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## **Women In The Wilderness: An Exploration Of How Women Interacted, Adapted, And Thrived In The American Environment**

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Women in the Wilderness: An Exploration of how Women Interacted, Adapted, and  
Thrived in the American Environment

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Bachelor of Arts, College of William & Mary, 2020

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William & Mary in  
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Masters of Arts

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## APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
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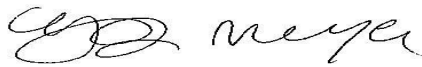
Masters of Arts



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## ABSTRACT

Women of all backgrounds have contributed to the environmental history of the United States, but most of the environmental historical scholarship places such women alongside men and by doing so clouds their involvement as well as their achievements. This discussion introduces readers to pieces of environmental history that engage gender as a framework, while also acknowledging that there is not an individual women's environmental experience by covering specific yet contrasting geographical spaces. The American West and the New York Adirondacks offer diverse perspectives and experiences of pioneering women who interacted with the environment, including Diné women, park rangers, Adirondack guides and residents, nature lovers, conservationists, and more. This research unearths the stories and experiences of these women, creating a more balanced and fuller image of the ways in which humans interacted with nature, while shining a light on the undervalued narratives of the frequently uplifting and consistently complex history of American women in relation to the environment.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Dedications	iii
List of Images	iv
Introduction	1
Part I: White Women of the American West	13
Part 2: Women of the Adirondacks	28
Conclusion	38
Bibliography	40

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To all the trailblazers in my life.



## LIST OF FIGURES AND IMAGES

1. Figure of the 100 <sup>th</sup> Meridian	3
2. Figure of the Blue Line	6
3. Photograph of Geraldine L. Lucas	20
4. Photograph of Julia Burton Preston	34

## Introduction

Women have played a critical and primary role in American environmental history, as homesteaders, conservationists, rangers, activists, explorers, naturalists, and more. Even though they were active participants in the discussions about and debates over how the environment should be managed and protected, their accomplishments and overall contributions have remained largely unacknowledged. Women environmentalists are largely absent in contemporaneous as well as secondary historical accounts that discuss the conservation movement and environmentalism and in many historical works that engage the particular regions where such activism was especially pronounced during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, including the “American West” and portions of the northeast where environmental concerns were highly visible, such as the Adirondacks.<sup>1</sup> Women environmentalists are also, surprisingly, generally not covered by most women’s histories focused on the nineteenth and early twentieth century United States. This elision of women as environmental actors suggests the need for a thorough analysis of *how* in fact, women have been significant figures in the environmental history of the United States. For the purposes of this thesis I will be focusing on female environmentalists of various types and their work specifically in the American West and New York State’s Adirondacks during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An analysis and comparison of women environmentalists in two very different regions of the United States reveals that women contributed to America’s environmental history in many different ways that were often distinct to their location and its context. I focus on women, and female

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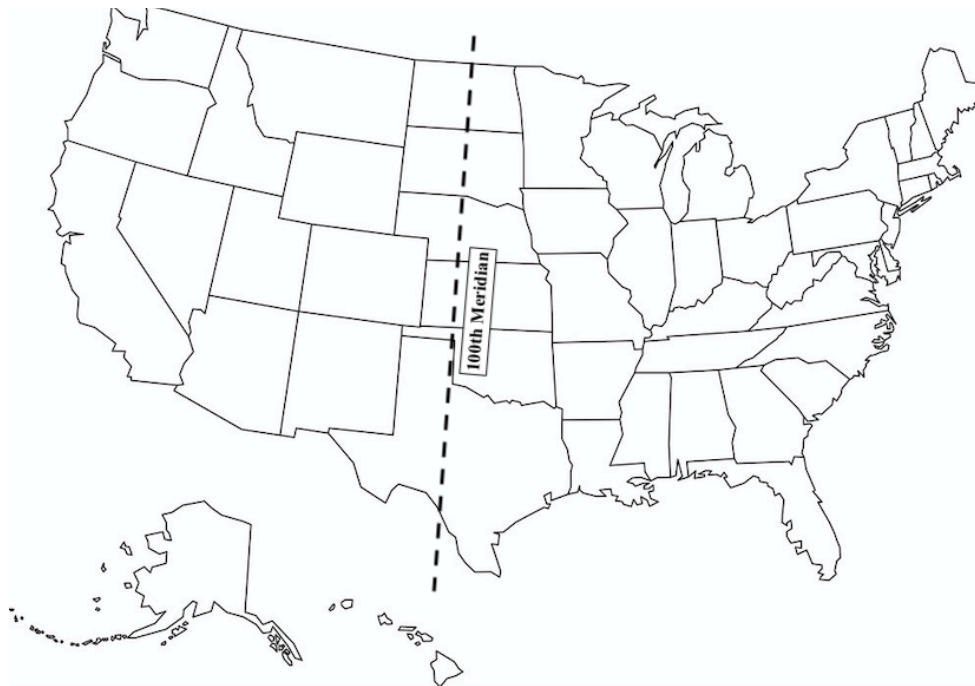
<sup>1</sup> For more information on a darker history of the conservation movement and establishment of preserved natural spaces see Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

environmentalists in particular, in this thesis because of their erasure from most literatures documenting American environmental history.

Environmental history is rooted in place. Concentrating on the American West and the Adirondacks of the Northeast creates an opportunity to explore the distinctions between these regions, but also highlight the common challenges and approaches to managing such challenges that emerged within each space. These sections of the United States encompassed different terrain, distinct ecological challenges, and have been engaged quite differently by those scholars for whom each has been a focus of inquiry. The environmental histories that I am most compelled by are those that concentrate on the relationship between nature and people. The American West has been the main emphasis of much of the scholarship on American environmental history. Many of these writers see the American West as the “heart” of environmentalism, as a space and land that has been visibly shaped and has shaped the people who reside there.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define the “American West” as the land west of the hundredth meridian – or more simply the boundary that separates the humid eastern and the arid western regions of the United States. This western region of the United States consists of a very different landscape to that of the east and various areas within this “west” have been the sites of a range of environmental extremes. The United States western climate is extremely diverse, from flat desert regions that experience severe drought to areas that experience constant rainfall to mountainous zones that undergo temperatures below freezing and others that endure intense heat. In order to understand the experiences and motives of those who inhabited the West, it is necessary to fully consider this arid, frozen, scorching and changing land.

The nineteenth century expansionist ethos in the United States was framed in part by journalist John O’Sullivan’s famous phrase “Manifest Destiny,” a concept and ideology that defined America’s “destiny” as to expand across the continent, spreading capitalism and democracy.<sup>2</sup> In 1850 Horace Greeley, an American newspaper editor and founder of the New York-Tribune, coined the saying, “Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country.”<sup>3</sup> Greeley directed young white men to travel West and secure land to claim and build on, encouraging them to harness their surroundings. While many of those men who traveled west were single, a significant minority were accompanied by wives and daughters – some of whom would become environmentalists – in name or in practice – and thus participants in the West’s environmental history.



**Figure 1.** This figure illustrates where the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian lies in the United States. It represents the boundary that runs north to south cutting through Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, North and South Dakota. The line separates the major climate differences in the United States, dividing the humid eastern region from the arid western expanse.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Manifest Destiny in relation to westward expansion in the United States, see Shane Mountjoy, *Manifest Destiny: Westward Expansion* (Facts on File, Inc., 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Knowles, *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 351.

