



Mount Joy in sun. Photo courtesy of Josh Douglass Smith

Changes at Valley Forge National Historical Park 2013 and Beyond

Kate Hammond

John O. Senior and Heidi Sproat, Editors

The following article was adapted from an audio recording of the Society's public meeting on Sunday, March 17, 2013. The featured presentation at that meeting was made by Kate Hammond, Superintendent of Valley Forge National Historical Park ("VFNHP" or "the Park"). Ms. Hammond's prior assignment was Superintendent of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Historic Site in Montana, one of 400 national parks. She was appointed VFNHP Superintendent in January 2012, and her responsibilities also include supervising the nearby Hopewell Furnace National Historical Site.

Some supplementary material has been added to illustrate and describe the subsequent progress that has been made on a number of the projects mentioned in her presentation.

Introduction

Materials provided: a general park brochure with map; a trail map for the Park; and a brochure about volunteering.

The Park relies heavily on the kind services of volunteers who do many important jobs (e.g. greeting visitors at the Visitor Center, providing living history demonstrations, controlling invasive species, etc.) and this help is much appreciated. Volunteers are always welcome.

The Friends of Valley Forge Park is an independent group that supports the Park, and hosts a lecture series (fall through spring) at the Washington Memorial Chapel on a variety of subjects.

The biggest fundraising event at the Park is the Valley Forge Revolutionary Five Mile Run and Three Mile Walk, held annually in April. The Revolutionary Run event is in its eighth year in 2013.

Overview

VFNHP is one of almost 400 parks and sites in the National Park Service (NPS) system, which also manages the White House, the Presidential Inauguration at the Capitol, and such sites as Little Big Horn Battlefield in Montana (Ms. Hammond's previous posting). The NPS was established in 1916, and is approaching a centennial anniversary in 2016.

The NPS cares for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. To quote Wallace Stegner, “National Parks are the best idea we ever had.”

There were federally managed parks that predate the NPS. Notably, Yellowstone was established in 1872 and was managed for the first 40 years by the U.S. Army. Valley Forge Park was established in 1893 as Pennsylvania’s first state park, and was transferred to the federal government in 1976 (as part of the bicentennial year), creating Valley Forge National Historical Park.

Why is it important?

As the site of the 1777-78 Winter Encampment of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, the Park clearly has national significance.

The Park contains other historic resources unrelated to the Revolutionary War, such as:

- The Philander Chase Knox mansion;
- The Village of Valley Forge; and
- The Port Kennedy area structures dating from the quarrying era, along Rt. 23 near the Kennedy-Supplee mansion.



The Park also contains important natural resources—increasingly important as southeastern Pennsylvania becomes more developed—and with 3600 acres of open space it is one of the larger green spaces in the region. The Park is known for its scenic beauty and the predominant use now is for renewal and recreation.

Background

The Park’s annual budget was around \$6.2M until recent sequestration reduced the budget by 5% to \$5.9M. The budget has been relatively flat in the recent past, but over the past ten years the costs of labor, health insurance, utilities, etc. have been increasing, so the actual purchasing power of the budget allocation has been slowly eroded. Even with this significant recent negative impact on finances, the Park has been able to maintain essential services without closing visitor centers, furloughing employees, or taking other drastic measures.

Approximately 1.4 million visits were recorded in 2012—predominantly recreational use mixed with historical use and some destination historical use. Visitation was up 10% over the previous year, but accurate numbers are hard to obtain because there are so many entrances and so many visits are made by casual recreational visitors. Only 10-15% of visitors actually enter the Visitor Center.

The Park is staffed by 55 year-round and 70 seasonal employees, including many interns and youth crews. Encouraging the next generation to engage in stewardship, both on the national and local levels is an important part of the Park’s mission.

Strong and vital partnerships are important to the success of the Park. Over 2,900 volunteers—some one-time for special projects and others more regular, working several days a week—donated over 54,000 hours in 2012, equivalent to 26 full-time positions. Clearly, they provide an essential resource critical to enabling the Park to fulfill its mission.

Ms. Hammond’s first day on the job in March 2012 brought a big surprise, and two important lessons.

