

Towns of Berne, Guilderland, Knox, and New Scotland

View from the park overlook.

“Cliffs Higher Than the Palisades” was just one of the superlatives used to describe John Boyd Thacher State Park after its acquisition in 1914. It was also extolled as a paradise for geologists and acclaimed for its precipitous cliffs and magnificent prospects. Enthusiasts declared its scenery unsurpassed, even in the Adirondacks.

Thacher Park is located in the Helderbergs, an east-west mountain range between the Adirondacks and the Catskills. Although the Helderbergs extend more than 300 miles, their most dramatic manifestation is the 3-mile-long, 1200-foot-high limestone escarpment southwest of Albany that forms the core of the park. The escarpment was formed more than 100 million years ago, when layers of limestone, sandstone, and shale were uplifted and eroded by wind, water, and other elements. As softer rock wore away, limestone broke off along vertical cracks, leaving a jagged, perpendicular wall. Thacher Park includes this escarpment and extends west along the wide, elevated plateau on top.

The park has a long association with human activity. Native American trails from the Mohawk and Hudson Valleys traversed the escarpment leading to settlements in the Schoharie Valley, while the secluded caves under the cliffs provided refuge for loyalists during the Revolution. Permanent European settlement began after the war, when Stephen van Rensselaer III opened this remote corner of Rensselaerswyck to tenants, and by the 1790s farms were established throughout the Helderbergs. In 1821 a steep road was cut along the cliff face; however, this treacherous approach did little to diminish the region’s isolation. A combination of poor soil and near feudal leaseholds sparked turbulence after van Rensselaer’s death in 1839, as heirs demanded long-overdue rents. The ensuing “Anti-Rent Wars” engendered years of instability. Despite disadvantages, a small agricultural community persisted on the Helderberg plateau into the twentieth century.

Early visitors were drawn to the Helderbergs by scientific interests. In the 1830s, geologists began studying the region’s superb exposures of upper Silurian and Devonian strata and its extraordinary collection of marine fossils. One prominent scientist called the Helderbergs “a key to the geology of North America.”¹ By the late nineteenth century, the Helderbergs were attracting tourists, and boarding houses, hotels, and campgrounds developed around Thompson’s and Warner’s Lakes, to the west. Increased visitation hastened transportation improvements, and after 1864 the Delaware & Hudson Railroad provided service from Albany to nearby stations.

In 1906 John Boyd and Emma Treadwell Thacher began acquiring land along the escarpment to protect it from development. J.B. Thacher (1847–1909), a well-known politician, served as a state senator and as mayor of Albany. By 1909, when Thacher died, the couple owned numerous ridge-top parcels. Emma Thacher (1850–1927) later donated 350 acres to New York State for public parkland. In 1914 the legislature delegated management to the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society (ASHPS), formed in 1895 to protect scenic and historic sites. The society enthused that “the lover of nature, the geologist, the seeker for inspiration can here make interesting explorations of the wonders of nature...”²

¹ Charles Lyell, *Travels in North America in the Years 1841-2*. New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1885. In American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, *Thirteenth Annual Report, 1914*. Albany: J.B. Lyon Company.

² ASHPS, *Thirteenth Annual Report, 1914*.

