyrifera*) is readily recognized by its chalky-white bark which readily peels from the tree and can be separated into paper-thin layers. The northern Algonquins used its bark for canoes, cooking pots, dishes, trays, and a protective covering for their dwellings.

At junction J, a foot path crosses the fire road. This foot path runs from Regis College to Highland Street. Our journey continues along the fire road. We pass junction E where our north/south fire road crosses an east/west fire road. At junction E, we are in a dry woodland where the trees are mainly birch and black or red oak. Bracken fern and low blueberry form the main ground cover. White pines are also present.

Beyond junction E, the fire road passes a trail on the left. Avoid this trail which leads to the water tank near the summit of Sanderson Hill. Continue along the fire road which drops down as it approaches Chestnut Street. Before reaching the gate at Chestnut Street, turn to your left along a well-used woods path. The wood here is mainly maple and oaks. After leaving the fire road, it is about 150 feet to a gap in a stone wall. Pass through the wall. In another 120 feet, you arrive at the edge of a meadow. Follow the path for about 150 feet into the center of the meadow where you reach a crossing path. The path going to your right (north) enters into private land. Looking to the south, you can see an F & T arrow on a large white pine tree at the edge of the meadow. Head for this pine. As you cross the meadow, take time to notice the wildflower display. The path passes from the meadow, through a stone wall, and into the woods. The path gently ascends. Ignore the path on the left. After passing through a second stone

wall, the path levels out on Sanderson Hill. Sanderson Hill does not have a distinct summit; but, has a plateau for its summit. It was on this plateau that the Patriot's maintained a Revolutionary War beacon. One of the Town Water Department's tanks stands on this plateau. The small field by the water tank has interesting displays of our native wild flowers through the late spring, summer, and fall.

Just beyond the water tank, there is a fire hydrant along a fire road. At the hydrant turn left following the fire road as it rises slightly. Continue along the road through an area of mixed woodlands. Soon you will come to a junction where white birches can be seen ahead. This is junction F. I have maintained a breeding bird site here for several years. One can usually find a scarlet tanager family here in late May through June.

At junction F, turn to your right heading south to junction G. The fire road descends slightly and turns to the west at junction G. Continue following the fire road as it leads west. The fire road is more or less level for some distance. Where the road starts to descend, a path crosses the road. If you turn to the right along this path and walk about fifty or sixty feet from the fire road, you will come to an area where beech and black birch trees predominate. Black, cherry, or sweet birch (*Betula lenta*) grow up to 75 feet in height. The twigs are tasty to chew having a wintergreen taste and odor. The sap may be collected in the spring and used to prepare birch beer. The bark of this birch is blackish and breaks into flat, square plates with age.

Return to the fire road and continue to the south along the path. The path turns to the west and leads to a viewpoint, known as Sunset Corner, along Highland Street. Here, there is a plaque on a boulder which reads:

BICENTENNIAL 1976

THIS MEMORIAL WAS ERECTED BY THE TOWN OF WESTON AND THE WESTON FOREST AND TRAIL ASSOCIATION ON LAND DONATED TO THE TOWN IN 1955 BY THE CHARLES JACKSON PAINE FAMILY SO THAT THE VIEW TO THE WEST MIGHT BE ENJOYED BY THE FUTURE GENERATIONS.

WEST BY SOUTH	REEVES HILL	2 MILES	406 ft.
WEST	NOBSCOT HILL	8 MILES	602 ft.
WEST BY NORTH	MT WACHUSETT	29 MILES	2106 ft.
WEST NOR'WEST	MT MONADNOCK	52 MILES	3165 ft.

Although Reeves Hill, Nobscot Hill, and Mt. Wachusetts may be seen on a clear day from this spot, the view of Mt. Monadnock is hidden by the pines on your right.

Retrace your steps back to the fire road and turn to your right returning to junction **G**. At junction **G**, the fire road turns to the left and heads to the north to Junction **F**. The foot path to your right leads to Highland Street exiting between number 195 and 208. You should continue straight ahead along a foot path. In about 60 feet, you will pass through a gap in a stone wall. In another 30 feet, the foot path divides at a large white pine bearing an **F & T** sign. The second sign on this pine reads:



These signs were prepared by Weston's Scout Troop 153 managed by David Kahler as an Eagle Scout Project and were placed in environmentally sensitive areas.

The trail on the right goes to junction **5** through a wetland. Thus, we shall take the drier path to the left to junction **J**. The canopy about this path is initially oak and beech with an understory of white pine, chestnut and sassafras. As the path descends, white birch adds to the canopy and bracken fern and low bush blueberry to the ground cover. Soon, we reach a fire road at junction **J** by a large hemlock. Turn to your right following a fire road which ends at junction **3**. Turn right on the fire road which is a section of the former race track. At junction **4**, turn to your right leaving the race track and continue straight through junction **5** to junction **6**. At junction **6**, leave the fire road to go straight ahead along a foot path retracing your steps to our starting place.