While some women ventured from east to west as Horace Greeley's prompt suggests, others looked closer to home for further economic expansion, in this case to the mountain range in their backyard, the Adirondacks located in New York State. Before the Adirondacks became the region explored by the women discussed in this thesis, its vast wilderness was almost destroyed by those searching for profit. The area encompasses a history of ruthless squandering of natural resources based on the belief that the raw materials were infinite. The landscape of the Adirondacks provided an ideal setting for logging operations to thrive as the region consisted of thousands of acres of timber along with many waterways, allowing loggers to float cut trees such as the white pine down the rivers to sawmills. The harvesting of the Adirondack forests began in 1664 and continued to the Revolutionary War when the young government sold almost all public acreage to generate wealth in order to discharge war debt.<sup>4</sup> Logging was not the sole reason for the decimation of the Adirondack forests. In addition to the focus on extracting white pine to the point of extinction, other trees such as hemlocks, spruces and firs, were highly sought after and used by the tanning, paper, and charcoal industries. Exploiting the wilderness – extracting resources from these natural spaces – was driven by a growing capitalist economy and its engineers who viewed the forests as dispensable. The exploitation of these “expendable” resources, in turn, resulted in the swift deterioration of the ecosystems of which they were a part. For example, the depletion of woodlands reduced the soils' capacity to maintain water, accelerating topsoil erosion, and hastening stretches of flooding across the region.<sup>5</sup>

While the environmental history of the Adirondacks encompassed with landscape misuse, by the end of the nineteenth century this misuse was mitigated by the voices of some environmentalists who sought to preserve and restore the land, and others who supported such

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<sup>4</sup> "Adirondack Park Agency." Adirondack Park History. [https://apa.ny.gov/about\\_park/history.htm](https://apa.ny.gov/about_park/history.htm).

<sup>5</sup> "Adirondack Park Agency."

restoration from a standpoint of profit, seeking to use the land for recreation. This latter group sowed the seeds that germinated into the Adirondack Forest Preserve in 1885. The Forest Preserve was organized around the beliefs that the Adirondacks needed to remain a place of refuge for spiritual, recreational, and medical needs in a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing country. American author, William Henry Harrison Murray characterizes the region as, “nature in her wildest and grandest aspects,” in his 1869 publication *Adventures in the Wilderness*.<sup>6</sup> Others that lobbied to protect the Adirondacks included topographical engineer, Verplanck Colvin, who proposed the creation of a six million acre protected park that would be (and now is) identified as the land within the boundaries of the Blue Line; the New York State term for the demarcation separating the *preserved* Park from the *unprotected* land. In championing the establishment of the Adirondack Park Colvin argued, “the interests of commerce and navigation demand that the forests should be preserved; and for posterity should be set aside, this Adirondack region, as a park for New York, as is the Yosemite for California and the Pacific States.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William Henry Harrison Murray, *Adventures in the Wilderness; Or, Camp-life in the Adirondacks. Preceded by “Plattsburg Route in the Adirondacks”* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1869), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Colvin Verplanck, “Ascent of Mt. Seward and Its Barometrical Measurement” (*24<sup>th</sup> Annual Report on the New York Museum of Natural History*, Albany NY: The Argus Company, 1872, 180, quoted in Van Valkenburgh, Norman J., *The Forest Preserve of New York State in the Adirondacks and Catskill Mountains: A Short History*, Schenectady, NY: Adirondack Research Center, 1983), 24.



**Figure 2.** This image is courtesy of New York State’s Department of Environmental Conservation website. It demonstrates where the Blue Line lies within the border of New York State and indicates the preserved land that consists of the Adirondack Park and the Catskill Park.<sup>8</sup>

Encouraged by environmentalists such as Colvin, the New York State assembly inaugurated the Adirondack Park in 1892, adding the Forever Wild clause in 1894, which stated, “The lands of the state, now owned or hereafter acquired, constituting the forest preserve as now fixed by law, shall be forever kept as wild forest lands. They shall not be leased, sold or exchanged, or be taken by any corporation, public or private, now shall the timber thereon be sold, removed or destroyed”.<sup>9</sup> The term “Forever Wild” is still used today by the residents and visitors of the Park. The Adirondack Park encompasses nearly six million acres of protected state and private land that embraces thousands of lakes, rivers, streams, countless peaks, dense forests, and other unique habitats. Even though the history and the establishment of the Park is conveyed

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<sup>8</sup> New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Accessed March 23, 2021. <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/4960.html>.

<sup>9</sup> N. Y. Constitution, 1894, art. VII, § 7.

as based solely on the experiences of white men, women contributed to the environmental history of this area, weaving their own stories into the narrative of the region.

There are a number of compelling stories from this region of the women who resided in the Adirondacks during its exploitation and of other women who sought to protect these resources and their beauty. Julia Burton Preston, for example, is identified as the first woman Adirondack licensed guide in New York State. Peggy Lynn and Sandra Weber celebrate women of the Adirondacks in their biographies of those who lived in the region and created relationships with the land in their chronicle, *Breaking Trail: Remarkable Women of the Adirondacks*. Lynn and Weber tell explore the life of Julia Burton Preston, revealing how she thrived in and embraced the unruly environment as a woman. Growing up as an outdoorswoman, Preston bent gender norms by studying and acquiring an expertise in firearms, specifically the Winchester .25-20 caliber rifle, and fishing.<sup>10</sup> *Breaking Trail* notes that Preston's skills and abilities were challenged by the men she guided as a result of her gender. While her competence as a guide was not always valued, Preston did not let male hostility stop her. Her motivation to become the first woman guide did not involve a stance as an explicit feminist. She guided hunting and fishing trips, mastering such abilities in order to survive paired with the realities of living in the unforgiving Adirondack wilderness.

In contrast to Julia Burton Preston, Anne LaBastille inspired women to search for adventure in the backcountry and to engage with the Adirondack wilderness on their own by writing about her experiences taking refuge in a log cabin, which she constructed herself, on the shores of Twitchell Lake in the Adirondacks. Her memoir, *Woodswoman*, communicates how she maneuvered through the outdoor recreation industry, which was mainly dominated by white

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<sup>10</sup> Peggy Lynn and Sandra Weber, *Breaking Trail: Remarkable Women of the Adirondacks* (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 2004), 150.



men.<sup>11</sup> Preston and LaBastille shared a commonality in their appreciation for the Adirondacks as well as their licenses as New York State Guides, but rather than directing hunting trips like Burton, LaBastille led backpacking and canoe trips throughout the region. Her reverence for the Adirondacks did not stop there, LaBastille was a trailblazer in the ongoing conservation of this section of New York State as well. Similar to environmental struggles that emerged from specific regions in the American West, women in the Adirondacks faced obstacles to their survival as well as their environmental activism.

The sources for women's contributions to and participation in the environmental history of the American West and the Adirondacks are scarce, and the few sources that are available tend to focus on white women's lives and experiences such as *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* by Nancy Unger and Peggy Lynn and Sandra Weber's piece, *Breaking Trail: Remarkable Women of the Adirondacks*. That said, it is important to note that these areas were not uniform or homogenous and remained locations composed of diverse people, communities, and cultures. While this thesis focuses primarily on white women's contribution to the environmental history of the United States, I will also engage those literatures that investigate the broader range of cultural diversity that is necessary to understand the full panorama of western and Adirondack experiences.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The outdoor recreation industry consists of activities such as hunting, fishing, camping, boating, hiking, climbing, skiing, and other pursuits associated with the wilderness.

<sup>12</sup> There are a few scholarly sources that expand and reveal the narratives of more diverse ethnic and cultural groups in relation to environmental history from these areas. Some include Melissa Otis, *Rural Indigeness: A History of Iroquoian and Algonquian Peoples of the Adirondacks (The Iroquois and Their Neighbors)* (Syracuse University Press, 2018), Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *African American Women Confront the West: 1600-2000* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), Robin Wall Kimmerer, and *Braiding Sweetgrass Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013). This narrative acknowledges such diversity, but does not explore those texts and does not thoroughly analyze them in view of the fact that such groups deserve and are worthy of their own analysis rather than being addressed out of formality. This discussion is written to provide a foundation for such research to occur.