A stream patrol volunteer walking along Valley Creek discovered a leak in the main sewer trunk line (carrying 1 million gallons per day) that runs under the park to a processing facility on the north side of the Schuylkill River. The leak was located approximately 100 yards upstream from the bridge on which Wilson Road crosses Valley Creek. The first lesson was the importance of the volunteers to the well-being of the Park. Had it not been for the volunteer’s report, the unfortunate situation might have gone undetected for much longer.



Kate Hammond (middle) with co-workers at the site of the leak repair.
Courtesy Kate Hammond/VFNHP

Tredyffrin Township was very quick to respond to the emergency and worked cooperatively with the PA Department of Environmental Protection to resolve the situation. After the repair was completed—at a cost of over \$1M—the damaged areas of the landscape were nicely restored. The second lesson was how much the Park is valued and supported by the local community and government.

Park Management

When a new superintendent arrives at a National Park, a standard procedure is followed to determine appropriate management policy. The General Management Policy (GMP) sets the framework for management goals. VFNHP had a relatively recent GMP dating from 2007, completed with extensive public involvement. Key points defining the Park include:

1. “A place where citizens understand, care for, and preserve their history and natural heritage.”
2. “A place where life-long education is compelling.”
3. “A place that is a vital and valued part of the community.”

More specifically, some of the core goals for VFNHP are to:

1. Communicate a core message about the encampment and the American Revolution in an engaging way that will bring the story alive for all visitors, from those coming for casual recreation to those more concerned with history. Reaching the recreational audience can be accomplished unobtrusively using options such as mobile device applications and strategically located information kiosks.
2. Protect, enhance and make accessible the park’s historic buildings, landscapes, and collections.
3. Restore natural habitats and biodiversity.
4. Manage traffic and parking to provide better visitor experience; manage trail systems and connections to regional trails.
5. Facilitate greater involvement by the community and partners in these goals.

Two points frame the management approach:

1. The National Park Service is celebrating its Centennial as an agency in 2016, and there is internal consideration about what is required to be ready for the next century of stewardship.
2. A very uncertain federal budget climate makes planning difficult.

Recent and ongoing projects:

- The rehabilitation of the Washington’s Headquarters area and the train station was completed in 2010–11 and was funded by the Federal Stimulus program. The 1913 station building was completely rehabilitated, converting it to a visitor center containing exhibits about George Washington’s leadership. The old parking lot was relocated further from the historic structures, and new restroom facilities were added. The considerably improved historic setting is probably the main destination in the Park for most historically-oriented visitors.
- Deer management is an ongoing project, and will be indefinitely. When the project was started the deer population was approximately eight times its natural or sustainable level. Since 2010, the herd has been reduced significantly, and should be returned to what is considered a



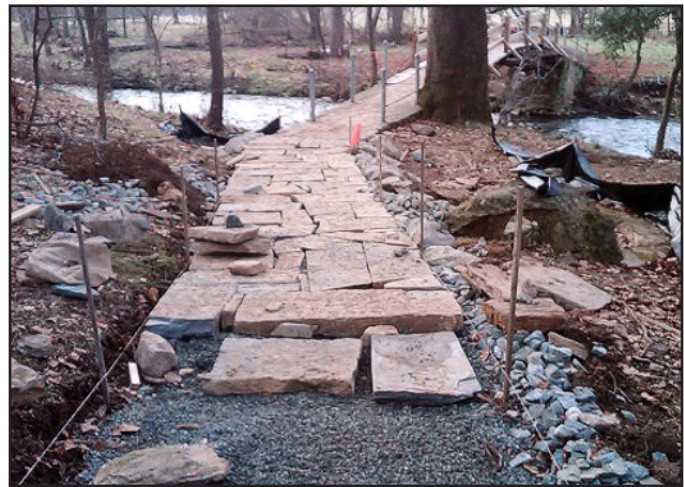
The 1913 Reading Railroad Valley Forge station under restoration, near Washington’s Headquarters. *Courtesy Kate Hammond/VFNHP*

more sustainable level by 2014. If and when safe and effective contraception methods become available, they will be employed. Until then lethal methods will continue to be used to reduce the herd. Immediate impacts can be observed: the deer herds are smaller, vegetation has started to return, and the number of automobile collisions with deer have decreased by approximately 40% compared to the number three years earlier.

