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Number 4

Burning Issues in North Madison or How to Make Your Own Charcoal



A

Charcoal Mound in North Madison Many Years Ago

Scattered about the wooded areas of North Madison are echoes of other times and other people who populated the area.

One of these echoes recalls a little known occupation - that of the collier or charcoal maker. Charcoal making in the 18th and 19th centuries had nothing to do with barbecuing hamburgers or glowing briquets and a lot to do with making iron and blacksmithing.

The Rockland Preserve in North Madison has many sites once used for the production of charcoal. These "charcoal pits" are nothing more than broad, flat, circular areas distinguished by their black soil peppered with bits of charcoal. Often a rude stone fireplace stands close by. A rusted iron kettle or pieces of an old iron stove may attest to the collier's presence many years ago.

The simplicity of the charcoal pit belies the skill and danger of the work of making charcoal from the trees of the forest. First an acre of woodland was harvested to produce 40 cords of wood cut into three to four foot lengths. The wood was carted to the site of the charcoal pit and stacked with great care to produce a dome shaped pile of wood 30-40 feet in diameter and 10 - 14 feet high. The pile was covered with leaves, dirt, and sod and set afire.

The process of burning the wood to produce charcoal was a tricky and dangerous business. Flames were the collier's enemy. If the mass of wood burst into flames, the product was ashes - not charcoal. It was the job of the collier to control the burning so that the wood charred but did not burst into flame. He constantly watched the color of the smoke. As long as the smoke was white things were going well. If it turned black only speedy action saved the operation. Another of the collier's jobs was testing the mound for "hot spots" that signaled disaster. To do this the collier climbed up on the pile testing for areas of weakness in the covering of the mound. The ever present danger was that should he find a "hot spot" where the wood was burning too quickly, he might fall into the burning mass. Not a job for the faint hearted!

The charcoal process took up to 2 weeks to complete and required constant attention from the collier and his helpers. A shelter was built complete with a stone fireplace. Many of these fireplaces remain near the remains of the charcoal mound.

Charcoal from the mound taking care not to allow the charcoal to burst into flame. Once removed the charcoal was loaded into wagons and delivered.

Directions to Rockland Preserve: From Madison Center take Route 79 north to the North Madison Traffic Circle where Route 80 intersects with Route 79. Continue north on Route 79 until you enter Rockland. Watch for County Road on the left. The next left (marked by two stone pillars) is the entrance to the Northridge Development. Turn left into the development and follow the sign to Rockland Preserve. You may also acquire a map of Rockland Preserve at the Beach and Recreation Office at Town Hall.