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“Observational, poetic and refreshingly nonjudgmental, *Seeking Parmenter* twines the human and natural history of a classic New England farm into a seamless narrative told through the author’s journey across the landscape and time. We should all be so lucky as Charles Butterfield to have such a lifelong attachment to a place on the land.”

—Ryan Owens

Executive Director, Monadnock Conservancy

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—Tom Wessels

Author of Reading the Forested Landscape and Forest Forensics; former director of the Environmental Biology Program at Antioch New England Graduate School

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Praise for *Seeking Parmenter*

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New England Graduate School*

Brought vividly to life for us in this succinct memoir is a subsistence farm in southern New Hampshire that was in continuous operation from 1800 to 1960. During all of that time it was in the good hands of one family progressing through fully six generations. The author, who grew up on the farm during its final agricultural years, with access to extensive family diaries and other records, as well as to relevant town reports, has been able to offer us a fascinating play-by-play description of the evolution of farming, with all of its ups and downs, sounds and smells, and sweeping drama through the passage of those 160 years of enormous technological advances and social changes.

And thus beginning in 1960, with the farm still in the same ownership for now even two further generations, the open land is being quietly reclaimed by nature, a phenomenon of old-field forest succession that the author has been continually observing and analyzing with awe and devotion. So here we have a volume not only of importance to the many descendants of our early New England's hard-scrabble farmers, but one that will as well broaden and otherwise enrich anyone devoted to American history on the one hand and to New England's ecological dynamics on the other in its slow recovery when human disruptions cease.

—Arthur H. Westing, M.F., Ph.D.

Putney, Vermont, 17 April 2015

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Seeking Parmenter is a moving and evocative exploration of the intertwining of place and history. Charles Butterfield grew up on a rural farm in southern New Hampshire. In this "memoir of place," he returns to his childhood farm and shows us what it might mean to be open to the presences of the past that are inevitably embedded in the places where we find ourselves. And with the eye of a naturalist Butterfield sees the ways in which the many other beings who live in places change over time, including those with roots and leaves, as well as feathers and fur. Full of fascinating observations, at times lyrical, *Seeking Parmenter* is an intelligent and beautiful book. It is also a wise book, inviting us on a journey of understanding our own place in a more-than-human world.

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SEEKING PARMENTER



a memoir of place

Charles Butterfield

Pen and Ink Drawings by Chuck McLean

HOBBLEBUSH BOOKS
Brookline, New Hampshire

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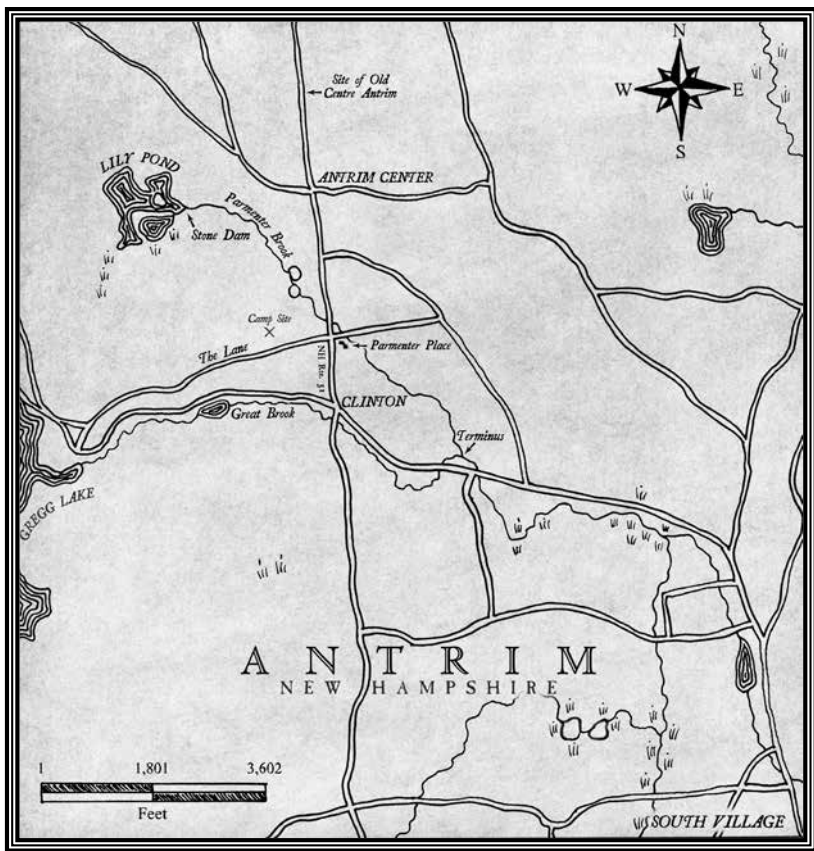
Biography

