

Uncovering the History of the Backbone Ridge
by
Walt Gable, Seneca County Historian

The Backbone Ridge is the name given to the hilltop ridge that runs between Seneca and Cayuga Lakes and today is the center of the Finger Lakes National Forest. Its history represents a microcosm of the larger economic, social, and political transformations that have taken place in American society since 1900.¹

Following the Revolutionary War, white settlers moved into this area, which was part of the Military Tract, as farmers. These early settlers cleared the land for production of hay and small grains such as buckwheat. As New York City grew, a strong market for these products developed, encouraging more intensive agriculture. The farmers prospered until about 1900. By 1900, soil depletion and increasing competition from the Midwest made farming in this Hector Hills area marginal. Between 1890 and the Great Depression (following the stock market crash in October 1929), over a million acres of farmland were abandoned in south central New York State. In the 1930s, it was recognized that farmers in many parts of the country could no longer make a living from their exhausted land. Environmental damage was occurring as they cultivated the land more and more intensively to make ends meet.



During the Great Depression, the U.S. Government, through its Resettlement Administration, stepped in to buy many farms, and help relocate their residents to better land or other jobs. Through this New Deal program, between 1938 and 1941, over 100 farms were acquired. Because the purchase of farms was done on a willing-seller, willing-buyer basis, the resulting Federal ownership resembled a patchwork quilt. This was especially true in the Seneca County portion, where because the soils were more productive, some of the families elected to stay. The newly-acquired Federal land was named the Hector Land Use Area (LUA) and was initially managed by the Soil Conservation Service. The emphasis was on stabilization of the soil by planting conifers, and development of a grazing program. Previously cultivated fields were converted to improved pastures to demonstrate how less-intensive agriculture could still make productive use of the land.

The Hector Cooperative Grazing Association was formed informally in 1938 and formally in 1946. This organization was issued a long-term lease to manage grazing on the Hector Land Use Area. This organization coordinated use of the pastures by as many as 120 individual livestock owners within a 100 mile radius.

By the 1950's, many of the original objectives of the Hector Land Use Area had been met. Farmers had been resettled, the eroding soil stabilized, and alternative agriculture uses demonstrated. At the same time, the public was becoming interested in the concept of multiple uses of public land. Management and private ownership of the Hector LUA was re-evaluated. In 1954, the decision was made to transfer administrative responsibilities to the U.S. Forest Service.²

In the 1970's, the Hector lands were identified as some of the possible lands to resolve Cayuga Indian Land Claim. The discussion centered on a total of 3,629 acres in Seneca County, comprising 27% of the total land base of Seneca County.³ This out-of-court settlement did not materialize and the Cayuga's filed a formal court case in 1980.

In 1982, the Hector area was identified by the federal government as one of the federal land use area which would be considered as excess to Forest Service needs and thus could be sold under existing authority without review by Congress. This touched off a massive local protest effort. A total of 520 comments from the public were received plus seven petitions with more than 8,200 signatures of those opposing the sale. Because of strong opposition to such a proposal, Congressmen Frank Horton and Stan Lundine introduced legislation to incorporate officially the Hector area in the Green Mountain Forest system so that Hector could not be sold without approval by Congress.

National Forest status was given to the former Hector Land Use Project lands by Congress on November 29, 1983. At that time the Forest consisted of a checkerboard pattern of land parcels totaling about 13,000 acres.⁴ In October 1985, the area was renamed the "Hector Ranger District, Finger Lakes National Forest." Today, the Finger Lakes National Forest, which consists of 16,212 acres, is still an administrative unit of the Green Mountain National Forest.



Although about 3.2 million acres of New York State is in the State Forest Preserves, Wildlife Management Areas, and Forests, the Finger Lakes National Forest is the only national forest in all of New York State!⁵

The Finger Lakes National Forest (FLNF) today is comprised of these farmlands, and remnants of the past, such as old stone walls, cellar holes, stone foundations, wells, and cemeteries that dot the landscape. Lou Ann Wurst of SUNY College at Brockport has been leading archaeology students for the past six

(Shown above is the Warren Clark homestead in the Finger Lakes National Forest..)

summers in archaeological excavations at a sample of farms located at the south end of the forest. The goals of the project are to understand the everyday life of these farm families from initial settlement in the early 1800s until the farms were finally abandoned. Their preliminary work suggests that farm families on the Backbone Ridge were making capital investments to improve their farms, changing their agricultural production strategies to match current markets, and investing in costly *(Shown at right are some artifacts uncovered in these Brockport excavations.)*



consumer goods such as automobiles, telephones, radios, and domestic objects well into the 20th century. These results contradict the commonly held belief that farming in this part of the country declines over a long period of time and indicate that the history of agriculture in this area was much more complex than is typically summed.⁶

Realizing that the history of this area prior to the Great Depression might be forgotten, and even lost with the death of so many of the residents of that time period, the Backbone Ridge History Group (BRHG) was formed in 2006. The BRHG is a grass roots organization to collect the history of the land and the people in this Backbone Ridge area. The group is very interested in this area because the Backbone Ridge was once heavily populated with people, farms and towns and was dramatically changed by the purchases by the Resettlement Administration. The BRHG has adopted the following mission statement:

