Headline: Berkshires offer luscious piece of the past

Deckhead: Hills come to life, flourish in western Massachusetts

The hills sparkle in western Massachusetts. Taconic Hills’ stony soil provides an astonishing sustenance that has nurtured the imaginations of writers, artists and musicians for more than a century.

The location’s wherewithal sparked emotion from Henry David Thoreau. The legendary wordsmith called it “a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise.”

A trio of states converge on these rock-ribbed hills that extend from Mount Greylock, located south of the Connecticut border. It’s where New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut converge. Mount Greylock hangs like a halo over a patchwork quilt of farmer’s fields and valleys. It’s where you can see five states from its peak on a clear day.

Quiet hillsides turn lush with moss-laden trees and thick clusters of clover during the summer. By autumn, the hills emanate a fiery palette of crimson, orange and gold. The Berkshires, a highland region, are a cultural retreat, with venues like Tanglewood, MASS MoCA – the country’s largest contemporary art center – and the Norman Rockwell Museum.

Stockbridge is a Rockwell community. It is where the artist made his home and the museum is nearby. It houses more than 570 drawings and paintings that capture Rockwell’s prosaic view of smalltown America that includes 300 covers for the Saturday Evening Post.

Rockwell’s studio remains intact. Easels, brushes and books are scattered. Visitors can explore its 36 acres of grounds, including excellent views of the Housatonic River and the Berkshire Hills.

Stockbridge also is the setting for Alice’s Restaurant – which never was a setting – but instead an 18-minute song by Arlo Guthrie that later was made into a film. The real Alice, Alice Brock, and husband Ray, lived in the former Trinity Church on Division Street, a location for much of the movie. The building today is home to The Guthrie Center and The Guthrie Foundation.

Mother Ann Lee, a founding leader of the Shakers, established her religious community in Hancock Shaker Village near Pittsfield. An offshoot of Quakerism, Shaker refers to the tendency of followers to shake their religious ecstasy. The village has 20 original Shaker buildings, including a round, stone barn that rises like a pagoda from the center of the community.

Nearby Arrowhead is the house where Herman Melville penned “Mobey Dick.” Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne met during a climb on Monument Mountain in 1850. Melville struggled to pay two mortgages and support his wife’s family. Legend has it that Hawthorne urged his friend to keep working on his story about a whale.

Edith Wharton’s circumstances, meanwhile, didn’t share Melville’s struggles. Born Edith Jones, her family’s prominent New York name became the basis for the coined phrase “Keeping up with the Joneses”.

The celebrated author of “The Age of Innocence”, Wharton built The Mount – her palatial estate in Lenox in 1902. The property is based on the principles expressed in her first major book, “The Decoration of Houses”. The main house and formal are open to the public.

Massachusetts’ reputation is built on Boston and its famous islands. Perhaps a trip to the state’s western side will widen its status.

Cutline: NATURAL BEAUTY – The autumn landscape lights up in Massachusetts Berkshires in western Massachusetts. Image: thomas. Adobe Stock.