

Report of the
VERNON LOCAL HISTORIC PROPERTIES COMMISSION
regarding the establishment of the
VALLEY FALLS FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT
as a LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT
in the Town of Vernon

presented to

The Connecticut Historical Commission
Town of Vernon Planning and Zoning Commission
Vernon Town Council

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VALLEY FALLS FARM HISTORIC DISTRICT

Valley Falls Farm Historic District is a rural historic landscape reflecting in its buildings, structures, natural features, and archaeological sites a variety of rural land uses dating from the time of first settlement of Vernon (North Bolton) until the present. A key feature of the district is Valley Falls Farm, dating from the mid- to late-nineteenth century, which has served to preserve the rural landscape in this area through periods of economic and cultural change within the town of Vernon.

The Valley Falls Farm Historic District contains approximately 228 acres of land and exhibits a diverse topography typical of Connecticut's eastern hills. The district is composed of eighteen buildings, including dwelling houses and significant outbuildings, on thirteen parcels of land. Valley Falls Park, owned by the town of Vernon, contains 193 acres of mostly wooded rolling terrain bisected by Railroad Brook; it includes two archaeological sites and the barn which originally served the Valley Falls Farm (Photograph Nos. 2, 3, 4). At the northern edge of the district, the remaining nineteenth-century farmhouse and outbuildings of the Valley Falls Farm are set into rolling fields (Photograph No. 1). Bolton Road, along the eastern edge of the district is a winding, somewhat narrow road. Houses along the road within the district are set back from the roadway and set into or astride the hillside to capture views of the valley as the road rises in elevation toward the south (Photograph No. 7). The oldest house at the intersection of Bolton and Valley Falls roads dates from the mid-nineteenth century (Photograph No. 5); eight houses

date from the early twentieth century; and five of the houses date from the late twentieth century. As a whole, the physical character of the district is defined by the park which contains both woodland and fields along the hillsides rolling down to the valley formed by Railroad Brook and the farmhouse with its surrounding outbuildings and open meadows.

Settlement in the Vernon area began in the first half of the eighteenth century. At that time it was a part of the town of Bolton and was known as North Bolton. In 1808 North Bolton was separated from Bolton and incorporated as the town of Vernon. Situated at the eastern edge of Connecticut's central valley, the town has a varied topography. The southwestern part of the town consists of rolling hills and fertile soil and consequently was the area of first settlement. In the northeast, the land rises precipitously to the eastern uplands. Two rivers, the Hockanum and the Tankeroosen, with their contributory streams have their source in the uplands and where they fell rapidly toward the central valley they offered opportunities for the development of water power which Vernon's semi-subsistence farmers were quick to exploit. Through the development of mechanized textile manufacturing, Vernon participated in the earliest stages of the Connecticut's nineteenth century industrial growth, and manufacturing quickly overtook agriculture as the basis of Vernon's economy. Still, many farms remained in operation in Vernon until the advent of suburbanization following the Second World War. Today, most of the town has experienced suburban subdivision, and very little of the rural landscape remains as evidence of its agrarian past. Valley Falls Farm, through a combination of fortunate circumstances, is one of a very

few areas in Vernon where the historic rural landscape of the mid-nineteenth century has been preserved.

Eighteen Century Settlement

The first mention of Valley Falls is found in the index of deeds of the Town of Bolton which refers to the area now known as Valley Falls Park as "the Second Society, Sixth Division of Valley Falls."¹ Cole refers to a sawmill at Valley Falls in Vernon operated by Thomas Johns in 1740 "on a little trout stream that comes down the gorge in the hills from the south and discharges itself into the Tankerhoosan near the Valley Falls mills."² Later histories of the area repeat Cole's statement.