*To identify and facilitate public access to sources of information documenting the history of the people, communities, and lands in around the Finger Lakes National Forest and promote the study of this history.*⁷

Given the aging of the population that has lived in this Backbone Ridge prior to the purchases by the Resettlement Administration, the Backbone Ridge History Group is initially focusing its energies on identifying existing primary source information about the history of this area and encouraging the preservation of these irreplaceable documents and artifacts. The BRHG is currently in the second phase of grants from the Documentary Heritage Program of the New York State Archives to help with these efforts. If you have any information, especially photos, family diaries, farm ledgers, store records, etc., you are urged to contact one of the following members of the BRHG Advisory Team:

Kari Lusk, Finger Lakes National Forest, 607-546-4470, klusk@fs.fed.us

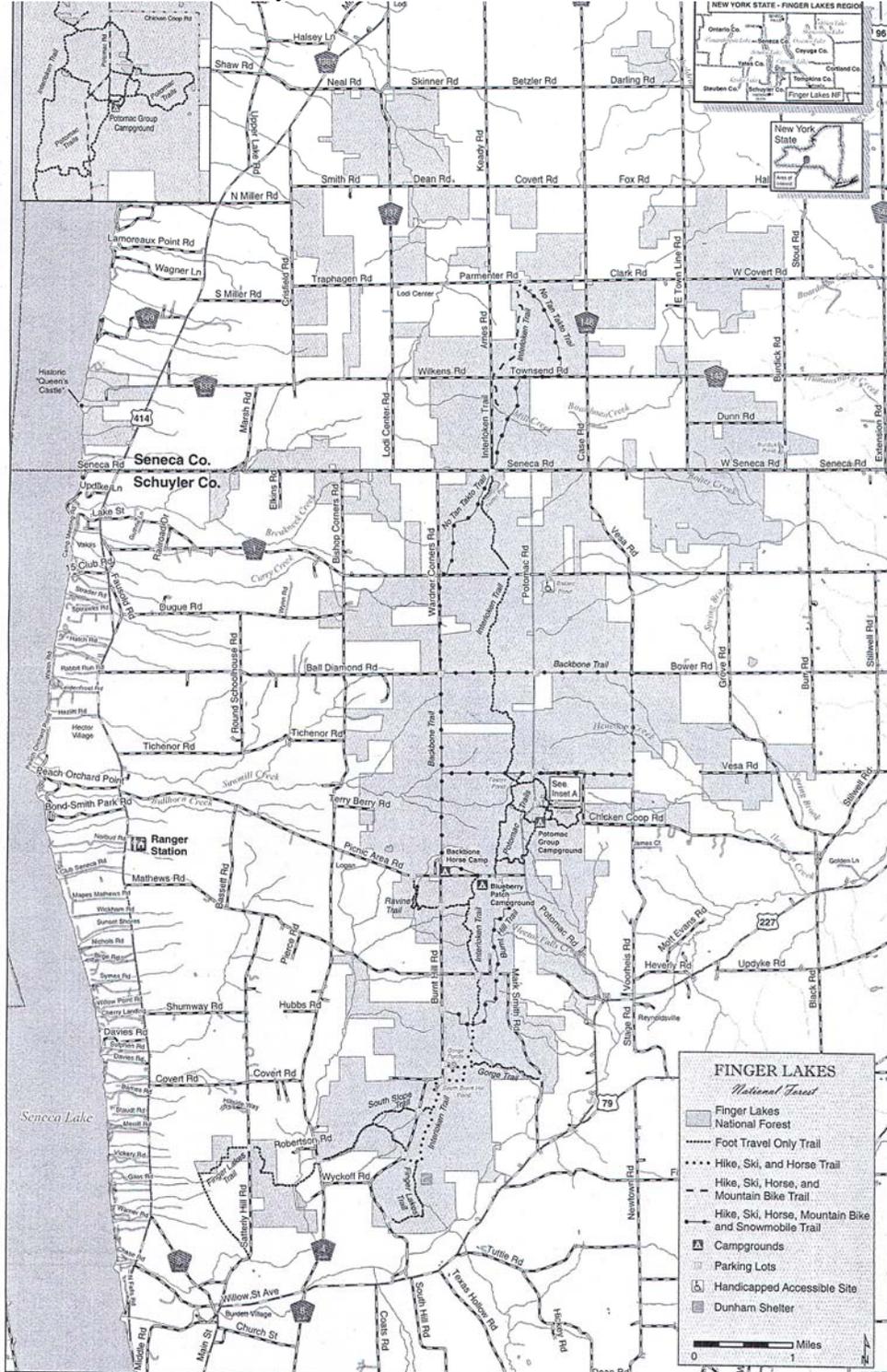
Allan Buddle, Interlaken Historical Society, 607-532-4213, orchardland@zoom-dsl.com

