

A Monumental History:  
Stories of the Berkshires

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## Abstract

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*A Monumental History: Stories of the Berkshires* is a creative-nonfiction work focusing on stories surrounding forgotten monuments in the Berkshire region of western Massachusetts. The Berkshires exhibit a distinct regional culture that has set them apart from the rest of Massachusetts and indeed from the rest of the rural and urban United States. As one of the first American frontiers, the region was settled by self-reliant and determined pioneers who had to endure harsh environments, Native American unrest, wars, and political and religious disturbances and disagreements. Utopian communities like the Shakers would settle in the Berkshires, drawn by their promise of frontier religious freedoms.

At the same time, the region also attracted celebrities who were drawn to the unperturbed natural beauty of the mountains. No other landscape can boast the attentions of literary giants like Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, while also showcasing the artistic work of residents like Norman Rockwell. Even the natural landscape poses a contrast to the rest of Massachusetts. While Massachusetts is relatively flat, the Berkshires are a land of mountain ranges, including both the Berkshire mountains in the east, really the southern branch of the Hoosac Range, and the Taconic Mountains in the west. The geology of the region has made it distinctive and created a crucible for the unique culture that colors its hills.

Yet, while the wild beauty of the area has attracted people like the Shakers, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, it has also attracted industries that have left the land scarred with old abandoned railroad lines and quarries, for instance. The land was left ravaged and the inhabitants were decimated by the loss of these industries. However, in the past century the Berkshires have come back to life, as exemplified by the outpouring of local aid that accompanied a military plane crash in the region in 1942 and the memorialization of the site on Garnet Peak.

To tell the story of the Berkshires, this work focuses on four sites: the Hancock Shaker Village in Hancock, Monument Mountain in Great Barrington, the Hudson and Chester Granite Quarry in Becket, and the Garnet Peak plane crash monument in Peru. Each of these areas is described firsthand as they exist in the present day through descriptions of hikes that serve to take the reader into the very woods where these stories took place. Then, the history of each area is analytically explored using historical texts, which provide the historical context of the Berkshires. Ultimately, by contrasting the present day with the past, the goal of this work is to establish how the natural environments of each of these sites were changed by human hands and what human happenings these changes memorialize.

By focusing on and exploring these specific sites, it is possible to reveal greater trends about the relationship between religion, art, industry, and community, on the one hand, and nature, on the other. Also, this project aims to evaluate the effects of Americans' inhabitation upon the land. Literary works dealing with these topics are cited and unpacked in order to add dimension to the question of how Americans might properly memorialize regional land. The works of William Cullen Bryant and Percy

Bysshe Shelley serve to provide a Romantic perspective on the purpose and longevity of humanity's monuments in nature. Expanding on this creative analysis, the Berkshires can serve as a microcosm from which the extensive history of America can be understood. From the history of the Berkshires, greater conclusions can be drawn about the United States as a country of progress, innovation, and hope.

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## Introduction

### *The Experience of Nature*

For most of my life my idea of ‘tall things’ were mountains—not skyscrapers. As a native of the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, everything I held dear in my early life, including family, friends, and school, was always framed by a mountainous backdrop. As a result, adult me is inextricably tied to the nature of my youth. Indeed, my development as a person and as a writer can be traced through my interactions with nature, preserved in journal entries I penned while hiking. One of these, written on August 7, 2016, describes the almost Transcendental connection I experience with nature:

I offer up my permeable soul to nature, letting what will of its goodness and strength flow in. I yield easily, as the memories and obligations of my human life seem to be but dreams. In this moment, I am pastless, and futureless; the only option is to the trust in the present—the natural world in which I seek to immerse myself. (Bolduc 5)

The experience of nature stirs in me a euphoria like I’ve never felt before. It is not like the highs of love, happiness, or exercise—it is an ultimate exhilaration, the feeling of a soul stretching out from its mortal confinement in communication with something greater. I’ve never felt more alive, or more human, than when I am out in the environment in my native Berkshires. I’ve hiked in countries as diverse as Thailand and the United Kingdom, but nothing I’ve experienced compares to the sensation of communing with my homeland.

Yet even as my soul soars in nature, I find myself yearning for human contact. Often this comes in contemplating those who have come before me, who have previously experienced the natural spaces I now draw inspiration from. In that same journal entry, I also write,

Here, in this place, I can explore myself, but I can also learn about the dynasty of humans who have occupied this land. For instance, the trail I've just sweated and struggled up was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. Each carefully laid stone in the manmade staircase I struggled over was put there by human hands nearly a century ago. How does my experience connect to theirs? The answer is through the conduit of the land. They have shaped the land I now see, the land that influences me and compels me to explore myself. These faceless men and women have sent reverberations throughout history that affect everyone who hikes this trail. In this way, nature becomes a fusion of human activity and the original nature itself. The experience of "nature" is not the experience of an untouched, completely natural world, but of a world forged through the actions of mankind and the reaction of the land. (Bolduc 5)

What we think of as "nature" is actually an amalgamation of manmade alterations on nature and nature itself. This is especially visible in the Berkshires. History is everywhere; it is nearly impossible to experience pure, unaltered nature. Each person who visits the land leaves his or her mark on it, which is seen again by future generations. For example, at the site that inspired the journal entry above—a mountain vista from which the Westfield River, Route 20, and the Boston and Albany Railroad can be seen—the scene is inseparable from the manmade constructions that impose upon it, as I note in that same entry:

Below winds a river; the Westfield River. This branch is the West Branch, the only untamed, undammed branch. It recklessly cuts through fields and forests, gurgling with pleasure at its wildness. Snaking by the river are the railroad tracks, which once carried these mountains' bounties of emery to markets on the coast. They shine in the sun; each sparkle is a silent chant of "technology, technology." On the other side of the river is Route 20. Now dull pavement and yellow lines, it was once a muddy and rutty scar on the earth. Back when automobiles were first invented people would come from all around to try their cars on Route 20, to see if they could motor over the mighty Berkshires. Rising high above these three landmarks are the mountains themselves. No buildings are in sight; only the mountains with their blue-green spattering of hemlock, oak, maple, and spruce trees. Crowning two of these mountains are two human edifices. One is a cell-tower, disguised to look like a tree but looking rather more like a tree-colored toilet brush; the other is a fire tower, whose decommissioned status has established climbing it as one of the local youths' rites of passage. (Bolduc 5)



All human history contributes to the sense of the Berkshires. Dams, roads, railroads, buildings, towers, and bridges all add another layer to the natural scene until what is human-made and what is nature-made becomes nearly indistinguishable to future generations. But even apart from these major impositions, humans have still managed to leave their mark on the land. Zigzagging through forests across the Berkshires are New England's famous stonewalls, hinting at a past where the region's trees were razed in favor of farm pastures. Many travel to the Berkshires to see these stonewalls, which they regard as beautiful constructions of ordered, native rock. But these walls are neither natural, having been arranged by human hands, nor unnatural, since they are constructed of natural materials. In the Berkshires, one of the most historic regions in the United States, the fusion of human history and natural history is overwhelmingly apparent. Natives of the Berkshires, like myself—who have perhaps seen more trees than people in their entire lives—are aware of their place in the equal partnership of humanity and nature, understanding from their history that only when harmony is reached between the two can we exist peacefully on this planet.

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*An Equal Partnership: Nature and Humankind*

Earth is marked by our habitation as a species. Everywhere across the globe we have diverted water, changed the slope of the land, dug into the earth, and moved materials from their native spot. Every mark is a monument to a human drive to improve our existence. Yet, in so doing, we sometimes thoughtlessly scar our earth. Such a history of habitation is especially apparent in the Berkshires. The region, settled in the eighteenth century, has experienced the eccentricities of many different inhabitants, from religious

sects to farmers to industrialists to tourists. All have treated the land differently, and have transformed it in their wake. Every layer of human residency on the land has changed the earth, until the strata of the land itself becomes a history of human existence. In a cyclical fashion, the land has also shaped the humans who live upon it. Through the conduit of the land, humans affect one another. In this way, nature becomes integral to human history, and humans become integral to natural history.

Herein I propose a new approach to understanding the convergence of our history and our natural environment: natural historicism. In the natural historicist approach, human history can be understood by reading the land. This work, *A Monumental History: Stories of the Berkshires*, endeavors to do just that. Four natural sites, serving as case studies of the entire Berkshires, are chosen to be the subject of four chapters. Certainly, there are many more locations in the Berkshires where humankind's colonization has left marks on the environment. Some are more obvious and some are less obvious. I have selected these four sites in order to explore different aspects of Berkshire culture—including religion, literature, industry, and community—and to develop the history of the Berkshires chronologically in this work. Reading the marks on the land with history as a guide reveals how human habitation has affected the natural environment at these four locales.

The first site is the Shaker Trail in Hancock, Massachusetts. Hiking this trail brings the explorer on the very lands that gave the Shakers their practical living and also their religious inspiration. The trail follows Shaker Brook, which supplied water power to several mills along its bank via two dams. Then, the trail climbs to the summit of Shaker Mountain, also known as Mount Sinai, where the Hancock Shakers established their

sacred feast ground. Spurred by Mother Ann Lee, the Shakers built communities out of the wilderness as a foundation to practice their faith peacefully and spread their beliefs. Many of their beliefs, including equal treatment of women and pacifism, have had great impacts on American culture. At this site, the Shakers' choice of establishing a holy place within the environment influenced their noninvasive treatment of nature—at the time, also a novel idea—that is visible at the dam and mill sites. Early in the history of the Berkshires, the presence of the Shakers attracted tourists to view the 'wild' Berkshires and the neat Shaker villages nestled in the mountains. Already the Berkshires were gaining a reputation for natural beauty and harmonious cooperation between people and the natural environment.

Chapter Two focuses on the writers of the mid-nineteenth century, who visited the Shakers and drew inspiration from nature of the Berkshires. Monument Mountain in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, is a perfect example of the nourishment writers attained from the Berkshire mountains. This mountain, as its name suggests, is a monument to human legends. William Cullen Bryant named the mountain in a poem where he recounted a Native American legend said to have taken place at its summit. Adding to the mountain's reputation, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville climbed the peak in 1850. The experience would shape their future writings, and by extension the American culture as a whole. Monument Mountain itself has become a monument to them and to other human visitations, as its summit is literally scarred with the etchings of hikers wishing to be remembered. Each visitor adds another layer to the Berkshire mountains' history; each visitor impresses upon the land their own concept on it, just as the land impresses its natural beauty and history upon them. So many mountains in the Berkshires

are indistinguishable blends of legend and nature like Monument Mountain, and add to the aura of the region as a place of inspiration.

Chapter Three reveals a dark time in the history of the Berkshire mountains when the land was not treated with such respect as previously. Industry, in the form of quarries, mills, and factories, polluted portions of the Berkshires and left long-lasting marks upon the land. The subject of this chapter is the former Hudson and Chester Granite Quarry in Becket, Massachusetts. Operated for nearly a century, the quarry is an open wound that the earth will not be able to heal for many years. Here, human needs outweighed natural concerns. In the rush to find a sustaining industry as farming started to fail, Berkshirites turned to ripping up the very land they lived on in the late nineteenth century. The quarry is a monument to humanity's drive for industry and for literal monuments, as much of the stone taken was used to build cemetery monuments. Ironically, this scramble to find a long-lasting financial livelihood to sustain Berkshire communities almost destroyed the Berkshires' chief tourist attraction: their natural beauty. While the era of the quarry represents a black mark on the history of the Berkshires, it also underscores instances where Berkshirites have treated the land well, such as in the case of the Shakers. After many industries folded and left scars on the land, the people of the Berkshires took it upon themselves to learn from the industrial era and preserve their homeland.

The final chapter focuses on an extraordinary event in Berkshire history, which proved that Berkshire communities, decimated by migrations to the West and the cities after the loss of industry, still had a pulse. On August 15, 1942, at 9:32 p.m., a troop transport plane carrying nineteen men crashed into Garnet Peak in Peru, Massachusetts. Immediately, the people of Peru, Worthington, and the surrounding towns located and

descended on the crash site, saving the lives of three paratroopers. The heroism of both the paratroopers and their rescuers deems this a tale that needs to be told. Unassumingly, the Berkshirites plunged into the dark woods and literally into the burning forest surrounding the wreck, and then carried the survivors on their backs to safety. Their modesty and determination to save the paratroopers are a direct result of their upbringing in the Berkshire wilderness where they were taught to be independent, self-motivated, and tough individuals. The small monument that now stands at the site of the plane crash in the untamed wilderness of Garnet Peak testifies not to the heroic actions of the townspeople, but to the sixteen paratroopers whose lives they couldn't save. In this, they display the Berkshire modesty and perseverance that has allowed them to forge homes in the wilderness and yet claim no praise for doing so. The crash monument memorializes a human event while leaving the surrounding nature untouched, striking a balance between human effects on the land and natural tendencies towards wildness.

All of these sites have been saved due to the actions of Berkshirites. When the Shakers closed their Hancock village in 1960, a nonprofit group opened it to the public the next year. Monument Mountain is owned by the Trustees of Reservations, a group of nearly 100,000 self-described "neighbors" who are caretakers of nearly "100 special places" in the Berkshires ("Our Mission"). The Hudson-Chester Granite Quarry is part of the Becket Land Trust and Historic Quarry, and was saved from being reopened in the 1990s as an active quarry by a group of concerned locals. ("Becket Land Trust Historic Quarry & Forest"). Finally, Garnet Peak is part of the Peru State Forest and its plane crash monument was paid for by the residents of Peru, who still visit the site every Memorial Day. The reason that all of these sites can even be visited is because the people

of the Berkshires understand and value their history, and recognize that this is what makes them unique.

Richard D. Birdsall, writing in 1959, does not share my view that the Berkshires retain their unique character to this day. In his argument, there were three periods in Berkshire county history: a first “provincialism,” or regionalism; a second provincialism; and decline (Birdsall 10, 13). In *Berkshire County: A Cultural History* (1959), he writes:

Intrinsic in [the first] Berkshire provincialism, however, was that indefinable sense of place which is the very flavor of local history. As a recent native of Berkshire has remarked, “no hills amid which people have lived long can be considered merely as geography, nor even chiefly as geography. They color the life that goes on in their valleys and on their slopes, and that life in turn colors them.” (ibid., 10)

The regionalism of the Berkshires is rooted in the very place itself, and the residents of the Berkshires are not merely residents, but products, of the place they inhabit. The feeling of being a part of the land I experienced and noted in my journal entries is not a fabricated emotion, but a real and tangible fact. I agree with Birdsall when he describes the character of Berkshire regionalism, but disagree when he states,

After 1861 there can be little doubt that Berkshire substantially lost its distinctiveness as a region ... provincial values gave way to acquisitive ones of peculiarly bourgeois stamp, more universal than regional. Berkshire County, in short, had become culturally indistinguishable not only from the rest of Massachusetts but even from New England as a whole. (ibid., 16)

He believes that once industry came to the Berkshires in the form of railroads and factories and mills and quarries, the district’s culture died away and the region lost its local flavor, its provincialism. However, his analysis misses much. In his entire book, Birdsall only covers events up to 1863, when Herman Melville sold his home, Arrowhead, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and moved to New York City (ibid., 379). Birdsall misses the century between Melville’s relocation and the publication of his

history, therefore providing no evidence that the Berkshires lost their regionalism in 1861 and have not gained it back. As a resident of the Berkshires now, with half a century between myself and Birdsall, I can see that the Berkshires have not become indistinguishable from the rest of rural America or New England. The region has reemerged with a cultural flowering that has made it a hotspot for the arts, for sports, for learning, and for history; every year the Berkshires are visited by thousands of tourists eager to explore and enjoy the natural scenery. Herein lies the issue with analyzing only the history of the Berkshires. In order to develop a full picture of the region, the present-day must be considered. In this work, I include the current appearance of each of the four sites to emphasize their preservation and their unique character. Experiencing the Berkshires today shows that they have not declined, but have come back stronger and more unique than they were during the first and second provincialisms Birdsall mentions. In this work, I aim to show that the Berkshire culture revived after locals rediscovered the years of history etched into their hills and saved their local history sites.

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### *The Berkshires*

One question that has not been addressed in any work cited in this project is what exactly are *the Berkshires*. Many authors simply solve this question implicitly by focusing on Berkshire County in western Massachusetts. Yet, in my experience, this is not the case; culture does not follow political demarcations. For instance, I live in Chester, Massachusetts, technically a portion of Hampden County. The county also includes the city of Springfield, Massachusetts. Three numbers show how different these two municipalities are. One is elevation. My house in Chester has an elevation of 1,220

feet, while Springfield has an elevation of 70 feet (“Springfield, Massachusetts”). A second is population. My town has a population of 1,337, while Springfield has a population of 153,991 (“Chester, Massachusetts”; “Springfield, Massachusetts”). Finally, the third is population density: in Chester, it’s about 36 people per square mile, and in Springfield, it’s about 4,797 people per square mile (“Chester, Massachusetts”; “Springfield, Massachusetts”). These numbers translate into lifestyle realities. I didn’t have neighborhood kids to play with while growing up; if I wanted to see friends, I had to seek them out some twenty minutes away by car. This forced me to go into nature, since it was all around me and was the most amusing thing to do. Children in Springfield, surrounded by city streets and neighborhood avenues, do not have a similar experience. In this way, I have much more in common with the Berkshire County towns of Hancock, Becket, Peru, and Great Barrington than I do with Springfield. My own experience proves that culture does not follow county lines, for even though I am not in Berkshire County, I feel the Berkshires in my soul the same as its residents do. The Berkshires are much more than Berkshire County.

Geological formations do not provide much insight into what the Berkshires are and what they are not, either. In a map included in McLaughlin’s *The Folding History of the Berkshires*, the geologic formations of Berkshire County are shown. On the eastern border of the county are the “Berkshire Hills,” and on the western border with New York are the “Taconic Range” (McLaughlin 2-5). In appearance, these two mountain ranges present themselves very differently. The Berkshires proper are curved, like a wave crashing on a shore. The Taconics are sharp and pointed, like a raised vein on the landscape. Looking at the United States Geological Survey confirms their distinction: the



two ranges are actually made up of two different materials. The Berkshires are composed of primarily granite, while the Taconics are comprised of mostly marble (Mineral Resources Program). The two materials collide in the Housatonic Valley between the two ranges. Based on this, it might be tempting to say that the Berkshires include only the Berkshire Hills. However, another look at McLaughlin's map would undermine this. The Berkshire Hills are actually a part of the Hoosac Range, which in turn is part of the Green Mountains that stretch into Vermont and form a subset of the Appalachian Mountains (McLaughlin 2-5). How is it that in Massachusetts the Berkshires carry a different flavor than their sister mountains in Vermont, if only geology matters and politics do not? With this question, the definition of the Berkshires as a cultural-geological entity falls apart. In addition, excluding the Taconic Range excludes the legendary peak of Mount Greylock, the highest point in Berkshire County and all of Massachusetts. Mount Greylock has added to the lore of the Berkshires, having been climbed by Henry David Thoreau, just the same as any mountain in the Berkshire Hills proper. Basing a definition of the Berkshires off either geology or geography encounters problems as it cannot adequately describe the range of Berkshire culture.

In summary, the Berkshires cannot be defined by political boundaries or geological formations alone, even though they contain those dimensions. Yet using culture to provide a precise definition is likewise difficult, for how can one measure where a culture begins and ends? The best workable definition of the Berkshires is one that combines all these elements in view of the region's history. The Berkshires were one of the last places to be settled in Massachusetts. McLaughlin's map gives dates of settlement and shows that Albany, which is farther west than the Berkshires, was actually

settled later (ibid.). Whereas Albany, or “New Orange,” New York, was founded in 1624, Pittsfield was founded in 1761 (ibid.). To the north, too, towns were settled earlier than the Berkshires: Bennington, Vermont, was founded in 1749 (ibid.). The towns of Hinsdale, Florida, New Ashford, Monterey, and North Adams in the Berkshires were all founded in the nineteenth century, even after the founding of the very American nation (ibid.). These dates show that the Berkshires were New England’s final frontier, protected for years from settlement by what Birdsall terms the “Berkshire Barrier” (Birdsall 21). This barrier prevented settlement until it could not hold back the gush of settlers from Connecticut, New York, and Massachusetts who flowed into the Housatonic River Valley quicker than the river’s lazy waters. Appropriately, the towns in the mountains were settled later than the towns in the valley. For instance, Great Barrington, Stockbridge, Lenox, Lanesborough, Sheffield, and Pittsfield were all settled before 1770, while the mountain towns, such as Otis, Peru, Windsor, Savoy and Hancock, were settled after 1770, in some cases into the nineteenth century (McLaughlin 2-5). While the Berkshires might be termed the final frontier of New England, the mountains themselves were the very final. The people who went into the Berkshires and, specifically, its mountains had to be independent and enterprising people, ready to carve their lives out of the unchecked wilderness. In this sense, the best measure of the Berkshires’ borders includes not only politics, geology, geography, or history, but all of these in combination with something more: the culture and character of the people. The land has affected the people in this region in a unique way. Whether this is due to the unique mix of rivers and valleys next to soaring mountains and fine forests, it cannot be determined. The only recognizable characteristic of the Berkshires that distinguishes them from all other rural regions and

from all other mountain ranges are the people who chose to settle there and inhabit these rolling hills.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will not define the Berkshires explicitly, but more generally as the mountains between the Connecticut River Valley and the Hudson River Valley, in an effort to recognize that culture has no concrete walls. Culture is like a continuum; the closer towards the Connecticut River Valley one goes, the more of that culture one sees, and the same with the Hudson River Valley. To place myself at the middle of the continuum, where the concentration of Berkshire culture is the highest, I emphasize the region contained within Berkshire County in this thesis. The places I have chosen all fall within Berkshire County, although I discuss places outside of the county as well in order to illustrate the full depth of the Berkshire experience. Just as I use works dealing with the Berkshires exclusively, including town histories and histories of Berkshire County, I also use resources outside of the region, including newspapers, censuses, literary works, and personal interviews. The culture of the Berkshires does not exist in a bubble but is influenced by both American culture and world events as well; to exclude sources beyond the region would give an untrue picture of the Berkshires. Therefore, this work strikes a careful balance between the region directly—represented by descriptions of hikes undertaken at each site and historical narratives of the region—and the greater narrative of human existence—explored by the analysis of theoretical and literary works.

