

# **West Rock, Hamden**

*The geography of history*

**Peter Sagnella**

At dawn I cross a stone wall that marks the north end of my parents' property and the south end of a watershed. It's a divide of public and private land. Past the wall I hike a dam to face Farm Brook Reservoir, dark and placid. The morning is overcast. Due north is York Mountain. To the northwest, Warner Mountain folds between York and West Rock Ridge. On the water Canada geese float.

I could tarry here, enjoy the view, but I walk west on the matted trail that splits the dam. Clover and timothy snag my laces, soak my boots. When I come to the west end, the trail dips and joins briefly a service road, which slopes south, winds round a giant hickory, and returns to the ridge before veering south once more to Mountain Road. To the west and north and east of this confluence is a meadow, and in the heart of the meadow a hickory. Near a monument commemorating Farm Brook the trail begins again, fades northeast through the meadow, then bends at the meadow's northern corner up West Rock. Looking across the meadow I see the trail as always, disappearing into pine, disappearing up the ridge.

I follow the trail to the summit of the first rise, where it turns south ninety degrees. I pass maple, mountain laurel, low bush blueberry. I climb, sniff cedar. The trail switches back. To the brightening east, between hickory, ash, and oak, I see Totoket Ridge and the floodplain of the Quinnipiac Valley. After a short climb over trap rock and prickly pear, I come to a bald. Very easily now, without the screen of trees, my eyes sweep the overcast horizon. I see sky and water, land and landmarks: Laurel View Country Club, Vernon Gardens, Paradise Preserve, New Haven Harbor, a trail, a meadow, a service road, a reservoir, a stone wall.

For more than thirty years I've hiked to this bald. I'm always baffled by the view, by the slow, sudden change in perspective. On the bald land and sky expand. Those places that were proximate

recede. In their place I am confronted with an immense, physical world, a world beyond bones and flesh, a world in which time and space dislocate the familiar. It is on this cloudy, humid morning, for instance—ironically with little long range visibility—that I actually see, for what seems the first time in my life, six hills tipped with hard wood, six valleys mired in fog.

**At first glance Frederic Church's famed painting of this south-central Connecticut ridge magnifies the agrarian life of early America.** Two laborers are illuminated in the foreground by a brilliant pond of sunlight. While not in perfect symmetry, the laborers angle in similar positions—one on the ground, the other in a cart. Oxen are yoked in equipoise. In the distance, beyond the laborers, the white spire of a church eclipses lowland trees. The geometry of the spire, pointing to heaven, contrasts the verdure in color and shape: while the spire is white, angular, clambering with frank purity, the trees roll across the frame in a gentle, dark green line. In the background, the ruddy face of West Rock curves long and wide, a basaltic belly. The West River, tributary of the Farmington, widens in the foreground into a meadow.

This past winter at Whitlock's Book Barn in Bethany I happened upon and purchased a catalogue of "The New Haven Scene," which was an exhibition of paintings, watercolors, and drawings sponsored by the New Haven Colony Historical Society in the spring of 1970. Church's painting was part of the exhibition (a facsimile of the painting was also exhibited at The New Haven Museum in the winter and spring of 2012 in "New Haven's Sentinels: The Art and Science of East and West Rock") but it was exhibited with Church's original title—"Haying Near New Haven." According to Theodore Stebbins in "The Artists of New Haven," the catalogue's preface, it was not until Church exhibited the painting at the National Academy of Design in 1849 that he titled it "West Rock, New Haven."

While this shift in title may seem miniscule, it seems to shift the perspective Church's painting offers in significant ways. What was

initially pastoral becomes allegory. As my eye moves from foreground to background, from seasonal labor to the ruddy, basaltic rock arcing gracefully under a spacious sky, I no longer see a terrifically detailed backdrop. Instead the rock swells, comes into focus. The jutting white steeple is no longer a minor, juxtaposing detail but a directive. The mirror of light and land and sky harmonizes heaven and earth, and this synthesis of light and height invokes suddenly a city on a hill, a promised land.