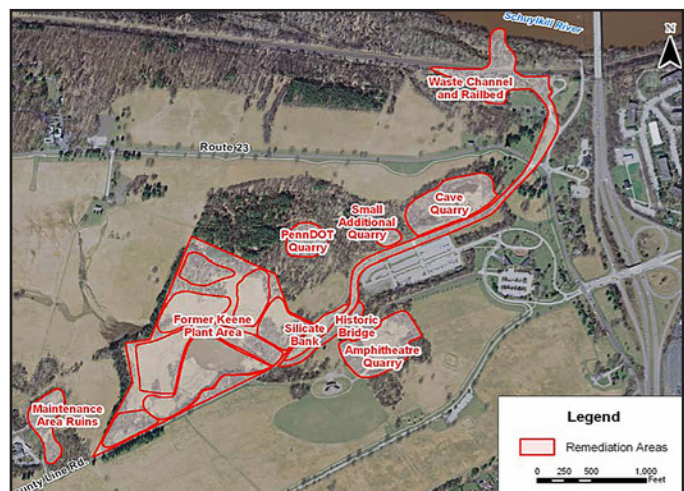
- The entire five-mile length of the very popular Joseph Plum Martin Trail was repaved.
- A trail connection was recently completed near the Knox Covered Bridge and the Philander Chase Knox Estate as part of the Park's effort to join the 26 miles of trails within the Park to other regional trails, including the Patriots Path connection to the new Chester Valley Trail.

Other projects and initiatives:

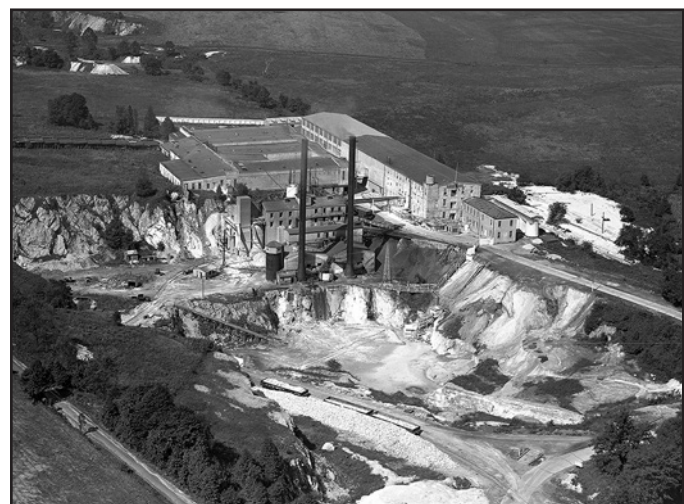
- Many people are not aware of the 115-acre Superfund site within the Park, consisting of remnants of an old industrial plant that manufactured magnesium pipe insulation and stored the waste by-products as asbestos slurry in the old limestone quarries along County Line Road. This area has been blocked off to the public since the 1990s when the NPS, while installing a telecommunication line, discovered white powder deposits which turned out to be asbestos. After testing, studies, environmental impact statements, and negotiations with the state (which ended up as the responsible party, since the dumping was allowed while the property was a state park), a shared cost agreement for remediation was worked out between the state and federal governments. A contractor was retained to begin work in April 2013 on abatement of the 115-acre site. The process will involve cutting down trees for access to the contaminated soil, which will be dug up and transported to a licensed disposal facility. The project is expected to take approximately two years, after which those areas will be reopened to the public after almost twenty years. The long term plan is to restore those areas, many of which were part of the Grand Parade where troops drilled during the Encampment. The limestone quarry areas will require many thousands of tons of clean fill to restore the original topography.



Construction of the new Knox Estate connector trail with bridge across Valley Stream. *Courtesy Kate Hammond/VFNHP*



Map of the contaminated soil remediation project area. *Courtesy Kate Hammond/VFNHP*



Looking west toward the Ehret Magnesia company plant, near County Line Rd. in what is now VFNHP. 1924 photo by Dallin Aerial Survey Company. *Courtesy Hagley Museum & Library and TEHS*



28 September 2013
National Public Lands Day 2013 - Courtesy VFNHP

Photo collection showing various views of the new Sullivan's Bridge construction project, including creation of temporary construction islands in the river. The access road to the new river bridge crosses the old Reading railroad on a new overpass close to the old Port Kennedy train station (shown below with a blue sign reading "Valley Forge Park"). Photos courtesy of John O. Senior © 2015



Installing new trail crossing signal at County Line Rd. and Rte. 23 for access to the new bridge, 12 October 2015.