The aim of this work is not to praise the Berkshires and thereby diminish other regions of the United States in the process. Indeed, other regions of the rural United States have influenced writers and artists; for instance, the Catskill Mountains of New

York served as inspiration for the writers William Cullen Bryant, James Fenimore Cooper, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and the painter Thomas Cole. The Berkshires do not have a monopoly on beautiful, wild nature either. The Rocky Mountains are taller and wilder. Neither do the Berkshires have a monopoly on history, as other regions, both rural and urban, have inspirational histories; for example, the history of New York City has influenced writers like Washington Irving and Edith Wharton and helped spawn movements like the Beat Generation. What makes the Berkshires unique, therefore, is not either the attentions of famous artists, remarkable natural beauty, nor stimulating history; rather, it is some combination of these. In the Berkshires, regard for the environment is high, with many environmentalist societies working to save the land. However, these environmentalist groups notably also contain a preservationist aspect, seeking to preserve the human history of natural sites as well. This project is focused on the interplay between environmentalism and historic preservation, where the natural world is a museum, a monument, to human events or trends. History often focuses on the idea of place, and every civilization has monuments to past events. Yet in the Berkshires, the past and the places of the past do not exist in a vacuum; they are an integral part of the vibrant and pulsating culture of the region. Towns today celebrate their histories with local events, adding to the modern-day flavor of each locale. In my own town, three annual events honor the history of the railroad and of local industry, the history of farming, and the centuries of military service by residents. These events, held every year without fail, are town-wide and boast attendance by most residents. It is by celebrating their past that the Berkshires have regained cultural life and defied Birdsall's prophecy predicting their decline after the late 1800s. In the Berkshires,

the present is a monument to the past. Both the people and the nature of today memorialize the events of yesteryear, recognizing that only by knowing where we have been can we know where we are going.

## Chapter 1: HANCOCK SHAKER VILLAGE

### *Mountain Utopia*

A few of the pleasantest and most peaceful nooks of our broad country are owned and occupied by the Shakers. Away from the noisy confusion of great cities and apart from the adherents of other faith these peculiar people like to make little Arcadias of their own . . . The town of Hancock in the westernmost county of Massachusetts has a Shaker village, which may be regarded as a type of the settlements of the order. Approaching it, the neat stone walls, sleek cattle, and flourishing crops give a more prosperous air to the land of the community than the country around can show. (Wergland, "Hancock" 110)

Writing in 1885, Oscar A. Bierstadt could not have described the appearance of the Shaker village at Hancock more truthfully. The settlement was established as a utopia, founded on the same fulfilling principles of pastoral and rural life as Greece's Arcadia. Hancock—a small hamlet at the foot of the Taconic Mountains in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, isolated from both New York towns and the city of Pittsfield, Massachusetts—proved to be the perfect setting for this endeavor. The land was fertile, allowing for the raising of crops and livestock. Streams rushing off the mountains provided power for mills of all kinds, while the clear water could also be collected and used for running and drinking water. Best of all was the seclusion offered by the location: just over two miles from the New York border, Hancock was out of the way and distant from large cities and powerful religious centers. As the land gave them privacy and a self-sustaining livelihood, allowing them to live by their own edicts, the Shakers honored it by holding sacred religious services on mountaintops and in natural amphitheatres. The

Shakers sought communion with God in nature, harkening back to primitive religions where nature showcased God's power. Indeed, "primitive Christianity" was the Shakers' self-described doctrine; in this, the Shakers were the "contemporary inheritors" of the ancient Essenes, a group that withdrew from established Judaism and may have been the contemporaries of Jesus Christ (Williams 6). Similarly to the Essenes, the Shakers believed in "celibacy, communal living, confession of sins, the acceptance of woman as an active independent individual, a sincere belief in prophesy, often expressed through visions, and withdrawal from the spirit and element of 'the World'" as the keys to living a pure life (ibid., 3). The only shock here is the condition a woman deserved, as John S. Williams notes, "a position of equal authority, trust and action with her male counterpart" (ibid., 3). For the Shakers, harmony was found through the equal treatment of man and woman, human and nature; for this reason, both Shaker women and men held leadership roles, and Shaker lands were kept neat and orderly.

However, the Shakers were not well received by all. Visiting the Hancock Shakers on August 8, 1851, with Herman Melville, Evert Duyckinck, and his own son, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, "They are certainly the most singular and bedeviled set of people that ever existed in a civilized land; and one of these days, when their sect and system shall have passed away, a History of the Shakers will be a very curious book" ("Hancock Visitor Accounts 1852-1885" 78). Hawthorne ridiculed the Shaker faith, concluding that their faith killed human emotion; his beliefs are exhibited in two short stories he wrote about Shakers, "The Shaker Bridal" (1833) and "The Canterbury Pilgrims" (1838). As this quote shows, he had no doubt that their way of life would fail. Little did Hawthorne know that the Shakers would outlast him by nearly a century, and

that their styles of design and progressive worldview would leave an indelible mark on American culture.

An impressive volume of work has been published on the Shakers and their impact on American society. Scholars have studied the twenty-four communities that prospered in ten states on America's frontier from Maine to Florida, seeking to understand what caused the Shakers to welcome all races, empower women, oppose war, love each other, and seek solace in which to perfect their arts (Morse xix). As one of the few religions founded by a woman, the faith is of particular interest to religious and historical scholars (ibid., xix). In this chapter, I can't possibly hope to explain all of Shaker theology, or to reiterate all of Shaker history. My interest is in how their teachings influenced how they treated the land, and why four of the twenty-four Shaker communities were located just in the Berkshire region. Why did they seek God on the Berkshire mountaintops, and did they find him there? What have they left behind to mark their existence? To begin to answer these questions, I travelled to the lands of the Shakers and I climbed their holy mountains. There I found that their legacy has been preserved in the form of neat trails and respectfully marked sites, which would be quite difficult to discern as one-time human constructions without the informative signs. Clearly, the "primitive Christianity" of the Shakers, which tied them to the land so intensely, prevented them from damaging the environment in any substantial or lasting fashion.

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### *Pilgrimage Up the Mountain*

Just over the line between Pittsfield and Hancock, Hancock Shaker Village is nestled in a valley between two opposing but distant mountain ranges. To the east, the

Berkshire mountains proper rise in a bluish-purple haze above and behind an uncharacteristically low Taconic ridge. Immediately to the west, the Taconic mountains gnaw at the sky. The summits of the latter mountains, including Shaker Mountain and Holy Mount, constituted the holy religious sites of the Shakers. There's a parking area just across Route 20 from the village where hikers park to explore the religious sites. Technically, these are contained within Pittsfield State Forest, but thanks to collaboration between the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Boy Scouts of American, and the village, a trail to these places has been well-marked and maintained, with many signs that explain their significance to the Shaker community.

As cars rush by on Route 20 at speeds well upwards of the posted 40-mile-per-hour limit, one is certainly confused standing at the trailhead to the Shaker Trail. There's nothing more than a closed and locked gate to welcome the visitor, with a sign that indicates visitors should check in with the visitor's center across the road to obtain a hiking pass. At the visitor's center there are many helpful resources for the hiker, including maps and pamphlets; however, in winter the visitor's center is closed due to lack of business. But even in winter the parking lot is never empty. Many people use the shorter trail up to the mill site to walk their dogs while holding cups of coffee on Sunday mornings. Here, the scene makes one think of modern, mainstream life and certainly not of the Shakers.

Further ahead the trail opens on top of the raised retaining wall surrounding the Shaker Reservoir. The hike continues along the narrow cusp of trail between the tree line and the edge of the reservoir. While not very large, the reservoir is pretty, suspended as it is above the trees bordering the field below. In the distance the mountains loom, hulking



and mysterious. The peaks seem to beckon from their high junctures with the overhanging firmament, reaching toward the deep sea-blue sky like the Shakers who spent their entire lives reaching for answers. Why did the Shakers believe that these mountains were holy? Why did they make the trek to the summit of both mountains—what did they seek there? There is something otherworldly about them, something beyond the realities of human society. They are emblematic of another, higher world, where humans are merely another organism subject to the omnipotent force of life—which, from the Shakers' viewpoint, would have been God himself.

Certainly, the Shakers were not idle dreamers who romanticized the hills while watching the world pass in their rocking chairs. They were extremely practical, as the reservoir shows. Water from the dams upstream on Shaker Brook was piped to this reservoir—not diverted and forced to fill it—and flowed to the village via an underground aqueduct (Manners 5). This water was used to do chores ranging from powering machinery to washing clothes to watering the animals (*ibid.*, 5). Then, the water was recycled by draining to the fields and the animal pastures (*ibid.*, 5). The reservoir, beautiful in its containment of more than two million gallons of water, was not merely for looks; it served many purposes as well (*ibid.*, 5). At the same time these people were seeking religious enlightenment in nature by travelling to the hilltops, they also sought to make a practical and honest living in their villages. The reservoir itself is plain, with no fences or elaborate dams. There is only a park bench on the far side where one might sit and watch the evening sunset color the Shaker buildings in the valley below.

Beyond the reservoir, the land dips into what used to be an apple orchard. The ground here is grassy, and the trees that remain cluster at the edges of a “K”-shaped intersection. Behind the hiker lies the trail to the reservoir—ahead, to Shaker Brook. Behind to the right there is another path to the village, and ahead to the right there is a small grassy trail that ends at a large cylindrical piece of metal lying on its side, so tall a child might easily stand inside without hitting his or her head. A small sign just before the cylinder labels it part of a “steam boiler used in the textile mill.” Reeds are all around, but do not overwhelm the drum; it still looks as if it might be picked up and used tomorrow, save for all the rust on it. Continuing along the stem of the “K,” the trail soon unites with a little, sunken brook—Shaker Brook, in fact. Across the brook the forest floor is carpeted with the silky, deep green of periwinkle plants. In spring and summer these periwinkle plants look up to the young trees—now reasserting their claim on this former field—with plaintive blue, purple, and pink flowers. In winter the periwinkle still sustains its lively green color, quietly defying the browns and blacks all around. Just beyond the first-sighting of the periwinkle, there is a small historical marker on this side of the streambank. Before 1960, this sign says, there was a bridge here that led to dwellings and mills on the other side. However, today only the bridge’s footings remain: an overgrown abutment reaches toward thick slabs of Berkshire rock piled in the little stream. All evidence here of human habitation does not impinge on the hiker’s experience of the land, but improves it. The periwinkle plants, actually an invasive species, would not be here if it wasn’t for the Shaker’s settlement. The old bridge, while a modification of nature, brings the two banks closer together and conjures thoughts of connectedness,

of what the land was like before the stream cut into it. Human habitation has colored this land, but it has colored it mildly and beautifully.

Up ahead Shaker Brook winds to a small dam with a three-foot-tall waterfall. This “Lower Dam” supplied water power to the village, as a little sign informs the passerby. In appearance, it resembles a stonewall that spans the brook instead of running through the woods. Water trickles over the top, plunging just a few feet with a satisfying gurgle. On the west bank, a long, riveted-metal pipe extends from a concrete reservoir on one side of the dam down beside the course of the brook. Something about the parallelism is pleasing: humanity’s route for the water alongside nature’s route. The Shakers did not replace nature’s way, but rather sought to unobtrusively work with her as neighbors. Their aqueducts, like the one pipe now visible, ran underground, so as not to mar the visage of nature. This dam itself, built in 1818, has become part of the landscape, just as the stonewalls that run through New England’s hills have become a part of them (Manners 5). Above the dam there is still some evidence of human habitation: pipes, iron fencing, and a low pond. At one time, this spot was a nicely curated dam with fencing and a high reservoir; now, nature has won in the tug-of-war and is retaking the area, undoing the little alterations effected by humanity. Some the forces of the environment keep, such as the little dam and waterfall; others will be eradicated soon.

Just a little farther ahead, the markers bid the hiker to cross a little walking bridge where once a wagon bridge spanned. Unaffected by the little bridge above, the clear water flows below, lapping at the old, ferned-over bridge foundations. Across the brook and down the east bank, the hiker stumbles across the same patch of periwinkles observed before from the other side, the west bank. Here another sign proclaims that once

carding, fulling, grist, and sawmills stood at this location. The carding and fulling mills were added in 1845, while the other mills had been powered by the water from the lower dam since 1818 (Manners 6). Just twenty years later the two new mills would burn in an 1865 fire, and the site would be shut down (*ibid.*, 6). Incredibly for the number of mills that stood here, the only remainder is a small stone-lined tear in the earth where the waterwheel once turned, along with a few moss-covered rocks (*ibid.*, 6). A little farther down the trail, another sign labels the former location of the “North Family Dwelling.” This wood-frame, three-and-a-half-story construction housed twenty-eight to forty people in the years between 1821 and 1867—yet today, there is no evidence that such a building ever stood here (*ibid.*, 6). Trees and ferns are the most dominant inhabitants of the site; indeed, it seems like any other patch of forest. No rocks or wood remain on the surface. When the Shakers dissolved the North Family in 1867 and salvaged the home to bring to the main village, they left no evidence of their habitation here.

Soon the trail turns sharply and begins to incline up Shaker Mountain or, as they called it, Mount Sinai. This portion of the trail is not the remnant of old roads but was built by a local Boy Scouts of America troop in the 1960s. However, the Shakers would have taken a very similar route to reach the holy sites at the top, and as the “Shaker Trail Guide” affirmatively states, “This is the route the Shakers would have taken to reach their Holy Ground at the top” (*ibid.*, 7). Yet even this route, this holy route, was sprinkled with sites displaying the Shaker’s practicality. Halfway to the summit, there is an open spot on level ground where a charcoal kiln once stood. Few charcoal kilns were located in the general area, but the Shakers had several (*ibid.*, 7). The charcoal formed in the kilns was used to make high heat fires for metalwork or making potash (*ibid.*, 7). Nearby, as the

guide states, there may have been a religious site called “Walnut Grove,” where the Shakers would lecture, dance, and sing (Manners 8). The proximity of these sites shows that the Shakers knew well how to combine function with faith, how to meld their practical lives with their religious lives. Respect for the environment is clear in everything they undertook, from the building of their homes and religious sites to the building of their industrial sites.

Now begins the final climb towards the summit of Shaker Mountain and the holy ground located there. After climbing steeply for some ways, the trail switches back to cross a powerline twice. Just a little way further the land evens out; a little placard proclaims this area “Holy Ground” and asks the visitor, “Please show respect to this consecrated ground.” Other than this sign, the land appears just the same as any other portion of this quiet, tranquil forest. The wind barely makes a sound through the trees, and everything is still. Yet less than a century ago Shaker feet stomped this ground and Shaker voices rose in song. The clamor would have echoed over these hills—then bald since their trees had been cleared away for farming—all the way to the Shaker village exactly a mile away. Gathering twice a year at the “feast ground,” as this site was called, the Shakers would sing, dance, pray, and receive revelations (Manners 8). Here once stood the sacred “fountain,” which gushed forth not “literal water” but “water of life” (ibid., 9). Around this “fountain” was constructed a hexagonal fence, marked at the top corner with a slab of marble (ibid., 9). Beyond this was a “shelter” where the sisters and the brethren could gather in two separate rooms (ibid., 9). Around the whole “feast ground” ringed a fence, inside which non-Shakers were not allowed to enter; however, they were invited to watch the “mountain meeting” from rows of seats put there for that

purpose outside the fence (*ibid.*, 9). But today, no evidence of any of these structures is visible. Only the borders of the half-acre feast ground are marked with little picket fence corners that peek through the woods; but other than that, there is no sign that anything as fantastic and beautiful—as observers would characterize it—as a Shaker meeting took place on this land. All evidence of human habitation has been erased from the land by a mutual agreement between the land and the people. Still, the thought persists: why did they choose this spot? Why did they choose to hold outdoor meetings, at the summit of a mountain nonetheless? There are no answers written on the land in any human language. But there are some hints. The most visible clue is what is not visible. The Shakers did not abuse or trash the land, whether it was a holy site or not. No evidence of human habitation exists, other than what was left in order to instruct the hiker on what was once there. Once the Shaker's need for the land faded, so too did their mark on it. Leaving no monuments to themselves not only shows modesty, but respect for the earth, sparking a deeper question: what in the Shaker faith compelled them to care for the land in this way? To answer this question, the Shaker faith must be explored, as I will later in this chapter.

The hike continues down Mount Sinai and across to Holy Mount, which was the feast ground of the Mount Lebanon, New York, Shaker community. Here, besides for the arrow-straight stonewalls and a foundation that was clearly once painstakingly built stone-by-stone, there is again no evidence of Shaker habitation. No gouges in the earth, no dilapidated structures, no rusting pieces of metal, no abandoned tools or wagons or harnesses. Just stones arranged in perfect form. If humans have to inhabit the land, this is how they should do it. Indeed, stone walls race through the woods on the Holy Mount, guarding the larger “sacred lot” of 45 acres like silent sentries (Manners 10). The “sacred

lot” was dedicated in 1842 and used until about 1852; its location proved unwieldy due to the rough terrain and distance of two miles from the Mount Lebanon village (ibid., 10). At the far southwest corner of the “sacred lot” there is a natural spring located within a natural amphitheater. A small sign declares that the amphitheater was “used by the Shakers for reflections through preaching and individual soul-searching.” With one mountain rising opposite, the Holy Mount sloping under the hiker’s feet, and a stream cutting a ravine between the two, it is a remarkable spot. The observer can imagine Shaker sermons echoing off the hills and coming back to the assembled congregation with twice the power with which they were first delivered. Nature worked to the Shaker’s advantage, not only in allowing them to be self-sustaining, but also in giving them fantastic locations in which to preach and seek God.

Descending from the Holy Mount, the visitor is invited to enter the Shaker marble quarry, which opened in 1785 and was active for almost a century. Most of the marble here was used to construct buildings in the village. Manners, writing in the trail’s guide, states that the quarry is “located a couple hundred yards off west of the trail” (ibid., 11). If the adventurer heads this way, they will find Manner’s judgement that “scant traces remain to indicate [the quarry’s] use” to be true. All that awaits is a slightly rocky hillside and a small retaining wall. If the sign hadn’t named this a former quarry, it certainly wouldn’t have appeared to be one.

The same is true of the High Dam, which is located just after the trail rejoins Shaker Brook. This dam, built in 1810 and destroyed in 1976, is now nothing more than a wall of nicely arranged rocks that gently cascade into a heap of stones and dirt at the water’s edge (ibid., 11). Just a little further downstream are two terraced walls of neatly

stacked stones, packed into the streambank and the hillside. There is no metal in the stream, no rusting metal pipes, nothing. A sawmill sheared logs here during its residency from about 1858 to 1926, yet no evidence remains besides some stones arranged where its foundation might have been (ibid., 11). Here, at the end of the hike, the explorer reminisces on how much distance has been covered—nearly seven miles—and how much has been learned, but comparatively how few human blemishes on the land have been seen.

So why did the Shakers trek to mountaintops to receive revelations? The story cannot be told with the land alone. To any casual hiker, the trail markers give little indication of what the Shakers believed and of what motivated them to construct their villages, pray on mountaintops, and to then leave little trace of their existence. The *what* is shown, but not the *why*. The hiker can see how the Shakers honored the land, but does not learn why they did so. Understanding the Shaker faith is key to understanding their treatment of the land at Hancock.

