

The Civilian Conservation Corps in Exeter, Rhode Island

By Gary Boden and Sheila Reynolds-Boothroyd

Four years into the Great Depression and shortly after the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President in 1933, the federal government began a massive effort to revitalize the depressed U.S. economy. One element of the “New Deal” was to create jobs for able-bodied, unemployed young workers. The 73rd United States Congress passed the Emergency Conservation Work Act (ECW), creating the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which recruited thousands of young men into a peacetime army run by the War Department for restoring and improving the nation's natural resources. The concept of organized national service in the field was not new. It can be traced back to the Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle who in 1850 urged the employment of young men to improve wilderness areas. Somewhat later, the Harvard philosopher William James advocated *“a conscription of the whole youthful population to form for a certain number of years a part of the army enlisted against Nature... and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas.”*



The qualifications for CCC workers were simple: they had to be U.S. citizens, physically fit, unemployed, unmarried, and between the ages of 18 and 26. The majority of enrollees had little education and work experience. Enlistment was for a period of six months, although reenlistment was accepted. Camps were set up in all states and run on a quasi-military basis. At its peak enrollment in 1935 the CCC employed 500,000 men located in 2,600 camps. Overall, three million young men participated in the CCC during its nine years of existence. Workers were paid \$30 a month of which \$25 was sent back home to families of the men – a practice that extended the economic benefit of

the program beyond the local community. Enrollees worked forty hours per week and received meals, housing, and medical care in addition to their pay. Some camps were set up to provide work opportunities for military veterans, whose eligibility requirements were less restrictive; for instance, veteran enrollees could be older and married.

The work involved reforestation, insect damage and flood control, fire protection, community safety, construction of roads and campgrounds so camps were located in rural areas. Companies of up to 200 men were lead by a company commander and junior officer and supported by about a dozen civilian staff. Work detail groups consisted of 25 men in a section with leaders who supervised the men. Camps were located near areas where the work was to be performed and organized like small villages with a variety of buildings – barracks, medical dispensary, mess hall, recreation hall,



educational building, lavatory and showers, offices, workshops, and garages. Most CCC camps offered vocational training and additional education, including literacy education, and more than 90 percent of all enrollees participated in these programs. Due to social attitudes at the time, African-Americans worked in segregated camps and there was a separate division for Native American tribe members.

The CCC began to decline as WWII approached. Congress made administrative changes that diminished its role and fewer applicants saw it as an opportunity as the economy improved. National defense took priority even though there still was work for the Corps to do. Never officially abolished, the CCC was defunded and its property distributed to other departments. The CCC existed for less than a decade, yet its legacy persisted for many years in planted trees, structures, and an experienced workforce. By the end of the program the CCC had erected more than 3,470 fire towers; built 97,000 miles of fire roads; spent 4,235,000 man-days fighting fires; planted more than 3 billion trees; and labored a total of 7,153,000 man-days improving wildlife habitats. Furthermore, it taught work skills, teamwork, and discipline to a generation of young men as well as supporting families and local economies and promoting recreational activities in state parklands.

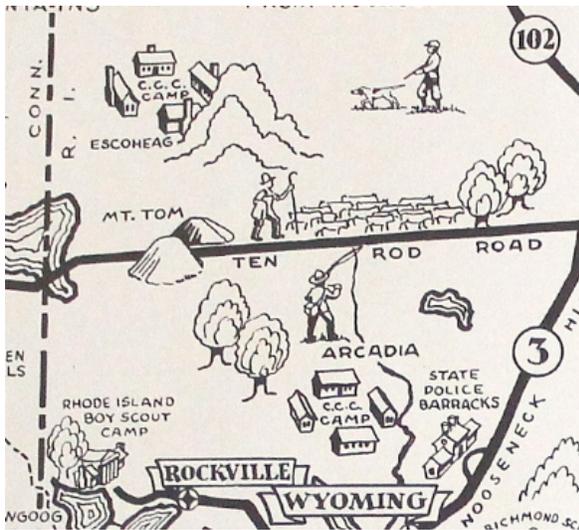
The Camps at Beach Pond and Arcadia



Several camps were created in Rhode Island and two are of particular interest. One was occupied by the 1186th Company. It was located on Escoheag Hill in western Exeter and known as Beach Pond Camp. The following information has been gleaned from the *Official Annual 1937 – Civilian Conservation Corps, Third CCC District, First Corps Area*. On June 18, 1935, an advance crew of twenty-three men arrived at the site to break ground. After setting up temporary quarters in tents, the men began clearing the grounds for the camp. A few weeks later the rest of the company arrived from Fort Adams in Newport to begin construction of permanent buildings and a well. Soon the company installed 110 volt generators and brought electricity and lighting to the village. By the end of September,

