



Since 2005, the nonprofit Millstone Trails Association has developed 1,500 acres of biking, hiking and nordic ski trails that weave abandoned granite mines near Barre. Suspended sediment gives the water this tropical hue.

The *Second Coming* of Millstone Hill

Recreation replaces mining in the granite capital of Vermont

MIRROR-CALM, a granite-rimmed pond reflects the variegated hulk of a 30-foot-high stacked-stone wall that melts from the forest. Rusty steel cable emerges occasionally from the forest floor like a sea serpent arching its spine, and just around the corner another steep-walled pond awaits, its onyx center flocked by a sunburst of floating fall leaves.

This is Millstone Hill near Barre, where Vermont's famous granite industry found its beginning, and where today dozens of long-forgotten mines have been reclaimed by forest. Not long ago, this place was a wasteland—mined, blasted, extracted and left for dead. Now, with the land healed by time and the forgiving Vermont woodlands, dedicated locals have turned the Millstone mining district into a regional hiking, biking and skiing destination with historical context, diverse terrain and singular natural beauty. The abandoned mines of old Millstone Hill haven't profited in a century, but the transformation from abandoned mine to healthy forest recreation area gives this unique property an entirely new kind of value.

Pierre Couture is the architect of the project, and as a born-and-bred Millstone Hill local, he's no stranger to the land or the mining legacy that defines his home. "I spent my childhood in these quarries," Couture says. "I fished in 'em, swam in 'em, and skied in 'em; they were a wonderful playground to grow up in. I moved away, lived all different places, came home and looked



Rock of Ages Corporation, which operates an active granite mine, holds the deed now criss-crossed by MTA trails. Above: NAME TK on WHAT TRAIL

around and thought 'You know, there's nothing else like this, and it ought to be preserved.'" So he bought the family estate—a dairy farm adjacent to several of the abandoned mines—and the surrounding land as it became available, hoping to one day turn the Millstone of his childhood into a place for others to experience and enjoy.

In 2005, his vision became the Millstone Trails Association (MTA), a nonprofit group that oversees the development and maintenance of 1,500 acres of biking, hiking and nordic ski trails across quarry-pitted hills and meadows. The trails weave through dozens of old granite mines, now

mostly forgotten—except by Couture. He has collected historical photos of many of the old mines, and assembled them into an album that is available to Millstone Trails visitors. "My passion is the history and preserving the land," he says. And in addition to providing recreational opportunity in a unique setting, the MTA's mission is to promote and build on the history of Barre's formative granite quarries.

MAKE NO MISTAKE, granite built Barre. Abijah Abbott opened the first quarry on Millstone Hill, the site of his farm in present-day Websterville. The exact date is unknown, but by



1825, he was manufacturing millstones from the granite in his quarry, supplying many of the great mills of New England and Canada. Before Abbott, the large mill wheels had to be imported from France, but Barre granite was superior in quality, and transportation naturally cost much less. As a result, Millstone Hill was named, and Barre became synonymous with granite. But it wasn't until 1833, when Barre granite was chosen for construction of the new State House in Montpelier, that the granite industry boomed and the economy of Barre became forever entwined with mining.

The mid-19th century was hard on the young granite industry, and on Barre. One reason was the dangerous and slow process of transporting the stone with horses, oxen and rollers. It could take more than 16 hours for a single load of granite to travel the 12 miles from Millstone Hill to the capitol building site in Montpelier at the time of construction. The granite industry in Barre faltered during the 1840s and 1850s, and the town population gradually dropped to less than 2,000 people. The Civil War cultivated Barre's economy, and finally, in 1875, the railroad came to town. Now, with an efficient

way to move granite to the rest of the world, the last remaining obstacle was Millstone Hill itself.

The biggest hurdle for Millstone quarriers was transporting their heavy product down the steep, 1,000-foot slope to town. The horse-drawn wagons used to haul granite down the mountain were so heavy that it was necessary to hitch as many horses behind the wagon as in front. In 1888, a railway was completed to the top of the hill, and Barre's granite industry surged. Between 1880 and 1915, the population of Barre grew 1,000 percent, attracting a melting pot of granite workers from the world over.

By the turn of the 20th century, there were more than 75 small independent quarry operations, and Millstone Hill was ravaged by industrial growth. Almost without exception, the entire hill was stripped and quarried, leaving a moonscape of discarded equipment, quarry pits and unusual "grout" piles, the giant stacked-stone walls that remain standing today. As the small quarry operations consolidated in the early 1900s, many of them closed down. The pits eventually filled with water. The forest found soil in which to put down roots. Wildlife returned.