One such example is the work of Native scholar Marsha Weisiger who, in her book *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* historicizes the evolving federal New Deal programs during the Great Depression and how these programs affected Navajo women. She uses gender as a primary form of analysis, exposing the devastating impact of New Deal programs male (and white) centered foundations. During the same period when Mary Anne Dyer Goodnight was working to save the buffalo population and Geraldine Lucas was fighting against the establishment of Teton National Park, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) sought to “save” the Navajo range. The BIA approach to “helping” the Navajo disregarded Diné women’s place and role as owners of the goats and a majority of the community’s sheep.<sup>13</sup> The BIA, was led by John Collier, who believed that scientific conservation and land management would prevent the erosion, overgrazing, and invasion of toxic plants that plagued the Navajo range. Despite the fact that John Collier prided himself on his understanding of Native peoples, he was unaware that women stood at the center of nearly all aspects of Diné life and thought, including kinship systems, residency patterns, economic wellbeing, land-use traditions, and spiritual beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

With this context in mind, several white women pushed against and broke through fairly constraining gender norms in order to both live in nature as well as work to protect it, but similar to the ways in which the Diné women and the Navajo gender system was misunderstood by the BIA, the lives and experiences of these white women were not acknowledged or respected by their own culture. Women, such as Julia Burton Preston, were challenged by men when participating in outdoor activities. Burton’s hunting skills are comparable to those of Diné women who managed the care of goats and sheep by slaughtering, skinning, and butchering the

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<sup>13</sup> Marsha Weisiger and William Cronon, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country / Marsha Weisiger; Foreword by William Cronon* (Weyerhaeuser Environmental Book. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 81.

<sup>14</sup> Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country*, 79.

livestock in order to feed their families.<sup>16</sup> The Diné created complementary gender lines when it came to labor, discouraging the establishment of a social hierarchy influenced by gender, which created a harmonious and respectable milieu. The Navajo's cultural gender system also understood women as central to the protection of the land and ecosystem as a communal space, while identifying women's connection to nature through ceremonies.<sup>17</sup> Diné women made their mark on the land by tracing land use-rights through matrilineages led by elder women, establishing a matricentered community that provided women with autonomy and power. Such power enabled them to possess control over their lives and bodies.<sup>18</sup> Diné women's independence and power is comparable to what some of the women in this thesis, such as Martha Ruth Rebentisch and Anne LaBastille, searched for in nature.

Even though women held autonomy and power in Diné society, Weisiger makes it clear that women were not more important than men. In Navajo communities' women and men existed as interdependent partners, with different yet equally valued qualities and roles.<sup>19</sup> While Navajo society revolved around women, federal authorities dealt exclusively with Diné men, ignoring women's autonomy and authority. The BIA's failure to acknowledge Navajo women parallels and is part of the reason for subsequent male scholars' consistent disregard for and erasure of women in the environmental history of the United States. Weisiger's analysis should be utilized and emulated in other work discussing women of all racial and cultural backgrounds in environmental history, as her method of placing Navajo women at the center of western environmental history amplifies their voices.

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<sup>16</sup> Weisiger, 85.

<sup>17</sup> Weisiger, 54.

<sup>18</sup> Weisiger, 80.

<sup>19</sup> Weisiger, 84.

There is little similar scholarly literature that engages Native women's work in the Adirondack range, although there are some works that include brief coverage of Black women's roles in that region.<sup>20</sup> Peggy Lynn and Sandra Weber researched and recovered several pieces of women's history in the Adirondack's in their book *Breaking Trail: Remarkable Women of the Adirondacks*. Their monograph touches on the story of Alice Paden Green, a Black, female, civil rights activist who grew up in the Adirondack mountains during the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> Lynn and Weber argue that Green remained concerned throughout her life about the lack of diversity in the region; residents in and around the Adirondacks continue to be predominately white. Seeking to increase racial and ethnic diversity in the region, Green introduced and established the Paden Institute and Retreat for Writers of Color in 1997, offering a space for writers of color to enjoy the Adirondack Parks' wonders.<sup>22</sup>

While Lynn and Weber make visible Green's work in the Adirondacks, she is the only Black woman discussed in the book. The omission of other Black women may be a result of the lack of sources or perhaps that Black women's lifestyles and situations in the Adirondacks did not fit within the parameters of their book. While Green felt that the Adirondacks continued to be an area inhabited by mostly white individuals, historian Sally E. Svenson's study, *Black in the Adirondacks: A History*, demonstrates that even though the population in the region was small, there was always a Black presence. Svenson historicizes the Black Adirondack experience, by pulling together a range of sources to reimagine the lives of Black residents. Svenson's analysis does not really discuss Black women's relationship to the environmental history of the region,

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<sup>20</sup> As the author, I chose to capitalize the letter B in Black throughout this discourse as it refers to groups in ethnic, cultural, and racial terms. It is also used to foster inclusivity by addressing the transnationality of the Black community rather than utilizing the phrase African American for the reason that not all enslaved Black individuals taken to America originally inhabited Africa.

<sup>21</sup> Lynn and Weber, *Breaking Trail*, 142.

<sup>22</sup> Lynn and Weber, 146.

but to fully understand the diversity of women who inhabited the Adirondacks, acknowledging Black women's existence as among those who survived the white and male-dominated region is imperative.

Our understanding of environmental history has been guided and based on an assumption that the field was founded by men and that it was predominantly men who were engaged in the early and continuing work to protest land misuse or engage in organized efforts to save and restore natural spaces in various regions. With the emergence of women's history in the 1970s, researchers unearthed and recovered the stories of many women who also contributed to efforts to protect the environment. Historian Nancy Unger characterizes the early environmental history that focused on women as emulating the male model of research by only calling attention to the "greats," but the development of environmental history as a field and the expansion of research subjects led to scholars finding records of women from all realms of life in the region. Those recognized were often notable (and thus noted in conventional records) because they broke with prescribed gender norms to contribute by organizing and directing efforts to restore the environment, personally engage with it, and had some marked success in their endeavors to protect the natural world.<sup>23</sup> This thesis follows and engages scholarship on white women's environmental history in the American West and the Adirondacks, not in terms of disregarding the contributions of men, but to recognize and honor the women who continue to be largely absent as reference points in the field. Drawing from sources and experiences based on two geographically different locations confirms women's importance and broadens their contribution to the environmental history field. Even though this thesis stages white women at its center, it works as a stepping stone for other scholars to unearth other layers to the complex history of

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<sup>23</sup> Nancy C. Unger, "Women and Gender: Useful Categories of Analysis in Environmental History" (*The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 602.

women in the United States in relation to the environment. Weaving together the diverse stories of women pioneers in the American West and the Adirondacks, while emphasizing how gender influenced their relationship to the American environment proves that women were important historical subjects in American environmental history.

## **Part 1**

### **White Women in the American West**

The historiography of the West has also been largely white male focused. However, like environmental history, this began to change in the 1970s. Historian Glenda Riley's work is one early example of this change. Riley focuses on women as significant actors in the environmental history of the American West in *Saving the "Wild" West*. Riley's monograph is an environmental history of the ways in which some white American women's ideas and actions influenced the emerging environmental consciousness about the American West.<sup>24</sup> Starting in the mid-nineteenth century and ending in the mid-twentieth century, Riley focuses especially on white women's commentary and activism around "nature" and its preservation. U.S. Western history and U.S. environmental history are fields that have been dominated by male scholars. The focus of these historians has been on the narratives of men, typically white men, and white men's "claim" to American western lands as explorers and the role of white men in the emerging American environmental conservation movement. In contrast, Riley calls our attention to and unearths the ways in which middle-and upper-class women of European descent were key actors and participants in the forging of the American environmental conservation movement. Riley

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<sup>24</sup> Other works on the United States western history and United States western environmental history include Sam Lightner Jr., *Wyoming: A History of the American West* (Summits and Crux, 2020), Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (Open Road Media, 2012), Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (Penguin Publishing Group, 1992), William Cronon, *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (W.W. Norton, 1993), and Dan Flores, *The Natural West* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

argues that these women's contributions to American environmental history have been largely omitted from Western environmental history narratives, which ultimately distorts the understanding of the American West's development.

Riley's evidence base includes settlement and travel narratives, diaries and letters, autobiographies, novels and stories by and about women, confirming their presence and significant roles in the West. Her central thesis is that women generated "immense exertions and cultural contributions to the American environmental movement..."<sup>25</sup> In supporting this argument Riley also explores what she terms "feminine relationships to nature" by examining women's understanding of, relationships to, and interactions with the environment in the West.