12 October 2015



14 May 2015



23 September 2015



12 October 2015



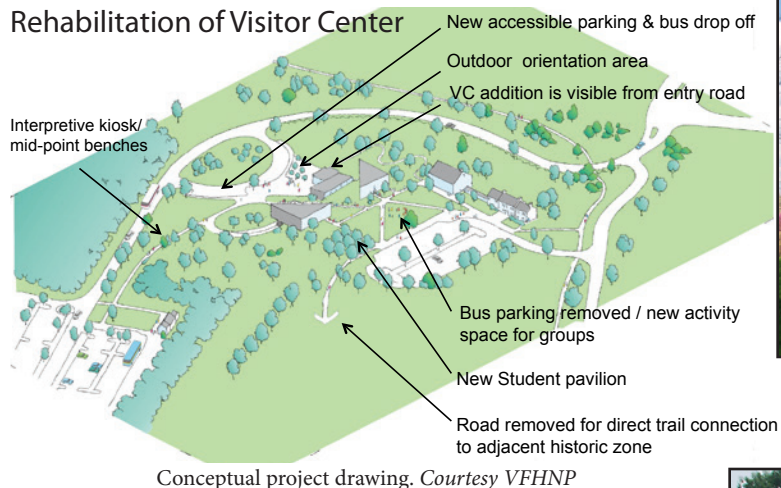
12 October 2015



12 October 2015

- The Schuylkill River Trail crosses the north side of the Park, and the current connection to that trail from the main body of the Park is a temporary cantilevered boardwalk along the Route 422 highway bridge over the river. Crossing on this narrow bridge is not a pleasant experience with high speed traffic passing by at close range and chain link fencing on both sides. After many years of working with the state and Upper Merion Township, in the spring of 2013 bidding was opened for contract proposals for the building of a new pedestrian and bicycle bridge across the Schuylkill River in the location of the old Betzwood Bridge, parallel to the 422 bridge. This new Betzwood Pedestrian Bridge (named “Sullivan’s Bridge” in September 2013) will be open only to pedestrian, bicycle, and emergency vehicle traffic, improving access to the northern third of the Park (also important during the 18th-century encampment) from the southern two-thirds, and providing a better connection with the trail system to the north of the Park. Navigating around the Park is challenging for visitors not familiar with the local road system, and this connection should enhance their experience.

Rehabilitation of Visitor Center



ABOVE: New landscaping in front of upper entrance.

BELOW: New landscaping in front of lower entrance.

28 April 2015. *Courtesy John O. Senior © 2015*

- Visitor Center area improvements have been planned.
 - Ultimately, road access will be simplified, separating Visitor Center traffic from the general traffic flow, and eliminating the current confusing loop that runs around the complex. An addition to the front of the Visitor Center and an outdoor orientation area is envisioned to make it more attractive and functional. The expanded building would provide more space for an education classroom, with exhibit areas which would allow more than the current 10% of the Park’s collection to be on display.
 - Improved pedestrian access from the lower parking area, with an interpretive kiosk along the pathway will improve the visitor experience. Removing the loop road will eliminate a barrier which currently separates the Visitor Center from the historic features nearby, and should encourage visitors to explore beyond the Visitor Center itself.
 - One of the three parking bays adjacent to the upper level of the Visitor Center, and currently used for bus parking, will be removed, and will be replaced by a “Mini-Parade” grassy area where children’s interpretive programs can be held, along with a multi-purpose student pavilion structure. This portion of the project is funded, and work will begin later in 2013.



New educational pavilion constructed in the former parking lot.

28 April 2015. *Courtesy John O. Senior © 2015*

- The other portions of the master plan, including the proposed additions to the Visitor Center, are not yet funded, and given the current federal budget climate it is hard to tell when funds may become available, but until then some of the other smaller and more affordable projects from the overall plan will be undertaken as possible, and sources for additional funding will be sought.



