



The Friends & Neighbors of Putnam Memorial State Park

"Connecticut's Valley Forge"



Bethel/Redding CT

May 2011 NewsLetter

A Case For Keeping Our Park Open This Time



No closure at Putnam

Our state is undergoing a painful budget paring process, once again. The administration is paring and cutting, while increasing taxes at the same time ... to try to come up with a budget for the next two fiscal years. The administration is pressuring all of it's departments to come up with cuts and savings to their budgets. This is an open letter to the DEP and its departments in the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, to justify keeping Putnam Memorial State Park, open if any cuts are mandated.



No budget hunting at Putnam

Revolutionary War Beginnings



Diagram of Gen. Starks Brigade. The small huts in front are the enlisted men.



14'X16' log hut

Camp Redding's hut line was almost a 1/4 mile long.



Each hut held 12 soldiers. Count the 12 bunks (three to each corner).

The Putnam Memorial State Park was built, beginning in 1887, around the ruins of the 1778 winter encampment used by the Continental Army during the American Revolution. There were two other encampments in Redding that winter, but Putnam Park was created as a memorial park honoring the soldiers of all three camps. The three brigades made up the Division of Maj. General Israel Putnam – a celebrated war hero from the French & Indian War. Putnam was one of the first five generals appointed by Congress to be a leader in Washington's Continental Army. The camp was constructed for around 1400 soldiers. The army was there from December 1778 to May of 1779.

Putnam Park Built Beginning 1887

The old army camp had lain dormant for more than 100 years. Key leaders of Redding and surrounding towns petitioned the Connecticut General Assembly to fund a Park Commission and a plan for creating a memorial park atop the old army campground. The legislature approved passage in January 1887. The first order of business was for the Commissioners to seek donations of land on which the old camp stood. The first thing erected in the following year (1888), was a granite obelisk monument which memorialized the troops of Putnam's entire division (from all three 1778/79 Redding camps).



Ca. 1889, construction crews using portable crane in constructing block house at entrance.



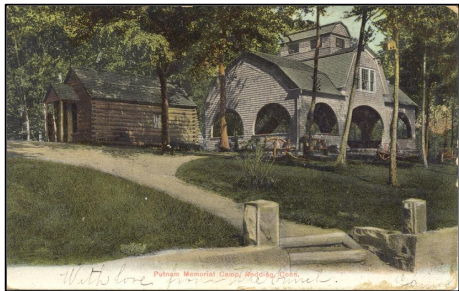
I.N. Bartram, head supervisor with his teams of oxen. The obelisk can be seen in back through the fog.



122 years later, block houses and obelisk monument today at park entrance.

Park Construction Continues in the 1890's

The next ten years witnessed the memorial park being built atop the old campground. Roads and walks were created to allow visitor access of the remains of the old camp. The main attraction even to this day is the almost quarter mile long double row of firebacks (a stone pile which used to be the chimney of each hut). There were 116 huts just for the enlisted troops.



The pavilion, built in 1893.

Military and war memorials were still fresh in the minds of the populace in the 1880's. The generation that served in the Civil War was still very much present. The original visitors to the park came by shank's mare, on horseback, or by carriage. The park visit in those days probably lasted for the entire day including a picnic (not the quick-visit agenda of many visitors today.). The Commissioners requested that a wooden pavilion be erected near the main entrance of the park. If a sudden shower came up, the visitors would have a dry shelter to wait out the rain drops. The pavilion was erected in the fall of 1893 (Total cost - \$13,000).. This building is the oldest structure to be built for any Connecticut State Park.



The Highs and Lows of Park Attendance

Then, like a time machine, the habits of the visitor were continually altered by progress. The automobile was a major boon to visitor attendance at Putnam Park. Not only did the more local visitors drive to the park, but literally thousands of visitors from the cities. Bridgeport, Norwalk, Stamford, Danbury and others had tons of people wanting to get out into the country. The auto made that possible. Fast forward into 1950's. Television cut into the visitor counts. Now dad good stay home and watch the Giants games on Sundays. Or, the family could go to a hundred other venues via their family car. By the 1970's and 80's The park was starting to show wear and tear of its buildings. Maintenance faltered as funding was cut back.. Outside of some sporadic history programs (which were excellent) at the museum, the park was hosting a few Revolutionary War reenactments each year; and some scouting camp trips. The old 1893 Pavilion was boarded up and posted "Off Limits".

