



The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness

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His book is a romance, a story of first love between Americans and a thing they call "wilderness." For it was in the Adirondacks that masses of non-Native Americans first learned to cherish the wilderness as a place of recreation and solace.

In this lyrical narrative history, the author reveals that the affair between Americans and the Adirondacks was by no means one of love at first sight. And even now, Schneider shows that Americans' relationship with the glorious mountains and rivers of the Adirondacks continues to change. As in every good romance, nothing is as simple as it appears.

The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness Details

Date : Published September 15th 1998 by Holt Paperbacks (first published 1997)

ISBN : 9780805059908

Author : Paul Schneider

Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Environment, Nature, Historical, Outdoors, Wilderness

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Katie says

Schneider uses the history of the Adirondacks to examine over two hundred years' worth of shifting attitudes toward wilderness in America. The book is heavy on anecdote and description, but not quite as comprehensive as I might have liked. Schneider provides a rather impressionistic view of Adirondack history, with a loose approach to chronology and lots of attention to character. And the characters he describes are fun to read about: fur trappers, loggers, industrialists, millionaires, romantic poets, early conservationists, etc. As a lover of the Adirondacks with a long personal history in the area, I found the book fascinating--might not be for those who aren't intimately connected to the region.

Katie says

This is was a good history book should be. Full of information balanced by tales of quirky characters, battles, mishaps, and unusual name origins. Definitely worth the read if you live in or love the Adirondacks.

MikeFromQueens says

The book started out very interesting with early American history and included the geographic history. There was not as much coverage of Iroquois and Algonquin pre-history, though that is probably best left for a book on North-Eastern Tribes. I was a bit dissatisfied as the work turned to the minutiae of the land owners over the centuries. Not that Schneider was at fault - he covered as much as anyone could ask. The problem was my expectations. As grand a park as the Adirondacks, I expected a story just as grand, or at least something different than how everyone is having their dreams dashed on the oldest rocks on the planet. So perhaps that is the lesson to be learned: that the Adirondacks are not here for mankind, and we should temper our human expectations in terms expected outcomes.

Cheryl says

I loved this book. It's been a very long time since I read this but I found it a fascinating page-turner about a place that I love dearly.

Jeff says

One of the most entertaining histories I have ever read. An anecdotal history told through stories of Native Americans, reprobates, explorers, presidents and robber barons. Reads like a book of the most entertaining short (true) stories. I was not happy when I read the last page, knowing there was no sequel.

Cassidy says

This is a FABULOUS book about The Adirondacks if you are interested in the history of the best park in New York state. It is a good balance of political and government history with the local population. By the end, you will understand why the park is so loved - and yet so threatened.

Glenn says

Schneider narrates a fun history, about a place I love and where I used to work as a journalist. You've got to be a poor writer to deaden Adirondack history, which is rich beyond measure. Schneider avoids that crime. But the huge volume of tales and trivia drowns the essence of the ADK's history with superfluous information. I was less than satisfied at the end. What are the lessons? What are Schneider's thoughts on this place of hope and conflict?

Cheryl Gatling says

Paul Schneider has a thesis: people's attitude toward wilderness, and therefore toward the Adirondacks, has changed through the years. The earliest white men viewed the forest as a place of spiritual as well as physical danger, as it was the home of "devil-worshiping savages." Later people viewed it as a place for extracting resources from, first furs, then iron ore, then logs-- get the goods, and then get out. Some wanted to "improve" the "wasteland" by converting it into farms, a purpose which it was not suited for. Later it became a playground for rich people having a rustic adventure in great comfort. The first proponents of preserving the Adirondacks as a park did so, not for the park's sake, but for protecting the watershed downstream. Only very lately did people come to appreciate the wilderness for its own sake.

