

With video: A treasure again: \$250,000 upgrade of the entire Vale of Springs at Saratoga Spa State Park restores vital natural assets

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By PAUL POST, ppost@saratogian.com



SARATOGA SPRINGS — Fred Russell, with fly rod in hand, cast his line into Geysers Creek's rushing waters while Hayes Spring spouted high in the background.

A year ago, the geyser was barely a trickle, clogged by years of built-up mineral deposits.

Now it's once again a major Saratoga Spa State Park attraction thanks to a \$250,000 upgrade of the park's entire Vale of Springs area that officials dedicated on Tuesday.

"This is my getaway," said Russell, of Mechanicville. "I come up here for peace of mind."

That's what it represents to thousands of other park visitors, too, each year.

"This is something that was done for generations to come," said Tom Maggs, who co-chaired with Heather Mabee, a centennial campaign to raise private money for the project. "This project was completed on time and within budget. It turned out far better than anybody could have dreamed."

Improvements include new walks, benches, walls, interpretive signs explaining the park's history and a pavilion overlooking Hayes Spring, the only spouting geyser east of the Mississippi River. Its water shoots roughly 15 feet high.

"There are busloads of people in the summer who come here from New York just to see this spout," said Mabee, who also chairs the Saratoga-Capital Region Parks Commission.

She credited her late father, Cornelius Vanderbilt "Sonny" Whitney, for instilling in her a love of parks. He was head of

the Kentucky state parks commission, which was named best state parks system in the country in 1977.

"My father owned lots of land," Mabee said. "He impressed on me that most of the world does not have a place to enjoy serenity. We have to make sure every person has a place they can go to rejuvenate themselves and be better the next day."

Her mother, Marylou Whitney, was among those present for Tuesday's ceremonies.

"This is perfect!" she said. "We came here when Heather was a little girl. This is one of our favorite spots. It's so beautiful."

Whitney was one of many local individuals and firms that donated either funds or in-kind services for park upgrades. Much of it was in the form of donated materials and labor. State employees also did considerable work.

"It's in these difficult times that public-private partnerships make all the difference," state parks Commissioner Rose Harvey said.

Recently-completed improvements are in compliance with the American Disabilities Act, meaning they're handicap accessible.

The Vale of Springs encompasses a half-mile loop trail on both sides of Geyser Creek, with the Saratoga Performing Arts Center bridge on the north end. In the early 1900s, the area was the site of numerous gas extraction plants. Gas was used for soda manufacturing.

In 1910, the first lands were set aside for what would later become today's state park, which marked its 100th anniversary last year. The park is a National Historic Landmark and gets about 2 million visitors per year.

"What a great backyard this is for the city of Saratoga Springs," Mayor Scott Johnson said.