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### *Hands to Work, Hearts to God*

Shakerism was born out of another religion named after physical movement: the Quakers. Two former Quakers, John and Jane Wardley, broke away from the Society of Friends, or Quakers as those who sought to deride the sect called it, in 1747, and began holding their own religious meetings wherever they could (Francis 25). Their meetings resembled Quaker meetings of nearly a century earlier, before the Quakers had entered Quietism and ceased the quaking motions that earned them their name (ibid., 26-27). In Bolton, in the northwest of England, the Wardleys tapped into the “original energies” of



the Quaker faith by going against societal norms and reintroducing the raw emotionalism of the conversion experience (ibid., 28). The meetings of the Wardleys' sect—which would become known as the Shakers, shortened from “Shaking Quakers”—began as quiet affairs, where each member sat in “silent meditation,” but soon a “mighty shaking” would overtake everyone; from there, the Shakers might undertake “singing, shouting, or walking the floor, under the influence of spiritual signs” (ibid., 25). The Shakers were also influenced by a group called the French Prophets, who were active in the late seventeenth century (ibid., 28). Mostly made up of women, this sect focused on receiving prophecies through “paroxysms, writhing, fainting, trembling, and twitching”; such prophecies focused on “the imminence of the millennium, when the heavens would open, anti-Christ would be defeated, and humankind [would] receive deliverance” (ibid., 28). Similar aspects can be seen within the Shaker faith, the members of which also believed that when God was revealed in one's soul, a tremendous shaking would accompany the reception of the Almighty. This was not without biblical foundation, as many times in the Bible—the Old Testament in particular—the presence of God is accompanied by shaking and quaking (ibid., 33). However, neither the original Quakers, the French Prophets, nor the Shakers would be readily accepted by other religious sects, no matter their justification (ibid., 29). Indeed, in the 1760s the Wardleys had just thirty members (ibid., 37). However, the course of Shakerism was about to take a wildly drastic turn, brought about by a simple location change to Manchester, England. By relocating just a dozen miles, the Wardleys would find the one person who could transplant their faith across the ocean to the fertile and free land of America. In order to understand the American Shaker

faith, it is important to explore the life of its transformative leader, whose energy and passion propelled the Shakers across the Atlantic Ocean.

She was born Ann Lees. Ann Lees of Toad Lane. In 1736, the year she was born, Shakerism did not yet exist (*ibid.*, 3). Her father was a blacksmith who fixed travelers' horses and earned a slight living; her family were faithful members of Christ Church (*ibid.*, 6,8). Firmly in the working class—who had not claimed that title as of yet—she would begin working as a child of four, five, or six in a workshop preparing cotton for looms (*ibid.*, 10). In a small house of just a few rooms, she would live with her parents and seven siblings (*ibid.*, 7). The thin walls meant that she could hear everything that went on in the house, and at a young age, she developed a revulsion to sex (*ibid.*, 7). Instead of toys, she would say later in life, her “mind was taken up with the things of God, so that I saw heavenly visions” constituting of “beautiful colours and heavenly scenes” (*ibid.*, 7). Although the details of her childhood are few, these few facts highlight the roots of the Shaker creed Ann would later champion. In Ann's Shakerism, everyone, even the young, had a skill and worked for the benefit of the “family,” just as Ann did when she was a child. In addition, Shaker dwellings resembled Ann's childhood home in the lack of privacy and concentration of many people within a small space. Finally, Ann's aversion to sex and tendency towards visions would inform the Shakers' choice to be a celibate sect focused on the communication with God through passionate reveries. However, Ann's life would proceed relatively normally until 1770. She would change jobs, marry a blacksmith in Christ Church, and give birth to four children, all of whom would die in infancy. She entertained an interest in the Shaker faith, and even converted in 1758 (*ibid.*, 35). But in 1770, the true calling for her life would be revealed to her in

the Lunatick Ward at the Manchester Infirmary (ibid., 42). For the past nine years, she had suffered insomnia, a side effect of her anorexia nervosa, and religious torment, walking the floor at night in anguish (ibid., 41). After the birth of her fourth and final child, Lee (having dropped the s) would be admitted to the Infirmary with severe postnatal depression and anxiety (ibid., 43). During her confinement there, meant more as a therapeutic endeavor, she had the revelation of a lifetime. Illiterate all her life, she would tell followers of her experience:

My soul broke forth to God, which I felt as sensibly as ever a woman did a child, when she was delivered of it. Then I felt unspeakable joy in God, and my flesh came unto me, like the flesh of an infant ... And when I was brought through, and born into the spiritual Kingdom, I was like an infant just born into the world. They see colours and objects, but they know not what they see; and so it was with me when I was born into the spiritual world. But before I was twenty-four hours old, I saw, and knew what I saw. (ibid., 44)

This working-class woman, who had watched her children die and had struggled all her life to make a place for herself, now sensed a new spiritual life bursting forth within her, which would propel her into the leadership of a faith heretofore she had only dabbled in as a casual member. She would become more confident, as exhibited by the active voice in the excerpt above: “I saw” and “[I] knew what I saw” indicate that, for perhaps the very first time in her life, she saw her place in the spiritual world clearly (ibid., 44). She became “Ann the Word,” an epithet that would follow her all her life. Although she never asserted it herself, she was to many the female Christ, the feminine counterpart to Jesus (ibid., 48). The coming of a woman “clothed in sun” had been foretold in the Book of Revelations, and to many Ann was that woman (ibid., 48). Strengthening her word was the association of her with both the Bible and with the sun, the force that breathes life into all other natural creatures and represents God. She became a woman with God’s

approval, having been blessed by nature; her word was truth, and, to the Shakers, it carried the essence of the primitive Christianity that would form the foundation for their faith.

Ann's life and, by connection, the Shaker's influence, began to accelerate with an energy that would carry them to America; her passion would sustain the Shakers as they travelled across the ocean, carved a community out of the wilderness, and earned a place in the American culture. Soon after her rebirth at the age of thirty-four, Ann took over leadership of the Shakers and amazed the Wardleys with her godliness (Francis 50). From there, Ann completely transformed the sect. The difference between the Shakers under Ann and the Wardleys is clearly illustrated by two instances: the conversion of Ann's brother William, and the multiple times Ann was arrested. William experienced a similar spiritual crisis to Ann's when he became "abruptly overwhelmed by the conviction of sin" in the late 1760s (*ibid.*, 55). When he went to see Ann, she told him to "put his hands to work and his heart to God"—a phrase that would be oft-repeated by Ann's followers (*ibid.*, 55). Based on this, William made several lifestyle changes, but still experienced "spiritual distress," during which he would visit the Wardleys and confide his "trials and feelings" to them (*ibid.*, 55). In response, the Wardleys would "encourage and build him up, so that he gained peace of mind" (*ibid.*, 55). Yet, when William visited Ann, she would, as William put it, "spoil his comfort, overthrow his false hopes, and again plunge him into deeper tribulation than before" (*ibid.*, 55). His distress soon paralleled Ann's in intensity and longevity (*ibid.*, 55). While the Wardleys emphasized spiritual peace, Ann campaigned for spiritual turmoil until a climax was reached, at which point she believed the truth would be revealed. Ann encouraged her followers, even her own family, to

constantly improve and reach a maximum point of confession where their sins would be resolved. She embodied pure vigor and became more radical than the Wardleys had ever been. In this way, she took the Shaker faith to a new level, intensifying the conversion experience and thus ensuring complete commitment from her followers. When the Shakers migrated to America, this commitment would be tested on the American frontier. Ann's multiple arrests attest to her unwavering passion and energy for the Shaker faith. On July 11, 1772, town constables from Manchester, England, raided a Shaker meeting being held at John Lees' house on Toad Lane (*ibid.*, 53). From the third loft of the house, Ann was "dragged down [the stairs] by her ankles ... which cunningly combined sexual humiliation (by sending her skirts skidding up to the tops of her legs) with physical abuse" (*ibid.*, 56). From Toad Lane, Ann was taken to the Salford Bridge jail, where she was held for a little while before being relocated to the House of Corrections (*ibid.*, 57). The Houses of Corrections in those days were notoriously "evil, disease-ridden places, managed by corrupt officers" (*ibid.*, 57). Here, Ann was held until her court appearance on July 23, 1772, where she was charged with the assault of Mary Ashley—the background of which is lost to history (*ibid.*, 63). The justice of the peace, Peter Mainwaring, let the Shakers off with just a generous request: "He simply asked them to provide sureties for their good behavior" (*ibid.*, 63). However, Ann refused, incurring a fine (*ibid.*, 64). She refused on the grounds that would inform future imprisonments: she could not give the "guarantee that their behavior would satisfy legal or social norms" (*ibid.*, 64). Indeed, exactly one year and a day later Ann would again find herself before the court for "wilfully [*sic*] and contemptuously disturbing divine service at Christ Church," the very church she was baptized and married in (*ibid.*, 67). In the intervening

year the Shakers had faced persecution, not unusual for them, but concerning in its volume and violence (Francis 66). After their second court appearance in 1773, Ann and her followers would be fined an imposing £20 each (*ibid.*, 70). Her refusal to yield despite societal pressure, personal injury, and threats testifies to her complete commitment to Shakerism. However, Ann would be nowhere near the courts of Manchester in 1774 to continue the cycle; instead, she would be more than 3,000 miles away on the American frontier.

The Shaker's journey to America began with a sense of spiritual naturalism that would influence their American existence and inspire their respect for the environment, which I observed at the Hancock site described earlier in this chapter. As a child, Ann had grown up in a Manchester where "you could still see fields and trees" in neat order (*ibid.*, 6). This Manchester would come to inform her concept of the Shaker village as a rural and neat undertaking. Indirectly, nature would be the chief impetus for the Shaker's relocation to America. James Whittaker—a very close disciple of Ann—received a vision of America as promised land: "...a large tree, and every leaf thereof shone with such brightness as made it appear like a burning torch, representing the church of Christ, which will yet be established in this land [of America]" (*ibid.*, 75). Richard Francis notes that many others have had similar visions of America, including John Winthrop, who saw a "city on a hill" when looking at the American coastline, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who imagined Dutch explorers seeing the "fresh, green breast of the new world" (*ibid.*, 75). Yet what is striking about Whittaker's vision is the clear merging of nature with religion. As in the Bible when Moses was confronted by the burning bush emblematic of the angel of the Lord, Whittaker sees a burning tree as emblematic of the spirit of Christ. This

parallelism makes sense, considering the Shakers' belief in primitive Christianity as outlined in the Bible, rather than its interpretation preached in places like the Anglican or Catholic church. It is also indicative of where the Shakers' teachings would go. Ann herself would use nature, specifically trees, to teach her American followers (Francis 76). In Shaker belief, the tree was not a "forced simile but a parallelism in the very nature of things" (ibid., 76). In other words, nature and Shaker teachings did not conform to one another, but unaffectedly came to the same conclusions. Richard Francis attributes the Shakers' ability to sync with nature to their success in America: "It was an experience that had the force of an imperative behind it, and would ensure that instead of being simply a cranky religious sect in northern England, Shakerism would become entwined with the developing culture of America" (ibid., 76). Nature, as the essential source of life, gave credence to the Shakers' way of life when used as an inspiration. In America, this spoke volumes, especially considering that the new settlers lived so closely with the land.

The Shakers' perseverance—a necessary trait for settlers in the Berkshires and on the frontier as a whole—would be tested on their voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. On May 19, 1774, nine Shakers hunkered in the cut-rate hull aboard the apparently condemned ship *Mariah* that would take them from Liverpool, England, to New York City (ibid., 81). It would be an eventful journey. The nine pilgrims were Ann's closest friends; they included the visionary John Whittaker, the Shakers' monetary benefactor John Hocknell, James Shepherd, Mary Partington, and three of Ann's family members (ibid., 81). All ardent Shakers, their singing and dancing soon angered the other passengers of the ship; the crew even threatened to throw Ann Lee overboard (ibid., 82). Yet they would soon be praising her companionship when a series of unfortunate events

befell the ship. When the ship ran into heavy seas, a plank was loosened and water threatened to invade the ship (Francis 82). The Shakers supplemented “religious faith with practical effort,” assuring everyone on board that God was watching over them and also manning the pumps to a “miraculous effect” that allowed the ship to make way again (ibid., 82-83). Even more moving is another account, which holds that a large wave came along and knocked the plank back into place (ibid., 83). Whether or not this wave was a result of God’s interference to save the Shakers, it had an incredible effect on the crew and passengers of the *Mariah*. One sailor onboard came to believe that “the woman [Ann Lee], and those who came with her, had a power above the natural power of man—and were the means of [the whole ship’s] ever arriving in America” (ibid., 83). From then on, the Shakers were allowed to worship in peace on the *Mariah* (Horgan 13). In this way, connection to nature provided the Shakers with enough legitimacy to earn them the right to worship as they chose. Similarly, hard work had the same effect. With this combination of seeming power over nature and hard work, along with their serenity in the face of calamity, the Shakers, led by Ann Lee, found a winning mix that would have an especially lasting impact on the pioneers of the American frontier and earn their acceptance.

After the Shakers landed in New York City on August 6, 1774, it would be some time before they could carry out their dream of a little community of their own. Ann and her husband Abraham found residence with a family who owned a blacksmith business; while Abraham worked in the business, Ann cooked and cleaned for the family (Francis 85). However, the Shakers still dreamed of “a base to establish themselves in” which, like



many other immigrants, meant “a settlement in the wilderness.” Richard Francis gives some of the reasoning behind the Shakers’ urge to go into the American outback:

It was a romantic inspiration, to reject the burgeoning cities and the early industrial age in order to settle back into nature. It was a religious ideal as well, to search out a new Garden of Eden in the wilderness of America, where a lost innocence could be rediscovered. These motives are the very fabric of American mythology, but for the Shakers they had an extra resonance and a sharper urgency, because they believed their leader [Ann Lee] to be the woman “clothed in sun” ... after this woman had given birth she fled from the great red dragon “into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared for God...” (ibid., 86-87)

The Shakers followed the American Romantics in that they too sought a virgin nature, a new start in the American wilderness. But they also had a spiritual motive, inspired by their very characterization of Ann Lee as the female Christ, the woman “clothed in sun.” They needed to fulfill the prophecy from the Book of Revelations and bring her into the wilderness. In this way, the Shaker’s voyage to America, their very ascendancy in the world, was contingent on Ann Lee and her legacy as “Ann the Word.” Yet even her power was partly derived from nature, enhanced by stories she told of lying on a frozen pond for hours hiding from mobs and feeling no cold, or of saving the *Mariah* from the seas with her group’s inexhaustible aid (ibid., 38). Before even coming to America and settling on the frontier, the Shakers’ connections with nature had already been established. With the formation of their own communities on the wild and rough fringe between Native American and Caucasian settlements, the Shakers would form an inextricable bond with nature that would legitimize and inform their way of life. In the Berkshires, the Shaker faith would be mostly well-received as pioneers recognized the same traits that had allowed them to survive—perseverance, strength, independence, agency, and determination—in Shakerism and therefore respected its adherents.

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*The City of Peace*

Hancock was not the first Shaker settlement. In fact, the first Shaker settlement was Watervliet, New York, now in Colonie, New York. Today, it is an oasis of green fields, neat houses and barns, and planned streets “hemmed in on three sides by a prison, Albany airport, and the Diamond Dogs’ minor league baseball stadium” (Francis 86). It is also the final resting place of Ann, who died in 1784. After years of persecution and abuse by those who didn’t understand Shakerism, Ann passed away after “suffering assaults by violent mobs on her evangelizing tour of New England” (Wergland, “One Shaker Life” 2). Today, she would have rested under one of Albany International Airport’s runways, but her body was reinterred in the community cemetery located on Watervliet Shaker Road in 1928 (Hakes). In 1929, Albany County would raze eight buildings in the Shaker village to the ground, presumably to make way for the airport (“Demolished Buildings”). The thickly-grown forest and swamp that took the Shakers three years to clear away is now acres of blacktop where the land shakes with the landing of massive metal planes (Horgan 14). Is this the legacy that Ann would have wanted? Certainly Watervliet has been preserved today, honoring her legacy, but the imposition of modern developments inhibits the experience of peaceful reflection that was so key to Shakerism. Unlike at Hancock, the Shakers’ careful preservation has not survived the times at Watervliet.

Luckily, the scene at Watervliet is not Ann’s only legacy. At the same time that the Shakers were settling in Watervliet and preaching their faith, converting a few visitors along the way, another “family” was also settling in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, in what would become Hancock. This family was a literal family: the Goodrich family,

along with other settlers from Connecticut whom they knew. The Goodriches were “not idle, dreamy people who drifted from one revival to the next” (Burns, 9). On the contrary, they were “frontier people” who were “independent, industrious, and frugal” (ibid., 9). An upstanding family, they had served in wars and in government (ibid., 9). Uniquely, the Goodriches were under the influence of a rather “fiery” Baptist preacher named Valentine Rathbun (ibid., 9). Rathbun, who heard of the Shakers in 1780, went to visit, and reported to his astounded congregation of the “people of God” living in Watervliet (ibid., 10). His words sent a shock through the town, inspiring many to go to Watervliet to see for themselves. Life in the Berkshire wilderness had inspired a “spiritual dilemma,” as settlers sought a new religion to suit their new lives (ibid., 11). For several families in Hancock, Shakerism would be it. These families would form a dynasty of leadership within the Shaker faith (ibid., 12). Person by person, Shakerism would spread in Hancock, just as it was then spreading in America. The Shaker principles of hard work and independence were embraced by many on the frontier, who depended on these very qualities to make their lives. This was especially true in the Berkshires, Massachusetts’ last frontier. The hard work of taming the mountains enough to allow farming had required discipline, and also earned admiration for those who had already done it.

Writing in the *Shakers Compendium*, Frederick William Evans noted that “the fame of these strange people, who lived in this obscure corner of the wilderness, extended far and wide” (Evans 28). Intrinsic to Shakerism was the wilderness; the Shakers’ notoriety depended on it, just as it had called for it with the prophecy of the woman “clothed in sun.” Shakerism breached the great unknown, the question of how to achieve purity in this life and attain salvation in the next. The wilderness was another unknown, where life

could be lost at a moment's notice due to illness, injury, or Native American incursions. For many on the frontier, the answer to one unknown depended on the other: life in the wilderness demanded a strong conviction in Shakerism. As Deborah Burns notes, "For them, as for most of humanity, life was sheer hardship with incessant labor, and they nurtured no expectations for anything greater in this life. Searching, spiritually restless people, they endured harsh pioneer conditions and sought through the Spirit the joy that was rarely present in daily life" (Burns 4). Compared to the harshness and the banality of everyday life on the frontier, Shakerism promised salvation and the experience of being touched by God, of literally shaking with his power. Settlers up and down the frontier, seeking something more than their quiet, dangerous existences, would be won over by Shakerism. Hancock itself would become the "City of Peace," welcoming African-Americans, orphans, and even "fair-weather Shakers" who sought refuge with the Shakers during hard times. Out of the trial of establishing a community in the wilderness would come a community that lessened the trials and tribulations of others.

Shakerism would spread across the country as quickly as the excited mouths of frontierspeople could carry it. It was the most successful communitarian and utopian experiment in America, with a maximum of 6,000 members (Horgan 2). However, Ann's name would only be put to the Shaker faith in 1808 after a letter from the western colonies asked for more correct information about the form of Christ's Second Appearing, i.e. Ann Lee (Stein 58). Finally, Ann was credited in *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing* (1808) with being one of the sects leading figures (ibid., 69). Her legend would grow as her neat communities did all across the frontier. As she was illiterate, the primary source of knowledge of her came from those who knew her

personally, especially her “first-born daughters,” as Jean M. Humez terms the first female converts of Ann (Humez). The neat villages, the care for the land shown by the Shakers, all originating with Ann’s reliance on nature for the power to influence her followers, would be a staple of every settlement.

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### *More Than Just Furniture*

Say the word “Shaker” to ten people, and you’ll probably get the following breakdown: three will say, “you mean the furniture?” one will say, “the religious sect?” and six will have no clue what you mean. Yet the impact of the Shakers is apparent in everyday life, beyond either their aesthetically pleasing furniture and design. Writing in 1867, Shaker Frederick William Evans noted, “Many of the most obnoxious features of the Society—such as drew down upon it the opposition and secret or open persecution, particularly of religious professors—are now becoming the popular views of the times, at least of all the progressive minds of the age” (Evans 1). Evans had no idea that the future would see a further integration of Shaker principles. The right for women to vote, to hold equal property, to work, to be valued the same as a man would lag centuries behind the Shakers. The love of all races and classes that so marks the American vision was a reality in the Shaker villages. Never one to seek a patent, the Shakers invented a multitude of industrial and agricultural machines and tools that have benefited factories and farmers everywhere. Believers in the Biblical phrase “the meek shall inherit the earth,” the Shakers recognized that in being meek they did not wish to inherit an earth that was trashed with corruption and polluted with toxins. This is the legacy they have left behind, the hints of which are apparent on that Berkshire mountaintop. The Shakers wished to

inherit an earth of love and of greenery, and that is exactly what they set out to create. Leaving no monuments to themselves, no plaques saying, “We were here,” they occupied this world meekly, in order to leave it more beautiful for the world’s people.

So why did the Shakers climb mountains to worship? The answer is not in the land. It is also not in the Shaker histories. The answer is a convergence between the two, between the people and the environment. Without the land, the Shakers would not have had such a strong basis from which to spread their religion. Without the Shakers, the land would have little significance to later generations; it would not be protected as it is now, most likely. For over two hundred years the Shakers were custodian of their lands, keeping them neat and keeping them well. In their memory, many of their lands have been preserved as historical sites or national parks. Sadly, in Watervliet, the lands were greatly reduced. But herein lies the Berkshire legacy. Immediately after the Shakers left Hancock Shaker Village in 1960, it was acquired by a nonprofit group and immediately reopened as a living history museum in 1961 (McLaughlin 50-53). The people of the Berkshires cared enough to acquire the village and then deemed it important enough to Berkshire history to open it as a museum. Unlike Watervliet, where several buildings were razed by Albany County, and an airport was built on the Shakers’ newly-vacated lands, Hancock Shaker Village was lovingly preserved by the locals. All the sites in the following chapters have been preserved through the efforts of locals, even against the threat of intrusion by corporate interests. In the Berkshires, the principle that history can only be understood through the experience of it is widely understood. Natural sites are preserved, with as much care as the Shakers first showed, and those with historic relevance are respectfully marked with informative signs, such as the one at the summit

of Shaker Mountain asking the visitor to respect the consecrated ground. Monuments to a time past, locations like the Hancock Shaker Village show that preserving nature has a long history in the Berkshires.