The Bolton Town Records (1:276, March 1730) indicate that land in or near Valley Falls was transferred from Nathaniel Allis to Benjamin Johns.³ There is a reference to a survey of a road "near Valley Falls" (2:36, April 2, 1738). The reference points in the deed are "land of Stephen Johns, Tankerhoosan Brook, and a great black oak."³

On March 5, 1741 (2:168) Stephen Johns deeded to Hugh Johns land including Hugh Johns' sawmill. Later in the same year (2:173), "unto Stephen Johns a division of common land in Bolton, beginning by a heap of stones by the side of the road from said Stephen Johns' house to the sawmill." In 1787 the estate of Stephen Johns transferred to Levi Carpenter, Samuel Field, John Olcott and Samuel Cooley, a piece of land or mill place "where Hugh Johns formerly had a saw mill, with privilege to repair dam, of ponding and flowing sufficient to a mill" (6:104). Cole refers to Olcott operating a mill at Valley Falls.⁴

Sawmills tended to be impermanent structures, sometimes portable, needing relatively little waterpower. The exact location of the above mills is not known, other than that they were in the general area of what is now known as Valley Falls Park. Further information must await archaeological exploration, but the documentary evidence does suggest that Valley Falls was probably the earliest site of industrial activity in Vernon, and that it was instituted by local farmers.

Nineteenth-century Development

The first deed to be found in the Vernon records relating to this area is a transfer from Ezekiel Olcott to B. and O. Carpenter of 20 acres abutting Abijah Johns (1:532, December 3, 1816).⁵ On the next page there are two transfers that indicate that the mill was now being operated as an oil mill (1:533). These early oil mills processed flaxseed into linseed oil. The conversion of a relatively simple sawmill to a more complex oil mill is unlikely. It is more probable that the oil mill was a completely new structure. Shares of the oil mill were traded back and forth in several transactions between 1816 and 1859. In 1850, Josiah Hammond sold an oil mill on "Box Brook," now known as Railroad Brook, to the Valley Falls Company for \$75 (6:127).

It was at about this time that the oil mill was converted to a textile mill. The Valley Falls Company, a joint stock company, was formed in 1847, and by 1850 was listed in the federal census of that year as a cotton warp mill, employing eight persons and producing 24,000 yards of "satinet warps" annually.⁶ Satinet was a mixed woolen fabric woven on cotton warps with a wool filler. A number of textile mills in other

locations in Vernon were producing this sturdy, inexpensive cloth which was rapidly replacing homespun, and it is likely that the Valley Falls Company was supplying these local mills with cotton warps. In 1851 a 999 year lease was granted by Ira Thrall to the Valley Falls Company for rights and privileges to convey water from their mill wheel through the ditch and tailrace and across the meadow (7:575). The Valley Falls Company was responsible for maintaining the bridge. Ira Thrall was a well-known land owner whose farmhouse was located on Bolton Road opposite Bread and Milk Street. Vernon records also note the granting of rights to raise the level of the dam indicating that the Valley Falls Company did not own the source of their water-power.

In 1859 the Valley Falls Company took out a mortgage with the Savings Bank of Rockville (11:246). A year later Lebbeus Bissell, agent for the Valley Falls Company transferred four acres, the factory, a stone house and machinery to William Ladd (11:408). William Ladd then transferred 1/4 interest in the property to Charles Ladd. Daniel Fairman bought out William Ladd and the business was operated under the name D. F. Fairman and Co. On February 3, 1877, the mill was completely destroyed by fire. At that time it was again owned by Charles Ladd who had bought out Fairman and continued to manufacture cotton warp. But the manufacture of satinet had declined rapidly after the Civil War and most of the Vernon mills had converted to the production of all-wool cloth. Five months before the fire, Ladd had leased the mill to one "Briggs" who converted it to the manufacture of cotton twine. Briggs lived in the adjacent boarding house which was saved while the two-story, 32 x 72 wood frame mill burned to the ground.⁷ This marked the end of 137 years of industrial activity

at Valley Falls. The huge foundation stones of one part of the mill are still visible as are the stones of the boarding house foundation (Inv. #4).

