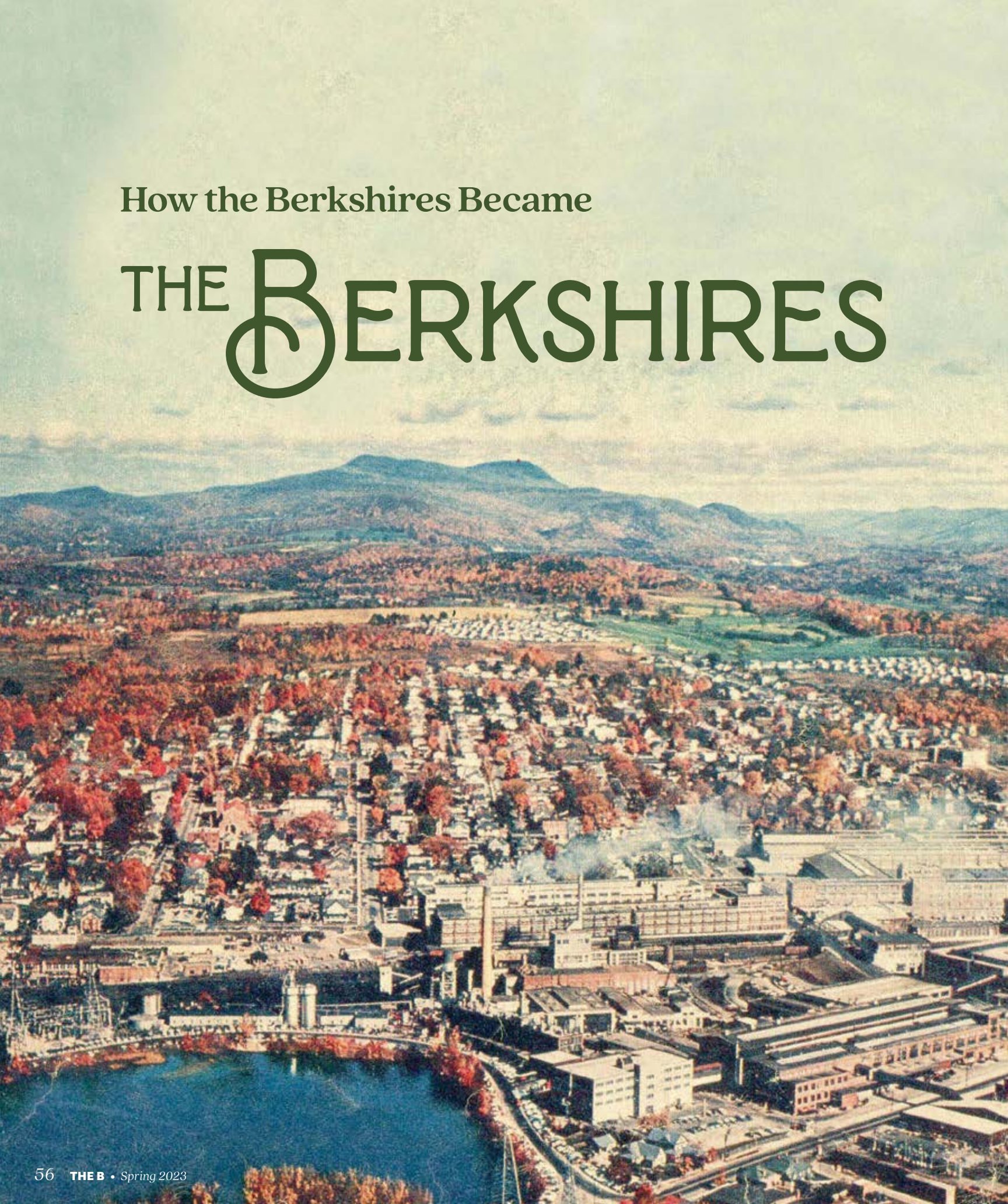
