

The Star-Ledger

At Waterloo, it really does take a village

By [Mark Di Ionno / The Star-Ledger](#)

on September 21, 2014 at 7:15 AM, updated September 21, 2014 at 8:40 AM

Next month, there will be a wedding at Waterloo Village. The ceremony will take place in the Waterloo United Methodist Church, built in 1859. There will be pictures in front of the waterfalls of the canal lock (1831) and there will be a cocktail hour in the grist mill (circa 1830s).

“One thing the bride wanted was to see the (mill) wheel turn,” said Robyn Bell, who works for the new catering company at Waterloo. “We’re going to set up a bar down there.”

The paddle wheel is working, the grist mill is restored and it even has a new roof. The caterer, Jeffrey A. Miller Catering of Philadelphia, is also polishing up the meeting house and banquet hall.

“This will be our first wedding, and we have two more planned for the spring,” Bell said.

Weddings at Waterloo? Who knew?

This weekend, the village is hosting the second annual Highlands Festival at Waterloo, complete with a road rally, canal boat rides, bluegrass music, fly-fishing classes and workshops on Native American life at a recreated Lenape community.

“Waterloo Village is many things to many people,” said Andrea Proctor, the state park’s interpretive specialist. That’s “village historian,” to us laymen.

True enough. Over the years – make that centuries – Waterloo has been an iron forge (1700s), a canal village (1800s), a hobo camp (during the Depression, after the village was abandoned) and an arts center. Age alone makes Waterloo Village historic; the remnants of its industries and architecture of its buildings make it a treasure. It has thrived and failed in various incarnations over four centuries and, yes, it has been many things to many people over many years.

Situated along the Musconetcong River where it meets placid Waterloo Lake at the base of Allamuchy Mountain, it is place of great natural beauty and solitude, whether on foot or navigating a canoe or kayak.

For generations , this is the place where school kids have walked watched a blacksmith pound red-hot iron into a horseshoe or learned how Native Americans lived off the land . When those kids grew up, they returned to the arts center to to see big-name acts: Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson, the Beach Boys. The Dodge Poetry Festival and New Jersey Symphony Orchestra were summer mainstays.

But then came problems. Big plans for an amphitheater fell through and there were charges of misspent public money. Historic preservation fell to the bottom of the state's priority list for spending as money got tight . The division of parks and forestry no longer had enough funds for maintenance , and buildings were closed in 2006, re-enactors in period costumes were let go and most of the programming came to a halt.

Waterloo Village appeared to be heading down the same path as so much of New Jersey's historic inventory over the years: demolition by neglect.

But now it's coming back, and while the signs of deterioration are still there in peeling paint and leaking roofs battened down by sheaths of plastic, there is renewed interest in the place again.

“We're at a turning point here,” said Steve Ellis, the park service's regional superintendent. “Waterloo is now very high on our priority list. We have something here, an intact canal village, you can't find anywhere else in the country.”

Any time a part of New Jersey history is saved, it's because of the passion of individuals or “friends of” groups.

Waterloo has no shortage of heroes, starting with Proctor, the village historian, who grew up in Byram, and visited often as a girl. The Scandinavian Festivals, the Lenape Village, the canal boat rides pulled by horses.

“My mother always brought us,” she said. “It was just something we did.”

“She's the right person for the place,” said Ellis, her boss. “She understands it. She knows what it was and what it can be again.”

Elliot Ruga of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition , a group dedicated to promoting and protecting the New Jersey Highlands, said that until Proctor arrived “there seemed like there was no real plan to bring people to the village. It's good we have someone there who understands the historical importance of the village and the entire Highlands area.”

Proctor isn't alone in her ambitions for Waterloo, however . For the past eight years, the

volunteers from the 700-member Canal Society of New Jersey have propped up Waterloo Village with programming, and the Friends of Waterloo have raised money to stabilize or repair the buildings.

“We’ve put hundreds and hundreds of volunteer hours into the place,” said Joseph Macasek, president of the Canal Society.

The society holds “Canal Days” 10 times a year (there are three left this season on Sept. 27, and Oct. 11 and 25), where it recreates village life, including boat rides. The society’s museum is also on the grounds.

“That’s our job and now the state is stepping up to plate,” Macasek said. “We have a great deal of synergy with them.”

Macasek said the greatest challenge facing Waterloo now “is letting people know it 's open.”

Ellis said the new banquet vendor will help. “When we bring people into the catering facility, maybe they’ll take some time to walk around and see the rest of the village.”

Proctor said that “technically, the park was never closed. People still came to hike or walk their dogs.”

But for too many years Waterloo Village was a little like a ghost town. Now, there is life again, and the day may come when this old canal town can attract visitors in the six-figure range once again. The National Canal Museum in Easton, Pa., draws 250,000, and while it has an impressive collection and an authentic-looking canal boat that offers visitors rides, it doesn’t have an intact village. It also doesn’t have Route 80 taking people to its doorstep.

“Waterloo has so much potential,” said Margaret Hickey, a board member of Preservation New Jersey, a non-profit group that promotes preservation. “I would like to see the state commit even more resources to it.”

Ellis says he can see the day when the village is completely restored and fully functional as a recreated canal town.

“It will take awhile, but I think we’ll see that kind of renaissance.”

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