

History of Valley Falls Park

“Located in the southeast corner of Vernon, just 1.3 miles south of Interstate 84, Valley Falls Park is one of Vernon’s 16 publicly owned parks and recreational facilities. The Park is generally rectangularly shaped, measuring between 1,000 and 1,400 feet wide (E/W), and almost 1 mile long (N/S). The scenic area consisting of 193 acres at the base of Box Mountain, a prominent Vernon land form, is a center for year-round passive recreation activities. Northerly flowing Railroad Brook drains through the middle of the Park and is the primary source of the water in Valley Falls Pond. The pond provides swimming in the summer and skating and ice-fishing in the winter, and 8.5 miles of trails grant access to the natural beauty of the park for hikers, bird-watchers and cross country skiers.” (Conway Study, March, 2001)

“The Valley Falls area is historically rich since it is part of the natural drain of the Eastern Highlands of Connecticut where various streams and rivers flow toward the flatlands at the center of the state. It is in the Park where a stream from Bolton (Railroad Brook, formerly known as Box Brook) falls sharply to join the Tankerhoosen River. Because of this, it has been a logical place to harness waterpower, and in fact, several mills have operated at the stream’s greatest drop point.

“The earliest record in which there is a reference to the use of water power at Valley Falls is Cole’s History of Tolland County, referring to a sawmill at Valley Falls operated by Thomas Johns in 1740. On March 5, 1741, Stephen Johns deeded to Hugh Johns (Bolton Land Records, vol. 2, p 168) ‘land including Hugh John’s sawmill.’ In 1790 this mill was purchased by Joseph and Samuel Carver and Zekiel Olcott of Bolton who converted it into an oil mill, using flax seeds, the by-product of the flax used to produce linen or homespun “linsey-woolsey.” In 1794, (Bolton Land Records, vol. 6, p. 403) Ezekiel Olcott transferred to Levi Carpenter, Samuel Field, John Olcott and Samuel Cooley, ‘a piece of land or mill place where Hugh Johns formerly had a sawmill, with privilege to repair dam, of ponding and flowing sufficient to a mill.’ (Carol Burke, Management Plan for Valley Falls Park, Vernon, CT, April 1998) Eventually, the mill was converted into a grist mill operated by Charles Ladd. The foundation of this mill can still be seen amid the undergrowth. While the mill prospered, the surrounding farm land was being worked by Anson Lyman, whose name the property bore for some time. He also owned shares in the mill. Lyman eventually acquired the dam which provided water power for the mill. At the time of his death, he owned about 150 acres. In 1870, the 150 acres became the property of Samuel Bradley, a man very active in area real estate acquisitions (Vernon Land Records, vol. 16, pp 284-85). In 1871, Bradley sold the 150 acres to Christian Sharps of Philadelphia for \$9,000 (Vernon Land Records, vol. 15, p. 529), and took back a mortgage on the property. Christian Sharps, best known as the inventor of the Sharps Rifle, began a trout-breeding facility there. Sharps died in 1874 and the property reverted to Bradley. In 1910, the 157 acre tract was sold to Hans Munchow (Vernon Land Records, vol. 41, p. 688). On April 2, 1915, Mary Batterson Beach, daughter of James Batterson, founder of The Travelers Insurance Company, bought the property for her husband Dr Charles C. Beach and her family. In 1958, Mary’s son, Charles B. Beach sold 225 acres to Jones and Lyon, real estate developers from Essex, CT.

“Starting in 1849 the Hartford, Providence and Fishkill Railroad constructed a line from Manchester to Willimantic. In this area railroads were usually constructed along the edges of streams. Due to the steepness of Box Mountain, the stretch of tracks along Valley Falls was the most expensive part to build. As a point-of-interest, it should be noted that the hill over the tunnel on Tunnel Road was man-made to afford a gradual descent for the trains as they came down from the mountain. This

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stretch of tracks proved to be difficult for heavy steam locomotives to climb and because of the slow pace Valley Falls became a “station” for hobos jumping a free ride to Boston. Some sayings and poems written by the hobos on the cliffs beside the tracks can still be seen along one section of the old track bed which forms the western boundary of Valley Falls Park. The railroad grade is abandoned now and in 1996 it underwent extensive regrading and resurfacing through a cooperative effort by the National Guard and the State of Connecticut. The resurfaced railroad bed is now part of the Connecticut “Rails to Trails” system. Although this facility marks the western boundary of Valley Falls Park, it is not part of the Park. Bolton Road roughly parallels the Park boundary along the east side. The eastern and southern boundaries are not easily discernable; the southern in a wooded area abuts the boundary of the Town of Bolton. Principal access to the Park is provided at its north end from Valley Falls Road, where a paved entrance provides access to the parking area.

“In 1962 the original Valley Falls parcel (known as the Batterson Company Parcel) was purchased for \$32,000 by the Vernon Fire District. This move was brought about by Andy Tricarico who was then the commissioner of the Fire District. Mr Tricarico had the strong backing of all the firemen and other Vernon residents who saw a need to ‘provide something for the future’ in the area, when the parcel became available. After purchase, the area was kept as untouched as possible to preserve its natural beauty. However, the pond was dredged and sand was imported for a beach. When the consolidation of Vernon and Rockville took place (1964), Valley Falls Park was turned over to the town government.” (Friends of Valley Falls Newsletter #1, Fall, 1981)

“Valley Falls Park currently consists of 193 acres of land. The original 130 acres, the Batterson Company Parcel was purchased in 1962 by the Vernon Fire District. In 1972, an additional 63 acres were given to the Town of Vernon by a Mr Jones and a Mr Lyon of Essex.

“General characteristics of the Park include a 3.7 acre man-made lake, surrounded by steep topography of open fields and varying tree cover. The valley floor along Railroad Brook lies at 320 feet above sea level and the elevation rises to 625 feet above sea level on the surrounding hills.

“The leading water resources, and among the greatest assets of the Park, are the small lake and Railroad Brook. The lake and island are about 3.7 acres in size. The lake is approximately 240 feet by 480 feet and the island is about 140 feet by 180 feet. Railroad Brook originates at Bolton Notch Pond and is fed by numerous springs, seeps, and small streams. Railroad Brook, upstream and downstream of the pond, supports a high quality coldwater fish community comprised of native brook trout, brown trout, and dace.

“The general relief of the Park is that of a ‘stretched-out horseshoe,’ with the steepest slope occurring along the western property line. Outcrops of crystalline rock of the Bolton Formation are plentiful in the Park with the most extensive area being along the railroad line on the west. Two rock types are most prevalent here: phyletic schist and quartzite. The dip of the Bolton Formation ranges from 25 to 40 . A number of faults can be viewed along the west side of the lake.

“At the head of the man-made lake, swampy woodlands cover much of the natural floodplain. This area is especially wet during the spring season or during periods when there has been above normal rainfall. A high water table is evident in the area. A small cattail and herbaceous marsh also exists, fed by a small stream that runs along the east edge of the lake. The National Audubon Society Survey report done in 1968 points out that woody stems are appearing in the marsh as a result of natural succession.

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The area will eventually become a swamp if steps are not taken to preserve it as a marsh.” (Friends of Valley Falls Newsletter #3, 1982)

“The rationale for its purchase then, as well as the focus of the studies and reports conducted on its behalf over the years, speak convincingly of the need to preserve its open-space characteristics, its historic sites, its water sources, its woodlands, its meadows, and the wildlife dependent thereon, while allowing controlled passive recreation, so it will remain an asset to all residents of the Town of Vernon.” (Carol Burke, Management Plan for Valley Falls Park, Vernon, CT, April 1998)