



Gypsy Hill Park History

“Staunton is justly proud of her park, as it has proved to be a successful undertaking, and there is not a man, woman, or child in this city of twelve thousand inhabitants, who does not appreciate the foresight of the promoters of the Gypsy Hill Park” -(Staunton Dispatch and News Historical and Industrial Edition, January 1906.)

Overview

Gypsy Hill Park began as the site of Staunton's water supply in the mid 1800's. Several springs were located in this area and water from the springs was dispensed to the city via the pumping plant nearby. In 1876, the city purchased 30 acres of land around the springs in order to protect the town's water supply. By 1890, the city had acquired approximately 90 acres and a proposal was made to City Council to establish a recreational park on the property.

Council approved the proposal and the area of land located between Churchville Avenue and the old Baldwin Fair Association grounds became known as Gypsy Hill Park- named for the wandering gypsies who camped near the springs. Captain W.P. Tams, a local citizen, was given much credit for the planning and development of the park. The nearby Baldwin Fairgrounds, a longtime site for local gatherings, races and fairs was purchased by the city in 1892 to increase the space for recreational activities. By 1893, Gypsy Hill boasted a small zoo which was under the care and supervision of a park policeman. Throughout the 20th century, the park has experienced many changes; however residents as well as visitors to Staunton can still experience much of the original Victorian character and charm of the park.

Captain William Purviance Tams

William Purviance Tams Sr. was born on March 11, 1852 in Rockingham County, Virginia. His father William Henry Tams (born in North Carolina), was the only surviving child of William Tams who immigrated to America from Burslen England in 1820. William Purviance Tams Sr. was the third of 10 children. Though born in Rockingham County, the family moved to Staunton when Tams Sr. was one year old. As a young man Tams Sr. attended Virginia Military Institute and graduated in 1873 with distinction. After teaching military tactics and chemistry for one session, he returned to Staunton and shortly thereafter entered the service of the Augusta National Bank, becoming its cashier in 1880. He served as the chairman of Staunton City Council for a number of years. While serving on city council, Tams took a special and very active interest in developing a place of respite, relaxation and contemplation for the Staunton community. Below is the first of several resolutions from the Staunton City Council Minutes from about 1889. To whose vision and energy the initial development of this park is due. -1889 earned him the deserved title, “The Father of Gypsy Hill Park”. On motion of Mr. Tams the following preamble and resolutions were adopted.....

“Whereas the city now owns 85 acres of land in rear of the pumping- house of the city Water Works, on which the head springs that supply the city with water are located, and whereas in order to protect said springs it is necessary for the city to forever retain control of said land and whereas the people of our city have now no pleasure resort and those who live in small houses without yards are without use of a cool and shady place to spend a few hours on close and sultry evenings – Therefore, Be it resolved, 1st,



That the 85 acres of ground in rear of the pump house, except so much thereof as immediately surrounds said house, be placed under the control and supervision of the Committee of Public Grounds and Buildings 2nd That said grounds shall hereafter be known as "Gypsy Hill Park". 3rd That said committee be instructed to employ at once a competent landscape gardener or engineer to plat off said Park into walks and carriage drives and to designate thereon where shade trees and shrubs shall be planted, fountains placed and summer houses erected and the probable cost of such work as should be done at once to eventually carry out the purposes herein set forth." -Staunton City Council Minutes May 7, 1889

"Mr. Tams offered a resolution which was on a call of the roll unanimously adopted, and is as follows:

Resolved That the Committee on P.G. and Buildings proceed at once to carry out the plans of E.G. Vincent in regards to laying out drives and walks and constructing culverts in the new park recently established by an order of the council, and that the money for this purpose be taken out of any funds in the hands of the Treasurer, not otherwise appropriated – sum not to exceed \$1500." -Staunton City Council Minutes May 1889

