

The History of Nelson Ledges

**Lou Horvath
Park Historian
Punderson State Park**

INTRODUCTION

The Manuscript, The History of Nelson Ledges, was the result of a two year study and research by the author as a part of the Volunteer In Parks (VIP) program of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks and Recreation. The research and study took place during the summers of 1986 and 1987. The manuscript was written in February 1988.

The research was sufficiently extensive to indicate that the manuscript contains all of the known information of the socialological history at Nelson Ledges and the hotels which served that site. Very little was documented on this subject and all of the written material such as letters, business papers and hotel registers had disappeared. Most of the details of the operation of the Cascade House was acquired through the interviews of Mr. James W. Chalker and Mrs. Hazel C. Cline who were alive at the time the hotel was in operation. Other information was gathered from books, newspaper clippings and materials in historical society files.

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A great deal has been written of the geological history of Nelson Ledges and, on that subject, this can not add significantly to what is already in print. But the sociological history of this area is not well documented and little has been written about what transpired there. This is the summary of a research into the subject.

The history of Nelson Ledges is decidedly linked to the history of the surrounding area; particularly the village of Nelson. The ledges started as a recreational area, first by the inhabitants of Nelson and then of Garrettsville, Hiram and other nearby communities. In time, people came from more distant places such as Akron and Cleveland to enjoy the beauty of the Ledges and the hospitality of the hotels.

Of course the earliest inhabitants of the area were the Indians of whom traces have been found as of arrow heads, spear points and ax heads, in the rocky recesses of the ledges. Besides these, charcoal traces of ancient fires were evident. So we know that Indians used the area before the coming of the Europeans; either for hunting, recreation or for habitation. It is easy to imagine that the overhanging ledges and shallow caves gave the early Indians shelter from the elements; as it is indicated by the ashen remains of ancient campfires. At any rate, it is a fact that the Indians were the first people to enjoy the beauty of the Ledges.

But these Indians were not the ones that the settlers found upon arrival. The earlier Indians had already disappeared and were succeeded by relatively newly arrived tribes from the south and east; mostly Delaware, Shawnee, Miami, Delaware, Seneca, Mohawk, Cajuga and a sprinkling of other minor tribes. By the time the first settlers arrived the larger part of the Indian population had already left the area. Those who remained lived in isolated family groups or very small villages scattered throughout Portage County area. There does not appear to have been contiguous tribal areas but rather the Indians were scattered randomly. They were trying to survive by hunting and farming but the wild game was becoming limited and the lands they occupied were rapidly claimed by the incoming white settlers and land speculators. It was becoming increasingly evident to them that their days in that locality were numbered and that they would be soon joining their brothers in the west.

The Indians were forced to move west after a series of defeats in battles before and after the Revolutionary War. This was made more imperative as the wild game in the area became depleted. A few remained until they were forced out or killed off.

Although they did not constitute a serious menace at the time the first settlers arrived there were some tense times later caused mostly by the behavior of some of the settlers. This was very evident in the historical accounts of the settlement of Nelson township. It contrasted sharply with the experiences of the settlers who settled the Geauga county area to the north where the settlers seemed to get along well with their Indian neighbors.

Prior to 1802 Portage County and Nelson township were a part of Trumble County with Jefferson as the County Seat. The establishment of Portage County was on June 7, 1807 when it was organized as an administrative district. The following year, Revenna was founded and it became the County Seat. The original owners of Portage County who acquired their claims through the Connecticut Land Company, were: Urial Holmes, Ephraim Root, Timothy Burr and Appolos Hitchcock; reportedly slave owners. Burr was the principle owner. Nelson township was owned mostly by Urial Holms, a land speculator, who was quite anxious to sell the land but found few settlers willing or able to pay the price he asked. In the spring of 1800, he went to Youngstown, then a small, young settlement on the southeast corner of the Western Reserve, to arrange for and supervise the survey of Nelson township into lots and to look for men to assist in the survey and for settlers to buy his land.

