Union College and
The Adirondack Mountains, Wilderness, and Waterways
A Brief History and Prospectus

Union College was founded in 1795, the first college or university to be granted a charter by the New York Board of Regents. From the time of its founding, Union has played a lead role in higher education. Its campus was the first in America to be designed with a master plan (several years before Thomas Jefferson designed the University of Virginia). It was among the first non-denominational colleges and among the first to allow modern languages to fulfill graduation requirements alongside classical languages. It was the first to bring engineering into the liberal arts curriculum. Other “firsts” followed in the curriculum (e.g., the first analytical chemistry lab was taught at Union) and in student life (e.g., the oldest radio station at a college or university, WRUC, is at Union College). Similarly, graduates from Union internalized their alma mater’s cutting-edge approach, becoming pioneers and leaders across many fields of endeavor. Among its graduates are a U.S. President, U.S. Secretary of State, U.S. Secretary of War, U.S. Supreme Court Justice, governors, heads of major corporations as well as Academy Award and Nobel Prize winners.

Early Association with the Adirondacks. Throughout its illustrious history, Union and its alumni have intersected in various ways with the Adirondack mountains and wilderness areas. Joseph Ramée, the French architect who laid out the plans for Union’s historic campus in 1813, came to Union via the Adirondacks where he’d gone in search of commissions. Some of Union’s earliest graduates had important relationships with the Adirondack wilderness and mountains. They helped shaped early conservation policy and popularize the recreational value of the area.

Among these alumni was Franklin Hough (Class of 1843). Hough (pronounced Huff) was born in Martinsburg, NY, the son of the first medical doctor in Lewis County, on the western edge of today’s Adirondack Park. After graduating from Union, Hough studied medicine at Western Reserve College. He established a practice in Somerville, NY but spent his spare time working on the natural history of the region. In fact, he discovered a mineral that bears his name, “houghite.” In 1852, he left his medical practice and conducted research and wrote several local histories on counties in the western Adirondacks (*A History of St. Lawrence and Franklin Counties, A History of Jefferson County, and A History of Lewis County*). In 1854, he was appointed superintendent of the New York State census, the first complete census for the State. During the Civil War, he served as a surgeon in the 97th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment and continued to write. After the war, he once again oversaw the State census. In 1873, he published a paper (*On the Duty of Governments in the Preservation of Forests*) that established his interests in forestry. He proposed the formation of forestry schools and urged the development of regulations regarding the use of forests. The paper ultimately led action
by U.S. Congress which, in turn, resulted in Hough’s appointment as a special forestry agent within the Department of Agriculture. In 1877, he published *Report on Forestry* and Congress ordered the publication of 25,000 copies. Hough’s position received division status in 1881. He is considered the first Chief of what was to become the U.S. Forestry Service and many consider him the “father of American forestry.” Hough Peak in the northern Adirondacks is named in his honor.

Another alumnus of Union, William James Stillman (Class of 1848) helped develop the Adirondack region as a tourist destination. After graduating from Union, Stillman studied painting with Frederic Church in New York City. He went on to study in England with Joseph Turner and John Ruskin before returning to the United States where he settled in Cambridge, MA. There, he developed the Adirondacks Club, a summer excursion for literary and philosophical figures. Among those who accompanied Stillman to Follensby Pond, located in the northern Adirondacks, were Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, and Louis Agassiz. Stillman referred to Follensby as “a not too greatly changed Eden” and Emerson was said to have been moved in a deeply spiritual way by his Adirondack experience. Stillman’s photographic collection, which includes works documenting the Adirondack Club’s visit to Follensby, is housed in the Union College Archives. Stillman’s painting, “The Philosophers Camp in the Adirondacks,” brought added attention to the Adirondacks as a destination for important literary and scientific figures. Stillman and the Adirondacks Club undoubtedly helped spur the interest of those flocked to Follensby and the Adirondacks after the Civil War.