The Geologic History of Gypsy Hill Park

by Kenny Bosserman

The geologic history of the Staunton area, as well as Gypsy Hill Park, goes back a long time, some 500 million years ago when this area, as well as all of the United States east coast was a shallow sea. During that period, vast amounts of sediment accumulated from decayed marine algae and other organisms which solidified into today's limestones and shales that dot the area. Even today in those numerous layers of rock, fossils from prehistoric times, such as graptolites and brachiopods (which look like modern sea shells) can be found in formations along Statler Boulevard and New Hope Road. But the shallow sea which covered the area was not to last. Tectonic forces caused by the collision of continental plates soon formed the Appalachian Mountains and its associated valley and ridge provinces that include the Blue Ridge, Alleghenies and Valley of Virginia where Staunton is located. This was completed approximately 250 million years ago. As this area formed, folded rock layers sometimes broke, thrusting one on top of the other. The result was numerous fault lines, one of those being the Pulaski-Staunton fault which originates north of the city, extends southwestward through the valley to Brisol, and into North Carolina. This fault line is no longer active. But its evidence is quite visible in Gypsy Hill Park, and is the main reason for the park. At the extreme north end of Gypsy Hill Park, the fault which is about 40- 60 feet wide, cuts through the park, and southward through the city. It can be seen in the road cut along the side of Churchville Avenue, approaching where the former Tastee Freez is located. Here, the overthrust of the Conococheague and Beekmantown limestones, rock layers dating back 450 million years, is quite evident. The powers of a fault can be seen in the fault breccia which is composed of large blocks of dolomite, and crushed conglomerate. It has a twisted and chewed up appearance caused by the thrusting, and is very visible as you drive by, or stop to observe. This wrenching of the rock created porous openings, and opportunities for water to reach the surface, and hence the many springs that are found in the park. Gum Spring Branch, the small stream that originates



in the upper end of the park, starts from one of these springs, and is fed by others along the way. One of those springs is about 45 feet downstream from the bridge near the Kiwanis Field concession stand where water is seen bubbling up, and the other is next to the creek near the children's swimming pool where water actually pours into

the stream. Some remain open springs. For example, Lake Tams can never be totally drained because there is a spring in its middle. Another one exists in the small lake next to the No. 2 hole on the Gypsy Hill Golf Course. And this spring water is what feeds the Gypsy Hill duck pond. Many springs in the park have been capped. You see those in the six-sided hexagonal structures just about two to four feet high and 10 feet wide. One is next to the Kiwanis Baseball Field concession stand, and another just beyond the right field fence of the Kiwanis' May Baseball Field. And there is one behind the old pump house (Stonewall Brigade Band Building) at the entrance to the park. It was these springs that attracted roving bands of gypsies to the area in the 19th century and hence the name for the park. And at one time, it was these numerous springs that was the source of Staunton's water supply. The Pulaski-Staunton fault is no longer active, so there will be no felt earthquakes any more. But its geology remains for all to see.

The Stonewall Brigade Band

by Brock Nicely

One only has to travel near the entrance of Gypsy Hill Park to hear strands of music that have entertained generations of local citizens, soldiers and area visitors. The Staunton Mountain Sax Horn Band, founded in 1855, derives its name from the type of instruments used as well as Staunton's close proximity to the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains. The band bears the nationally recognized sobriquet of the Stonewall Brigade Band. The band has borne various names at various time periods and has been referred to as: 5th Regiment Band (during the American Civil War many of the members served in the 5th Virginia Infantry Regiment), Second Corps Band, and Turner's Silver Cornet Band. It is the oldest continuous community band in the United States. David W. Drake, father of the Stonewall Brigade Band, was a former student of Professor Augustus J. Turner. He convinced Turner to move to Staunton and accept a teaching position at the Wesleyan Female Collegiate Institute and become the first band director. Edwin M. Cushing became the first president of the band. An early roster listed the original members as J.W. Alby, Samuel C. Baskins, Edwin M. Cushing, Alexander A. Grove, David E. Strasburg, James A. Armentrout, J. Harvey Burdett, Augustus Dailas, John Blair Hoge, Augustus J. Turner, Joseph P. Ast, William A. Burnett, David W. Drake, and Horace M. Stoddard. Early records indicate the uniformed band played for various social, political and civic events and groups. In May 1857, the band enjoyed a joint concert with the VSDB band under the direction of Professor Graham. In addition, United States Senator R.M.T. Turner was honored with a serenade while visiting General John D. Imboden. The Union Hall on West Beverley Street was the site of the band's first formal concert 17 July 1857. In 1858, the band purchased a band wagon complete with six matched cream-colored horses and was reorganized into a more structured and military band. The local militia units combined with the band for parades, musters and inspections. Prior to 1859, all instruments were individually owned. That year, the band purchased a set of German silver instruments manufactured by Antonie Sax of Belgium. These instruments were carried through the Civil War and brought home after the surrender of Appomattox.



