

## 15 - Blue Hills History - The CCC, WPA, and related programs.

Many of us have hiked past the CCC Camp. You may even have stopped and read the granite memorial. <sup>i</sup>



Or have seen the signs:

Note: The Friends of the Blue Hills have recently installed a new sign as well.

ii

You have probably been told that many of the things we see, and take for granted, were built by the CCC. Like the tower on Great Blue Hill and some of the stone steps. But I think it's time we look a little deeper, and learn some more. I know that when I hiked through the CCC Camp area I had always envisioned a few small buildings sitting up behind those low stone walls. A nice small, quaint, place. Think again. Here's an aerial view of the CCC Camp when it was first starting out.



Most structures in upper section, and some in lower section, are tents. Compared that first shot to:



This is how it looked once they started building some barracks. So much for small and quaint, the CCC Camp was a *big* encampment. Well, let's take a look at the CCC, and the Federal programs in general, and specifically some of what they did at the Blue Hills.

The CCC was a public works program that ran from 1933 until 1942. It was part of FDR's "New Deal" to recover from the Great Depression and one of the first programs started after FDR took office. The idea was that young men, originally aged 18-25, but eventually expanded to 17-28, would volunteer to join the CCC and would be paid, with most of their pay going to their families. Most of these men were unemployed, with little opportunity to find a job because of the depression, and their families were receiving aid from the government. Across the country the CCC grew to a maximum of 300,000 at any one time, and over the 9-year life over 3 million young men served in the CCC. The men were provided with food, clothing and shelter, and paid \$30 (equivalent to about \$600 in 2020 dollars). They were allowed to keep up to \$5 (\$100 in today's money) of their pay for themselves, with the rest sent directly to their families. You volunteered for 6 months, but could re-enroll for up to two years total.

The CCC was the most popular of all of the New Deal programs, as it was said to lead to increased physical conditioning, higher morale, and increased employability. It also led to greater appreciation of the outdoors, and contributed to the support for conservation efforts to protect natural resources. The program continued until 1942, when the beginnings of World War II made it unnecessary due to the jobs created by the war effort.

Operation of the CCC was split among 4 government agencies. The Labor department recruited the young men. The War Department provided reserve officers who provided operational support for the camps, as they had the experience in supervising young men, and getting them to work together. The Agriculture and Interior departments were in charge of determining the projects to be undertaken.<sup>iii</sup>

#### **The CCC at the Blue Hills.<sup>iv</sup>**

Most of the following is from the 1933 -19 39 MDC (Metropolitan District Commission, predecessor to today's DCR) annual reports.

1933<sup>v</sup>

The program started in June of 1933. There were from 145 to 212 enlisted men involved at any point in time. These initial members were all World War veterans. They were supervised by a civilian supervisor and 8 foremen. They repaired and got working 13 miles of telephone police signal lines. They created over 5 miles of service roads, bridle paths and fire breaks and over 2 miles of foot paths. [While I don't have the records of which service roads and bridle paths these were, they would have been the wider trails we are familiar with today. My adopted trail, 5 Corners Path may very well have been one. (Wolcott Path, from Rt. 138 to Headquarters, was already in existence.) You have to remember that in 1933 cars were 'new' and riding around the Blue Hills in a horse drawn carriage was the mode of transport that had originally been envisioned. This is one reason many of the trails, even today, are cart paths, not single-track trails.] They also cleared and improved 400 acres of forest. 7 acres were cleared and improved as picnic grounds with stone fireplaces and tables. Over 1300 acres were inspected for gypsy moths and over 61,000 nests were creosoted. Finally, several new parking areas were created and old areas improved.

And while the CCC is the program we think and hear about the most, it is important to recognize that not everything that was done at the Blue Hills was done by the CCC. There were other of FDRs 'Alphabet soup' programs at work as well. Specifically, in November 1933 federal funds were made available

through the CWA (Civil Works Administration) and 29 projects were approved for about 2800 men to work 30 hours per week through February mostly in the Blue Hills and Middlesex Fells.

