The Story of the Myers Pond Forest

“I wanted to be able to stand on top of a hill and own all the land, as far as I could see.”

-George Hewitt Myers

In Union, Connecticut, one of the last towns settled in northeastern Connecticut (and the first to be abandoned by farmers looking for greener pastures), there is a 453-acre parcel of land comprising a hilltop and three ponds, known as the Myers Pond Forest. Buffered by 7,500 acres of forestland now owned by Yale University, this parcel is a unique acreage with an interesting past. Once the stomping ground of the Nipmuck Indians, then settled by Scotch-Irish settlers, the land was later logged extensively for various New England industries. In the early 1900s, George Hewitt Myers, heir to the Bristol-Myers pharmaceutical fortune and a graduate of the Yale School of Forestry, used a local land agent to purchase up to 9,000 acres of forestland in Windham and Tolland counties. The creation of the Yale Forest and the existence of the Myers Pond parcel are owed to the persistence of this one man in executing his vision.

George Hewitt Myers

George Hewitt Myers (GHM) was born in Cleveland, Ohio on September 10, 1875. His father, John J. Myers, was the first president of the Vermont Marble Company and died from injuries sustained by a runaway horse when George was only eight years old. GHM was raised by his mother, Mary Butterfield Myers. He had one sister, Helen, and a half-brother, John R. Myers. GHM attended boarding school in Pennsylvania, studied botany at Harvard, and was a graduate of the very first class of Yale’s new forestry school in 1902. His brother John, who had founded a small pharmaceutical firm that later became the Bristol-Myers company, died prematurely in 1887, leaving George a half-share in the company.

On April 21, 1908, GHM married Louise Stoddard Chase, the daughter of a wealthy merchant in Fall River, Massachusetts. They eventually made their home in Washington, D.C. in a residence designed for them by renowned Gilded Age architect John Russell Pope (also known for designing the Jefferson Memorial and the National Archives).

GHM made a career out of investment banking and enjoyed great success with forestland investments in New Hampshire and Georgia. In 1926, he founded the Brunswick Peninsula Company, a timber company operating in the southeastern United States, from which he reaped significant profits over the next 30 years.

GHM also had a passion for collecting carpets and textiles that began with the purchase of an oriental carpet for his dorm room at Yale. In his lifetime, he managed to compile a collection of textiles more diverse than any other in America, and he founded the Textile

Museum in Washington D.C. in 1925 with a collection of 275 rugs and 60 other textiles. His collection grew to contain more than 5,000 pieces, focused heavily on Persian rugs, Ottoman embroideries, and early Islamic textiles. Myers took a scientific approach to collecting, always looking for objects that showed the history of a particular art form, even if those objects were just fragments, because he wanted to create a collection that showed the evolution of the art forms. Myers donated his Washington D.C. home as the site for the museum, gifted it his personal collection, and provided an endowment equal to ¼ of his multi-million dollar estate. The museum operated out of the former Myers residence for 90 years but eventually outgrew its Kalorama neighborhood location. In 2015 the Textile Museum building was sold and the museum reopened on the George Washington University campus at Foggy Bottom, with the proceeds from the sale of the buildings going toward the Textile Museum endowment. In 2017 GHM's Washington D.C. residence and the adjacent former museum, a total of 27,000 sf (making it the largest residence in Washington D.C.) were purchased by Amazon founder/CEO Jeff Bezos for $23 million. More information on GHM's textile collection is available at George Washington University's Textile Museum: https://museum.gwu.edu

Joseph Columbus, the first conservator of the Textile Museum, recalled Myers as a deliberate person, who apparently collected rugs in much the same way he collected land: “[He was] a very direct man, a very learned man who knew what he wanted and did it. He had a direction for the collection and knew exactly what he had in it. He bought each piece separately, not by the warehouse load.” To catalog his collection, Myers directed the publication of several books on oriental carpets, which remain authoritative texts in the collecting world.

GHM was an upper-class self-described “Progressive non-Rooseveltian Republican.” GHM was no fan of Theodore Roosevelt, despite that president’s efforts to preserve national forest land. The Progressives were opposed to the abuse of power, they advocated the reform of social institutions, and they believed in cooperation between government and business. Science and scientific method— planning, control, and predictability—were central to the Progressives’ values. Progressives like Myers supported some government regulation and political reform to protect their interests from more radical political elements, but they were also Republicans committed to individual rights.