Riley contends that women played more than just a marginal and cooperative role in the conservation of the American West, but during this period how her female subjects approached nature tended to be in line with dominant gender norms and thus was much more "feminine" as to be effective or "heard" at all they were often forced to participate in the nascent environmental movement in ways that were deemed socially acceptable by its contemporary male environmental leaders and activists. For example, female environmentalists had to dress "respectfully," as understood and prescribed within the prevailing gender system. Riley presents a short timeline of women naturalist's attire, revealing that garments had to conform to normative prescriptions of appropriate female attire, but also be functional for the field work in which many conservationists engaged. One of Riley's subjects, Alice Eastwood, tried to solve the dilemma by wearing a skirt in the field that reached her shoe tops rather than a trailing skirt with a braid, as was normative for the period and her class and race status. Eastwood eventually

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<sup>25</sup> Glenda Riley, *Women and Nature: Saving the "Wild" West* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), xii.

produced her own clothing, including a blue denim outfit composed of a skirt that she could transformed into an acceptable riding skirt through an adjustment of buttons.<sup>26</sup>

Riley demonstrates how women's willingness to adapt to prevailing social norms paralleled their views on the environment. She holds that women's perceptions of the environment, particularly in the West, differed from the pervasive presumptions that women were "suspicious and frightened" by the wild. She acknowledges that throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, many Americans believed that women did not belong "out" in nature and that their rightful place was in the "safe" and domestic environment of their homes.<sup>27</sup> While some women, as well as men, found the West and the natural world to be menacing, many did not, and the stereotype of all women clinging to the safe domesticity of their homes was unfounded. Riley challenges this stereotype by proving that women *have* been influential historical figures in the American West, "Rather than avoiding the western 'wilderness,' American women 'conquered' it in their own way-by feminizing it."<sup>28</sup>

Riley provides numerous examples of female conservationists and naturalists, adding another layer and perspective to western environmental history. The American buffalo are a symbol of the West, and their near extinction is a testament to the selfishness and ignorance of the human population. Riley brings to light the story of Mary Ann Dyer Goodnight, who helped reintroduce buffalo to the West, including Yellowstone National Park.<sup>29</sup> Goodnight and her husband established the Goodnight Buffalo and Cattalo Park in the Texas Panhandle, where they collected abandoned calves. Goodnight raised the calves to preserve the breed, and by the 1930s

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<sup>26</sup> Riley, *Women and Nature: Saving the "Wild" West*, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Riley, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Riley, 190.

<sup>29</sup> Riley, 91.



Goodnight's herd numbered about two hundred animals.<sup>30</sup> Mary Ann Dyer Goodnight is one example of women's influence on Western environmental movements; in this case she was an important figure in the history of bison conservation, yet she is often overshadowed by the work of her husband, Charles Goodnight. In *Saving the Buffalo*, Albert Marrin writes a meticulous narrative of the bison and discusses the reestablishment of the herds during the twentieth century. In his analysis, Marrin does not mention Mary Ann Dyer Goodnight, acknowledging only Charles Goodnight as a "key savior" to the bison population.<sup>31</sup> By calling our attention to the conservation work of Mary Ann Dyer Goodnight, Glenda Riley confirms that women contributed to and were influential participants in western environmental history.

To fully understand the importance of women in environmental history requires considering the significance and impact of gender norms and gender systems that were an ever-present context for and often constraint in women's lives. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dominant cultural gender norms prescribed specific roles for men and women. These prescriptions affected the ways in which white men and women engaged and understood the environment, as well as shaped the distinct ways they responded to their own local environments. While many divorced, single, or widowed white women took advantage of the opportunities offered by the Homestead Act and traveled West in 1862, many others had journeyed West earlier, usually as a result of their husband's desires and the economic, social, and political appeals westward expansion presented to them.<sup>32</sup> Historian Nancy C. Unger demonstrates the interplay between gender and the environment in her book, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History*. Unger begins with a brief analysis

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<sup>30</sup> Riley, 98.

<sup>31</sup> Albert Marrin, *Saving the Buffalo* (Scholastic Nonfiction, 2006), 100.

<sup>32</sup> Nancy C. Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 52.

of westward expansion and how gender affected women's attitudes towards the environment, arguing that, "there is no single 'woman's environmental experience' in any place and time."<sup>33</sup> Unger focuses on the American frontier, emphasizing settler families and their move west, highlighting frontier women's agency, and demonstrating the structural changes that affected women and their views of the environment. Unger incorporates a broad range of women's experiences in her book, including the reluctance of some women who did not want to travel west, and calls attention to the formation of gender identities in this new environment and how such identities contribute to the understanding and misunderstanding of western environmental history.

Unger's analysis of women in the American West and their relationship with the environment differs to a degree from that offered by Glenda Riley. While Riley explicitly scrutinizes and debunks the stereotypes of women and their presumed fear of the wilderness by exploring the lives of female environmentalists like Mary Ann Dyer Goodnight, Unger instead draws our attention to those women who embraced the West *and* makes visible those women who found the West intolerable. Unger's work adds to our understanding of the narrative of women's western history in part by exploring the obstacles only women endured when traversing the Great Plains. Women, like men, traveled across the country by walking or riding in a wagon, but women, unlike men, experienced conditions such as pregnancy, childbirth, and menstrual cycles, which challenged their relationships with the environment in different ways than men. Women struggled to keep their saturated menstrual rags clean when traversing deserts or plains where water access was limited or heavy rains prevented them from drying.<sup>34</sup> Men and women

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<sup>33</sup> Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Unger, 54.

not only viewed the treks through different eyes, but they experienced such travels in extremely different bodies.

Unger examines how physiology was not the only factor that shaped women's attitudes about the trails and the American West. The climate and the conditions of frontier life caused morose women to be miserable. Some women, such as Anna Shaw's mother, Alice Neal, and Annie Green, regretted joining their husbands on their treks West.<sup>35</sup> Unger offers diary excerpts from Anna Shaw which detailed her mother's reaction to their log house on the Michigan frontier: "Something within her seemed to give way, and she sank upon the ground...she buried her face in her hands, and in that way she sat for hours without moving or speaking...Never before had we seen our mother give way to despair."<sup>36</sup> Unger's acknowledgement and inclusion of some women's despair upon seeing their "new" western homesteads clarifies how women's domestic, material, and bodily anxieties interacted with the western environment to influence their actions and opinions toward the landscape. While Unger's book provides material that can lead to a more complex understanding of women's place in western environmental history, she could have expanded her analysis of white women in the West to equally explore similarly situated white women who appreciated the West such as Geraldine L. Lucas or acknowledging those who endeavored to succeed and, in the end, suffered defeat like Estelle Siglin.

The story of Geraldine L. Lucas is one partial answer to the question of how women, as historical subjects, figured in the environmental history of the American West. Unlike the female experiences documented by Unger, Riley, and Weisiger, local historian Sherry L. Smith focuses on the life of one early twentieth-century Wyoming woman, who "conquered" and ultimately thrived in the wilderness. Sherry L. Smith's "A Woman's Life in the Teton Country: Geraldine

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<sup>35</sup> Unger, 61-62.

<sup>36</sup> Unger, 61.

L. Lucas,” tells the story of Geraldine Lucas, a western woman pioneer in Wyoming. “G.L. Lucas-1924” can be found at the summit of Grand Teton Mountain etched into the granite, recording Lucas’s monumental climb as the second woman to reach the crest as well as signaling the reason for her recognition in western history.<sup>37</sup> Lucas’s journey west occurred in the early twentieth century when she followed her family's migration and their purchasing of public lands in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Her relationship with the United States federal government and its conservation activity reflects the country’s progressive changing beliefs about the use and ownership of forests, public and private land, and preservation.

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<sup>37</sup> Sherry L. Smith, “A Woman’s Life in the Teton Country: Geraldine L. Lucas” (*Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Summer, 1994, Vol. 44, No. 3), 18.



