

Floodplain Forest

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Cross Vermont Trail

Along the



“It must have been spectacular.” Continuous bands of forest extended for miles along all our major rivers, prior to European settlement. Entering a mature Floodplain Forest, with towering Silver Maples, pillar trunks, arching crowns, open airy and fern filled, could create the impression of a cathedral interior.

- from Wetland, Woodland, Wildland: A Guide to the Natural Communities of Vermont by Elizabeth Thompson and Eric Sorenson.



Disturbance

Floods make the Floodplain Forest, of course. Here the river is always moving, back and forth, shaping and reshaping the land. Plants that need unchanging ground do not last. Those few that can “go with the flow” get to thrive in the rich soil given by the river. For example, few shrubs survive, freeing ferns to grow luxuriantly, head high. The trees that dominate grow tall quickly during quiet times – and quickly regroup and regrow after storms – bowed but unbroken.

Calm

The ever changing land makes this forest. But once made, the forest works to slow changes caused by the river. During floods, trees act like a filter, slowing water, screening out floating debris, reducing the water’s power to scour and erode. In addition, many people find the flood plain forest has a calming effect on sunny days too!

First cut, last recovered.

Floodplain Forests were quickly cut down by pioneer families to get at the rich, stone free soil, deposited by annual floods. Food grown here helped them survive. Later, as the population grew, all types of forests were cleared. Today, most have regrown and the view of tree covered hills stretching into the distance is again normal. Down in the floodplain, though, forest remains uncommon. The reason is simple. We still value this land along rivers for agriculture and settlement. The forest on the trail ahead of you is young, but protected and growing - imagine what it will look like in time!



Along the Winooski c. 1910.

Photo by Homer Locke, courtesy Town of Bolton.