## Chapter 2: MONUMENT MOUNTAIN

### *Land of Legends*

When we think about the great writers and poets of the nineteenth century in America, several prominent names come to mind: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Frederick Douglass, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Stephen Crane, among others. All these authors shaped our understanding of nature, and several spent time in the Berkshires, which was quickly becoming known as a literary and artistic hub of the northeast. Melville, for one, so loved the area that he bought his estate, Arrowhead, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in 1850, where he would spend his most prolific years. Twain settled in Hartford, Connecticut, in the southern Berkshires in 1874, where he would write his masterpieces *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885); coincidentally, his next door neighbor was Harriet Beecher Stowe (Connecticut Humanities). Hawthorne, after losing his job as a customs officer in Salem, Massachusetts, would relocate his family to a guest cottage on the Tappan estate in Lenox, Massachusetts, where he would compose *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) (Robertson-Lorant 28). Other intellectuals, such as Joseph Hodges Choate, former ambassador to England, Oliver Wendell Holmes, doctor and writer, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, “the first lady of American letters,” and

James Thomas Fields, editor and author, made the Berkshires home as well (Robertson-Lorant 30, 32; “Naumkeag”). Their presence inspired others to visit the Berkshires, which soon had a thriving intellectual and artistic community. Later in the Gilded Age, when richer elite like Andrew Carnegie built summer homes in western Massachusetts, the Berkshire mountains would earn the title of “Inland Newport” for its ornate and beautiful mansions. The Berkshires’ legacy as a hub of artistic and literary thought would persist into the twentieth century as well, when the Berkshires would become the home of writer Edith Wharton, artists Norman Rockwell, George L.K Morris, Suzy Frelinghuysen, and sculptor Daniel Chester French. Indeed, Richard Birdsall would term the area “The American Lake District” in his work *Berkshire County: A Cultural History* (1959) (Birdsall 323). Comparing the Berkshires to the Lake District in England, which inspired great writers like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is a most accurate comparison considering the intellectuals drawn to these two sites of natural beauty.

What was it about these mountains that drew intellectuals and artists from all over New England? Why did they come and sit among these rolling hills and these shady brooks to ponder life and how their art would represent it? As we saw in Chapter One, the Shakers, too, gravitated to these hills, seeking freedom and a chance to find God among the rolling hills. Just as Shaker histories provide context for their lifestyle in the Berkshires, the written works of the artists who visited the Berkshires provide evidence of their motivations. In 1824, William Cullen Bryant, a literary giant of the early nineteenth century who resided in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, from 1815 to 1825 and was born in Cummington, Massachusetts, penned these few lines:



Thou who wouldst see the lovely and the wild  
 Mingled in harmony on Nature's face,  
 Ascend our rocky mountains. (Bryant 1-3)

“Our rocky mountains,” he stresses. As a native, Bryant means the Berkshires—mountains he grew up running and playing on as a child. This is made even clearer by the title of the poem, “Monument Mountain,” which is an actual mountain and popular hiking destination located just off Route 7 in Great Barrington. But even if the mountain is a real place, what are we to make of the abstract nouns “lovely” and “wild” and how they mingle in “harmony”? What exactly is the “face” of “Nature”; how can something so broad and indefinite as nature have a face? The only way to see is to explore the Berkshire mountains, to visit the site that inspired such reveries and experience the nature there firsthand.

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### *The Mountain*

The parking area is deceiving. Backed up against a steeply-rising slope of hemlocks and pines, it hardly looks as if there is a trail at all, never mind the two that wind to the summit of Monument Mountain—one on the left, and one on the right—to form a loop. Just before the slope is a shaded clearing beneath the trees that is scattered with picnic tables and pine needles. Children run between the tables, ecstatic to be freed from the car. Dogs lay in the shade, watching everything with their knowing eyes. In the middle of the clearing is a signboard covered with dilapidated notices giving warnings about the trails, which seems at odds with this peaceful scene at the trailhead. Fliers advertise for joining the Trustees, an organization committed to preserving nature; membership costs just \$47.

By far, the most interesting part of this clearing is a small signpost at the beginning of the right-hand trail that proclaims it “The Melville Trail.” Briefly, it describes how Herman Melville and a party containing Nathaniel Hawthorne scaled the mountain in 1850. During the hike they were caught in the rain and had to shelter in a cave. While waiting out the storm, they discussed a multitude of topics, which Melville would go home and weave through his masterpiece *Moby Dick*. But these century-old names and abstract conversations seem a long way away from the whisper of maple and oak leaves and the clunk of boots on stone that fill the explorer’s ears as he or she ascends the trail. Soon large boulders begin to accumulate, until one whole cliff side is covered with them. It’s an unusual spot. There is a story written on the land—which may be read by seasoned eyes—telling of how the slope was perhaps formed by the movement of glaciers, how the abundance of red pines resulted from a 1930s replanting effort after the mountain had been logged, how the trail was worn down to the tree roots by generations of feet trailing back to centuries ago.

But the summit seems so close, and any hiker would be eager to hurry on, hurry to the climax, and avoid listening to the land. From the boulders the trail inclines gently. To the left there is a barely noticeable, small footpath winding along above a ravine. This path leads to a hanging cave veiled with fine drizzles from a future waterfall. The visitor cannot help but recall the signpost’s stories, and picture Melville and Hawthorne huddling in the cave and discussing philosophy passionately as the rainstorm raged outside. But just as quickly as it came, the image is dispelled. Only the present remains. Maybe the cave is just a cave. Maybe it has no historic meaning; maybe its walls do not ring with the voices of Melville and Hawthorne in deep conversation. But inside the

narrow cave the past inevitably bursts through into the future. Along the roof of the cave are scrawled years and initials by hands long gone, leaving questions in the viewer's mind that even the soft *tap tap* of the dripping water-veils on granite cannot mask. This cave is marked by the whims of history, and can never belong to the present day. The seeker of soul enlightenment must venture along further to find a bit of this mountain that he or she may connect to, a portion that sparks creativity similar to that experienced by Byrant, Hawthorne, and Melville.

Heading up the trail, skipping across a little brook and climbing a rather steep ascent with stone steps, the visitor enter into a false summit clearing. On a massive rounded boulder in the clearing is a rock with a careful, mechanical inscription that reads:

THIS RIDGE AND THE CLIFFS  
OF MONUMENT MOUNTAIN WERE CONVEYED  
TO THE TRUSTEES OF PUBLIC RESERVATIONS  
BY DEED BEARING DATE OCTOBER 19 AD 1899  
IN FUFILMENT OF A WISH OF ROSALIE BUTLER  
THAT SUCH PORTIONS OF THIS MOUNTAIN  
MIGHT BE PRESERVED TO THE PEOPLE OF BERKSHIRE  
AS A PLACE OF FREE ENJOYMENT FOR ALL TIME

It's impossible to look at this inscription without being swarmed by questions: Who was Rosalie Butler? How did she have the power to give this land to the Trustees? Why did she wish to do so? Why on October 19, 1899? Who are the Trustees? Instead of becoming lost in the screen of bushy leaves, stout tree trunks and flowering undergrowth, the hiker is surrounded on all sides by questions of the past, questions that are now written into every leaf, every tree root and every stone. The freshness of the natural world is lost amongst the dusty questions of the past, so much that spell of the hike is almost broken. The joy of being alone in nature, of physically exploring a new place, of losing

the concerns of modern humanity is overshadowed by the swirling questions of who has trodden this ground before and what their human drives were.

The clearing is a crossroads. A signpost marks one trail as “Squaw Peak Trail” and another as “Indian Monument Trail.” These are someone else’s names, not ours, as well as a prime example of cultural appropriation—there are no Native Americans left to explain whether this trail was a monument in their culture, since they were forced off this land by white settlers. More questions arise: Did the white settlers make the monument to the “Indian” as he forced the tribes off this land, or did the “Indian” make the monument to their failing way of life? Did the squaw simply live here, or did she retreat to this lonely mountaintop to escape from white men? Here a hiker is faced with a choice. Continuing on the hike, will he or she decide to just look at the aesthetic, superficial beauty of the surrounding nature, or will he or she decide to look deeper, to look into the human story that has been imposed upon the land and has shaped it? The decision may be pushed off; perhaps the evidence of human influence on this lonely natural outpost will die out like a parasite with nothing to feed upon.

Ahead, the trail is worn down to the tree roots and has clearly been well-trodden. Towards the left is a slightly less-abused turn off; hoping for some original experience of nature, one ventures this way. Rounding a massive boulder, the explorer is suddenly confronted with a view north. Below, Route 7 winds by a sprawling, concrete and brick high school, a commercial sand pit, and a swampy lake. In the distance Mount Greylock, the highest mountain in Massachusetts, is barely visible, shrouded in a heat waves and mist. Here is safety; here is protection underneath the tree cover and away from the main trail. But the questions still swirl. Did the squaw shelter here—did Rosalie Butler admire

this view—did the Trustees put this on a postcard to encourage tourism? The questions are too numerous, and the sense of looking through someone else’s eyes, of seeing the scene as someone else saw it, is overpowering. Maybe the summit will be freer; maybe the wide expanse of unmarked sky overhead will free one’s thoughts and restore the viewer to his or her internal experience. There is something else, too, that draws one back to the summit trail. It is that indescribable need that is paradoxically opposed to, yet coexistent with, the need for solitude. It is the basic human instinct to be social and to share in human experience. Nature writers are the best example of this push-pull phenomenon: at the same time they delve into nature and enjoy their independent solace among the trees and bushes, they contemplate how they may write of their solitary experience to share it with a larger audience. The need for human interaction, indeed, is nearly inescapable, and shows itself most potently when one is alone.

Shouldering their packs, explorers must turn back and follow the side trail back to the summit. Scrambling over massive, humped boulders, it is easy to lose sight of the trail, which invites the thrill of possibly making a new one, an individual and completely original one. However, this dream is soon dispelled when one tops out at the summit and is faced with a sweeping vista in almost every direction. To the southwest one can see Catamount Ski Area with its wide swaths of cleared trees; to the northeast Mount Greylock looms. Surrounded thus by both the Catskills and the Berkshire mountain ranges, ringing around in all directions, one ought to feel hemmed in; but instead the bald summit frees the spirit and loosens the soul. Like an innocent, oblivious child, one feels the urge to clamber around giddily, searching for a new angle on the wonderful vista. But this spirit cannot help but skitter away with the discovery that one promising path through

the sparse brush leads to an elaborately carved rock. “1888” in big rounded numerals proudly accosts one’s dismayed eyes, as does “Morton, Worcester, Sept. 1 1888” and “S.G. Penson.” Other hands have touched these rocks—other eyes have seen this view—other souls have felt the elatedness that comes from nature. There’s a beautiful view from this spot, but the scratchings on the rock are too distracting to enjoy it. Who was Morton from Worcester, and how did he come to be here? Why did S.G. Penson carve his name in this rock, and when did he do so? No one knows; not even the great Google. While these words and names will remain for years, having marked this rock indelibly, the human mind and hand behind them have gone and will never be found again. It is hard to see the original wildness and the loveliness of the land, in Bryant’s words, when everywhere remain marks of its conquerors.

Having exhausted the summit, one has no choice but to continue down the mountain. The trail narrows, and it seems as if the climax of the hike is over and now only the denouement awaits. This finale comes in the form of a signpost that indicates a detour from the path down. Pointing up the rocky slope, the sign simply reads, “Devil’s Pulpit.” The name alone is enough to pique one’s interest, and the old hunt for an original, fresh experience spurs the hiker down this side trail. Winding around pines and crossing slabs of granite, one suddenly steps into a scene of absolute wonder. In the foreground the ridge bisected by the trail peters out onto a rock-rimmed pulpit that looks out upon a pine-backed ridge to the right. This ridge dives down to the valley floor, but curiously as it declines in height a parallel structure—a tall column of granite—rises next to it. In the background the Berkshire and Catskills meet in a blue haze, challenged only in height by the cumulonimbus clouds that linger just above the horizon. What majesty in

this spot! What power! Here, no rocks are carved with human language; no signposts bite into the earth; no thought of anything but the beauty of nature persists. Here, one is free—or would be, if it wasn't for the name: Devil's Pulpit. This spot, this glorious spot, is of the devil? How can it be so? Even as the evergreens and the granite fill the observer's vision, the name still looms. It recalls the greater name of this mountain: Monument Mountain. Why must such grandeur be a monument, and to what? It is difficult to be organically inspired by nature as the American Romantics were when all around the experience is already characterized. However, in regards to Monument Mountain, perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Instead of pondering how the environment of the peak influenced artists and writers, we should be asking how the amalgamation of natural constructions and human legends can be inspirational in of itself. Looking just at the mountain does not give enough context to understand its pull; it is necessary to look both at the mountain and the monument.

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### *The Monument*

All the carvings that have become part of the landscape of Monument Mountain make one thing clear: in order to understand the mountain, we need to understand the past. If you do happen to Google Monument Mountain searching for some semblance of its past, or how its name came about, you will most likely stumble upon the 1824 poem by William Cullen Bryant as a top result. Clearly this poem has lent much to the myth of Monument Mountain. His first few lines, as we've seen, suggest that one ascend the mountains, the experience of which is recounted in the previous section. Bryant suggests that if one "fail[s] not with weariness" and makes it to the top, one will forget "the steep and toilsome way" (Bryant 4). The recent past of the ascent is forgotten when the hiker is

faced with the goal, or so suggests Bryant. Certainly, the summit of Monument Mountain is awe-inspiring, but it is not completely separate from human society. In Bryant's view, even when faced with the "haunts of men below thee," reminders of the mortal, human world, one's "expanding heart / Shall feel a kindred with that loftier world / To which thou art translated, and partake / The enlargement of thy vision" (ibid., 8, 9-12). On reaching the summit and overlooking the miniaturized human world below, the viewer's heart becomes one with godly nature and receives truths from the "loftier world" (ibid., 12). This description seems almost Shaker-like in its recognition of communion with a higher power within nature. If any place could result in such an "enlargement" of one's vision, it would certainly be Monument Mountain with its bald summit and wide-ranging views that make the viewer question the concept of distance. But there is a problem here. The aura that surrounds Monument Mountain is one of the past, of history and of legends. Instead of inviting one to relate to nature, the mountain would seem to invite one to relate to the past.

Bryant himself even recognizes Monument Mountain's omnipresent connection to history. For him, the past is a romantic one: "There is a tale about these gray old rocks, / A sad tradition of unhappy love" (ibid., 49-50). The tale comes from a time when "the savage sought / His game in the thick woods," which for the Berkshires would have been before 1785-1787 (Bryant 52-53; Holland 588). In these years, the peaceful Native Americans of Stockbridge, who had become civilized, built a town, and engaged in government, were removed to New Stockbridge in Madison County, New York, before they were further removed to Green Bay in 1822, then to Lake Winnebago in 1833, and then beyond the Missouri River in 1838—a rather unromantic storyline that Bryant



overlooks (Holland 587-588). Rather than romanticizing a legend from his own era, Bryant chooses a time before his own to set his tale in, and bypasses the reality of the modern day. His focus on the past echoes would be echoed down the long corridor of time by the reading of his poem at the summit by Hawthorne and Melville, by the physical marks of man left on the mountain today, and by the present discussion within this chapter. Each layer adds to the legend of the mountain, and to the culture of the Berkshires as a whole.

Bryant's poem memorializes the first layer of Monument Mountain's history. Within the setting of the past, Bryant describes how "the fairest of the Indian maids" falls in love with her cousin, a love that her tribe is quick to label "incestuous" (Bryant 54, 61). Similar to the tradition of courtly love in medieval European literature, where a lover pines after a forbidden love, the maid starts to waste away and lose the "lustre" from her eyes (*ibid.*, 63). Unable to achieve her love, she comes to only one solution: ascending what is now called the Devil's Pulpit, "she threw herself / From the steep rock and perished" (*ibid.*, 122-123). This act, done out of unrequited love, is memorialized by the tribe, who "built up a simple monument, a cone / Of small loose stones" in her honor (*ibid.*, 129-130). Bryant asserts that this legend is what gives the mountain its name: "The mountain where the hapless maiden died / Is called the Mountain of the Monument" (*ibid.*, 136-137). In Bryant's mind, the natural scenes that form the experience of the mountain inspire thoughts of a past full of romance, love, and lust. The mountain becomes a function of this vision, rather than its own entity. It is a "Mountain of the Monument," not just a mountain in its own right. In other words, its history defines its identity. But should it be this way? Should scenes of nature be defined by their past—or,

more specifically, by their human past? Ought not they exist on their own, fresh and original always? This is a Romantic ideal, and avoids the reality that human constructions have always imposed on nature. Besides the merely physical—schools, homes, roads, mines, factories, tunnels, bridges, pastures—human literature and human history have made their mark as well. In his work “A Defence of Poetry,” Percy Bysshe Shelley writes that poetry “creates the universe anew after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration” (Shelley 611). Poetry has the power to sweep away our “impressions” of a place or a scene, and to replace it with a new sense of that place that is the poet’s creation. This power of the poet to recreate nature elevates him to the level of God. Indeed, the next sentence in “A Defence of Poetry” proposes this idea using an Italian saying: “Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta” (ibid., 611). Translated, this means, “No one deserves the name of creator except God and the Poet” (ibid., 611). God, in religious tradition is the creator of the Earth and a supreme being above humanity, is equated to the Poet, who by merely striking pen on paper can remake one’s perceptions of nature. William Cullen Bryant’s poem is a stark example of the ways in which a poet or a writer may remake the image of a place. Alone, Monument Mountain need not be romantic or melancholy. But when the tale of the “hapless maiden” is imposed upon it, the original image of the mountain is dispelled and Bryant’s vision infects readers and hikers like a parasite, altering their natural experience of the mountain (Bryant 136).

While there is no evidence to suggest so, Bryant’s vision of Monument Mountain may have influenced two of America’s greatest writers: Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne. As previously mentioned, the two scaled the peak in 1850. Afterwards, the

two exchanged letters, which often took a passionate and sexual tone (Argersinger 2).

Argersinger and Person describe Melville's letters to Hawthorne as containing "frankly erotic language" (2). Melville once wrote to Hawthorne:

Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips—lo, they are yours and not mine. I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling. (Robertson-Lorant 42)

Here, Melville describes his relationship with Hawthorne, going so far as to say that they are from the same source and share the same life force. But clearly Melville has some hesitation at their relationship, wondering what right Hawthorne has to connect with his life. Such a question may reflect that Melville realizes the homosexuality undertones of their relationship, and also recognizes how discouraged and inappropriate such feelings were deemed at the time. Still, despite Hawthorne's marriage and two children, he and Melville would engage in this relationship-through-letters for sixteen months following the hike. Their relationship, an example of another forbidden love, adds another layer of human history on top of the bald bedrock of Monument Mountain. Undoubtedly, Melville and Hawthorne knew of Bryant's work romanticizing the mountain. According to Joe Roman, a conservation biologist, researcher, and writer who penned a piece titled "In Melville's Footsteps" for the *New York Times*, Melville and Hawthorne's party actually read Bryant's poem "Monument Mountain" when they reached the summit that day in 1850 (Roman). The vision of the Indian maiden flinging herself off Devil's Pulpit for a love she could have never had combined with the passionate cave discussion in the rain may very well have sparked a relationship between Hawthorne and Melville that could never have begun in any other setting. The inescapable past of Monument Mountain, literally carved into its bedrock by human hands, jumped to the forefront to influence the

present on that day in August 1850 when Hawthorne and Melville ascended the peak. Inspired by a time nearly fifty years before his poem, Bryant would himself become a part of the history of the mountain that would influence future seekers of natural inspiration—two of which happened to be the great American novelists Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The relationship between Melville and Hawthorne, sparked on Monument Mountain, would have a profound effect on their writing, even changing the course of both of their works. During his time in Lenox, Hawthorne would write *The House of Seven Gables* in a guest cottage on William Aspinwall Tappan's estate. From here, he had an excellent view of Monument Mountain, fresh with all the memories of the blissful day spent with Melville and others. Indeed, Hawthorne and Melville so hit it off that they became regular visitors to each other's homes (Robertson-Lorant 33, 38). Melville would write a review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from Old Manse* (1846), which was first published in 1846. Robertson-Lorant describes this as a "catalytic event for Melville" (ibid., 33). Recognizing in Hawthorne a "kindred spirit," Melville defended his works from other critics and drew inspiration from them (ibid., 34). The two shared a sort of symbiotic relationship, notes Robertson-Lorant: "By exploring the dark side of the American experience, Hawthorne's tales of Puritan guilt, self-righteousness, and gloom paved the way for Melville to expose the deeper, darker truths that lay beyond the myths on which America was founded" (ibid., 34). Indeed, Melville would dedicate *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* (1851) to Hawthorne when it eventually came out for publication a year after the Monument Mountain hike. The metaphysics that appear in *Moby Dick* may have been a direct result of the times Melville spent talking metaphysics in his barn with Hawthorne.

