

Our Towns

Housatonic Heritage Walks return

Each weekend from Sept. 6 to Oct. 5, history comes alive with free, guided tours throughout Litchfield County, Connecticut, and southern Berkshire County, Massachusetts. The historical walks shed light on the region's past, covering indigenous heritage, iron and industry, wildlife and foliage, and terrain and weather. For a full list of tours, visit housatonicheritage.org

Iron history at Beckley Furnace

By Robin Roraback

EAST CANAAN — On a quiet Saturday morning, Sept. 6, at the Beckley Furnace in East Canaan, it was hard to imagine that the peaceful, green spot where the blast furnace stands was once filled with buildings, horses, carts, workers, smoke, and heat from the furnace.

Friends of Beckley Furnace guide David McCunn stood by the furnace saying it could reach temperatures of 2,700 degrees.

At the top of the furnace a mixture of charcoal, iron and limestone was poured into it. Melting iron filtered down to where workers guided its flow along a channel on the way to be cast into “iron pigs,” bars of iron, from which iron products would be made in Lakeville, Limerock, Amesville, and other towns.

These bars would be made into such products as



PHOTO BY L. TOMAINO

Members of the Friends of Beckley Furnace, from left, Dolores Perotti, David McCunn, Bobby Anderson and Geoff Brown, were on hand on Sept. 6 to give tours.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Beckley Furnace when it was in production with its buildings intact.

cannons, cannon balls and wheels for railroad cars.

The waste from the iron making process, known as slag, was carried to the other

side of the Blackberry River. McCunn and fellow guides Bobby Anderson and Geoff Brown, said that the slag, still there, covers 23 acres and is

90 feet deep.

McCunn pointed out a “salamander” resting at the side of the furnace. Iron had become fused to furnace bricks. The furnace fires needed to be kept going. “Fires go out and a salamander results,” said McCunn. When this happened, he said, “They had to shut down and break the furnace apart to get it out.” McCunn said it happened about once a year. The salamanders were often thrown in the river.

McCunn said this location had all that was needed for the furnace. “Water power, limestone, iron from Salisbury and plenty of trees to make charcoal.”

A path up a small hill leads to the turbine which the Friends of Beckley Furnace uncovered and restored. The turbine, powered by water, provided the power to pump air for the “blast” which made the process of making iron more efficient.

The furnace is named for John Adam Beckley of the Forbes and Adam Iron company who built it in 1847. In 1858 it was bought by the Barnum and Richardson Company and produced iron until 1918 or 1919.

Geoff Brown indicated that the advent of another metal was the beginning of the end for the iron industry in the northwest corner. “The Holleys were respectable local iron people,” he said. “One of the sons went to England and saw the Bessemer Process. He saw the future coming: steel.”

Brown said Holley had told people on Mt. Riga in Salisbury he’d be back with something to keep the industry going, but instead he went to Pittsburgh. Brown mused about how changed the Northwest Corner would be had steel come to Salisbury.

Sharing Amesville’s industrial past

By Patrick L. Sullivan

SALISBURY — On Sunday, Sept. 7, Lou Bucceri of the Salisbury Association Historical Society led a group of curious participants upstream from the dam on the Housatonic River into a heavily wooded area that was once the site of a sprawling industrial complex.

The trip to see what remains of the Horatio Ames iron works, and the Housatonic Rail Road’s industrial complex was part of the Housatonic Heritage series of walks in Connecticut and Massachusetts on weekends through Oct. 5.

Bucceri said that Ames was the son of a successful industrial family in eastern Massachusetts. The Ames shovel was ubiquitous in the early 19th century.

Young Ames turned out to be an indifferent salesman, Bucceri said. “He was an innovator, a tinkerer.”

So the Ames family, in conjunction with two other Massachusetts families with similar business interests and sons that needed jobs, bought property along the Housatonic River for Horatio to establish an iron works in 1832. By 1835 only Ames remained of the original three.



PHOTO BY PATRICK L. SULLIVAN

Lou Bucceri shares info on the rise and fall of iron in Amesville.

As the group made their way along the newly cleared trail, Bucceri pointed to a partially submerged tree in the river.

The tree marks the approximate spot of a second, smaller falls upstream from the Great Falls. Bucceri said the “Little Falls” was dynamited when the Hartford Electric Company built the dam in 1914 because the engineers feared the volume and force of the water would be too much for the new dam.

Off to west was a lagoon, completely covered in charreuse-colored slime.

Bucceri said the lagoon is the site of where the Housatonic Railroad, which bought the site when Ames went out

of business, had their roundtable for turning railroad cars and engines around.

As the group completed the short hike, Bucceri detailed how Ames had success at first with railroad locomotive wheels and innovations in iron production.

But the depression of 1857 was hard on American railroads, and in turn on Ames. Production fell 90%.

Ames tried to get into defense contracting when the Civil War began. After a couple of false starts and a strong suggestion of corruption in federal defense appropriations, Ames did finally land a contract to build 15 cannons that shot a 125-pound projectile six miles.

Ames was ready to deliver the guns in May of 1865.

Unfortunately for him, the war ended in April. Bucceri said the federal government lost no time backing out of the contract, and that was it for the Ames iron works.

The property was soon sold to the railroad, and then again to the electric company.

And Nature moved back in, doing an excellent job of reclaiming the site.

“This was an industrial area,” Bucceri said, gesturing around. “Can you tell?”



PHOTO BY PATRICK L. SULLIVAN

The Housatonic Heritage Walk through Dark Hollow was led by Tom Key Saturday, Sept. 6.

Spooky tales on Dark Hollow’s trail

By Patrick L. Sullivan

LAKEVILLE — Tom Key led a group through Dark Hollow in Lakeville during a Housatonic Heritage Walk on a drizzly Saturday morning, Sept. 6

Dark Hollow is about 175 acres of preserved land bisected by a seasonal dirt road that runs between Farnam Road and Salmon Kill Road. The group of 10 or so gathered near the Farnam Road entrance, just past the property that was once a home for the indigent.

The Salisbury Association Land Trust bought the property in 2002, helped by a large donation by the Belcher family.

The land trust takes a “forever wild” approach to the land. If a tree falls over a trail or the road and blocks passage, it will be cut.

Otherwise, the land stays the way it is. However, there is a sign on a downed tree at the start of the trail.

Key said the tree is too high up to be safely cut with a chain saw. So hikers either have to go around, or simply

go under.

The sign refers to this, obliquely, with a reference to “aquatic fowl.”

Or “duck.”

This joke took a while to sink in among the hikers.

Volunteers have removed all sorts of things from Dark Hollow over the years, including mattresses, bed-springs and assorted roadside debris.

But since the land trust volunteers keep an eye on the property the amount of trash has decreased significantly.

One of the enduring tales of Dark Hollow is the one about the tombstone bearing the name Charlotte Remington.

Key came across the tombstone some years back. It had two sets of dates on it, adding to the mystery. The land trust board decided they didn’t want it, so Key dragged it into the woods off the path and covered it with leaves.

The next time he went up the ridge it was back in its original spot. Then the stone disappeared again, this time for good.

It has not returned.

Salisbury Republican Town Committee

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