

Norfolk's Haystack Monument

In the summer of 1928, Mrs. Ellen Battell Stoeckel set into motion plans that would enrich and inhense the town of Norfolk for generations to come. Her plan was for a stone tower to be constructed atop Haystack Mountain, with a road for autos to be built about three quarters of the way up the 1,677-foot high mountain.

Initial plans were worked out between a committee of state park and forest commissioners that consisted of Deputy Comptroller Edward H. Wilkins, Walter O. Filley and Commissioner John A. Macdonald and Motor Vehicle Commissioner Robbins B. Stoeckel. The estimated cost was to be \$40,000.

The state park and forest commissioners appointed the committee, aftwer receiving a letter from Mrs. Stoeckel, offering to construct the tower on the summit of Haystack Mountain, in the town of Norfolk. Commissioners Stoeckel and Macdonald were present at the meeting, and discussed the park and engineering details of the proposed plan. The park commission voted to express to Mrs. Stoeckel its highest appreciation of her offer.

Mrs. Stoeckel, in her offer to the state, wrote:

“During a considerable part of his lifetime, and especially in the years around 1885-1890, my father, Robbins Battell, was greatly interested in the hills, or perhaps one should say mountains, of northwestern Connecticut. Always an enthusiast for the welfare of Litchfield County, he foresaw that in a comparatively short time this part of the state would become a playground and resting place for those who enjoyed the mountains and hills.”

“He it was who first caused the heights of many Litchfield County summits to be determined and who built the original paths, trails and roads so that each might be easy of access. His developments include Bear Mountain, Mount Bradford (or Canaan Mountain) and Ivy Mountain in other towns, and Hall (or Bold Mountain) and Haystack Mountain in Norfolk, his native town.”

It is with Haystack that this letter is concerned. His roadway to the top of this mountain was laid out for carriage travel and was built and maintained along with a wooden tower on its summit, which was continually used by the public over many years. In the tower he had a small tablet upon which was inscribed the sentiment ‘*Deo, Patriaae, Municipio, Semper esto fidelis*’. (To thy God, to thy country, to thy family, to thy town be thou ever faithful.)”

Whether his vision of future disposition included state ownership and development of this mountain I cannot say, but the legal status of ownership practically dedicated to public use by an individual made it, in the course of time, apparent that permanent maintenance might be impractical, and so the use of the driveway was gradually discontinued and eventually the tower was taken down.”

“At a somewhat recent date, as I now remember it, upon the initiative of your commission, my husband, Carl Stoeckel, and I sold and conveyed the Haystack land and rights, formerly owned by my father, to the state.”

I ascertained that these rights consist of ownership of an acre of land at and including the summit of the mountain with a twenty-foot right of way starting at the highway known as North Street in Norfolk (now Conn, Rt. 263) and following a curved course to the acre at the top.

I am advised that it is entirely practicable to construct a roadway suitable for motor vehicles, and to build a permanent stone tower upon the summit. So I am writing you this letter as an offer to do that. If accepted, the whole is to be constructed in such a manner as will perpetually, under proper management and control, provide a pleasant looking place for members of the public.”

It was also announced by Mrs. Stoeckel that a perpetual light would be provided in the tower, this to be lighted both day and night. The details in this connection have not as yet been worked out.

Then followed suggested details of the proposed project, after which Mrs. Stoeckel wrote in closing:

“My understanding is that I will be constructing a roadway and tower upon lands of the State and that I may need a formal documentary permit; further that Commissioner Macdonald is to undertake to oversee the actual work, including the making of contracts and all the management of the whole proceeding, and that I will pay to the State, either through your commission or under your direction, such sums of money as are hereinafter agreed upon between us for the competition of the work, and when the same is completed I will turn it over by deed or gift or by any other legal paper or proceeding which you advise, to the State of Connecticut to be accepted by it and thereafter maintained for the use of the public.”

Lucius Robinson, president of the state park commission at Hartford announced that a committee had been appointed and that they would visit Norfolk later in the month of February. They will go over the mountain if it is feasible, and prepare tentative plans for the proposed tower.

The winning general contractor for the road and tower was Uno Stenman of Colebrook. He was one of several families from Finland that had settled in these parts after immigrating to America shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. Stenman was probably the largest general contractor around here through the tough depression years. Somehow he kept his crew of fifteen or twenty craftsmen and laborers occupied throughout the 1930s. Many of his men went on to make names for themselves in various professions. Included in this group was Stenman’s chief stonemason, John Negri. He and two sons John and Mike built that tower during the warm months of 1928. Years later, well after they were past middle age, both sons would remember that they worked harder on that job than any other in their careers. Mr. Negri was not only a master stonemason; he was also a hard taskmaster.

During the summer of 1999, the tower, which had stood all those years looking benevolently down upon Norfolk, fell victim to a mindless act of arson. Someone set fire to the wooden railings and other wooden trim used on the inside. The result was a fire almost intense enough to burn the wooden roof completely off, although it was severely damaged enough structurally to cause the state to padlock the iron door at the base of that wonderful tower. To

date, nothing has been done to restore it for public use, and with the state of the economy at present, who knows when we will be able once again to climb the circular stairway to that three hundred and sixty degree panorama of the Litchfield Hills?