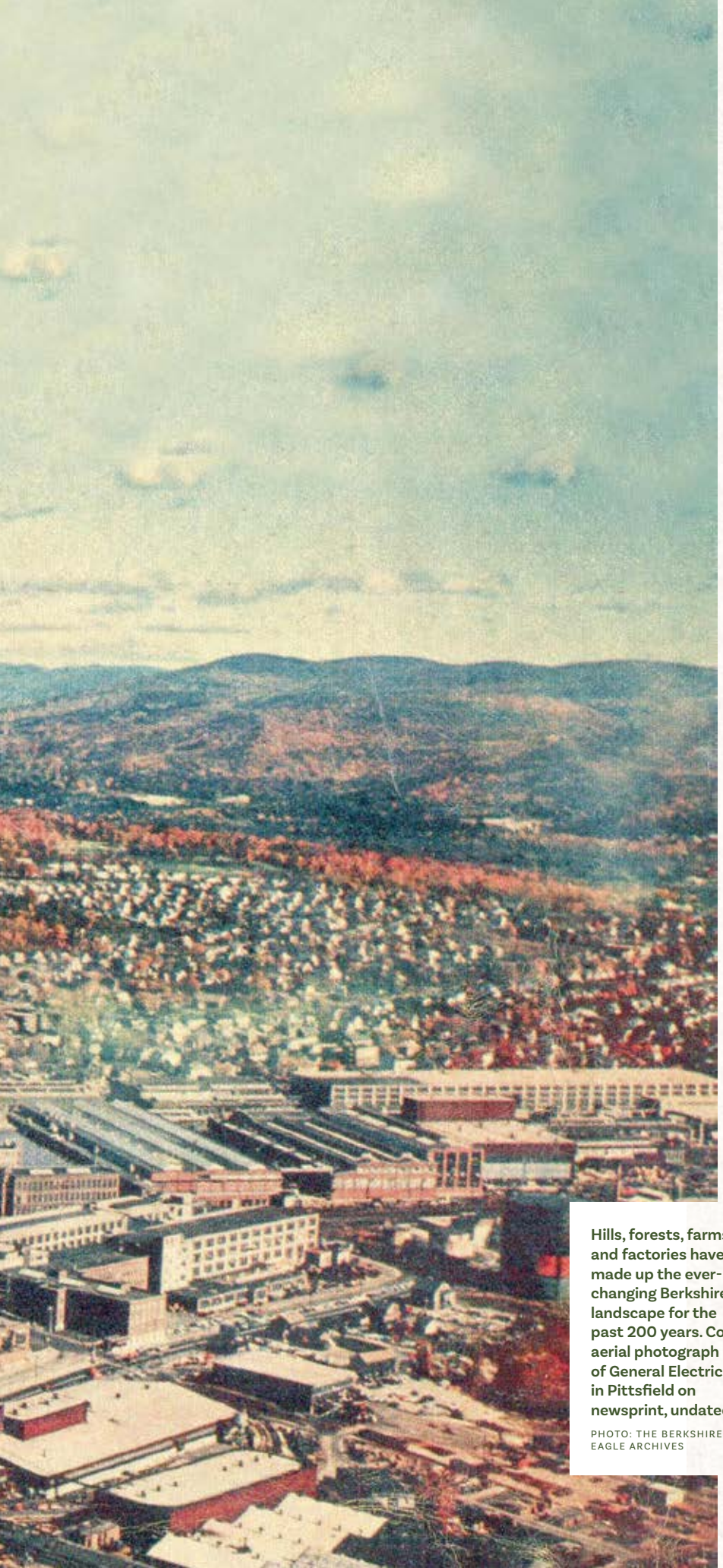
How the Berkshires Became

