

Clearing the way in Stark Park



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People walk the paths in Manchester's Stark Park during Saturday's Celebrate Trails Day event. Trails through the North End park have been cleared for easier access for pedestrians and bicyclists.

\$200,000 project opens overgrown trails, builds bridges

By Jonathan Phelps
New Hampshire Union Leader

IT'S EASIER to take a walk in the woods at Manchester's Stark Park now that volunteers have cleared the paths in and around the North End landmark.

In recent years, the lower 15 acres of the 30-acre park had become overgrown with invasive species, such as bittersweet, making the paths only somewhat passable.

The Friends of Stark Park, Manchester Parks & Recreation and nonprofit

Manchester Moves worked to develop the "Walk in the Woods" trail network. The majority of work was done by parks employees and more than 40 volunteers who cleared the land and built a staircase and new wooden bridges.

The trails are an original feature of the park, which was dedicated in the late 1800s.

"It was getting harder and harder to pass through," said Jason Soukup, secretary of Manchester Moves.

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Charlotte Tetrault, 6, of Manchester, greets General Stark, a Manchester police horse, during the Celebrate Trails Day at Stark Park on Saturday.



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After the ribbon was cut to open the improved trails at Stark Park on Saturday, children race past (from left) Tom Christensen, director of the NH Rail Trails Coalition; Jason Soukup of Manchester Moves, with his son Simeon; and Manchester Mayor Joyce Craig.

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“The rambling road that originally went all the way to the (Merrimack) River was the pattern of how it was laid out,” he said. “That hasn’t changed in 150 years ... it wasn’t maintained over time.”

Last Saturday, dozens gathered at the park to celebrate Trails Days and the improvements to the trail system. Soukup also worked to clear sections of the Heritage Trail, which continues to the north onto state-owned land behind the John H. Sununu Youth Services Center.

The work started in January after several years of planning, Soukup said.

The work included the installation of six bridges. One bridge had been previously constructed as a Boy Scout project, he said.

Manchester Moves estimates the cost at about \$200,000, with \$50,000 coming from in-kind donations. All of the money was raised through private donations, Soukup said.

The park is named after Gen. John Stark, who is best known for leading the First Regiment of New Hampshire to victory against a much larger British force during the Battle of Bennington on Aug. 16, 1777.

The park, once the site of the Stark family farm, was dedicated in 1893. Renovations to the family gravesite at Stark Park were completed in 2014.

Martha Lyon, a landscape architect, completed a master plan for the park in 2005, which included recommendations for the “woodland trails.”

Brian Brady, president of the Friends of Stark Park, said the organization has been chipping away at a master plan over the years.

“That was always part of our plan,” he said. “What was a surprise for me was how quickly (Manchester Moves was) able to execute it. They had a single purpose in mind and were able to really help drive the process forward

and in a very short amount of time.”

Brady hopes the organizations can plant blueberry bushes and other native plants in the future to help prevent a resurgence of invasive species.

“We’ve seen people walking the trails the past couple of weeks,” Brady said. “It is an exciting use of the park.”

The organizations plan to apply to the state for grant money to maintain the trails, Soukup said.

“The more it gets used, the less maintenance you’ll need,” he said. “We’re figuring out a way to make sure there is money available for routine maintenance this time around, so we won’t have to do 15 years of work all at once.”

More is expected at Stark Park in the future, including the Stark Farms Community Garden.

“We love it,” Soukup said. “It’s taking on a life of its own.”

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