12 October 2015

- The Muhlenberg's Brigade area rehabilitation project will be undertaken on a "piecemeal" basis. This area is within a quarter-mile of the visitor center and is a prominent location for living history demonstrations. The plan is to build a few new huts, rebuild several more, and fill them with interpretive media. On weekends and during the summer this area is staffed with interpreters, but during other times, the interpretive media will help to provide a compelling experience. The nearby old redoubt, or defensive fortification (one of a number in the Park), is in need of rehabilitation. It was reconstructed in the 1940s by the state, but has fallen into disrepair once again. The plan is to bring it back to a state more closely resembling its original condition with earthen walls and moat, "abbatis" (sharpened wooden stakes), and replica cannon, along with view tubes toward Philadelphia (past the Valley Forge casino) to focus on the location where the British were in residence during the encampment.
- Another component of the interpretive media will be smartphone applications designed to show what the landscape might have looked like during the encampment. The contemporary landscape is beautiful, but then it would have been denuded, muddy, and stark, and some help is required for visitors trying to envision those conditions.
- Preservation and protection of the twelve encampment-era historic structures (e.g. Washington's and Varnum's headquarters), along with other significant historic structures on the property, will continue, but there are a number of other structures for which there is no administrative or visitor use, and they are being considered for leasing or demolition. Other such structures have been demolished over the last seven years.



17 June 2015

Muhlenberg Brigade huts during and after reconstruction.

Photos courtesy John O. Senior © 2015

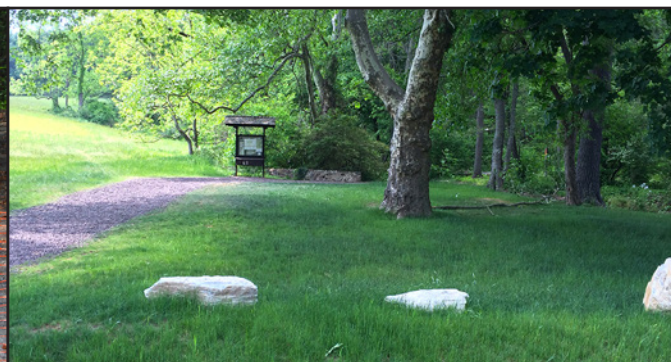
- Examples of leasing as a means of preservation:
 - The David Walker Farmstead on Thomas Road, not deemed in the GMP to be historically significant, is under a 40-year lease to the Montessori Children's House of Valley Forge, which invested millions in renovating the property. The school has done a nice job preserving many of its essential features. At the end of the lease the property will revert to the federal government, or a new lease can be drafted.

Photos courtesy John O. Senior © 2015



- A plan is in place to lease the Philander Chase Knox mansion for special events, and a request for proposals will be sent out to event management companies who can use it for events such as weddings, parties, and anniversary celebrations. The grounds are beautiful, and as envisioned, the larger events would be held outdoors, probably in temporary tent structures. Smaller events could be held indoors in ways that would not compromise the building's historic fabric. The building is currently closed to the public and houses the Park's library, which is open by appointment only. It is hoped that more public access to the facility will be possible. The leasing revenue will also help to fund the ongoing maintenance of the property.
- The Kennedy-Supplee Mansion, last used as a restaurant, fell into disrepair toward the end of the previous tenant's occupancy, and since 2005 the empty structure has continued to decline. This structure really needs a new tenant to assist with its restoration. A general request for proposals will be issued to hopefully identify a new tenant with a purpose compatible with the Park's preservation goals (e.g. another restaurant, bed and breakfast, office space, etc.).





- A new 50-car parking lot with restrooms will be built along Wilson Road near the Philander Chase Knox estate, serving as a support resource for the connections from the Park trails system with the route along Wilson Road through Chesterbrook to the new Chester Valley Trail, and replacing the current inappropriate small gravel lot at the Mt. Misery trailhead just off Yellow Springs Road. The old lot will be restored to natural conditions. A new trail will be created beside Yellow Springs Road between the road entering the Knox Estate and the historic Knox Covered Bridge, allowing safer off-road pedestrian access to the trailhead at the bridge.

Objectives

A major goal is fostering community involvement and active stewardship. The Friends of Valley Forge are a great resource, and not only raise money and volunteer, but also help to spread the word and get the community engaged in Park events and learning about the Park. The NOVA Hut Brigade devotes one weekend a month to help maintain and enhance the huts. Volunteers also help to control the invasive, non-native crayfish population in the streams. Another goal is the ongoing effort to maintain and extend a strong partnership with the Valley Forge Convention and Visitors Bureau who help to staff the Visitor Center desk and distribute information.

It is important to keep finding ways to keep the public engaged with the parks. The future of VFNHP and the other national parks depends on getting the local communities and the American public engaged with the parks and actively interested in valuing the parks.

Engaging the next generation: A significant aspect of the interpretive program is hosting school groups that come to the Park, and sending rangers out to local schools to give presentations. Public archaeology programs where Ph.D. students conduct research projects within the Park and can interact with visitors interested in observing and asking questions, and learning more about the relevance of archaeology could be offered.

Relevance: People visit parks on a much different basis than was typical 20-30 years ago. The formerly popular multi-week family vacation driving trips have been replaced by shorter duration visits with more planning done in advance, often using the Internet, smart phones, and social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter feeds from the Park, etc.), and supporting these new trends is important.

Diversity is a key issue: Walking around the Park on weekends and observing the visitor population, show the majority to be upper-middle-class white Americans, but that may not be the face of the future, and it will be important to find ways to make the visitor experience relevant and compelling to other populations. For example, 10-13% of the troops at Valley Forge during the encampment were African-American, and a better job could be done in telling that story, both at VFNHP and by the Park Service nationwide.



Clockwise from top left: Old gravel lot after closure (2014-08-20); Re-landscaped former lot (2015-05-22); New 50-car parking lot with restrooms (2014-08-20); New Knox roadside connector trail and safety crossing (2015-05-22). Photos courtesy John O. Senior © 2015

At the end of her presentation, Ms. Hammond conducted a question and answer session with the audience.

Questions and Answers

Q: Is there any information about the possibility of rerouting Route 23 around the Visitor Center?

A: Nothing specific. The reduction in transportation funding at the state level caused that project's priority to decline precipitously, but there has been some discussion of raising transportation revenue from new sources that might help increase this project's visibility.

Q: Are there any plans to reopen Lord Stirling's Quarters to the public?

A: Not at present. Currently there is no floor in that building, and it would need significant funding for restorations and staff to reopen to the public.

Q: What is the status of the Walnut Hill/Pawlings Farm/Wetherill mansion house on Pawlings Road?

A: There is some funding for stabilization (e.g. arrest deterioration) for that building in summer 2013 or 2014. A more significant restoration would cost millions, with related ongoing maintenance expenses.

Q: Does access to the trail along Valley Creek require walking along Route 252?

A: No, there is a new trail that crosses Valley Creek on a small bridge near the Philander Knox Estate and provides access near Yellow Springs Road to the trail at the covered bridge.

Q: Given the nice restoration of the Valley Forge railroad station, what might be done at the Port Kennedy Station? It was built in 1904 and renovated nicely for the bicentennial, but now has holes in the roof.

A: The same concerns with lack of funding apply in this case too. Perhaps some alternative solution (e.g. volunteers) might be employed. There are over one hundred structures within the Park, and many need maintenance for which funds are not available.

Q: Are there plans to expand the Park?

A: No. It would take legislation to do so, and there are no plans to acquire additional property at this time.

Q: Any plans for Lafayette's Quarters? It was in the family for one hundred years.

A: That is interesting. No one lives there, but part of the building is used for record storage, and part is occasionally used for temporary housing for visiting volunteer groups.

Q: Will the grass ever be cut like it was in the past?

A: No, rather than the lawn-like approach formerly used, the meadow management plan in current use focuses on the natural resource value (e.g. wildlife and plant diversity) of the open spaces, and mowing only in selected areas and where needed for visitor safety reduces the manpower demand and expense.

Q: Do you have any idea how many people take advantage of the Golden Age Pass (for people age 62 and above)?

A: Not really. Those passes are purchased once and are good for life, but they are not sold at VFNHP. Entrance fees are not collected at VFNHP, but the Park does benefit from a portion of the revenue that comes from fees collected at other parks. Approximately 80% of the fee revenue stays at the park where it is collected, but the remaining 20% is put into a fund for projects that is shared amongst all of the parks, including our Muhlenberg Brigade hut reconstruction effort.



LEFT: New paved trail alongside Yellow Springs Road near the Knox Covered Bridge. Connects to the refurbished trail leading from the Knox Parking Lot, across Valley Stream, to the Philander Knox Estate. 2015-05-22

RIGHT: New paved trail connection across Wilson Road to the new 50-car Knox Estate parking lot. 2014-08-20

Photos courtesy John O. Senior © 2015