During the war, the 5th Regiment Band often serenaded troops of both sides when camped close by. Four months after the end of hostilities, the citizen soldiers of the band were back in the community playing for local events, proudly bearing the earned title of Stonewall Brigade Band. In the 1870's, the band once again took on a military appearance with the growth of post war militia units and provided music for civic, patriotic and political events. In 1874, the band honored President Grant at the railroad depot as he traveled through Staunton. Two years later, the band boasted ten civil war veterans and eight charter members still in its ranks. Concerts were conducted at several venues including the corner of Main and Water Street (Beverley & Central), Court House Square, Reservoir Hill, and on West Main Street opposite of Trinity Church. The band provided the music for the funeral of President Grant in New York in 1885. It was also invited back to play for the dedication of Grant's Tomb. Nationally recognized, the band traveled to the 1889, Washington Centennial in New York City. In 1889, it participated in the Columbian Exposition at the Chicago World's Fair. The Stonewall Brigade Band marched in six Presidential Inaugural Parades: Taft's, McKinley's, Cleveland's (2), and Woodrow Wilson's (2). Arbor Day, 1 November 1889, the band played at a tall gazebo in Gypsy Hill Park as 1500 trees were planted. The modern day concert band has performed across the Commonwealth including Manassas National Battlefield Park, Richmond, and events at Pamplin Park's "Celebration of America's Wars". A rigorous local schedule keeps the 120 members on the go. The traditions of the Mountain Sax-Horn Band have carried over to the twenty first century. The annual Summer Concert Series features a free concert at the Stonewall Brigade Bandstand every Monday night. The tradition lives on.

Staunton Water Works and Pump House

Water was first brought to Staunton from county springs in 1839. Western Lunatic Asylum and the town united to bring water from Kinney's Springs (on Middlebrook Avenue) in iron pipes, but the quality was inadequate for both places. In 1848, Staunton piped water from "Buttermilk Spring,". This spring is on the road by the same name which is an extension of Straith Street. This spring is also formerly known as "Stoney Spring". Later Staunton began piping it's water from the springs in Gypsy Hill Park, then known as "Spring Farm", when owned by Peter Hanger. (Shirey)

The spring water was gathered in a "well" in the pump house and forcefully pumped up to city's reservoir on Madison Street, what is now called Reservoir Hill. From that high altitude, the reservoir via gravity fed water to the city below. (Tams) Staunton and Gypsy Hill Park sit on top of a huge formation of degraded limestone known as Karst. This allows for springs, sinkholes (for which Staunton is famous, not to mention the surrounding area), caverns, and caves. Karst and its relative instability allow springs to reach the surface. Some are pure water, but some, due to the porosity of this type of rock can allow pollutants to filter down to the water supply. Our area's early settlers had little concern about water pollutants, unfortunately we don't have that same luxury today. Reference: Paul Shirey, *The Mirror of Staunton*, March 25, 1966, pg. 4; William Purviance Tams Jr, Newsleader article; Susan Blackley (oral history)



Baldwin Fairgrounds

Baldwin Fair Grounds was once part of the 100 acre Peyton Estate called "Steephill". In 1891 the Baldwin District Fair Grounds became part of Gypsy Hill Park. In the foreground of this photo is the now named Lake Tams before the Army Corp of Engineers relocated the lake.

Staunton City Council Minutes November 1890

"A communication was presented from Mr. Erskine Miller President of the Baldwin District Fair Association, which having been read was referred to a special committee composed of Messrs. Bell, McQuaide and Tams, and is as follows:

Gentlemen: I desire to present for the consideration of your honorable body the purchase of the estate of the Baldwin District Fair Association for and in behalf of the city. This subject has been discussed informally by member of the board of directors of the Fair Association and some of the members of the city council, in which the mutual benefits to be derived by both the city and the Fair Association, at the meeting some months ago instructed the Executive Committee of the Fair Association a perpetual right to hold its meeting or Fairs, and to receive and nous the revenue and thus obtained for the conduct of its businefo."....