**I grew up seven miles northeast of this ruddy, basaltic face.**

Topographically that face is the southern terminus of a trap rock ridge that bends through New Haven, Woodbridge, and Hamden. In 1973, a year after my parents built a house on the crest of a knoll on Dunbar Hill, the town of Hamden and the State of Connecticut, in the name of flood prevention, dredged Farm Brook, southeast of the ridge's northern terminus, due north of my parents' newly built house, and the first of three watersheds in the town's uplands. In 1939 President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration funded the construction of a seven-mile road that split the summit of West Rock. The road was named Baldwin Drive, after Connecticut governor and Yale alum Simeon Baldwin. One hundred and eighty-eight years before Church exhibited his painting, English judges Edward Whalley and William Goffe, who had authorized the beheading of King Charles I, fled to the New Haven Colony. Directed by John Davenport, Puritan leader of the Colony, the outlaw judges hid atop the ridge under a glacial erratic a few hundred yards northwest of the ridge's face. Today a blue-blazed hiking trail, Regicides, stretches from Judges Cave in Westville to the Quinnipiac Trail in Hamden, memorializing the judges' asylum and resistance. Six thousand years before Whalley and Goffe retreated to their cave, Native Americans of the Middle and Late Archaic used the ridge to hunt and shape tools. Two hundred million years earlier Pangaea split. Millennia unfolded like leaves in a history book. Lava cooled, sills broke. Stone gave way to flesh.

**Look east from the bald, as I do this overcast July morning,** and you see first what immediately confronts you: the rounded lobes of white oak leaves, the tawny, peeling bark of red cedar. Look to earth and you see the old bitternut hickory, that lone tree in the center of what was once the dairy farmer Harold Hansen's pasture, then Farm Brook, which, from this vantage, resembles a horseshoe. Facing Hill Street, butting the east shore of Farm Brook you see a red brick ranch, built by the mason Peter Panaroni, and large contemporary homes, built by his sons. In 1971, on a cold spring afternoon, my parents looked to buy Panaroni's lot, which, at the time, belonged to a man named Frank Vernon. Continue east across Hill Street and your eyes catch fairways stretching north and south, and round, white traps. At the end of fairways hang yellow flags. Honing in, your eyes see holes terraced into hills: the third and fourth, the fifth and sixth, the seventh and eighth, the ninth. Beyond the ninth green, positioned rightly it seems, at the summit of these hills, is the club house.

It wasn't until I played this course that I heard the phrase *local knowledge*. Sometimes it was used wryly, to justify the fortuitous outcome of a poor shot: a shot that sailed out of bounds, struck a tree, then caromed in bounds. Such a shot could be attributed only to a player who was manifesting his knowledge of the local terrain. Other times the phrase described the awareness of a player who, because of experience, understood how to manipulate such terrain. In this way it was meant sincerely, appraising the wisdom of a player who knew the course as it was, and could negotiate it as such.

The thirteenth hole, for instance, is a short, uphill par four measuring 310 yards. For a long hitter, this distance may be traversed in a single shot. However, the tee rests thirty yards below the fairway, which means the hitter ultimately cannot see much of the fairway or the green, the latter of which sits left of the short hill's apex. All things being equal, a well-struck drive that splits that apex will likely land right of the green in one of three sand traps.

Behind the green, though, there is a house the color of black walnut. From the perspective presented by the tee, the house is fifteen to twenty yards left of the center of the crest. However, surmount the hill and you see that the house aligns with an alley to the green. A good drive adhering to the line established by this house will more than likely in favorable conditions run that alley and end up on the green.

**I know this about the thirteenth hole at Laurel View because I** played golf there as a boy almost every day. What began as a place unknown eventually became a place I knew very well.

Still, though I came to know how to traverse the lay of the land with a small white ball I did not know some of the land's history. I did not know that the same year my parents bought their lot on Dunbar Hill—1971—the clubhouse I see looking east from the bald was built on the foundation of a house, on land, that once belonged to toymaker A.C. Gilbert.

A municipal, Laurel View was constructed in 1968 by golf course architect Geoffrey Cornish. After touring the clubhouse, Francis O'Connor, longtime writer for the *Hamden Chronicle*, observed the following in "Champagne, Conn.," an essay from his collection *The Melting Pot: Nostalgic Essays from The Hamden Chronicle*. "The scenery on the former A.C. Gilbert Estate off West Shepard Ave. is beyond description, and provides a remarkable setting for the clubhouse." After praising the design of the clubhouse, O'Connor praised the way in which the clubhouse complemented the beauty of the land and its native and cultivated flora: "Place such an impressive building in the charm of the site, with its massive spreads of laurel and attractive plantings of dogwood, and you have a very remarkable public facility."

In the 1930s Gilbert purchased more than 700 acres of land in the town's northwestern hills, building first a game preserve where he could hunt and fish, then a hunting lodge and residence for he

and wife Mary. In his 1954 autobiography *The Man Who Lives in Paradise*, Gilbert describes why he moved from Maraldene (a compound of Gilbert's wife's name, Mary, and the English word *dene*, meaning "hill"), his palatial residence in the eastern part of town, to a part of the town's western uplands referred to simply as the Dunbar Hills. "The Dunbar Hills was an even lovelier spot, the choicest location anywhere near New Haven, under the shadow of West Rock, amid rolling hills, and with a view in places of the far-off sound."