THE BERKSHIRES





Hills, forests, farms, and factories have made up the ever-changing Berkshire landscape for the past 200 years. Color aerial photograph of General Electric in Pittsfield on newsprint, undated.

PHOTO: THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE ARCHIVES

The interplay of nature, economics, and culture has shaped and reshaped the region in a million little ways, moved along by visionaries, thinkers, leaders, and inventors—here's their story.

By Christopher Marcisz

There are images that leap to mind: Hills and forests untouched by time. A string of little towns that jumped out of a Norman Rockwell painting, and gritty mill towns reinventing their future step by step. A place hanging in the balance between too remote and perfectly accessible, where you can hike or ski or catch a concert or see world-class art. Where little farms and pastures hint at a bucolic past.

As with most quick impressions, these are just the surface of the Berkshires. Ask local historians about how geography, people, and luck have created the many layers of the Berkshires over generations. Or someone who has spent a lifetime within a Berkshire institution watching it grow and change for the better over decades. Or an artist who found the community here to make the work he wanted. Or the chef who remembers learning about how food and place meet here, and what can be taken into the future. Ask, and you'll hear stories about resilience and adaptation, of building something tied to the world but with a little slack. ☛

Farming was an important part of the early economy in the region, and while it couldn't compete in scale, it could in quality; this farm is shown in 1903.

Local historian Bernard Drew has spent decades thinking and writing about this place. He moved to the Berkshires from far northern New Hampshire in the early 1950s when his father became caretaker at the estate of Colonel Arthur Budd in Windsor. As a boy, Drew would ride the backroads of the 3,000-acre property in a truck, his father and the colonel up front, he in the back with the dogs. He wanted to learn the stories in the land, in the cellar holes of abandoned farmsteads and old country roads.

When Colonel Budd passed away in 1965, the estate went to the Trustees of Reservations and became Notchview Reservation. Drew had picked up the bug for telling stories and went into journalism, writing for the old Berkshire Courier and the Lakeville Journal, and since 1996 writing the "Our Berkshires" column for the Eagle. He draws from a bottomless well of stories about how the Berkshires became *the Berkshires.* "It emerged in different times and different ways; you'd be hard pressed to find a single source that pulled everything together," he said. "It's luck and happenstance."

Early Inhabitants

The land itself is part of the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people, who hunted, fished, and farmed along the rivers and in the woodlands between what are now called the Hudson and Connecticut Rivers. Their traditional way of life was put under assault by the waves of European settlers who began to arrive in the 1700s. Some Native families tried to find a way to live with the newcomers, adopting Christianity and western farming practices and settling in at Stockbridge in the 1730s. But the systematic devastation of their livelihood and dispossession of their lands continued. They were forced to relocate to western New York, and then again to Wisconsin, where the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians lives today.

The Land: Nature's Playground

The first settler farming was largely subsistence level, providing just enough from the hilly, rocky land for survival. As the United States added more and more territory in the west, many of the first white settlers pulled up and left for more fertile farmland in the Midwest, leaving empty farms behind—along with the opportunity for reinvention.

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The rising urban middle class began to notice the natural appeal of getting out of cities like New York and Boston. Places like Bash Bish Falls, Mount Greylock, Balance Rock, and Monument Mountain became the region's first tourist attractions. And a lot of that unprofitable, difficult-to-farm land was ripe to be snatched up by the early state park system. Mount Greylock was preserved in 1898, and other sites by nonprofit land trusts like the Trustees of Reservations in the following decades. The charm of the Berkshires' rolling hills for hiking, lakes for swimming and boating, and green space for its spectacular views was locked up, even as the economy and demographics of the region continued to swirl around it.