Park Decommissioned in 1991

20 years ago this coming summer, CT Governor Lowell Weicker was battling a terrible economy. State budget money for spending evaporated. Mr. Weicker blessed our state with its first income tax in 1991 (a memorable achievement) and, among many other things, decommissioned nine Connecticut State Parks – to "save" money. One of those parks, Putnam Memorial, was shut down. The park was thrown under the bus! The gates were padlocked. The lawns turned into hay fields. The buildings continued to deteriorate. For more than seven years, the park looked terrible. The neighbors were using their own lawn mowers to at least cut the lawns visible from the road. The mess and neglect impacted on their properties, as well. This was *their* neighborhood. (Note: these people were the "original" Friends & Neighbors of Putnam Park.



Seven Years In Lock-Down... But, Light At End Of Tunnel

During this lock-down period, the DEP contracted an outside consulting firm, Berkshire Design Group, to make a study and recommendation of what to do with Putnam Park – if it ever opened again. While the initial plan was strongly rejected by the towns of Redding and Bethel (too much like a theme park), one of the sub-contractors created the finest comprehensive historical record of the 1778 army camp and its rebirth as a park. This document, called the "*Winter Campaign of Starving*", by the Boston University School of Archaeology, remains the benchmark of all subsequent data on the park.

In 1996/7, the Parks Division sent some people down from DEP in Hartford, and some folks from the Friends of CT State Parks, to see if there was any interest in forming a volunteer park organization. There was interest. Historians, reenactors, hikers, and the tried and trusted neighbors ... formed the Friends & Neighbors of Putnam Park (FANs) in the fall of 1997. The park was recommissioned on May 22, 1997. The governor, state politicians and DEP management attended the reopening. The Friends & Neighbors of Putnam Memorial State Park was officially formed in August of 1997.



May 22, 1997 – Putnam Park was reopened. In photo L to R, 1. Colonial Soldier, Carlton Kline, 2. CT Gov. John Rowland, 3. DEP Comm. Sidney Holbrook, and 4. FANS head, Jeanine Nimmo (Herman today), Outdoor Chief Richard Clifford led the ceremony. Rosemary Payne and her 3rd grade were part of the opening event.



Gov. John Rowland at the podium and DEP Comm. Sidney Holbrook, in wheelchair, addressed the crowd at the recommissioning of the park.

FANs and DEP Get Working On the Park

Though given new life, the park was not given a full budget for maintenance of the grounds and buildings for another year or so. The first two seasons were marked by manual labor for many of the FANs volunteers. Weed-wacking, raking, clearing trails and brush. In the meanwhile, plans were being made to hold reenactments ... like those held in the old days. Actually, one event that was held periodically during the “closed-down period” was the *Patriot’s Weekend* reenactments where the public could come and watch the Redcoats and Americans do battle with one another. These events were run by a private contractor who had been holding the event over the years in conjunction with the DEP and corporate sponsors.

One of the items at the top of the wish list was historical education, especially for school children. The FANs has distilled, through trial and error, four main events each year: *The School Days* program for school kids in our region; the annual *Living History Weekend*, reenactment for the general public (now held every other year), *The Summer Craftsmen Series* of artisans demonstrating colonial era crafts on weekends during July and August; and, the *December Winter Walk* on the first Saturday of each December, which is a history/archaeology walking tour of the historic section of the park.



School Days



Summer Craftsmen



Living History Weekend



December Winter Walk

In conjunction with the history/education thrust of the organization, another high priority was to create a park visitor center for the public. The original idea was to try to salvage the old boarded-up 1893 Pavilion. But this poor old relic was sagging, leaning, and not really a prime example of a healthy structure. FANs secured a grant to have a leading historical building restoration company come in and survey the old park shelter. Can we save it, or should we burn it? To our surprise, the prognosis came back positive. The main problem was water damage and rot to some of the main support timbers. It could be fixed. The DEP found some funds to have the building go through immediate first aid. Fixed the leaking roof, repair the support timbers, and square the building back to its plumb. Now that the pavilion got a passing grade, FANs continued the campaign for the conversion to a visitor center.

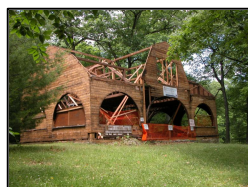
The same consulting project conducted by the DEP back in the early 1990’s, highly recommended a *visitor center* to promote historical education of the park to the general public. That recommendation called for building a center on top of the scout camping hill. Though this was rejected with the overall proposal, the need for a visitor center remained high on the DEP list. The initial FANs recommendation of just upgrading the old 1893 Pavilion, was undergoing some tremendous “upgrades” within the DEP, and architects, up in the DEP headquarters in Hartford. In June of 2001, the request for an allocation and Bond Authorization was approved for Putnam Park for \$2.4 Million. The dollars covered the new visitor center project as well as reconstruction on the dangerous intersection in front of the park entrance, new parking lots and entrance way upgrades. The DEP was going far beyond what we hoped for!

