

Interesting Elements of Mills Reservation

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Part One explored the history and development of Mills Reservation, the Essex County Park established in 1954 that straddles the Montclair/Cedar Grove town line from Normal Avenue south to near Bradford Avenue. Part Two highlights several interesting features of Mills Reservation.

■ QUARRY OPERATIONS

Rocks were big business in the 1800s, and numerous quarries operated along the ridge of First Mountain throughout Essex County providing gravel and other rock essential to the construction of homes, buildings, and a rapidly expanding network of roads. From 1890 to 1918 Osborne & Marsellis operated a quarry located below Mills Reservation's southern and eastern cliffs, extracting trap rock and brownstone.

The quarry relied on steam power to blast rock from the face of the mountain. Residents living a short distance from the site were well aware of the active quarry operations: a warning would sound prior to a blast and homes nearby might feel the rumble or even a shower of smaller rocks in its aftermath. A crusher at the base of the cliff turned trap rock into gravel. Rock was taken via horse drawn carts to the company's sales yard off Bellevue Avenue in Upper Montclair or directly to a construction site.

■ A STRATEGIC LOOKOUT

With a 400-500 foot elevation and unobstructed views, the ridge of First Mountain has long been prized as a strategic location. George Washington used positions along the ridge to monitor British activity during the Revolutionary War. During World War II, a high-powered search light was installed above the quarry, part of a network of anti-aircraft defenses employed throughout the metropolitan area. The military personnel tending the light were housed nearby in Cedar Grove, at the intersection of Pompton Avenue and Ridge Road.

■ SIDEBAR

Curious about the circular, cement pad at the overlook? Join the club! Maps and anecdotal accounts from the early 1900s indicate it supported a water tower – possibly to address water pressure issues for nearby residences or to fuel the steam power the quarry required. A logical working theory is that the pad supported a water tower until some point prior to World War II, when it was re-purposed for a military search light.



1897 Montclair City Directory ad.
Top: Workers at the Osborne & Marsellis Quarry, with a rock crusher in the background.

■ NATURE

Well before the establishment of Mills Reservation in 1954, preservation of the area's natural beauty was encouraged. In 1896, a New York Times article cited Essex County Park Commission plans for a mountain park extending from Eagle Rock Reservation in West Orange to areas in Montclair, "as far as Van Giesen's Gap [today's Bradford Avenue], at least" to provide "a series of picturesque breathing spots." A 1931 petition presented to the Essex County Park Commission by citizens of Cedar Grove and Montclair noted the area was already being utilized by bird watchers, botanists, geologists, Boy and Girl Scouts, and Rangers. Local desire for a county park was finally realized when the Davella Mills Foundation acquired 118 acres of land from various property owners and donated it to Essex County in 1954 to create the bulk of today's 157-acre Mills Reservation.

■ HAWK WATCH

This ridge, the first west of the lower Hudson River Valley, acts as a passageway for both coastal and ridge flights of migrating birds and is ideal for bird-watching: red-tailed hawks, bald eagles, american kestrels, and more. The Montclair Bird Club has conducted an official hawk count every fall from a site across the street from the Old Quarry Road entrance to Mills Reservation since 1957. Spring migration is observed from the cement pad in Mills Reservation. Did you know that the red-tailed hawk is the mascot for the Montclair State University "Red Hawks?"

■ LENAPE TRAIL

The Lenape Trail, marked with yellow blazes, was established in 1982, is 34 miles long and traverses 18 Essex County Parks, including Mills Reservation. Its name was inspired by the Lenni Lenape Native American tribe that originally inhabited the region.

■ RESERVOIR

In 1899 the City of Newark purchased land in Cedar Grove to build a reservoir to help meet Newark's water needs. Operations began in 1905. In 1915, well before the Olmsted Landscape Architecture firm was retained to design Mills Reservation, its designers had recommended that Essex County include the reservoir in a system of parkways linking the county parks, a plan that never came to fruition. The reservoir can be glimpsed across Reservoir Road. ■