2022 Charlestown Hiking Trails

When I retired from the Navy in 1994, I started visiting Pillsbury State Park in Washington, NH, because my mother’s family came from Washington, I spent a lot of my youth there. After running or walking the trails in the park I started helping maintain them. From there I expanded into the AMC and the Monadnock/Sunapee Greenway. The state gave me trail maintenance training, mostly on the safety involved. Soon after I started running a town trail. More on that later.

First I’ll talk about the blazes on trails. I use white paint. The state thinks I should use yellow which may be more common. but I find white easier to see. One blaze, actually a bit of a rectangle, means keep going, two, one over the other, means danger be careful. Generally, two indicates a corner, but could mean cliff, brook, steep downhill, etc. I met a hiker once who complained because he thought two blazes meant two trails. No!! Then I found a trick, tip the upper blaze to indicate the direction of the turn. In some cases, if the marks were made before I started doing that it’s not too clear. When I checked on line it says that the trick now is to set the upper mark off to the side of the turn. Too late on our trails.

Now to the trails. Nature Trail – (show where it is on the map) .6 miles one way, so 1.2 miles up and back. The trailhead and kiosk are down behind the police station building. Park in the area down behind the building or on far back of the fire house parking lot. The trails goes down from the kiosk, across a seasonal brook, then up along the bank below RT 12, then drops down, crosses a feeder brook, runs along Clay Brook and uphill to the top of Fling Road. At the top if you walk over and look at the brook you will see the remains of a dam. There is the remains of a grist-mill dam along the brook as you go up. The trail passes through a variety of habitats, including the riparian zone (along a brook), then through a mixture of softwoods and hardwoods. Besides just turning around and coming back down, you can also walk back down via Fling Road or the Old Claremont Road.

The trail was built by the Charlestown Conservation Commission in 1969. They may have started in 1967. Finished that section in 1970. The town worked up an agreement with the landowners at the top third to allow the trail to pass through their property. It was finished in 1980. The trail was originally built for the school children to get acquainted with nature, thus the name. School children still do many projects in the lot.

Over the years the trail has gone through some changes. It used to go over the hump just behind the kiosk, down to the brook and crossed a bridge over Clay Brook. In 1999 the spring thaw took the bridge out. In 2000 the ConCom turned the trail when it reached the brook and came up over the culvert that goes under RT12, but later, members of the ConCom built a bridge and followed along the bank by the Claremont Road and down across the feeder brook. The bridge over that feeder brook has been replaced at least three times since. Last year one of them. A couple years ago, I moved a portion of the trail on the hill because it washed out. We moved a bit more this last year.

What are ‘invasive species’? Plants that are not native to the area. There are many invasive species in this small forest. Most common are European buckthorn, multi-flora rose, Japanese knotweed, bittersweet and Virginia creeper vines.

Wildlife:: I have seen many smaller animals and birds in the forest, skunks, squirrels, etc. Also, because of the brook, there are tallow-spotted salamanders and frogs and toads, mostly seen in the spring when they go to the brook to mate.

Maintenance of this trail is mostly washouts of the trail or the bridges. A few fallen trees and branches.

In early 1990’s the Charlestown Economic Development Association (CEDA) formed a group called CEDA-T, CEDA trails. Through them John and Jan Lambert built two new trails. After I retired, and discovered a trail, I used to run a couple trails. I’d run for two or three days and maintain the trail for the next. I also joined the Conservation Commission soon after. When the Lamberts found out I was maintaining the trails they handed them over to the Conservation Commission. In 1997 CEDA-T published the first trail map. The ConCom published an updated map in 2005.

The first CEDA-T trail is now called the Reservoir Lot Trail because it goes through the Reservoir Lot Town Forest. The total trail is around 2.7 miles long, though the shape is two loops, and a Spur Trail’ which leads to the Old Acworth Stage Road, a class 6 road.

