



# READING THE LANDSCAPE

*200 Years of Change*

Before immigrants from Europe invaded the Americas, the environment was controlled largely by climate. Where rainfall was sufficient, forests dominated the landscape. Where there was not enough rainfall for trees, lush grasslands prevailed. Where the rainfall was insufficient for grasses, there were cactus and desert brushlands.

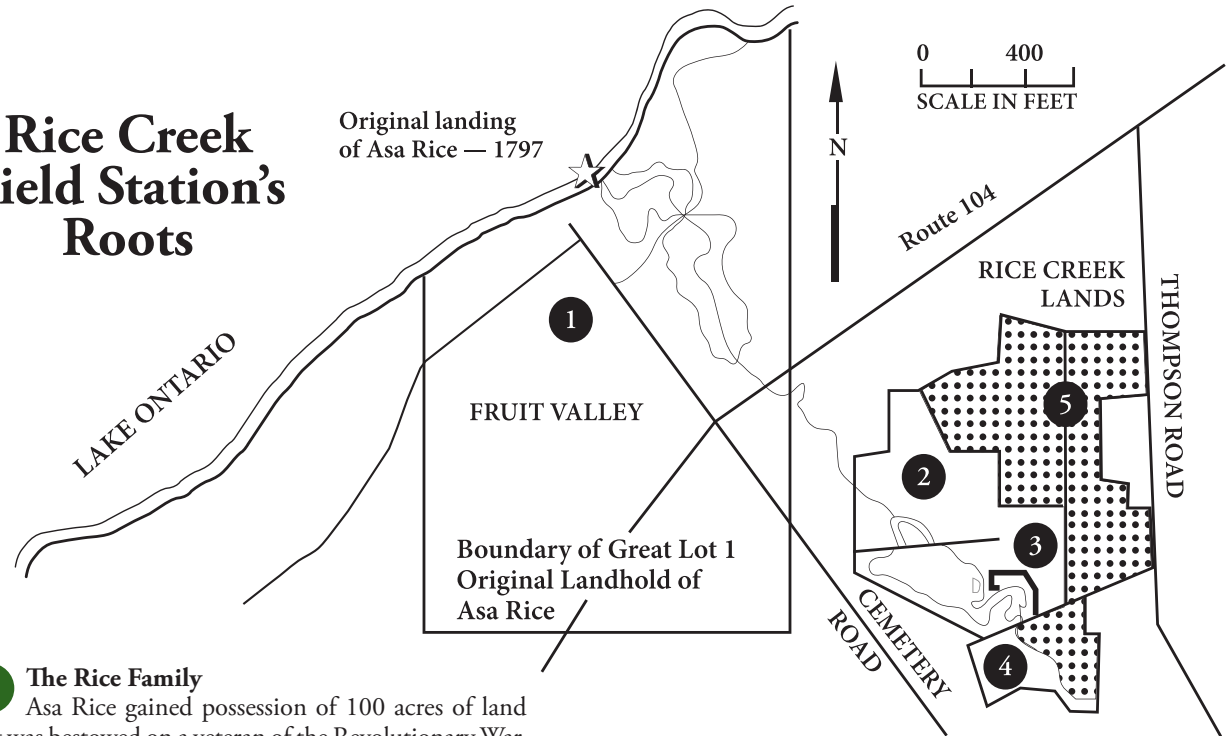
The Oswego landscape at the time of the American Revolution supported tall hardwood forests right down to the shores of the Great Lake Ontario.

It was into this beautiful but forbidding country that a family moved in 1797. The Rice family, consisting of the parents Asa and Elizabeth and eight children, were used to more settled countryside. They had very little experience in clearing the land or in garnering a living from the native environment. Still, after a difficult trip up the Mohawk River, across Oneida Lake and down the Oneida and Oswego Rivers, they entered Lake Ontario and made their way westward to the mouth of Three Mile Creek, now known as Rice Creek.

From humble beginnings, they laid the foundations for a comfortable life. They were soon joined by others and within 30 years a farming community began to emerge. The hamlet of Fruit Valley grew from this early settlement, which Mr. Rice had named Union Village.

The influence of this pioneer family and their immigrant experience is still evident both in the land and in its people.

## Rice Creek Field Station's Roots



### 1 The Rice Family

Asa Rice gained possession of 100 acres of land that was bestowed on a veteran of the Revolutionary War. The Rice family's first shelter was a log crib covered by a tent borrowed from Fort Oswego. The first winter of 1797 was one of great hardship and one family member died. Shortly after, they moved upstream and built a more permanent dwelling. The extent of their landholding is shown on the map.

### 2 The Conway Family

Daniel and Catherine Conway acquired land in 1950. Mr. Conway raised and trained racehorses. The acres acquired from Mr. Conway for Rice Creek Field Station were all pasture, hayfields, and crop fields. The dam and spillway that form Rice Pond were built on this property. SUNY Oswego acquired the land in 1963.