Their relationship spurred intellectual curiosity in the both of them with such a passion that Robertson-Lorant characterizes them as “soul mate[s]” (ibid., 40). While neither of them ever wrote of that first day on Monument Mountain, it is clear that the meeting of Hawthorne and Melville would alter and affect each other’s personal and literary lives beyond all measure.

The romantic myth of Monument Mountain, spun first by William Cullen Bryant, would extend down the chain of time to influence Melville and Hawthorne, who would then go on to spin their own tales and myths. No one who has read Bryant’s poem may go to Monument Mountain without picturing the maiden plunging to death; similarly, no one who has read Melville’s novel may look upon a white whale without thinking of *Moby Dick*. Scenes of nature have been irreversibly altered by these two writers, who have gone on to influence other writers. Retracing their footsteps, we see that it all comes back to the Berkshires, and the literary and artistic traditions there that have drawn writers and artists for centuries now.

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### *An Artist’s Memorial*

Why have the Berkshires become such a hub of literature and art, layered with traditions of storytelling and legend like strata within the earth’s crust? Why this place? The most obvious answers are tradition and history—layers and layers of tradition and history. The Berkshires have been the site of glorious happenings that have inspired a multitude of writing and artistic work. The settlement of the region, King Philip’s War, King William’s War, Queen Anne’s War, the French and Indian War, the religious fervor of the hill towns, the American Revolution and General Knox’s trail, Shays’ Rebellion,

the coming of industry, and the War of 1812 all provide ample material for writers such as Bryant to romanticize and to spin into new works (Holland vol. I). Indeed, the history of the early Berkshires is the history of the early American nation. The policies set forth in the Berkshires regarding settlement, Native American removal, the founding of churches, farming, and later industry would echo across the United States as the new nation pushed forward to claim and settle all the land between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. All this history, conveniently located just several hours outside of Boston and New York, two massive centers for intellectuals, made the Berkshires an attainable source of material for writers and artists of all kinds.

But the captivating nature of the Berkshires cannot be explained by history alone, or by the images of history that writers and poets have constructed. There is something else. It exhausts description, but instead of discouraging attempts it has the opposite effect of inspiring more. Back in 1855, as he was writing his history of Stockbridge, Josiah Gilbert Holland brushed up against this something. He wrote, “Few towns in the county or State, it is believed, can rival Stockbridge in beauty of location, and richness of landscape ... [villages] appear nestled down amidst a scene of rural loveliness, worthy of a Utopian commonwealth” (Holland, vol. II 596-597). At first glance it seems that Holland is merely influenced by the aesthetic beauty of the land, which would include its mountains, valleys, rivers and lakes. But he also uses the term “richness of landscape” (ibid., 596). To a farmer, this may mean the richness of the soil; to a hiker, perhaps the variety in the geographic features; to a builder, perhaps the richness of stone and wood; to an industrialist, perhaps the richness of natural minerals; to a hunter; perhaps the richness of game. But to the poet, the artist, the thinker, and the writer, this means the richness of

inspiration. The thing that defies description but which makes the Berkshires so alluring is inspiration, which stems not from a historical source, although some may find that inspiration as well. It is the real-time beating heart of the Berkshires: the streams that continue to babble, the trees that continue to color in the autumn, the rivers that continue to ripple, and the falls that continue to crash. It is an essence of eternity, of a place that outlives all human attempts to alter it drastically and continues to spin on in its own sphere governed by its own laws, which sometimes bumps up against human life to affect a small change that, down the chain of human coincidence, may turn out to change the course of the whole human thought. Instead of altering the mountain with our history, as the feeble scratches on its rocks would suggest, it instead alters us. Our carvings fit the grain of the rock; our trails wind around its trees and stones; our writers form their thoughts around its immovable geological formations.

What draws writers and artists to the Berkshires is the sense of the infinite and a feeling that this unchangeable infinite only affects us. To understand the history of the land, we must understand human history, but only because that is its most direct derivative. We cannot observe the infinite directly, for all we see are the small things: a squirrel burying a nut there, a bird nibbling on a branch here, a few drops of water tapping on stone there. To see the infinite, we must look through the lens of human experience, and identify where it has intersected human life and affected an astounding change. Literature, directly linked to both the consciousness of the writer and the reader, is the most telling place where we may feel the tiny changes in the pulse of human consciousness that result from the force of nature. The Berkshires' long history of literary attention provides a perfect sample of the circular effects of human influence on the land,

which result in layers of cultural legends at locations like Monument Mountain. Once written, these legends bounce around the whole region, the vast expanse of America, and even the entire globe, influencing writers and thinkers who will go on to have their own impacts on other natural locales. This is the infinite, for as long as language exists, so too do the words we write. At Monument Mountain, the land is monument to human legend, but also to human art and language, adding a timeless and storied component to the Berkshires' culture.

### Chapter 3: HUDSON AND CHESTER GRANITE QUARRY

#### *In Search of a Sustainable Industry*

In recent years many have claimed that industry is leaving America, that manufacturing jobs and factories are being outsourced to places like Mexico, China, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia.<sup>1</sup> They say our country is changing, and that politics in recent years are the cause. I take no stance on the issue, except to point out the word “recent.” The loss of industry in certain parts of this country is not recent. It has been an ongoing process, hand-in-hand with the processes of urbanization and modernization that have marked the whole of the twentieth century and have left a lasting imprint on our natural world. This mark is very different from the layers of literary history left on Monument Mountain by visitors, for it has actually reshaped the physical contours of the land and torn holes in the earth. Areas like the Berkshires lost countless forms of

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<sup>1</sup> President Donald Trump, speaking in Monessen, Pennsylvania, on June 28, 2016, detailed his vision of a debilitated America whose “wealth and factories [have been moved] to Mexico and overseas.” His rhetoric has been echoed by many politicians (“Donald Trump”).



industry, from emery, mica, granite, and marble mines to tanneries to basket and bedstead factories to paper mills. All these left lasting scars on the environment, and their loss starved Berkshire communities. What remained were skeleton towns, populated with people who stayed for the scenery, for their families, or for their heritage, but not for work. In the warm months the lakeside houses open their doors to the summer residents from New York City and Boston, who flee the confinement of the city for the open space of the Berkshires. But they, too, do not come here for work. They come to enjoy “nature” as they see it: human-made trails for hiking, human-made reservoirs for boating, and human-made golf courses for amusement. They do not come to work here, to live here, to become a part of the Berkshire regional culture.

From the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, this was not the case. People often worked and lived within their very same town. The Shakers in Hancock are an example of this lifestyle. At first, it was a farm living. Becket, a small town in the mountains between the valley of the Housatonic River in the west and the valley of the Westfield River in the east, is a perfect example of the transitions many Berkshire towns underwent. In the *History of Berkshire County* (1885), Jarvis Norcott describes how the rocky and thin soil made farming difficult, but how many settlers persevered:

By reason of the rocky broken surface but a small part of the land in Becket is suitable for cultivation. Corn, oats, and potatoes are raised in moderate quantities, but the farmers find their principal profit in the cultivation of grass, and in the raising and fattening of cattle for marketing. Dairying and wool growing were once sources of profit, but these are to a great extent abandoned. (Norcott 597)

Farming in the Berkshires was hard due to the rocky nature of the mountains, and many families raised just enough for themselves and only turned a small profit at market.

Farmers had to be independent, as the nearest neighbor was often far away. Norcott

describes how some of the first settlers of Becket, Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Walker, “passed their first winter here alone” in the latter half of the eighteenth century, as their nearest neighbors were in Blandford, “some miles away, an unbroken wilderness lying between” (ibid., 599). When Mr. Walker cut his foot badly, requiring medical assistance, Mrs. Walker could not leave him to go get help; she could only tie bloody bandages to one of her horses and send it on the way to Blandford (ibid., 599). Luckily, the message got through, and help soon came (ibid., 599). This anecdote shows how dangerous farming could be, and also how isolated life in the Berkshires was. With no good roads to the major towns, the Berkshire farmer had to learn the hard lesson of self-reliance. Even a century later this lesson would still be relevant. Elsie Gibbs Hill, writing in the Winter 1984 edition of *Stonewalls*, described how her father, born on the farm he would run his entire life in 1863, was “certainly a Jack-of-all-trades” (Hill 29). Running the farm on the border of Becket and Blandford made Frank Nelson Gibbs not only an expert farmer but also a blacksmith, barber, veterinarian, and even dentist (ibid., 29). From the farm’s livestock, gardens, apple orchard, berry bushes, and forests, the Gibbs family could put away salt pork, corned beef, sausage, bacon, potatoes, canned vegetables, preserved fruits, and butter in the cellar for the winter (ibid., 31). Other farm products were sold to buy sugar, flour, and crackers, as Elsie notes that “little else had to be purchased in the food line” due to family’s independence (ibid., 31). But farming could only last so long. The Gibbs family farm had to be sold off when no one was left to run it in 1939 (ibid., 32). Even in 1885, Norcott made the astute observation that

[a] large majority of the farms here are less productive than formerly, partly because of the soil becoming exhausted, and also because of the farms passing into the hands of those that have not the energy and perseverance that characterized the preceding generations. The inviting city and the fertile West

have allured the sons of Becket from their native soil to seek homes and fortunes elsewhere. (Norcott 597)

As the West drew heirs away from their Berkshire family farms, and as the land itself began to yield fewer and fewer crops, it became clear that farming in the Berkshires was beginning to decline. However, this made way for other industries to prosper in the Berkshires, as Berkshire residents sought some way to sustain their lifestyle in these idyllic hills. The period witnessed a struggle between the settler and the land. It was not romantic, where the two worked in harmony, but rather a question of who could last longer: the land, exhausted of all nutrients; or the settler, continually under the siege of isolation, bitter winters, and the search for employment.

There would be some hope after the decline of farming. Some of the earliest industries of the area included the production of lumber, tanning, paper and grain milling, the formation of charcoal, basket-weaving, and silk-making (Archer 85). However, many of these industries would go “extinct” in Becket: some were swept away by the great flood of 1927, while others would simply die out (Jackson 110). Many of the stores and taverns in Becket would shutter their doors, too, after the 1927 flood nearly destroyed the town. In *A Bicentennial History of Becket* (1965), Archer notes, “the trend of the twentieth century brought the closing down of industries and the gradual development of the area as a vacation resort whose unspoiled countryside and cool air beckoned more and more summer visitors from the cities” (Archer 89). However, one industry would “[span] the turn of the century in Becket” (ibid., 88). This was the granite industry. Centered away from the town, it was unaffected by the 1927 flood, and, unlike other industries such as basket-weaving or silk-making, it could not be moved. Becket is known for having high quality granite very near the surface, which “takes a polish equal to the

Scotch or English granite” (Norcott 597). The granite was used for “building purposes, paving blocks, and monuments” (ibid., 597). Norcott, in his description, melds the mining of granite with hope for prosperity in the Berkshires: “[the granite] is sent to all parts of the country, and these rock bound hills may yet prove sources of wealth to their owners” (ibid., 597). Nothing in the country was known to compare to Becket granite, giving hope that the town would finally have a lasting industry. Indeed, granite quarrying would outlast the lost industries of tanning and milling, but it too would die out in the mid-twentieth century, leaving a ghastly scar on the land.

Human habitation in the Berkshires has left many scars like this at former quarry, factory, and mill sites. At one time in my hometown of Chester, the mountains were barren, stripped of trees in the search for farmland and grazing pastures. The stonewalls that now crumble in the thick but young forests once marked the borders between miles of fields. The earth itself has been changed by human hands. Roads have flattened the curve of the hills and worn away the topsoil. Dams have impeded the natural flow of water, stalling the water’s work of smoothing the Berkshire bedrock while completely altering the landscape. In our hurry to colonize, we destroy the very treasure we seek to attain. What is left cannot quite be called “nature,” for it is not the result of natural processes alone but of artificial processes too, wrought by human hands. Some may claim that humans are natural since we are of this earth as well. While I recognize this, I also cannot avoid noticing the incredible effect we have had on this earth, one that outweighs the impact of any other species. Therefore, I answer that we have made ourselves unnatural. We have affected this land unnaturally, using its natural resources much more than we were entitled to as just one of the many species on this earth. But what else were

we to do, as we must inhabit this earth and survive somehow? In our drive to survive, whether by farming or industry, we have marked our earth, and have exhausted certain areas of our country. While we have sometimes handled this well, such as at the Hancock Shaker Village or at Monument Mountain, we have also handled this poorly. It is no wonder that industry has left, as the land here has now become unable to support it. One perfect example of the long-lasting wounds on the natural world we leave is the Hudson and Chester Granite Quarry in Becket. Knowing that only by examining these places may we learn from our mistakes, Becket residents to protected the site. Pictures, diagrams, stories, and even personal testimonies will never inspire as much poignant dread for the negative effects of human habitation as does firsthand experience of the quarry site.

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### *Wounded Hills*

Even before reaching the quarry, it is apparent that this is an unnatural spot. At the trailhead to the quarry there is a large parking area split in half by a peninsula of a raised, soil-filled stone wall. On this, several hefty granite boulders perch next to the old Sullivan air drill that perhaps cut them apart. Hidden behind a shrub on the peninsula is a monument to John Guachione, "Creator of this Quarry Gateway." All of this is a human fabrication, of course, a place constructed in order to give access to another human-built place. Just at the trailhead there is an info station surrounded by many trash bins. There is also a worn green Adirondack-slide-style chair nearby that in summer is occupied by a local who watches carloads of kids disembark in their flip flops and bathing suits. A long chain, supported by two large boulders at either end, marks the path and protects the quarry from any four-wheeled vehicles, despite there having been many such vehicles on

this land during the quarry's active days. The trail itself is quite wide, with the appearance of a forgotten but once well-used road. It increases gradually in steepness until the hiker finds himself or herself suddenly climbing a steep grade. For the moment, however, the even human-made grade is the only unusual thing about these woods, which are typical New England woods, otherwise. But the first hint that something is different here is not a small one. A hulking grout pile can be observed just past the foreground of trees, arresting one's attention and disrupting the smooth curve of the mountain. Piled high with chunky bits of granite and small hunks of other less-valuable rock, this slag heap bares its razor teeth against the sky and against wild nature, resisting the colonization of snow and trees, shrubs and grass. In front of the slag heap hundreds of rocks half-covered with leaves bow like worshipers throughout the woods, paying homage to a time long since past and to the quarry from which they were birthed.

Just as the slag heap towers on the right-hand side of the grade, on the left a small access road rises in height and joins the grade under one's feet. Barely noticeable indentations of parallel lines suggest that this access road is an old rail bed, and its direction suggests that it is all that remains of the old Chester-Becket Railroad. At one time, tons of granite blocks were ferried down this railroad to the finishing and polishing works in Chester, then shipped off to locations all over New England, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, and even Canada (Spencer 138). Now, however, it is largely overgrown and nearly invisible to the hiker's eye, marked only by large granite blocks. On satellite imaging, it is merely a line in the trees that sparks one's curiosity. Indeed, all around there are reminders that this site is not in its original, natural state, that the order established by natural laws has been disrupted here.

Just beyond the juncture of the old railroad line and the trail grade another smaller slag pile appears, hanging on to the edge of the grade and hemming the traveler in between the two grout piles. It is such an unusual spot—almost like a valley except it is on top of a mountain, and almost like a mountain except it is on the smaller scale and devoid of plant life. Overhead a rusted cable loops through the trees and descends to the ground, appearing almost vine-like at first glance. All around are metal pieces posing as natural objects; here, a twice-twisted cable mimics a tree branch; there, a length of pipe winds along the ground like a tree root. All of these details contribute to a sense of a faux, metallic nature that competes with and sometimes overpowers the organic environment.

Up ahead there are more rusted objects. Once a generator shed, the awkwardly bent pieces of corrugated metal that greet the explorer give the whole scene a ghostly feel. Scraps of metal have been left on the ground nearby, now misshapen by rust and weather. Toward the back of the shed there is an old motor and some tires, remnants of days when the quarry was alive with the purring of engines, the clunking of trucks, and the crackling of stone. Behind the sheds is an odd assortment of shattered wooden pieces and degraded metal that a nearby signpost refers to as the remnants of a “Stiff Leg Derrick,” a type of crane. With a tall mast that once rose above the current treetops, this derrick now lies in a heap on the forest floor. This contraption was used to load chunks of granite onto railcars and to transfer granite between rail carts from the quarry and railcars headed down the mountain to Chester. Derricks utilized simple technology of the time, resembling a ship’s mast when in operation. The mast could be spun while its boom could be raised up and down; cables attached to the top of the mast and the top of the boom allowed the derrick to operate like a crane, raising and lowering granite blocks.

Winches, originally powered by steam and then by the electric generators housed in the generator shed, were responsible for rotating the derrick and for raising and lowering its cables. Such a system resulted in an elaborate array of winches, power supplies, cables, and anchors that covered the entire quarry, even bridging across the quarry itself. Now, however, this extensive network lies in ruins: cables mingle with tree branches and vines, shattered wood shards barely break through the topsoil, and metal boxes, barrels, drums, and debris take on the hue of fallen leaves. Such a scene of metallic rot, typically denoting urban decay, is unusual and out of place in the Berkshire wilderness.

Heading back past the sheds towards the trail, one comes upon two parked trucks. These trucks would look as if they were just left there yesterday by the quarrymen, except that their tires have flattened into the ground, their seats have been eaten by mice, and their doors have been dented by falling trees and reckless people. The truck nearest the trail across from the shed is a haul truck; with its trailer, it would have transported granite to Chester for finishing after the Chester-Becket Railroad became defunct. The truck on the right, with some of its green paint and lettering of "GENERAL ASPHALT PAVING CO. OF PHILA-" still intact, was a compressor truck that pumped compressed air into the large holding tank perched on the hill above the trail. Compressed air from the tank powered mining tools like the Sullivan air drill in the parking lot. Past the two trucks is another derrick site. What remains now is a twisted jumble of cables, pulleys, and wood next to some drum winches; but at one time, they composed a guy derrick, which was similar to a stiff leg derrick but had more guide lines, called guys.

Continuing down the narrow trail between several chunks of granite and stepping over some rusty iron rails, one finally glimpses the quarry in its entirety. Like a narrow



canyon, the quarry is 600-feet long and cuts into the mountainside in front of the path. At its widest point, which is here on the edge the path now occupies, it is 200-feet across. On either side of the quarry to the right and left rise up steep cliffs, anywhere from 140-190 feet tall, from the quarry floor. It is an incredible view: the deep blue of the 100-feet of water in quarry, the sheer cliffs that resemble hardened Play-Doh, the cables stretching across the heights of the quarry, and the slag pile on the far side surmounted by a reconstructed guy derrick with a 55-foot tall mast. Gashing into the mountain, the quarry is both of nature and yet unnatural, having been crafted by human hands. The water, the rocks, the metal scarps, the timber of the derricks, the trucks, and the winches are all natural materials, yet here they have been displaced and shaped and stripped by human hands so as to resemble something unnatural. Running beneath one's feet into the water is a rusty pipe, which competes with the tree roots for footing on this eroded slope. Further along on the left-hand side there is a worn rope swing with a few random knots. Away from the quarry's edge are several granite slabs, one of which is heavily carved over with years and initials; some of the more legible ones are "1894" and "PM." Clearly, this is well visited spot, for the ground is well trodden and there are signs of human habitation everywhere, like the trash bag tied to a tree or the shirt frozen to a tree branch. In winter, this quarry is nearly deserted, and the water ices over by late December; but in the summer, the quarry is packed with young people seeking to jump from its 10-story high cliffs. The kids have left their mark here, too, in the form of graffiti. A tree up the trail ahead bears "X TACO X" in black spray-paint, while the rocks nearby are spray-painted frowning suns, "PITZ CHEW," "STOICZ," "#FreeWilly," and other unintelligible markings. From the quarrymen who carved this gash into the earth, to the

thrill-seekers who dive off the ledges, to the hikers who barely impress a footprint on the ground, everyone who visits this spot leaves a mark. Yet, it is not a history that adds to the land, as at Monument Mountain; here at the quarry, history has abused the land.

The path continues around some slabs of granite with parallel blast holes along their edges to a granite staircase that leads up the cliff. Each step is a brick of granite, hewn out of the quarry and fitted here into the mountainside. It is such a human construction—there are no staircases in nature—yet it blends in so well, covered with leaves and moss as it is. Up the staircase to the left, hidden behind a few broken birch trees and clinging to the narrow ledge is another rusted winch, eyeing the two bolts driven into a large block of granite closer to the trail that once supported its matching derrick. Cables crisscross through the trees in every direction: some high above, a few closer to human height, while others have fallen and now slither underfoot. At the edge one can peer down the slick granite cliff to the water, nearly 60 feet below. Another staircase leads to the top of the giant slag pile one could see from the trail below. From up here, a wonderful vista of the Berkshires greets the observer. On a clear day, one can see northeast all the way to the OMNI aviation tower and the Gobble Mountain firetower in Chester, while to the north the microwave tower in Peru is clearly visible with its red and white frame. These towers define the towns more clearly than the shape of the mountains ever could, at least to the human eye. The hawk or the falcon, who also see this view, do not need to know where Peru and Chester are; to them, this is all their habitat, all their home. Only humans seek to divide and label the land, altering the smooth connectedness of the earth with country, state, county, and town boundaries—certainly, no other species cuts up the land like we do.

