

Walking Trail of Hurry Hill Maple Farm
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#1. How Hurry Hill Got Its Name

The Edinboro farm owner responsible for this unusual name is Archie Billings, who was the one among his dad's four sons who took over the enterprise begun by the father in 1846.

One significant improvement Archie made was the building of a massive barn on the hilltop. It was three stories high and the floor was big enough to allow two teams of horses, hitched to wagons, to enter the barn for unloading, then make a circular exit! Not having to back out and take turns was a huge saver of both time and effort.

One day in 1911, Archie was in "town" (Edinboro) with his horse and buggy while his hired man was grinding feed with a gas-powered engine on the second story barn floor. The barn caught fire. Throughout the afternoon Archie was informed several times by townspeople that his barn was on fire but he did not seem to be troubled by the imminent loss. After several inquiries, he simply replied "Why should I hurry up that hill when there will be no barn to put my sweaty horse in when I get there?" From that day on, the hill at the "top" of Fry Road was called Hurry Hill. Of course what Archie actually said was he was in no hurry.

#2. Settling Hurry Hill

Take time to orient yourself. We are in Franklin Township, settled between 1820 and 1850. When you face west, towards the woods, then the lengthy Fry Road (once called Townline Road) is to your back and running north/south. Charles Billings, Archie's father, moved here from Washington Township at age 22, to establish a farm and home for his future family. He bought 100 acres for \$2 per acre.

Imagine the work it took for this young man, armed just with an axe and saw, to clear land by cutting huge beech, hemlock and maple trees, then removing the stumps and rocks. To the south, you can see one field he cleared plus a current maple woods, known as a "sugarbush."

Where settlers cleared land for farming, sawmills were built nearby to process the wood for making houses and barns, though the first shelters were snug and small log cabins. Today, near the Fry Road bridge north of the creek, there is a tell-tale mound of a former sawmill. Also, we can faintly see the "run" where water flowed around the uphill side of the mound to power the mill. At first, there was a barn at the site where we see a brick house standing.

As other farms developed, shortly after the Civil War in the 1860's, a school was needed. The first Townline School was on Fellows land a mile north of here, and the second early school remains, as a home.

By 1922, the farmers in this locale each paid \$100 to have an electric line run up the south end of Fry Road from Edinboro, the nearest town.

#3. Maple Orchard

As you begin to walk, look to your right, north, up Hurry Hill, to see the maple orchard the current Hurry Hill Farm owners began planting in 1998. Hurry Hill has an interest in sustainable agriculture, so by establishing a maple orchard we have preserved sugaring for future generations. Five-year-old sugar maple and black maple trees were transplanted to the site on April 1st of that year. These specimens were from an old sugar bush just north of here, where members of the Harned family tapped its trees for many generations. David and Georgie Knight left a wonderful legacy, having donated the trees for the orchard.

The maple orchard required diligent watering, summers, throughout at least the first two years of its establishment. Protecting trees' bark from deer who rub their antlers on it is another concern. Using snow fence, commercial products and inexpensive and scent-rejected soap samples are all usable deterrents. More extreme measures may include rotting eggs and human hair. A further challenge for successful transplanting of trees is timing. The saplings need to be moved after the frost is out of the ground but before their buds break. Only after 20 to 40 years will the maples be ready to tap. People ask why Hurry Hill Farm is willing to make such an effort when tap time is so far off. In reply, they are reminded that syrup makers in general never get to tap a tree that they have planted.

4. First Creek

The first creek you are crossing tells a little history of Hurry Hill. It is one headwater for Edinboro Lake, formerly Conneauttee Lake which means either "land of the snowflake" or "land of lingering snow." This area was once occupied by Eriez, Iroquois or Seneca Native Americans. In the maple orchard there is one of the familiar blue signs asking citizens to tread lightly in the Edinboro Lake Watershed. More broadly, the creek we are crossing is also part of the French Creek Watershed. It is of note that just a mile north of Hurry Hill, as terrain descends, water flows to Lake Erie and, in turn, to the Great Lakes Watershed. Maple syrup is only made in North America around the Great Lakes: Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior.

Edinboro is known for long winters and good sugarin' history. Usually, 150-300 inches of snow fall each year on Hurry Hill Farm. Snow and cold weather are two essential ingredients of a good sugar season.

#5. Bluebird Houses

Watch for wildlife. With luck, you may see bluebirds, turkeys, squirrels, pheasants, bear, deer, coyote, and, with extreme luck, a bald eagle. At least once in recent years while boiling sap at the sugar house late at night, coyote pups were seen and heard. In fact, one July, two adult coyotes and five pups made this field their playground.

It is fairly easy to notice bluebird houses all around the fields of Hurry Hill Farm, and for good reason. Their favorite food is the gypsy moth, and these moths are a real pest for maple trees. If you care to protect a sugar maple, install a neighboring bluebird house!