The trail head and kiosk are out North Hemlock Road, just past and across the road to Blueberry Hill Road. From the kiosk, the trail leads down to the upper reservoir, then follows Clay Brook (remember that name?) to where the Lower Reservoir used to be. The state had the town take out part of the lower dam a few years ago. The portion of the dam still there has the old pump station building still on it. This used to be where the town got its water, before the state made it illegal to use surface water for drinking. At the dam the trail splits. If you go straight, you walk the southern loop. About a hundred feet and the trail goes left. If you walk the straight trail, you’ll enter a private trail that will take you to the parking lot at the bottom of the hill. If you turn left, you’ll be on the loop. It goes around back of the hill and will soon split again. Here, if you go straight, you will be on the Spur Trail to the Acworth Stage Road, a class 6 road, maintained by the land owners. The Spur Trail goes along the bank, turns and crosses a brook, then up and more up then to the Old Stage Road. You should go out and back. If you turn left at the T. (or right if you went out the Spur Trail) this trail leads up a hill and through some woods and drops down to join the trail across from the lower dam. When you get in sight of the lower dam, if you turn left, toward the dam, you’ll be back where you passed. Many of the trail’s users, just walk the southern loop. If you turn right, you will enter the northern loop. This loop is much more a challenge. It goes up and across a hill, dips down to cross a feeder brook and up a steep hill, to a flat, soon turns right and up another hill, then left and across the hill, and back down to the same flat and out onto the North Hemlock Road. Turn left and walk back the road and pass the Burroughs Road and back to the trailhead. The southern loop is much shorter than the northern loop. Without the Spur Trail the two loops total about 2 miles. Out the Spur Trail and back adds about .7 miles.

This trail is mostly hemlock with some areas of the northern loop mostly hardwood. When I took a class in flora in Grad School, we had to pick a forest in our town to do a personal study. I chose the inside of the northern loop. I had to identify all the plants inside the loop. The most unusual to me, I discovered three apple trees on the flat. That was a fall class, by next spring all three of the apple trees had fallen. They were really old, each only having one trunk, with few branches still on them. I identified them because each had a couple apples hanging on them.

I have seen beaver, otter and mink in the brook, and in the woods, deer, moose, skunks, weasels and once a fisher paralleled me for a while. Also, a tree beside the trail had been tore up by a bear.

Maintenance of this trail is mostly fallen trees and branches The ConCom had the forest logged a couple years ago, so the views at this time may not be the best at this time. It will grow back, maybe there will be some berry bushes.

The other trail CEDA-T trail is now called the Connecticut River State Forest Trail. The hardest trail to walk in town, officially labeled as “Advanced.” It is a bit under 2 miles one way or a bit under 4 miles out and back. It ends at the Lamb Road, a class 6 unmaintained road. Class 6 roads are town roads that are not maintained by the town. Lamp Road has some major puddles if you drive in from either direction. It is also possible to walk up the trail and out the back roads, left will lead to Meany Road and down Breakneck Hill Road. That way is likely around 4 miles. The right will take you into South Charlestown, off Lamb Road, onto Weeks Road, right onto Old Turnpike, left onto Bowen Crossing, to Rt 12. This way is closer to seven or eight miles.

The trailhead and kiosk are at the end of East Street Extension, past the primary school. The trail parking is just past the kiosk. The state has a gate about fifty feet. The trail is out the logging road about fifty feet past the gate and left for ten feet and then right. Then up and up for about three quarters of a mile. Then past the old-old log landing and up some more as it angles right and then left. After the trail angles right again, it becomes some what flat. The state logged this trail three and four years ago. It has affected the top a lot. The loggers placed logs on both side of the trail when the trail crosses a logging road. Very helpful.

The trail goes through many habitats with the changes in height. Most of the uphill in the beginning is softwoods, hemlocks and pine. Then it reaches a lot of hardwoods.

The biggest problems with this trail are the water-bars and ditches up the hill. A water-bar is a ditch that crosses the road. We do have fallen trees sometimes.

Many people cross-country ski or snowshoe this trail in winter. So be careful if you walk it when snow is on the ground. Also, the hill part becomes slippery when snow is on it and has frozen. It is the northern side of the mountain.

I have seen bear, deer and fishers in this forest and once a moose was passing through. I’ve also seen signs of many smaller animals. I have also seen many types of birds. Once I had a broad-tailed hawk swoop ahead of me numerous times.

As of right now this trail is not usable, unless you don’t mind having to wade cold water to reach it. Just past the state’s gate is a culvert where a brook used to flow through. Last year’s highwater filled the culvert, and the brook in the area, with debris and the water now runs over the culvert part of the trail. Last year when summer arrived the water level fell enough to allow crossing. The state said they were short money, but when they got some money, they would repair the culvert. Also, the parking lot right now is a mud zone.