Compiling the Myers Acreage

By 1908, GHM had already begun to acquire land in Tolland and Windham County, Connecticut. As he told David Smith, former head of the Yale Forest, “I wanted to be able to stand on top of a hill and own all the land as far as I could see.” Much of this land was purchased for a few dollars per acre, with the best land costing no more than $15 an acre.

Myers maintained a crew of loggers and some water powered sawmills, and lumber shipments were taken to the Pomfret railroad depot.

The Quinebaug Forest Company, run by the Wells family, was also purchasing local land at this time and some of the small plots purchased by Wells and Myers were mixed together. They devised an agreement: Myers would stick to land south of Bigelow Road, and Wells would keep to land north of the road. They swapped parcels owned on the "wrong" side so each party could keep their parcels together.

Myers accumulated his Connecticut acreage in the early 20th century, at a time when the scientific practice of forestry was just beginning in the United States. Theodore Roosevelt had established the U.S. Forest Service in 1905 with Yale graduate Gifford Pinchot, founder of the Society of American Foresters, as its first chief. Pinchot had previously worked to implement large-scale scientific forestry at Biltmore, a 100,000 acre estate in North Carolina established by George Vanderbilt, much of which is today part of the Pisgah National Forest.

Myers used local Union surveyor George Towne as an agent to help him acquire his land. Towne's granddaughter Susan Towne recalled that Myers had the first automobile in Union. She also told of a meeting Myers held with some Union townspeople at her grandfather's home on September 21, 1908. Among those present were Myers, his chauffeur, Ed Howard, Austin F. Hawes of the CT State Forestry Department, Judge Joel H. Reed, Morgan Reed, Holly Howard, Willis H. Reed, Ed Pinney, Gene Walker, W.E. Demond, Henry Barlow, and Frank Morey. At the time of this meeting Myers already owned 1264 contiguous acres in the area.

The existing timber on Myers's land was mostly pure stands of white pine that had naturally grown up on the abandoned farm lots and fields. This pine was logged to supply the wooden box industry, which was flourishing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Logging for the box industry was common on abandoned agricultural land. Approximately 2/3 of Myers' acreage, which he created by buying over 100 contiguous tracts of land, had been in cultivation, or in use as pasture, much of which had been abandoned by the 1860s, following the westward migration of New England farmers.

The Abandonment of Agriculture in the Northeast 1820-1860

As late as 1860, rural residents still far outnumbered urban dwellers in the United States, but their lives had changed from pioneer days. Farm families in the Northeast had traditionally been self-sufficient, producing goods needed for their own household, rather than those produced for the demands of a market economy. Farm families used their agricultural surplus to trade for things they could not produce themselves. In 1820, only a

third of food produced in rural areas was intended for market, but by 1860, this figure had grown to two thirds. A transportation revolution, sparked by the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the beginning of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in 1830, altered trade routes and transformed the economy. Grain grown in the fertile western plains began being transported to eastern markets, bringing eastern and western farmers into direct competition, to the disadvantage of eastern agriculture. In the northeast, all of the eligible land was already under cultivation and expansion was impossible. Soil exhaustion from worn-out land resulted in lower yields, and the uneven New England terrain did not lend itself to the new labor-saving inventions of the 1830s, such as mechanical sowers, reapers, threshers, and balers. “If you can’t beat them, join them” is an apt description of what happened next. Many New England farmers went to western New York and the Midwest to settle on cheap, fertile land. Others took factory jobs in the new textile mills. This great migration left behind a ubiquitous legacy of cellar holes, crumbling stonewalls, and grown-over fields that characterizes rural New England today.

Those who stayed behind on the farm adapted themselves to the conditions they faced. Rather than attempt to produce corn or wheat commercially, they raised livestock and specialized in dairy farming or fruit and vegetable production, for which their proximity to market gave them an advantage. Being further from the railroad than other rural towns, Union was at a bit of a disadvantage. Charles Hammond, in his 1893 work, *The History of Union, Connecticut*, named men as Union’s chief product of export, and gave this description of town life:

“A hundred years ago, the town was no more ‘out of the world’ than any other. But the flocking of the population to railroad towns has left Union high and dry as it were. . . Although there is little hope of acquiring much of this world’s goods, still one may live a happy, useful, and honorable life here. The number of able and useful men which Union has sent out indicates that it is a good place to be reared in. Here may be developed a sturdy independence and self-reliance, and a strong, upright character.”

