

TIMELINE

Mount Beacon has played an important role in the history of the City of Beacon. This timeline highlights moments in the Hudson Valley's history as well as diverse ways humans have used this mountain.

Circa 13,000 B.C.E. • Last glacier retreats from the Hudson Valley.

10,600 B.C.E. • First evidence of native settlement along the Hudson. Prior to the valley's Dutch and English settlement, small Native American villages lined the Hudson's shores. Their inhabitants relied on the river for communication, trade and sustenance. These indigenous people grew corn, beans and squash and hunted turkey, deer and bear. They supplemented these foods with fish such as alewives, shad and sturgeon.

1609 • Dutch *Half Moon* explores the river later named for its captain, Henry Hudson.

1683 • Wappinger Indians sell 85,000-acre Rombout patent (including today's Beacon) to three Europeans.

1709 • Catheryna Brett, who inherited one-third of Rombout patent, settles in present-day Beacon.

1775 • Signal fire built on Mount Beacon to serve as warning of British advance during Revolutionary War.

1807 • Robert Fulton's *North River* steamboat makes maiden voyage up the Hudson.

1864 • Opening of Mattewan Manufacturing Co., first of several factories leading to Beacon's renown as "hat-making capital of New York."

1900 • Daughters of the American Revolution dedicates a memorial atop Mount Beacon to soldiers who manned signal fires up and down the Hudson River during the Revolutionary War.

1902-1975 • Mount Beacon Incline Railway in operation. It carries about 3 million people to the summit.

1900-1905 • Seasonal one- and two- story cottages are built atop Mount Beacon. By 1910, 15 cottages made up this summertime colony.

1905 • Mountaintop Casino is constructed. It includes a restaurant and dance hall.

1908 • Beaconcrest Hotel—a three-story building with 60 rooms—is erected next to the Casino.

1909 • D.W. Griffith films *The Red Man's View* on Mount Beacon.

1913 • The City of Beacon is created via the merger of the villages of Fishkill Landing and Mattewan.

1927 • Fires destroy the Casino and Beaconcrest Hotel, signaling the end of the mountain's golden era.

1928 • A dance hall is rebuilt on summit. It also includes picnic facilities, a restaurant, snack bar and gift shop.

1936 & 1967 • Fires destroy two incline railway cars. They are rebuilt without roofs.

1965-1975 • Dutchess Ski Center in operation with a lodge, cafeteria, cocktail lounge and ski shop on summit. Chairlifts are installed in 1968.

1981 • The dance hall burns to the ground.

1983 • The incline railway is destroyed by fire.

1995-1998 • Scenic Hudson acquires 234 acres on Mount Beacon's flank and summit, protecting them from development.

1999 • Scenic Hudson opens Mount Beacon Park.

NatureNotes

MOUNT BEACON PARK *Beacon*

Robert Rodriguez, Jr. • www.robertrodriguezjr.com



Why we protected this place...

Many species rely on multiple habitats, which is why it's critical to conserve large, unbroken spaces that allow these creatures to move about freely. On Mount Beacon and adjacent Fishkill Ridge, Scenic Hudson has preserved nearly 2,000 acres of one of the Hudson Valley's most ecologically diverse landscapes, ensuring it always will be a prime destination for exploring nature.

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Natural and Human History on Mount Beacon

Over millions of years Mount Beacon was shaped by natural forces—earth-shifting collisions, the heating and cooling of rock, the passage of glaciers. More recently, humans have changed the mountain landscape, adding structures and altering plant species. Today visitors to Mount Beacon can witness evidence of all of these impacts—as well as enjoy sweeping summit views.



Who's Scenic Hudson?

We're a group of dedicated people who care about the Hudson River Valley. Starting in 1963, our founders fought to stop a power plant from destroying a mountain. Since then Scenic Hudson has continued protecting special places like this park. Now we're focused on Saving the Land That Matters Most—working with communities and other partners to preserve lands of the highest scenic, ecological and agricultural significance.

For more information about the 50-plus parks we've created or enhanced, visit www.scenichudson.org/parks.

The Geology of Mount Beacon

Mount Beacon actually has two summits, North and South. At 1,635 feet, South Mount Beacon is the tallest peak in the Hudson Highlands. The Highlands are made primarily of **metamorphic rock**—rocks that change (or metamorphose) under heat and pressure. Metamorphic rock found in the Highlands includes gneiss, marble and quartzite (crystal rock fragments). Hundreds of millions of years ago, giant continental plates beneath the land and sea collided violently, thrusting coastal sediments far beneath the earth’s crust. (We call these movements **plate tectonics**.) Subjected to extreme heat, the sediments melted and then gradually hardened.

This new rock eventually made its way to the surface. Then during another series of continental collisions that began about 450 million years ago, it was crumpled, broken and lifted into the Appalachian Mountains, stretching from Alabama to Maine and including the Hudson Highlands. Geologists surmise the Highlands once were as high as the Alps or even the Himalayas. Eons of **erosion** have worn them down to their current size.