And also, in April of 1933, an appropriation of \$75,000 had been made available for the relief of the unemployed, and 850 men were hired for 3 days a week for four months cutting brush, clearing woods and other work throughout the reservation.

In 1934<sup>vi</sup> the number of men enrolled in the CCC varied from a low of 140 to a maximum of 205. The rehabilitation of the police signal service was continued. The right of way was cleared, poles replaced as needed, and other improvements made to 11 miles of wiring. A shelter structure of natural stone was built above the Chickatawbut Parking Area, and the slope around it planted in natural shrubbery. Construction of the stone 32' tower at Chickatawbut was undertaken.



8 miles of roads and bridle paths and 5 miles of foot paths were constructed. 600 acres of burnt and damaged growth was cleared, and 1000 acres sprayed for gypsy moths. 20 acres of landscaping, mostly at road junctions were completed.

In addition to the CCC other programs also added 18 miles of new bridle paths, and 7 new fireplaces were built adjacent to picnic grounds and new trees and shrubs were planted. At the Ponkapoag golf Course 2,000 square feet of Velvet Bent sod was transplanted onto several greens and 5000 square feet of nursery sod was put in condition and sowed with South German bent. 16 new tees were constructed, and a cement block compost house erected.

1935<sup>viii</sup>

[Aside: Unrelated to the Federal programs, but of note: Chickatawbut Road was extended from its junction with Wampatuck St to Granite Street in Braintree in 1935.]<sup>ix</sup>

In 1935 the War Veterans which had been working at the CCC Camp were transferred to the second Corps area and a new group of recruits were brought in. Not all of the War Veterans actually left, as 7 were hired as supervisory personnel, and 16 others were retained as 'local experienced men' at the Blue Hills and Breakheart Reservation. [Aside 'local experienced men', known as "LEMs" were used as foremen to supervise the men, as they were familiar with the site and the new recruits were typically not familiar with the site, or with working in the woods.]<sup>x</sup> During the year the number of recruits varied from 104 to 173.

The stone observation tower at Chickatawbut was completed in 1935. The grand opening was attended by the National Director Robert Fechner, and other high-ranking officers of the military and naval establishments. The overlook was recognized as being one of the most distinctive and beautiful developments attempted under the CCC in the entire country.

Other work constructed during the year included 4 latrines, the installation of 5 miles of police signal service cable, 10 miles of roads rebuilt, one mile of park road maintained, 3 miles of horse trails constructed, 25 acres of field planting, 300 acres of gypsy moth control, 150 acres of woodland cleared for fire hazard reduction and over 28,000 square feet of parking area construction.

Two downhill ski runs were constructed on the westerly side of Great Blue Hill. (This was the initial phase of what we now know as the Blue Hills Ski Area.)



Also, the entire reservation was scouted for white pine blister rust and 40 acres drained in a mosquito control project. 162 man-days were devoted to forest fire fighting, and 27 man-days to the search for a missing person. A total of 35,424 man-days of labor were contributed by the CCC.

**Federal Emergency Relief Activities** During 1935 the Federal Emergency Relief Activities rules were relaxed, allowing state agencies to submit applications for work projects, and MDC applied for 19 projects, of which an unknown number were at the Blue Hills. One project provided employment for 22 lifeguards at the bathing beaches in the Blue Hills division. [Note: The Blue Hills *Division* included areas outside what we consider the 'Blue Hills Reservation' today. It is not possible to know from the annual reports how many of these projects were inside 'the Blue Hills Reservation'.] Other projects included building service roads and truck trails, filling, grading and landscaping, building retaining walls and sidewalks.