While the mill prospered, the surrounding farmland was being worked. The rise of manufacturing proved to be a stimulus to commercial farming, and local farmers were encouraged to specialize in the production of vegetables, milk, butter, eggs, and poultry which were consumed in the growing mill villages. In 1851 Anson Lyman began buying property in the area, including the pond but not the land on which the Valley Falls factory was located. Anson Lyman owned the farm property including the house on the corner of Bolton and Valley Falls road. He had purchased the property in 1836 and probably built the house at 479 Bolton Road shortly after this (4:181. Inv. #6). He continued to accumulate property and must have built the Valley Falls farmhouse at 345 Valley Falls Road between 1851 and 1853 (Inv. # 1).⁸ He also owned shares in the oil mill and deeded 9 acres of his land to The Hartford, Providence, and Fishkill Railroad for \$113 (7:517). In 1849 the railroad was built along the southern boundary of the farm. The abandoned railbed, which was carved out of the side of the hill to create a terrace in this area, marks part of the District boundary. Lyman also owned the dam which provided water power for the mill. At the time of his death he had accumulated about 150 acres. In 1870 the 150 acres became the property of Samuel Bradley, a man very active in area real estate (16:284-285). In 1871 Bradley sold the 150 acres to Christian Sharps of Philadelphia for \$9000 and took back a mortgage on the property (16:529). Bradley reserved the right to live in the house for one year.

Christian Sharps was best known as the inventor of the Sharps rifle, a weapon carried by John Brown at Harper's Ferry. These rifles were called "Beecher's Bibles" in Kansas, because they were shipped there from New England in boxes marked "Bibles." Sharps rifles were considered one of the finest carried by Union soldiers during the Civil War.

Sharps rifles were manufactured in Hartford for some time. But Sharps left the company and moved to Philadelphia where he manufactured pistols. At the time he retired to Vernon, about 1871, his Philadelphia factory was still producing side arms. Sharps established a trout breeding business on the so-called Anson Lyman Farm. He built a cottage at the south end of the pond and installed pools, penstocks, and a hatching facility. He had the capacity to hatch 300,000 trout in a single year. Sharps sold trout eggs and had planned to sell young trout later on, but he died from tuberculosis in 1874 and the facility was abandoned. Some evidence of the trout farm is still visible and this is the second archaeological site in the park (Inv. #5). Sharp's widow continued to live in Vernon on Birch Road near Vernon Depot for several years after her husband's death.⁹

Samuel Bradley purchased the 150 acres from Sharps' heirs, and then re-sold it. Over the next 35 years, the property was transferred on 10 occasions, the purchasers coming from as far as New York City and Buffalo. No Vernon residents were involved in any of these transfers. Sharp's ownership seems to have ushered in an era of "gentlemen farmers" who may have become familiar with the area through their acquaintance with Christian Sharps or his wife.

Twentieth-century Development

In 1910 the property, still called the Christian Sharps farm, was sold to Hans Munchow. Munchow became somewhat of a folk figure during the time he lived in Vernon. According to residents of the time, he drove around in a horse and carriage accompanied by two Great Danes. Rumor has it that he left Vernon for California to become involved in the motion picture business. Another story that circulated at the time was that he was a member of the Hungarian aristocracy. He was responsible for building the beautiful stables on the hill behind the farm house and rebuilding the bank barn on the opposite side of Valley Falls Road (Inv. # 1, 2). At the time Munchow purchased the property, the original 150 acres had increased to 157 acres and included the site of the ruined mill. Munchow deeded the property to his wife when he left Vernon. Munchow's wife, Henrietta, sold the property to Anna Werner of Fredricksberg, Virginia. On April 2, 1915, Anna Werner sold to Mary Batterson Beach, wife of Charles C. Beach, M. D., and daughter of James Batterson, founder of the Travelers Insurance Company, the 157 acres and the buildings thereon (43:588). Within the next two years, Mary Beach purchased an additional 109 acres. Mrs. Beach had a George Keller-designed home on Woodland Street in Hartford, and an estate named Bay's Edge at Pleasure Beach in Waterford, designed by Edward Hapgood, but she chose the property in Vernon for her summer home because its proximity to Hartford would allow the men of the family to commute to work. An additional advantage to the location, she pointed out, was that the commuters would have the rising sun to their backs driving in to Hartford, and the setting sun to their backs when returning in the evening.¹⁰ Mrs. Beach engaged Edward Hapgood to design the mansion on

Bolton Road.¹¹ Later a cottage was built to the north of the main house to accommodate members of the household staff, and two houses and a stable were built to the south for the use of the Beach family. The property included a renowned rose garden (Inv. #7, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16).