In the Shadow of Cedars

to Nancy

*Scratch a name in a landscape
and history bubbles up like a spring*

CHET RAYMO



Preface

Walking the rural highway (NH Route 31) between Antrim Center and Clinton Village, I reach the old Parmenter farm. My eye goes to the large sign propped up in a field grown wild:

FOR SALE—33 ACRES

But when I look across the ragged open space and into the disheveled woods beyond, I see something else.

I picture Guernseys feeding. Across a stone wall men build a load of hay, the hayrack drawn by a single large horse. A chubby woman emerges from a henhouse carrying eggs in a pail. Her daughter opens the shutters on a slab-sheathed roadside stand. Behind the stand, a ten-year-old boy moves on his knees down a long row of beans, sliding a bushel basket beside him as he picks.

I can also imagine a bulldozer scraping wide swaths of the second-growth field's dark soil, heaps of sand and gravel to one side. Concrete forms are stacked beside the stone wall. The old pasture is being shaped for something, but I can't tell what. A house with two-car garage? A gardening center? A mini-mart? An animal shelter? There is no point in letting my imagination range at will. Time will tell, for there is no idle land.

I pass by the neglected field and meet a slim, young woman, mother of Amos Parmenter's great-great-great-great-great-grandsons, tugging out poison ivy roots and sumac shoots to prepare places for her perennials beside a stone wall Amos laid



up along the road well over 200 years ago. She shows me some of the pieces of equipment she has unearthed in her digging—part of a peculiarly broad-tined dung fork (we guess), a section of scythe blade, half a heavy gate hinge, the hub of a wooden-spoked cart wheel. She has placed the relics on top of the wall to set off her bright day lilies.

2

When I was a senior at the University of New Hampshire, in 1953 and '54, the faculty introduced an elective course called Senior Synthesis. I elected to enroll in this survey of academic fields, and for a dozen evenings (as I recall) I heard spokespeople for several departments describe the nature of their disciplines. Some of these areas I was familiar with, majoring in biology, but many others—engineering, philosophy, anthropology, art, economics—I knew little about.

To tie their lectures together, the professors traced the historical development of their chosen fields. The reiterated message that new ideas build on old had a great deal to do with how my world view developed. I am not afraid of change. I expect it. In many instances I welcome it.

I embrace *emergence*. Out of present conditions something different will come. “Something-more from nothing-but,” is a principle of evolution. It means that any new modification arises from parts already present. It is what comparative anatomy teaches us. I see that principle at work everywhere. I believe it is a law of nature. What emerges is not necessarily more



comfortable or more beautiful than the parent conditions, and in many quarters humans play a crucial role in guiding emergence (alas, often with unintended consequences), but we make ourselves grumpy and cynical as we grow increasingly alienated if we fail to recognize that something-more is emerging from nothing-but everywhere and all the time.

3

What is emerging on the old Parmenter place, and from what is it emerging?

The name Parmenter appears frequently in the earliest records of Antrim, New Hampshire. But as I use it, and think about it, it is more than a surname, ancient as its derivation from 16th century Huguenot *Parentier* (*fitting* or *finishing* as by a tailor or seamstress) may be. My Antrim ancestors did not choose their name, nor could the first to arrive foresee that within a couple of generations the name would disappear from town rolls altogether. Yet Parmenter persists. Amos's genes are expressed today in some of Antrim's people.

The name endures in Parmenter Brook, the stream that originates in the town's earliest settlement and flows around what was once the industrial hub of Antrim. Too small to power that industry, the eponymous brook was an essential resource to farmers. And Parmenter persists in the name I give to this land along the brook that Amos cleared of forest and that sustained generations of his descendants, whatever their names.

Parmenter, to my mind, represents an early American



idea—that one can leave familiar and stable territory and strike out for the unknown and through dint of labor and with faith and a little luck shape one’s life and environment.