**Figure 3.** This photograph is an image of Geraldine L. Lucas on August 19, 1924 at the age of 59 when she summited Grand Teton Mountain, which stands at an elevation of 13,776'. The shot was taken by Harold P. Fabian and embodies who Lucas was as an individual, illustrating her rugged yet tenacious nature. Courtesy of the Collection of Jackson Hole Historical Society of Museum, 1958.0351.001.

Smith explains that Geraldine Lucas did not purchase her thirty-eight acres of land along Phelps Lake at the base of the Teton Range under the Homestead Act, but rather under the Timber and Stone Act of 1878, where she paid \$3.25 an acre.<sup>38</sup> The Timber and Stone Act attempted to promote settlement of the West and required claimants to vow that their intentions of purchase reflected personal gains such as logging and mining. Large migrations of people

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<sup>38</sup> Smith, "A Woman's Life in the Teton Country: Geraldine L. Lucas," 23.

from a range of backgrounds traveled to the West, captivated by the cheap and vast open lands that allowed for mining and agriculture. Acts like the Timber and Stone Act of 1878 caused overuse and exploitation of water supplies, grassland, and timber, which in 1890 resulted in the federal governments' expansion of policies for the administration of public lands to cover the conservation of natural resources. In turn, policies such as these frustrated Lucas. Smith claims that Lucas's motivations to buy the land are still undetermined, but it is suspected that she purchased the parcel for personal enjoyment and the long-term potential of such a breathtaking property. Unlike other early Jackson Hole homesteaders who harnessed the land for ranching, farming, and other practices, Lucas barely touched her land during her residency, only plowing three acres and planting a garden in 1913.<sup>39</sup>

Smith particularly focuses on the processes by which Lucas looked to expand the acreage of her initial land purchase, which reflects how other homesteaders employed land laws. For instance, Lucas filed for more acreage under the Forest Homestead Act of 1906, allowing her to purchase land already classified by the Teton National Forest boundary. Lucas filed her homestead claim on Cottonwood Creek in 1914, at the time when conservationists desired to protect Jackson Hole from further development, but Lucas had no interest in turning her private land into a national park for public recreation.<sup>40</sup> Lucas encountered many difficulties with the government, but like many white male landowners of the time, she always seemed to succeed in deceiving the system; she acquired even more public land when she convinced Naomi Brewster Colwell to apply for a homestead neighboring her own and then ultimately purchased the land.<sup>41</sup> Lucas was clearly knowledgeable about and used a majority of the federal land laws to expand

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<sup>39</sup> Smith, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, 25.

her property, including applying for a certificate for desert land where she claimed to need seventy more acres. Even though Lucas detested the General Land Office as well as those striving to preserve the land, she believed she was contributing to the land's protection by claiming it herself.

Landowners like Lucas are one of the subjects of Robert W. Righter's book, *Crucible for Conservation: The Creation of Grand Teton National Park*. Righter examines the early twentieth century and ongoing struggle between preservation and development in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, particularly in relation to the establishment of Grand Teton National Park.<sup>42</sup> In 1929, Congress set aside the mountain range and the lakes at the base as Grand Teton National Park, but designated only about 150 acres of land to constitute this National Park.<sup>43</sup> The original declaration of Grand Teton National Park did not include the plains of Jackson Hole. During the late 1920s to 1950 land, like that of Geraldine Lucas's, became a battleground for an intense exchange between the National Park Service and dude ranchers who advocated for the valley against local business interests, ranchers, and individual land holders like Lucas. In one example, the Snake River Land Company, a front organization led by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and Horace Albright, bought private property in Jackson Hole that showed signs of "creeping commercialism," purchasing more than twenty-five thousand acres in three years.<sup>44</sup>

In 1930, Rockefeller Jr. and Albright decided to reveal themselves as the owners of the Snake River Land Company, which infuriated many Jackson Hole citizens, including Lucas. Explaining this event in his book, Righter acknowledges that "no combination could be more

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<sup>42</sup> Robert W. Righter, *Crucible for Conservation: The Creation of Grand Teton National Park* (Colorado Associated University Press, 1982), 19.

<sup>43</sup> Righter, *Crucible for Conservation*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, "A Woman's Life in the Teton Country: Geraldine L. Lucas," 49.

open to local criticism than the Park Service in collusion with eastern private wealth.”<sup>45</sup> Plagued by community distress and bad press, the Snake River Land Company was rebranded and absorbed as the Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. Anti-park activists challenged the company for years to come, but in 1950 the Jackson Hole National Monument lands were attached to Grand Teton National Park. Following her death, Lucas’s land was sold to John D. Rockefeller Jr. in 1944 for 100,000 dollars, becoming part of the Jackson Hole National Monument, and one year later, her land was added to Grand Teton National Park.<sup>46</sup> Righter’s narrative is incredibly important in revealing the slow battle to establish Grand Teton National Park in relation to western environmental history. Righter included conflicts and stories that occurred between private landowners who were mainly Anglo and male such as the JY Ranch, but he failed to cover other Jackson homesteaders who were women, like Geraldine Lucas, who owned property deemed “the most beautiful place there is in the country.”<sup>47</sup> Righter’s lack of acknowledgment of Lucas is just another example of the narrow, uninformed view of environmentalism and its contributors.

Geraldine Lucas was one of thousands of women who took advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862 and traveled west to own their own land. Even though her story ended with the federal government seizing her land and placing it in the domain of a national park when she died, Lucas’s homestead still stands and can be found today in Grand Teton National Park. Her narrative is not necessarily a success story in her own eyes, but her ability to maintain her land and survive challenges to her ownership provides one window into the world of female pioneers

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<sup>45</sup> Smith, 66.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Horace Albright to Harold Fabian, November 13, 1929. File 35, box 6, Snake River Company, Rockefeller Archives.



in the West. While Lucas thrived on her homestead in Wyoming, many other women were not so lucky. Rena A. Fowler speaks of those who were “not so lucky” in her article “Settling Down and Proving Up on an Eastern Colorado Homestead: The Correspondence of Estelle Siglin and Homer Evans, 1906-1911.” Fowler explores the life of homesteader Estelle Siglin and her experiences proving up on her homestead in Colorado through her analysis of Siglin’s letters from the period. In the early twentieth century, the regions authorized and available for homesteading were mostly located in the arid West on the High Plains due to the West holding the vast majority of open and unclaimed public domain, including Colorado, areas vulnerable to drought and other weather conditions hazardous for farming. Siglin’s letters document her time spent on her Colorado homestead, revealing her relationships with the land as well as the environmental conditions she endured.

Estelle Siglin received her homesteading patent in 1913 as an independent and unmarried white woman, and her letters articulate the demands and stresses she experienced to get it.<sup>48</sup> Under the Homestead Act and in order to receive the patent, the land had to be improved, requiring homesteaders to construct a dwelling and cultivate the land. So out of respect for the regulations, Siglin had a 12x14 home built, organized her land to be farmed and in 1908 she located someone to plow the fields, eventually planting trees and other crops.<sup>49</sup> Fowler explains that the establishment of Siglin’s farm was not easy and that she encountered several setbacks as a result of the arid Colorado landscape, which many women homesteaders experienced. In a letter to her partner, Homer Evans, Siglin wrote of one such setback: “We are living in the center of a seven or eight-hundred-acre tract of land, perhaps more, charred black as coal. The fire came

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<sup>48</sup> Rena K. Fowler, “Settling Down and Proving Up on an Eastern Colorado Homestead: The Correspondence of Estelle Siglin and Homer Evans, 1906-1911.” (*Great Plains Quarterly* 36, no. 3, 2016), 210.

<sup>49</sup> Fowler, “Settling Down and Proving Up on an Eastern Colorado Homestead,” 214.

within a few feet of the door, started in the corn burning only one shock and very nearly half of the pasture. All the rest of my claim is burned.”<sup>50</sup> This fire was not the only hardship Siglin endured in homesteading the land. She also makes note of strong winds that blew her barn away as well as a great drought.