#6. Giant Maple Tree

This giant sugar maple tree is more than 200 years old. Confirmation was obtained via a smaller tree cut down in 1997 which clearly had at least 180 growth rings. Norwich, Connecticut, claims the largest living sugar maple, having a trunk at least 23 feet around. The tree in front of us is our biggest maple at 18 feet around. We retired it from tapping, but are happy that its hollow openings serve well as our special wildlife condominium!

#7. A Perfect Maple Tree

This fine specimen at the edge of the woods is afforded plenty of sunshine, and displays a “perfect” 80% crown of leaves and a 20% trunk. Sugar maples are great shade trees and are really fall beauties with brilliant yellow, orange and scarlet leaves. These trees are actually a natural sugar factory. Photosynthesis is the biological process by which chlorophyll and sunlight work within the leaves to make sugar from water and carbon dioxide. This high-energy sugar feeds the tree while it grows during spring and summer. The sugar, is sent in late fall to the sapwood in the tree’s roots to be stored for the winter as starch. Just before it becomes spring, the starch turns to sugar as the wood thaws and it mixes with water from the roots, plus carbon dioxide gas in the tree, and begins the “sap run” up and around the trees’ branches to feed new buds. When the buds “leaf out” the entire process, starting with photosynthesis, begins again.

It is during the time between winter and spring, the “maple sugaring season,” that sugar makers use a tree’s “sap run” to remove some for syrup-making. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make 1 gallon of syrup. There is no harm done to the tree itself since only 10% of the sap produced is taken for processing. A taphole, a mere scratch on the bark, heals over in about two years.

#8. Old Tapholes

This sugarbush is very old and many maple trees remain healthy for about 400 years. Able to withstand a lot of stress, the maples are very resilient. Unknown threats include a severe ice storm or a new insect, such as ALB, the Asian Longhorn Beetle or EAB, the Emerald Ash Borer. Since casual observers report most infestations, it is helpful to be informed. If you see several half-inch holes in a tree with fine sawdust at the base, speak up.

Springtime tapping of the maple trees also means a sugar-maker will drill a small hole in the tree, also producing sawdust, so a person should not mistake this activity as the work of an Asian

beetle. Tap holes are 2 inches deep and about 5/16 of an inch in diameter. Hurry Hill uses a gas powered “tapper” and a metal “spile,” serving as a sort of spigot, is gently hammered into the hole. Metal buckets, with lids, are used for collecting the sap. Care is taken to drill new holes at least 12 inches above or below a scar from an old hole, and at least 6 inches to the left or right of a former taphole.

Notice the old taps visible on this piece of wood and in this tree recently cut down. Each hole likely yielded 10-12 gallons of sap each year, which was boiled down to about a quart of maple syrup. Ideal conditions for strong sap flow are sunny days above 40 degrees paired with frosty nights. Some call this the “season of mud and snow.” Old timers invented rhymes to explain when the sap runs best, such as:

When the wind is in the east, the sap will run the least;

When the wind is in the west, the sap will run the best.

Actually, at Hurry Hill, we have learned it’s best with wind in the southwest!

Sugaring involves both science and art. An experienced maple producer relies not merely on a thermometer to take advantage of a short 6-week season; even then, the sap runs irregularly on only about 10-20 of those 42 days. In fact, in just one week, the flow of sap may be so strong that the yield is 30% of the entire season’s take.

Early sap runs make a delicate-tasting syrup colored golden, with later runs boiling down to darker colors and more robust tastes. Once the buds swell, the taste becomes undesirable and is termed “buddy.”

#9. Creek-bed and Fossils

This rock was taken from the creek seen here. It is filled with fossils and is a result of the glacier during the last Ice Age, 15-20 thousand years ago. Good glacial soil makes good maple syrup! The sugar maple is indigenous only to Northeast United States and Southeast Canada, both regions around the Great Lakes which were once covered by glaciers.

Of the world’s supply of maple syrup, Quebec produces 80 percent, Ontario 10 percent and all the other Canadian provinces plus the U.S. produce the remaining 10 percent.

This creek begins at a spring where local Native Americans had a meeting ground. A nearby creek-bed contained lots of arrowheads. By the time this area was settled, illness, starvation and war had wiped out the natives; new settlers encountered only an occasional Indian hunter.

#10. Hurry Hill Sugarhouse

Earnest and Cecil Mecham built the little sugarhouse in 1930. Paul and Mary Woods built the big sugarhouse in 1958. The Woods-Nathanson family still makes maple syrup here.

An evaporator is the equipment that boils the tree’s sap to make syrup. Evaporators are described by their size and the number of channels the flue pan has.

Four evaporators have made their home in the big sugarhouse:

1958-1976 a 4' x 14' English tin evaporator

1976-2004 a 5' x 14' English tin evaporator

2005-2018 a 4' x 16' Stainless steel Leader Special

2019 a 2' x 6' Stainless steel Leader

The four cupolas at the roof peak open and allow 98% water to escape as steam. The 2% syrup is “drawn off” from the evaporator’s finishing pan.