As for the location of his house, assessed by O'Connor fourteen years later in the form of Laurel View's clubhouse, Gilbert said this: "I've built my own home here, too, of course. Mountain View, or as Mary would have it, Hilltop, is built at the northern end of the game preserve, on the highest spot anywhere around."

## II

My paternal grandfather, a carpenter, immigrated to Wallingford, Connecticut from the Italian village of Gioia San Ittica in 1901. He was fourteen. Prior to the Great Depression he was self-employed and built houses in Wallingford, Orange, and New Haven. He lived with his wife, also an Italian immigrant, and their three children in New Haven—cold-water flats on Stevens Street, Hamilton Street, Humphrey Street, Chestnut Street. Later my grandparents moved their family to a post-World War II Cape Cod on Woodin Street in Hamden, which is where they lived the rest of their lives. While he did not build a house and pass it on to his son or daughter, he did pass on wisdom distilled from his experience building homes for other people. When you build a home, he told my father once, build it on high ground.

**"Frank Vernon was a yankee," my father says. We're drinking coffee, sitting at a harvest table I built for the small Cape my wife and I bought a few years ago in Centerville. It's early spring. I've asked**

him to recount the story of how he built his home on Dunbar Hill. Listening, I hear how my parents' first home was on Mueller Drive, just off Woodin Street, where my grandparents lived. The house was a small ranch, halfway up one of Hamden's western hills, near Belden Brook. The house was not at the summit of Mueller Drive, which would have been the cul-de-sac my brothers and sisters started their sleds from in winter, but was slightly higher than my grandparents' house a half mile east in Hamden Plains. Still, when my parents—with five children aged eleven to two—went looking for a lot on which to build a home in April 1971, they continued by coincidence the line established by my grandparents a decade before and headed northwest to Hamden's uplands. My parents found themselves on Norman Road, then Hill Street, about a quarter mile south of West Shephard Avenue, on a lot owned by Frank Vernon.

For some reason my father's terse assessment of Frank Vernon's character ignites my memory. I see, or perhaps want to see, a New England archetype: hard chin, straight jaw, sun-burned cheeks, eyes dark and skeptical, eyes that perused angles and curves of fieldstone, beheld pale seeds in black furrows. I envision Frank's hair as a workman's pompadour, windblown and stressed, not unlike Robert Frost's. As my mind's eye revivifies the man I see a crooked, plodding gait, an icy stare that implies he may tire of the harvest he's desired.

"Frank was from Medford, Massachusetts," my father adds. "He lived on North Street and then bought land on Dunbar Hill. It was his retreat."

In the periphery of family photos from the 1970s and 1980s, I've seen evidence of this retreat—apple trees, pear trees, a Concord grape vineyard, a garage strewn with tools. East of a neatly constructed farmhouse Frank had a stone barn which was, with a flatly graded yet symmetrically pitched roof, at once Neolithic and Neoclassic. In the 1960s and 1970s, Frank began selling his twelve acres. One by one the lots were cleared and graded, the houses built.

By doing so he added ranches and raised ranches and Cape Cods to the land where Gilbert built cottages in the 1940s and 1950s. Vernon called his land Vernon Gardens. Gilbert called his Paradise.

**On a cold afternoon in April 1971, my father tells me, George Revelis** showed my parents for the final time one of Frank Vernon's lots, the lot where the mason Peter Panaroni would eventually build his home. Revelis, the selling agent, was anxious to close. He did not know, however, that my father had had a crisis of conscience that morning—waking early, staring at the wall in the bedroom of the house on Mueller Drive, turning over his father's advice about high ground.

Late that afternoon my parents went to the lot. My sister Monica, four, was sick and my brother John, one, was carried by my mother in a papoose. The lot was listed for \$11,000 and my parents were offering \$10,500. They had saved for a decade on a teacher's salary, my father's summer carpentry work, and here and there my mother's nighttime shifts at Yale-New Haven Hospital.

About halfway into the lot was a wall of briars that had, in earlier visits, prevented my father from seeing the rear. So, this time, he told Revelis he wanted to walk the whole lot. Revelis obliged, so my father ambled west toward the ridge, felt soft ground underfoot, eyed skunk cabbage and sink holes, and concluded the lot did not drain well. Winter and spring had been relatively dry, yet the land in the rear that afternoon was sodden. Bordered by thicket, the rear was clearly a basin for melt and runoff from West Rock, which, several hundred yards west, surged into gray sky. It was lowland, and my father did not want to build on it.