### 3 The Hilton Family

Dorwin and Betty Hilton had their roots in Fruit Valley. They acquired 95 acres in 1951 and set up a dairy farm that was recognized for its excellence by the Oswego County Farm Bureau. In 1961 Mr. Hilton sold his land to the College Foundation. He moved to Conquest, NY where he operated The Dor-Bet Holstein Farm. Rice Pond, Rice Creek Field Station, and much of the Rice Creek Trail System were built on former Hilton land.

### 4 The DeAmbra Family

Louis and Antoinette DeAmbra were fruit farmers who owned land adjacent to the Oswego Town Cemetery, and on both sides of Bunker Hill Road. They operated a popular retail fruit stand at their homestead on Bunker Hill Road. SUNY Oswego acquired 15 acres from the DeAmbras in 1963. Adjacent to this land was a pear orchard which once produced a very good crop for the DeAmbras. Today the orchard is a tangle of old pear trees, forest trees, and shrubs. It is a rich wildlife area.

### 5 SUNY Oswego

Much of the acreage of Rice Creek Field Station was acquired as land speculation. Part of it is the property of the State of New York and part belongs to private non-profit organizations affiliated with SUNY Oswego. These 99 acres (indicated by dots) have become a vital part of the Rice Creek instructional and research programs. All but 22.5 of these acres were cropland or producing orchards when acquired.

# Reading the Landscape

*Rice Creek Field Station was developed on land that was once farmland. As late as 1955, cows still grazed where lawns, buildings, and a pond are now located.*

**1** As you enter the Red Trail, you cross a fencerow that has separated pasture from orchard since the land was first cleared. When farming ceased here, ash, maple, and cherry invaded both fields crowding out apple trees and pasture grasses. Only a row of large trees remains to mark the field boundary.

**2** Nature seldom plants trees in straight rows. Over 30 years ago the spruce trees on the right were planted in an old hayfield. Since the plantation was never thinned, the trees are crowded and no sunlight can reach the ground. Compare the bare ground under the spruce with the growth under the hedgerow to your left.

**3** Past the plantation is a farm pond excavated to provide water for livestock in the pasture ahead. Once the pasture was twice as big as it is now. The open part is kept in weeds and grasses by mowing. The not mowed half to your right has been taken over by trees and shrubs.



*Photo courtesy of Professor Karen Sime*



**4** You are now entering a 36-acre woodlot. Only one-third of it was wooded 40 years ago when it was part of a farm. Woodland is always the end product of land abandonment. On a working farm, woodlots provided firewood, lumber, and fence posts. Can you tell which trees were part of the original woodlot?

**5** You are now passing through a young (pioneer) woodlot. It was horse pasture until 1963. Immigrant settlers learned from Native Americans that shrub fields provide food and medicinals and attract wild game. Look for fruit-bearing shrubs and trees as you walk through this section.

**6** This is the same hedgerow you crossed at the beginning of the trail. Here it separates two fields that are kept open by mowing to create habitat for butterflies, birds, and other grassland species. A four-year rotation is followed. One-quarter of each field is mowed every year. Why does mowing keep fields open?

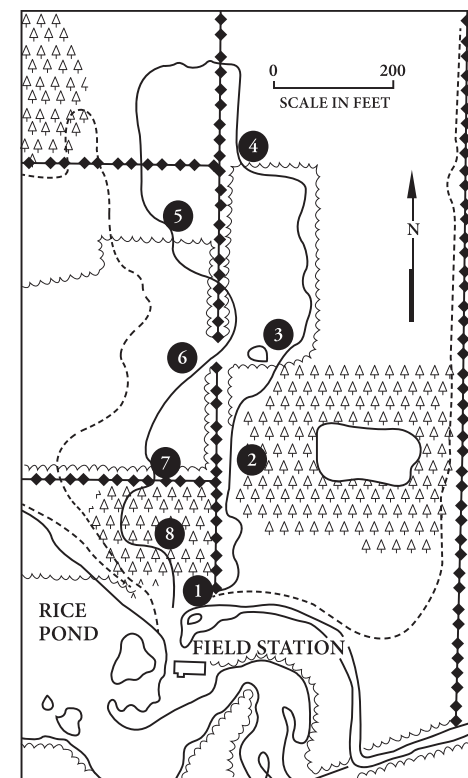
**7** You are crossing another field boundary (stone fence). These stones were moved here to the field margin to prevent them from interfering with the plowing of the fields. As you continue along the trail, you will see several long-needled white pines. The soft pine needles occur in bundles of five. White pine is sacred to local Haudenosaunee Native Americans but was extensively cut down by European immigrants because it made excellent lumber.

**8** It takes only a few years for trees and shrubs to get a foothold after mowing, grazing or plowing ceases. Notice here how the ash trees planted by nature are crowding out the spruce planted here in 1966 by the college. Like these “immigrant” spruce trees, the immigrant settlers were in a constant struggle to prevent trees from crowding them out. Their first task was to remove the forests, and their second was to keep the trees from coming back.

*Rice Creek*  
FIELD STATION

STATE UNIVERSITY OF  
NEW YORK AT OSWEGO

Areas of the Red Trail have been interpreted to help you understand some of the changes this land has experienced.



KEY :     
Hedge Row    Plantation    Wood's Edge

 **OSWEGO**  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK