



Town of Greenwich
Department of Parks & Recreation
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BABCOCK PRESERVE

Woodlands and Trails, approximately 300 acres

DIRECTIONS:

US 1 to North Maple Avenue to North Street. Continue on North Street past North Street School on left. Continue approximately 2 more miles, entrance on left just past the reservoir.

The Babcock Preserve is open to the public during daylight hours for hiking, walking, jogging, cross-country skiing, nature study, picnicking and horseback riding on designated trails. Camping without permission of the Department of Parks and Recreation and use of trail bikes are prohibited.

Open year round, sunrise to sunset, this largest of the Town parks stretches between North Street and Lake Avenue. Access and parking is off North Street about .5 mile north of the Merritt Parkway. The entrance way with its attractive stone wall and low plantings was donated by the Greenwich Garden Club.

This vast tract of forested land, containing an enormous variety of plants and animals, is being deliberately maintained as a natural area and allowed to undergo change without the interference of man. An extensive network of trails, many of them based on wild animal trails, range in length from 1 to 3.5 miles. They beckon the hiker or cross-country skier; others are designated for horseback riders. A picnic area has been set aside near the entrance.

The topography ranges from dry upper slopes with thin soils to lowland swamps and vernal ponds and, in general, the vegetation follows its lead. One knoll, between Red Maple and Yellow Birch Trails, boasts a magnificent stand of 75-100 year-old chestnut oaks. Descending the hillsides one encounters a variety of trees including: black oak, cherry and birch. Mountain laurel vies for space with low bush blueberry, viburnum and huckleberry in the under story. Further down, the forest cover changes to tulip trees and white ash, until the wetlands are reached and the red maples and willow take over. Stands of both hay scented and New York ferns are abundant, as well as wild flowers in the spring. Of the wide variety of bird and animal life, suffice it to say, the quiet hiker who keeps his eyes open will be amply rewarded, perhaps even spotting a rare river otter or Hooded Warbler.

The forests began their slow growth with the melting of the last glacier about 12,000 years ago. Later, there is archeological evidence that nomadic native Americans used these woods as a seasonal hunting ground. A rock shelter, several spear flints and a millstone, dating to 2500 BC, were found on the property in 1980.

Around 1720, the land was cleared for farming, and stone walls constructed to separate pasture lands from orchards and plowed fields. Some small homesteads were located on the property, and the forests provided firewood for the farmers.

Agriculture was gradually abandoned in the mid-nineteenth century, and once again, the land began to revert to forest with an under story of shrubs and wildflowers. In 1880, the Greenwich Water Company bought the land to preserve the Putnam Reservoir's watershed. When the Merritt Parkway separated the Reservoir from its watershed, the Water Company sold the land to Mary Reynolds Babcock and Charles H. Babcock, Jr.

The Town of Greenwich acquired the property in 1972, partially by purchase and partially by gift from two Babcock heirs, Mary Babcock Mountcastle and Betsy Babcock, both keenly interested in the conservation and preservation of open spaces. Since then, very few changes have been made and almost all the property remains an undeveloped, unspoiled mini-wilderness, invaluable for recreation, education and research.

Marjorie Mountain

NATURAL FEATURES:

The Babcock Preserve has a variety of topographic features, ranging from brooks and peat and muck swamps to ridge tops composed entirely of exposed bedrock. The East Branch of the Byram River, which transects the property on the west and Horseneck Brook on the east, contribute to Putnam Lake, one of the Towns reservoirs. A number of trails wind through the property, passing historical and archeological sites.

The vegetation consists of various upland and wetland species of a mixed hardwood forest. Trees, mostly dating from the 19th century post-agricultural period, include oaks, maples, locust, beech, tulip and birch. Native shrubs - rhododendron, azaleas and various viburnums - are found in abundance. The diverse habitat supports such wildlife as deer and a variety of small mammals such as mice, rabbits, chipmunks, bats, squirrels, and woodchucks. Berry species are especially attractive to wildlife; found here are strawberry, blueberry, huckleberry, elderberry, partridge berry and wild grape.

The swamps and marshes are of special value. Pollen samples taken from bogs have proved that acid-loving plants abounded in the past and formed a peat layer at least 16 feet deep in places. Current plant species - yellow candles, liverwort and sphagnum - probably are left over from earlier post-glacial days and provide a unique habitat which shelters a variety of amphibians and reptiles.