Paul Schneider, as I said, has a thesis, and he returns to it throughout the book, but what he really wants to do is tell stories. He tells stories of the early Indian wars, with their shifting loyalties, and of Sir William Johnson, who lived in a mansion, but scandalized other white men by dressing in a loincloth and dancing with the Indians. He tells of the hunters and trappers, and guides, rough men who might kill you and laugh it off. He tells of the famous John Brown of song, who, when he wasn't leading slave uprisings, was trying to run a farming community, and whose famous body is buried in the Adirondack town of North Elba, which I did not know. If there was a colorful character in Adirondack history, and there were many, you will probably find him here. There are also journalistic interviews with contemporary trappers, and loggers, and settlers.

The book is dense with information, and kind of jumps around from topic to topic, but almost all of it is fascinating.

Brian says

I highly recommend this book for anyone who is interested in the Adirondacks and/or the history of American attitudes towards wilderness and/or the management of park lands. The book was full of

entertaining stories that illustrated the themes the author was exploring. I learned a lot about the history of the Adirondacks and how it is such a unique entity as the largest park in the continental US (larger than Yellowstone, Yosemite, Glacier, the Grand Canyon, and the Great Smokey Mountains combined!) and protected by the state's constitution that mandates that it be forever wild. The book has very interesting chapters on the challenges of carrying out that mandate when only half of the park is owned by the state, with the other half in private or corporate hands, along with the more typical challenges of satisfying different stakeholders (conservationists, hunters/anglers, local economy, etc.). The book traces the various eras of fur trapping, logging, mining, and attempts at other industries, and how those have shaped the park. Hard to believe that beavers were totally eradicated from the park by trappers! (have now been reintroduced) There are also lots of simply entertaining tales about the legendary Adirondack guides, the wealthy who established the Adirondack style in their 'great camps', and the artists and writers who helped shape American attitudes towards the wilderness during their time in the Adirondacks. The book was very well written to convey so much information in such a page turning manner. I can't wait to do some more exploring in the 'Dacks!

Kevin says

A good social and political history of the Park. He intersperses history with accounts of current activity in the Park, including LOTS of trapping. Who knew there were so many beaver there? And what do people do with all those beaver furs? I thought the most interesting was the great camp era--Vanderbilts, etc, all playing at "camping." And the discussion at the end of wilderness. Can we really preserve something "forever wild" that hasn't really been wild since the European-Americans first came upon it and began removing resources at incredible paces? And that is riddled with resorts, private homes, etc.?

Jan C says

Enjoyable read. Parts of it I loved and parts just seemed to drag. I just had more interest in certain parts of the discussion than in others. I found the part about the lumbering business painful, especially since I moved to North Carolina and have beaucoup trees outside my window. And I understand the reason for why the water has to be poisoned but I disagree with the act.

I lived in Albany at one time and a friend came to visit and we drove up to the Adirondacks (I lived a similar distance from the Adirondacks, the Berkshires and the Catskills - all were within a 30-minute drive). It was beautiful. We drove up to Lake George and back. It was close to 40 years ago but I haven't forgotten it.

I enjoyed more of the history of the place than the land management portion of the book. I see the need for both. And this book is definitely an education.

Sandy says

The book gave me background knowledge to the Adirondacks region and the many types of people who lived there. Now driving through and visiting a few towns and musuems plus hiking a few mountains puts this beautiful region into perspective. Lots more to see and do next time in the Adirondack region.

Kathryn says

Some really great history in here, but I got bogged down in the industry sections

Judy Gacek says

A narrative history of one of America's great wilderness areas. Very readable. the author evokes memories of the area I visited often as a young person. It is only as an adult I fully realize how lucky I was to grow up with the park in my back yard.

^ says

Absolutely fascinating, and hugely readable. I bought this book during a four day trip to upstate NY, for a job interview. The interview went very, very, well. I realised that I hadn't really spent much time beginning to think through the culture change, let alone the winter weather, I'd have to acclimatise to. This book, which I began reading on the 'plane back to Britain was invaluable because I found myself able to begin to cross match the text to the characters of the Americans I'd met round Lake Champlain. Schneider certainly knows how to tell an engaging story. His characterisation of the landscape left me wanting to see more, and to learn more, even though I always would be an out-of-place Englander.
