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Introduction

Picture for the moment a forest of rolling snow-covered hills with acres and acres of maple trees that have been tapped in the springtime for their sap to be made into maple syrup. With taps numbering around 50,000 this massive volume of sap is moved downhill from the sugarbush by thousands of feet of pipeline to a series of large collection tanks. The seemingly endless supply of fresh sap is reduced to maple syrup by boiling inside a collection of massive warehouse-like buildings each containing many enormous evaporators. At the end of the season, thousands of gallons of syrup are stored in barrels inside a warehouse, waiting to be repackaged into fancy glass containers and remade into other maple products.

This reads like a description of a modern commercial maple syrup operation, but it might surprise one to learn that in fact it is a description of the Horse Shoe Forestry Company maple syrup operation deep in the wilderness of the Adirondack mountains one-hundred and twenty years ago. This maple operation was the creation of Abbot Augustus Low and served as the centerpiece of his Horse Shoe Forestry Company and extensive forest estate.

As a wealthy and prominent Brooklynite, A.A. Low established his estate and forestry company in the late 1890s following the opening of the interior of the Adirondack wilderness by the entry of the Mohawk & Malone Railroad (M & M). With the wealth to quickly purchase large tracts of land, build railroads and dams, erect sawmills, and syrup plants, and provide residences for workers, an industrial landscape was developed seemingly overnight. But it was not just a working forest centered around Horseshoe Lake in the wilderness. The Lows after all were a family of means and A.A. Low saw to it that his family had a Great Camp to relax and entertain other New York City elites.

This is where the Low estate differed from most of the Adirondack Great Camps. Instead of simply developing a private recreational retreat like many of the better-known Great Camps, for Low, the camp was secondary to the importance to the activities of the Forestry Company. The decision to call his company a “forestry company” and not a timber or logging or lumber company at that time in our history reflected Low’s embracing the changing ideas of a more integrated approach to forest management, emphasizing a diversified use of the forest and forest products, with maple syrup production at its core.¹

Horseshoe Pond, later named Horseshoe Lake, as the central geographic feature of this story, is a 426-acre lake southwest of the water body of Tupper Lake in the northwest quarter of the Adirondack Park (Figure 1.1). More specifically, Horseshoe Lake is in the Town of Piercefield in the southeast corner of St. Lawrence County, New York. The larger estate of A.A. Low surrounding Horseshoe Lake also encompassed land in the adjacent Towns of Colton in St. Lawrence County and the Town of Long Lake in Hamilton County.²



Figure 1.1: General location of Horseshoe Pond and the estate of A.A. Low within the Adirondack region of New York. Map by author.

Horseshoe the place did not begin with A.A. Low. Following the completion of the M & M railroad in 1892 a small hotel sprang up to serve the rather modest railroad station adjacent to Horseshoe Pond. The Horseshoe Pond area was a logical area for a station due to the popularity of the area for hunting and fishing and the proximity of the pond to the railroad tracks for access to clean water for the trains and harvesting ice in winter. It was in 1896, with the beginning of Low's land purchases around Horseshoe that things really began to change. Workmen by the dozens arrived and Horseshoe grew rapidly into a working town with the construction of a personal cottage for Low, along with a sawmill,

barns, pasture, gardens, offices, small cottages and a boarding house, and later a new and improved railroad station. A fine, graveled road was built six miles through the woods to Silver Lake, later renamed Lake Marian, and a Great Camp was erected. Three branches of a private working railroad, complete with locomotives and rolling stock, snaked out from Horseshoe Station and settlement into the maple forests of the growing estate. At key points and at the terminal ends of these rail lines, Low erected massive maple syrup plants, woodworking mills, and dams. Prior to the construction of hydroelectric dams, steam powered generators electrified the entire Horse Shoe Company operation, as well as the Horseshoe settlement, station, and Great Camp at Lake Marian.



Figure 1.2: Topographic Map of the Greater Horseshoe Landscape. Tupper Lake 7.5 Min U.S.G.S Quadrangle. 1954 edition.

In ten short years Low carved an industrial landscape out of the Adirondack wilderness. But almost as soon as it started, a massive forest fire in the fall of 1908 swept across the draught-stricken lands around Horseshoe Lake and the Bog River. Although the buildings and infrastructure of the Horse Shoe Company were saved, Low's valuable maple woods were largely destroyed, suddenly bringing his maple operation to a halt. Low himself died a few years later in 1912 and in the coming years the Low estate was broken up and sold off to various groups and individuals who brought new uses and faces to the landscape of Horseshoe. Geographically speaking, at the core of the Horse Shoe

story and Low's estate is a place called Horseshoe (Figure 1.2). Over time, Horseshoe has come to mean a settlement, a railroad station, a pond (later called a lake), and company.

Today, the lands around Horseshoe Lake are mostly owned by the people of the State of New York and managed by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and are a well-known and easily accessed recreational destination in the center of the Adirondacks with campsites, hiking, biking, canoeing and snowmobiling opportunities. Designated by the Adirondack Park Agency as a mix of state-owned Wild Forest, Primitive



Figure 1.3: Abbot August Low riding a flatbed railcar on his private Horse Shoe Forestry Company railroad. Collections of the St. Lawrence Country Historical Association.