Some of this erosion was caused by **glaciers** that moved across the land between two million and 12,000 years ago. The scouring action of these giant ice sheets rounded off the Highlands’ peaks and ridgelines, exposing rock. The glaciers also carved this part of the Hudson River estuary, squeezing between the mountains and creating the river’s narrowest yet deepest stretch. This is actually a **fjord** (pronounced *fee-YORD*), an inlet of the sea between high, steep slopes.

Evidence of the glaciers is everywhere. Boulders that don’t resemble the native rock, called **erratics**, were randomly deposited by moving glaciers. You can also see scars where the glaciers scraped against the rock.

Human Impacts on Mount Beacon

During the American Revolution (1775-1783), a tall signal fire was constructed and maintained atop the mountain. Though never lit, it was intended to warn nearby communities of the approach of British troops. This beacon later gave its name to the mountain and city at its base. In the 1900s, Mount Beacon’s summit became a prime tourist destination. It was reached via the Mount Beacon Incline Railway, the world’s steepest passenger funicular. (The Mount Beacon Incline Railway Restoration Society is working to return the ride, destroyed in a 1983 fire, to its former glory.) Awaiting visitors on the mountaintop was a restaurant/dance hall and the impressive Beaconcrest Hotel, whose verandas offered a great place to relax and admire panoramic vistas. For a time the mountain also was an entertainment hub: Three silent films were shot there and in the 1920s it sported the Northeast’s tallest radio tower. The station transmitting from it was called “the Voice from the Clouds.”

Tough economic times and a series of fires eventually took their toll on Mount Beacon’s summit buildings and the railway. Today all that remains of the mountain’s heyday are the ruins of the railway’s wheelhouse and the magnificent views that still attract visitors from all over the world.



Courtesy of Beacon Historical Society



Courtesy of Beacon Historical Society

Mount Beacon Today

Thanks to the mountain’s rich natural and human history, there’s much to explore in Scenic Hudson’s Mount Beacon Park.

The most evident **ecosystem** on Mount Beacon is the northern hardwood forest. You can see the different stages that forests move through, a process known as **forest succession**. The tallest trees make up the **canopy**. Here they include oak, hickory, hemlock, chestnut, maple and birch. Shorter, more shade-tolerant trees and shrubs make up the **understory**. Small plants grow on the **forest floor**. Among these are the ferns and mosses lining Mount Beacon’s trails. Ferns and mosses are unusual because they use spores, instead of seeds, to

reproduce. They are among the oldest plant species on the planet. Look at the underside of a fern leaf (called a frond) for small, hard dots—these are the spores. Also notice how moss doesn’t have roots or stems like most plants. It grows directly on rock. Since spore reproduction requires lots of water, ferns and mosses need moist **habitats**.

Along the trail you’ll also see lots of green-gray patches on rocks and tree trunks. That’s **lichen**, the result of what’s called a symbiotic—or mutually beneficial—relationship between a fungus and algae. Over time, lichen loosens the rock, creating soil in which mosses and ferns can grow. Because of its role in initiating forest succession, lichen is called a **pioneer species**. Eventually the mosses and ferns give way to annual and perennial herbs, shrubs and finally trees.



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While hiking up Mount Beacon, it will be easy to spot birds, deer, squirrels and chipmunks. Look a little more closely and you might see a millipede or red eft. Though the word “millipede” means “1,000 feet,” these insects actually have two feet on each of their 20 to 200 segments, meaning they have a maximum of 400 feet. Millipedes are reddish-brown, slow-moving **detritivores**—they feed on decaying plant material. Red efts are land-loving juvenile newts. These amphibians begin and end their lives in the water, starting as aquatic larvae and returning there as adult spotted newts to reproduce.

Despite a century of human impacts, Mount Beacon Park now supports a healthy ecosystem. To keep it that way, ATV and other motorized vehicle use is illegal. These vehicles erode trails, damage plants and destroy wildlife habitat.



Reward at the Top: Mount Beacon’s Spectacular Views

Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852), the “Father of American Landscape Architecture,” was born across the river in Newburgh. The well-traveled Downing claimed the view from Mount Beacon was “among the most powerfully striking and impressive landscapes on this continent.”

As you walk along the trail, look for:

- Glacial erratics (random boulders of “different-looking” rock)
- Quartzite (crystal rock fragments)
- Glacial scars (gashes in the rock)
- Serpentinite (a bright-green metamorphic rock, found mostly near the top of the trail)
- Lichens, ferns and mosses

On a clear day, from the summit you can see:

- The cities of Beacon and Newburgh
- The Newburgh-Beacon and Mid-Hudson bridges and Walkway Over the Hudson State Historic Park
- The Shawangunk Ridge and Catskill Mountains

What’s the Source of Beacon’s Drinking Water?

Located atop Mount Beacon is the reservoir that provides the city below with tap water. It is part of the Hudson River watershed, one of the water bodies in a five-state region that drains into the river.