

Naturalist

By

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The city of Keene enjoys an impressive wealth of conserved public land. An aerial map of the city reveals its famously wide Main Street, a series of residential roads spiderwebbing out therefrom, and hundreds of acres of green space hemming in this arrangement on all sides. For many cities, parkland must be eked out through many various bequests, often over the course of many generations, but in Keene's case, a startlingly large percentage of this land was given to the city in a short span of time, and by the same person. This man was named George Wheelock and next month marks the 105th anniversary of his death.

Wheelock was a lot of things. He was an expert on plants and animals and would introduce himself to you as a naturalist. He was also an accomplished poet. He was a generous benefactor, heavily involved not only in the protection of the Ashuelot Valley landscape but in the construction of such institutions as the Keene Public Library. He was something of a geologist. He was a landscape architect. He had an unrivaled and carefully maintained collection of native mushrooms.

As it happened however, Wheelock began his professional life not as a naturalist, nor as a poet, but as a lawyer. He graduated from Harvard College with flying colors in 1838, joined a firm in Keene with his brother-in-law shortly thereafter, and before long he was a practicing attorney. By his mid-twenties, George's young life appeared by nearly all accounts to have been a resounding success.

This assessment, though, ignored the inconvenient but incontrovertible reality that Wheelock had little to no interest in practicing law. To him, his career seemed a sad misuse of time that could be spent in the world of glaciers, photosynthesis, birds, and fossils that called to him daily from outside the entombing walls of his practice. All but indifferent to the mechanics of the legal profession but enchanted by the dynamic field of natural history, the young lawyer spent his jealously guarded hours out of the office on long, rambling walks around the forests and streams of the Monadnock region, eyeing details of plants, wildlife, and rock formations and giddily noting them all down.

Eventually his focus came to rest on a series of boulders in and around Keene, all of which had certain qualities that his geologic knowledge led him to believe were out of line with other minerals in the area. Theories of glacial movement were then quite new, and to everyone's astonishment – perhaps even his own – Wheelock was the first to determine, correctly, that these boulders had been plucked by the advancing Laurentide ice sheet from the top of Mt. Ascutney in Windsor, Vermont (roughly thirty-five miles from where the boulders now lie) and gracefully strewn across Cheshire County to the southeast over the course of several thousand years.

This revelation put Wheelock on the map in the natural history world. Not long after his discovery had made him a celebrity among his new peers, he founded the Keene Natural History Society. Finally able to withdraw a bit from the demands of his legal practice, he had time again to generate poetry, which he did at a prodigious rate. His poems reflected his interests: one, for instance, is an enraptured paean to a dragonfly (“Hawk of the pool!... Like a jewel in flight!”). Another is called “The Naturalist” and offers a humorous self-portrait of an unnamed eccentric man “with grizzled beard” crashing around town inspecting stones and logs, collecting insects, being “delighted beyond measure” by “the well-cleaned bones cast up by owls,” and dissecting the heart of an elephant. It concludes, good-naturedly, “I think he’s out of his head.”

As his influence increased, Wheelock came into a lot of land. Much of this he gave over, little by little, to the town of Keene in the form of public parks. When he didn’t own the land in question, he worked hard on behalf of the town to secure easements. In 1866 he gave twenty-five acres: the old West Keene fairground. In 1889, he gave the twelve acres of the Children’s Wood and seventeen acres in West Keene. In 1897, he donated Robin Hood Park, a whopping eighty-three acres of woodland that joined the Children’s Wood and City Park to create a vast expanse of permanently protected conservation land.

He is buried today in the Woodland-Greenlawn Cemetery (which he had helped the city to design in the 1850s), buried in a section very near the Robin Hood Forest. The lot is marked by one of the Ashuelot boulders he discovered, laboriously rolled there in his honor. There’s also a dark stone on the site with some writing carved into it. This displays the usual gravestone fare – the dates and locations of his birth and death – but otherwise reads simply, “George Alexander Wheelock: Naturalist.”

Just “Naturalist.” One would be hard-pressed to find another case where such a simple epitaph seems appropriate for a person for whom so many other words might just as easily have applied. Wheelock himself may have not seen his life so clearly at first, but if his tombstone is any indication, history at least has managed to get it right.