

METTLER'S WOODS IN NEW JERSEY

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Contributed through the Garden Club of Somerset Hills*

In the gently rolling farm country of central New Jersey it is amazing to find that a 65-acre woodland still stands today as a convincing and living example of the American wilderness as the first European settlers saw it. The woods are just south of the old Amwell Road between East Millstone and Middlebush, near the southeastern edge of Somerset County and only a few miles from New Brunswick. They are part of a tract of land which came into the possession of a Dutch farmer in 1701, and which he settled about 1703. These predecessors of the Mettler family gradually cleared most of their large holding, and the rich loam made fertile fields. For some reason or other, and quite possibly because they liked to look at the finest trees and the richest forest as it was, this portion was left untouched.

For more than two centuries and a half the forest has remained practically undisturbed, seemingly unaffected by such milestones in the history of the colony and state as the founding of Queens College in 1766, the tides of the Revolution that swept back and forth across New Jersey, and the digging of the nearby Delaware and Raritan Canal. Massive grey-trunked white oaks shoulder the powerful dark-barked columns of black and red oaks, with their leafy canopies more than 80 feet in the air, and hickories struggle to keep pace with the giants. This is a picture which would seem entirely natural to Peter Kalm, searching in the late 1740s for seeds of hardy and useful plants for the Swedish Government and striving to please the quickly critical trustees of his University of Åbo . . . and a picture familiar also to André Michaux, searching throughout the new nation 40 years later for plants to grace the gardens of Marie Antoinette at the Petit Trianon and Rambouillet. If these keen-eyed explorers were to ride along the narrow roadway into the center of the forest today, Mettler's Woods would be little different from acres and acres of uncleared land they knew well between Trenton and Elizabethport.

The amazing fact is that the woods were preserved during those dim early years when thousands of similar mature forests through-



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Towering above the lower canopy of dogwoods, this black oak might have been seen by André Michaux, plant hunting in New Jersey in the 1780s—though he would note it as Quercus tinctoria of Will Bartram, instead of Q. velutina as now specified.

Photo by John Wolbarst, New York

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out the colonies were being cut hurriedly and wastefully for building logs and boards, for firewood, and with such useless surplus still left pulled into great windrows by ox teams and burned just to make the land available for crops. And generations later, the Mettler family was still preserving the trees, even though a mature oak forest had become one of the most valuable resources the land could offer in the industrialized eastern states.

During these 250 years, the forest was continuing much as it had for milleniums. Aged trees would crash to the ground in storms, temporarily leaving openings through which broad shafts of sunlight would reach downward, penetrating the middle shade of dogwoods and strengthening the thicket of dockmackie or maple-leaved viburnum beneath. Small maples and ashes might struggle for the space opened up, but in most cases the adjacent oaks would close in, broadening out with strong new growth, and soon the opening in the high canopy would be closed. Leaves, branchlets, trees fallen to the forest floor make a gradually decomposing surface layer breaking down into humus and then into mineral components, and increasing the depth of fertile soil.

The November storm of 1950 brought several giants crashing to the ground, and logs were salvaged from their trunks. Counts of growth rings at the basal cuts show them to have been as much as 310 years of age. Even the largest and oldest trees have clear straight trunks, without lateral branches or stubs for at least half their height, and this indicates that they have always grown under forest conditions. This and other factors lead to the conclusion that the woods have been densely forested for a very long period of time—a laboratory in which nature has been working on countless biological balances long before man knew this continent.

Classes from nearby Rutgers University (colonial Queens College) have utilized the woods for field trips and nature study outings for many years, and during the past decade or so important research in ecology has been carried on there. In addition to these scientific and academic contacts, during recent years, also, the woods have been of increasing interest to lumbermen. Planks and boards are more marketable than scientific papers on plant growth, and the present owner is no longer able to dismiss the

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Alarmed by the imminence with the aim of preserving it in a preservation area, a small group at Rutgers University has formed the Citizens Scientific and Historical Society of Mettler's Woods. Others have been active in conservation and forestry has been active in a campaign to obtain \$100,000 for the purchase of the woods. The Society has made a very favorable arrangement for deferring consideration of other offers for more detailed information and contributions for this unit. For more information contact A. Johnson of the Department of Geology, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey at the same address.

One of the great phenomena of the accelerated pace at which the forest is spreading. While this has been the case in the country," the point is so rapid that it is gone, and all is city or an agricultural scene, it is all too soon. In the case of one by one. It is infinitely more difficult. Conservation efforts to safeguard the natural states are well known and many of our national treasures are irreplaceable. In the case of an area, even small spaces unaffected by his changes are now very rare. In the case of the type and significance of the case has been convincingly shown by the American Museum of Natural History. In the present we must know the history of the natural communities as it is of the past. In the nation we have set aside primeval forests of California, pine forests of the Great Smokies, but in the case of the imperative that we save this

handsome offers made for the trees, nor to avoid a realistic appraisal of the forest holding in view of today's taxes.

Alarmed by the imminence of the danger to the forest, and with the aim of preserving it in perpetuity as a wild-life conservation area, a small group at Rutgers has become the nucleus of a Citizens Scientific and Historical Committee for the Preservation of Mettler's Woods. Others prominent in various institutions and in conservation and forestry have joined forces with them, and a campaign to obtain \$100,000 is well under way. The committee has made a very favorable arrangement with the owner, who is deferring consideration of other bids for the present. Requests for more detailed information of the plan for saving the woods and contributions for this unique project may be sent to Dr. M. A. Johnson of the Department of Botany, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, or to Dr. Murray F. Buell at the same address.

One of the great phenomena taking place before our eyes is the accelerated pace at which cities and towns are growing and spreading. While this has been pleasantly termed "moving to the country," the point is soon reached where the country has gone, and all is city or an anomalous semi-despoiled stage that may not pass for either. In this losing battle for the natural and agricultural scenes, it is all too familiar to see the downfall of trees one by one. It is infinitely more tragic to see the loss of a forest. Conservation efforts to safeguard natural areas in the western states are well known and most gratifyingly successful, for these national treasures are irreplaceable. In the eastern metropolitan area, even small spaces unaffected by man's work and preserved from his changes are now very unusual. Here, no other natural area of the type and significance of Mettler's Woods remains. The case has been convincingly summarized by Richard H. Pough of the American Museum of Natural History: "To understand the present we must know the heritage of the past. This is as true of natural communities as it is of human societies. Throughout the nation we have set aside primeval areas—to name a few, the redwoods of California, pine forests in Minnesota, and cove forests in the Great Smokies, but in this part of the country—none. It is imperative that we save this one."