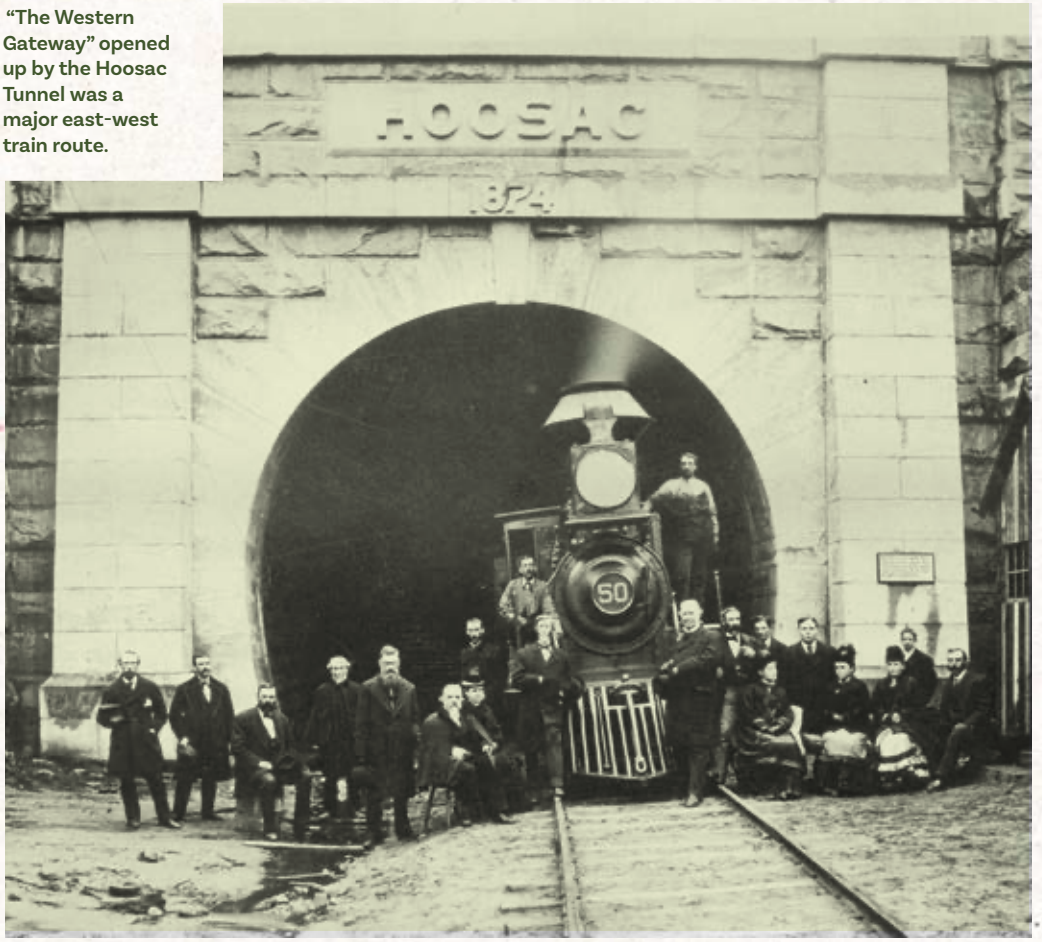
PHOTO: WILLIAM TAGUE

Getting Here

New railroads began to spread through the region starting in the 1850s, snaking up from New York and over from Boston. The tracks followed along the rivers, except in the notable case of the Hoosac Tunnel. This nearly five-mile-long tunnel under the Hoosac Range was built from 1851 to 1875, at the cost of at least 135 workers' lives and a whopping—for the time—$20 million. It was famous enough to become a punchline for Mark Twain ("a joke had managed to bore itself, like another Hoosac Tunnel, through the solid adamant of his understanding"). It gave a sense of grandeur and purpose to the region, as the city seal of North Adams to this day notes: "We Hold The Western Gateway."

The brilliant railroad network made the Berkshires more and more connected to the world, though service began to be scaled back in the 1950s as auto travel grew. The Mohawk Trail along Route 2 formally opened in 1914; it was one of the first routes marketed as a way for city dwellers to drive out into the country. The completion of the Massachusetts Turnpike in 1957 created another major east/west route in South County.

And it looked for a while like the future of getting here was by air. In 1965, Robert C. Sprague Jr., Sprague Electric's head of corporate relations, claimed he could leave his office at 10 a.m. and make a 2:30 p.m. (Pacific time) meeting in San Francisco. In the mid-1970s, Command Airways offered five flights a day from Pittsfield Municipal Airport to JFK or LaGuardia in New York, $30 one-way. ☛



"The Western Gateway" opened up by the Hoosac Tunnel was a major east-west train route.

