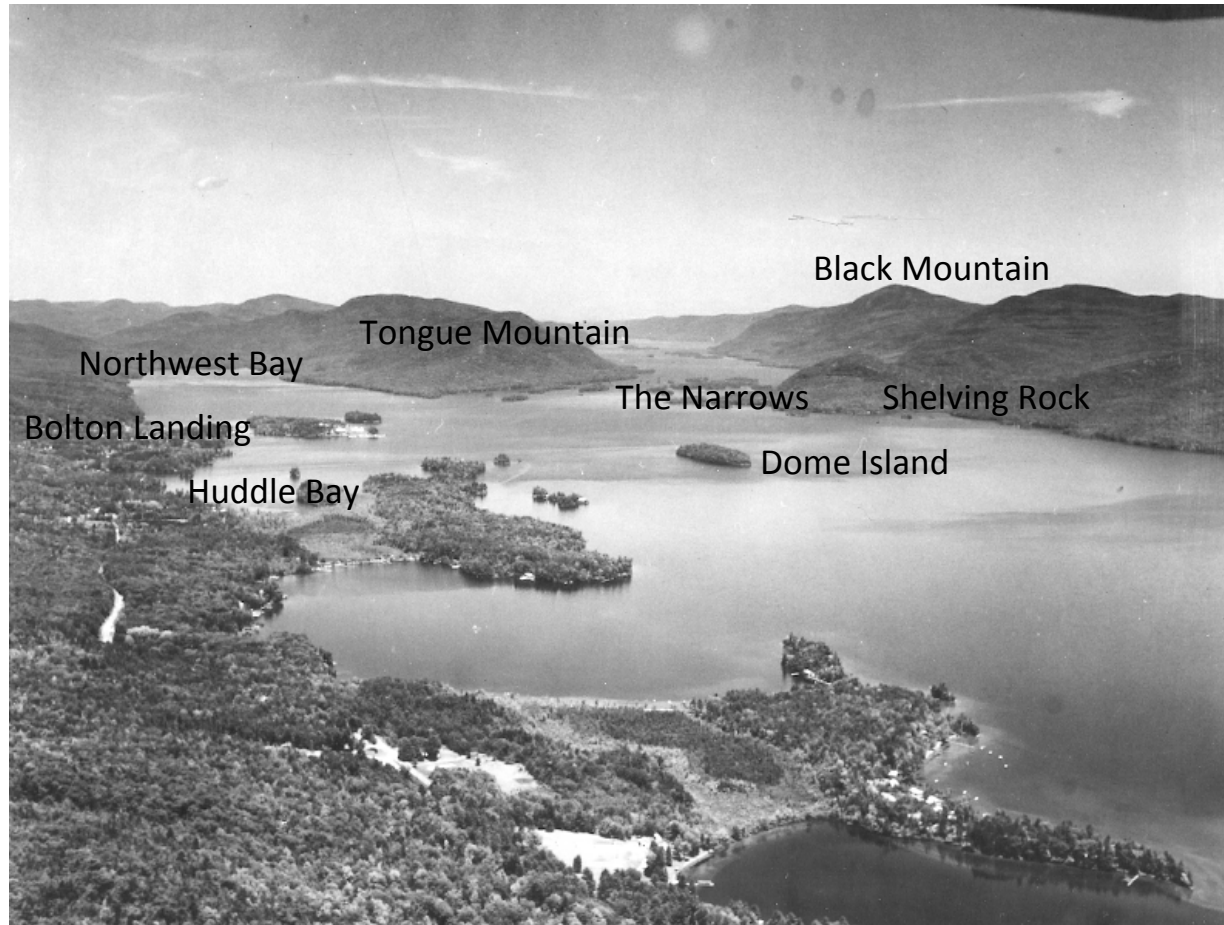


Lake George, New York

Fighting for Wilderness Preservation: An Untold Story

By Ellen Apperson Brown

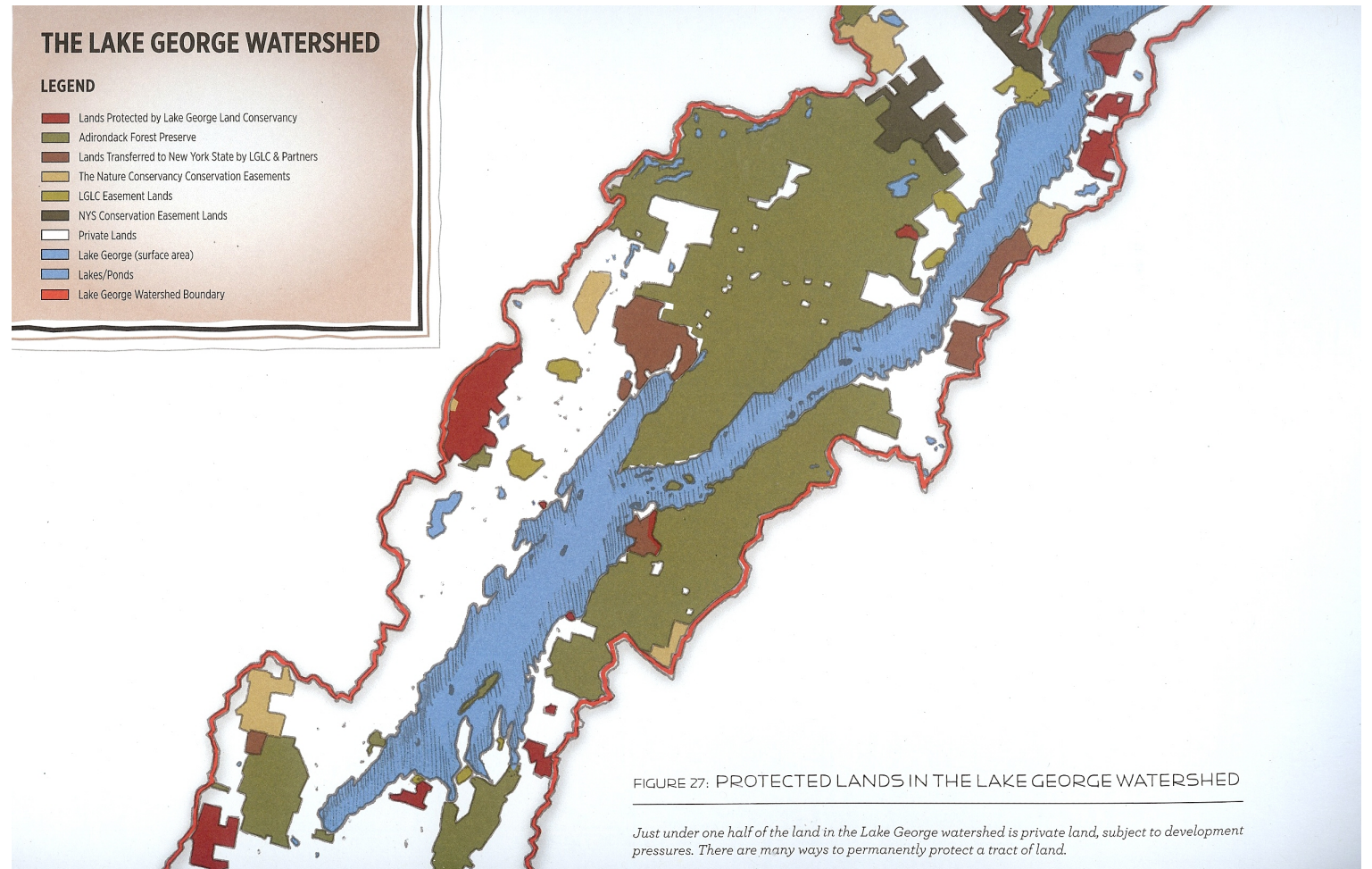


Utilization vs. Preservation

Lake George, a thirty-two mile long body of water on the eastern edge of the Adirondack Park, became a battle ground in the early 20th century, pitting private and commercial interests, who wanted to *utilize* the natural resources for personal gain, against preservationists, those who wanted to *preserve* the natural beauty for future generations to enjoy. Because of the efforts of an unlikely coalition of wealthy landowners, politicians, and an energetic group of outdoor enthusiasts, primarily from the General Electric Company, in Schenectady, more than one third of the lake's natural scenery was protected and preserved.