**Formalizing the Adirondack Relationship.** Thus, Union College has a long relationship to the Adirondacks. This relationship became more formalized and programmatic in the 1980s, during the tenure of John Morris (Union College President, 1979-90). In 1978, Paul Schaefer – well-known advocate for the preservation of the Adirondacks – offered a non-credit course at Union, titled “The Adirondack – the Land Nobody Knows.” At around the same time, members of the Union community (Professors Carl George and Ennis Pilcher as well as Pilcher’s wife, Edith), supportive of Schaefer’s preservationist efforts, met with him to discuss ways of better utilizing his substantial collection of Adirondack books and documentary materials. Conversations with College officials (including Union Archivist Ruth Ann Evans) led to an arrangement by which the College’s Library became home to the Adirondack Research Center (ARC). Edith Pilcher was appointed the first chair of the ARC in 1979 and that same year Union awarded Paul Schaefer an honorary doctor of science degree in recognition of his conservationist efforts. Substantial space was dedicated to housing the Adirondack
materials and the College supported the ARC’s development and mission in other ways as well. For example, President Morris hosted the ARC’s inaugural banquet in 1980 where Vincent Schaefer, a noted authority on atmospheric science, delivered the keynote address. Furthermore, in support of the ARC’s educational mission, the College also hosted the ARC’s inaugural conference in 1981, provided space for meetings and conferences, and displayed various historical materials from the ARC collection in the Library. In 1984, a special exhibit of Adirondack photos was displayed in the Music Room at the Union Library.

By the mid-1980s, space constraints in the Union Library resulted in the ARC materials being moved to the Schenectady Museum, where they remained until 1989. During this time, however, Union remained very much connected with the work of the ARC. The College co-hosted the Adirondack Forum and co-hosted a major symposium celebrating the Centennial of the New York State Forest Preserve.

The ARC materials were moved from the Schenectady Museum to rented space on Roland Place (off upper State Street in Schenectady) in 1989 and they remained there until 2003, ultimately being moved (as the Adirondack Research Library or ARL) to their current location on St. David’s Lane in Niskayuna – the former home of Paul Schaefer.

Union College and the Study of Mountains, Wilderness, and Waterways. After the ARC/ARL moved from the College’s Library, Union continued to focus curricular and co-curricular programs on the Adirondacks. The College has continued to sponsor symposia and conferences that focus on the Adirondacks. In 2000, for example, Union’s Environmental Studies Program (working with the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks) sponsored a five-part weekly series, titled “The Adirondacks.” This series contained talks and performances by:

- David Gibson, Executive Director of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, titled “Where Wilderness Preservation Begins.”
- Dan Plumley, cultural ecologist and Director of the Totem Peoples Preservation Project, titled “From Siberia to the Adirondacks: Sharing the Wisdom of Mountain Protected Areas.”
- Dick Lefebvre, Chair of the Adirondack Park Agency, titled “People in Partnership and Politics.”
- Carl Heilman, nature photographer, titled “Wild Visions.”
- Dave Kiphuth, John Kirk, and Trish Miller, musicians, titled “Adirondack Folk, Bluegrass, and Clog Dancing.”

As another example of its programmatic commitment, the College more recently hosted the Mohawk Watershed Conference. The 2009 conference explored the drainage basin with tributaries that empty the Adirondack mountains to the north and the Catskill mountains to the south. The conference featured about 30 presentations exploring topics such as flooding, ecosystem analysis, water quality, sediment yield, and watershed management.
In addition, Union’s Geology Department has focused on the Adirondacks. The Department’s Geology Club frequently harnesses the Adirondack Park for mineral collecting field trips and the Adirondacks provide a natural geoscience “lab” for studying a variety of topics, such as mountain building, glaciation, and high grade rocks (a discussion of the critical pedagogical role the Adirondacks play in the geology curriculum in the Union-created Youtube video, titled “Schenectady and Upstate New York as Geoscience Classroom,” can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cj1m0N1tDBQ). Geology faculty members have focused their scholarly research on the Adirondacks as well. Professor Kurt Hollocher, for example, has conducted and presented research (at such professional outlets as the Geological Society of America and the Keck Geology Consortium) on the petrology of big garnet amphibolites in the Adirondacks. Similarly, students have authored Senior Theses related to the Adirondacks (e.g., “Thermal History of the Potsdam Formation in the Eastern Adirondacks Determined by Fission Track Dating of Detrital Zircons”).