Revelis, agitated by my parents' reversal, subsequently claimed they could not make a decision. He asserted, truculently according to my father, that my parents thought their money was gold. Determined not to yield, or perhaps yielding opportunely, my father shook the check for \$10,500 and urged Revelis to show my mother

and father the best lot he had. Revelis swept his hand east and west, north and south.

“Take your pick,” he barked. “You can have any of these lots!”

Having spent Sunday afternoons the year prior perusing building lots, and therefore familiarizing themselves with the lay of the land in this part of town, my parents promptly drove south on Hill Street, west on Dunbar Hill, and stopped at the summit of a knoll two hundred yards southwest of Frank Vernon’s stone barn. Exiting the car, my father faced Revelis and pointed to the high, clear lot on the north side of the street.

“We’ll take this one,” they said.

“It’ll cost you more,” the agent said. “\$11,000.”

“You got it,” my father said.

**When we finish discussing what it was like building his house** on Dunbar Hill, my father describes a walk he took with my mother and six brothers and sisters. It was the summer after my parents built the house, and they, like I do still, crossed the stone wall at the north end of their property. It was before Farm Brook Reservoir, however, and lowland thicket extended from the wall to the south end of Harold Hansen’s dairy farm for roughly a half mile. There were paths in the thicket, likely deer runs or old hunting trails, and one such path veered northwest through bramble and red maple. Not knowing what was at the end of the path, my parents led my sisters and brothers through it.

“It was tough to see,” my father recalls. “But then we came to the end of the woods. All of a sudden the path exploded into light. There was the meadow and West Rock, right in front of us. Wide open. Your brothers and sisters were so excited they just ran off.”

I’ve heard this anecdote before but, having listened for an hour or so to my parents’ quest for a home, I’m struck this time by my father’s genuine pleasure in the story, a pleasure that includes, I believe, retrospective disbelief. Having moved a large family from

a small ranch on a cul-de-sac to an area described eighteen years earlier by Gilbert in *The Man Who Lives in Paradise* as “one of the loveliest residential communities anywhere around New Haven,” I imagine that that moment, surging into what seemed a boundless land, was, for my parents, a deep affirmation of the sacrifices they had made for a decade.

**And I, too, have fond memories of West Rock. When I was five,** my oldest sister Mary, fourteen years my elder, walked me through the meadow until we found a large rock—obscured now by decades of undergrowth—near the west shore of Farm Brook. It was August, and humid, and under the shade of cherry and ash and oak the rock warmed my thighs. There we ate lunch. Some winters my sisters and brothers and I tobogganed over and down the meadow’s rippling hills, plowing through snowdrifts that sprayed our red, cold cheeks. Once our family hiked to the bald to look out. Afterward, we tied a red rag on a cedar. Before passing over the stone wall into our yard, I turned to the ridge. I remember the ecstasy I felt—induced by that sudden shift in perspective—when I saw the rag, a mere red blot on a tree. One November my father and I hiked to the bald with hot dogs and sauerkraut and baked beans. We cooked the meat on a grill in a stone ring, and the beans and sauerkraut in a pot. It was autumn in New England—gray, brown, chilly—but the fire warmed us. Late September or October, after rain, we hunted mushrooms. Years later, my friend Scott and I hiked Regicides on a mild January morning. Early in the hike we crossed Baldwin Drive into Bethany. Before turning back to the road and descending outcroppings of trap rock, we came to a promontory facing south. It was the first time we traversed the ridge east-west, and the first time we saw Lake Watrous. Standing atop a massif, looking south over a long, narrow reservoir I could not then name, perusing clean stands of evergreen stretching across the valley below, I felt like I was witnessing new land.

**On April 13, 1638, roughly nine miles south and east of the** promontory we stood on that day, eight hundred Puritans assembled to bear witness in a new land, land that would, slowly, become home to hundreds of thousands of immigrants from all over the world, my paternal grandparents included. Sarah Day Woodward, in *Early New Haven*, describes the assembly this way: “On Sunday the colonists gathered under an oak tree standing near the corner of College and George Streets to listen to a sermon preached by the Rev. John Davenport, who was one of the leaders of the party. His text was ‘Then Jesus was led up into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.’ (St. Matt. 6.1). He kept a diary at the time, in which he recorded that he ‘enjoyed a good day.’”