Fowler includes another letter that Siglin wrote to Evans in 1910, explaining the failure of crops and the subsequent need to sell her of cattle as a result of a lack of rain. She wrote, “I read an article in a paper ... It criticized Congress for encouraging *poor* people in homesteading arid and semi-arid land where they can never hope to live, besides they are ruining thousands of acres of fine grazing land and reducing the country’s meat supply, etc. I’ll give you a quarter for a good cold drink. You never said fish, I’m *mad*.”<sup>51</sup> The comment about “fish” in this message is implying that Siglin did not move to Colorado to fish, but to farm. Siglin’s frustration in this letter reflects the emotions of many other homesteaders who experienced the difficulties of farming in arid landscapes. Siglin’s story makes visible the setbacks, progress, and near disasters homesteaders encountered by surviving on the land.

Like Rena Fowler, western historian Glenda Riley in another study also reflects on how the physical environment and the climate produced many difficulties for women in *A Place to Grow: Women in the American West*. Riley explains in one example the creativity and energy required for women to obtain water that was always in short supply. Women would melt snow for cooking and washing, carry water in pails or in barrels on water sleds, dig wells and construct windmills, hire diviners to locate veins of water, and utilize baking soda to break the alkali content of water.<sup>52</sup> Water was necessary for the homesteader’s survival, not only for themselves,

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<sup>50</sup> Fowler, 215.

<sup>51</sup> Fowler, 223.

<sup>52</sup> Glenda Riley, *A Place to Grow: Women in the American West* (Harland Davidson, Incorporated, 1992), 198.

but for their livestock and agricultural land as well. Droughts caused many pioneers to abandon and relinquish their homestead claims due to crop failure and the inability to pay their fees, which Siglin mentions in her letters. Fowler's inclusion of Siglin's letters in reference to her relationship with the land adds to the historical narrative of the American West. Fowler is among the scholars who are challenging stereotypes of female "pioneers" in the West and providing further evidence of the active roles of women by telling the story of Estelle Siglin. Homesteading letters written by women should be analyzed and considered when studying the environmental history of the American West as they unearth new perspectives and understandings of women as pioneers within their landscapes.

During the period when conservationists struggled against holdouts like Geraldine L. Lucas to transform Jackson Hole and the Grand Teton mountains into Grand Teton National Park, many other female naturalists were challenging the all-male tradition of the National Park Service. National Parks are many-storied landscapes that mainly feature men. Historians have tended to associate the main actors in and themes of national parks history with men, as seen in Robert W. Righter's book on the creation of Grand Teton National Park. In contrast, Polly Welts Kaufman follows the history of women and their journey through the National Park Service, revealing in the process how they contributed to the environmental history of the American West. Yellowstone National Park has one of the richest and earliest histories of women rangers, naturalists, and interpreters. In the early 1900s, the National Park Service added three fundamental principles and policies that would change interpretation in national parks forever, causing the practice to be more formal with an emphasis on accurate scientific and historic information. This change brought the ranger naturalists into Yellowstone in 1920. The Park superintendent Horace Albright hired the first interpreter in Yellowstone, a woman named Isabel

Bassett.<sup>53</sup> In an alumnae magazine for Wellesley College, Bassett wrote, “Next summer I am to be a ranger in Yellowstone Park. You never heard of a woman ranger? Well, neither have I.” Kaufman highlights Isabel Bassett’s importance as one of the first female NPS rangers; even though Isabel Bassett only remained at Yellowstone for a year, she was highly praised for her skills and laid the groundwork for future women rangers.

By the 1930s Yellowstone Park and the Park Service as a whole began to forbid the employment of women ranger-naturalists, but in the decade before many women contributed to the NPS’s success as a governmental enterprise as well as its scientific endeavors. Kaufman not only focuses on one female appointee at Yellowstone, she names all of those female rangers who served before the employment policy changed during the Great Depression, including Mary Rolfe, who published a two-volume work on national parks for young people titled *Our National Parks*. Marguerite Lindlsey was the second female appointee at Yellowstone and eventually became the first permanent female Park Ranger. Lindsley contributed to the bottomless reservoir of natural history documents, *Yellowstone Nature Notes*. Kaufman reveals that Marguerite Lindsley wrote more than fifty articles, recording information on vegetation, weather, and wildlife in addition to developing the park museum.<sup>54</sup> Another scholar who discusses Marguerite Lindsley is Erin H. Turner, who expands on Lindsley’s work as a naturalist in her book, *It Happened in Yellowstone: Remarkable Events That Shaped History*. Lindsley was eulogized as the “breath of Yellowstone” for her work at the park, work that included touring the park, reading water gauges in the rivers, inspecting trails, working on fire patrol, counting animals, and

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<sup>53</sup> Polly Welts Kaufman, “Challenging Tradition: Pioneer Women Naturalists in the National Park Service” (*Forest & Conservation History*, Vol. 34, Issue 1, January 1990), 4.

<sup>54</sup> Kaufman, “Challenging Tradition: Pioneer Women Naturalists in the National Park Service,” 10.

observing those animals and their interactions in the wild.<sup>55</sup> Without Lindsley's scientific contributions, academics would find a gap in the history of the parks. Yellowstone National Park was not the only park that employed female ranger-naturalists who contributed to parks' environmental histories, as Kaufman also notes the employment of those at Rocky Mountain and Grand Canyon National Parks as well.

## Part 2

### Women in the New York Adirondacks

Similar to historians' early work on the American West, the nineteenth century Adirondack region has been depicted as a predominantly masculine arena. Philip G. Terrie engages this perspective in his book *Forever Wild: Environmental Aesthetics and the Adirondack Forest Preserve* where he discusses how people responded to the idea of wilderness in the Adirondacks.<sup>59</sup> Terrie concludes that while surveyors, sportsmen, and travelers enthusiastically appreciated the beauties of the Adirondack wilderness, their perceptions remained timid as they felt alien and psychologically disoriented in the wilderness.<sup>60</sup> Terrie provides a thoughtful analysis of how the early environmental history of the Adirondacks was marked by fascination and fear, but he, like other scholars of the period, only considers the opinions of the men that explored the area.<sup>61</sup> Without acknowledging the perspectives and lives of the women who

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<sup>55</sup> Erin H. Turner, *It Happened in Yellowstone: Remarkable Events That Shaped History* (Globe Pequot Press, 2012), 67-68.

<sup>59</sup> Philip G. Terrie, *Forever Wild: Environmental Aesthetics and the Adirondack Forest Preserve* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 3.

<sup>60</sup> Terrie, *Forever Wild*, 12.

<sup>61</sup> Other works on the Adirondacks history and Adirondacks environmental history include Paul Schneider, *The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness* (Holt Paperbacks, 1998), Frances B. Rosevear, *Colvin in the Adirondacks: A Chronology and Index* (North Country Books Inc., 1992), William J. O'Hern, *Adirondack Logging: Stories, Memories, Cookhouse Chronicles, Linn Tractors, Gould Paper Company History from Adirondack and Tug Hill Lumber Camps* (Adirondack Architectural Heritage, 2016), and Barbara McMartin, *Hides, Hemlocks and Adirondack History: How the Tanning Industry Influenced the Growth of This Region* (North Country Books Inc., 1992).

resided and traversed the region, the environmental history of the Adirondack range remains skewed. Seeking to remedy the gap created by Terrie's work, Kate H. Winter wrote her own narrative on the Adirondacks that positioned women at the center in, *The Woman in the Mountain: Reconstructions of Self and Land by Adirondack Women Writers*.

In her research Winter found and made visible a connection between what she calls the "female imagination" and the environment where these women lived. More specifically she examines the women's reactions to the environment through the literary response of women writers who lived a considerable portion of their lives within the Blue Line. Rather than comparing the works of such women to those of men and replicating the habit of believing men's writing was the norm and women were aberrant, Winter uncovers and centers the voices of women and their responses to and recreation of their lives within the Adirondack landscape. Winter brings Jeanne Robert Foster's life to light to demonstrate that some women found themselves enamored by the wilderness, not unnerved as Philip G. Terrie believed. At a young age Foster created a mysterious and spiritual attachment to Crane Mountain, producing written works about the peak as well as guiding tourists up the mountain. A 1969 letter from Foster that Winter found recounts Foster's experiences as a child. The letter seems to confirm her bond with the mountain, "There seemed to be a strong force passing through me, so untamed wild and beautiful there are no words for it."<sup>62</sup> As a creative writer, Foster frequently returned to her fondness for the nature of the Adirondacks, writing several poems about Crane Mountain. Winter uses the writing of women to show how they interacted with nature, finding independence and confidence within themselves as well as discovering their contributions to the region's history. Winter's analysis of the literary responses of Adirondack women makes vivid their personal and

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<sup>62</sup> Kate H. Winter, *The Woman in the Mountain: Reconstructions of Self and Land by Adirondack Women Writers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 13.

intimate connections to the Adirondack landscape while also suggesting that women were instrumental in its history.