He came upon the Mills brothers, sons of Deacon Ezekiel Mills of Becket, Massachusetts who had started out for the Western Reserve with two ox drawn covered wagons but had depleted their money by the time they reached Youngstown. They were stranded in the town; penniless and looking for a way to proceed westward. Urial Holms hired them to assist the surveyor Atwater. He promised them help in settling on his land in Nelson township.

Delawn Mills, who was 24, (had married at 16) and his wife had three children by the time they arrived at Youngstown. Asabel Mills and his wife had one child and brother Isaac Mills (19) was single. Delaun moved into a cabin on 100 acres that Holms gave him, presumably for services. This was in Nelson township on the only road through the township and just west of what later became Nelson Center. It is of interest that this cabin was the first habitation in the area and was constructed by surveyor Atwater in the spring of 1800 as a shelter and storehouse for his crew. Delaun used this cabin during the first year. It is on record that Delaun (also known as Captain Mills) produced the first wheat crop in the township (43 Bushels) in 1801 from 3 pecks of seed sown in his turnip patch.

Asabel settled on 100 acres in 1801 on the north-south road through Nelson Center where he resided for a time. As of the spring of 1803 these were the only inhabitants of Nelson township.

Whether they had time to visit and enjoy the beauty of the nearby Nelson Ledges is questionable because life was hard in those days and most of each day had to be devoted to survival.

But it is also very probable that they had knowledge of the ledges and had seen the rock formations a few times.

It is known that the Mills brothers had a great deal of interaction with their Indian neighbors. Unlike the settlers in Geauga County, the Mills brothers, especially Delaun, were very prejudiced against Indians and took every opportunity to take advantage of them. Delaun sold them whiskey and rum. When they became intoxicated he would steal their furs or anything else of value.

The Mills brothers did a lot of boasting about how great they were as Indian fighters. It is doubtful that they killed as many Indians as they claimed; one each day. But they did deceive them at every opportunity and gave them a hard time. They, as the first settlers, set a very poor example for the others and probably helped to set the negative attitude in the community toward the Indians.

This was not lost upon the Indians who soon took an antagonistic attitude toward the settlers. There were several instances of bloodshed as when a John Diver cheated Nickshaw, an Indian, on a horse trade deal. Nickshaw, after trying in vain to get justice, arranged with his brother-in-law, Mohawk, to kill Diver but Mohawk made an error and tried to kill Daniel Diver, John's brother, instead. Daniel was only wounded and Mohawk fled but Johathan Williams, another settler, killed Nickshaw. Similar stories of trouble between the Indians and settlers in Nelson township are on record. It is probable that if there had been more Indians in the township the settlers would have suffered reprisals.

The first court case tried in the area was Delaun Mills vs James Knowlton. This was an attempt to recover the price of a bear. Mills owned a bear trap and loaned it to Knowlton who baited and set it. When John caught a bear in the trap and killed it he took it home to process it for food. Mills objected claiming that the bear was his because it was caught with his trap. The judge awarded Mills twenty five cents for the use of his trap and gave the bear to Knowlton. However, the two had to share the court costs.

Captain Delaun Mills operated the first tavern and inn in Nelson township but he neglected to get a license to serve liquor. For a time he got away with it but one day he was arrested and arraigned in the Trumble County court. He pleaded guilty and Judge Kirtland (who had been a steady customer in Deleon tavern) remarked to Judge Pease, who was trying the case, that he did not consider the defendant guilty within the meaning of the statutes. Whereupon Judge Pease told Mills to change his plea.

"May it please the court, your Honor, I am not guilty," said Mills and he was promptly discharged.

The first persons to be born in Nelson township were Diantha Mills, daughter of Asabel Mills, in October, 1801 and followed by Harmon Mills, son of Delaun Mills, in November. The first deaths among the settlers were registered in September 1804 when the infant sons of Colonel Garrett and of Mabel Mills died. The first adult death registered was that of Colonel John Garrett who died at the age of 46. The graves of many of the early settlers, including the Mills family, are in the community cemetery on the west edge of Nelson Center.

