

# H. Newman Marsh Memorial Trail

Chester-Blandford State Forest

## SELF-GUIDED INTERPRETIVE TRAIL



### Welcome

This guide gives you a slice of the natural wonders found in Chester-Blandford State Forest. The work of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) made this place both accessible to public recreation and started growing a forest for the future. Their efforts created access to the beauty and wonder of this state forest that we still enjoy and benefit from today!

The CCC was a federal employment program during the Great Depression. Between 1933-1942, it put 3 million unemployed men to work, nationwide, improving state and federal conservation lands.

Here at Chester-Blandford State Forest a 200-man CCC camp, mostly city boys, worked, got regular pay, meals, new clothing, had a place to live, and enjoyed the camaraderie of shared experiences that shaped lifelong benefits. Visitors today can still discover their rustic handiwork on the landscape. This hike route follows an old wood road, re-built by the CCC as a forest fire control trail, and the foot and ski trails they cut on top of Observation Hill.



*Harold Newman Marsh*

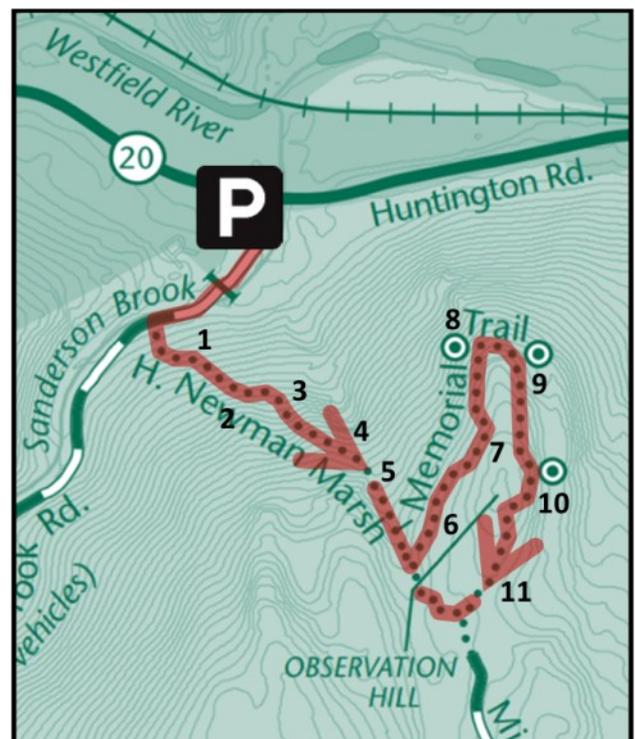
The H. Newman Marsh Memorial Trail honors the memory of **Harold Newman Marsh** (1924-1996), an outdoorsman and patron of the Hilltowns of western Massachusetts. He played a prominent role in the development of the [Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway](#) (US Route 20). This trail explores the landscape he loved.

### About the Trail

The Newman Marsh Trail is **2.2 miles round-trip from the Sanderson Brook Road parking lot**, off U.S Route 20 in Chester. Aside from the delightful surrounding forest and Sanderson Brook, the highlight of this hike are three vistas on Observation Hill. They reward the hiker with scenic views of the Westfield River valley.

Considering the rough terrain and steep slope this trail is considered **moderate-difficult**, not appropriate for those for whom climbing is difficult. Wear proper gear during rainy or freezing conditions. The trail is rugged and can be slippery when wet.

Along the Newman Marsh Trail are directional signs. Numbered posts corresponds with this guide and interpret interesting features, or, you may simply notice these features along the trail. Enjoy your hike!



From the parking lot proceed up Sanderson Brook Road for about 0.2 miles. The Newman Marsh Trail turns off to the left at the steps and begins a steep climb. Please stay on the trail.

## 1.) Living On the Edge

Notice how tree roots have a firm foothold on an outcropping of bedrock schist. Yellow birch and eastern hemlock are suited to these foothills. They have adapted to growing on ledges. The golden bark tree on this ledge is a **yellow birch**, a more northern tree that grows larger than most other hardwood species. Yellow birch thrives in cool, damp conditions. The increasingly shaggy appearance of its bark signals its older age.