Starting in 1908, when a group of engineers started camping in the Narrows, they noticed that the islands were being threatened by high water levels, and decided to try and protect them. They recruited volunteers to help by hauling boulders from the main land, building rock walls around the edge of several islands, and thus preventing erosion of the soil. They soon moved on to other problems, such as the removal of squatters from state owned islands. They realized how important it would be to find friends and allies among the local landowners who shared their concerns. Their activities stirred up considerable resentment among those who wished to develop this area as an exclusive resort. The leading activist in this decades-long effort was a young man from Virginia, John S. Apperson, Jr.





John S. Apperson, Jr. (1878-1963) arrived in Schenectady in 1900, and soon found employment with the General Electric Company. By 1918 he had risen through the ranks to a top management position in the Power and Mining Department. His enthusiasm for various forms of recreation led him to a second career, as a preservationist, lobbyist and watchdog. He fought against corrupt politicians, published pamphlets, and created non-profit organizations to protect and preserve the spectacular scenery of his adopted state. He found sympathetic friends among leading lawyers, senators and politicians. This story, based primarily on a large collection (about 80 cubic feet!) of letters kept by Apperson and his friends, is finally coming to light, primarily through the efforts of Apperson's great niece, Ellen Apperson Brown, and with the help of archivists at the Kelly Adirondack Research Center, in Niskayuna.

Courtesy – Kelly Adirondack Research Center

This photo, taken in 1908, shows Apperson folding his sleeping bag on a big rock, on West Dollar Island, with French Point in the background. Over the next ten years or so, he used the Dollar Islands as his base of operations, bringing hundreds of friends to come enjoy the delightful experience of camping, and introducing them to exotic sports such as skate sailing and skiing. Everyone was encouraged to bring a rock (or a boat load of rocks) from the mainland to help rip-rap the shores.



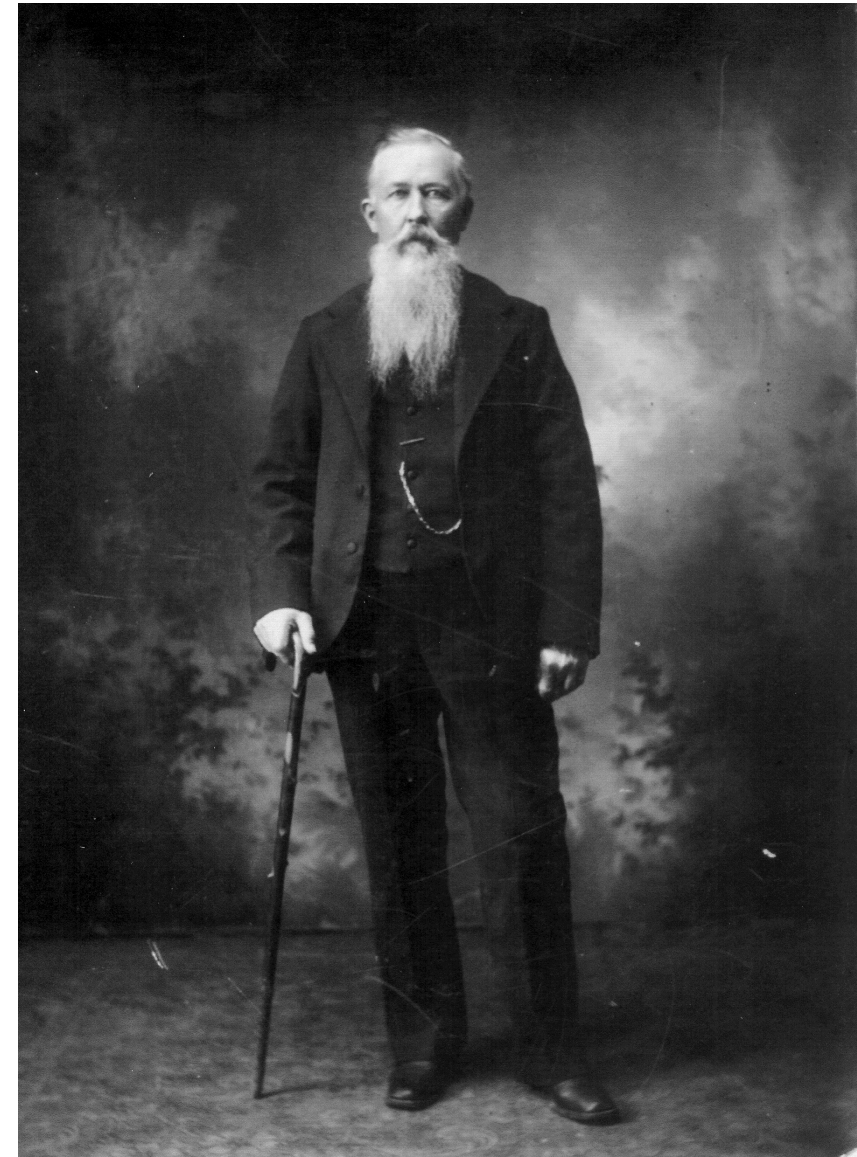
Apperson built a barge named Article 7 Section 7 (a reference to the forever wild clause of the New York Constitution), and used it in the summertime, taking heavy stones out to the islands. In the winter they used horse-drawn sleds and trucks.