The Pittsfield Airport weather station in 1938; at one time, it seemed that air travel was really going to take off as another major gateway to the Berkshires.

PHOTOS: THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE ARCHIVES

The center of Williamstown has changed and grown along with the College through the decades. The Van Rensselaer Manor House, seen here in 1963, was torn down to make room for Sawyer Library, which itself was torn down in 2014 to make way for the new Stetson-Sawyer Library.

Academic Influence

Charles Dew, a professor emeritus of history at Williams College, arrived here as a first-year student in 1954. Williams was a very different place. It was all men, social life was dominated by fraternities, and it was profoundly non-diverse. But in the course of Dew's time, upon returning to teach there in 1977, it was already dramatically different, thanks to the will and the ability to take steps toward change. "Each time we've done that, we've gotten better," he said.

It may be a small liberal arts college, but Williams is a foundation of the region's economic and cultural life. It adapted to its unique environment to become a world-class presence that is not just the county's second-largest employer, but continues to play a role in shaping the cultural landscape in North County.

The school sprang from the last will and testament of Colonel Ephraim Williams, the heir of a major landowning family from the Connecticut River Valley. He died in battle with the French in 1755, but left funds for the creation of a school in the township where many of his troops had settled. No sooner had Williams opened its doors in 1793 than some malcontents on staff began scheming to move anywhere else—anywhere more cosmopolitan, that is. In the late 1810s, the then-president and a handful of faculty and students finally headed east—though not with half the books from the library, as college folklore still claims. They founded Amherst College, creating one of the longest lasting college rivalries in the country.

Williams and Amherst have one of the longest lasting college rivalries in the country.

After this existential crisis, Williams realized it needed reliable, long-term support to survive. It created an alumni association—the first—in 1821, giving Williams an enormous fundraising head start that it has never given up.

The college chose to embrace its idiosyncratic location and lifestyle, where big ideas could be pondered in natural tranquility. It was best embodied by Mark Hopkins, who was president from 1836 to 1872 and defined the American liberal arts tradition for undergraduates. As the beloved and oft-repeated quote goes, attributed to Williams graduate President James A. Garfield: "The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other." Williams still serves as a cultural foundation for the rest of the region, bringing people and ideas to the area even if just for a little while. Many decide to stay.

Cutting Edge of Industry

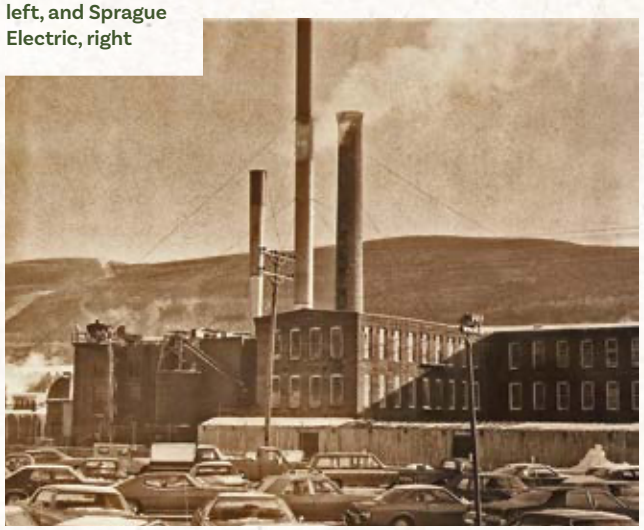
It seemed in the early 1800s that sheep and wool might be the future, but more and more economic activity concentrated on the fast rivers that first powered sawmills and grist mills, and later textile mills that could turn Southern cotton into products. By the 20th century, new enterprises had come to the region. William Stanley Jr. was an early pioneer of alternating current, and in 1886 lit up downtown Great Barrington. A few years later, he opened Stanley Electric Manufacturing Company, which made his patented transformers in Pittsfield; he sold to General Electric in 1903.