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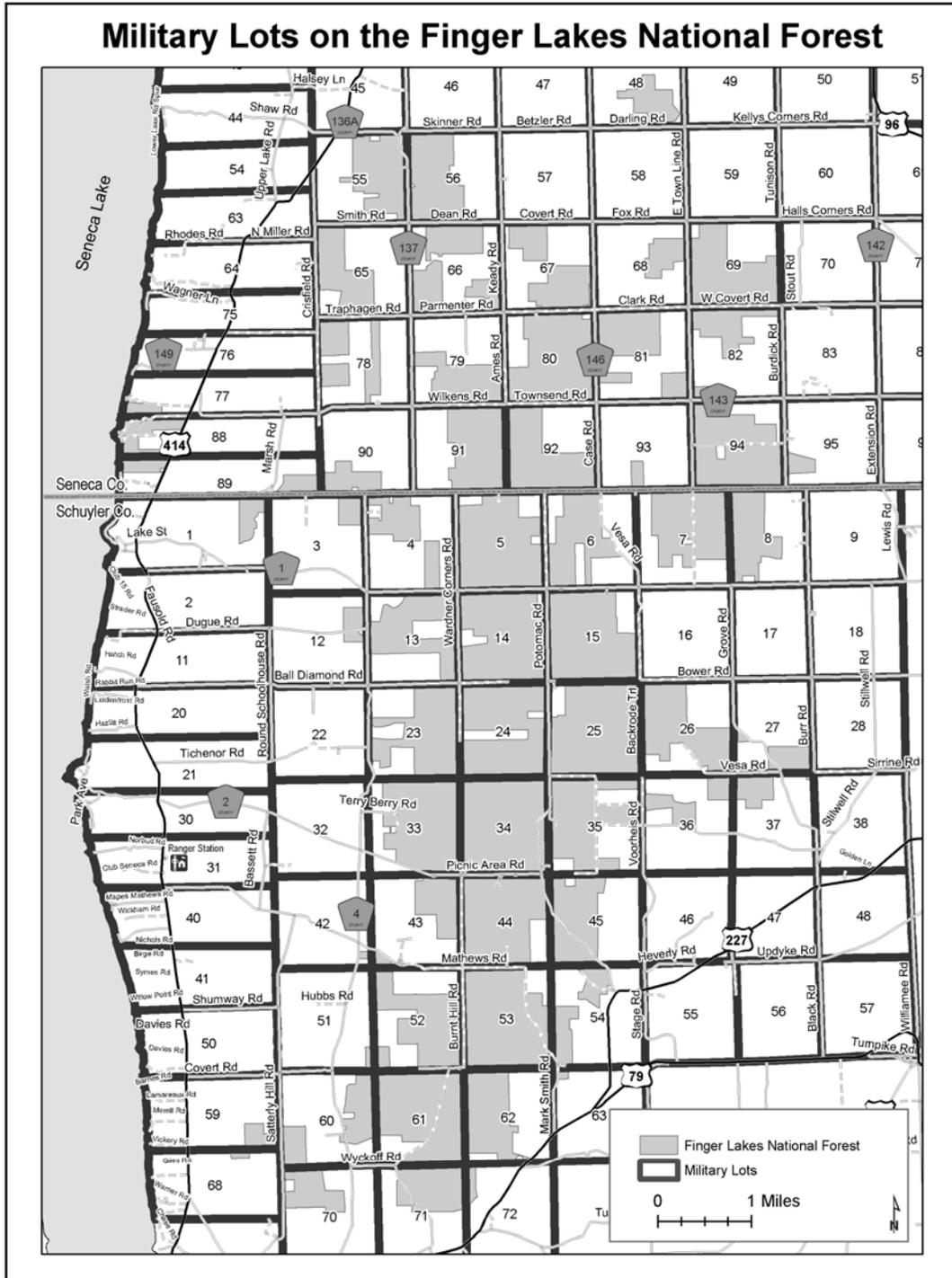
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As the informational brochure of the BRHG says, “History Matters! Please share your stories, photos, and information. Help us save your history for generations to come.”

This map comes from the Finger Lakes National Forest brochure and shows in detail the county line between Seneca and Schuyler Counties and the various roads in the Backbone Ridge:



This map, supplied by the Green Mountain Forest office, shows the FLNF and the military tract lots:



¹ Comments made by LouAnn Wurst, associate professor and chair, department of anthropology, SUNY College at Brockport, in a January 23, 2009 email to Allan Buddle, Christine Ridarsky, David Lacy, Kari Lusk, and Walt Gable

² Information taken from the Backbone Ridge History Group brochure.

³ Talking points prepared by Kari Lusk of the Finger Lakes National Forest

⁴ Talking points prepared by Kari Lusk of the Finger Lakes National Forest

⁵ Information basically quoted from the website of the Finger Lakes National Forest (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/greenmountain/htm/fingerlakes>)

⁶ "Archaeology students digging at FL forest," *The Finger Lakes Times*, July 6, 2008.

⁷ Information taken from the Backbone Ridge History Group brochure.