As the landscape healed, the scars of 100 years of extraction economy faded, until all that remained was a beautiful Vermont forest, pocked by dozens of beautiful moss-ringed lagoons. And trails run through it.

THERE ARE now more than 70 miles of trails under MTA management, ranging from short, scenic hiking paths to technical mountain bike routes, twisting over an artificial karst topography. In winter, 20 miles of Nordic skiing and snowshoeing trails offer a unique perspective—many features are more visible without the warm-weather foliage. The trails have been specifically routed to showcase the earthly artifacts of Millstone's mining era. It seems every turn in the trail reveals a Vermont Stonehenge of grout walls stacked high into the mature forest canopy, or ducks lazing on the protected surface of yet another quarry pool. Old steel cables snake through piles of rock, where porcupines waddle and wildflowers bloom. For visitors it's easy to imagine how this must have looked a century ago, when granite hand-cut by men with hammers and dynamite sloughed from the walls of these quarries.

More than 70 miles of trails range from short, scenic hiking paths to technical mountain-bike routes. Some lagoons cover acres; others are small ponds.



This is not the first time Millstone Hill has attracted tourists. During the Barre boom, in the late 1800s, “Every square foot of the hill would have been clear-cut, quarried and mined,” says Couture. “It was an industrial wasteland. But the funny thing is, even then it was a tourist attraction, because in the late 1800s they loved industrial wastelands; it was sign of progress, of man making his mark.” They came to see and feel the land yield its reluctant stone prize; to experience the power man has over nature. Now visitors come to Millstone to see and feel the regenerative power of time; to experience the power nature has to reconquer everything. “What was an industrial wasteland is what we like to think of as Vermont’s manmade natural wonder,” says Couture.

Much of the wonder of Millstone is due to the sheer scale and beauty of its unlikely artifacts. The cool lagoons can cover acres, though most are small, intimate ponds. Some have spectacular coloring from sediments suspended in the water, while others are inky black. Moss often clings to the rough stone edges, in stark contrast to the rich grey of the granite, and trees grow out over the cliffs, as if trying to cover the water altogether. The tremendous grout walls, what Couture refers to as “The Ruins,” are rough works of art. Great blocks of granite are stacked precisely, in neat, stable rows that reach dozens of feet into the air. Hiking or biking among these enormous monuments—covered with ferns and mosses, and partly concealed by maples, oaks and shimmering aspens—gives one a haunting sense of the passage of time.

Compared to the ordered assembly of the walls, the numerous and

equally impressive waste-rock piles are chaotic. Erratic boulders spill down from hilltop mounds, and uneven stone wharves jut into a sea of trees. Discarded refuse from generations of mining, the jumbled waste-rock defies the encroaching forest and in these places where trees fail to root, clearings provide stunning views of the surrounding countryside, mines and distant Green Mountain peaks. Remnants of another time, wrapped in a blanket of new life, the Millstone ruins could symbolize the future of Barre.

There is still an active granite mine (the largest of its kind in the world) on the other side of Millstone Hill—Rock of Ages Corp.—and it holds the deed to most of the land now crisscrossed by MTA trails. “They’ve allowed us to build a significant part of our trail network on land that they hold,” says Couture. “It’s been a positive relationship, and we’ve found a lot of other adjoining property holders who are open to expanding our trails onto their land.” But finding allies in the community was difficult in the beginning. “At first people were scratching their heads saying ‘What are you doing there?’” says Couture. “Locals tend to see it as the old wasteland of Barre, because

Just the facts

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at one point it was. A lot of people take it for granted, and a lot of people don’t even know what’s back there.”

During the initial planning phase, MTA worked with another community recreation nonprofit, the Kingdom Trails Association in East Burke, to create a business plan. “What an (economic) difference Kingdom Trails has made for the Northeast Kingdom. And the MTA is a real positive thing for Barre,” says Couture. “Barre’s been in a bit of a slump; the granite

industry is struggling, everything is going to China—there’s been a cloud hanging over Barre for a couple of decades.” But Couture is the first to admit that MTA isn’t going to turn the local economy around on its own—recreation-based nonprofits just aren’t high cash flow. Ask any biker, hiker or skier who has visited the MTA trails, though, and they’ll rave about the place and the people who make the trails possible. “I don’t think you could find a more compelling site for a mountain biking center,” says Han Jenny, Director of *The Fellowship of the Wheel*, a nonprofit mountain bike organization in northern Vermont. “Millstone is so rich in history, and the sites are so captivating, it’s definitely a must.”

It’s a start at something new for Barre, and Couture is optimistic. “Sometimes it’s hard to shake people up and say ‘Wait a minute—the granite business may be our past, but there’s no reason these quarries can’t also be part of our future.’”

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