At Hurry Hill Maple Farm, we choose to keep it old fashioned:

Spiles and buckets instead of modern plastic tubing.

Wood-fired evaporator instead of propane or gas to heat the sap.

Propane lanterns instead of electricity to light the sugarhouse.

Our transplanted outhouse is the only restroom in the woods and was built in the mid-1930’s by WPA (Works Projects Administration) employees. Part of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal program was to have many unemployed citizens obtain jobs building things. The toilet facility is usable and requires no flushing, although sometimes visitors worry they might fall in!

#11. The Sugarbush

From this point, the entire sugarbush can be viewed. We know that Indians gashed trees and used the sweet sap to boil venison. Imagine early pioneers and farmers using oxen and stoneboats, or teams of horses pulling bobsleds, to collect sap for boiling in black kettles or on flat pans. Later, of course, the tractor and wagon would roll up to the sugarhouse with another load of fresh sap.

Imagine making sugar cakes to sell, then having to leave at 3 a.m. by horse and wagon for the market in Erie. How different today is the marketing of maple syrup and products, using all the communication, social media, and travel improvements. Overall, though, not much has really changed in the process of sugarin’ at Hurry Hill. Every spring, fragrant maple steam rolls out of the sugarhouse, and some helpers work through mud and snow just for the fun of making maple syrup! And these same trees, tapped during centuries past, will continue at least into the next century, their contribution.

#12. Adirondack Shelter

This three-sided hemlock sided structure was built here to enhance the Walking Trail, and to illustrate a type of basic lean-to used by exploring pioneers as basic shelter. These structures were later popularized by Adirondack Mountain guides, in upstate New York, for fishing or hunting parties.

Settlers used giant iron pots to make syrup and then smaller ones to stir maple sugar. When explorers, traders and pioneers arrived in America, native people already had well-established methods for turning sap into sugar – that’s why we call the place where syrup is made, a sugarhouse! These Native Americans would have traded items with the settlers so they too could enjoy having an iron pot. Records from the mid-1700’s indicate wide use of sap as a social and medicinal drink. In the colonies, maple sugar was more available and less expensive than the

heavily taxed cane sugar coming in from the West Indies and, unlike cane sugar, maple sugar was not produced with slave labor. Our third president, Thomas Jefferson, thought that if we were to be truly independent of Great Britain we should produce maple sugar and plant maple trees. Syrup was boiled down to make maple sugar crumb, cakes or loaves for easy storage. This sugar was traded, bartered, sold and used year 'round in American households. No wonder maple sugar was the main sweetener used in America for nearly two hundred years.

Annually, pioneers celebrated "sugaring-off-time" with sugar-on-snow parties, sugar-stirs, and taffy pulls. Hurry Hill celebrates "the coming of spring" with hot cocoa made with maple sap, plus hotdogs, even eggs, boiled in sap. Native Americans celebrated the sugar month, or Maple Moon, with ceremonies and dancing.

#13. Peepers

We are near the end of our Walking Tour. The end of the yearly sugar season on Hurry Hill, and elsewhere, is marked by locals having heard three nights of spring peepers. Frogs sense the warmth of spring in the creek and ponds and know when spring is sprung. Hurry Hill hopes to carry on, and to inspire others to join, the sugarin' tradition for centuries to come. We are grateful for your interest and help in preserving maple sugaring.

Finally, we like to relate what Dr. Benjamin Rush told President Thomas Jefferson, in 1791: "The general happiness which heaven seems to have prepared for mankind will be derived from the manufacture and general use of maple sugar."

#14. *Miracles on Maple Hill* and Hurry Hill Museum

The large barn with the blue roof is the Hurry Hill Maple Museum, which opened in 2009, and focuses on everything maple, "From Tree to Table." One exhibit is dedicated to the book *Miracles on Maple Hill*, its author, and the characters in the book. There are also exhibits on the Magic Maple, Tapping, Gathering, Pouring, and Storing maple syrup and more.

About 10 miles to the South of Hurry Hill is another Hill, Maple Hill, the setting for the Book *Miracles on Maple Hill*.

Hurry Hill recommends this award-winning book for readers all ages. It's also a story true to the art of making maple syrup. *Miracles on Maple Hill* is packed full of miracles its characters experience, ranging from springtime discovery of wildflowers to baby foxes, and to improved emotional health for a combat veteran. By author Virginia Sorensen, the novel was written in the 1950's when she lived in Edinboro. Various people she met here turn up in her book that won the Newbery Medal for 1957. Miraculously, the actual medal was gifted by the author's son to the Hurry Hill Maple Museum! Visitors who have read the novel are allowed to hold the medal in their hands, and receive a duplicate bookmark Mrs. Sorensen gave to readers of *Miracles on Maple Hill*.

We hope that you have enjoyed your "sweet" walk today!

Hurry Hill Maple Farm and Museum

