Middlebury's Bread Loaf Lands: A Story of Nature, Humans, and a Conservation Legacy

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Pre-Human — Ice and Woods

To envision Middlebury College’s Bread Loaf lands before humans settled the Vermont landscape is to envision what glaciers have left behind. Smooth mountain ridges, meandering brooks, and the ever-present forest cover are remnants of the glacial epoch.

As the glaciers of the late Wisconsin retreated, they left their mark on the Vermont landscape. The glacial till, a mix of rock, sand, and clay, formed the foundation for the future farmland. The glaciers also carved out valleys and left behind moraines, low hills of unsorted debris that were left behind as the ice retreated. These features provided fertile soil for early settlers.

Early Settlement of Bread Loaf — Working the Soil

Since the first French settlement of the region in 1634, the area was dominated by the Abenaki people. The Abenaki were skilled farmers and hunters, and they left behind a legacy of agricultural practices that influenced the early settlers.

By the early 1800s, today’s Bread Loaf campus was a heavily worked farm. Settlers in this mountain land area saw the benefits of converting the land to agriculture. They cleared the forests, drained the swamps, and built roads to facilitate the movement of goods and people.

Battell’s Management of the Forest

Battell’s tenure at Middlebury College coincided with a period of rapid forest exploitation in Vermont. During this time, “timber butchers” were cutting forests without regard for sustainability, leaving the landscape scarred and denuded. Battell recognized the value of maintaining forested landscapes for future generations.

Battell’s vision for Bread Loaf was rooted in his belief in the importance of preserving natural landscapes. He understood that the landscape held intrinsic value, beyond its potential for agricultural production. His efforts to preserve the forested landscapes of Bread Loaf laid the foundation for modern conservation efforts.

History as a Context for Bread Loaf’s Conservation History

By the mid-19th century, the concept of wilderness conservation was gaining traction. In the 1870s, Joseph Battell began acquiring land around Bread Loaf, with the goal of preserving the forested landscape for future generations.

In 1916, the Bread Loaf Land Trust was established to manage the lands and ensure their preservation. The Land Trust continues to this day, with the mission of protecting the natural and cultural heritage of Bread Loaf.

Conclusion

Today, Middlebury’s Bread Loaf Lands stand as a testament to the efforts of Joseph Battell and others who have worked to preserve and protect this unique landscape. The lands serve as a reminder of the importance of conservation and the value of preserving natural landscapes for future generations.