In her writing, Jeanne Robert Foster explains how the Adirondack environment released a “wild” and “beautiful” energy. This sensation and connection can also be found in other narratives that explore women’s experiences in the Adirondacks such as the story of Martha Ruth Rebentisch, which is revealed in Sandra Weber book, *Adirondack Roots: Stories of Hiking, History and Women*. In a detailed analysis, Weber discusses the textures of Rebentisch’s life in the Adirondacks battling against tuberculosis and in doing so acknowledges the health benefits many saw in the forest environment of the Adirondacks. The phenomenon that Weber explains is also known as forest bathing or Shinrin-Yoku, which is a concept scientifically identified by Japanese researchers in 1982, but Weber’s discussion reveals that this practice also occurred in the wilderness of Upstate New York during the late 1800s and early 1900s.<sup>63</sup> The town of Saranac Lake, a village in New York State, became a safe haven for those infected by tuberculosis when Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau opened the Adirondack Cottage Sanitorium or “Cure Cottages” in 1882. Dr. Trudeau recognized the impact of crowding in disease transmission, the employment of isolation for treatment, and the significance of fresh air, exercise, and diet for those suffering from the deadly disease. Unfortunately, before his unique treatment plans became widely known and practiced, many patients died as a result of instructed bed rest and failed operations.<sup>64</sup> Dr. Trudeau was not the only individual who believed in the healing powers of nature. Many Adirondack residents approved of this treatment as well, which is where Rebentisch’s story began.

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<sup>63</sup> Qing Li, *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2018).

<sup>64</sup> "Taking the Cure: The Trudeau Institute In Saranac Lake NY For Tubercular Healing & The History Of The Adirondacks!" Adirondack.net, October 01, 2020. <https://www.adirondack.net/history/tb-taking-the-cure/>.

In her narrative, *Adirondack Roots*, Weber analyzes how Rebentisch traveled to the Adirondacks in search for a cure in 1927 after responding to a newspaper ad written by Fred Rice, a local Adirondack woodsman who believed that nature could heal the sick. Weber includes Fred Rice's bewildered, yet intrigued reaction to Rebentisch's inquiry by sharing an excerpt from his own monograph, "Fifty Years in a Health Resort," which stated, "The only invalid who had the courage to act against the influence of her environment was a young woman."<sup>65</sup> While Rebentisch not only challenged gender barriers as she battled disease by traveling to an unfamiliar location, Weber communicates how Rebentisch's story also discloses how women interacted with the Adirondack wilderness.

Rebentisch's healing journey to Weller Pond sparked a new-found appreciation for nature and the Adirondack mountains. When she visited her doctor for an examination and an update on her Tuberculosis, he was astonished by her improvement. Rather than returning to the hospital in New York City, she relocated to the boathouse of Fred Rice's homestead in Saranac Lake, establishing a heartfelt relationship with her surroundings. Rebentisch was enamored by the wildlife that surrounded her, befriending animals, boating, hiking, and writing about her experiences. Weber notes that within a few years, Rebentisch made a full recovery and when examined by doctors in 1945 there was no indication of active Tuberculosis.<sup>66</sup> Rebentisch traveled to the Adirondacks searching a cure to her disease, but she found much more:

The wilderness did more than heal my lungs...It taught me fortitude and self-reliance, and with its tranquility it bestowed upon me something which would sustain me as long

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<sup>65</sup> Sandra Weber, *Adirondacks Roots: Stories of Hiking, History, and Women* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2011), 69.

<sup>66</sup> Weber, *Adirondack Roots*, 71.



as I lived: a sense of the freshness and the wonder which life in natural surroundings daily brings and a joy in the freedom and beauty and peace that exist in a world apart from human beings.<sup>67</sup>

Weber unearths the ways in which some women interacted with the Adirondack wilderness through the story of Martha Ruth Rebentisch, making clear that women's decisions and actions were not passive or mundane. Rebentisch acquired a new sense of self and independence in the Adirondacks, eventually purchasing her own cabin from the profits secured by her novels, *The Way of the Wilderness* and *The Healing Woods*.<sup>68</sup> In Weber's history she acknowledges that many women, like Rebentisch, embraced the wild yet gentle environment and utilized its qualities for their personal enjoyment in addition to discovering the health benefits nature produces. In order to fully comprehend women's contribution to the environmental history of the Adirondacks, it is necessary to consider the varying relationships women produced with the natural world.

While some white women such as Martha Ruth Rebentisch sought out the Adirondack park for leisure and recuperation, others gained confidence in mastering and exploring what they saw as the "unruly" wilderness. In the biographies of Adirondack women engaged by Peggy Lynn and Sandra Weber other women's lives come to light. The story of Preston, for instance, differs from that of Martha Ruth Rebentisch; both women succeeded in forming their own identities as pioneers, but rather than standing by the animals that roamed the woods and writing about the beauties the Adirondacks embodied, Preston sought to conquer the environment.

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<sup>67</sup> Weber, 74.

<sup>68</sup> Weber, 75.

Lynn and Weber's narrative documents the life of Julia Burton Preston and her experiences as the first woman licensed guide in New York State. Although official documentation of her status as a guide remains missing or possibly destroyed, Preston was widely known and talked about in that capacity at the time. Preston was born in the town of Piseco, New York during the mid 1890s to a local woman and an indigenous man of Cree descent from Quebec, Canada. At a young age Preston's father, John Burton (originally Boutin, but his name was misspelled after receiving citizenship from the United States and his surname was forever altered), introduced her to the skill of hunting. Not only was hunting a recreational activity for Preston and her family, it was necessary for survival. Thus Preston's "observation" of the Adirondack wildlife was not a means to write about their beauty, but rather to become a proficient hunter by mastering the ways and movements of such animals. In her diary Preston makes clear her respect and desire for the wild, "Saw a beautiful doe in the red coat yesterday, she was standing, feeding and watching us and that wonderful color showed so vividly against the green fir trees. Even while enjoying the picture the thought crept in... boy-she sure would taste good."<sup>69</sup> Preston also had prowess as a fisher, locating the prime locations for securing large fish such as trout, bass, pickerel, and bullhead.<sup>70</sup> These skills and experiences prepared Preston for her work to becoming a guide.

In 1914, Preston began guiding hunting parties into the mountains near Piseco Lake, Spruce Lake, and Jessup River, receiving ten dollars a day, which she used to support her family. Preston did not lead just any hunting group throughout the Adirondack backcountry, the assemblage of people she directed consisted of only men, which is illustrated in several of the

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<sup>69</sup> Lynn and Weber, 109.

<sup>70</sup> Lynn and Weber, 105.

photographs of Preston herself such as figure 2.<sup>71</sup> Throughout Preston's years existing as a guide the sportsmen never doubted her abilities, except for one who traveled into the woods alone to hunt deer and found himself lost. Preston searched for him in the woods, eventually recovering the man, but in his embarrassment at a woman finding him he refused to return with her, resulting in Preston having to patiently convince him to follow her home.<sup>72</sup> In their book Lynn and Weber identify Julia Burton Preston as a distinguished white woman of upstate New York, suggesting that women did not fear the Adirondacks physical environment and contributed to its environmental history by learning to maneuver through it, while gaining expertise to survive.