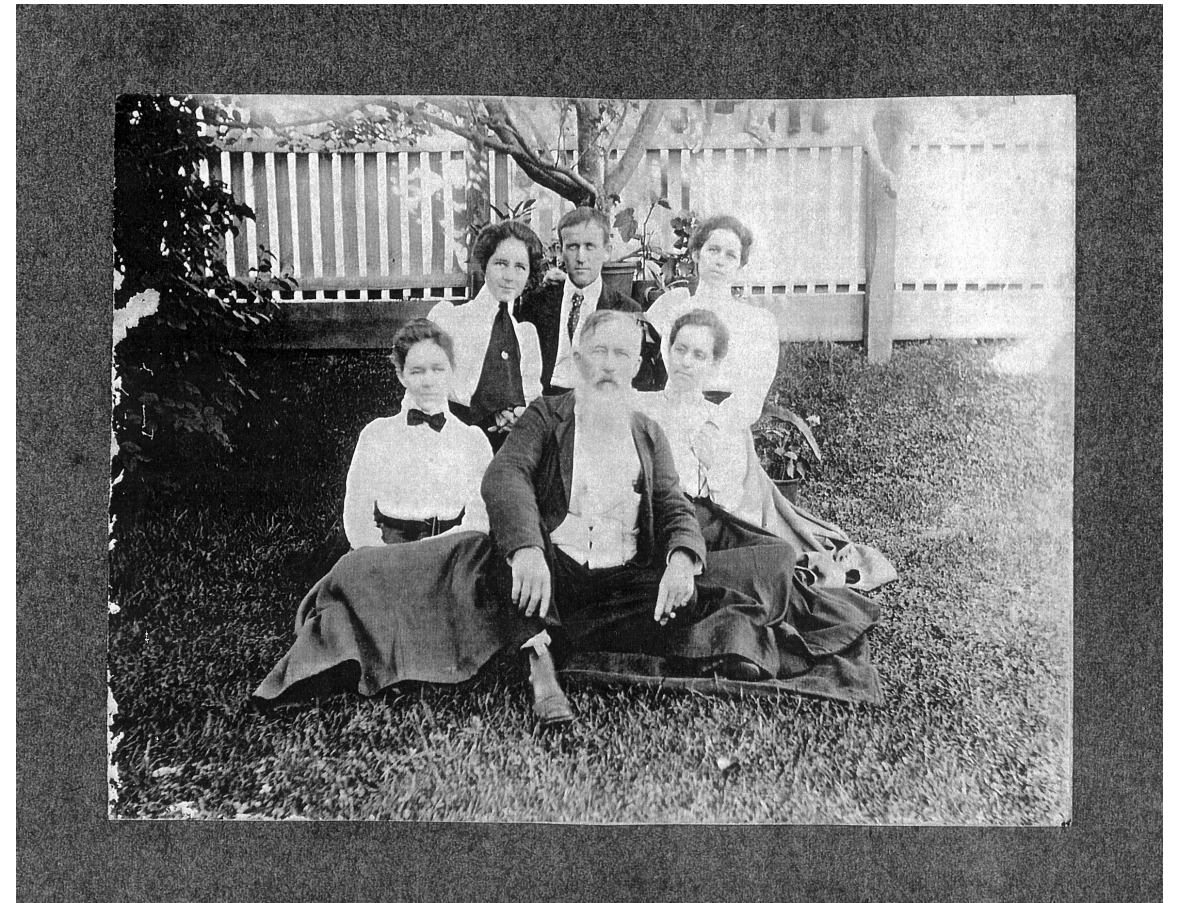
Before coming north to New York, Apperson had worked as the foreman for a branch railroad, in Grayson County, Virginia, where he supervised hundreds of men as they built roadbeds and laid down tracks. This experience gave him the idea, and the confidence, to build protective rock walls around the islands at Lake George, in a process called *rip-rapping*.



John's father, Dr. John S. Apperson, Sr., shown here in 1894, as Commissioner from Virginia at the Chicago World's Fair, was a self-made man, with unusual leadership abilities. He left home in 1859 with twelve dollars and a few postage stamps in his pocket, for parts unknown. He served as a medic throughout the Civil War, Army of Northern Virginia, became a country doctor, and then a leading entrepreneur and industrialist, helping to build up the "New South." John, Jr., born in 1878, in Chilhowie, Smyth County, absorbed the limited education available, in the local schools, but discovered a larger classroom in the out-of-doors, as he was allowed to roam throughout the countryside, particularly after his mother, Ellen Victoria Hull Apperson, died, in 1887, when he was just nine years old.

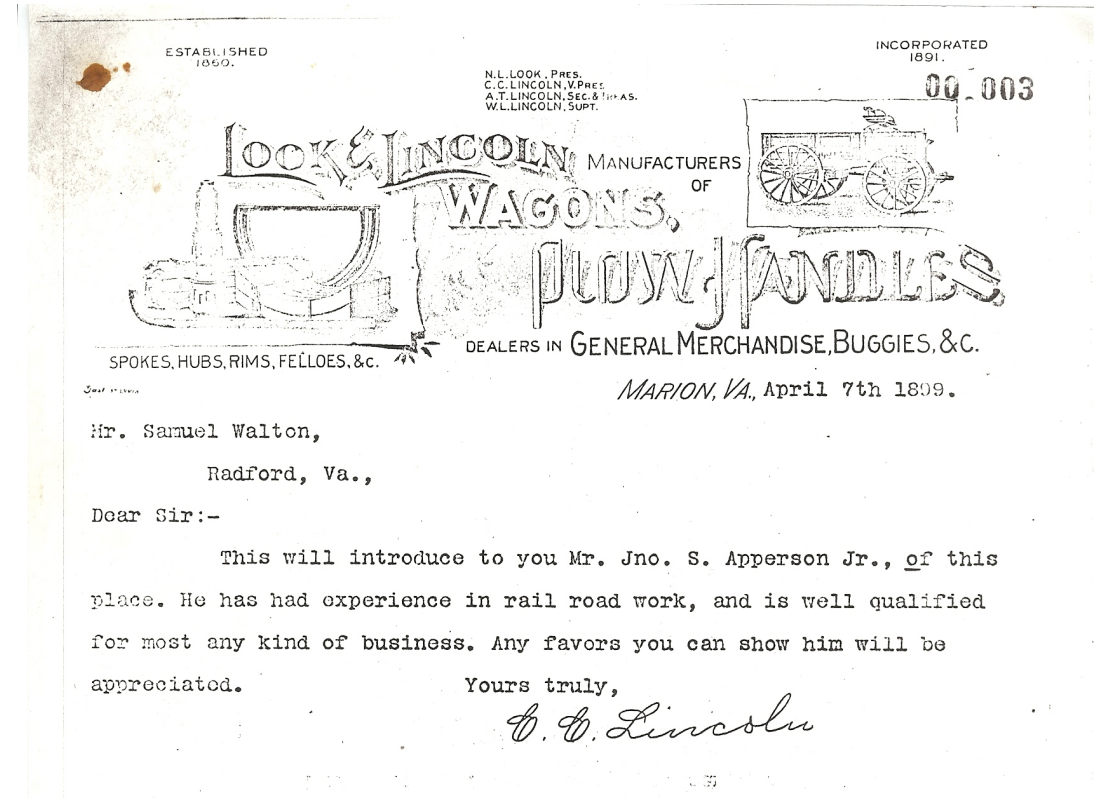
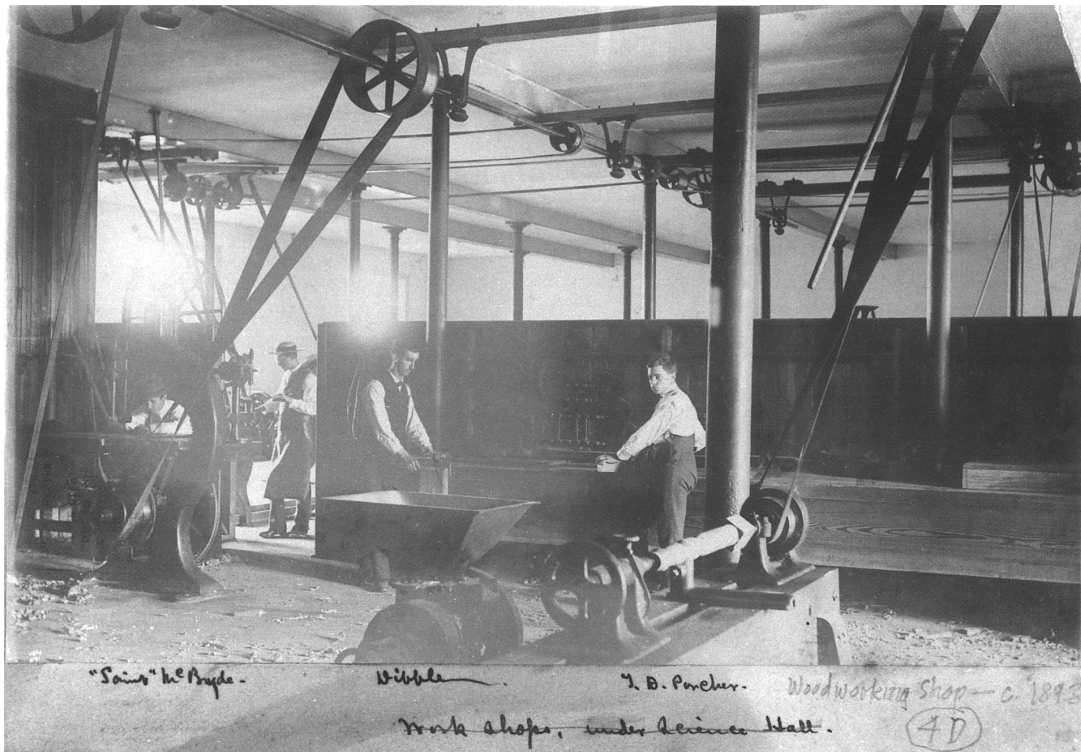


Dr. Apperson was appointed Assistant Physician for the Southwest Virginia Lunatic Asylum, in Marion, in 1887. Pictured here are Dr. Apperson (#2) and his son, John (#1) sitting on the steps along with other staff members and their families. Mrs. Apperson, John's mother, was probably inside, resting. She died within a few weeks of this photo, leaving six children ranging in ages from 7 to 18.