Economic Activity on the Myers Parcel

The land that comprises the town of Union was once inhabited by the Nipmuc people, an Algonquin speaking tribe who hunted deer and cultivated corn, beans, and squash. Corn was ground on what is now the Myers property, in a deep mortar initially hollowed out of a ledge by glaciation. This ” Indian mortar” is nearly one and a half feet deep and worn smooth. The first colonial settlers did not come to Union until 1727, and it is believed the name Union is derived from the fact that the town was formed by the “union” of various sections leftover when the boundaries of adjacent towns were drawn. Some of the town’s early settlers were Scotch-Irish immigrants, while others came from neighboring towns.

The steep, hilly character of Union land made much of it more suitable for grazing animals or growing timber than cultivation. Water-powered sawmills were built by the earliest settlers, as early as 1740. The Myers tract was home to several sawmills, and the last of these mills ceased to operate around 1940.

Bush Meadow Brook was the site of the Lawson sawmill, the lowest of five sawmills which the brook once powered. At one time the site also housed a grist mill, the last being run by David Lawson around 1840. David Lawson was the son of Captain Thomas Lawson, who led Union's militia during the Revolutionary War. The cellarhole of Captain Lawson's home is located within the Myers Pond Forest. Captain Lawson led Union men to Boston in response to the Lexington alarm that reached Union on April 20, 1775. He served a total of 25 months and was at the Battle of Saratoga, where he witnessed the surrender of General Burgoyne.

Captain Lawson's parents had emigrated from Scotland and were among the earliest settlers of Union. Captain Lawson married Esther Paul in Union in 1754, and at the time of the 1790 and 1800 censuses, their closest neighbors were the Coye and Fairbanks families. By the time of the 1810 and 1820 censuses, their neighbors also included the Kinney family. The Kinney mill, off of Kinney Hollow Road, was the third mill built on that site. Earlier mills were built there by Archibald Coye, son of the original settlers on the Myers tract. Nathan Kinney built the later mill in 1837, and his descendants, the Kinney brothers, Myron and Milton, ran an extensive lumber business on the site that peaked in the 1860s and 70s. The Kinney brothers sawed an average of 200,000 board feet a year in their mill. Their operation included a shingle mill and a box-shop for the construction of wooden boxes. The box industry thrived on Union timber. Before the use of cardboard, wooden boxes were the norm for packing and shipping and they were in demand.

Around 1870, portable steam-powered sawmills came into use in Union, outdistancing the capacity of the water-powered mills. In 1893, Hammond remarked in *The History of Union*:

"The lumber business will be an important one for many years to come. To be sure, all the old primitive growth has now been cut off. But there are acres and acres of land, much of which was once used for pasture or cultivation, which are now covered with a dense growth of trees. It was formerly the custom when a lot was cleared to burn it over, raise rye and make a pasture of it. But now, when the lumbermen leave a lot, a new growth immediately springs up. If it is pine that has been cut off, it is followed by the deciduous-leaved trees. The old pastures and fields grow up mostly to pine."

In the early 1900s when GHM purchased his Union property, he also acquired two water-powered mills that were still being run: one by the Barlow family in Ashford on Bigelow

Brook, and the other by the Morse family in North Ashford. Myers had a plan to make the forest profitable and hired Wallace Goodhall to supervise his 17 employees. The existing box industry, together with a supply of white pine on abandoned grazing land, made the area seem potentially profitable to Myers.

However, much of the land he purchased had already been heavily cut over for the box industry. An investment banker, GHM was always looking for business opportunity, but he may have been over-zealous in his plans if he anticipated the short-term harvesting of timber on his land in Union. Perhaps Myers' real intention in purchasing the land was to gather a contiguous parcel, making his dream of owning all the land around him a reality. Corroborating this theory is the fact that Myers designated the choicest piece of this land as his principal summer residence and, ultimately, his final resting place.

Summer Estate of George Hewitt Myers

Of all his holdings in the Union area, GHM's favorite land was the approximately 500 acres that comprise one side of Walker Mountain and Coye Hill. Bigelow Brook runs through this acreage, which also includes Kinney Pond and Myers pond, which Myers dammed in the early 1900s. Situated on the hill was the old Coye homestead, a farmhouse from the 1790s, which Myers turned into his summer home. Hammond described this house, then already a hundred years old, in his 1893 book *The History of Union*:

"After passing the summit of the range [of Coye Hill], you begin to go down, down, down, down into the valley below. Its sides seem to be entirely covered with forests. Half way down the hill you come suddenly upon a house which is so situated that it seems as though it had climbed "half way up the hill, and then sat down to rest as if to say, 'I climb no farther upward, come what may.'"