**Figure 4.** This photograph consists of Julia Burton Preston and other hunters in the Adirondacks taken in the early 1900s. Image taken by Beth Lomnitzer, ed., from an original photograph owned by Julia Burton Preston's granddaughter, Kathy Hawkins. Image downloaded with author's permission from "Julia

<sup>71</sup> As cited in Lynn and Weber, 106.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Burton Preston, *An Original Adirondack Guide*” published through Adirondack Experience on March 26, 2018. Accessed on March 2021.<sup>73</sup>

The Adirondack region and park consists of hundreds of mountain summits, some reaching five thousand feet or more above sea level. Lake Placid, New York is home to forty-six mountain peaks that pass an elevation of four thousand feet, known as the Adirondack High Peaks. The history of these mountains begins in the 1920s, when just twelve out of forty-six peaks contained barely marked trails. Two hikers, Robert and George Marshall, embarked on their journey to summit all forty-six High Peaks, commencing what is now known as the ADK46ers. Their expedition started in August of 1918, hiking Whiteface Mountain, and they completed their quest in June of 1925 by finishing the climb of Emmons Mountain. The history of the ADK46ers is based on the experiences of men, but Lynn and Weber uncover the life story of a woman mountaineer who became a forty-sixer in August 1937.

Grace Hudowalski summited Mount Esther, becoming ADK46er number nine and more importantly, the first woman to tackle the arduous undertaking. In *Breaking Trail*, Lynn and Weber argue that Hudowalski was the epitome of a mountain woman, embodying specific characteristics including a sharp wit, independence, and expressiveness.<sup>74</sup> Hudowalski represents the qualities possessed by some the women who visited and inhabited the region, her physical achievement of spending years scaling mountain peaks parallels how women contributed to environmental history as their journeys were precarious and difficult. Without considering women’s involvement in this history the story of the Adirondacks during the early twentieth century is incomplete. Grace Hudowalski used her legacy as the first women to become an

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<sup>73</sup> Beth Lomnitzer, “Julia Burton Preston, *An Original Adirondack Guide*,” taken from an original photograph owned by Kathy Hawkins, Adirondack Experience, accessed March 2021, <https://www.adirondackexperience.com/story/2018/julia-burton-preston-original-adirondack-guide>.

<sup>74</sup> Lynn and Weber, 125.

Adirondack 46R to create the Adirondack 46R Conservation Trust, whose goal is to preserve the “Forever Wild” aspect of the High Peak region, achieving this through conservation and education.<sup>75</sup> The Trust also supported the Summit Stewardship Program, which preserves the fragile alpine vegetation found on the top of some of the High Peaks.<sup>76</sup> Her devotion to the Adirondack environment appeared through the stewardship programs she initiated. Hudowalski’s life and accomplishments demonstrate how women interacted with the Adirondack mountains and contributed to its environmental history through stewardship and passion.

Grace Hudowalski was not the only woman who saw her life intertwined with the Adirondacks and who found solace through the landscape and passion for protecting the environment. Anne LaBastille is a prominent author, conservationist, and a strong spokesperson for the environment, and one of her most notable endeavors was during her residence in the Adirondack wilderness. She retells her story of this life in four memoirs. My discussion of Anne LaBastille’s life will only engage one of her narrations, *Woodswoman: Living Alone in the Adirondack Wilderness*; as the first memoir it discusses her original contact and experiences with the Adirondack wilderness. Inspired by the American naturalist, Henry Thoreau, and her extensive educational background in wildlife ecology, wildlife management, and conservation of natural resources, Anne LaBastille journeyed into the Adirondack woods in 1964. *Woodswoman* covers LaBastille’s relationship with the wilderness by exploring how she purchased land neighboring Twitchell Lake or what she refers to as Black Bear Lake. She recounts her process of constructing her cabin, using pre-cut materials to preserve the forest surrounding her

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<sup>75</sup> Lynn and Weber, 129.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

property.<sup>77</sup> She also relinquished her dependence on common comforts, living without electricity or running water.

LaBastille's "pioneer" experience in the Adirondacks was inspiring and brave, as she fought to both survive in and conserve the environment where she lived. LaBastille also explicitly identified as a feminist. In *Woodswoman* for example, she addresses the ways in which some men, even those close to her, reacted to her experiences as a woman living alone in the wilderness. She explains, "I had noticed that the more competent I became, the more insecure certain men acted, or the more aggressive others behaved toward me. It was as if their inferiority complexes were showing, as if they couldn't stand to have a female be better at anything than they."<sup>78</sup> The men LaBastille associated with acted as gatekeepers of the knowledge and techniques required to sustain oneself in the Adirondack outdoors. She benefited from these relationships, facilitating her own knowledge of the skills by observing and implementing them herself, soon surpassing those who disparaged her. The remainder of her first chronicle documents her adventures becoming one of the first New York State women guides.

*Woodswoman* demonstrates LaBastille's fascination with and attachment to the environment. Throughout the book LaBastille comments on her surroundings, describing the wilderness in extensive detail and providing historic information on the region, including the logging history of the region. She notes that opportunists flooded the area, ravishing the forests by the act of clear-cutting and timber stealing, resulting in a complete devastation of the forests and their ecosystems.<sup>79</sup> As an ecologist and environmental enthusiast, LaBastille had a deep appreciation for the trees that surrounded her, similar to the experiences shared by the poet

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<sup>77</sup> Anne LaBastille, *Woodswoman* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 10.

<sup>78</sup> LaBastille, *Woodswoman*, 285.

<sup>79</sup> LaBastille, 52.

Jeanne Robert Foster. LaBastille writes about her connection and coexistence with the trees, proclaiming, “I feel this communion, this strange attunement, most readily with large white pines...clearly white pines and I are on the same wavelength.”<sup>80</sup> Her appreciation for her environment is not only demonstrated through her literature, but through her actions as well. She wrote for National Geographic and Sierra Club magazines among others, researching the devastating effects of acid rain and pollution, enrolling in multiple Adirondack conservation organizations, and remaining on the Adirondack Park Agency Board of Commissioners for years. LaBastille’s experiences in the Adirondack wilderness touch on multiple facets of how women existed in the area. Even though she was inspired by Thoreau's *Walden*, her remarkable story of survival, conservation, and adventure is eclipsed by Thoreau’s own efforts and stories, remaining relatively unknown in the male-dominated environmental literature.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis places women at its center, departing from the customary approach of exploring environmental history through the efforts of men, in order to explore the ways in which women have been significant figures in the environmental history of the United States. Women who participated in such environmental history including those mentioned in this narrative entered a terrain dominated by men, causing their achievements and contributions to be ignored. The intersection of environmental history and women’s history surprisingly remains in its infancy, but there have been several exciting new works materializing, which are discussed in this thesis including among others *Saving the “Wild” West* by Glenda Riley, Peggy Lynn and Sandra Weber’s *Breaking Trail: Remarkable Women of the Adirondacks*, and *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* written by Marsha Weisiger. This analysis of pioneering women in the

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<sup>80</sup> LaBastille, 56.

American West and the Adirondacks recognizes the intersection of women and the environment throughout different geographic boundaries, time periods, and cultures. Without acknowledging women as historical subjects in the environmental history of these two locales, scholars provide only some but not all of its history. The historiography of the Adirondacks and American West is dominated by masculine narratives highlighting men in the vast landscapes, often depicted as rugged and free individuals, and neglecting the women who either lived alongside them or survived on their own. This thesis revises the conventional histories that argue the wilderness is no place for women by suggesting that women were very much part of this wilderness and central and essential to United States' environmental history. Women who loved and worked in the West and the Adirondacks left some documents behind that reveal their existence and contribution to the environmental history of the United States. Women like Jackson Hole resident, Geraldine L. Lucas, Yellowstone National Park rangers, Mary Rolfe and Marguerite Lindsley, the Navajo women of the Southwest, Adirondack Park Guides, Julia Burton Preston and Anne LaBastille, Adirondack native, Alice Paden Green, and tuberculosis survivor Grace Hudowalski. America's "wildernesses" are not one-dimensional and both women and men need to be understood as active subjects creating space for themselves in these areas in order to create a more complete history of the American environment.



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