In 1803 a number of settlers arrived from Massachusetts and Connecticut. These were Stephen Baldwin, Benjamin Stow, John Bancroft, Daniel Owen, Stiles, Thomas Kennedy and Asa Truesdale. At the end of the year, Nelson township had seven families. Isaac Mills had returned to Connecticut and came back on foot in 1804 with his friend Origen Adams. The Bancroft and Baldwin families ultimately settled on land at Nelson Ledges.

There were more arrivals in 1804. Col John Garrett came from Delaware and he went on to settle Garrettsville. Johann Noah and Abraham Dyson also arrived from Delaware. In 1805 John Tinker and Nathaniel Bancroft came. In 1810 Charles Johnson arrived from Connecticut. Portage County was organized on June 7, 1807. The migration of settlers continued and increased after the War of 1812 so that there were 35 families in the township area by 1815.

Religion was not entirely absent from the area. Asabel Mills conducted services for a short time and Reverend William West, a Baptist minister, came to serve in 1807. The first church services were held at various homes and the first church was organized in the home of Abraham Noah by the Reverend Thomas G. Jones.

Education came to Nelson township somewhat before the church. The first school was taught by Hannah Baldwin at the Center in 1804. Two years later Oliver Mills took over the school master job. Finally higher education came upon the scene; on January 6, 1832 the Nelson Academy was founded at the Center with trustees: Charles Goodsell, O. Everest, Eldred Mills and Josiah Mills. By 1884, the school consisted of 8 buildings with a total value at \$5,000. The average pay of the teachers ranged from \$22 to \$36 per month and the enrollment was 88 boys and 91 girls.

The first wedding to be held in the township was in the spring of 1804 when Anne Kennedy married Enoch Judson of Mantua. Very soon afterward, a sister of Anne Kennedy married Joseph Norse, a lawyer from Burton.

During 1811 to 1812 there was a large influx of people from Connecticut. Wills Clark, Bridsy Clark, Theron Colton, David Beardsley, Titus Bonny, Hezekel Bonny, John Hannah, David Goodsell and a large part of the Hopkins family arrived to settle in the township. Then, the arrivals ceased until the end of the War of 1812. In 1815 there were 35 families living in the township.

Nelson township grew rapidly after the War of 1812 and by 1840 there were 1,398 people living there. By that time Artemus Bancroft had established a tavern and inn north east of the Center, probably near the Ledges. Later, he constructed the first hotel and community center at the Ledges, the Grotto. This was located on the west side of the road going through the Ledges and just in front of them.

The Ledges area had become an attraction. First for the township residents and then for people as far away as Cleveland. Picnics, outings, reunions and other social activities were held there and of course many just went there to climb about the rocky outcroppings. This has always been somewhat dangerous because the geological formation was treacherous. It was easy to slip on the crumbling rock surfaces. There were many accidents and occasional deaths when people misjudged their ability or the terrain. In addition, the rocks were full of rattle snakes. It is said that one settler built a home on one of the larger rock outcroppings above the Ledges and when they lit their first fire in the fireplace the snakes came out in great numbers.

There was great excitement for a short time in 1870 when someone claimed to find gold in the ledges. A gold rush developed quickly but it died just as suddenly when the first analysis showed that the supposed gold was only iron sulfide or "fools gold".

There was a great epidemic in Nelson township in 1842 which caused many deaths and probably was one of the factors responsible for the decline in township population so that by 1880 there were only 890 people living in the township.

