

***A Not Too Greatly Changed Eden:
The Story of The Philosophers' Camp in the Adirondacks***



Of all the paintings in the Concord Free Public Library's art collection, the one in which researchers and visitors have the most interest does not depict Concord at all, although it is very important in the iconography of the town. It is *The Philosophers' Camp in the Adirondacks* by William James Stillman, painted in 1858. The painting, which hangs in the library's reference room, depicts a camping trip taken in August of 1858, in which Stillman led a group that included Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Louis Agassiz, Judge Ebenezer Rockwood Hoar and several others to Follensby Pond in the Adirondack wilderness. The library acquired the painting in 1895 through the bequest of Judge Hoar.

Though best recognized as an artist who worked in the style of the Hudson River School (he studied under Frederic Church), William James Stillman's life seemed a never-ending quest to find himself and his place in the world. In addition to painting, he worked as a war correspondent, a diplomat, a political activist (involved in Kossuth's Hungarian revolution), and a photographer, but in the end identified himself as a writer. Stillman briefly edited *The Crayon*, a graphic arts and literary periodical that he founded in 1855. A native of upstate New York, he explored the Adirondacks as an artist, while at the same time acquiring valuable experience as an outdoorsman. His work as editor of *The Crayon* engendered contact with a number of local writers and as a result he became friends with several members of Boston's esteemed Saturday Club, several of whom he persuaded to accompany him on a camping expedition in the summer of 1858.

Philosophers' camp though it was, the strenuous life was the order of the day. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, and hiking filled the daylight hours, while evening lent itself to transcendent conversation. A respected ichthyologist, Agassiz was able to expand his body of work while at the pond, while James Russell Lowell proved a capable woodsman, relishing the hunt in particular, which consisted of using dogs to drive deer into the water where they were easily taken with a rifle shot. Loathe even to pick up a rifle, Emerson shot only at bottles. And though more comfortable in his study or on gentler treks through Concord's fields and woodlands, he enjoyed the sojourn immensely and glimpsed a wilder, more majestic view of nature than was available in Concord.

And for those who are wondering, yes, Henry David Thoreau was asked, but declined the invitation.

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James Schlett, author of *A Not Too Greatly Changed Eden: The Story of the Philosophers' Camp in the Adirondacks* (Cornell University Press, 2015), will speak at the Concord Free Public Library on Saturday, September 26th at 5:00 p.m. The talk is free and open to the public.

Mr. Schlett's presentation will focus on the Adirondack adventures of two Concordians: Ralph Waldo Emerson's first encounter with raw nature and Ebenezer Rockwood Hoar's involvement in creating the legend of the Philosophers' Camp and his role in the Adirondack Club's bid to purchase 22,500 acres around Ampersand Pond in the Adirondacks. Hoar was the first president of the Concord Free Public Library.

The book has been featured in the *Boston Globe*, on NPR's *All Things Considered*, and was excerpted in the October issue of *Adirondack Life*.