Park’s Crown Jewel Project – The Visitor Center

The old pavilion was taken down board by numbered-board. A new cellar foundation was constructed with measurements assured down to the inch. When the new building was erected, which included electric, water, A/C and all-season climate control (the 1893 version didn’t even have electricity for a light bulb!), All reusable beams, supports and even the shingled siding was re-installed on the new structure. Today’s visitor can tell the new from the old wood by the dark and light color on the interior of the center



1990’s Boarded up



June 2004 – Coming down



Oct 2004 – New foundation



Nov - New center going up



Jan 2005

New Visitor Center Opens – Oct. 2005

To contact us:
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The new and beautiful visitor center opened with fanfare in October of 2005. Again, the governor, regional politicians, and DEP headquarter management, plus building contractors witnessed the opening ceremonies.



Connecticut Line Color Guard



Governor Jodi Rell



DEP Comm.
Gina McCarthy



Col. Carlton Kline recites history
of Putnam Park.



Redding 1st Selectman Natalie Ketcham, Jeanine and Elizabeth Herman, assist Com. McCarthy and Gov. Rell with the ribbon cutting.

Park Improvements

FANs and the DEP crew then helped plan the kiosks and display cases inside the building. DEP in the meanwhile created a new department at headquarters that specialized in visitor center and museum themes and furnishings. A problem for years has been park signage. New signs, tied into park maps/walking tour guides, were erected for year round site identification. Archaeological digs have taken place for over a decade now. Artifacts can be seen in the museum. Putnam Park was the first property in the state to be designated an *Archaeology Preserve*, which comes with posted signage prohibiting and digging or use of metal detectors. FANs has the park events running on a steady basis these days. The organization spends between \$16,000 and \$20,000 per year on these public educational events. The park is one of only two in our state which showcases the American Revolutionary War. (Ft. Griswold is the other). The park is in the center of the state's population density zone. Over 75% if CT residents are less than an hour from the park. None of this success story would have been possible without the side-by-side efforts by the Parks management and staff. These are the ones that keep the park spotless and well groomed. They are highly skilled artisans that repair, fix or build from scratch the park infrastructure. Outside contractors are rare. FANs, the park crew, and the DEP Hartford crew all work together to insure that this historic site is one of the gems in the park system. It is critical that the operation of this park be preserved, maintained and improved into future years.



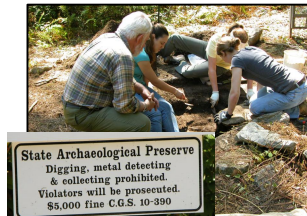
Maps/Walking Tour



New Graphical Kiosks



Park Signage



Ongoing Archaeology



Visitor Center ...
Meeting Room...
Rest Rooms ...

Here We Go Again ... With State Budget Money Hunts

Now that we are at the end of the twenty year cicada or locust cycle, our state government is once again scouring every corner for funding for its deficits budgets. It is déjà vu all over again. As we write this letter, the Governor of Connecticut is short on his spending cuts and labor concessions. He, like governor Weicker 20 years ago, is under extreme pressure to find places he can cut so he can put forth a balanced budget. Twenty years ago the governor's axe fell upon government departments. Demands went out to cut spending. Nine state parks were offered as DEP sacrifices. Putnam Park was decommissioned and locked up. But, back then the park deserved to be cut. He was falling apart. Buildings boarded up and almost zero maintenance. **But NOT today! NOT this time around if mandated cuts take place!**

The above newsletter describes how the DEP and the FANs brought this park back to life, like the mythological phoenix from the ashes. The park today is the result of thousands of hours of volunteer hours, which supplemented even more thousands of hours by the very able park staff, and assistance from DEP Hartford managers. The state has poured in several million dollars to create a wonderful infrastructure with a first class visitor center, an upgraded park museum, historic grounds with signage for the visitors. All this is supported by tried and tested historical educational events for all ages of visitors. If the DEP is pressed again for sacrificial victims to be offered up to the gods in Hartford, it should look elsewhere for the "shared sacrifices" the governor keeps calling for. Our park is an investment in the presentation or our state's history and education.

The next FAN's Meeting will be on Monday, **June 13th, 2011**

at **7:00PM** at the Visitor Center at Putnam Park.