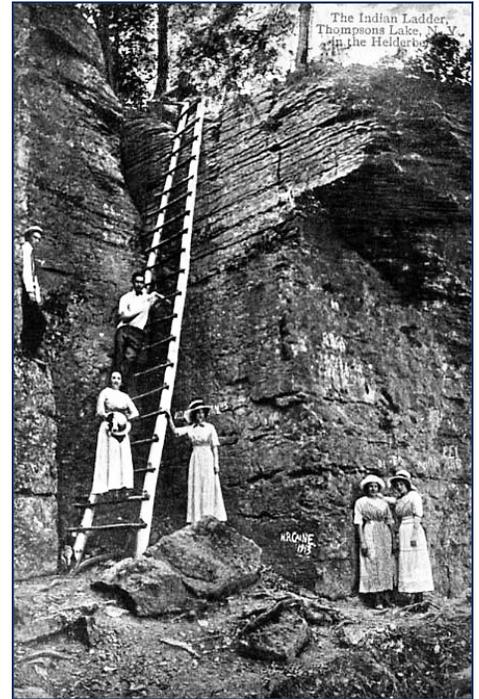
The ASHPS surveyed the land and constructed trails, picnic groves, and camping areas. Stabilization took priority; the same natural forces that had created the park made public access difficult or even hazardous. Flooding streams washed out roads, and waterfalls and erosion undermined the cliffs. By 1927 the 900-acre park included the Indian Ladder Trail, a scenic path below the escarpment; additional land along the cliff; and fifty acres on Thompson's Lake.³ A new state highway improved access and increased visitation.

In 1924 New Yorkers had passed a \$15 million bond to develop a state park system, and Thacher Park received \$25,000 for development. With funding secure, in 1928 the ASHPS solicited a plan from chief engineer Major William A. Welch, from the Palisades Interstate Park Commission. Among many new features were a large rustic log shelter and improved vistas.⁴ The state park plan, which linked urban populations with scenic resources, identified Thacher as the key park serving the Capital District, prompting plans for additional improvements.

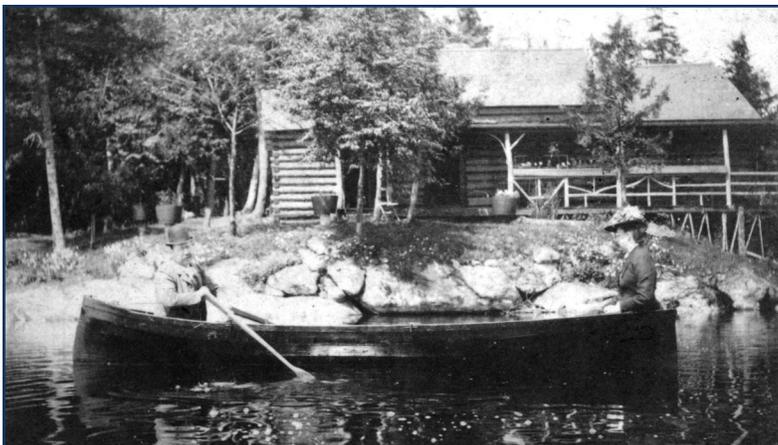
The untimely onset of the Depression eliminated state park funds, leaving officials dependent on state and federal relief programs. The Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA) provided funds for maintenance, and a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp on Thompson's Lake provided labor for forestry and trails. Workers from a later camp at Thacher constructed the first section of a handsome stone overlook along the edge of the escarpment. Before 1940, the park was transferred to the New York State Conservation Department, which administered it until 1972, when the Saratoga-Capital District State Park and Recreation Commission was established.

After World War II, the increase of suburban families produced patrons seeking family activities and water recreation. A large pool (no longer extant) constructed at the north end of the park in 1952 became a popular attraction for young families in the Albany area during the 1950s-60s, and new picnic shelters, athletic fields, game areas, and parking lots accommodated record-breaking weekend crowds.

Today Thacher Park offers hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling. Students and scientists still study the park's geology, and its panoramic views inspire artists. The Emma Treadwell Nature Center, at Thompson's Lake State Park, presents exhibits and educational programs about the area's natural history.



*Postcard of tourists at Indian Ladder, c1920.
Courtesy Timothy Albright.*



*John Boyd Thacher and Emma Treadwell Thacher at their camp, 1880.
Courtesy Albany Institute of History and Art.*



Indian Ladder Road, built in the early nineteenth century to connect farms atop the escarpment to communities below, undated.

³ This was the nucleus of Thompson's Lake State Park, a discontinuous area four miles west of the escarpment. Thompson's Lake was established as a separate park in 1972.

⁴ The society also received a second appropriation to construct a bathhouse, access road, and a picnic and parking area on Thompson's Lake.