By 1899, Dr. Apperson had remarried and started a second set of children. Here he is pictured with the children of his first wife (clockwise from the left – Nancy, Ellen, John, Jr., Sallie, and Georgia.) The oldest, Hull, may have already left to seek employment in Schenectady, New York.

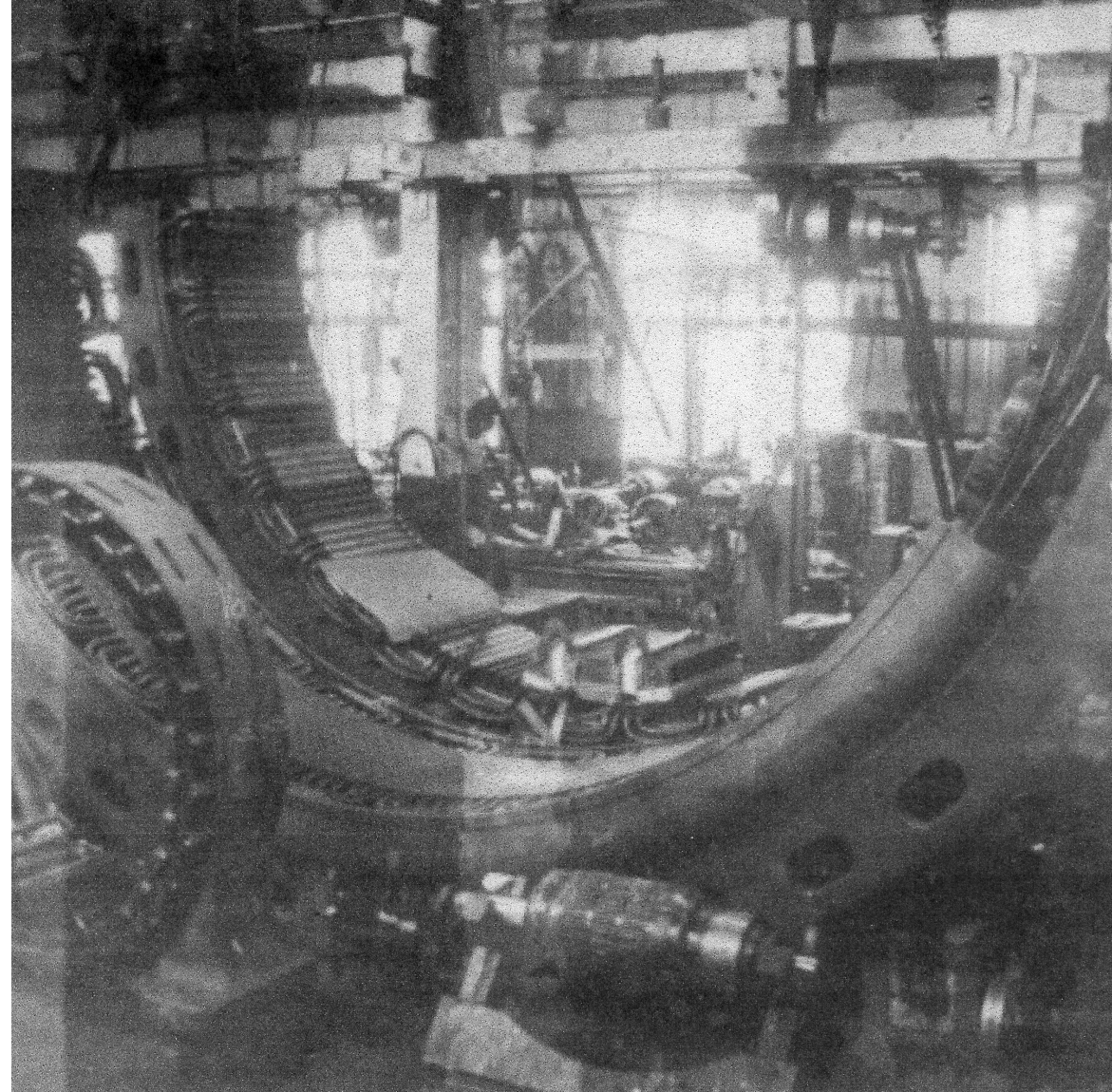
During the 1890s, Hull Apperson (b. 1869) earned a Bachelor of Science Degree from the Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College (now known as Virginia Tech) in Blacksburg, Virginia. He stayed on campus several more years working as a graduate student in Electrical Engineering. His younger brother, John, arrived in Blacksburg in 1894, as a sub-freshman. Notice the rather primitive equipment available in the “work shop.”