## 2.) Managing Forest Health

You are standing near a **Continuous Forest Inventory (CFI)** plot. All trees within a 105 foot diameter circle are marked with an identifying number. Every 5 to 10 years state foresters visit the plot and record each tree species' growth, new significant-sized trees, and any diseases or pests. These plots also record information herbaceous and shrub species. Over 2,000 CFI plots are located throughout the state forest system. This data allows foresters and scientists to determine the health of the forests and how to best manage it in the future.

## 3.) Slowing the Flow

Water flowing downhill creates an erosive energy that can easily damage a trail, create large trenches, or even become stream beds! Notice that steeper sections of the Newman Marsh Trail have trail design features called **water bars**.

A water bar is a low, angled barrier across the trail made from rocks (or a log). It catches, slows, and diverts flowing water off the trail into the woods. Otherwise, the water would run directly down and erode the trail.

Water bars help preserve the trail surface. You can help preserve the trail by cleaning out any water bars you find that are full of sediment, leaves or twigs.



When a trail is on a slope, a **water bar** helps deflect water off the trail. This prevents destructive erosion of the trail so hikers have a stable route.

## 4.) Under a Hardwood Canopy

Appreciate a typical northern hardwood forest here. **White ash, black birch, yellow birch, white (or paper) birch, sugar maple** and **basswood** are all found here close by. When a forest is cleared, birch and ash are among the first trees to reappear, followed by sugar maple and then beech. Understory species, such as **striped maple** and **witch hobble** are able to grow in the shade made by the canopy of the larger trees. Touch the bark to feel the textures and see differences.

*The trail crosses a rocky brook.*

## 5.) A Climate in Miniature

The many ferns, lichens and moss growing in this vale indicate it is something of a **micro-climate**. The combination of cool air in the valley on the north side of the hill, moisture from the nearby stream, and spring run-off on the upper slopes of the hillside make ideal conditions for these plants to grow. There are a variety of ferns here including **marginal wood fern**, **ever-green fern**, **New York** and **Christmas ferns**. Can you identify other possible microclimates as you hike along this trail?

*The trail levels off at the top of the ridge. Turn left on-to “Memorial Trail” and Observation Hill.*



## 6.) Beech Trees



The smooth gray trunks of mature **American beech** trees might resemble giant elephant legs. Many animals rely on beech nuts to fatten up for winter. Black bears look for beech nuts in the fall. They might climb and sit up in a tree to create a “bear’s nest,” pulling limbs towards them to strip off the nuts.

Unfortunately, the region’s beech trees are struggling against diseases, including a fungus that has caused the loss of many beech trees— and significantly changed this landscape. Can you identify either healthy or diseased trees?

## 7.) That Milky White Rock

Look for a large outcropping of white **quartzite**. Quartzite is a metamorphic rock, originally formed from sandstone eons ago. Shifting tectonic plates heated the rocks and melted the impurities. The molten liquefied impurities pooled, cooled, and hardened into quartzite.

This area has remarkable geology. Prospectors associate the mineral quartz with gold, confusing it with quartzite. The crystal structure of quartzite is smaller than quartz— and *not* associated with gold. Still, nearby Gold Mine Brook recalls the once optimistic claim of speculators in late-1800s who claimed to strike it rich in these hills!





*Vista #1: Looking west up the Westfield River valley toward Chester. Gobble Mountain peaks just above the horizon.*

## 8.) Vista #1 - Big Erosion

You are standing at about 1,200 feet (365 meters) in elevation. Look out at a landscape that shows its geological past. Shifting tectonic plates during the continental drift, more than 440 million years ago, formed the Appalachian Range, including what we call the Berkshire Hills. The edges of the plate uplift are visible today as angled ledges across the valley. Erosion has slowly leveled most of these mountains over the years.

Then, about a million years ago, a series of glaciers “scraped” the mountains. But some of the bed-rock granite and gneiss resisted this erosion. These became the steeper hills of the valley. In fact, the scenic hills exposed today are the walls of what once was the great canyon of the Westfield River.