barracks, a mess hall and kitchen, and other buildings were finished, supplied with water, and occupied. In November the camp educational program was initiated and through the winter a garage area for the Army and the Forestry Departments was constructed. All of this work brought recognition in March 1936 as the best camp in the CCC District. Radio communication with Fort Adams was established next and then telephone service in the following summer.





Different camps engaged in work projects with a particular focus. Much of the labor of the 1186th Company was devoted to building recreational facilities. In the Dawley Memorial Park, situated in the towns of Exeter and Richmond, a picnic area with fireplaces, road, trails, and a log shelter were constructed. The shelter, once a fine example of Depression-era construction, now has fallen into great disrepair from neglect as the before-and-after photos below illustrate.

Land around the Step Stone Falls also was developed as picnic grounds while that along the Wood River was preserved for wildlife. At Beach Pond, which straddles the border between Rhode Island and Connecticut, the company cleared excess vegetation and constructed bath houses and bathing facilities for the swimming area. Other projects involved clearing lots and building shelters for the public to use. In 1937 the 1186th Company was transferred to Fort Devens in Massachusetts. A caretaker watched over the buildings until the 1950s when they were demolished.

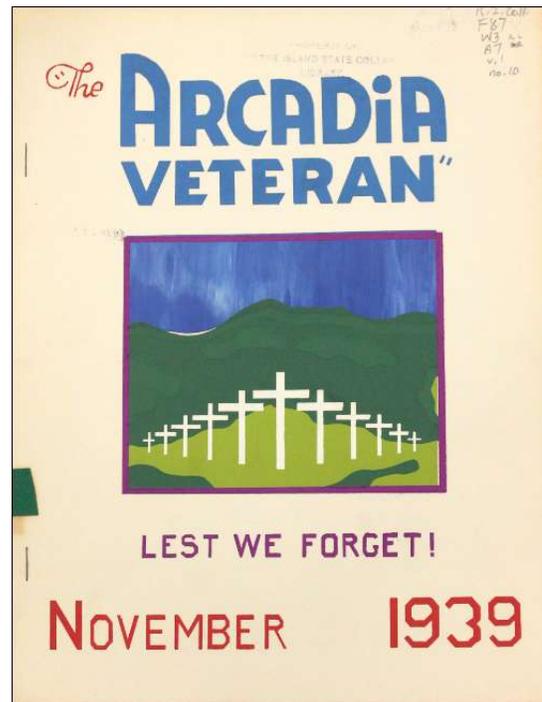


Another camp located at the nearby Arcadia village in the town of Richmond housed the 1188th Company. It was established just three weeks before Beach Pond Camp by men transferred from the 141st Company camp at Burlingame Park in Charlestown. Arcadia Camp was tasked with projects more related to forestry than recreation. After the camp itself was built during the summer of 1935, forestry foremen arrived in August and started field work, some of it in Exeter woodlands. A number of trails were completed in the area – the Voluntown Trail, Rockville Trail, Grassy Pond Trail, Tefft Hill Trail, and Sessions Hopkins Trail. Other work involved digging water holes and accomplishments included “five

miles of telephone lines, 165 acres of forest stand improvement, 75,000 acres of gypsy moth control and 10,000 acres of blister rust control work.” The 1188th Company was noted for its exceptional ability fighting forest fires in the 1936 season.

The men did more than work all the time. Holidays such as Christmas were observed with celebrations and parties. On Mother’s Day in 1936, visitors were entertained with a play and a special lunch was served to the mothers of the enrollees and to the District Executive Officer who also attended the occasion. On the fourth anniversary of the CCC in April 1937, the men heard a talk by Judge Stephen Casey and received certificates for proficiency in class. Athletic activity was important and the 1188th Company won the soccer championship of the Southern League in 1936.