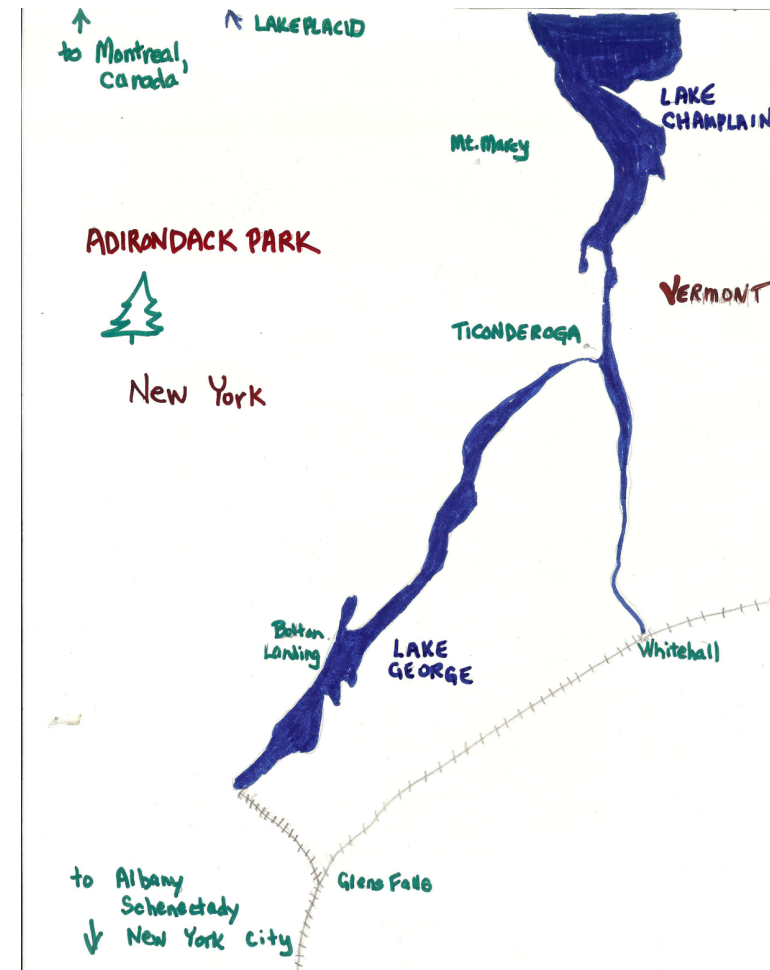
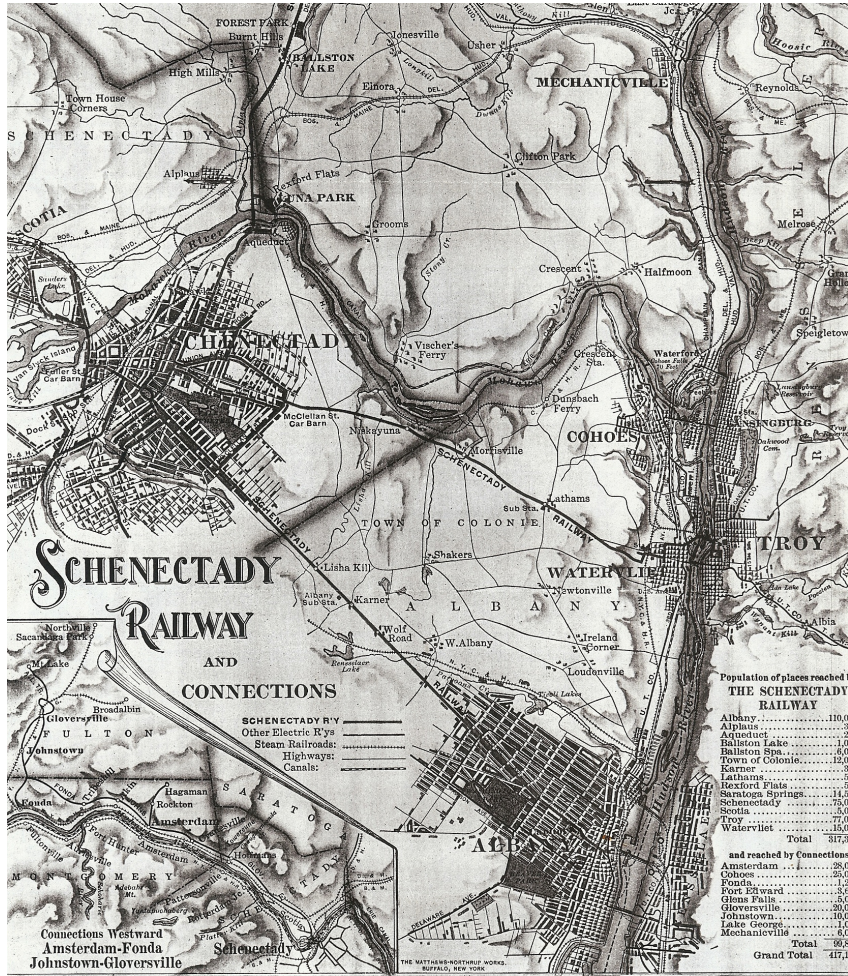
John did not apply himself to his school work, perhaps because he was not being challenged or stimulated by the curriculum available. His father refused to continue to pay his tuition, but in 1896 Dr. Apperson offered his son employment with the Marion and Rye Valley Railroad, as a surveyor. By 1899, John was back in the job market and applying for one of the few jobs available, at Look and Lincoln, in Radford.

Students in Blacksburg were eager to leave Virginia and find jobs in the newest fields, especially electrical engineering. Hull Apperson had visited the Chicago World's Fair, in 1894, and had heard all about Thomas Edison and all the exciting new opportunities in the field of electrical engineering. Schenectady was a mecca for him and hundreds of his contemporaries. Hull stayed at GE in Schenectady for about three years.

John, nine years younger than his brother, Hull, did not have much training in this field, but he was bright and eager to learn. Fortunately, G.E. was ready to launch a training program, and that is where John found his niche. He must have been impressed with the size and power of the equipment there, for he took this photograph of one of the generators.



By 1900, the General Electric Company was transforming Schenectady, a sleepy town, into a thriving industrial giant, and offering training in the new field of electrical engineering. These young scientists and engineers were eager to explore the huge playground to the north...



There were virtually no highways running north/south from Schenectady to Canada, back then. Only railroads and steamboats provided transportation. But that was about to change. As automobiles became affordable, the pressures mounted to build roads into the Adirondack Park.



Apperson made excursions into the Adirondack Park, earning a reputation around Schenectady as an expert in all forms of recreation. He also began building a reputation as an activist, as he became involved in efforts to protect the islands at Lake George. He made friends within the State Conservation Commission and supplied them with photographs for use in their magazine, *The Conservationist*. Here are two images that were published, telling the story of how volunteers were helping protect the islands of Lake George, and illustrating the extent of the damage from high water. He began to seek others who agreed with his vision of creating a **Lake George Park**.



In order to create such a park, the State of New York had to take ownership of lake shore property from private individuals and commercial interests.

This struggle lasted for 2-3 decades, but eventually resulted in the protection of:

Northwest Bay

Tongue Mountain

Paradise Bay, Shelving Rock, and Black Mountain



Courtesy Apperson Family Collection

The idea of creating a **Lake George Park** came primarily from a small group of wealthy landowners. Among those who supported the Park were:

Mary Loines (Mrs. Stephen) and her daughters, Hilda and Sylvia

William K. Bixby

George Foster Peabody

George O. Knapp

And a group of scientists and engineers:

John S. Apperson, Jr.

Irving Langmuir

And others:

Adelbert and Richmond Moot, Elwood Rabenold,
Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt, & Ethel Dreier

They ran up against opposition from:

William J. Knapp (son of George O. Knapp)

