

Charcoal History Hike at Highland Park

By Susan Barlow – Among several Highland Park walks, I schedule a charcoal-themed hike about every other year. Hikes sponsored by Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) Family Ramble Program & Manchester Historical Society

On the east side of Case Mountain, we'll discover remains of Connecticut's charcoal industry, going back to a time when the hills were cloaked in smoke, and forests were burned to make fuel for factories and mills. The charcoal mounds are slightly raised circles 25-45 feet in diameter made up of earth and cinders. Former CFPA President Dick Whitehouse (1937-2015), first showed me the charcoal mounds, which I had walked by many times while hiking at Case Mtn., but hadn't recognized. Once he pointed them out, they became clear and identifiable, because they are quite large and still have bits of shiny charcoal, found a few inches under the top layer of leaves and soil. The raised circles vary in size, but are quite large, and they are located near old roads, recognizable even 100 years later. Water Landgraf, historian and author, presented "Fire in the Hills," an illustrated talk on charcoal making at the Manchester Historical Society in 2006. A video of the program is available for borrowing at the Mary Cheney Library, Manchester.

Christopher Rand in his book *The Changing Landscape*, which is partially available on Google books, describes the charcoal process: "...the old charcoal burners, the colliers, had made their pits. First they had cleared and leveled off their circle, he said, then they had taken some four-foot logs and leaned them together in its center, making a cone or tepee-shape. Next they had taken more logs and leaned them outside this, widening the pile and keeping it circular, till they had reached the pit-base's rim. Then on that storey of logs they had put another, its diameter smaller, and then another and another, till they had had a solid pile or dome in a beehive shape. Each pile had taken thirty or forty cords of wood, and they had covered it, when finished, with leaves and with a coating, several inches thick, of dirt—the leaves to keep the dirt from sifting down among the logs, the dirt itself to damp the burning. They had dug the dirt from the little excavations, here and there, that still remained—they had scratched it up wherever they could find it. They had moved it to the pit on wheelbarrows that had had huge wheels...four-feet in diameter—for negotiating the rough ground."

Visit these websites for information on...

Connecticut's blue-blazed trails preservation of Connecticut's natural heritage, visit the web site of the Connecticut Forest and Park Association (CFPA) <http://www.ctwoodlands.org/>.

The event page of the Manchester Historical Society's website www.ManchesterHistory.org

Manchester hiking and park-and-rec information along with a map of the Case Mt. trails on Town website.

Cox Cable carries our local-history television programs on public access channel 15, Saturdays at 8:00 p.m. in Manchester, South Windsor, Glastonbury, Newington, Rocky Hill, and Wethersfield.



Demonstration of charcoal-making.

Photo courtesy of Walt Landgraf (1941-2007).



↑ Photo: People tending a charcoal mound off Spring Street in Hope Valley, R.I. in 1941

In his book, *Abandoned New England: Its Hidden Ruins and Where to Find Them*, William F.

Robinson describes the charcoal-making process:

"In the winter, when the sap was low, the charcoal burners cut their wood, preferably the slower-burning hardwoods like beech and oak, which was laid to season until the arrival of milder weather. Come late spring, the charcoal burner stacked the wood into mounds... also called pits, kilns, or hearths, carefully covered with a mixture of sod, dirt, and leaves. The charcoal burner climbed the pile and dumped live coals down inside, igniting the wood. For the next two weeks he lived by the mound, carefully adjusting the burn by opening and closing holes in the covering. This kept the mound smoldering, but prevented it from breaking out into open flame. Finally he removed the covering and raked out the charcoal to let it cool before bagging it for shipment." This book, the photo at left, and quote (above) from Mr. Rand's book are available at

<http://www.mdc.net/~dbrier/yawgoog/trails/green.html>