Abruptly, the path ends as one rounds some granite slabs and descends. There is no way to reach the other side of the quarry and the reconstructed derrick. The land between is a deep, impassable gorge of torn trees and slag granite, up to a steep slope from which a derrick's bullwheel hangs by its cables over the edge. To reach the derrick the hiker must retrace his or her steps back down the staircases and to the old trucks. Near the two trucks there is an intersection of three trails: one, to the staircases; two, to the derrick; and three, to the motion, which is a mining term for a very small quarry. Since the trail to the derrick affords the best view of the quarry, many choose to venture this way.

Just a few dozen feet up the trail the quarry is forgotten. The viewer can almost convince himself or herself that this is any patch of Berkshire woods. Any cables in sight can be written off as vines, while the scattering of granite boulders seem to be merely the remnants of glacial forces. But soon it becomes apparent again that this land is unnatural. Trees grow on top of unusual mounds, while metal pipes and water pumps and rusted drums break through the forest floor. The trail suddenly opens upon an Ingersoll-Rand portable air compressor, which sits with its hitch ready to be secured, just as it has sat for the past sixty years. Above the compressor on a flat ledge hunches a cinderblock tool shed, now devoid of doors or siding. To the right the trail continues, and suddenly the derrick commands the skyline. At 55-feet tall, it dwarfs all the other trees nearby, and with its base more than 100 feet above the waterline, it commands the entire quarry. The derrick serves as a portal back to a time when the quarry was stripped of all tree growth, pumped clear of all water, and ringed with ten derricks whose cables spread out in every direction. This was a place ruled by mankind. This was a place where mankind was the

dominant species, where the tools forged and sharpened just behind the derrick in the blacksmith shop cut into the earth and took its perceived treasures miles away to build human edifices to human things. The keyword, however, here is “was.” While people still make pilgrimages to this spot, they have long since abandoned their dynamite and their drills, allowing nature a chance to attempt a reclamation of the quarry. It is a slow reclamation, for the damage was so great, but it is a reclamation nonetheless.

Standing back from the rim with the derrick behind, this spot seems like the verge between two worlds. Bare granite, with rough edges against the sky, makes up the foreground, broken only by the smooth and exact wheels, drums, and gears of the derrick’s winch. In the background, only the very tops of purple, gently rolling hills are visible, offering no competition to the dominance of the foreground, with its sharp corners and neat shapes—at least to human eyes. But the difference between the foreground and the background is staggering. The foreground was created by the work of more than fifty men for nearly a century. The background was created by the work of continental collisions hundred of millions of years ago. Which force—human or nature—will ultimately win complete control of this land? In another century, will natural forces have overtaken the quarry, or will there still be evidence of human intervention? This tug of war between mankind and nature is not new in the Berkshires. While places like the Hancock Shaker Village and Monument Mountain are slowly being overtaken by nature, it is doubtful that the quarry will be reclaimed quickly. The amount of refuse at the site and the sheer size of the quarry itself guarantee that the human alterations will long outweigh the environment’s natural processes at the quarry.

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*“Art Combined with Nature”*

Settling the Berkshires has long pitted those that would make homes out of the wilderness against the environment. Besides the efforts to find a sustaining industry, settlers have carved their homesteads out of the wilderness, built towns where before colonies of chickadees lived, laid roads where only deer and Native American trails ran before, and constructed railroads that cut into mountains and hung over rivers. It was no small undertaking. Josiah Gilbert Holland, writing in his *History of Western Massachusetts* in 1855, amazingly noted that the first settlement in Berkshire “occurred but a few years more than a century ago!” while the Connecticut River Valley had been first settled nearly a century earlier in 1634 (Holland 165, 21). Settlement of the Berkshires was so long delayed due to the foreboding Berkshire mountains, the Native Americans that occupied them, and the dispute with New York over where exactly the borders lay between the two colonies (ibid., 164). One of the first settlers, William Williams, was so put off by the “insecurities of the region” that he “constructed his home in Pontoosuc with heavy wooden ramparts and walls of four-inch white ash planks, and named it, significantly, Fort Anson” (Birdsall 18). The first settlers of the Berkshire hills lived in fear of what lurked in the dark woods outside their cabins. But in 1759, the British won in Quebec, eliminating the threat of Indian attack in western Massachusetts (ibid., 19). Between 1761 and 1790, the number of settlers increased in Berkshire County from 700 families in three towns and four plantations to 30,000 inhabitants and 25 towns (ibid., 19). With the Native American threat gone, settlers streamed into Berkshire county, releasing the “build-up of population pressure” in the previously settled areas of people looking for new farmland (ibid., 19). However, the “Berkshire Barrier”—

Birdsall's term for the Berkshire mountains—still limited emigration from the Connecticut River Valley in Massachusetts, meaning that most of the settlers after 1761 came up from Connecticut (ibid., 21). Settlers from Rhode Island, New York, and eastern Massachusetts would all come to claim land on this newly-opened frontier (ibid., 21). Of course, the land would not come easily. Floods, bad winters, and disease would claim lives, and there were always the potential for life-changing accidents. One example of the potential for danger is recounted in *History of the Connecticut Valley in Massachusetts* (1879). John Gordon, a settler of the town who had been helping a neighbor in Middlefield slaughter his hogs, was returning home with meat on his saddle when he was cornered by a pack of wolves (Everts 1057). Although he threw the meat to the wolves, they still continued to pursue him and his horse, attacking “horse and rider savagely from flank and rear” (ibid., 1057). The chase continued for two miles as Gordon desperately tried to escape “amidst a terrific howling of swift-footed demons, snuffing his blood” (ibid., 1057). Terming the wolves as “demons” captures the fear of the first settlers of the Berkshires of the beastly, hellish unknown in which they chose to make their homes. Gordon, luckily, did make it home, but “it was a terrible experience, never to be forgotten” (ibid., 1057). It was the settlers against the unpredictable wilderness in which they lived; in no way could it be romanticized or underestimated. In their eyes, nature was vicious and needed to be subjugated.

In the end, humanity would subdue nature substantially and build towns, churches, schools, dams, canals, bridges, and roads. But along the way, something would change in their view of nature, something that is purely Berkshire. One of the biggest

and most transformative undertakings was the building of the Western Railroad through western Massachusetts. As Holland notes:

No agency tended so generally and so powerfully to the development of the resources and prosperity of Western Massachusetts as railroads . . . Were all that has been done for Western Massachusetts by railroads struck out of existence, the section would relatively be thrown back a century in the path of its progress. (Holland 412)

Costing almost ten million dollars in 1850s money, it would take ten years to build the railroad from Boston, Massachusetts, over the Berkshires to Greenbush, New York (ibid., 421). This railroad, though not “a large railroad as railroads go” was a “mighty important enterprise in its day because it was the first trunk line railroad built in America” (Fisher 8). A trunk line railroad is a main line railroad, and, in this case, the Western Railroad was the first because it not only sought to connect two cities, as other early American railroads did, but to connect the port of Boston to the commerce of the Hudson River and beyond to the Midwest (ibid., 8). At first, no one believed that a locomotive engine could scale the Berkshires carrying goods, but thanks to determined engineers such as George Washington Whistler, the railroad became “an outstanding engineering feat of its day or of any other day for that matter” (ibid., 8). The Berkshire Barrier would finally yield to interstate and intrastate commerce, connecting the two halves of Massachusetts in a way they hadn’t been before. Delegates from Boston could travel all the way to Albany in just a day (ibid., 34). It was an incredible feat. Birdsall claims that the coming of the railroad would contribute to the Berkshire’s feeling that “the identity of their county as independent and inimitable region was fading,” but I disagree because today it is clear that the railroad has contributed to the unique culture of the Berkshires (Birdsall 13). The railroad only added another dimension to the relationship between the inhabitants of the

Berkshires and the nature they were surrounded by. This becomes increasingly clear when one visits one of the engineering feats of the railroad, the Keystone Arches in Chester.

The Keystone Arches support the Western Railroad nearly seventy feet above the windings of the Westfield River. As the “Keystone Arches” website claims, they are the “first keystone arch railroad bridges in America” (Friends of the Keystone Arches). The website also proclaims the virtues of the Western Railroad:

The Western Railroad of Massachusetts radically changed the world when opened in 1841. It was the world’s first adhesion gradient rail line to cross a mountain range. It was the highest (1,459 ft. ASL) and longest (150 mi.) railway ever built; almost doubling the length of the previous title holder. It included the longest bridge in the world over the Connecticut River (1,264 ft.) It moved railroads from novelty to the forefront of modern transportation. Venture capital for canal projects dried up quickly after its opening. (ibid.)

Here we see that the Western Railroad—an engineering feat—brought the Berkshires fame and added to their already-legendary history. Besides this impressive listing of “firsts,” the Arches also notes that the railroad was the “first major infrastructure project to employ large numbers (up to 3,000) of immigrant laborers” and the “first to show what railroads would become in America” (ibid.). But the most incredible feat, in my opinion, is the beauty of the arches and the way their art blends in with the natural world. Made of local granite, the arches blend in with the bare rocks of the river. While they are arranged in an elongated semicircle, the rocks still exhibit their natural folds and curves, and, now, stained with rust and dotted with clumps of greenery, they seem a part of the local landscape. Standing upon the defunct second arch, which raises itself nearly seventy-five feet above the rushing and gurgling Westfield River, one feels an incredible sense of jubilation. Yes, these arches are unnatural; yes, they are human constructions; but they



allow one to experience the natural world in a way completely unlike hiking through the woods. These arches lend hope to the wish of a compromise between humanity and nature, where, although nature is tainted by human intervention, the land is not destroyed either. On the contrary, the land is now more beautiful than ever before. Besides constructing the beautiful and novel, yet practical, Keystone Arches, Berkshirites have found other ways to make a positive impact on nature. Few know that the “first village improvement society in America” was founded in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in the Berkshires (*The Berkshire Hills* 109). The Laurel Hill Association, founded in 1853, “a model for the rest of the country,” has since “planted thousands of trees and miles of hedges” and has educated “public taste” into “preserving the beauty of their town” (*ibid.*, 109). The society members, as their mission states, work in harmony with nature:

“We mean to work,” said society members, “till every street shall be graded, every side-walk shaded, every noxious weed eradicated, every watercourse laid and perfected, and every nook and corner beautified—in short, till *Art combined with Nature* shall have rendered our town the most beautiful and attractive spot in our ancient commonwealth.” (Birdsall 11, emphasis mine)

The Laurel Hill Association aims to increase the reputation of the Berkshires as a beautiful place by caring for the land and only changing nature in positive ways. It cannot be ignored that their mission is littered with references to subjugating nature to human design, to human art. It does not speak of a wild nature, free to grow according to entropy and natural laws. But it also speaks of a compromise with nature, a mixing of human will and the environment: “Art combined with Nature” (*ibid.*, 11). From the raw material of nature and by the skill of human hands, the association hopes to create a new medium—art—which will not diminish the environment but improve it. There is no reason that we cannot live in some sort of harmony with our world, that we cannot combine the better

parts of our nature, like art, with nature itself. The compromise comes with places like the quarry. Slabs of granite stolen out of the earth at the old Hudson and Chester granite quarry were possibly used to make the very curbs of the sidewalks the Laurel Hill Association pledged to beautify. Granite from similar places was used to build the beautiful Keystone Arches. If we cannot stop changing nature, then what matters is how mindfully we do it. No visible efforts were made to minimize the impact of quarrying operations on the environment; the experience of the quarry suggests that its proprietors were only interested in money, not the welfare of the site. Comparing the Hudson and Chester Granite Quarry against other sites that have been well-preserved shows that, while its operation marks a decline in the conservationist history of the Berkshires, its current preservation indicates that the Berkshires are indeed on the rise again and that Berkshirites are aware that the quarry has important lessons to teach.

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*A Monument to Honor All Monuments*

There's the human history of the quarry. It was opened in 1886 and closed down in 1946 with a quarter-million dollars' worth of orders still open (Dale 142; Spencer 138). Its primary purpose was to furnish the granite for monuments. According to the Becket Land Trust Historic Quarry and Forest brochure, a monument is "a structure erected to commemorate persons or events" (Becket Land Trust). Thousands of cemetery monuments poured out of the quarry and spread across the United States, commemorating the lives and actions of people such as Doctor Hoover in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and W.A. Harder in Hudson, New York (Dale 144). Locals even say that some of the granite was used to build St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, New

York, or government buildings in Washington, D.C. One slab of Becket granite found its final resting place no more than seven miles from the quarry in Becket's own Ballou Park to commemorate the town's 33 World War One veterans ("Honor Roll"). This is the quarry's legacy: giving up rock to tell our human story. But the human story is not the full story. We are not alone on this planet; what we do has repercussions for the other species we share Earth with.

We can build monuments and try to make this earth remember us. But I'm reminded of a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley titled "Ozymandias." In "Ozymandias," a traveler describes to a foreigner a scene where monuments lie in ruin in the desert:

I met a traveler from an antique land,  
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command . . ." (Shelley 1-5)

These chunks of rock, shaped to someone's fancy or to mark a great civilization, have become orphaned and lost, a monument to what was and is now gone. The "visage," a monument to perhaps a once-great leader, or a noble statesman, or a prestigious war lord, lies shattered and sunken into the sand. Nature, in this scene, is the all-powerful force, destroying all human-made monuments with its simple entropic tendencies. The remnants that remain are not untruthful; in fact, from each one can "tell that its sculptor well those passions read / Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things, / the hand that mocked them, the heart that fed" (ibid., 6-8). Human passion, artfully rendered from the hand and heart of the sculptor, is captured in the shattered bust. The sculptor has imprinted human emotion into the "lifeless stone," just as he was bid to do (ibid., 7). But the crux of the poem comes when the traveler recounts the inscription that accompanies

this scene: “And on the pedestal, these words appear: / My name is Ozymandias; King of Kings; / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!” (ibid., 9-11). In his time, this spot, the seat of Ozymandias’ power, must have been grand to warrant such a declaration.

Pillars and temples and monuments must have covered this ground. But now, the poet notes an ironic twist in the last few lines of the poem: “Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away” (ibid., 12-14). The poet recognizes that this is a great site with the use of the term “colossal,” but notes that it is nothing more than a “colossal Wreck” (ibid., 13). The great city or pilgrimage site that was once here is no more, and its glory has been long forgotten. Nature is the only “boundless” power in this poem, despite the aspirations of Ozymandias, as it outlasts human lives, which will forever fall victim to time (ibid., 13). Vainly, we as humans hope to outlast time: we build monuments of granite and marble, buildings of steel and concrete, dams of earth and stone, all in a hope to make a mark upon this world, to make a mark upon nature. But in the end, nature rules all.

Monuments, buildings, and dams all crumble with time.

The biggest monuments we leave are left inadvertently. The quarry itself is a monument to our urge to memorialize ourselves, to build things that will withstand time in a way we cannot. The way we treat nature becomes our biggest, most timeless monument. Estimates from paleontologists suggest that all evidence of humanity’s existence on earth, at least on the surface, would be erased in a few millennia if we went extinct (The Naked Scientists). That is an incredibly long time, and if we continue to make marks upon this earth like the Hudson and Chester granite quarry that can be seen from space, it may be even longer. But, if instead we quantify our effect on the land and

mindfully decrease our harmful use of the environment, we can prevent the formation of more sites like the Hudson and Chester Granite Quarry.

## Chapter 4: PERU CRASH SITE

### *The Power of Community*

In the customs line in front of me at Heathrow International Airport, a couple with their infant child have misplaced some documents and are holding up the queue while they search through pocketbooks and backpacks. In my boredom I glance down at my United States of America passport, tracing the eagle clutching its olive branches and arrows with my eyes and feeling the power of the document in my hand. What power is it? It is the power of home, the power of place, the power of nationalism, and for me it is inextricably tied to a lonely mountaintop in Peru, Massachusetts, in the very heart of the Berkshires. Just eight miles from my house, from the very land I grew up playing on as a child, this mountaintop would be the setting for the deaths of sixteen United States servicemen in 1942, but would also be the setting of one of the greatest examples of the energy released when a Berkshire community works together. This power has been seen before in this work. In Chapter 1, the power of community in the form of the Shaker village was explored. Chapter 2 showed how a place can the literary community can reshape and be reshaped by a place. Finally, in Chapter 3 the power of a working community to destroy or beautify a natural place was surveyed. In this chapter, the power of community to save lives and keep the history of a place alive is investigated.

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*Sixteen Deaths*

American flags guide the hiker up the rough trail. Tacked into trees along the route, some flags are slightly tattered and flap idly in the gentle breeze of the mountaintop. In summertime they must be invisible under the leaf cover and underbrush, but now it is winter and their artificial red and blues stand out starkly. Winter makes the trail firmer, but even now it is accessible by cars only up to a point. Soon all vehicles have to be abandoned and the only way to continue is on foot. But even a steady person's feet start to fail as he or she stumble up the trail. Clearly, this is not a way that is travelled often. Few must know of this spot, and fewer are those that still make the pilgrimage here. The path ahead has been maintained only by gravity; fallen trees block some sections and brooks have washed out others in their fury to race down the mountain.

Eventually the trail opens into a little clearing, rewarding the explorer's resilience and determination. It is not much, to be honest. Leafless oaks and pines and maples fall to the sides as one is confronted by the piercing blue sky. In the middle of the clearing with its back to the trailhead hunches a stone monument. Here alone, the monument's only focus is on preserving its message and withstanding the brutal Berkshire winter. Constructed of assorted chunks of granite tightly arranged and neatly shaped, the monument seems unnatural, even fake, compared to the natural stones randomly scattered all over the clearing. Biting through the receding snow all around are oddly misshapen sheets of battered metal. On top of the monument a repository for the smaller metal bits has been founded. Mixed in with these shards are the torn remains of an American flag, now soiled with snow.

It is an odd, eerie, mystical place. A tingling feeling that one cannot attribute to the cold alone overtakes one's limbs. The air feels thick yet crisp, like the feeling of struggling to breathe normally after a long run on a cool day. To face the monument head on, the explorer must tiptoe around the twisted steel that mixes with snowy leaves on the forest floor, not quite blending in yet not quite standing out either. More American flags cluster around the monument's base. Smaller shaped stones ring the monument, connected by a fence, marking this ground as different from all the other acres of forest that surround it. A plaque, placed squarely in the middle of the monument, proclaims the following inscription to the barren and silent woods:

THIS TABLET ERECTED  
IN MEMORY OF  
THE FOLLOWING WHO GAVE  
THEIR LIVES HERE IN  
A PLANE CRASH AUG. 15, 1942  
WHILE IN THE SERVICE OF  
THEIR COUNTRY

JOSEPH J. FIELDS  
HYMAN B. FLINKMAN  
SAM B. HATHORN  
JOHN H. KELLEY  
ROBERT W. LAMON  
FRANK A. LASTOSKY  
JOSEPH C. NEUROHR  
JACK E. PALMER

GARDNER V. PLAIN  
STANLEY E. RACINE  
NORMAN SANDS  
STEVE E. SCHOLLIN  
CHARLES M. SCOTT  
JAMES E. THOMPSON  
AUSTIN W. WEECES  
JAMES D. WESTBROOKS

Who were these men? What were they doing in the backwoods of the Berkshires?

The ordinary visitor would treat this site as so many other hikers, snowmobilers, ATV drivers, and jeepers have treated it: as a destination tinged with momentary sadness for the lives lost. But for informed visitors, this site carries an entirely different feel.

Suddenly, they can see it all. They can see the horror of that night as if they were there.

They can see the Douglas C-53-DO troop transport plane taking off with eleven other

planes from Mitchell Field, Long Island, New York, at 6:35 p.m. on that fateful night, even as inclement weather loomed (“Aircraft Incident and Accident Reports”). They see the sleeping men sprawled around the plane, sleeping on luggage and supplies without any seatbelts—except for one man, Sergeant Robert G. Lee, who is in his seat wearing his seatbelt, his head sleepily lolling over his shoulders (“Aircraft Incident and Accident Reports”). They see that the crew have no radio operator on board and cannot talk to the rest of the squadron, and that with limited visibility the pilot is struggling to fly on instruments alone because he lacks the training. They see that the crew have no idea they are in the Berkshire mountains, and not on the way to Hyannis on Cape Cod over the flatland of Connecticut. They see the Douglas C-53-DO plowing into the mountainside; they hear the screams of the men and the crackling of an engine eating itself; they feel the heat of the flames and the humidity of the foggy night.

It is so terrible, especially as the explorer stands in this exact spot—this peaceful, indifferent spot—where on August 15, 1942, a living hell existed. That night human technology and nature collided to bring about a terrible catastrophe that claimed the lives of sixteen United States paratroopers. This crash could have happened anywhere. Nature is unforgiving and indifferent to human life; it is likely that those paratroopers would have died had the plane crashed in Montana, or California, or North Carolina. But what gives this story a purely Berkshire flavor is something that the plaque does not mention. While sixteen paratroopers died, three lived. The three paratroopers that lived owed their lives to the 134 residents of Peru, Massachusetts, who reacted quickly and selflessly that August night to locate the plane and rescue the survivors (Barris 1). Against the tragedy of that night, the heroic actions of this close-knit community are a silver lining that



showed the entire nation what a few caring people, raised in the wilderness of the Berkshires, are capable of.