William G. Beckers

W. B. Woodbury (Lake George Association)

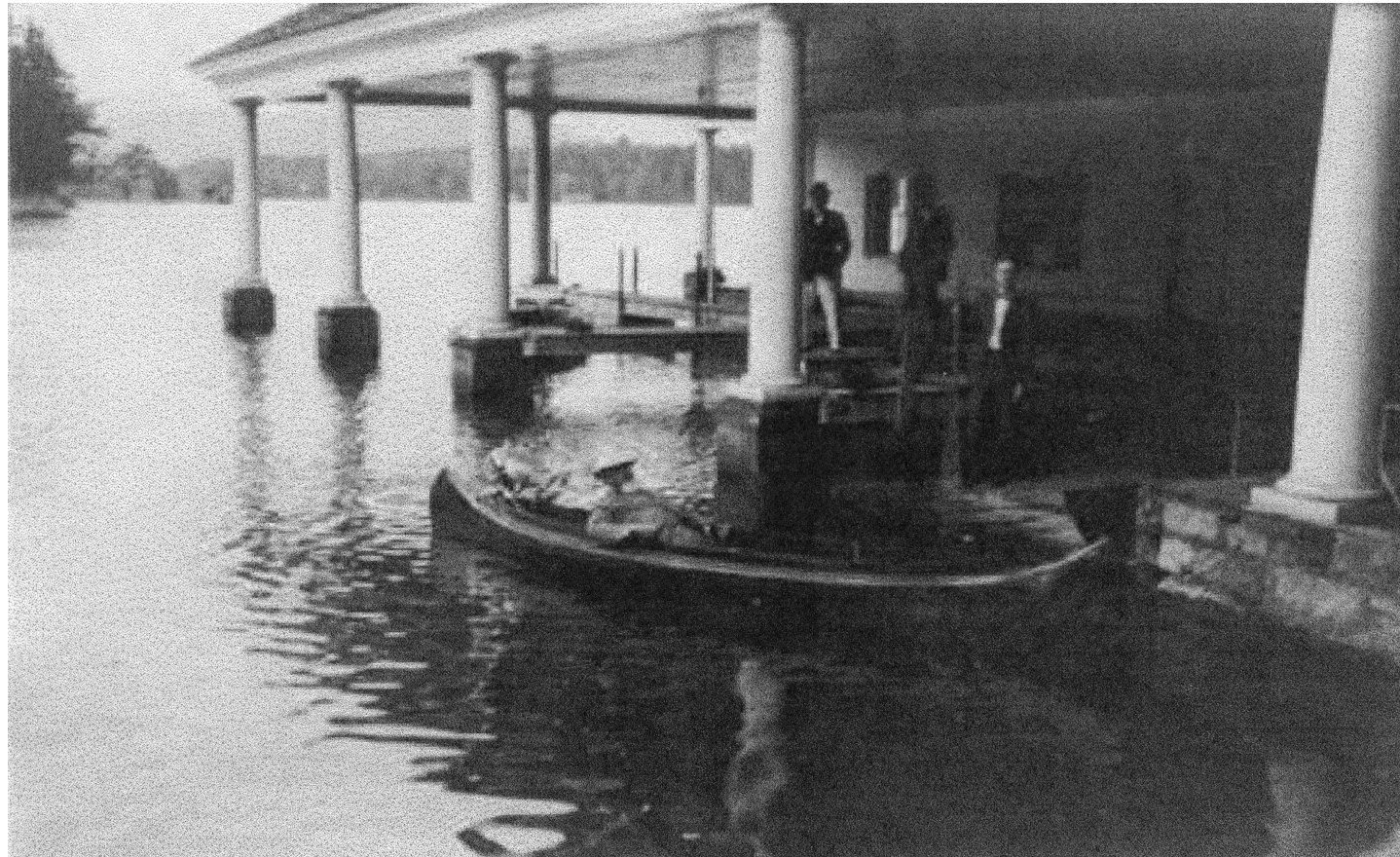
Alexander McDonald (Commissioner of Conservation)

Robert Moses (Secretary, parks commission, under Gov. Al Smith)



Unidentified group of volunteers moving rocks, on Hen and Chicken Island, 1912

William K. Bixby (an industrialist, collector and philanthropist from St. Louis) owned a beautiful mansion (Mohican Point) in Bolton Landing. He was delighted to have an elegant hotel (The Sagamore) in the neighborhood. However, he also wanted to preserve the peace and tranquility of the islands and shoreline stretching to the north of Bolton (from the Narrows to Black Mountain Point) and to protect them from unsightly development.



Courtesy Apperson Family Collection

A huge controversy emerged concerning the plans for building a road from Bolton Landing north toward Ticonderoga. Apperson wanted the land on both sides of the highway to be purchased by the state to ensure that no one could build gas stations or other such businesses. Based on letters in the Apperson archives, we know there were heated exchanges at a meeting of the Lake George Association, in the summer of 1923, followed by several letters to the editor in the *Lake George Mirror*. There was harsh criticism voiced against the Loines family because of their gift of 15 acres of land in Northwest Bay to the state of New York. John Apperson and George Foster Peabody sprang to the defense of Sylvia Loines, who had objected to the comments made at the LGA meeting.



Hilda Loines and her niece, Barbara
Courtesy Kelly Adirondack Research Center



Northwest Bay and Tongue Mountain

Dr. William Gerard Beckers built the Villa Marie Antoinette, in Huddle Bay, between 1917 and 1920. A German chemist and founder of Beckers Aniline and Chemical Company, he purchased 90 acres of shoreline property and built a mansion with 40 rooms.

Other prominent people wanted Lake George to be developed as a prestigious resort, with golf courses, exclusive clubs, and elegant hotels. William G. Beckers and William O. Knapp (son of George Knapp) both invested heavily in the Sagamore Hotel, and supported commercial development. Beckers tried, unsuccessfully, to have the name of Bolton Landing changed...to Beckersville.

On the lake's eastern shore, George Owen Knapp purchased the Hundred Island House and Pearl Point House, in 1894. In 1904 he purchased Paradise Bay and Black Mountain, making an estate of over 10 miles of shoreline. Although George Knapp was sympathetic to the cause of preservation, his son, William J. Knapp, had different ideas. William purchased most of the prime land from his father in 1925, for \$75,000, thus making it very difficult for Apperson and his allies to bring these important landmarks under state ownership. It wasn't until 1941 that the last miles of the Knapp estate became public land.

George Foster Peabody was one of the lake's most generous benefactors, and he also happened to be a close friend and advisor to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Here is an excerpt from one of the letters in the archives (Kelly Adirondack Research Center), from Peabody to William K. Bixby, discussing the plans to bring Tongue Mountain under state ownership. (1923)

As I understand it, the road plans and general scheme of development make it most desirable that all of Tongue Mountain shall be held by the State. A relatively high price was paid for the corner and will have to be, I fear, for Amphitheater Bay in order to preclude the putting up of shacks and other features leading to nuisance development. Of course I suppose if Mrs. Stevens were to continue to hold lot ten, she should be as safe a custodian against nuisances as Mr. Knapp has proven to be but as it was reported to me the other day Dr. Rogers was a part or joint owner. I judge from your letter that it cannot be joint ownership.

The Lake George Water Trespass Case

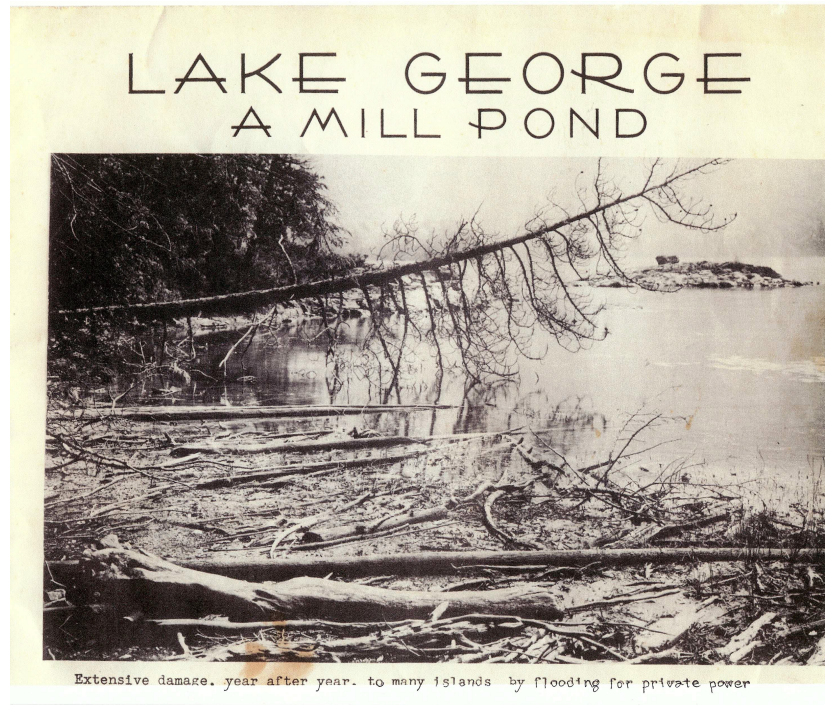
Another long-running battle took place over the issue of whether the owners of the dam at Ticonderoga (the International Paper Company) should be allowed to manipulate the water levels for commercial purposes, thus turning Lake George (state land) into a virtual mill pond, and washing away the soil from state owned and private properties.