The diversity of plant species and variety of habitats makes the Babcock Preserve ideal for passive wilderness recreation and long-term observation and research of its plant and animal communities. Several endangered or locally rare species can be found in the park. River otter, hooded warblers, pink lady's slipper and great horned owl are present in the proper season. Natural factors and human actions - fire, lumbering, pasturing, cropping, Dutch elm disease, Chestnut blight, gypsy moths and deer browsing - have brought about many changes in the vegetation in the past. The Preserve, left in its natural state, now offers a living experimental environment in which naturalists can study patterns of change.

HISTORY:

Before European settlement began in Greenwich in 1630 AD, the area containing the Babcock Preserve was probably used by Indian populations as hunting grounds. A temporary rock shelter found on the property confirms this use of the land. Based on what is known about Indian practices of the time, it is probable that Indians built fires to destroy the under story trees and bushes. This encouraged the growth of forage and improved conditions for hunting.

In the early part of the 18th century, settlers changed the use of the property. They cleared the land for agriculture, pasturing and planting of orchards. Stone walls were erected to separate planting fields and pastures. At one time, the land supported four different homesteads.

However, in the late 1800's, railroads began to bring farm products from the more productive mid-west to the New York City area. As a result, Greenwich farm lands became less profitable and were sold. In the 1880's, the Greenwich Water Company purchased property, which now includes the Babcock Preserve to protect that watershed of the Putnam reservoir. During this period the land was left unaltered and the forest gradually returned.

In 1937, after plans were made to build the Merritt Parkway across Water Company lands, 304 acres north of the Parkway were sold to Mary Reynolds Babcock. The most significant alteration in the environment made during her ownership was the installation of a deer-proof fence around two-thirds of the property. The white-tailed deer was rare at that time and the fenced area provided a sanctuary from all predators. As a result, the herd expanded and over browsed the palatable plant species. Some species were removed permanently and unpalatable species grew up to take their place.

In 1968 the fence was opened and the herd dispersed. Growth of plants continued. One visible sign of the deer over-browsing today is the "two-story mountain laurel". The tops of these shrubs rise up 12-20 feet. Below this canopy are bare stems, followed by another filled-out area. Also, the *under story plants* on either side of the fence stand in sharp contrast to each other.

PARK DEVELOPMENT:

In 1972, 292 acres of the original Babcock Family property was acquired, partially by gift and partially by purchase. The Town had wanted a large, multiple-use park in central back country Greenwich and the Babcock property was ideally located for such open space. In addition, Town ownership of this land would protect the water supply in a sensitive watershed area, protect wildlife, and at the same time protect the aesthetics of the area.

Shortly afterward, the Conservation Commission, the Greenwich Audubon Society and Scout Troops 25 and 34 laid out a new trail, the North Loop Nature Trail, now included as part of the Red Trail. Horseback riding trails were added by the Greenwich Riding and Trails Association. An exercise trail, patterned after the "Vita Parcours" system, was built in 1975 but has fallen into disrepair and largely been removed.

The trail system has changed over the years, partially in an effort to protect the environment from overuse. While one trail is allowed to rest, a new one is cut. Currently seven miles of trails exist; two trails, roughly paralleling each other, run east to west in the northern and southern portions of the Preserve, with connecting trails joining them at various locations to create three separate hiking loops. A map of the trails is available at the entrance.

In 1983, the Conservation Commission completed a use and maintenance plan, for the Babcock Preserve, based on the environmental constraints of the land. The Commission concluded that 262 acres of the total acreage was suitable only as a conservation area, with usage limited to passive recreation - activities such as hiking and nature study that would leave the setting natural and undisturbed. The plan further suggested specific improvements be made to encourage the usage of the park by townspeople. These included development of a picnic area, improvement of sections of the trails with footbridges and boardwalks, improvement of the trail-marking system and an increase in the diversity of plant and animal habitats by creating openings in selected sites in the forest.

These changes will be made only when adequate funding is achieved. At present, few funds from the Town budget are allocated for the Babcock Preserve. Meanwhile, conservation projects, such as cutting and marking trails, clearing areas to promote growth of more desirable species and erosion prevention, are being carried out by members of Boy Scout troops and participants in the Teen Conservation Project.

The Preserve in its natural state provides a mini-wilderness for recreation education and research purposes of incalculable value. Its use by the public should be encouraged by a high standard of maintenance of the park and a variety of public programs.