Area, and Wilderness Area along with privately held managed forests, today's Horseshoe landscape is managed to present visitors with a natural outdoor experience, largely free of the structures and modifications of settlement common to more urban areas. In short, it is managed today to be a place much different in appearance from the landscape of forest industry it was a little over one hundred years ago. But do not be fooled. Even though remains of standing buildings and railroad tracks are no longer evident, a wide range of features and fingerprints have been left behind for reading this historic landscape.

The Horseshoe story and story of A.A. Low has appeal because it is many stories rolled into one. Some will find interest in the biography of A.A. Low, a uniquely wealthy man who was not afraid to develop his ideas, take risks, and try new ways of doing things during the Gilded Age (Figure 1.3).

To railroad historians, the Horseshoe story is an important chapter in the development of the M & M and New York Central & Hudson River Railroad (NYC RR) through the Adirondacks. Others will want to know more about the development and continued existence of privately held Great Camp in the Adirondacks. Still others are curious about the later stories of boys' and girls' camps, private hunting clubs, hydropower development, the American Legion Mountain Camp for returning World War II veterans, and boy scout camps. Some want to explore the process of how this landscape come into state land ownership and park status and finally attempts by the state to re-wild the land. It is not hard to see how the Horseshoe story, from pre-Low to today, is a microcosm of the history of the Adirondacks and a case study in the range and breadth of Adirondack land use and management.

On top of all that, and near and dear to the heart of this author, the Horse Shoe Forestry Company and A.A. Low is the story of the first industrial-scale maple syrup production in the world. Low dared to go into syrup making on a huge scale at a time when most maple producers were small, farm-based seasonal operations, working a few hundred to maybe a few thousand taps on a single evaporator in a small sugarhouse nestled in their sugarbush. From the start, the Horse Shoe Forestry Company maple operation was none of that, rather it was an order of magnitude larger than the next biggest sugarbush in North America. As a historian with a specialty in the history of the maple syrup industry, my emphasis in telling the story of A.A. Low and the Horse Shoe Forestry Company focuses on the maple sugaring operation within the context of the larger narrative of the Horseshoe story and A.A. Low's life and estate.

To that end, the book is organized into eleven chapters to present a coherent overview and background for understanding the development of the Horseshoe landscape, while setting the stage for a detailed description and interpretation of the Horse Shoe Forestry Company maple operations. Based on primary historical research and original archaeological field investigation, the descriptive chapters present many never-before published historic maps, photographs, and original site maps. Because the Horseshoe story did not end with the dissolution of the Horse Shoe Forestry Company, the book carries the story forward to today, outlining significant events and land use changes that followed the company's end.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two presents a brief biography and examination of Abbot Augustus Low the individual and the mind behind the formation of this endeavor. Chapter Three traces the development of Low's estate and the operation of the Horse Shoe Forestry Company's industrial landscape within the historical and regional context of the Adirondacks at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Besides being interesting in their own right, such details are vital for setting the stage for understanding the place and integration of Low's maple syrup operation in the greater Horseshoe landscape. Chapter Four describes the maple sugar and syrup industry at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States and Canada as a

context to better understand and recognize the significance and uniqueness of Low's operation. Chapter Five details the evolution and history of production of maple syrup at Horseshoe. Following a short introduction, Chapters Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine describe the built environment and the archaeological evidence that remains today of the four primary locations of maple syrup operations in the Horseshoe industrial landscape.

Chapter Ten even brings the Horseshoe story forward from the Horse Shoe Forestry Company's end with the fire of 1908 up through to the present. The new faces and new uses of the land that came with the fragmentation of the estate are detailed in chronological order. Concluding it all is Chapter Eleven which presents a summary of the Horseshoe story, integrating the chapters, themes, and events to provide the reader with a better understanding and appreciation of the history and place that is Horseshoe.

Considerations of Previous Research

While working on this story and talking with people interested in my research, I realized that I was wading into the murky waters of a variety of carefully held beliefs and traditional knowledge of the community of those that know and love the Adirondacks. Many lovers of the Adirondacks have an intimate familiarity with the Horseshoe and greater Bog River areas, having hiked, canoed, hunted, and camped in the area for decades. Many treat their understanding of A.A. Low and the Horse Shoe story as sacred knowledge. However, my research made it clear that upon closer examination, the historical record did not agree with a great deal of the details of the often-repeated stories of Horseshoe. To upset the status-quo of the prevailing narrative was not a goal or desire when undertaking this project. In researching and re-telling this story, I have never specifically sought the role of myth buster. But history is constantly being rewritten, and the Horseshoe story is no exception.

How, or from where, is it that folks have developed their understanding of the Horseshoe story? In addition to word of mouth and the retelling of oral history, there are a handful of articles and chapters in books published in the last forty years describing the Horse Shoe Forestry Company and Low's "dynasty". Overwhelmingly, the publication cited as being the authoritative source on Low and the Horse Shoe Forestry Company is a 1974 article by F. Mark Clark. Clark's article is illustrated with a nice variety of photos from the period of A.A. Low. It features a map indicating the location of important places on the Horseshoe landscape and is peppered with dates and is rich in details on Low's activities at Horseshoe. Unfortunately, the article contains a small handful of supporting references, and is largely lacking in documentation directing a reader or researcher to the primary or secondary sources consulted by Clark. In other words, a discerning reader of the Clark article is left wondering just where he learned the details he described? By and large a lack of supporting references or notes is not uncommon for magazine style publications. However, in this case, the article was published in *The Quarterly*, a journal of the St. Lawrence County Historical Society, whose format and institutional title leads