This is how thirty-year-old Amos Parmenter’s search for a new home is told:

He had great difficulty in finding the town, then called in common talk ‘Enterum,’ a pronunciation not yet dead. He traveled several miles northwest of Antrim, was displeased with the land, and was on his return home [to Framingham, Massachusetts]; but, on being told again of this township, he turned back and bought twenty-five acres on which there was then a small house, which seems to have been built and occupied some years by Taylor Joslin. The rest of his large farm he bought and cleared.

Parmenter has yet another, personal, meaning.

When I was six or seven years old, my grandmother took me for a long walk from our farm to a cemetery created in the 1820s close by the site of the Central Society Meetinghouse that Amos Parmenter founded and where he served as deacon for forty years. We ate our picnic under a butternut tree near Deacon Parmenter’s headstone. Afterwards we strolled among the graves of his immediate family, reading the encrusted tombstones, working out relationships. This adventure, I understood, was my initiation into my clan.

4

Seeking Parmenter is not a family history *per se*, or a treatise on old-field succession. Rather, it is an informal search for a family



SEEKING PARMENTER

and the environment in which they lived and worked and had their influence on their contemporaries and, in the long run, me.

For consecutive summers since 2008, I have camped alone on Parmenter land I farmed seven decades ago and later inherited and passed along. Though I moved away from the family farm to follow a career in education, my long life grew from here. I derive my love of the land from what I experienced here as boy and young man. This memoir is my attempt to act on a tenet of my faith which writer Anne Michaels puts this way: “If you can learn to love one place, sometimes you can also learn to love another.” In my case, that other place is emerging from what was. Right here.

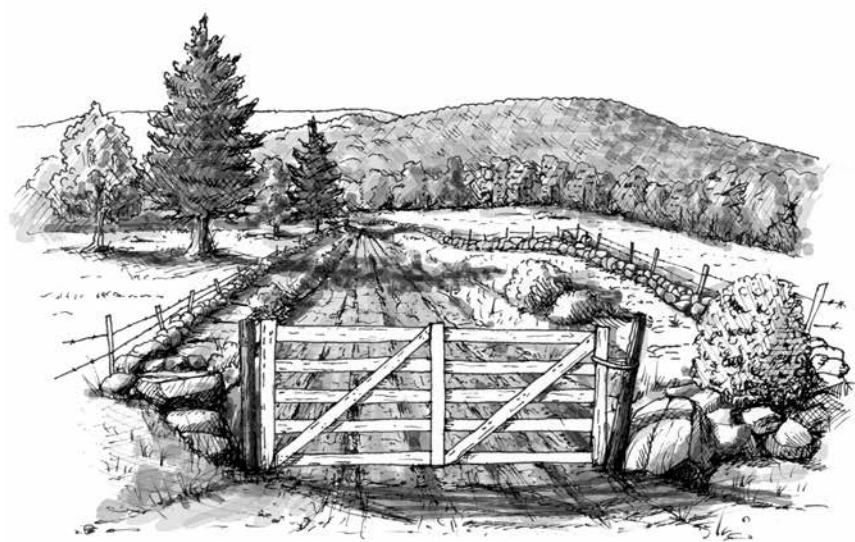




Seeking Parmenter

*There is only one single urgent task:
to attach oneself someplace in nature.*

RAINER MARIA RILKE



Through the underbrush and ferns to my left and right, I see the granite ghosts ox-drawn and levered into place to mark the right-of-way of one of the oldest roads laid out in the small town of Antrim in south-central New Hampshire. On this overgrown trail, scarred once with deep wheel ruts, I stumble past the site of the old Parmenter cabin. Where I go, alone and loaded with camping gear, the Parmenter children watched sleds pass by bearing logs to Samuel Gregg's sawmill and carts carrying grain to be ground.

Now labeled "private way" on Antrim's tax map, this wide path, cleared of tree stumps in the 1790s, was a major business route through the town's center for eighty years. After the town voted to "give up" the road in 1873, it was incorporated into the Parmenter farm which had grown up on both sides, and for 100 years "the lane" continued to serve my family, linking cow pasture to barn, woodlot to woodshed, and providing a shaded shortcut from itchy haymow to cool Gregg Lake. I am lugging my tent and sleeping bag up the same wet hill my great-great-great-grandfather's oxen trod pulling firewood and produce, mired, as they must have been at times, where underground springs still flow and soak my boots. My campsite, on land Amos Parmenter cleared early in Thomas Jefferson's presidency and which I owned (at a distance) for thirty-five years, is partway up this soggy slope.

Just over the wall, south, stands a set of new buildings amid