## 9.) Vista #2 - Changed Landscape

This view is a slice of the Westfield River valley. Although not visible, the river is below Cherry Tree Hill on the left and Great Moose Hill on the right. In the late-1700s to early-1800s, it was customary for Hilltown farmers to take in cows from Connecticut River Valley farmers during the summer months, pasture them, and fatten them up for market. Farming ruled!

In the 1840s the railroad came through and mill towns along the rivers grew. Many of the region’s people moved to these towns to manufacture paper and textiles, or headed west to New York State or the Midwest for better farmland. Some of these abandoned farms grew back into forest.

## 10.) Vista #3 - Forest Recovery

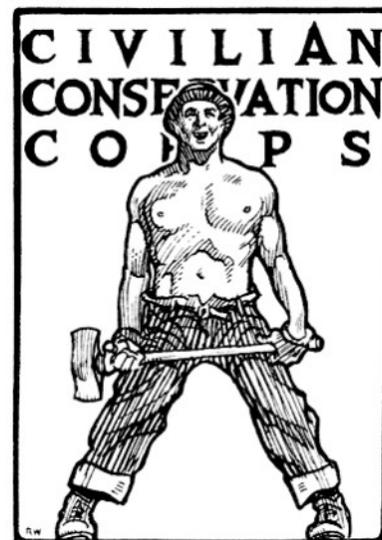
Up until the late-1800s this view would have been very different. Pastures on the surrounding rocky hills were kept open by grazing sheep. Sheep provided the wool for local textile mills. As the mills closed, demand for sheep decreased. Pastures slowly grew back into forest, but some kept open by dairy farming into the 1900s. Look carefully and you can see Mount Tom 15 miles away!

Along the trail look for a rich variety of forest-dependent wildflowers: **Starflower**, **Indian cucumber root**, **painted trillium**, **trout lily**, **Solomon seal**, **Canada mayflower**, and **sarsaparilla**.

## 11.) Roosevelt's Tree Army

1800s farming, pastures, railroads, industry, and demand for charcoal, all contributed to the consumption of the woodlands. The forests that the Civilian Conservation Corps worked in during the 1930s Great looked different than the one that surrounds you today.

Chester-Blandford State Forest, established in 1924, was still a young, re-growing forest. Few trees were more than 20 or 30 years old. The main job of the CCC, also nicknamed (President Franklin D.) "Roosevelt's Tree Army," focused on forest conservation and its future growth. They inventoried forests and planted many, many trees. They controlled insect pests and plant diseases. They prevented and fought forest fires that threatened to destroy it. This work is still evident today, because a forest takes many lifetimes to mature. DCR Forestry continues this forest management legacy today in this working forest.



The CCC also opened up the state forest to recreation. They created trails for hiking and skiing, picnic and camping areas, a lodge and shelters. Some enrollees even stayed and settled in the local area.

**This is the last stop on this self-guided tour.** Much of this state forest was once cut over, burned, mined and grazed. It has since returned to forest through scientific forest management. It's also been made publicly accessible through thoughtful design, and now ongoing state and volunteer efforts. We hope you enjoyed today's hike and perhaps consider pitching in someday too.

**TO RETURN:** Complete the loop on Observation Hill. Return down the H. Newman Marsh Trail to Sanderson Brook Road. Take a right to head back to the parking lot.

**OPTION:** If you have more time and energy, at Sanderson Brook Road, take a left and head up to the falls, a highlight of this state forest. This **easy** rated hike would **add on 1.4 miles** and **about 45 minutes round-trip**, plus admiring the falls. Enjoy!

The H. Newman Marsh Memorial Trail Interpretive Trail and brochure were originally created by the Jacob's Ladder Scenic Byway and the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission through a grant from the Federal Highway Commission and the Massachusetts Highway Department, along with Interpretive Naturalist Consultant and Illustrator Kimberly Jensen. It was updated in 2021 with help from the members of Highlands Footpath, Inc.

The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) oversees over 450,000 acres of state parks, forests, beaches, bike trails, parkways, watershed lands, and dams across the Commonwealth. DCR's mission is to: *Protect, promote and enhance our common wealth of natural, cultural and recreational resources for the well-being of all.*

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