

The Boston Globe

Hard times legacy

New Deal projects employed thousands back then, and remain as historical, and sometimes sentimental, landmarks



The windows of Bascom Lodge atop Mount Greylock offer a wraparound view, and the repaired Summit Road reopens this week. (Amy Toensing for The Boston Globe/File)

By [Christopher Klein](#)

Globe Correspondent / May 17, 2009

The hikers who have scaled Milton's Great Blue Hill are ready for their well-deserved rewards. Once they take a few more steps up Eliot Tower's winding staircase and gaze out, grimaces melt into smiles as the broad plain of Eastern Massachusetts unfurls, from the island jewels of Boston Harbor to the heights of Mount Wachusett. The resplendent vista has always been a welcome escape from the city, but these days it also offers a needed reprieve from the din of bankruptcies, layoffs, and foreclosures.

Unbeknownst to many of the hikers, however, the view from the rough-hewn stone lookout is a legacy from the last time economic news was so dire - the Great Depression. Eliot Tower and thousands of other New England landmarks were built in the 1930s with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. From hikers watching the sea crash along Acadia National Park's Ocean Path

to families enjoying peanuts and Cracker Jack at a Pawtucket Red Sox game to skiers schussing down the Stowe Mountain slopes, New Englanders continue to enjoy the fruits of public works and conservation projects built decades ago by federal workers brandishing picks, shovels, and axes.

If You Go

Blue Hills Reservation

725 Hillside St., Milton
617-698-1802

www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/metroboston/blue.htm

Richard Diehl Civilian Conservation Corps Museum

Bear Brook State Park 157 Deerfield Road
Allenstown, N.H.
603-485-9874

www.nhstateparks.org

Park admission \$4 adults, \$2 ages 6-11.
New Hampshire residents 65 and over and children under 5 free. Museum open Memorial Day to Columbus Day.

Mount Greylock State Reservation

30 Rockwell Road, Lanesborough
413-499-4262

www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/mtGreylock/

Summit roads open seasonally from late May through Nov. 1. \$2 parking fee for the summit parking lot.

The Stone Hut

6992 Mountain Road, Stowe, Vt.
802-253-4014

www.vtstateparks.com/html/stonehut.cfm

Reservations from mid-November to mid-April are available by lottery in the fall, \$150 per night per group of up to 12.

Merritt Parkway Museum

6580 Main St., Stratford, Conn. (exit 53 off the parkway)
203-661-3255

www.merrittparkway.org

Free. Monday-Friday 9-5.

Information National New Deal Preservation Association

www.newdeallegacy.org

Civilian Conservation Corps Legacy

www.ccclegacy.org

"You probably can't go more than 10 miles in any direction along the highways and byways of New England without finding examples of New Deal projects in existence today," says Joseph J. Plaud, board member of the National New Deal Preservation Association and the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. "Even though 75 years have passed, many of the New Deal projects are still with us."

The recent passage of the massive federal stimulus package has stirred the historical echoes of such programs as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Works Progress Administration (WPA), and Public Works Administration (PWA) that provided jobs to millions. The young men of the CCC planted trees and constructed recreational facilities across New England, and in the Blue Hills Reservation these "Pine Cone Johnnies" built the Eliot Tower and picnic pavilions, roadways, and dozens of miles of trails.

The reservation's visitor center at Houghton's Pond features a small exhibit of CCC memorabilia, but a more robust collection can be found at the Richard Diehl Civilian Conservation Corps Museum at Bear Brook State Park in Allenstown, N.H. The museum is housed in Bear Brook's historic corps camp, one of the few left in the country that remains mostly intact. The long, squat buildings lend the camp the aura of a military base, and for good reason. They served as barracks, latrines, and mess halls for the uniformed members of Roosevelt's "tree army."

A diorama inside the museum, complete with black bears and miniature 1930s-style pickup trucks, depicts a typical CCC camp in its heyday. Display cases feature personal effects donated by corps alumni, and visitors can flip through photographs of men shoveling snow or chopping trees and at play posing in the camp's basketball uniforms or enjoying a cigarette break. The museum, housed in a former mess hall, includes one of the tables where men gathered for meals, and the pot-bellied stove

and cot on display reflect the camp's austere living conditions.