Around 1916, Myers built an addition onto the Coye house that doubled its size. Furnished with simple cottage furniture, this residence became a rustic summer retreat for the Myers family, which now included three daughters: Persis, Mary, and Louise. The Union estate had a caretaker's cottage, a chauffeur's cottage, and a horse barn, among other outbuildings.

Anna May (Goodhall) Palanck recalls playing with the Myers girls when her parents lived in the caretaker's cottage. Her father Wallace Goodhall was hired by Myers as a caretaker and lumber superintendent, and when the Goodhall family moved out of the caretaker's cottage to a house in Eastford, Myers arranged for a crank telephone to be wired all the way from "the Hill," as the Goodhalls called the Myers' place, to their house, so Myers could be in touch with them. According to Palanck, the Myers family read a great deal in the summer, played cards, and listened to their shortwave radio. They also kept horses and entertained friends.

GHM gave instructions for the limbs overhanging the roadway to be trimmed (so that a man riding a horse up to his residence while wearing a stovepipe hat would not have it knocked off by an offending branch). Some townspeople remember that Myers often came out alone, or with his daughters only. Others remember his wife being there frequently. The family's household staff included a cook, a house cleaner, and a companion for the girls. The Union summer cottage was far simpler and quieter than the family's other summer home, an imposing oceanfront Tudor-style mansion known as The Timbers at Watch Hill in Westerly, Rhode Island. The exposed chestnut beams at The Timbers were said to have come from Myers' Connecticut forestland. That mansion was designed especially for the Myers by John Russell Pope in 1917. According to Anna May Goodhall Palanck, the Myers family traveled back and forth between the two summer residences.

During the winter, Myers' caretaker, a Mr. Beecham, stayed behind to oversee the Union property. He kept to himself and kept other people off of the property. Bill Scranton, Union native and latter-day caretaker, remembers his father putting the black Model A in neutral, turning the lights out, and coasting past Beecham's cottage at night, down to the pond, to fish for trout.

The Myers were chauffeured to Union from their principal residence in Washington, D.C. each summer in a Lincoln Zephyr, and Myers also frequently visited in the fall, reluctant to leave and "get himself all polluted" again, as he put it, in the city of Washington D.C. By 1930, however, Myers had given up managing his forestland with his own crew, since it was not yet a lucrative enterprise.

The Creation of the Yale-Myers Forest

In 1930, sufficiently discouraged in his efforts to make the land profitable, Myers decided to donate 8,000 contiguous acres to the Yale University Forestry School. At the same time, the Charles Lathrop Pack Foundation was establishing demonstration forests around the country at various universities, and the Pack Foundation made a gift, together with some private donors, of $425,000 to the forestry school.

Under the terms of Myers' agreement with Yale, Yale was obliged, during the Great Depression, to maintain Myers' crew of 17 full-time employees, who lived on the property. The 1938 hurricane devastated the forest, blowing down much of the white pine on the property, which was salvaged and stored in Kinney Pond until it could be cut. By 1940, the last of the sawmills on the site were closed and most of the staff had moved to other jobs. Yale's administrator of the forest resigned, frustrated by the situation with the forest, which he deemed a losing proposition. In 1943, Russian emigre Basil Plusnin took charge of the Yale-Myers Forest, and he and his wife Vassa moved to their long-time residence at 95

Kinney Hollow Road. Along with the two remaining forest stewards, Clifford French and Samuel Curtis of North Ashford, Plusnin directed the cutting of hardwood brush to encourage white pine growth, maintained the roads and buildings, and marked boundaries. In 1948, Dr. David Smith took over the Yale Forest, and together with Plusnin, searched the forest for timber that could be cut to alleviate the financial burden of owning the forest, without ruining the stands. They were able to locate such timber mainly on the slopes east of Bigelow Brook where the stands had been protected from the ’38 hurricane and the heavy cutting for the box trade.

According to Smith, Yale found their agreement with Myers burdensome, as if a “white elephant” had been ceded to the university, and upon GHM’s death, they approached his wife, Louise, who abrogated the terms of their agreement. In the 1950s, it became the intention of some at Yale to sell the forest, although some administrators, Dr. Smith among them, succeeded in the fight to maintain the holding. Second-rate trees were harvested for the pallet business in the 1960s, and by the 1970s, the forest had recovered enough to again be harvested for high- quality hardwood, which had begun to garner good prices on the European market. This recovery aided Yale in its support of the forest, which has since continued to make money for them.

