Preface

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Always intrigued by the blank spaces on any map, I was first attracted to the Highlands by their wild character, as an antidote to suburban life in the sprawling Philadelphia–New York City–Hartford megalopolis. Repeated forays into the Highlands revealed a much richer, more complex, and more interesting landscape than I had first imagined. As I delved a little deeper, I soon realized that what appears to be untrammelled forest today was vastly different one hundred and two hundred years ago, and that human and natural history in the Highlands are incredibly tangled and interwoven. A classic example of this is Sparta Mountain in the northwest Highlands of New Jersey, once the site of the Edison Iron Works. Early in American colonial history, the discovery of iron-bearing rock formations spawned the development of a widespread iron-mining industry with both surface and deep-shaft mines all across the Highlands region. Iron furnaces and forges were built to process the ore. Villages and farms were settled to shelter and feed the miners and furnace workers. The neighboring forests were chopped down and turned into charcoal to fuel the furnaces. By the mid-1800s, the Highlands were largely denuded of forest. As recounted in chapter 11, during the last decade of the nineteenth century the Edison Iron Works comprised a huge ore-processing facility and on-site housing for hundreds of employees, all surrounded by an extensive network of open-pit and deep-shaft mines. In less than ten years, the whole enterprise went bust, the buildings were dismantled, and site was abandoned.

It is hard to fathom, glancing around Sparta Mountain today, that a little more than one hundred years ago this place hosted a massive industrial and housing complex. Grasses, shrubs, and trees are well established, and second-growth forest has reclaimed the land. Closer examination reveals several concrete footings and other building foundations scattered among the undergrowth of the returning forest. Erosion has softened the edges of the abandoned pits, filling in the bottoms with tumbled boulders. The many stages of natural succession—from initial establishment of lichens and mosses on the bare rocks, followed by colonization of forbs and ferns in the crevices deep enough to hold pockets of soil—are evident. Where water has not collected

into pools of unknown depth, grasses and shrubs have invaded the hollows and pit floors. If the area were not surrounded by a rusting cyclone fence (ostensibly put up to protect the public from stumbling over the edge of a quarried cliff but today riddled with gaps making for easy trespass), one might be forgiven if one somehow mistook these for natural geological formations. Only subtle differences in the forest structure and composition reveal where a cleared field or homesite may have been one hundred years prior. Here at Sparta Mountain, as elsewhere across the Highlands, the forests and wetlands have regrown to the point that the land's wild character has gained the upper hand.

I am struck by the incredible resilience of the Highlands ecosystem as well as the host of connections between the Highlands proper and the broader mid-Atlantic and southern New England region. As with any number of places across the region, given the chance, natural vegetation communities will reclaim once-ravaged industrial wastelands, and functioning ecological systems will reassert their primacy. Forests will grow and mature, wildlife will return, and clean, clear waters will flow from the hills. The Highlands' history provides hope that forests and watersheds abused by misguided land-use practices today might be protected and restored to provide vital open space and ecosystem services to the broader region's many human residents.

With this in mind, I set about to bring together a number of leading experts on the Highlands to provide readers with a more thorough understanding and appreciation of the Highlands region, its environment, and its cultural and natural history. So, as Abraham Lincoln once said in his famous 1858 House Divided speech, "If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it."

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The Highlands