

Salt Springs Park – Susquehanna County's not-so-hidden gem

BY JEFF FETZER

FROM A business standpoint, Susquehanna County's best-known mineral spring never proved to be worth its salt.

Long before it was ever a park, the Salt Springs area of Susquehanna County beckoned visitors. Prior to the movement of white settlers to the region, the prominent salt spring near the confluence of Fall Brook and Silver Creek was frequented by native Americans traveling through the area, according to Emily Blackman's "History of Susquehanna County" published in 1873. After the arrival of the early pioneers, various attempts were made to procure salt near the salt spring. One early settler, Balthasar DeHaert, began efforts to com-



PHOTO BY JEFF FETZER

SAVED FROM DEMOLITION: The historic Wheaton House, built in the 1830s, houses the Friends of Salt Springs Park offices, a gift shop, historical and environmental displays. Open from May through September, the Wheaton House was renovated through the efforts of the Friends of Salt Springs.

mercially mine salt there as early as late 1799 and continued those efforts intermittently for some 35 years, with only minimal success.

Although commercial salt production never quite panned out in the area today known as Salt Springs Park, the park's namesake pool of bubbling brine, its stand of virgin hemlock and its picturesque waterfalls have been drawing folks to Franklin Township for two centuries.

Last year, an estimated 20,000 visitors explored the 842-acre park, and its popularity with sportsmen and women, campers and nature lovers continues to grow, according to park administrator Debra Adleman.

Located seven miles north of Mon-

trose just off of State Route 29, Salt Springs Park offers a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities, including hiking, fishing, birding, hunting, camping, skiing and picnicking. The park, which is served by Claverack, also hosts dozens of environmental, historical and interpretive programs throughout the year.

While the main salt spring located near the park visitor center is well-known, it's due more to the methane gas that continuously bubbles up through the water than its aesthetic qualities, according to Stephen Spero, president of the Friends of Salt Springs Park, a non-profit organization that operates the park through a cooperative agreement with the Pennsylvania Bureau of State Parks.

Nor is the salt spring — basically a shallow pool of water not much larger than a children's swimming pool — the park's most prominent feature. That distinction belongs to the beauty of a stream called Fall Brook, with three scenic waterfalls that cascade along the floor of a steep-sided, rocky gorge surrounded by

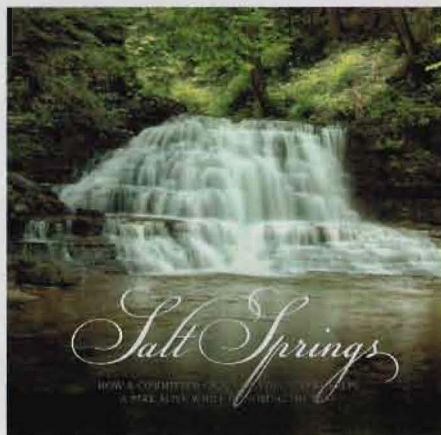


PHOTO BY BILL BORNE

20TH ANNIVERSARY BOOK: The details of the Friends of Salt Springs Park's struggle to ensure the survival of the park are chronicled in "Salt Springs: How a Committed Group of Volunteers Keeps a Park Alive While Honoring the Past," published in 2014. The photo depicts the first of a series of three falls in the Fall Brook gorge.



PHOTO BY JEFF FETZER

PREPARATIONS: Claverack member Stephen Spero, president of the Friends of Salt Springs Park, and Debra Adleman, park administrator, discuss plans for the park for the upcoming season.

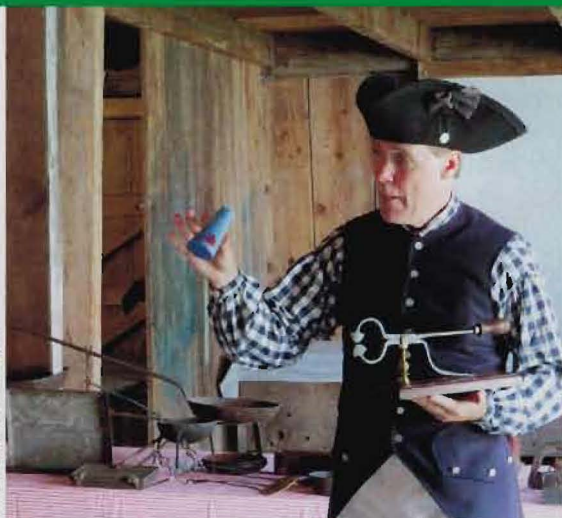
old-growth hemlock trees, some estimated at over 300 years of age.

Due to its natural splendor, Salt Springs was a popular site for church picnics and family gatherings since the early 1800s, according to Adleman. But by the 1990s, the park was succumbing to neglect.