Photograph number 8 is an aerial view showing the Beach estate along Bolton Road as it appeared about 1930. The surrounding area was a working farm with a full time farm manager and was meant to be self-sufficient.

Here the Beaches with their married children and grandchildren would gather during the summer to escape the heat of the city and enjoy an idealized country life among the Vernon hills. The children of the family were free to roam the woods and fields, fish in the pond, swim, ride, play tennis, and dine on the freshest of vegetables, fruits, and dairy products. During the winter months, fresh dairy products, eggs and poultry from the farm were delivered to their home in Hartford. The mansion was used as a summer home until after the Second World War when Dr. and Mrs. Beach's son, Brigadier General Charles B. Beach made it his year-round home.¹² During the period of Mrs. Beach's ownership, the property was divided, sold and re-sold among family members. By 1951, 225 of the original acres were held by Charles B. Beach.

In December, 1958, Charles Beach sold the 225 acres, including the mansion and adjacent buildings, the property on the corner of Valley Falls Road and Bolton Road and the entire farm property to Jones and Lyons, real estate developers from Old Lyme, Connecticut (112:420-22). Between 1959 and 1964, Jones and Lyons disposed of the property. The farm on the north side of Valley Falls Road was sold to members of the Darico family who had formerly managed the farm. The Daricos have subsequently built new houses

further along Bolton Road, but have maintained the farm property in excellent condition (Inv. # 12, 13). The mansion was sold separately as were other houses and some building lots. In 1964 Jones and Lyons sold one parcel of 130 acres to the town and later donated a second parcel. These two parcels make up the present day Valley Falls Park. This beautiful park with its pond, trails, and woodlands is one of the few undeveloped areas left in Vernon for the enjoyment of passive recreation. The bank barn is a part of the park property and is being restored for use as a nature center. On the opposite side of the road, the original farmhouse and its outbuildings, fields and meadows, all beautifully preserved by the Daricos, remain as a final remnant of Vernon's agrarian heritage.

Along Bolton Road, extending to the Bolton Road entrance to the park are the remaining subdivisions of the original farm. One building dates from the mid-nineteenth century, and seven buildings date from the period when the farm was the Beach family's summer retreat. Five houses were built after the division of the property in the 1950s, and three of these (Inv. # 8, 17, 18) represent the exurban development of the late-twentieth century. Because of the topography of the area, the large size of the building lots, and the positioning of the buildings, these houses present only a very limited intrusion on the historic rural landscape. Overall, the district reflects the varied uses to which this area was put in response to changing economic and cultural conditions while preserving its great natural beauty and rural origins.

NOTES

The following sources were consulted in the preparation of this report. For detailed information on individual buildings and sites, please see attached Historical Resources Inventory forms.

¹Town of Bolton, Land Records.

²Cole, J. R., History of Tolland County, Conn. Including its Early Settlement and Progress to the Present Time (New York: W. W. Preston & Co., 1888), 772.

³Town of Bolton and Town of Vernon Land Records. The first number which appears in parentheses in the text refers to the volume number of land records, and the second number refers to the page in that volume.

⁴Cole, 772.

⁵Town of Vernon Land Records, Volume and page in parentheses.

⁶Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Manuscript Schedules, Schedule 5, Products of Industry, Vernon, Conn., Connecticut State Library Archives.

⁷Tolland County Journal, February 9, 1877.

⁸Map of Vernon, 1853 (Philadelphia, Penn.: Richard Clark).

⁹Tolland County Journal, July 25, 1873.

¹⁰"Childhood Recollections of Valley Falls Farm, 1925-1951." A tape recorded interview with Elizabeth B. Shepard and Beverly B. Eaton, June 30, 1994, Vernon Historical Society, Oral History Project.

¹¹"The Architecture of Melvin H. and Edward T. Hapgood," An Exhibition of the Stowe-Day Foundation, April - "The Architecture of Melvin H. and Edward T. Hapgood," An Exhibition of the Stowe-Day Foundation, April - September, 1992, Hartford, Conn., 1992, 32.

¹²"Childhood Recollections of Valley Falls Farm."