MANOR HOUSE: THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE ARCHIVES; FOOTBALL: STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN

By the 1940s, "the GE" as locals called it, employed about 13,000 people in a town of about 50,000, and its rhythms defined Pittsfield—from the Thursdays of the month when everyone was paid and traveled downtown, to traffic around the massive plants in the center of town at shift changes. And it was a place of new technologies and new ideas, not all for the best. For most of the 20th century, PCBs were a wonder invention, until the environmental consequences of them getting into the water became clear. Jack Welch got his start running the plastics division in Pittsfield and honed his hard-charging leadership style there. His name became a byword for a new generation of rapacious corporate leadership that emphasized cutting costs and maximizing shareholder value.

In North Adams, the massive textile complex at Arnold Print Works was done in by the Depression, and a new firm from outside Boston, Sprague Electric, moved in. Sprague made high-quality electrical circuits and parts that powered the age of electronics—especially tiny capacitors with names like "Bumblebees" and "Orange Drops" that were on stage in Jimi Hendrix's guitar at Woodstock and in the Apollo 11 lunar module on the moon. Their research and development wing was moving faster than the company could keep up, filing patents for discoveries that would later be exploited in Silicon Valley to make semiconductors and microchips.

In 1950, the city of Pittsfield was slightly larger than the city of Orlando, Florida, but everything was moving south and west, and once again the region had to find a new way forward. ☛



Much of life in the Berkshires' two largest communities, Pittsfield and North Adams, revolved around the enormous industrial complexes at their heart. Top: General Electric; Bottom: Arnold Print Works, left, and Sprague Electric, right

GE: WARREN FOWLER; SPRAGUE ELECTRIC: SUSAN PLAGEMAN, NORTH ADAMS TRANSCRIPT; ARNOLD PRINT WORKS: THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE ARCHIVES