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### *Three Survivors*

Lively is not a word many would have used to describe the town of Peru on any normal day. Even now, driving through the town center on Route 143 gives the impression that the town is abandoned. In the years between the first U.S. Census and the Second World War, the population of many Berkshire hill towns declined (*The Berkshire Hills* v). As industry waned, people left for the cities, abandoned their farms and small villages for the promise of a steady paycheck. Many were also more than eager to get away from the harsh climate of the Berkshire mountains. Life in the Berkshires was not always as lovely as the postcards of fall colors and winding roads portrayed. In Peru especially, whose town center has an altitude of 2,295 feet, making it the highest town center in Massachusetts, life was less than glamorous (*ibid.*, 243, 250). According to *The Berkshire Hills*, the pioneers of Peru “forced obedience from an enemy whose weapons were crags and precipices, stiletto peaks, and an almost impenetrable armor of forest” (*ibid.*, 243). Even in the 1930s, the winters were so harsh that both the school and the church were shut down until spring (*ibid.*, 249). Modern technology had done little to ease the difficulties of life in Peru. Cars could be easily disabled by the ice and snow of winter and the foot-deep mud of spring, and often pulling animals like oxen, mules, and horses were needed to pull cars out (“Over the Berkshires by Auto”). In the late 1930s

and early 1940s, electrical power was just coming to Peru (“Hinsdale”).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in 1959 a section of Peru was considered “one of the last few areas in Western Massachusetts which have no electricity” (“Age of Electricity”). Peru was, in every sense of the word, a wilderness with few tenants who dared to brave its abusive climate and remote location.<sup>3</sup>

In the face of the harshness of their environment, the people of Peru bonded together as a tight community. Town Meeting Day in Peru was well attended by every man, “his wife, children, and grandchildren ... any relatives ... and possibly a pet dog or cat which can’t be left home alone—even a new baby—they’ll all come with him” (*The Berkshire Hills* 247). Each town office, elected on this day, was hotly contested, even though many were unpaid or paid very little (*ibid.*, 247). In the 1940s, only the main road in Peru was paved, making the job of road boss a very controversial office (*ibid.*, 247). Despite the rough dirt roads and the limited access to resources, with only one store in town, the people of Peru eked out a living that made them proud. Pride echoes through the statement that accompanied their name change in 1806 from Partridgefield to Peru: “Like Peru in South America, we are in the mountains, and though there is no gold or silver under the rocks, our town favors hard money and begins with a P” (*ibid.*, 251). While the residents of Peru loved their town and the nature that surrounded it, they were under no illusions. Surviving the Berkshire mountains meant fighting nature for survival, for shelter, for warmth, and for food. But this also meant relying on neighbors and on the

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<sup>2</sup> The town hall of Peru had electricity by 1942 when the Springfield Republican reported that their electricity bill was \$60 (“Two Peru Voters are Challenged at Town Meeting”).

<sup>3</sup> Other towns in the Berkshires, such as Great Barrington, Lenox, and Stockbridge had gained electrical power in 1888, 1894, and 1906 respectively, while towns nearby to Peru, such as Pittsfield and Lee, were wired in 1922 and 1932, respectively (Blalock, part 1 and 2).

community, whose boundaries soon blended with the surroundings so that “Peru” may refer to both the place and the people in it. In their struggle to survive, the people of Peru became closer to the land they occupied, and became proud of their homes and farms.

It was this sense of pride in the place they had chosen to make their homes that would propel the townspeople of Peru to heroism on that night in 1942. The best account of that night was written by one of the first responders, an ordinary townspeople named Franklin G. Burr. In *Stonewalls*, a magazine series that focuses on the stories of people in the Berkshires, Burr published his account titled “Rescue Mission” in the winter of 1984. Burr, his wife and his parents were sitting on the porch of his father’s house just over the line in Worthington when they heard a plane at about 9:00 p.m. (Burr, “Rescue Mission” 22). Burr, walking out onto the lawn, was unable to see the plane and noticed the engines were growing fainter (*ibid.*, 22). Assuming that the plane had passed and the dense fog had obstructed it from view, he returned to his seat on the porch, only to be startled by “three rapid reports and the sound of the plane’s motor [stopping]” (*ibid.*, 22). The “deep, heavy, and somewhat muffled” reports convinced Burr that the plane had crashed, causing him to instantly mobilize (*ibid.*, 22). Franklin immediately started calling the Worthington Report Center, operated by Mrs. Guy Bartlett, and his neighbors in an attempt to learn more about the crash, while his wife established the time of the crash as approximately 9:04 p.m. (*ibid.*, 22). Through these contacts Burr was able to establish that the plane had gone down somewhere to the west in Peru. Mrs. Bartlett “couldn’t be sure from what any of us had told her that the plane was down” and was hesitant to report the plane as landed or not (*ibid.*, 23). She told Burr, “If you are going over there, Franklin (her son) wants to go with you” (*ibid.*, 23). In typical Berkshire fashion, rather than

waiting for the fire department or police to respond, Burr and Bartlett instinctively acted independently to respond to the crash. Burr assembled a team of Franklyn Hitchcock, his sister Mary Burr, and his wife and ventured out in his father's Ford sedan to find the crash site (Burr, "Rescue Mission" 23). While picking up Franklin Bartlett at the Worthington Report Center, news came from Mrs. David Cochrane in Peru "that the pilot was in distress, and sending up flares" somewhere "in the Curtin district" (ibid., 23). Armed with this new information and after inquiring as to where the Curtin district was, Burr and his team drove to Peru (ibid., 23).

At the same time that the Franklin Burr was obtaining information and forming his makeshift search party, Robert Torrey in Peru was also searching for the crash site. Strictly a Civilian Defense auxiliary policeman, Torrey was nonetheless "plane conscious" (Barris 1). Indeed, "all the folks in town had become unofficial spotters" since the Aircraft Warning Observation Post at the Wheeler's Sunset Farm is often inhibited by the high mountains in Peru (ibid., 1). When Torrey heard the plane go over, the engine stop, and then an explosion, he "went out of the house to attempt to locate the fire which he thought must accompany such an explosion" (ibid., 1). While outside, he heard three revolver shots: the universal signal for distress (ibid., 1). Retrieving his shotgun, he answered the three shots with one shot, and immediately got a response (ibid., 1). Through this gunshot conversation, Torrey was able to locate the rough direction of the crash, and started walking towards a nearby trailhead, ready to enter the woods and face whatever carnage awaited (ibid., 1). He, like Burr, did not sit back and relay their information to what we may think of as first responder personnel; instead, they were the

first responders. They approached the crash with unhesitating courage, unassuming energy, and unadorned concern for those in need.

These men were not the only ones mobilizing to respond to the crash. Mrs. Matie Bishop, an air raid warden and mother of Robert Torrey, was the first to report the crash (Barris 1). Bishop called Mrs. Wheeler at the Observation Post, who immediately gave the “Red Flash,” alerting Westover Field that there had been a crash and calling out all Civilian Defense personnel in the area (*ibid.*, 1). In Peru alone, a town of 134 residents at the time, 29 men and women were engaged in “defense work, Red Cross work, etc.” while maintaining another job—about one person per family, an incredible ratio (*ibid.*, 1). The home of the Wheelers was a perfect example. Their home at Sunset Farm was not only a farm but was also a Report Center and Aircraft Warning Observation Post. Charles Wheeler was simultaneously chief air raid warden, chief of police, member of the Board of Selectmen, chief observer for the Observation Post, and a railroad engineer (*ibid.*, 1). Since Mr. Wheeler’s work often took him away unexpectedly, his wife Ina, parents Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Culver, and hired farm helpers helped to keep “the Report Center and the O.P. manned every minute of every day since they were opened” (*ibid.*, 1). This incredible dedication to the Observation Post stemmed not just from patriotism or nationalism, but also from a determination to represent Peru and the Berkshire community well. It was this “not on my watch nor in my hometown” attitude that would help save the three surviving paratroopers that night. When Albert W. Barris, Region I Director of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety, awarded Peru a commendation for their efforts on March 8, 1943, he summed up this attitude perfectly:

It would have been easy for the Peru observer that night to have gone to the movies; it would have been easy for the nearby man to have gone to bed, or let

someone else do it. But, if anyone had such thoughts, they did not know the people of Peru. Here is a small town that wanted to become a part of civilian defense; a town that sent candidates to the state schools for training; a town that was prepared to go into nearby cities to give a helping hand. When the hour came they were alert and ready ... What were the results? Three American soldiers are alive this afternoon. They might have died alone if it was not for the native ingenuity of these people. ("Town of Peru Commended")

The people of Peru, despite their few number, despite their remote location, were mentally prepared to handle a crisis of this size as a team, due not only to their training as Civilian Defense personnel but to something Barris terms "native ingenuity." What exactly does this mean? Since they were all natives of the Berkshires, I believe it refers to the independence, perseverance, and self-reliance that comes with living in these mountains. The best example I can give is the story of what happened when the first responders reached the wreck.

Franklin Burr and his careful of friends and relatives reached the home of David Cochrane, who had originally approximated the location of the crash, looking for more explicit directions, only to find it empty (Burr, "Rescue Mission" 23). However, another car stopped as well, full of people looking for the plane as well (ibid., 23). This car was occupied by Raymond Britt of West Worthington, a Mr. Gibson and Eben Shaw, who knew the road and agreed to guide everyone there (ibid., 23). Just as these two cars were about to head out, two other cars pulled up, one carrying the Cochranes and their nephews, and the other driven by Kenneth Torrey who had picked up his brother Robert Torrey (ibid., 23). All four cars headed out towards where the plane was supposed to have crashed, although there was no sign of the plane (ibid., 23). After driving for a while, Torrey again fired off his shotgun and immediately got a response (ibid., 24). With this near information, the rescue party attempted to drive as near as they could to where

the shots were heard (ibid., 24). Burr reports that “at one point we could hear a voice calling ‘Help!’” and soon after the men abandoned the cars and plunged into the woods (ibid., 24). Leaving the three women behind, the men “struggled southward through the brush and timber towards the sound of the shooting,” occasionally firing the shotgun to aim towards the answering shots (ibid., 24). Optimistically, Burr “remembers thinking that somehow the plane must have landed safely and the men were shooting off their ammunition now that they knew they had been found” (ibid., 24). Sadly, that was not the case. Soon ahead the men saw a “red glow” and started to run as they neared the wreck, carefully avoiding the front of the plane where ammunition may be stored (ibid., 24).

Burr describes the terrifying scene:

On the other side of the burning wreck a figure clothed only in an undershirt and boots was standing. “Over here,” he called. “Hurry, there are men dying here.” As we ran around the right side of the plane towards him, I remember stepping over several bodies. There were several more moaning. Down in the bushes ahead of the plane one man called something and several of our party ran down there. I heard him say, “You can’t move me. Both my legs are broken and ...” (Later I was told that he said his ribs were crushed in.) (ibid., 24)

The figure in an undershirt was Robert G. Lee, the hero of the crash who pulled out four other men, and who could still walk despite suffering burns to most of his body. The closest comparison to the scene Burr describes is a warzone, akin in some ways to the World War Two battles being waged in the Pacific and in Europe. As a 30-year-old newlywed who had been born and raised in the Berkshires on his family’s 142-year-old dairy farm, Burr had never seen anything like this (Burr, “200 Years”; “Harriet A. Burr Obituary”; U.S. Bureau of the Census). It must have been shocking to see the destruction of the plane crash and the lifeless bodies strewn among the carnage, especially against the backdrop of the very woods he had known as a child. Just a little over five miles from his

home, the land that had given Burr a living had taken life from these sixteen paratroopers. Yet, neither Burr nor any of the other responders let their emotions stop them from helping where they could. Soon after arriving at the crash site, they realized that they needed to “get out and get a lot of help in here in a hurry” (Burr, “Rescue Mission” 24). The rescuers decided to split into two groups: one to walk out and get more help, and one to stay and aid the crippled survivors. Robert G. Lee, the walking survivor, who had been muttering hysterically, “Gotta keep moving ... We’ll all stiffen up—gotta keep moving,” now focused on the rescuers and said, “I’m going with you” (ibid., 24). As burned as he was, it hurt to even put on clothing, so they gave him a leather jacket to hold in front of himself to deflect tree branches as they hiked back to the waiting cars (ibid., 24). Thoughtfully, one man with a flashlight walked in front of Lee while another walked behind (ibid., 24). The care these Berkshirites showed Lee, a complete stranger, is incredible.

Leaving the crash site in the darkness of night posed its own set of issues. There was no trail to follow, no markers to guide, no maps to aid. However, thanks to the knowledge of locals Torrey and Cochrane and the sound of horns blared by the women who had stayed with the cars, the little party made it safely to the road (ibid., 24). Burr, his wife Harriett, his sister Mary, and the young Carpenter boy immediately set out to bring Robert G. Lee to the nearest doctor, who was in Hinsdale (ibid., 24). Others, like David Cochrane, went to phone help and stand ready to guide them to the crash site (ibid., 25). On the drive out, Burr met a police officer and another official, both of whom he shouted his mission to in passing; instead of stopping him and taking over the situation, they aided him as much as possible (ibid., 26). Still, the drive to Hinsdale must



have been long for the wounded man. Town center to town center, Hinsdale and Peru are only ten minutes apart via Route 143; but to someone burned as badly as Lee, each bump on the dirt road to the highway must have aggravated his wounds, and each minute brought about a new pain. To distract him, the rescuers asked Lee questions about himself, memorizing every detail to repeat later (*ibid.*, 26). Nearly to the main road, Sgt. Lee asked the car window to put down in order to feel the cool night air on his burns (*ibid.*, 26). He told his liberators, “I’ve never had anything hurt so . . . I’ll be scarred for life from this” (*ibid.*, 26). This comment suggests that Lee did not realize the extent of his wounds, which were life-threateningly serious. Captain Alvin Groendyke of the Air Corps, one of the first investigators sent to the site by the I Troop Carrier Command, would write, “the medical officer stated he did not believe Sgt. Lee could recover” (“Aircraft Incident and Accident Reports” 104). Newspapers reported that Lee was given a “50-50 chance to live” (“Transport Hits Garnet Peak, Bursts Into Flames”). Even as Burr rushed to Hinsdale’s Dr. Lent, who had been informed of the tragedy and waited with all the lights on in his house, Lee’s injuries—injuries sustained only by going back into the wreck to save two more men—could still have claimed his life. Based on this, if he had been left in the woods for any longer without medical care, it is almost certain Lee would have perished.

Meanwhile, back at the crash site, Franklin Bartlett was looking after one of the survivors while they waited for help to come. The man Bartlett watched over “was severely burned, especially on his face, [and] he had a broken leg and broken ribs” (Burr, “Rescue Mission” 26). Bartlett tried to distract the wounded man with conversation, and “by doing this he found some strength to endure the terrible pain,” but soon the man

“began to scream and curse and beg to be shot and released from such agony” (ibid., 26-27). There was nothing Bartlett could do to ease the pain endured by this man—probably Private James Fern from Abingdon, Virginia—except be there for him (ibid., 27). Help would come soon in the form of two summer visitors to the town, who happened to be trained nurses from New York City, Mrs. Thomas Lebrun, a first-aider, and other locals who would come to stand guard and guide aid workers to the plane (Barris 2). Dr. Lent with his wife, Mrs. Lent, a trained nurse, would appear on the scene too after tending to Lee’s wounds (ibid., 2). Everyone in the surrounding area who had a relevant skill was found and brought to the scene. However, not everyone was admitted to the crash site, even as the news spread and people began to flock to the scene. As Barris notes:

... the Peru Auxiliary Police, on guard at all available entrances, began to have their hands full. With great tact and equal firmness, this group of serious individuals did honor to their branch of the service. No newspapermen got in in spite of bills of large denominations offered. Those who were entitled to go in were given every help. Those not entitled were given a friendly tip that they were wasting their time. (ibid., 2)

The Peru Auxiliary Police stood their ground, protecting the crash site from prying eyes even as they ferried emergency resources to the site. Surrounding towns such as Pittsfield, Middlefield, Hinsdale, Dalton and Worthington also contributed resources to the Peru crash (Barris 3,4). Recognizing the need to come together to protect the crash site before newspapermen and bystanders trampled evidence, the people of the local area rallied and supported the town of Peru. The young and old both came out to help. Barris discusses how young Carpenter was offered a great deal of money, about two hundred dollars, to tell his story and to guide someone on the site; Carpenter simply replied: “Colonel Price said not to talk, and I ain’t talking” (ibid., 3). On the other side of the age

continuum, Barris tells the story of a seventy-five-year-old retired Auxiliary policeman who lived near one of the trail entrances that has not been covered yet by the police (ibid., 3). When Mrs. Wheeler called to ask him to guard the trailhead, he immediately responded and had the trail guarded in five minutes (ibid., 3). Meanwhile, the Cochrane home became a temporary base camp, dispensing coffee and milk to whoever stopped and relaying communication since they had the closest telephone to the crash site (ibid., 3). All over Peru people who played instrumental rolls in the whole affair did so modestly and without complaint. Another example Barris gives is Mrs. Wheeler, operator of the Observation Post, who despite have organized most of the rescue efforts, “spent most of the night assuring newspapermen that she really didn’t know anything about the whole affair” (ibid., 3). Any one of the first responders could have claimed notoriety by sharing their story with newspapers and casting themselves as the chief reason why three men’s lives were saved. But none of them did, because they understood that working together was more important than claiming individual heroism.

At every step of the way, nature fought the rescuers and emergency personnel, but deterred none of them. In Burr’s account, Bartlett mentions that once help came to the two survivors left at the scene of the crash—Private James Fern and Private Alonzo Pearson—the forest growth and natural terrain made carrying the men out difficult: “rescuers had to carry the two survivors on stretchers, stumbling over the rough ground and struggling through the underbrush. The [wounded] men on the stretchers endured even more on this trip to the ambulances” (Burr, “Rescue Mission” 27). The dedication of the rescuers is incredible. In the middle of the night over rough territory they carried the wounded paratroopers—strangers really—out of the wilderness so they could be driven

to hospitals and cared for. The difficulty in reaching the site was even mentioned in official documents. In the Aircraft Incident and Accident Report, a media statement declared that the crash “was in a forest so dense that soldiers, civilian defense workers, police and physicians had to hack a trail through the underbrush to bring out the wounded and the bodies” (“Aircraft Incident and Accident Reports” 83). Everyone who visited the site was tested by the environment of one of Peru’s tallest mountains. However, the difficulty in reaching the site attests to their perseverance and determination to aid the living and honor the dead of the crash site. The indomitable spirit of the Berkshirites shone clearly through in their treatment of the crash and its aftermath, providing a model for the entire nation. As Barris wrote of the Peru townspeople:

They had a very difficult job dropped right in the most inaccessible spot in the town. They accepted the challenge; asked favors of no one. They cleaned it up and they are now back in their daily routine, ready for whatever tomorrow might bring. If we here in the Regional Office [of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety] ever need any strengthening of our hand or any spur to our efforts, we have but to look to our own hills. (Barris 3)

The people of Peru sought no fame, no credit for their efforts. They did not try to capitalize off the crash, understanding that in what had transpired sixteen men lost their lives in a most terrible way. At the same time, they asked no one to do their work for them. This was their town, their land, and their watch. No one else was going to die if they could help it—and they did.

Peru will not forget the crash. For their efforts, the town of Peru was awarded a citation of merit. Today, it is proudly displayed within the Peru library, along with a small radio tag from the plane. The commendation reads:

The Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety recognizes the Alertness, Efficiency, and Self-Sacrifice of the Personnel of the Peru Committee on Public Safety as evidenced by their Prompt Rescue of the Victims of the U.S. Army

Bomber Disaster on August 15, 1942, and, in Appreciation, awards this Citation of Merit.

Underneath the citation are names of Peru townspeople, including the Cochranes, Torreys, and Wheelers. This small token is not ostentatiously presented, but, in Peru fashion, resides in a simple, small frame, covered with just a little dust. Inside the congregational church in Peru is another small shrine to the crash and Peru's involvement, consisting of newspaper clippings about the crash and Barris' typed report, which are pasted onto a corkboard nailed into the wall. Indeed, the very monument at Garnet Mountain's summit is the result of fundraising and organizing by the Peru townspeople. Just four years after the crash in 1946, Mrs. Wheeler would chair the monument committee and raise over \$350 to build the monument ("Peru to dedicate"). The same people that located the crash site, reached the crash site, and guided Sgt. Lee to the road in just an hour would be the same people to erect a monument to the fallen (Barris 3). They could have erected the monument to themselves. They could have dedicated it to the men they saved, and glorified their rescue in the process. But they didn't. The townspeople of Peru chose to highlight the ones they couldn't save.

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### *Bloodstained Nature*

I am haunted by the crash site. Solemn and isolated, yet rough and unforgiving, it seems both otherworldly and completely unexpected. But for all its gravity, that scene instills a small sense of hope in me. I know that out of that unforgiving night emerged three souls in whose memory the image of flames against the oak and pine and maple trees will be forever etched, but whose lives remain squarely in their grasp. I know the heroism of the Berkshire rescuers on that August night.