Other science departments, such as Biology, have utilized the Adirondacks for teaching as research. “Conservation Biology,” “Plant Physiology,” “Biology of Plants,” “Plant Ecology,” and “Aquatic Biology” offer vehicles for understanding life in the lakes and wilderness of the Adirondacks. Carl George, Professor Emeritus in Biology, has long used the Adirondacks for such purposes, conducting a study of plants (e.g. at Lake Piseco in Hamilton County) in the Adirondack Park.

The Adirondacks also provide an opportunity for Union faculty and students to study and better understand environmental policy and history. The creation of the Adirondack Park, in particular, has been an integral part of Union’s History Department’s course, “Environmental History.” This course explores human interaction with nature and focuses on United States history from pre-colonial times to the present. “Policy Making and American Society,” offered by the Political Science Department, affords similar opportunities to utilize the Adirondack Park to teach about the formulation of environmental policy.

Finally, there is both established and emerging interest in the music, literature, and arts of the Adirondacks. Professor Hilary Tann, John Howard Payne Professor of Music at Union, composed “Adirondack Light,” for narrator and orchestra on the occasion of the Centennial for the Adirondack State Park. Professor Jill Murphy, an expert on 19th century American literature in Union’s English Department, is currently developing a course that will focus on the literature of the Adirondacks. Travel writings and memoirs related to the Adirondacks again afford remarkable teaching and research opportunities.

The Adirondacks have also been a favorite destination of student groups and organizations sponsored by Union’s Office of Student Activities, such as the Outdoor
Club. In 2006, for example, members of that Club travelled to Silver Lake Lodge where they went cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking.

For the past two years, Union College has been in conversation with the Irondequoit Association on Piseco Lake in Hamilton County, aiming to establish a foothold in the Adirondacks for both curricular and co-curricular programs. The Association owns approximately 500 acres on the northeastern shore of Piseco as well as the Irondequoit Inn. The land provides remarkable opportunities for recreation (e.g., cross country skiing, snowshoeing, hiking, and swimming) and it offers equally remarkable opportunities for environmental studies. The access provided to lake, streams, and wetlands on the property afford especially interesting research opportunities. While these conversation are ongoing, faculty from the College’s Environmental Studies and English Departments have already spent time at the location.

Union College and the St. David’s Lane Facility. While Union’s relationship to the Adirondacks is long and extensive, the College intends to develop its curricular and co-curricular potential, attracting students and faculty to the College. As an institutional priority, this makes sense given Union’s historical ties and the current faculty interest in mountains, wilderness, and waterways. It also makes sense in terms of sheer proximity. The College’s location in Schenectady places it just south of the Adirondacks, just north of the Catskills, and just west of the Berkshires. It places it near historically important waterways, including the Hudson and Mohawk rivers and the Erie Canal. It places it just miles away from the seat of State Government where environmental policies are established and maintained. Thus, the College’s location provides its faculty and students with unusually robust opportunities to turn nearby mountains, wilderness and waterways as well as their culture and governmental regulation into opportunities for research and study.

The St. David’s Lane facility in Niskayuna lies just 3 over miles from the Union Campus. It provides – along with the surrounding 100 acres of protected land in the Reist Sanctuary, stewarded by the Albany Hudson Bird Club – an exceptional opportunity to provide a home for and advance the College’s curricular and co-curricular offerings related to mountains, wilderness, and waterways in general and to the Adirondacks in particular.

Union is well-acquainted with the facility. The College has hosted events for student groups at the facility. Faculty members in History already use the Adirondack Room facility to teach classes related to environmental policy history. Faculty members in Biology already take classes into the Reist Sanctuary for purposes of field studies. The College is well-familiar with the strengths of the Adirondack Research Library which
provides the College and the Capital Region more generally with a remarkable collection of books, videos, and archival materials.

The facility and the ARL provide opportunities for Union to establish collaborative partnerships with other colleges and universities working on the Adirondacks (e.g., St. Lawrence University and Paul Smith’s College), museums related to the social and natural histories of the Adirondacks (e.g., the Adirondack Museum and Wild Center), and organizations dedicated to their conservation and preservation (e.g., Protect and Adirondack Wild).

In sum, the St. David’s Lane facility represents an opportunity for Union to affirm its long connection the Adirondacks, preserve the educational mission that has been central to the Adirondack Research Library, and increase the College’s curricular and co-curricular programming related to the Adirondacks. All this will launch a new chapter in Union College’s own distinguished educational history.