

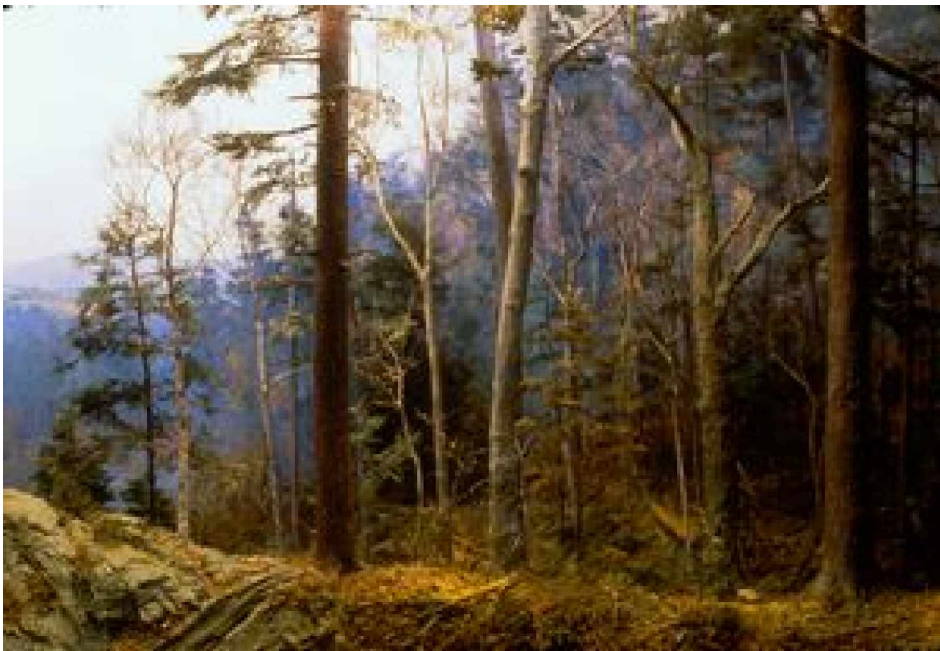
# Ecological and Social History of Connecticut's Forests\*

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*September 16, 2007*

## 1. Pre-Settlement Forest

- ◆ 80% to 90% of Connecticut was forested when European settlers arrived
- ◆ Not quite the forest primeval that we wax romantically about
  - Native American manipulated the forest for crops and for game.
  - But the forest was dense in most places and the trees both bigger and older than most of what we see today



## 2. Early Settlers Clear Homesteads

- ◆ There were commercial farms in the main valleys and coastal areas that sent food to cities and sometimes to England
- ◆ But most farms were subsistence and produced food for the family and what little cash that was earned came from pelts and the like
  - Cost of moving a ton of freight from London to Boston Harbor was the same as moving that ton from Boston to Framingham.
  - In other words, it was not possible to move much from upland farms to market unless it walked, like a beef animal or sheep

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\* Photos are from the Harvard Forest Dioramas, Fisher Museum, Petersham MA



An acre of pasture required one or two months of hard physical labor – plus time to remove stones and make walls

- ◆ Adding cattle was a major investment. Just think of what it would take to clear an acre of our current woods with an axe!
- ◆ But some farms were very productive – Connecticut was known as the Provision State because it produced wheat, corn and other key foodstuffs for the Revolutionary Army.



At the height of agriculture, 90% of southern New England was cleared

### 3. Height of Forest Clearing and Agriculture

- ◆ By 1830, 80% to 90% of southern New England was cleared for croplands or pasture, and cattle or sheep were grazing in much of the remaining woods
- ◆ The vistas were magnificent and quite different than 200 years earlier



As farms were abandoned, weeds and then woody plants began the ecological succession back to forest.

### 4. Farm Abandonment

- ◆ In 1825 the Erie Canal was completed, which opened up East Coast markets to farmers in western New York, Ohio and other parts of the eastern Midwest
- ◆ Southern New England could no longer compete except on its most productive croplands
- ◆ Shifts occurred toward dairy, sheep, and poultry



- ◆ And many acres returned to forest, often pine and then oak, maple and other hardwoods
  - "Old-Field" White Pine Forest on Abandoned Farmland
  - "Old-Field" White Pine is Succeeded by Hardwoods



- So today Connecticut is 60% forested, much of it a vigorously growing forest of hardwoods with some pine, hemlock, and a few spruce mixed in
5. What are the implications for the farms of Granby and the rest of Connecticut?
- ◆ The ecological forces of our climate and soils give a competitive advantage to woody vegetation, and over time taller vegetation (trees) will dominate the landscape
  - ◆ Unless we pour energy into keeping the land open with crop agriculture or grazing.
  - ◆ This will only happen if we shift toward buying more of our food locally and seasonally

*If you like the Granby that you see today, support working landscapes of farm, pasture, and managed forest. These lands are the least expensive ways of producing social benefits on private properties. These lands require few town services, and add to the town economy.*

*Remember - Eat Locally!*