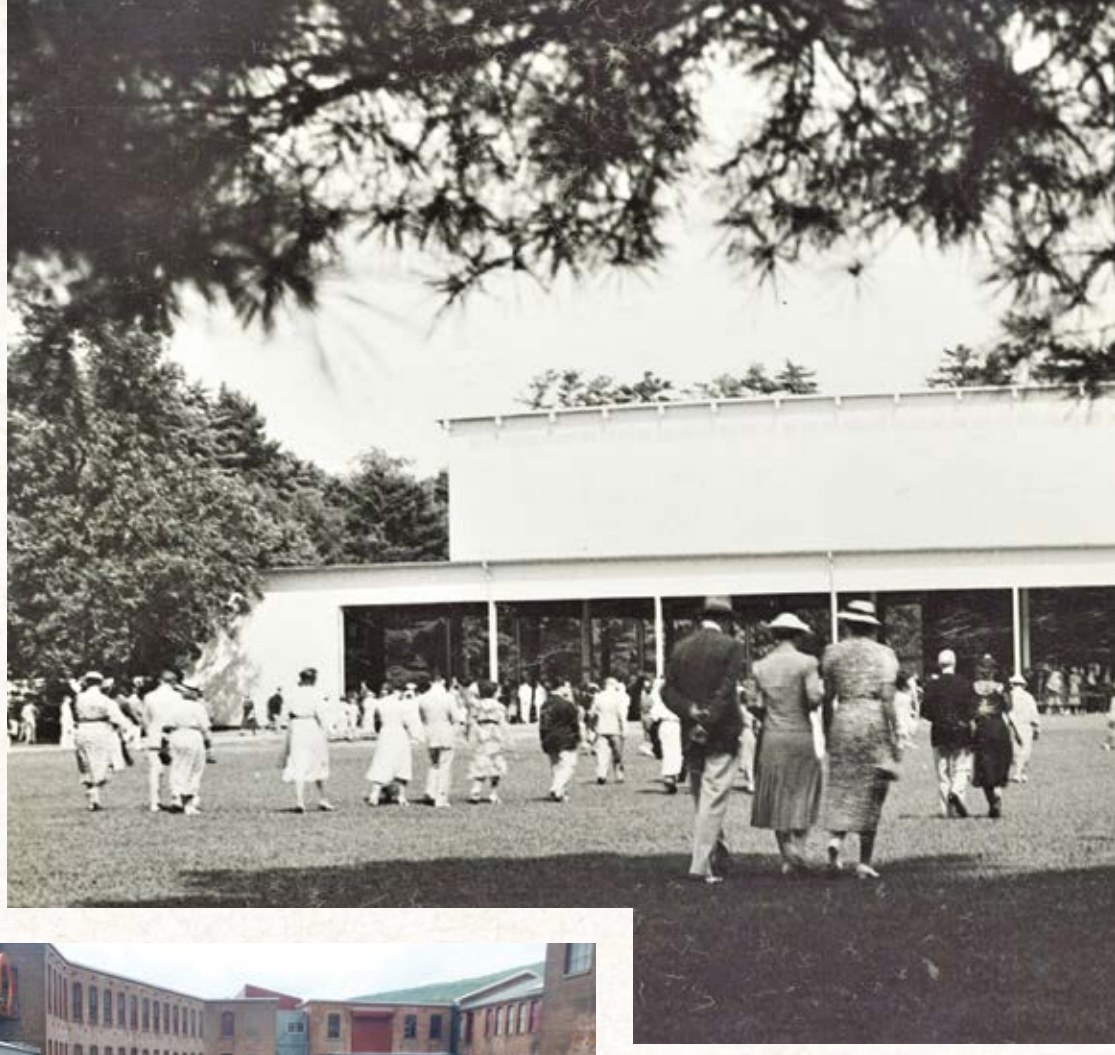
A Creative Escape

What made the Berkshires' reputation for nurturing the arts? That it is a place not too far but not too close to big cities? Where there was a small community to keep you company, but still plenty of time and space to be alone and get to work? That it was affordable (at times!), or had enough of an audience available (at times!) to put your work in front of? It was a little of everything.

Nathaniel Hawthorne rented a farm in Lenox in the 1840s and wrote some of his most famous works, including "Tanglewood Tales." Here he met Herman Melville, who lived up the road in Pittsfield and was working on "Moby-Dick."

Later, Edith Wharton wrote several of her most famous works at her home, The Mount, in Lenox, tending to her husband's health and her gardens and renovations over their 10 years there. "But meanwhile The Mount was to give me country cares and joys," she wrote years later in her memoirs. "Long happy rides and drives through the wooded lanes of that loveliest region, the companionship of a few dear friends, and the freedom from trivial obligations which was necessary if I was to go on with my writing."

The popularity of the Berkshires as a second-home location meant audiences—even if at first they were only seasonal. In 1937, the Tappan family donated their estate—where Hawthorne had lived in his little cottage in a previous century—to the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Under the leadership of luminaries like Serge Koussevitzky, Leonard Bernstein, Seiji Ozawa, and James Levine, Tanglewood became a summer home for the orchestra, and a vital part of the region's cultural calendar, drawing over 350,000 visitors each season.



Above: Tanglewood Festival crowds enter The Shed, newly open in 1938.

Left: Fans gather to hear Foxwarren perform at Wilco's Solid Sound Festival at MASS MoCa in North Adams in 2019.

TANGLEWOOD: BERKSHIRE EAGLE ARCHIVE; MASS MOCA: STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN

Other arts institutions found the same appeal of getting away and getting to work. Ted Shawn was already a major figure in American dance when he bought a rundown farm in Becket in 1930. It began as a place to nurture his own dance company and create a uniquely American style of modern dance. It evolved into the wide-ranging Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival that is now a major event on the world's dance calendar. Summer stock theater for those seasonal crowds also grew here, with the Berkshire Theatre Festival in Stockbridge and the Williamstown Theatre Festival up north.

Some visionaries saw the potential for year-round culture here. At Williams, the art history department had become legendary, led by acclaimed scholars including Lane Faison, Whitney Stoddard, and Bill Pierson, producing generations of curators, scholars, and museum leaders.

When art collectors Sterling and Francine Clark were looking at

JACOBS PILLOW; JOHN LINDQUIST

Ted Shawn turned a ramshackle Becket farm into an important and beloved center of modern American dance.