**[Aside: As I'm writing this on Juneteenth (June 19<sup>th</sup>) 2020, I think it only fair to point out that almost all of those chosen to serve in the CCC were young white males. A look at two pictures of the members of the CCC in Milton show the striking lack of diversity:**



**“Despite the fact that FDR had advocated for young black men to be included in the program, most of the men chosen to fill the recruitment quota, both in Massachusetts and nationally, were white. One historian of the CCC notes that "the efforts of blacks to gain equality of opportunity by securing leadership positions in the CCC were not very successful." In the peak years of CCC employment in Massachusetts, only one to four percent of the Corps' members were African American.”<sup>xi</sup> The Great Depression hit *everyone* hard. There is no reason to think that only ‘young white males’ needed a helping hand. When we look around today and see inequality, part of that directly results from who we chose to help when they were down on their luck in the past. The CCC was a favorite of FDR's programs in part because it increased employability for those who were involved. Restricting access directly restricted future employability for non-whites. One of the direct benefits of being in the CCC was when the draft began in 1940, the Army policy was to make CCC alumni corporals and sergeants.<sup>xii</sup>]**

WPA: During 1935 - \$340,000 was expended for road extensions and improvements, to modernize and extend many badly congested and unsafe roads in the Blue Hills District.

During 1935 the MDC also investigated building a beach and bath house at Hoosicwhisick (Houghtons) Pond. They were also investigated the cost and feasibility of dredging the St. Moritz ponds.

1936<sup>xiii</sup>

This year construction was begun on the stone tower at Great Blue Hill. The two ski runs constructed last fall were improved. A six-acre ski practice area, located off Chickatawbut Road was also completed during the year. (I wasn't able to locate this, however my *guess* is that it may have been north from the Chickatawbut Overlook. That area slopes down, and had already been cleared of trees to provide the overlook.) A Cross Country Ski trail, from St. Moritz Ponds to Great Blue was begun, and was completed from St. Moritz to the Chickatawbut ski practice area.)

A new 600-acre area obtained on the easterly side of Ponkapoag Pond was improved by the addition of 1.3 miles of police signal lines, and 2.6 miles of truck trails to give access for maintenance and firefighting.

The entire reservation was scouted for evidence of ribes (a type of currant or gooseberry), the host plant of the white pine blister rust and the creosoting of gypsy moth nests was continued. Also, a corrective treatment for white pine weevil was given to more than 15,000 white pine trees in early summer.

The Pakomet Spring parking area was completed. (More on this in a later issue.)

They also rebuilt 2 miles of police signal lines, 3.4 miles of service roads, 3 miles of horse trails, six stone culverts and 16 rustic settees. A total of 35,850 man-days were worked at the Blue Hills.

WPA: In preparation to construct an additional 9 holes of golf at Ponkapoag 30 acres of trees and brush, and their related stumps were cleared, over a mile of 5' wide drainage ditch was dug, and 1600' of drain pipes installed. Additionally, work was done on the buildings and 550' of water lines run to the Club House and sod nursery. Four tees were rebuilt, and all 18 re-sodded. The nursery was replenished with velvet bent grass, and 450 small evergreen trees were planted along the edge of the No. 4 fairway.

1937<sup>xiv</sup>

The CCC activity continued at the Blue Hills through September 28, when the camp was permanently closed. The Blue Hills camp was highly regarded, and was flying the honor pennant as the best camp in New England at the time of its closure.

During the year the construction of the tower on Great Blue was effectively completed and the adjoining shelter was started. An additional 3 miles of police signal lines were reconstructed, and two sections placed underground. About 15,000 pine and spruce trees were transplanted in the vicinity of Buck Hill, and waterholes for moth spraying and fire protection were dug. About 7 miles of truck trails and service roads were reconstructed.

And the area at Pakomet Spring was extended to include a sizable picnic ground with picnic tables, benches and fireplaces. A total of 22,000 man-days were used before the camp shut down.

WPA: In 1937 the WPA funded the construction of a 120' x 40' fieldstone and brick garage. Two baseball diamonds and 4 tennis courts were constructed south of Hoosicwhisick (Houghtons) Pond, and work continued on the additional 9 holes at the Ponkapoag Golf course.