George Hewitt Myers died in 1957 at the age of 82. He is buried in a hilltop cemetery on the property, along with his wife and three daughters, beneath a stone which reads: “This Was His Forest.” In a sense, the forest itself is a monument to the vision of George Hewitt Myers.

Myers bequeathed his Union estate to his wife, with the provision that it should thereafter go to his three daughters. However, the untimely deaths of all three daughters, from 1958 to 1960, followed by the death of his wife, resulted in the property being ceded to their heirs, the Pugh family. Major General John R. Pugh, husband of GHM’s daughter Louise, enjoyed visiting the property. However, by the 1970s, the buildings had begun to deteriorate, their upkeep perhaps beyond the reach of distant owners. Fields became overgrown. Fortunately, the Pugh family kept the parcel undeveloped and intact.

Hull Purchases the Myers Forest

In 1996, William Boston Hull of Hull Forest Products, purchased the property from David Pugh, grandson of George Hewitt Myers. Hull had previously logged the property in the 1960s under the direction of then-superintendent Basil Plusnin. Dr. David Smith, former head of the Yale Forest, commented on the Myers property change in ownership, remarking “Hull’s purchase is the best thing to happen to the property in a long while.” The Hull family land trust, Hull Forestlands L.P., has since overseen the harvesting of hemlock pulp to allow for white pine reseeding and more valuable timber growth on the property. Hull

Forestlands views ownership of the Myers tract as a long-term stewardship responsibility and aims to maintain the legacy of George Hewitt Myers. Hull's goal is to make the property once again vibrant and profitable, while keeping the forestland intact and healthy.

Because the Myers summer home had deteriorated, it had to be dismantled, but the older half of the home (the Coye homestead) had a timber frame that could be salvaged, and this frame was recycled and re-erected as a residence in Killingly, CT, in the 1990s.

In March of 2009 Hull Forestlands conveyed a conservation easement on the Myers Pond Forest to the Nature Conservancy. The easement, which includes all the property save approximately 17 acres surrounding the former Myers summer home, was established with the help of a grant from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA). The easement permanently protects the Myers Pond Forest from development so the property will always remain a forest. The Nature Conservancy identified the Myers Pond Forest as an important property to protect because it was home to wetlands, streams, and forest that are critical wintering and staging areas for migratory waterfowl. As part of the Quinebaug Highlands landscape, the property also helps sustain the largest drinking water supply watershed in Connecticut. Hull Forestlands continues to own and pays taxes on the property and practice responsible forest management there, growing and harvesting timber to meet the needs of society.

In 2014 scientists from Connecticut Audubon and the CT Agriculture Experiment Station conducted bird habitat assessments on over 25 woodland properties in Connecticut. One of the most intensively managed properties they visited was the Myers Pond Forest in Union, CT, which has been actively managed for timber production since 1900, with a recent focus on hemlock removals and white pine regeneration. Patrick Comins, Director of Bird Conservation for CT Audubon, personally photographed a wide variety of birds and habitats on the land, including sedge/tussock meadow, open water, riparian, and upland bird habitats. Comins hailed the property as "One of the crown jewels of forestland in Connecticut."

Jeffrey Ward, Chief Scientist at the Dept. of Forestry and Horticulture at the Connecticut Agriculture Experiment station, said the Myers Pond Forest was the "best managed property he had seen" in their state bird habitat assessments. In addition to a wide variety of birds, the Myers Pond Forest is home to many of the common woodland mammals of eastern North American, including white tailed deer, moose, black bear, wild turkey, coyote, bobcat, and beaver.

The Myers Pond Forest is an excellent example of how intensively managed forests can provide ecological services such as wildlife habitat, air and water quality enhancement,

recreational opportunity, and carbon storage, while at the same time providing a source of renewable building materials. George Hewitt Myers would no doubt be proud to see his favorite forest remain productive and forever green.

Mary Hull is co-owner of Hull Forest Products and authors the web site www.hullforest.com. *She gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the David Smith and Anna May Goodhall Palanck, as well as that of Robert and Carol Mancini, Mr. and Mrs. Bill Scranton, Igor Fedoroff (nephew of Basil Plusnin), Bob and Betty Bragdon of Union, CT, Susan Towne of Union, CT, and the staff at the Textile Museum (in its former location in Washington, D.C.) in writing this article.* *Anyone wishing to add or correct information is welcome to contact Mary at info@hullforest.com.*