



TIMBUCTOO Empowering Youth for a Better Tomorrow

BY IAN CLEARY | PHOTOS BY TIMBUCTOO INSTITUTE/PAUL B. HAI

↑ Students and Environmental Conservation Police Officer Krug during a fireside conversation.

Most people know about the abundance of wildlife biodiversity in the Adirondacks, as well as the seemingly endless variety of scenic landscapes and recreational opportunities. But do you know that it's also rich in human history and that it's currently serving as a conduit for youth to explore social and environmental equality and confront climate change?

The Adirondacks provide critical habitat for a variety of wildlife species, contain beautiful places to explore, and offer

many opportunities to hike, fish, ski, hunt, camp, and boat or paddle. In addition, the Adirondack village of Lake Placid hosted both the 1932 and 1980 Winter Olympics, with the latter making history when the United States men's ice hockey team won a historic gold medal. Perhaps less well known is that the Adirondacks was also the location of Timbuctoo, one of several nineteenth century settlements envisioned to surmount an 1846 law that restricted the right of Black men to vote.



↙ Top to bottom: climbing Goodnow Mountain, making corn husk dolls with members of the Onondaga Nation, stream sampling at the Newcomb Campus in the Adirondacks.



During the summer of 2023 and again in 2024, the Adirondacks hosted the Timbuctoo Climate Science and Careers Summer Institute, a new initiative with the goal of diversifying professional natural resource-related fields by introducing teens to academic and professional careers related to climate science. It is designed to examine the intersection of climate science and environmental and social justice, while also exploring New York State, from Brooklyn to the Mid-Hudson Valley, to Syracuse, and the Adirondacks.

HISTORY OF TIMBUCTOO

In 1821, New York State enacted a law requiring free Black men to own real estate or a house in order to vote. In 1846, as New York prepared to reconfirm this legislation creating essentially what was a poll tax, wealthy abolitionist Gerrit Smith launched a “scheme of justice” to address the law by giving away 40-acre lots of land to Black New Yorkers. Within a few years, one collection of homesteads from among the 120,000 acres that Smith gave away was named Timbuctoo, first referenced by name in a letter from John Brown, another prominent American abolitionist, to Smith. Brown moved to the Adirondacks in 1849 to share his expertise in farming with the residents of Timbuctoo.

Several other renowned abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet, worked with Smith to promote the settlements and recruit Black New Yorkers to the Adirondacks. At its peak, the number of families in the settlements reached approximately 50. Ultimately the communities failed; most families left due to frigid winters, harsh conditions, the remoteness of the settlements, and the difficulty of farming in the Adirondack region. Although, a few families stayed and succeeded despite the challenges.

The Timbuctoo settlement was located near present-day Lake Placid, but its exact location remains a mystery. It’s not found on any maps, there are no remains of the houses or buildings, and there are no known photographs.

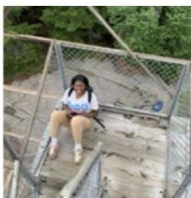
In June 2022, a historical marker was placed near where the settlement is believed to have existed. What does remain is the parcel John Brown owned and farmed, which was part of the group of land grants that formed Timbuctoo. The John Brown Farm State Historic Site has been protected by New York State since 1895 and is open to the public, managed by the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

TIMBUCTOO TODAY

During each of the past two summers, high school students from across the five boroughs of New York City gathered at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn to hear from leaders and faculty in the environmental, natural resource, public policy, and social justice fields; they were joined by public officials to celebrate the start of the Timbuctoo Climate Science and Careers Summer Institute. This initiative is designed to expose mid-level high school students to climate-related careers before they decide what to study or where to attend college.

Medgar Evers College President Patricia Ramsey; Assemblywoman Michaelle Solages, Chair of the New York State Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic, and Asian Caucus; Senator Zellnor Myrie of Brooklyn; Aaron Mair of the Adirondack Council; and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Deputy Commissioner Adrianna Espinoza all attended the kick-off events. Others included professors and Institute staff from Medgar Evers College and the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF) to welcome the 16 students about to embark on an experience that resembled more of an adventure than an institute.