Additionally, the WPA contributed 300 men for 4 months to work on the gypsy moth program, and many diseased and dead trees were removed, and nests throughout the entire 6,700-acre reservation were sprayed with creosote.

The WPA also funded a radio survey and at the end of the year a 500-watt transmitter was installed and three police cars were equipped with radios. Additionally, two portable radios were available for emergency use. To provide coverage over the entire MDC area two remote transmitter towers were constructed, including one on the roof of the Blue Hills Observatory.

1938<sup>xv</sup>

CCC: "I thought you just said the CCC camp was shut down in September of 1937?" True, but I also said the tower/shelter construction on Great Blue wasn't finished... so how did they finish it? Crews from the still operating CCC camp at Breakheart Reservation in Saugus came down during the summer to work on the project, which in 1938 was almost finished.

WPA: While the CCC camp has shut down the WPA is still funding improvements and the work on the additional 9-hole course at Ponkapoag continued. Additionally, the entire 27 holes had a watering system installed. And work continued on the area south of Hoosicwhisick Pond with construction of the access road and parking lot, and clearing of additional land to provide more space for the fields which are there now.

1939<sup>xvi</sup>

CCC: Finally, the construction on the summit of Great Blue was finally completed, with the use of workers from the Breakheart Reservation CCC camp. They also cleared a hiking path from the base of the hill to the new tower.

[Aside, while a few of you may remember the hurricane of '38, for most of us it is just something we have heard about. It was one of the worst hurricanes in US history. The maximum winds ever reported at Great Blue Observatory, as we learned a few weeks ago, was during this storm and those winds resulted in many downed trees throughout the reservation.]

WPA: A major project this year was processing the downed trees everywhere from the previous fall's hurricane. At the Blue Hills much work was expended clearing downed trees from 3500 acres of the reservation. The WPA also continued the gypsy moth spraying, and cleared 18 acres near the junction of Unquity Road and Canton Street for fields and skating.

Other known, but undated, specific CCC accomplishments at the Blue Hills:

The CCC helped make improvements at Ponkapoag Pond. They built Acton Path, the trail that leads across the southern edge of the pond from Maple Ave. They also installed the steps up the steep embankment at the AMC camps.<sup>xvii</sup>



So, while the CCC had a camp, and thus is the most often remembered program, lets thank all of FDR's programs for the work they contributed toward making the Blue Hills the wonderful place that we enjoy today.

Bob Vogel

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<sup>i</sup> <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/ccc-camp-blue-hills-reservation-milton-ma/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://halperns.wordpress.com/2016/07/05/blue-hills-reservation-ccc-camp-7316/>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilian\\_Conservation\\_Corps](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilian_Conservation_Corps)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/ccc-camp-blue-hills-reservation-milton-ma/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofme1933mass/page/12/mode/2up>

<sup>vi</sup> [ibid.](#)

<sup>vii</sup> [https://newenglandnomad2015.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/c917d-dsc\\_0204.jpg](https://newenglandnomad2015.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/c917d-dsc_0204.jpg)

<sup>viii</sup> <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofme1935mass/page/12/mode/2up>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Granite+St,+Braintree,+MA/@42.2262396,-71.0446267,15.5z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x89e37d4002b20c87:0x6728fb946483d0c3!8m2!3d42.2147976!4d-71.0220387?hl=en&authuser=0> pg. 2

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/ccc.html>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.massmoments.org/moment-details/first-ccc-enrollees-arrive-at-ft-devens.html>

<sup>xii</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilian\\_Conservation\\_Corps](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilian_Conservation_Corps)

<sup>xiii</sup> <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofme1936mass/page/12/mode/2up>

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofme1937mass/page/12/mode/2up>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofme1938mass/page/12/mode/2up>

<sup>xvi</sup> <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofme1939mass/page/12/mode/2up>

<sup>xvii</sup> [www.Ponkapoagcamp.org](http://www.Ponkapoagcamp.org)