John Apperson and his associates believed that the natural dam should be restored and the man-made dam removed, thus addressing the problems of erosion to the islands and shores. Apperson's organization, the Lake George Protective Association produced pamphlets giving evidence of the harm caused by high water, and printed documents that backed up their claims.

The opposing forces, led by the Lake George Association, fought against this idea in every forum possible. They even had their allies convene hearings before a state legislative board to insist that Apperson defend his arguments there. However, Apperson understood that this was a tactic designed to have him reveal his evidence that he was preparing to use in a big case pending before the courts, known as the Lake George Trespass Case. He was testifying on behalf of the citizens of New York, to prove that the paper mill had no right to damage state and private property along the shores of Lake George.

Two examples of Apperson's publications...

Excerpt from *Tragic Truth About Erosion*
(published during the Dust Bowl, in 1935)



Pamphlet published by the Lake
George Protective Association, 1941

NOTE

The great importance of protecting farm lands against erosion has been made so plain in the foregoing that further comment on this phase of the subject is unnecessary.

The very serious effect of erosion on water sources in New York state, while visible in many locations, has not, however, been recorded in such comprehensive form and no reasonable comparison can be made between erosion in New York state and other states in the absence of such complete data. Disastrous forest fires which usually follow lumbering operations greatly accelerate the process of erosion. A million acres or more have burned in New York state in recent years, and several thousand acres were destroyed during the spring of 1934. Many of the precipitous slopes on the upper watershed of the state have thus been severely damaged and tree cutting operations are still in progress in spite of the damage already done and the low market value of such

wild lands. Because of the steep, smooth and hard rock underlying the soil on many mountains in the Adirondacks, they are very susceptible to erosion wherever the vegetation is disturbed.

Well informed conservationists point out that New York state imports a large per cent of its farm products and could obtain all such produce outside of the state if necessary, but it would be impractical to import water for its rivers, springs and lakes so vital to its large urban population. Therefore, protecting the water sources of New York state is of first importance.

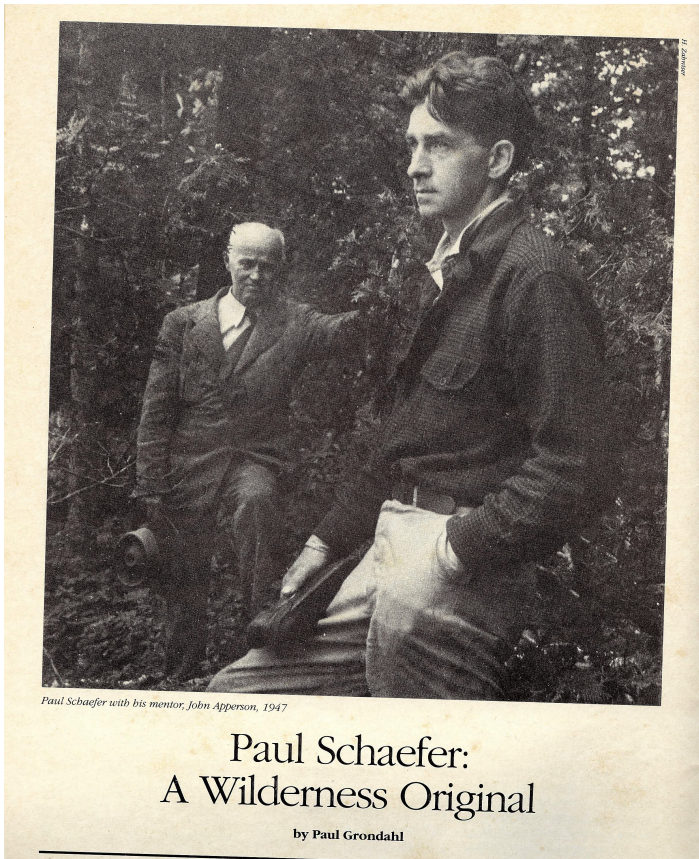
Combating erosion successfully throughout the country with due regard to all interests will obviously require our best efforts and best talent, and the Forest Preserve Association of New York State sincerely urge full cooperation be given Director Bennett and his staff in this vital work.

Issued by the FOREST PRESERVE ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK STATE INC.
SCHENECTADY, NEW YORK

Based on his own observations, Apperson became convinced that government officials could not be trusted to protect the islands of Lake George, so he had to find a different way to protect his favorite, Dome Island, and find a lasting solution. In 1939 he purchased the island, with help from his good friend, Irving Langmuir, but then began worrying about what would happen after he was gone. In 1956 he succeeded in finding a wonderful solution, donating Dome Island to the newly forming Nature Conservancy. His friends raised an endowment of \$20,000, establishing a Dome Island Committee to watch over the unique landmark, in perpetuity. Significantly, this idea of asking donors to give land along with a substantial gift of money has become standard practice for land conservation organizations ever since.



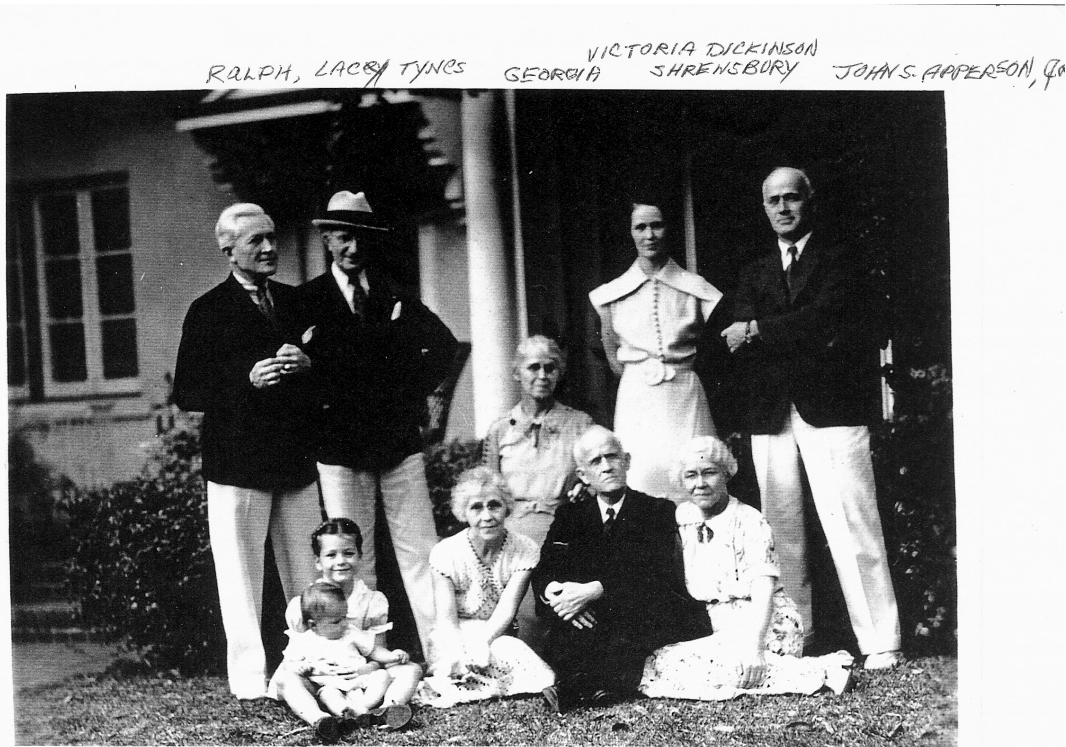
View of Dome Island from Bill White's camp, summer of 2000



John Apperson and Paul Schaefer, in 1947

Over the span of about fifty years, John Apperson successfully defended the New York constitution's *Forever Wild* clause, and had a lasting influence on public opinion, helping voters appreciate the value of preserving wilderness, even when it is in close proximity to well-populated areas. In the 1940's, however, he handed some of the leadership responsibilities over to Paul Schaefer, his protégé, knowing he could keep up the good fight. This allowed Apperson to concentrate his efforts on the work he had started at Lake George, especially concerning the ongoing litigation about the water level. Visitors to Lake George might not learn the full story about the man who fought to create a Lake George Park, but they can certainly enjoy the "untrammelled" scenery, especially Dome Island.