In the early 2000s, the town asked the ConCom to take a look at Halls Pond Forest as they had a complaint of people camping and having cook-fires. I checked it out and reported my finds of yes to the town. Afterwards, I thought about the lot and figured with the snowmobile trail going past close to half the pond maybe I could build a new hiking trail. With the ConCom’s approval I laid out and built a trail along the other side of the pond. I used an old logging road for much of the new part.

This trailhead is tricky to get to, go out the Burroughs Road from the North Hemlock Road, then onto the Halls Pond Road. Once past a house, the road becomes class 6, though the landowner does keep it well maintained. Drive straight past a driveway to the left, then one to the right. that second driveway is the town’s right of way to the pond, but that is private property. A quarter mile further, the kiosk sits to your right on a large parking lot. Park and walk out the rear of the parking lot, past the snowmobile gate. The ConCom had the forest logged a few years ago and the parking lot was the log landing, so lots of room for parking.

This trail is about 1.5 miles around and back. The trail leads up to a corner of Halls Pond, then splits, go straight onto the hiking trail, which follows an old logging road for aways, and then angles right and around the end of the pond. The ConCom installed a bridge over the feeder brook a couple years ago. Again, this lot was logged five or so years ago, so some areas are open. Once over the bridge, the trail goes over a rock field, then angles right. All along the trail the pond is thirty or forty feet to your right. Then the trail reenters the snowmobile trail. Turn right. You will soon reach the dam. Good views of the pond from the dam. Just past the dam, the town’s right of way road comes in from the left. There is a gate on that road, so people cannot drive up to the pond, though over the years a couple times people have broken the gate and drove in. Go right and follow the snowmobile trail. It will take you to the pond’s earthen dam. Cross it and up the slope and back onto the trail you came in on. Turn left and head back to the parking lot.

On a side note, the class 6 road that passes the kiosk can also be walked. It leaves Charlestown about ten or so yards down the road. The road leads past a few driveways, some are summer camps, at least one has people year-round. If you stay left, you’ll not see any of their houses. If you reach a gate turn and come back. On the other side of the gate, you’ll be in someone’s drive way.

This lot is very remote. It is mixed woods. Let me explain what a ‘rock field’ is. An area of large rocks, which make it hard to walk over for some people. We moved some rocks, and put in other rocks to make it as smooth as we could. The feeder brook that goes under the new bridge comes from a swamp/pool up stream. If you push through the logged area and the bushes, you’ll see a large area of less then knee-high bushes, some times it is full of water.

In summer, I see people fishing in the pond most every time I walk the trail. Most of them fish from the dam, though some fish from the shores. It seems to be full of bass. At least that’s what most of them tell me they catch. In season, many deer hunters are up in the lot. I always wear orange when I go on the trail at that time. Also, in spring and fall the pond will have geese and ducks. So, you may see those hunters. Sometimes ducks and/or geese will stay the summer. There are also turkeys in the area. I hear them sometimes. I’ve seen bear and signs of coyotes, besides lots of deer sign, which brings in the hunters.

In 2001 the Sullivan County Conservation Commission with assistance from the Federal Natural Resources Conservation Commission and with help from Jan Lambert, volunteers, and members from the ConCom planted a buffer zone along the Connecticut River from the water treatment plant south, officially called the Great Meadows. Jan and I laid out a trail as we planted. The Great Meadows Trail. This trail out and back is about 2 and ¼ miles long.

The Great Meadows is comprised of three fields. The town owns the first and the power company owns the next two along with the little stretch of woods at the southern end. After the trail opened the ConCom hired someone to keep the trail mowed. The mower, the first year after we opened the trail, mowed past the end and continued the trail into the forest and took it to where the meadow sweeps back to RT12. So now the trail is composed of that was 3 fields and a bit of woods. You can tell when the trail changes fields by the line of trees leading into the field. The first line more obvious then the next.

The first field, we and the volunteers planted in sections. The state had taped off eight by ten sections and gave each of 6 to 8 plants per section. The next two fields were planted with a tractor drilling holes and a rider dropping plants in each hole, which we planted. We put in eight or nine rows of pines, maples, oaks, dogwoods, and various other bushes and trees.