No other information has been found about activities of the 1188th Company after 1937, but evidence from 1939 indicates that another CCC Company came to occupy the Arcadia Camp site. This particular company was identified as the 1116-V Company because unlike its predecessor its membership consisted of military veterans. We know some details about it from a set of newsletter-type publications called *The Arcadia Veteran* produced by enrollees at the camp. Newsletters were common at many camps across the country. They consisted of practical information such as activity schedules, inspirational essays, as well as stories, jokes, and other news about camp life. Additionally they provided an opportunity for the men to learn some practical skills in writing and production. A typical issue of *The Arcadia Veteran* contained about 30 pages of mimeographed copy with a silk-screened color cover displaying art work depicting a theme appropriate to the month – for example, Mother’s Day for the May issue and Veteran’s Day for November. Circulation of these publications generally was scaled for the size of the camp, although copies found their way home and out into the local community. The Beach Pond Camp published its own newsletter in 1936 called *The Escoheagan*, but unfortunately no copies are known to exist.



An early issue of the newsletter recalls its origins:

“Following is a brief history of 1116 company, which is in many respects typical of other companies: the 1116 company was originally formed as the 392nd company at Fort Belvoir (Old Fort Hampshire) Virginia on May 24th, 1933. It was stationed there for six weeks and on June 27th, 1933 entrained for Rutland Vermont to engage in forestry work at Zitkin State Forest. One year later, in May 1934, the outfit moved to Gorham, N.H. and a short time later again moved across the map to the site of the Wrightsville



Dam, being barracked at Camp Greene, a short distance from Montpelier Vt. Two months later they were again transferred to tents on the South Plateau of Camp Charles M. Smith, so named in honor of the governor of the state at that time. 1116 was known as the concrete company at Camp Smith and did commendable concrete work on one of the largest rolled earth type dams in New

England, in the construction of the concrete tunnel and spillway to the dam. Upon completion of the flood dam control project in Vt., the company was transferred late in October 1938 to its present location at Arcadia State Forest Reservation in Rhode Island and are at present performing forestry work in this area. Capt. Edwin L. Tucker is the commanding officer, and Lieut. Wilson C. McNamara, who succeeded Lieut. Edward L. Norris is second in command; the medical department is in the very capable hands of Lieut. Gordon E. Menzics, a graduate of McGill University and the University of Edinburgh."

"This camp, like most others is a complete small town in itself, complete with water and lighting systems. This camp is also equipped with a School Building, 20 feet wide and 116 feet long. In this building are located and up to date barber shop, a library of approximately 3000 volumes, a dark room for developing pictures, and a complete woodworking shop. Equipment available and frequently used include an up to date 16 mm movie projection outfit and shows are given two or three times a week. This feature of camp life is under the direction of the Commanding Officer, assisted by the Educational Advisor."



“The general public is cordially invited to inspect the camp or visit any of the work projects now in progress. The camp is located about thirty miles south of Providence, just off Route #3, near the village of Arcadia in the town of Richmond. Road signs giving needed directions to strangers are prominently placed. The personnel of the camp will be glad to have visitors call and will be pleased to show them the camp or answer any questions concerning camp life or the work at the camp.”

Disaster Relief

The great hurricane of September 1938 severely damaged Rhode Island shorelines and forests. Immediately after the hurricane passed, enrollees from the Escoheag camp were deployed to the coast to search for missing persons and open blocked roads. Afterwards the CCC camps undertook the task of salvaging usable timber and clearing debris in the State forests. Mrs. Nancy Allen Holst, who was State District Fire Warden at the time, recalled in an interview in 1977 that eighty million board feet of salvageable timber had been blown

down, most of which was white pine. The State sold twelve million of it for \$24 per thousand feet to the federal government through the Northeastern Timber Salvage Administration. After temporary storage in ponds to discourage insect damage, it eventually was used in construction projects during World War II. The picture at right was published in *The Regional Review* by the National Park Service with the caption “STORM HAVOC AT BEACH POND RECREATIONAL DEMONSTRATION AREA, RHODE ISLAND”.