On December 2, 1890, Messrs. Bell and Tams (City Councilmen) present a communication from the president of the Baldwin Fair Association accepting the offering \$10,000 dollars with a few stipulations that include using the grounds for an annual fair and maintaining roadways and fences near the adjoining the Peyton property. In January of 1891, City Council rejected the purchase of the Baldwin Fair Grounds and then later in that same meeting passed the resolution after Tams submitted and amendment to the proposition. "...an amendment was submitted by Mr. Tams to clarify the proposition, which having been considered was adopted on a call of the roll by the following vote: Ayes -10: Messrs. Armentrout, Bell, Crowle, Crimmens, McQuaide, Scheffer, Summerson, Tannehill, Tams and Berkeley. Nays – 1- Mr. Weller."

John Lewis

By Jane Gray Avery

When Margaret Erskine Catlett married Lawrence Washington Howe Peyton, three families with strong past and future ties to Gypsy Hill Park were united. Due to both their love of the city of Staunton and proximity of the park to the Peyton's Steephill estate, the Peytons and their Catlett relatives took great interest in Gypsy Hill Park. L. W. H. Peyton was the son of John Lewis Peyton, author of the History of Augusta County and a descendant of John Lewis (1673-1773), the first European settler of Augusta County and founder of Staunton. John Lewis Peyton was born at Montgomery Hall, the estate of his father, John Howe Peyton, and built his own estate, Steephill, a property that originally consisted of over 90 acres with a small lake, between 1877-78. By the 1890s, the new Gypsy Hill Park abutted his Steephill property. On August 25, 1891, John Lewis Peyton, along with other Lewis family descendants, (see list below) wrote to the city of Staunton proposing that the remains of his great-great grandfather, John Lewis and those of his wife, Margaret Lynn Lewis be removed from their former Bellefonte estate and reinterred in Gypsy Hill Park and that a monument be erected in his honor there. On November 10,



1891, Staunton City Council met and agreed to this proposal, with Col. J.L. Peyton appointed trustee of the project. The monument was erected much later and inscribed with the words from Lewis's original gravestone, but the gravesite itself was never relocated. According to the obituary of Charles Catlett, brother of Margaret Erskine Catlett Peyton, he was "an admirer of all things beautiful, both in nature and the character of men. Gypsy Hill Park was a center of his interest and many of his suggestions were used in increasing, from year to year, the attractiveness and serviceability of this recreation center." In his will, Charles Catlett provided the site for Betsy Bell Park. Elizabeth Gay Catlett, sister of Margaret E.C. Peyton and Charles Catlett, left a sum of money to be used for the construction of the pool at Montgomery Hall Park, located on the former estate of John Howe Peyton. The Peyton and Catlett families have also been beneficiaries of Gypsy Hill Park's beauty and amenities. In 1922, junior golfer Richard Catlett Peyton, eldest son of L.W.H. Peyton and Margaret E.C. Peyton, won the Staunton Golf Club's Beverley Cup playing on the Gypsy Hill links. Richard Catlett Peyton, Jr., of Richmond, recently recalled a poignant moment from his childhood that occurred while visiting his grandmother, Margaret E.C. Peyton, at Steephill. "My father and I were walking along the Gypsy Hill course. I was holding his hand and looking up at him in awe as he was telling me the story about how he won this junior tournament when he was a boy. Earlier this year, I became reacquainted with Staunton, walked along that same path, and then visited the memorial to John Lewis in the park. I suddenly realized that not only was my ancestor, John Lewis, honored there, but my Peyton and Catlett family members also played a role in Gypsy Hill and other community parks in Staunton and that my family and I had an opportunity to enjoy this lovely space as well. I was humbled by that and intend to continue the tradition in whatever useful way I can."

Hutchens Lake

By Susan B. Blackley

P.E. Hutchens was Staunton's first Superintendent of Parks. Mr. The Hessian House Hutchens came by this title in a rather circuitous manner. He was first a general handyman for the City of Staunton. Payment for his services appears in the council minutes in 1888. In 1889, Mr. Hutchens was nominated and elected as Staunton's third police officer (council minutes May 7, 1889, though nominated in April of 1889). This also happens to be the same date that Gypsy Hill was established as a park by Staunton City Council. Six months later, as part of his police duties, he patrolled Gypsy Hill Park for one week each month. According to council minutes the officers of the police force were assigned a week of supervisory and enforcement duty in the new park on a rotating basis. After a period of time, Mr. Hutchens was the sole officer on the beat in Gypsy Hill Park (Things We Talk About). One can only surmise that it was his dedication to Gypsy Hill Park that afforded Mr. Hutchens the opportunity of becoming the Superintendent of the park. Superintendent Hutchens was a very busy man. He cared for not only the grounds but also an array of domestic animals, wild animals (including monkeys), various birds, and a herd of deer. (Things We Talk About). In addition, he monitored the newly purchased Baldwin Fair Grounds and enforced the many rules established for the governance of the park and adopted by Staunton City Council. According to ancestry.com reference to a Staunton census, P.E. Hutchens was Peyton Edward Hutchens born July 8, 1860 and died July 27, 1930. He is buried in Thornrose Cemetery. The Duck Pond of today was originally referred to as Lily Garden Pond and then named Hutchens Lake which then in the late 1940's became known as Swan Lake.