Before leaving the park, stop at Catamount Pond, a popular swimming spot the corps dug by hand. A life-size bronze statue of a shirtless corps worker surveys the pond, appearing satisfied at the result. The brawny worker is as solid as the trees felled by his ax. Due to the physical nature of the job, the average corps enrollee gained more than 10 pounds of muscle during his service. (Similar statues stand at the Freetown-Fall River State Forest and the Maine State Library in Augusta.)

Corps workers often labored amid breathtaking landscapes. In Maine's Acadia National Park, the corps blazed the Ocean Path along the rugged seaside and the Perpendicular Trail, complete with hundreds of stone stairs, into the heart of the park. On Mount Greylock, the highest peak in Massachusetts, the corps constructed a scenic automobile byway to the summit. "The 'C's' were all about making these natural areas accessible to the public for recreation," says Alec Gillman, visitor services supervisor with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation.

Following two years of repair work, that summit road reopens Friday, and at the top drivers will find the Bascom Lodge, a low-slung, rustic structure built primarily by the corps. The lodge is an example of the corps' use of native materials - in this case Greylock schist stone and red spruce and oak timber - to create structures that blend with the colors, contours, and textures of their natural surroundings. While Bascom Lodge is closed to the public, there are plans to reopen it this summer, allowing visitors to once again soak in the views through the lodge's wraparound windows.

The corps blazed Mount Greylock's Thunderbolt ski trail and dozens of others that continue to draw skiers throughout New England. "The CCC had a huge impact because they came around in the 1930s just when skiing was starting to catch the interest of many people in the region," says Jeff Leich, executive director of the New England Ski Museum in Franconia, N.H. "Before the CCC, except in a very few cases, you couldn't ski 4,000-foot mountains in the White or Green mountains."

Some of the ski trails cut by the corps form the foundation of well-known resorts, such as Cannon and Wildcat mountains in New Hampshire and Stowe Mountain in Vermont. The corps built log cabins atop several peaks, and adventurers can still spend the night in some of these rustic shelters, such as the Stone Hut near the summit of Mount Mansfield, Vermont's highest peak. Despite a lack of electricity and only a wood stove for heat, the views from 3,350 feet and the opportunity for solitary early-morning runs make the Stone Hut a popular wintertime draw.

New Englanders who are more partial to summertime pursuits also reap the benefits of New Deal projects. McCoy Stadium in Pawtucket, R.I., home of the Triple-A affiliate of the Boston Red Sox, and Hyde Park's George Wright Golf Course were built under the WPA. And while it may not be an enjoyable experience on congested summer weekends, drivers heading to Cape Cod utilize two crossings built by the PWA: the Bourne and Sagamore bridges.

The PWA also contributed a small portion of the financing for the construction of Connecticut's Merritt Parkway, according to Jill Smyth, executive director of the Merritt Parkway Conservancy. The 37-mile road, which is free of trucks and billboards, is a throwback to the golden days of motoring. When the parkway first opened, winding through the shady woodlands and hills of Fairfield County, it was so bucolic that drivers pulled over to the side to picnic or swim.

The Merritt's landscape design is complemented by the intricate ornamentation of its 69 bridges, some of which feature bas-reliefs with subjects ranging from construction workers to griffins to Pilgrims. "The monumental bridge art, the different styles of architecture, and the natural

landscape make the Merritt Parkway one of the country's most unique roadways," says Smyth.

The architecture is hard to appreciate at 55 miles per hour, but the conservancy operates a small museum in an office building lobby that allows for slower inspection. Motorists can view a video on the parkway's history, bridge photographs, and a map detailing points of interest. Time has ravaged some of the bridges and a number are badly in need of repair. According to Smyth, money from the stimulus package will soon pay for repairs along a 9-mile stretch, bringing the Merritt's history full circle.

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