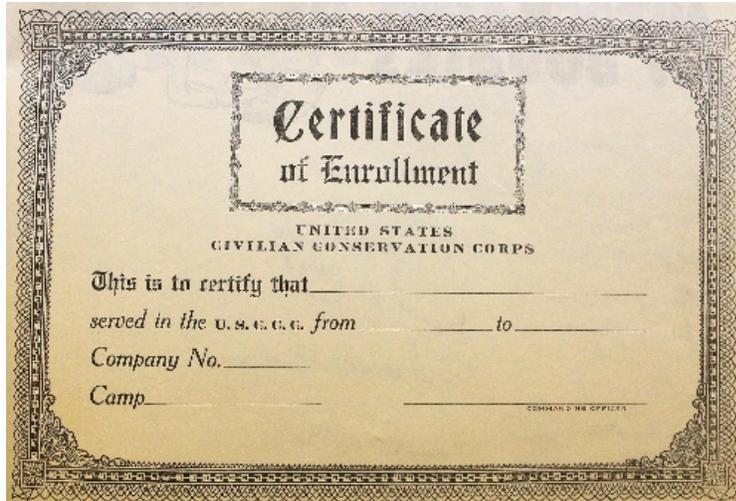


Besides recovering valuable lumber, crews opened fire trails, cleared flammable materials that posed a forest fire hazard, and restored damaged communication systems.

Education

A significant part of the CCC mission was to educate enrollees. In October 1936 Vice Present of Rhode Island State College, John P. Barlow, informed selected faculty members of a request from the educational director of the National Youth Administration office in Providence. The letter asked for “*the assistance of the college faculty in the arrangement of an educational program for the C.C.C. camps of Rhode Island.*” Barlow inquired if faculty members would be willing to assist in work of this kind, what subjects would be addressed, if they would arrange for an extension course of several lectures in practical courses, and if they would provide entertainment programs for the camps. Most instructors agreed to help, but cited a lack of time to do any more than deliver a single lecture. A few agreed on

condition of compensation for their time, but Barlow found that unacceptable, stating in letters to these individuals that *“it has occurred to me that you have not given much thought to the fact that you are working at the State College and that your remuneration comes entirely from State and Federal funds. The work of the C.C.C. camps is part of the National program of relief and education, and incidentally, one of the most praise-worthy of all the projects of government relief. The State has a right to expect the cooperation of all of its citizens in its relief program and particularly so from those who are upon its payroll.”*



Barlow’s appeal was successful and confirmed by a letter from Ralph G. Winterbottom, who was the director of the National Youth Administration for Rhode Island. Several months later he wrote *“The detailed schedule that you have done for the CCC speakers’ program, and the many nights which your colleagues on the State College faculty have spent in speaking to the various camps make it very difficult for me to express fully my sincere appreciation and thanks for this*

splendid service. In my year and a half with the Youth Administration, I have had no better cooperation and volunteer service from any other group in the State.” Another letter from the Educational Advisor of the 1186th camp at Beach Pond, Arthur J. Spring, offers *“our gratitude for the splendid lectures offered by the Rhode Island State Faculty.”*

