

# From Industrial Boneyard to Recreational Boon

## Millstone Hill Seeks Next Preservation Milestone

by Ricka McNaughton

About a century ago in the old quarry-lands along the ridgelines of Barre Town, the development of new capital-intensive technologies began a trend toward fewer, bigger granite companies. As small operations shut down, they left behind an ever more desolate landscape of abandoned excavation sites, partially blasted cliffs and looming mountains of unwanted granite rubble, or "grout piles." Networks of service roads and rail lines fell into disuse. For many years, only nature took an interest in reclaiming these areas, eventually giving them a surreal atmosphere—almost like the greened-over ruins of a lost and somewhat puzzling civilization.

Thick woodlands had grown up around the remains of rock-retaining structures. There were tall, grid-marked granite faces suggestive of fortress walls. Rusted iron "artifacts" and clumps of boulders, set into patches of rebounded plant life, could pass for abstract sculpture. The area was dotted with scenic vistas and lovely, rain-filled chasms. People who live in this region have long known that this was a peaceful and oddly compelling area to wander. It was riddled with history, too. Eventually, a group of people came up with an idea. Why not build a recreational trail system through the region? The nonprofit Millstone Trails Association (MTA) took shape and has spent the last seven years converting this industrial wasteland into a 70-mile system of nonmotorized recreational trails for hikers, mountain bikers, snowshoers and cross-country skiers. Their efforts imaginatively improved upon an infrastructure that nature, then man, then nature again, had already laid out. For a while, things moved forward splendidly.

The trail system has drawn highly appreciative users both regionally and nationally. It provides unique and inexpensive outdoor resources for central Vermonters and holds promise for tourism gains in the greater Barre region. Just last year, construction of the Millstone Hill Touring and Recreation Center was completed at the entrance to the trail system in Websterville. Then, the unexpected happened.

The Rock of Ages Corporation, which owns the land the trails were built on, notified MTA that it was selling off that real estate. MTA board member Pierre Couture said, "We realized that this might in fact be an opportunity to preserve this property, which had always been a goal." The Trust for Public Land, a national nonprofit with offices in Montpelier, became enthusiastically involved and recommended the creation of a town forest. Couture said, "We proposed purchasing several parcels totaling about 400 acres which would allow us to preserve



An abandoned quarry pit along one of the Millstone trails. File photo by John Walters.

the majority of historic quarry sites at Millstone Hill." It would secure only about half the total trails, but, Couture felt, "it would be a beginning."

In its proposal, MTA committed to raising \$100,000. Barre Town was asked to give a matching grant, and the remaining 80 percent of the \$1 million price tag would come from federal, state and private funds. Barre Town voters approved the project 2 to 1 last November. Fundraising has now begun for the land purchase that will become the town forest. The goal is to safeguard public use of much of the trail system and prevent other development from encroaching. MTA has also worked closely with other central Vermont organizations such as the Vermont Granite Museum of Barre and the Vermont History Museum to raise awareness of Barre's granite heritage.

### Some User Feedback

Jay Baitz lives in Barre Town and teaches physical education at Spaulding High School in Barre City. Millstone Hill is a great outdoor resource for him. He takes groups of kids who participate in after-school programming up to the trails. The system also makes challenging terrain for his cross-country runners from Spaulding. "It's a lot more inter-

esting for them than running in the streets," he said. Jay recalled being amused when a student thought that the remains of a "cool" antique railroad car next to the trail had been put there on purpose, like a theme-park element.

Chrissy Rohan keeps busy as a mother of active children and as a riding instructor at—and all-around supporter of—the Vermont horse-assisted therapy program in Middlesex. Her time to go mountain biking is in the evening. Once a week from spring to fall, she rides with a women's mountain bike group. They are special fans of the Millstone Hill trails. Chrissy said, "I live in Montpelier . . . and while other trails we do may be closer by, they are shorter and don't form loops. It's an out-and-back ride." Millstone Hill has good loops. "They are not only beautiful, but things there are well maintained. I like that there are levels of difficulty to choose from, and every time I've gone they've added new trails so it keeps it all interesting," she said. "I also think," she added, "that it's a critical time for preserving open places like this." Many agree.

### If You Go

To increase awareness of the trail system and efforts to create a conserved town for-

est, MTA has slashed prices for cross-country skiing and snow shoeing by 50 percent for the remainder of the season. Season skiing passes are now \$48; day passes are \$5 per day. Snowshoeing season passes are \$20 and day passes are \$2.50. Get tickets, maps and access to the trails at Millstone Hill Touring and Recreation Center, 34 Church Hill Road, Websterville.

The town-forest proposal would make walking, hiking and snowshoeing free not only on the town-forest acreage, but throughout the trails that will continue to exist on private land. Enhanced uses that require significant upkeep, such as cross-country skiing and biking trails, will be based on membership or day pass fees. All the proceeds from these fees will go (and have always gone) to the nonprofit MTA to support the upkeep of both fee-based and free trails. MTA has suggested this as a way to provide a self-sustainable network that will cost the town nothing to maintain.

For more information, or if you are interested in helping with fundraising efforts, contact MTA at PO Box 44, Websterville, VT 05678, 479-1000 or millstonehill@aol.com; or visit their websites, millstonehill.com and millstonetrails.com.

**Central Vermont Humane Society**

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