While we have no written record of the Native Americans who inhabited the valleys and hills thousands of years before Davenport and the New Haven Colony, no invocations of the anthropomorphized or the supernatural, evidence on West Rock has been uncovered to suggest the land was used by various cultures across the Late Archaic, roughly 6,000 B.P to 3,700 B.P. Cosimo Sgarlata, assistant professor of archaeology at Western Connecticut State University, led excavations ten years ago on four different sites on or near the ridge. His digs revealed that West Rock was one of several local residences for the indigenous people. Rather than settle exclusively at one site, they moved with the seasons. Having described the pressures of increasing population and decreasing resources, and thus a subsistence gleaned from smaller locales, Sgarlata describes in “The Archaeology of West Rock: The Importance of Trap-Rock Ridges in Connecticut Prehistory” the ways in which the ridge helped these native people subsist locally: “not only was West Rock important for Late Archaic cultures in south central Connecticut, but additionally they seem to have created a fairly specialized adaptation allowing for maximal exploitation of the available resources. This seems to be the case, [sic] because not only were a fairly wide range of site types present during the Late Archaic, but a fairly wide range of site types appears to have been utilized including: quarries, temporary or seasonal campsites adjacent to

upland streams, information gathering or ‘lookout’ sites, and intercept hunting sites.”

And, perhaps most humbling, beyond human culture, there is the land revealed by geology, the land as it is, land that is never new but simply undergoing slow, relentless change. Through this lens, West Rock is an eroded mass formed over a staggering range of time. That ruddy face captured by Church, the bald I return to every season, conveys not a verse in the history of a people but a stanza in the epic of our earth. Describing the origins of West Rock in *New Haven Sentinels: The Art and Science of East Rock and West Rock*, geologist Jelle Zelinga de Boer says, “[West Rock was] formed when huge volumes of magma—originated and accumulated at great depths—rose along the major faults and spread inside a long, relatively narrow tectonic trough stretching from New Haven to Deerfield in northwestern Massachusetts. That trough, a geological rift zone, developed when the Appalachian crust spread tectonically and was thinned during the embryonic phase in the breakup of the supercontinent Pangaea, a process that eventually led to the opening of the basin that holds the Atlantic Ocean.” When fissures broke on the western edge of this trough magma, nearly 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, spewed through the rifts. Thus the ridge took shape, some 200 million years before Church’s painting.

**Church’s “West Rock, New Haven” is often described as a** prime example of Hudson River pastoral and, as such, viewed as an evocation of a simpler, nobler time. This perspective is plausible: the simplicity in subject and focal point, the subject matter, the color, the tone—the land that is today Westville and Woodbridge seems, with Church’s inspired brush, Arcadian. And while pastoral tends to romanticize the past to obscure the political and economic realities of the present—what lives do the laborers we see in Church’s fields *actually* lead and *why*—I can’t help but think the genre can nonetheless *induce* an understanding of the past, not simply an idealization of it. I’ve come to see my returns to West Rock as an exercise in pastoral: in using the present to see what

is past, the past to see what is present. But returning again and again to West Rock has forced me to see beyond the merely personal or familial, beyond what might be otherwise pure nostalgia or sentiment. Returning season after season after season has forced me to perceive the past as incredibly complex—a layering of perspective and narrative and ideology as stratified as the bald I stand upon to look out.

On that bald, I look out and see places that force me to inquire into geology and culture, local and natural history, time and space: the harbor that once stretched to New Haven's original nine squares, the land the Dutch called Rodeberg, the sentinels responsible for that name—the southern terminus of the trap rock ridge on which I stand, curving, cradling east, its igneous brethren overlooking the harbor into which Adrien Block sailed in 1614. In the southwestern foreground I see the white spire of Ascension Church where I attended mass Sundays with my brothers and sisters and parents, where I served masses as an altar boy, where my oldest sisters married. In the southeast I see the floodplains of the lower Central Valley, the land John Davenport and Theophilus Eaton purchased from the Quinnipiac in autumn 1638 for, as Woodward says in *Early New Haven*, “twelve coats of English trucking cloth, twelve alchemy spoons, twelve hatchets, twelve hoes, two dozen of knives, twelve porringers, and four cases of French knives and scissors.” I see due east the rolling, terraced hills of Laurel View Country Club where I spent ten summers practicing and playing, where A.C. Gilbert retired and lived. I see the red brick façade of North Haven High School, eight miles further east, where I teach. Roving west my eyes spot my parents' house, erected in 1972, and my brother's next door, a house my father and brothers and I framed a decade ago. And I see the sky, the magnanimous sky, and the meadow beyond the stone wall at the north end of my parents' property where my father and I long ago hauled a telescope on a warm summer night. There, against the amphitheater of West Rock, in stunned silence, we looked out to behold the rings of Saturn, 750 million miles away.