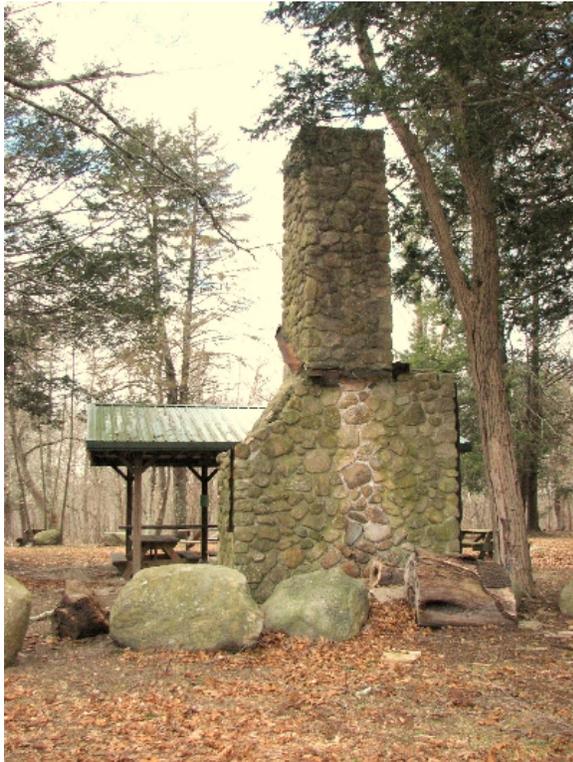
State Parks

Most of the land that now comprises the former Beach Pond State Park and Arcadia Management Area had been held privately for two centuries. Soon after the General Assembly of the Rhode Island colony sold the so-called “vacant lands” to speculators in 1710, early settlers arrived to farm the land. They built houses, barns, and stone walls; grew crops and raised livestock; bought and sold lots and passed on their properties to successive generations. After most of the farms were abandoned in the mid-1800s, the forests grew back, but in poor condition. The General Assembly became concerned with the situation in 1932 and called for a plan for taking forest lands into state ownership. The plan proposed three distinct properties in western Rhode Island – in northern, middle, and southern sections – of up to ten thousand acres each. Payment of no more than five dollars per acre would be made and the towns reimbursed four cents per acre for loss of tax revenue. By the summer of 1935 the plan had expanded into a proposal to take 80,000 acres from towns along the border with Connecticut into cooperating State and Federal forest programs and a state park. Opposition swiftly arose from the towns based on fears of losing tax revenue and the direction of patronage jobs to workers from the cities rather than the affected towns. When put to a statewide vote, the proposal failed but the Federal Resettlement

Administration continued its pursuit of sub-marginal lands for conservation purposes and the development of a sustained supply of wood products.

At the same time, the National Park Service was optioning private land in western Exeter and West Greenwich. Some landowners agreed to sell, but others refused to abandon their homes. As the idea of a national park faded, the State moved to take 1350 acres for its own purposes by right of eminent domain in 1936. One resident of Escoheag Hill, John S. Tanner, vowed not to give up his 125 acres and the house built by his grandfather without a court fight. His neighbor, dairy farmer Edward J. Gardiner, lost 50 acres to the State seizure. He was left with some pasture land, but it lacked water so his only alternatives were to dispose of his animals or find other pasturage.

Governor Theodore Francis Green claimed *“the pressing reason for action now is to provide additional work for the boys of the CCC camp nearby.”* Because the Federal government had acquired only a patchwork of tracts, the Governor said it was *“necessary for the State to acquire (the other tracts) if the whole area is to be developed as a unit and the greatest good is to be received from it. The purposes of this area are varied. We want to conserve the flow of water so as to prevent damage by flood. We want to develop forests on lands which are practically valueless for any agricultural purpose. We want to provide recreational facilities for the people of the State.”* Ultimately the State prevailed and the condemned acreage was consolidated with the purchased tracts that the Federal government turned over to the State. Even if generally unrecognized as such, these forests are the enduring legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps.



The former CCC camps look different today, nearly eighty years after their establishment. No intact wooden buildings remain, but the fieldstone fireplace of the headquarters still stands as a silent monument. This recent photograph of it by Sheila Reynolds-Boothroyd was taken from the same perspective as the one earlier in the article.

The former Beach Pond camp site in Escoheag now hosts the LeGrand Reynolds Horsemen's Area that was developed by the RI Federation of Riding Clubs. In 1969 the Department of Natural Resources set aside fifty-two acres for a show ring and jumping course, a track, and camping sites. The Federation did much of the work on the site and dedicated it in 1974. A continuing agreement between the Federation and the State guarantees its upkeep and maintenance. The site is open to the public for day use, but only people with horses may camp there. The photographs below were taken at the dedication by a member of the RIFRC, T.D. Brown.

Opening ceremonies of the Horsemen's Area
at Beach Pond State Park, Exeter, RI, June 22, 1974



Ribbon cutting with Dennis J. Murphy, Dept Head RI Dept. of Natural Resources
and Anne D. Holst, Pres. of RI Federation Of Riding Clubs



Sheila Reynolds on left with her horse Thunder was flag bearer for
Drum Rock Riding Club

At the Arcadia camp site modern buildings now house offices of the Department of Environmental Management – Division of Forest Environment which supervises activities in the forests. The various picnic sites scattered throughout the Management Area go largely unused by a public that has little interest in picnics anymore. Most people now head to beaches rather than the woods. The trails carved out by the CCC enrollees still are in use for hiking and horse riding, however.



In its short lifetime of less than a decade, the Civilian Conservation Corps created mostly positive impacts on millions of people during a desperate time in America. The five CCC camps in Rhode Island

introduced about 900 young men to the outdoor life, rewarding labor, and public land management. CCC organizations still persist today to promote awareness of the CCC program and the men who served so well. Digital materials are being collected and made available through the internet so that the history of one of the most successful federal programs will not be forgotten.

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General information about the CCC is available at

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilian_Conservation_Corps

http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/ccc/ccc1.htm

CCC Legacy website – <http://www.ccclegacy.org/>

Civilian Conservation Corps Resource Page – <http://cccresources.blogspot.com/>