The Friends of Salt Springs sprang to life in 1994 in an effort to save the park and several historic buildings from demolition and to restore it as a venue for family-friendly outdoor activities. Adleman, who was working for the Susquehanna County Historical Society at the time, says community outcry over announced plans to destroy the park's historic buildings — including the 1840s-era farmhouse that now houses her office and the park's visitor center — led to the formation of the Friends of Salt Springs Park.

A founding officer with the Friends group, Adleman says by the early 1990s, the park, referred to by many as the old Wheaton Place, had fallen to neglect and was becoming a haven for drug-related activity and alcohol parties.

"When the Wheaton family bought this land in the 1830s, with the waterfalls and salt spring, it was already a destination," Adleman says. "The Wheatons



LIVING IN COLONIAL TIMES: George Cummings, an 18th century history enthusiast, shares his antiques and knowledge with visitors to Salt Springs Park.

encouraged the public to visit their property up until the 1970s, when the family could no longer handle a 400-acre farm."

Seeking to keep the property open to public use, the Wheatons, in 1971, conveyed the property to the state, giving birth to Salt Springs State Park. But due to funding issues and other priorities, the state was unable to effectively promote and maintain the park and its historic structures, according to Adleman.

"The parks department really couldn't afford it," Adleman recalls, noting that the sole employee of Susquehanna County's only state park was a part-time worker who mowed the grass and maintained it minimally to keep it open.

Thanks to a groundswell of local sup-



POPULAR SITE: Although decades-long attempts to produce salt from the namesake spring at Salt Springs Park failed, the spring, which continuously burps up bubbles of methane gas, remains a popular visitor attraction.

port that coalesced around the Friends of Salt Springs, the fledgling organization persuaded the state to give the group the opportunity to oversee the park operations and to work to preserve the two dilapidated farmhouses and outbuildings

on the property. Salt Springs is the only state park in the commonwealth managed by a non-profit volunteer organization.

The park has flourished under that unique cooperative agreement over the past two decades.

The Friends, through fundraisers, membership dues and grant assistance from the state, was ultimately able to preserve the historic Wheaton House and a companion farmhouse, the James Calvin House, along with the farm's large dairy barn, small carriage barn, and

summer kitchen.

Aided by the state, the Friends group was also able to double the original park grounds by purchasing two adjoining parcels of land in the early 2000s. In addition, the Friends spearheaded construction of three rustic rental cottages and two pavilions on the grounds. Until 2008, the park operated without paid employees, relying instead on an extremely dedicated corps of volunteers, according to Spero, a Claverack member who resides in Brackney.

"This is a remarkable group of people who have been committed to upholding the heritage of the Wheatons in providing a welcoming place of recreation and natural splendor," says Spero, who became a member of the Friends board of directors in 2010.

Today, the Friends' \$92,000 annual operating budget includes wages for five part-time positions — administrator, environmental educator, groundskeeper and two maintenance workers. The park still relies heavily on volunteers to clear trails, take shifts working as park hosts on the weekends and pitch in where needed. In addition, the state Bureau of Parks provides the park with supplies, guidance and police protection, when requested.

Prior to the Friends' intervention at Salt Springs, Adleman says few people

outside of Susquehanna County were aware of this gem of a park.

She explains that when the Wheaton family owned the park, they had always encouraged area church groups and local residents to picnic on the grounds of their farm and enjoy the beauty of the Fall Brook waterfalls. Adleman notes that the Wheatons maintained a ledger of guests at their "Salt Springs Farm" that dates to 1865.

Today, according to Spero, the majority of visitors to the park hail from upstate New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, although many local residents visit for the more than 50 programs and events the park offers throughout the year. The park hosts interpretive tours, environmental education programs for school children, music performances and its

annual Salt Springs Celebration over Labor Day weekend. In addition, various organizations host events on the grounds throughout the summer, and wedding ceremonies occasionally take place at the park.

Calling the park "a beguiling place," Spero says people enjoy Salt Springs for its solitude, its beauty and its abundance of wildlife.

With the exception of a state-designated natural area that encompasses about 30 acres of the park in the Fall Brook gorge, the hemlock grove and picnic area, the grounds are

open to hunting. The property is home to deer and turkey, and the state Game Commission stocks pheasants on the property. Both Fall Brook and Silver Creek are stocked with trout and see a fair amount of angling activity in the spring and early summer months. The park also has some 15 miles of well-maintained trails that are popular with birders and hikers.

The park is open year-round, from sunrise to sunset. Additional information about the park can be found at www.friendsofsaltspringspark.org.



MASSIVE HEMLOCK: A huge hemlock tree towers above the Fall Brook gorge at Salt Springs Park, home to one of the few remaining stands of old-growth hemlock trees in the state. Some of the hemlocks at the park are estimated to be over 300 years old.