What I don't know is what to make of the whole scene in a natural sense. The wind-whipped American flags, the relentless work of nature to retake the trail, and the loneliness of the spot all defy the view of nature I've developed as a benevolent, life-giving force. Yes, three men survived, but this seems more like a mistake, like an accident that was more accidental than the crash itself. The first responders spent hours cutting through brush and struggling in the pitch blackness to make a way to get the survivors and the dead out. What motivated them to fight nature in this way, to defy the natural course of events and save Lee, Fern, and Pearson? The whole event seems like an imposition of a human thing, patriotism and care for one's countrymen, on nature, who really is indifferent to the whole thing. But even then, nationalism, or, more specifically, regionalism, can be identified as the one of the chief motivations behind the efforts of the Peru townspeople. Those that were enrolled as Auxiliary Police or as Air Wardens were serving their country, doing their jobs. Those that weren't still acted out of compassion for their countrymen. Regionalism plays an even bigger role when the very character of the rescuers is considered. They are who they are—strong and resilient, tough and determined—as a direct result of their upbringing in the rough Berkshire landscape. Paradoxically, the Berkshires as a natural entity influences all its residents, even as it stands aloof and indifferent to human affairs.

The nationalism I know—that of love for the maples and the sumacs, the rivers and the brooks, the bears and the fisher cats, the stars and the leaves—is not a bloodstained nationalism. Indeed, the other case studies explored in this work in Chapters One, Two, and Three investigate regionalism rooted in the pride of settlement, the power of religion, the beauty of literature, and the strength of industry—not regionalism

associated with a loss of life. The regionalism of Chapters One, Two, and Three is pure and emotional, stemming from a natural world that blends innocence with indifference and power, to the point that human description fails and nature is neither malicious nor harsh, loving nor gentle—it just is. But that is not the scene on top of that lonely mountain in Peru, Massachusetts.

Just a few years before the crash and twenty-five miles away a prominent scholar was writing and thinking about nationalism at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. Hans Kohn, a Jewish American born in Prague who immigrated to the United States in the 1930s, is sometimes called a “pioneer in the history of nationalism” for providing the footwork for nationalism as we understand it today (“Kohn, Hans”). Because of this, I looked to him to help explain my feelings about the Peru crash, to explain the contrast between human perceptions of nature that color ideologies like nationalism and nature itself.

In Kohn’s mind, “nationalism is not a natural phenomenon, not a product of ‘eternal’ or ‘natural laws,’” and indeed is not “a harmonious natural growth qualitatively identical with love for family and home.” (Kohn 1004, 1006) It arises not from love for one’s birthplace and the nature one explored as a child, although these may be factors, but rather from a sophisticated intellectual awakening. Kohn compares it to a “state of mind,” a group consciousness of similarity in political, economic, and social beliefs that drives unification and conformity. (ibid., 1008) Awakened by the French Revolution, nationalism stems from the rising power of the third estate and their willingness to break the stagnation of tradition. (ibid., 1008)

But while this may be true, Kohn still searches for the ultimate source of nationalism within human nature. He examines “common descent, language, territory, political entity, customs and traditions, and religion” as attributes that may bind people together. (ibid., 1011) However, ultimately he finds none of these to be satisfactory. Kohn recognizes that in the modern day, races are often mixed, languages are changing or not native to the region in which they are spoken, customs and traditions vary locally, and religion has sometimes hindered the rise of nationalism. (ibid., 1012) The single “outward” factor that Kohn pinpoints as the most important in the “formation of nationalities” is common territory, citing Canada as an example (ibid., 1013). Suggesting that nationalism is merely a function of proximity simplifies it too much, even while location certainly is a factor. To make up for this deficit, Kohn rallies by stating, “the most essential element is a living and active corporate will” (ibid., 1013). This will is simply a “subjective declaration,” a spontaneous lightbulb thought that it might be a good idea to form a country with a group of other people (ibid., 1013). By focusing on the common will of people, Kohn simplifies the problem of explaining nationalism. He fails to answer where this common will comes from, and how it is first formulated. In my view, the missing piece to Kohn’s analysis is love of nature.

By nature, I do not mean necessarily the love of a forest, or a mountain, or a river. I mean the love of a place, whether that place is New York City and the nature is the rows of trees down a street in West Village or it is Vale, Colorado, where the nature is the skiing slopes in dead winter. Nature, in this sense, is simply a facet of one’s surroundings that is not forged out of steel or carved out of wood; that is not fit to a mold and cast, or wrought and dyed. It exists in a place, as a symbol of that place. We adopt these symbols



as a measure of ourselves. As Whitman wrote when struggling with how to explain grass: “I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven” (Whitman 1333). The single piece of biological matter we connect with that connects us to the greater natural world represents our soul. When we find others who connect to this greater natural world as well—who see the same beauty and feel the same power in an organic symbol of their choosing—we can connect as countrymen.

We all struggle for existence against nature in some form. The townspeople of Peru struggled against external nature when they built their homes in the wilderness. Some struggle against internal nature in the form of medical conditions—they fight the natural courses of their own bodies for survival. It is this struggle that brings people together. Two people in the same town can relate through the difficulties within that town: the struggles of having to wade through three-foot-deep snow in the winter or keeping cool with fans and open windows in the summer. Similarly, two people with the same disease can relate. Cancer patients form bonds unlike any other that are rooted in their comparable experiences. Along this line of reasoning it is only natural that the residents of one town—one specific natural place, such as the Berkshires—should form connections unlike any other.

Whereas Kohn believes nationalism to be ultimately a political entity, I argue that beneath its political implications lies a spiritual and emotional reality. As Americans we unite through a similar love for our national treasures just as much as through a love for our national documents. The Grand Canyon is just as potent a symbol of the United States of America as is the Declaration of Independence. Through this connection, Emerson for one hoped that we may build a new nation, fashioned on the truths of nature:

“A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men” (Emerson 256). Our common American appreciation for this land of ours runs through each of our minds like an electrical circuit, placing us all on the same frequency and energizing us.

It is reasonable that nationalism should be appropriated by politics, especially in a nation such as the U.S. where the inhabitants are bound together by historically neither common blood, common language, nor common traditions. But even so, politics will always be an imposition on nature, forcing it to be a pawn in a fabricated game. Like the long line of tattered flags leading to the mountaintop monument, abstract symbols of patriotism and nationalism—and even concrete human constructions like industry, literature and religion—have no place in nature where the most fitting symbol of one’s love for the environment are the leaves crunching underfoot or the trees rising high above, unaltered by human touch. Better than dying for the abstract United States of America is the dream of dying in the country of clear streams and tall mountains, of roaming deserts and plains of salt, of misty swamps and shadowed glens. This, of course, is a naïve vision: we must reside on this earth as well, and in doing so we leave our mark on it. But it is the mark we leave that matters.

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### *The Crash That Shouldn’t Have Happened*

The lonely monument on Garnet Mountain is a monument to lives that should not have been lost. No technical failure that brought the Douglas C-53-DO down that August night. The engines were working smoothly, according to witness testimony, although they may have been a bit out of synchronization (“Aircraft Incident and Accident

Reports” 104). The reasons for the crash determined by the Air Corps War Department were: poor leadership in the form of the flight squadron leader, Captain Allan L. Dickey; a mistake in judgement by the pilot, Second Lieutenant James J. Fields, Jr.; and weather conditions that did not hold as expected (*ibid.*, 2). If the pilot Fields had lived to tell his story, he probably would have shared something similar to Second Lieutenant Harold I. Pawlowski, who was the pilot of ship 393 that landed in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. During the terrible flight, little radio communication and poor weather cause Pawlowski to almost crash into another plane, become disoriented—for a while, he thought he was in Connecticut, then Rhode Island, then New York, then Massachusetts, then New Jersey—fail to achieve radio contact with any plane or station, and eventually resort to flying by sight and seeing if he could visually locate a place to land (*ibid.*, 105). Captain Alvin Groendyke, one of the first investigators of the crash, stated:

Rather than use the radio equipment available, Lt. Fields probably was trying to find a place to land by attempting to fly contact and study the map and terrain features. Considerable haze is evident from all weather reports for the vicinity. Broken clouds were present and he probably attempted to fly underneath, over fairly high terrain. (*ibid.*, 105)

Flying underneath the low-hanging, broken clouds, Fields was probably attempting to find a field to land in when he flew directly into the last thing he expected: Garnet Peak. This is supported by evidence at the crash site, which suggests that the plane had been coming down gently and under power when it crashed (*ibid.*, 104). It would only be much later, however, that the Air Force would discover that Fields didn’t use his radio because he couldn’t: he didn’t have a radio operator. Contrary to media reports, which claimed that the operator had gone AWOL because his wife was sick, a simple typographical error accounts for the missing radio operator (*ibid.*, 29-57). Shellie Towery, the radio

operator, was accidentally assigned to ship “473,” which landed safely in Windsor Locks, Connecticut, rather than ship “463,” which crashed into the Peru mountain (*ibid.*, 133). This typo originally led the Air Force and the press to suppose that there were twenty men on the flight and that seventeen had died, when in fact one man had never been on the plane at all. Another contributing factor to the crash was that Fields had not received his certification to fly using instruments alone—or, in truth, that he had earned it, only to have it revoked (*ibid.*, 117). This meant that he was “not a rated instrument pilot during this flight,” as Captain William A. Butters, Regional Safety Officer, noted (*ibid.*, 117). Therefore, when the weather worsened to the point where flying by contact (by sight) was no longer possible and Fields had to rely on his gauges and other instruments, he had little idea of what he was doing simply because he was an inexperienced pilot. The poor weather, the mis-assignment of the radio operator, and Fields’ inexperience were some of the reasons for the crash.

Still, none of these would have been a problem if the squadron had stayed in formation and followed the squadron leader, Captain Allan L. Dickey, all the way to Providence. But just forty-five minutes into the flight, Captain Dickey decided to let down from their cruising altitude at 3,000 feet without radioing the rest of the squadron (*ibid.*, 117, 133). He later stated that he wanted to get below some clouds forming underneath the squadron before it became completely overcast beneath them (*ibid.*, 133). However, once Dickey was below the clouds, he made a series of 90 degree turns of that completely confused his squadron. Once they broke through the clouds following his lead, none of the planes could locate Dickey, or each other for that matter (*ibid.*, 137). Scattered to the wind, the eleven planes ended up landing all over New England: some

landed in Providence, some in Hartford, one in Windsor Locks, another in Pittsfield, while two more returned to New York and landed at Mitchell Field and La Guardia (*ibid.*, 133). Even before taking off, the squadron had expressed concern at flying in inclement weather conditions. Squad Operations Officer and pilot of one of the planes, Lt. Ray B. Denham Jr., was “very insistent that the flight was foolhardy, but was overruled by Capt. Dickey, Sq. C.O.” (*ibid.*, 117). Captain George E. Murphy, another pilot, describes how Denham “voiced his opinion to the commanding officer that in his mind we should stay overnight due to the weather plus the fact that many of the pilots were of limited experience” (*ibid.*, 143). In fact, Denham wasn’t the only one to object. Murphy notes, “There was a discursion [*sic*] between a Lt. who was a former TWA pilot who would have voiced the same opinions as our operations officer” (*ibid.*, 143). Their concerns went unheeded: Murphy notes “However the command was to take off” (*ibid.*, 143). If Captain Dickey had listened to his squadron’s concerns he would have avoided the catastrophe that befell Fields’ plane and the eighteen other people on board that August night.

Reading the causes of the crash can distract from what actually happened in the crash. To remind us, we can look at those whose lives were lost in the crash. Here, I present the personal details of seven men who died in the crash, in order to show that they were more than mere names. Second Lieutenant Joseph J. Fields, the pilot of the doomed flight, was just twenty-one when he passed away (National Archives and Records Administration). He was born in 1921 and had attended three years of college in Georgia, also his birthplace (*ibid.*). At the age of 20, he enlisted as an Aviation Cadet in the Air Corps at Fort McPherson, Atlanta, Georgia (*ibid.*) What was his prior occupation? Acting

(*ibid.*). He had been an actor—with what troupe or company we may never know. He never went back to acting, probably never got married, and had just tasted his first legal drink when he died on that Berkshire mountaintop.

His co-pilot was Staff Sergeant Charles M. Scott. Scott had enlisted in just May of that year at Luke Field, Litchfield Park, Arizona, although he originally hailed from York, Pennsylvania (*ibid.*). Enlisting as a Staff Sergeant with the Air Corps, he was also just 21 when he died (*ibid.*). Coincidentally, his past occupation had been acting, although, unlike Fields, he had only finished high school (*ibid.*). The records go on and on. Staff Sergeant Robert W. Lamon was the engineer on the flight. He had enlisted in 1940 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, as a private; by the time he died at the age of 24, just two years later, he had moved up to Staff Sergeant, suggesting he was a very skilled engineer (*ibid.*). Indeed, before enlisting in the Air Corps he had been a skilled builder of aircraft, although he had only attending high school (*ibid.*). His assistant engineer was Corporal Austin E. Weeces (*ibid.*). Weeces had enlisted in 1941 at the tender age of 18; he would die a year and a month later at 19 (*ibid.*). Private 1<sup>st</sup> Class James E. Westbrooks, 25, was drafted into the Army on January 13, 1942; formerly, he was a chauffeur or driver of some sort (*ibid.*). He would die just seven months later, having only attended grammar school in his life (*ibid.*). Private Steve E. Schollin was drafted on January 22, 1942, at the age of 25 (*ibid.*). He was not even a citizen yet, as he had been born in Sweden (*ibid.*). Having attended all four years of high school, he was a semiskilled welder or flame cutter in 1942 (*ibid.*). For the seven men I have highlighted here, there are still eleven more; for about four of those eleven, information is scarce and hard to find. The reason records are so hard to find for these men is because they died so

young. They never got married, never had children, never registered a telephone number, and they did not appear on more than three censuses in their entire lives. The saddest fact is told by one line on their enlistment records: “Single, without dependents” (ibid.). Sixteen lives and countless generations were cut short that August night, all due to the confluence of a few errors.

What did the hero of the crash, Robert G. Lee, do prior to finding himself on the Garnet Peak with burns over the majority of his body? Were there any heroic instances in this past to indicate that, after finding himself flung free of the flaming wreck, he would go back in four times to pull out four bodies—burning himself in the process—to discover that only two of them still harbored life? There is no such thing. Lee was an office machine operator until he was drafted at the age of 23 in 1941 (ibid.). However, perhaps the most significant thing is not what Lee did before the crash, but what he did after. Lee and Alonzo Pearson, another of the survivors, appear in the July 19, 1943, issue of *LIFE* magazine in an article titled “Repair of the Wounded: Soldiers Help to Heal Themselves” (“Repair of the Wounded”). Lee is pictured kneading some clay, working a hand printing press, and sawing an intricate wooden puzzle, all in order to regain use of his hands. Pearson is shown exercising his hands on a finger ladder and setting type to train the muscles of his burned hands. Nearly a year after the crash, these two survivors were still recovering in the Occupational Therapy Shop at Lovell General Hospital, Fort Devens, Massachusetts. However, their work would pay off. Not much is known of Pearson after this, but Robert G. Lee left a reliable trail. He married a woman named Natalie Maxine and attempted to move to California, but got stuck in Arizona (Lee, interview). I had the pleasure of talking to his son, George, on the phone. George said

that his father never spoke much about the crash, but mentioned that their mission was to ship out abroad (ibid.). Interestingly, George mentioned that the reason his father was wearing his seatbelt—and the only one to be doing so—at the time of the crash was because he heard a voice telling him to put his seatbelt on (ibid.). George attributes this to divine intervention of some kind (ibid.). According to George, Lee was still marked from the crash: one hand was badly burned and scarred, and had limited motion (ibid.). However, he still remembered the men he saved. George, now 67, related that his father once took him to visit another survivor in New Mexico, but due to his youth doesn't remember who (ibid.). Robert G. Lee would live to the ripe old age of 79 and is buried in the National Memorial Cemetery of Arizona (“Robert G. Lee”).

There would be another silver lining to the catastrophe of the plane crash. Local legend has it that one of the survivors married a nurse from Lee, Massachusetts, who helped him regain his strength. The two reportedly resided in the area for a while. Indeed, the legend is true. Private James Fern, the other survivor of the crash, married Florinda L. Ciullo, who was born in Lee, Massachusetts (“James Fern”). They relocated to Abingdon, Virginia, after 1953 (“Louis D. Ciullo”). The pair are buried in Knollkreg Memorial Park in Abingdon, Virginia (“James Fern”). This Berkshire legend of love among the pain and suffering of the plane crash proves that what Robert Lee and the townspeople of the Berkshires did was not for nothing.

Motivated by a pride in their hometown, the people of Peru not only saved three lives and ensured that those men could live full lives, but gave men who did not have enough time to make a lasting imprint on the world a monument. The Peru people knew that the three survivors Lee, Pearson, and Fern would be able to make their own



monuments. In addition, their modesty prohibited them from dedicating the monument to themselves. Therefore, the Peru people dedicated the monument to the men who they could not save and who would never have families of their own to remember their names. The compassion of these Berkshire residents is unforgettable. The Peru crash site is a perfect demonstration of Berkshirite's belief in monuments to be important markers of history for events that future generations need to remember and learn from.

The events surrounding the Garnet Peak crash were not known, or at least not mentioned, by Birdsall in his book *Berkshire County: A Cultural History* (1959). Yet they disprove his assessment that the Berkshires lost all cultural uniqueness near the end of the 1860s. The initial response of the hill towns to the crash showcases the best traits of Berkshirites—determination, perseverance, empathy, and independence—while the efforts of the Peru townspeople to raise a monument to the lost soldiers highlights the best aspects of Berkshire culture—respect for others and respect for the natural sites of human history. All of the sites mentioned in this work were preserved after the time period Birdsall focuses on. If the inhabitants of the Berkshires had lost their regional culture, they would not have bothered preserving these places. Although I agree with Birdsall that the era of industry in the Berkshires—explored in this thesis using the case study of the Hudson and Chester Granite Quarry—was a dark time for Berkshire culture, I see that the Berkshires have come back. The most potent symbol of the Berkshires' reemergence is the Peru plane crash, where Berkshirites showed that the traits necessary to survive in the Berkshire mountains had not left them and were just as integral to their revered, naturalist culture now as in the past. Memorializing history through monuments

placed within nature is now, more than ever, a crucial part of Berkshire culture, for the link between Berkshirites and their homeland has never been stronger.

## Conclusion

The Berkshires of Massachusetts are alive and well. The inhabitants—who see themselves reflected in the tall mountains and fertile valleys, in the swaying of hemlock trees and the cry of a coyote after midnight—recognize that just as the hills have influenced them, they have influenced these hills. Protecting the nature and the history of the Berkshires has become a favorite pastime of all its residents. Their mission is paying off in dividends: every fall, tourists flock to the Berkshires to awe at the autumn colors; every summer, vacationers gather to hike and to swim in the pristine lakes; and every winter, bored travelers visit the Norman Rockwell Museum or the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. In appreciating their history and their environment, Berkshirites have finally found a sustainable industry that will carry them forward into the next century.

Three of the four sites I've chosen to explore in this thesis—the Hancock Shaker Village, Monument Mountain, and the Hudson and Chester Granite Quarry—function as chronological case studies emblematic of specific periods described by Birdsall. As he argues, the Berkshires experienced two waves of regionalism, but declined after the coming of industry. However, I come to a different conclusion than Birdsall by focusing on what happened after the loss of industry in the Berkshires. My final chapter, the Peru crash site, focuses on the attention of Berkshire communities to their natural world, hinting at the environmentalist and preservationist organizations that would encourage a cultural re-flowering in that later part of the twentieth century. Berkshire culture has

always peaked when Berkshirites have treated their land well; in this way, the land serves as an indicator of how healthy the culture is. This connection only makes sense when one considers how inextricably attached Berkshirites are to all aspects of their homeland, including its history, its folklore, and its natural scenery. Other rural communities struggling with keeping their way of life should use the Berkshires as a model—by focusing on their history, these communities might also achieve a characteristic distinction of their own. I truly believe that each region within America has something unique to offer, and that, contrary to Birdsall’s work, it is very difficult to completely lose this special character.

I recently attended a talk by the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. During his talk, he said to the audience, “If you want to be an optimist in America today, stand on your head because it looks a lot better from the bottom-up than from the top-down” (Friedman). His point was that America is in a time where the national political stage is not representative of the little communities. Little communities like his hometown of St. Louis Park, Minnesota, are where the best things in America are happening. I couldn’t agree more. As a native of the Berkshires, I take pride in the regeneration I’ve witnessed. In my own little town of Chester, the Chester Theatre Company has brought hundreds into the deserted streets of downtown during a calendar year. The company has succeeded where older, now-defunct industries like the Hamilton Emery Co. have failed: it has given my town hope for the future. The sites mentioned in this work are all emblems of the hope that the Berkshire lifestyle will continue to thrive and flourish in these fertile lands. Vigorous and vivacious societies are marked by a love for their history and a consideration for their appearance. In a society so deeply rooted in

its regional environment, it is only fitting that the people on the Berkshires would take such care in preserving their natural history sites.

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