

North Country Scenic Byways Council

Press Release

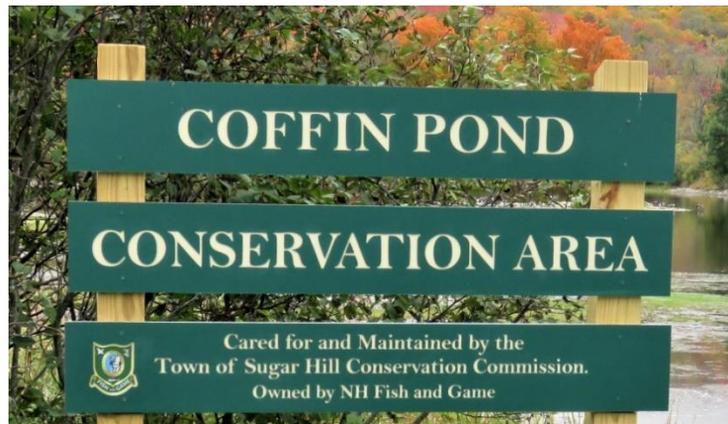
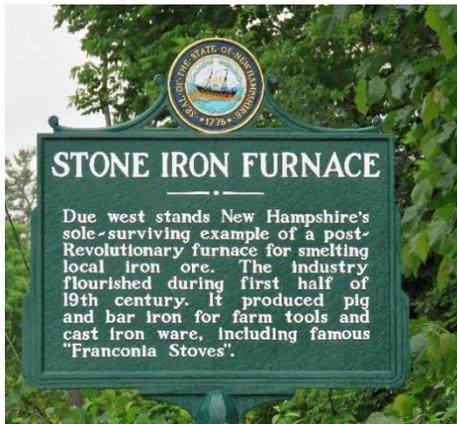
(For release on June 30, 2021)

Improvements to Pull-offs for the Stone Iron Furnace and Coffin Pond Conservation Area Are Winners of Byway Enhancement Awards

The North Country Scenic Byway Council (NCSBC) today announced the winners of its first two Byway Achievement Awards. These awards highlight outstanding community efforts taken between 2016 and 2019 to upgrade local pull-offs along the North Country's extensive network of scenic & cultural byways. Any town or group involved in such efforts was eligible to nominate their project for the "Read the Marker Award" or the "By the Byway Award" award.

The "Read the Marker Award" recognizes improvements that encourage people to pull off the byway to learn about the people or events described on one of New Hampshire's historical markers. The "By the Byway Award" recognizes improvements that encourage people to stop to photograph the scenery, take a walk, have a snack or otherwise enjoy a few minutes at a local rest area, pull-off or trailhead. Nominated projects were evaluated on criteria related to the attractiveness of the site, the activities available at the site, the nature and extent of improvements, the extent of community involvement, and demonstrated success in attracting people to the site.

The first "Read the Marker Award" goes to the town and residents of Franconia for the many improvement to the site of the Stone Iron Furnace Historical Marker on NH 18, which is part of the River Heritage Trail. The first "By the Byway Award" goes to the town and residents of Sugar Hill for the many improvements to the Coffin Pond pull-offs, which are also on NH 18.



Non-profit organizations associated with these award-winning projects will receive a cash award of \$1,000 from the Friends of the North Country Byways. The Franconia Area Heritage Council and the Franconia ArtWalk Association will share the cash award for the "Read the Marker Award," and the Sugar Hill Conservation Commission will receive the cash award for the "By the Byway Award".

The nominations for these two sites included descriptions of the work that was done, the groups involved, and the way that the enhancements have attracted visitors. In both cases, multiple groups of people were involved in making multiple kinds of improvements that have led to greater use of the sites by both residents and visitors. The following information about the projects is extracted from the nominations submitted to NCSBC.