The Hessian House

Peter Hanger, a Dutchman from Germany was the original owner of "Spring Farm" in 1750, which after changing hands from his heirs to other owners then once and for all purchased by the city in 1876, became known as Gypsy Hill Park. "Just west of Staunton village were "Spring Farms" lands so called by virtue of the many springs bubbling up between the rounded hills. Peter lost no time acquiring the tract while George (his brother) settled in another section of the village". (Gladys B. Clem, Richmond Times-circa 1915). During the Revolutionary War, a group of 200 Hessian mercenaries hired by King George to battle for England were captured at the Battle of Trenton and shipped to Staunton. Staunton provided the perfect prisoner-of-war camp because of its isolation. "For a long time Peter Hanger had wished to build himself a fine stone house like the well-to do Pennsylvania Germans owned. The Hessians provided an answer to his labor problems." (Clem) The Hessian prisoners built a rectangular Dutch farmhouse made of stone with small-panel windows set in three feet thick walls. The home fronted what is now Churchville Ave and sat at the entrance to the current Gypsy Hill Park. Peter Hanger's home was razed well over 125 years as it was empty and dilapidated. A new dancing pavilion was built in its place which then gave way to the current Garden Center.

Gypsy Hill Park Pool

June 2, 1932 - City Council authorized construction of a swimming pool at Gypsy Hill Park and loan of \$11,000 to the Staunton Fire Department to be paid over a long period of years with interest. The Staunton Volunteer Fire Department put up \$1,500 of its own funds. On July 22, 1932 the following article appeared in the Staunton News Leader: "Marked by the blare of bugles, short talks by four speakers, and appropriate swimming and diving exercises, the swimming pool in Gypsy Hill park, named Gypsy Hill pool," was formally opened yesterday afternoon at three o'clock with a crowd of more than 300 persons present.

"The pool was formally opened by Mayor George A. Cottrell, following short talks by Charles Catlett, Mayor E.W. Opie, and George H. Reed, superintendent of parks for Lynchburg.

"After the opening exercises, fancy diving and swimming exhibitions were given by two life guards from Lynchburg, by the two guards for the Staunton pool, Claiborne Sniteman and Lawrence Steele, and Miss Tomlin Braxton, Amelia Deekens, Dorothy Allen, and Elizabeth Cochran and Mrs.. David C. Ebrhart, and Stuart Allen, Charles Ralston, James Thomas and Randolph Gardner. "Fire Chief E.H. Dabney acted as master of ceremonies for the opening and introduced the various speakers" (Van Hanna) It certainly did not take the men in 1932 very long to build the pool. Men anxious for jobs during the depression completed the entire job in forty working days. The Gypsy Hill pool, including the large pool and the baby pool, the original bath house, walkways, flood lighting, plumbing, refreshment stand, office, diving tower, beaches, labor, etc. was built for a total cost of only \$11,200. November 1947, Final payment made on loan from City Council On July 4, 1958 the new bath house was dedicated at Gypsy Hill pool. The swimming period for adults was interrupted for about forty minutes while the dedicatory program was conducted from the portico of the new building. Praises Fire Department in 1958

"In dedicating this lovely building we should all be gratefully aware that it has been built and will be paid for without help from the beleaguered taxpayer. We pay tribute to this system that makes this possible, but especially we do pay tribute to the men of the Staunton Fire Department who conceived the idea and have carried it out in such a fine manner - largely, I must add, through their own personal labor.