Our major problem with this trail is that in many years the breakup of the ice dams washes out the bank when they break up. In some areas there is only one row of plants left. Another problem is invasive species, especially the bitter sweet vine. The grape vines also play a part. I spend a lot time last spring digging up the grape vines that rooted in the trail and started tripping walkers. Another problem is broken branches hanging on the trail and the southern part of the trail has had many fallen trees mostly sumac. The ConCom sends a crew down the trail most falls to cut vines from the trees. Bittersweet by its growth squeezes trees to death and grape vine will pull over young trees by the vines’ weight.

On a side note, a few years ago the boy scouts repaired two benches given them by the Fall Mountain schools (they used to sit in front of the school’s office on East ST) and installed them on the trail. The first is just before the town property line and the second is at the southern end. The ConCom had to repair the first bench when someone broke the cross panels.

This area is noted for birds, especially in hibernation periods. A birder counted over 200 species of birds in the area. In the spring the geese are on the river and in the corn fields on the other side of the trail. I have seen woodchucks, and otter and once seen deer sign. In the fall, the state brings in pheasants, so you may see hunters.

The next trail is the Hubbard Hill State Forest Trail. This is one of the snowmobile club’s snowmobile trails and the state requested we make it a multi-use trail. So, I marked it a hiking trail. This trail starts at the snowmobile shed on the Old Claremont Road. Park beside the shed and walk across or around the cornfield, past the kiosk and onto the trail. It leads up the hill, past the gun range, across a powerline, through the snowmobile land and near the top of the hill crosses into the state land. The blue state markers will let you know when you cross. This trail is 2.5 miles one way to the Burrough Road or 5 miles out and back. It is the longest trail in town. Again, the state logged this a couple years ago and the Burroughs Road end is open in places because of that. Last winter the snowmobile club had their land partially logged. They are not done. The trail in winter has open gates, so snowmobiles can use it. Last winter someone drove a pick-up into the forest and dropped off eight TV’s and a refrigerator. We had some issues but the Snowmobile club and the ConCom got the stuff out of there. Because the trail is so well defined, when I blazed the trail, I used less blazes, then I would a regular trail.

This trail goes through a large variety of forest types, from hardwood to softwood to mixed, past swamps, over snowmobile bridges with brooks beneath them.

The Snowmobile Club does most of the maintenance of this trail, though the ConCom has occasionally gone out to cut up fallen trees in the summer.

The newest trail in Charlestown is the Crown Point Trail. The town Planning Board did a survey a couple years ago and many people brought up the idea of more trails along the Connecticut River. I looked over the town maps and discovered that most land along the river was owned by private owners with small lots. I did discover a section of land owned by the town. I asked for and received permission from a private land owner to cross a potion of their land to reach the town land. There is a small part of the trail on state land. The Crown Point Trail starts off lower Lovers Lane. The ConCom installed a kiosk. It’s right across lower Lover’s Lane from Jones Road or at the upper end of the guardrail. Parking is in the woods behind the kiosk.

The trail follows an old road for a bit, then up onto a narrow knoll, overlooking the river, then down past the Water Pump Station, then up along another knoll, down and back to the river. In a couple places because of ravines, the trail leaves the river but gets back soon. The ConCom put in steps in two places, and one of the knolls had a narrow section, so we widened it a bit.

The trail ends at the Crown Point marker that marks the place the British soldiers crossed the river during the French and Indian War. The trail is .6 miles one way, so 1.2 miles round trip.

A bit off the subject of trails, I’ll mention ticks. Be aware of deer ticks on all trails. The worst place I have seen is the Hubbard Hill State Forest Trail. Please be aware and spray yourself down before going into the woods to hike. Perhaps tuck your pant legs into your socks.

The town trails are open for multi-use, walking/running, biking, horses, winter skiing etc. They are not open to motorized use, except the snowmobile trails, but all are closed to motorized wheeled vehicles. Motorized wheeled vehicles destroy the trails as the soil is not solid enough for them.

Lastly, who has heard of geocaching? Geocaches are worldwide GPS tracked places. The geocaches are plastic boxes with a log book and maybe little gifts. If you take a gift, you’re supposed to leave one. I know of one along a town trail and have been told there are others. Watch for them.