The Stone Iron Furnace Historical Marker is located at the edge of a formal parking area next to a small park maintained by the town of Franconia on the southern side of the Gale River. The park, which is across the river from the blast finance, includes a trail that crosses a relocated iron bridge that was built in 1889. Since 2016, many improvements have been made. Franconia replaced the walkway spanning the iron bridge and replaced the informational signs in the park. Community volunteers enhanced the one-third-mile wheel-chair accessible trail leading south along the Gale River to the business center of Franconia. Profile School students constructed and donated picnic tables to the site. In 2019, the Franconia Heritage Council financed the re-painting of the Besaw Interpretive Center, which along with several information kiosks and displays details the history of Franconia's Iron Industry. The Franconia Library installed a Leave a Book/Take a Book small library at the site. In 2019, the Franconia ArtWalk has incorporated the Stone Iron Furnace site as a cultural component of the organization's promotion of the arts. Taken together these improvements have enhanced the safety, accessibility, and experience of visitors to the site.

Reviewers evaluating the stone iron furnace projects testified to the attractiveness of this site. One reviewer commented “This is by far one of my favorite historical marker stops, it provides a vast amount of information, and it is a magnet for visitors to the area.” A second reviewer said “This is one of the most accessible markers and one of the most historically interesting places in the state.” The third said the “this site has become a more popular destination for locals as well as visitors. The historical quality of the site is extremely high, as the stone iron furnace described on the historical marker is visible just across the river, there is an interpretive center at the site, and there is even another interesting historical artifact – the 1889 iron bridge.”



View of Iron Furnace from the Parking Area



View of Park from the Historical Marker

The various elements of the Coffin Pond project were equally impressive. Coffin Pond, a conservation area owned by NH Fish & Game, was created when water was diverted from the Gale River into a gravel pit used as part of the construction of I93 through Franconia and Sugar Hill. Although a rough pull-off from NH 18 allowed access to the pond, there were multiple, deeply rutted routes through a marshy area that had deteriorated over the years into an unattractive nuisance. Then, in 2015, New Hampshire Fish & Game allowed the Town of Sugar Hill to make a series of improvements resulting in a formal, well-drained and well-defined parking area for several cars. Mike Warren volunteered to assist the town's road agent in adding large, flat rocks so that visitors could sit along the shoreline. The Conservation Commission removed invasive plants, installed native plants to stabilize the ground around the parking area, and opened up views to the pond from the highway. NH F&G also allowed Jim Snyder and members of the Conservation Commission to create a hiking trail from state- to town-owned property between the Gale River and the pond. In 2018, the town entered into a 10-year lease of the property from NH F&G so that the town could maintain improvements to the access area.

Once the site was made more inviting, it attracted visitors. People stop to have their lunch or take a break; families come for a picnic; a boat launch area allows access for kayaking or fishing. Birdwatchers come to see flocks of ducks feeding in the pond or the eagle that has nested by the pond. In winter, enthusiastic skaters shovel off the snow for pick-up hockey games.

One reviewer said “I went out to Coffin Pond this weekend after reading the narrative. I had no idea that this was the outcome of excavation of gravel for the I-93 project. Fascinating! I was always aware that it was a popular stop for fishermen and the occasional visitor to just park and enjoy.” The second reviewer noted that “This site has come a long way from what I recall from my first visit 25+ years ago” and suggested that additional signage would “let byway travelers know that this is a place worth visiting.” The third reviewer attested to “the increased usage of the site which attracts people (and birds) in all seasons. ... This site is clearly an outstanding example of a pull-off where there are many things to do, and this project is exactly the kind of low-cost community project that NCSBC is trying to promote.”



Newly Completed Formal Parking, Flat Sitting Stones, and Landscaping at Coffin Pond
(October 17, 2016)



View of Coffin Pond Access Area from the end of the new trail along the Gale River
(October 4, 2016)

NCSBC is currently accepting nominations for Byway Enhancement Awards for projects completed in 2020 or 2021. Once again, towns, historical museums, conservation commissions, other organizations or groups of volunteers can nominate their projects for either the “Read the Marker Award” or the “By the Byway Award”. Nominees can indicate one or more non-profit organizations that would receive or share the cash award of \$1,000 if they win the award. Nomination forms, which can be downloaded from NCSBC’s website (www.northcountrybyways.org) should be submitted to klamb@nccouncil.org by September 27, 2021.