After the welcoming event, the new cohort of students get to know each other with group bonding and orientation and learn about what to expect for the next two weeks. Each session visits the Newtown Creek Alliance in Green Point to see a real-life environmental cleanup in action and learns about food justice at the YMCA Farm Project in Kingston. They also visit the Pine Street African Burial Ground before heading to Syracuse, where they explore topics introduced at Medgar Evers. While in Syracuse, each session meets with representatives of the Onondaga



↑ Top to bottom: touring the YMCA Kingston Farm, sunset on Rich Lake, The Wild Center in Tupper Lake, learning to Mountain Bike at John Brown Farm, enjoying the breeze on the Goodnow Mountain Fire Tower.

Nation to learn about the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, as well as traditional lore, food, and skills.

The Institute's first week ends in Syracuse, before shifting to SUNY-ESF's Newcomb Campus, a 15,000-acre regional campus in the central Adirondacks. Once at the Newcomb Campus, students spend the next week engaged in hands-on, field-based science programs with researchers, visit The Wild Center in Tupper Lake, and spend a day learning about the history of Timbuctoo at the John Brown Farm site, while discussing contemporary issues in education and careers. Students also gain recreational experience and skills by hiking Goodnow Mountain, riding mountain bikes, and paddling a five-mile canoe trip from the Newcomb Campus through several lakes to the Hudson River.

The Summer Institute is designed to provide students with engaging and hands-on opportunities to learn about environmental and intersectional careers from experts in the field. It focuses on introducing them to professionals from diverse backgrounds, while role modeling paths to careers that students can see themselves following. They not only learn about the different career options available, but also about the reasons why this work is so important. With an overarching theme of environmental and social justice, these trips and presentations highlight the importance of tackling the climate crisis from the perspective of those who are most severely impacted by it.

ENVIRONMENTAL CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Several environmental agencies and organizations, including SUNY-ESF and DEC, have been working to increase the diversity of students

and employees to better reflect the population of New York. This is an incredibly diverse state, and for too long the people involved in environmental protection and the academic programs leading to these professions have not represented that diversity. Genuine efforts are being made by SUNY-ESF, DEC, and many others to hire and recruit a more diverse population, but challenges remain.

Paul Hai of SUNY-ESF, who created and leads the Timbuctoo Climate Science and Careers Summer Institute, explains that one of the challenges resulting from an “empty pipeline,” or lack of people from diverse backgrounds who consider environmental work as an option for themselves, is that few are aware of these careers or the pathways to prepare for them. That is why SUNY-ESF and Medgar Evers College are collaborating to open doors and increase awareness about a wide variety of environmental career paths for students from the New York City area.

The Timbuctoo Climate Science and Careers Summer Institute hosted 41 students during the inaugural year and 47 this past summer, providing an opportunity to travel across the state and experience the beauty of New York’s natural areas. The participants engaged in enriching discussions and learned from more than 60 experts and professionals who hopefully opened the door to a path in climate action and environmental conservation. DEC, a key partner, is proud to participate in the initiative by meeting with students at different stages throughout their two weeks to talk about the richness of careers within the agency.

The Institute is committed to removing barriers to participation for students. It covers all expenses and provides a stipend to each student who successfully completes the program.

There is no doubt that the students who attend, as well as many others across the state, have the potential to unleash innovative and sustainable solutions to our climate challenges. Hopefully this initiative, which matches the goal of Smith and other abolitionists to provide access to the vote with a current goal of providing access to careers, will continue to energize and inspire Institute alumni and each new summer’s cohort of students with exciting new pathways to achieve their dreams and goals. 🗣️



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From top: lunch at the Adirondack Interpretive Center, learning from peers at the Kingston Farm Project, paddling in the Adirondacks, on a green roof in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.