RALPH, LACY TYNES VICTORIA DICKINSON
 GEORGE SHRENSBURY JOHN S. APPERSON, JR.

BARBARA holding NANCY HULL NELL
 NANCY

RALPH & NANCY APPERSON DICKINSON WITH
 her brothers & sisters at 440 Scotland St.
 Dunedin, FL. Xmas 1936

Starting in the 1930s, Apperson's siblings began to gather in Florida over Christmas. Hull is seated, with sisters Nancy and Ellen on each side, and sister George seated behind. John is standing on the right.

One of Apperson's half-brothers, Harvey Black Apperson, had a very successful political career in Virginia, but died young, at age 57. Apperson Drive, in Salem, bears his name. As is often the case, Virginians do not know much about the accomplishments of those many young men and women who left home, "for parts unknown," and went on to accomplish great things in other parts of the world. Wouldn't it be nice to let Virginians know that one of their own, a man from Chilhowie, became a leader in wilderness preservation?

H. B. Apperson Dies; Brother Of City Man 2-4-48

Harvey B. Apperson of Richmond, Va., attorney-general of Virginia since October and brother of John S. Apperson, Schenectady, died Sunday at the age of 57.

Born in Marion, Va., he attended Virginia Polytechnic institute and received a law degree from Washington and Lee university.

Elected to the state senate in 1933, he served until 1944 when he was named by the legislature to the state corporation commission.

Mr. Apperson served on the three-man corporation commission until he was appointed attorney-general in October. The appointment was confirmed by the general assembly only a week ago.

Other survivors include his wife, Mrs. Louise Logan Apperson; two sons, Harvey B. Apperson jr., Great Falls, Mont., and Charles L. Apperson, Richmond; three stepchildren, Mrs. William L. Snyder of Brooklyn and Livingston C. Hansbrough and Marion W. Hansbrough, Richmond; another brother, Alex A. Apperson, Birmingham, Ala.; four sisters and three grandchildren.

The funeral was scheduled today in Salem, Va. The Virginia state assembly was adjourned yesterday in tribute to Mr. Apperson.



View of Dome Island from the old Knapp estate, courtesy of Peter White, 2015

Exhibit featuring Apperson's skates, snowshoes, pack baskets and photographs, from the Bolton Town Museum.





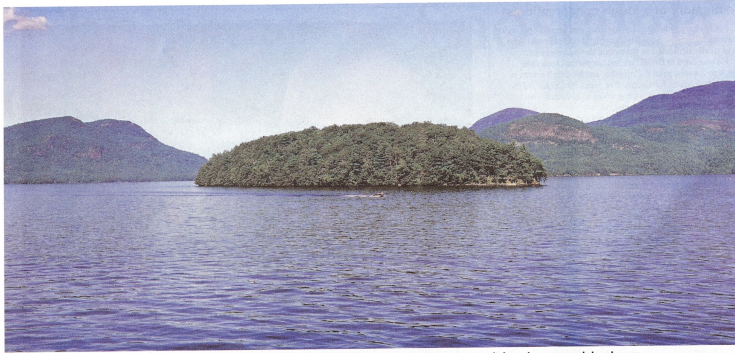
Many of Apperson's successes at Lake George could not have happened without the help of his good friend, Irving Langmuir, who also bought property at Lake George and joined enthusiastically into all the fun projects there. Langmuir, who won a Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1932, became an officer of the organization known as the New York Forest Preserve Association, and used his influence to help Apperson win many battles. Here is a view from Langmuir's dock on Crown Island, now summer home of his grandson, Roger Summerhayes. What a view of Dome Island!

In 2016, the Lake George Land Conservancy is continuing the work Apperson started, as they protect the watershed, work with land-owners to create conservation easements, and prevent undesirable development.



Photo courtesy of website – Lake George Land Conservancy

Viewpoint



John Apperson bought Dome Island, a Lake George landmark, in 1939 to protect it from loggers and developers.

Letter to John Apperson

By Ellen Apperson Brown

Dear Uncle John,

I found a letter from you the other day, dated 1959, when I was just eight years old. You were thanking me for sending you a homemade valentine. We were all sad to have moved so far away from you and Lake George. Perhaps you'll be happy to know that some of your kin are still thinking about you and still trying to carry on the work you started. Although my home is in Virginia now, a bit

I drove north from Bolton Landing to Ticonderoga one evening, and thought about the story I've heard about your confrontation with Robert Moses. He was planning to build a parkway along the rocky shores of Tongue Mountain. What a victory you won that day, in 1923, when you and some highly placed friends "kidnaped" Al Smith, took him out in William Bixby's launch, and helped the governor see for himself the importance of protecting that beautiful shoreline.



stately pines now stand in the clearing where you once lost so many giants in the Big Blow (not 'easter') of 1950! Other good news... Doug Langdon's son, Chris, tracked down your Chris Craft (*Art. XIV, Sec. 1*) and has had it fully restored. It is beautiful! The "annex" to the old hotel looks much the same, as if Mrs. Christie would be coming out on the porch any minute to offer us some of her famous peanut-butter cookies. Although the Lake George Protective Association no longer exists, other

Photo by Carol Hennessey

Brown has also published [Back in the Day: how John Apperson formed an early neighborhood association in Huddle Bay at Lake George \(2013\)](#)

[John Apperson's Lake George \(Arcadia Publishers\) will be available May 15, 2017.](#)

Ellen Brown has been studying the Apperson papers for many years, and has written articles for a variety of journals and newsletters, as illustrated with this article here in the *Adirondack Explorer*. Here is a list of topics she has explored:

- Rip-rapping the shores of islands
- Removing squatters from state lands
- Enlisting women to the cause (building a preservation lobby)
- Joining clubs and other organizations and forming new ones
- Documentary photography, for use in publications
- Fighting proposed amendments to the NY constitution
- Defending “forever wild”
- Promoting camping and winter sports at Lake George
- Personally protecting Dome Island for several decades
- Finding an organization willing to take over ownership of Dome
- Raising money to create an endowment fund at the Nature Conservancy
- Establishing a Dome Island Committee
- Creating “Preservation communities” in Huddle Bay and Turtle Bay
- Developing a prototype for conservation easements and
- Understanding how to implement the vision for an Adirondack Park

For further reading...

- Frank Graham, The Adirondack Park: A Political History (1978)
- Sally Bixby Defty, Passionate Pursuits: William Keene Bixby (2012)
- Kathryn E. O'Brien, The Great and Gracious on Millionaire's Row (1978)
- William Preston Gates, Millionaire's Row on Lake George, NY (2008)
- Frank Leonbruno, Lake George Reflections: Island History and Lore (1998)
- Robert Caro, The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York (1975)
- Lynn Esmay, Lady of Yaddo: The Gilded Age Memoir of Katrina Trask (2013)
- Ed Zahniser, editor, Where Wilderness Preservation Began: Adirondack Writings of Howard Zahniser (1992)
- Philip G. Terrie, Contested Terrain: A New History of Nature and People in the Adirondacks (1997)