There is something wonderful about men who will put in a full day's work at their own jobs and then work all hours of the night on a project such as this. This structure stands as a monument to their resourcefulness and their dedication to the welfare of the people of Staunton. Our special thanks go to Mr. Ashby and his committee. Recognition should also be given to Mr. Eugene Twiggs for his fine design." (Vice Mayor Richard W. Smith) The Staunton Fire Department, builders of the pool, spent over \$32,000 in 1957 to rebuild the bath houses.

"The lifeguards at the pool in 1962 were Tom Payne 18 head life guard who lived on 1119 Greenwood Rd, Sandy Gum 18 who lived on 1812 North Augusta St., Wayne Hite, 20, 12 gay Street; Randy Olsen 16 Sharlaine Drive; and John Einstein 20 819 Selma Blvd. Chick Crawford was the manager in 1962 and kept things running with the help of his assistant W.W. Talley. All of these employees were selected by the swimming pool committee of Staunton Fire Department which was made up of O.C. Armstrong, Chief G.L. Chandler, Glen Ashby, C.K. Morrison Jr., and Wade Mitchell." (News Leader)

Fireman Carnival This Week

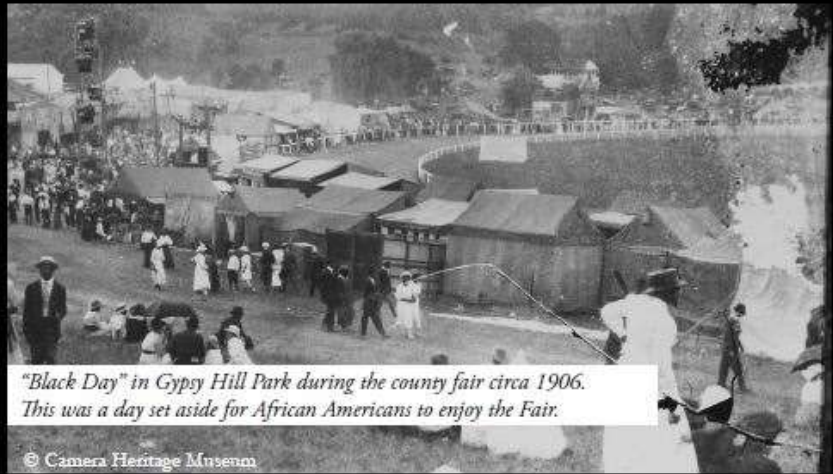
"The firemen are holding a carnival at the fairgrounds from Monday through Thursday to help pay the expense of building the bath house in 1957. They hope to clear enough money to put a filtering system in Gypsy Hill pool." (Van Hanna)

Staunton horticulture staff wins state recognition



"On motion of Mr. Bargamin the following resolutions were adopted: Resolved That the committee in charge of the contemplated Park be requested to ascertain the number and kind of trees necessary to procure for said Park and contract with some company for the number needed.

That the 25th day of October, 1889, be set apart as arbor day, and the citizens of Staunton be invited to attend and engage in planting said trees, at points to be designated by the committee and the trees to be furnished at cost." -Staunton City Council



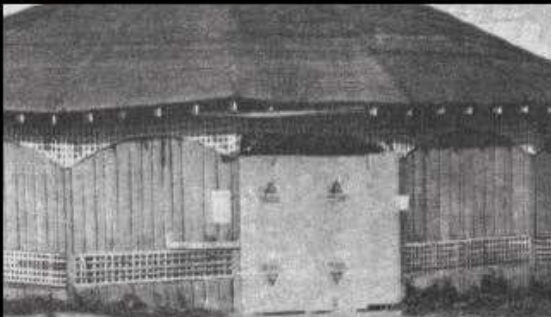
"Black Day" in Gypsy Hill Park during the county fair circa 1906. This was a day set aside for African Americans to enjoy the Fair.

© Camera Heritage Museum

The Bears were brought to Gypsy Hill in 1910 when they were cubs. A few years later they were replaced with exotic birds purchased by the Godfather's of Gypsy Hill Park – The Staunton Moose Lodge and Mr. Byrd of Dooms



Thousands of country music fans flocked to see Staunton's own Statler Brothers perform on July 4th. Photo circa 1983



The Round Barn was built in the 1800's and was demolished October 23, 1964 in light of public outcry to preserve it.

In 1936, a 9-hole golf course was built in Gypsy Hill Park near the sheep barn. In 1958 an \$18,000 new clubhouse was dedicated.