Jacob's Pillow, 1968

preserving their collection in New York, Faison and Stoddard convinced them to think about the value of showing their Renoirs and other French masterpieces in the glory of nature. Not coincidentally, they explained, it would be more likely to survive a nuclear war away from a major city. The Clark Art Institute opened in 1955.

There was a lot of culture here in 1954 when Norman Rockwell, the most famous painter in America, decided to move to Stockbridge from his home in Vermont. He was lured here by the Austen Riggs Center, a prominent mental health treatment center founded in 1919, where his wife Mary was receiving treatment.

Rockwell became a cottage industry all his own. He used locals as his models and turned Stockbridge into a model of a small town. He bought supplies and supported local institutions. "He needed that community to paint the way he wanted," said Laurie Norton Moffatt, director of the Norman Rockwell Museum. "He found what he needed to continue to nourish and inspire him in this community." From that point on, Rockwell would create some of his most iconic images. When he passed away, a group of community volunteers came together to preserve his studio and eventually create a museum to put his work on permanent display. That mix of outsiders becoming insiders and the people and money coming together made it a vibrant place.

Some steps were so bold, it is hard to believe they worked. Thomas Krens was a Williams graduate who came back to become director of the Williams College Museum of Art. Inspired by seeing old industrial buildings in Germany turned into contemporary arts spaces, he wondered why something similar couldn't happen at the abandoned Sprague Electric plant.

Through his work and that of his protégé Joe Thompson, the plan won support from local and state officials, who guided it past all the doubters. While it took over a decade to get off the ground, MASS MoCa opened in 1999. Today it is one of the largest contemporary arts spaces in the world, host to a sprawling assortment of special and semi-permanent exhibitions, and to big music events like the annual FreshGrass festival, each summer's Bang on a Can festival, and Wilco's biannual Solid Sound Festival. ☛

Food and Farms

Chef Dan Barber grew up in Manhattan, but remembers the deep impression made on him by his summers on his grandmother's farm in Great Barrington. At Blue Hill Farm, he spent days feeding cows and haying fields and learned about the connection between agriculture, beauty, and open space.

"I was introduced to a lot of hard work and the idea of land management and open space, and responsibility has stayed with me," Barber said.

While nature and culture have been important parts of the Berkshires equation, another pillar is right under our nose. While the land isn't suitable for large-scale industrial agriculture, it is almost perfect for smaller high-quality, sustainable, artisanal farming. Berkshire farms are vibrant—from the cheeses of Cricket Creek Farm in Williamstown to the milk and ice cream of High Lawn Farm in Lee. Restaurants like Prairie Whale in Great Barrington and Mezze in Williamstown are building menus using local, seasonal products.

But Barber thinks this is just the start. He went on to build a brilliant career at the very top of fine dining, opening his own restaurant, Blue Hill in New York in 2000. His passion for top-quality, farm-to-table food continues today at an additional restaurant/laboratory space, Blue Hill at Stone Barns, just north of the city. In addition to holding two Michelin stars, he works with farmers and researchers on new products. Along with his brother, David, they still manage Blue Hill Farm in Great Barrington, along with full-time farmer Sean Stanton.

This kind of farming is almost unlimited, he says, and a place like the Berkshires is poised to lead with its mix of land, commitment to quality, and proximity to big markets. He envisions a network of small, independent farmers that grow sustainable products and can share seeds, equipment, and expertise.

It wouldn't be farming as nostalgia, but the cutting edge of food production and economics. And it wouldn't just be for those who can afford it, but could democratize quality food for consumers and provide economic stability for a whole region. **B**

Top: Early farming in the region was hard work just to get by. Now, technology has opened up possibilities and markets. Bottom: Corn is harvested and chopped for silage at High Lawn Farm in Lee.

Cheese made on the premises from cows at Cricket Creek Farm in Williamstown is sold in its on-site farm store.

FARMERS: ROGER JOHNSON; CRICKET CREEK: GILLIAN JONES; HIGH LAWN FARM: BEN GARVER