Shortly before the Civil War the Grotto hotel caught fire and burned to the ground. For a few years all picnics and social gatherings were held in the open. In 1868 construction on another hotel was started on the east side of the road and opposite the site which the Grotto had occupied. The Cascade House, which was named for the waterfall in the ledges, was opened in 1869 and quickly became the pride of the neighborhood. The Ledges area became more popular than ever. Many family reunions, social and church groups came to hold their gatherings at the Cascade House. It was a beautiful site with well trimmed grass all around the hotel and a scenic water pool and fountain facing it on the opposite side of the road; probably on the site of the earlier Grotto Hotel.

The Nelson township reunions were held regularly here. The hotel, originally two stories, had a public sitting room, a small store for picnic necessities, a public dining room, a kitchen, an office and the living quarters for the manager on the first floor. On the second floor there were two rows of guest rooms for summer use. A short time later, a third floor was added to serve as a dance hall. It was of unique construction. The original structure probably did not have enough strength to support the dance floor so the third floor was built to be self supporting. The dance floor itself was built to have a spring to it which proved a novelty for the dancers of that day.

There was an Independence Ball held at the Cascade House on Friday Evening July 2, 1880; tickets were \$2.25 per person. At that time A. F. Hannah was the proprietor. A short newspaper item during 1885 called the interest of its readers to the Cascade House as "a good hotel at the center of interest and a great place of resort for pleasure seekers and curiosity hangers." It seems that the Ledges were also a romantic site for couples; some of whom subsequently married.

Unfortunately, we don't have details on the personalities and activities that took place at the Cascade House until the turn of the century. About that time members of the Chalker family were involved in the operation of the hotel. A Mr. and Mrs. Smith, related to the Chalker family owned and operated the hotel at the turn of the century. It is from the surviving members of this family, who took part in the operation of the Cascade House, that we get first hand information on the social activities there.

Mr James William Chalker (95) and his sister Hazel Chalker Cline (97) recall the events when the Cascade House was still in its prime. Their aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Smith operated the hotel and part of the Chalker family assisted. Mr. Chalker as well as Mrs. Cline remembered the social events clearly. There were dances or balls at every opportunity, especially at holidays. New Years eve, Easter, May day, 4th of July, Harvest and Christmas holidays were always observed with balls. Besides these, there were countless picnics, family reunions, outings and other social activities at the Ledges. The Cascade House always had a part in these and also served as the principle hostelry in Nelson township. It was a fashionable and pleasant place to vacation at for urban dwellers from places like Cleveland. The hotel was regarded with much civic pride by the natives and they took their out-of-town guests to see it and have dinner in its dining room.

Although there was no public transportation to Nelson Ledges and the hotel, it was relatively easy to reach it; even during the early days before the advent of the automobile. The Erie Railroad main line ran through nearby Garrettsville and stopped there to pick up and discharge passengers.

There were several trains each day so that the prospective hotel guest would have no difficulty in making a comfortable and pleasant trip to Garrettsville. A hired buggy, hack or other horse drawn vehicle would transport the guests to the hotel which was but a few miles north east of Garrettsville.

The hotel was busiest during the spring, summer and autumn months; during the winter guests from outside Portage County seldom came to stay overnight. However, it was still in operation and host to festivities such as the annual Christmas ball and the New Year Eve festivities. Then, the kitchen was famous for its home cooked meals and, those who had the money, came to the dining room to enjoy a repast.

Mrs. Cline had memories of the hotel from the turn of the century; Mr. Chalker from about 1910. According to their accounts the balls were indeed festive occasions. The music would be supplied by some local or, if possible, musicians from Cleveland. Mrs. Cline remembers a Cleveland five piece band which played on a number of occasions. The dancing would start early in the evening and continue until midnight when a recess was called and everyone went down to the dining room on the first floor for dinner. The dining room had rows of picnic type tables set end to end and set with plates and cutlery. Mrs. Cline remembered that, while still a teenager, she helped her parents by serving at the tables in the dining room. Her mother did much of the cooking in those days while her Dad ran the cloak room and office. The typical menu for dinner was a choice of roast beef, roast pork or chicken pie. She said the meals were delicious and people came from miles to eat there.

Mrs Cline loved to dance so she took part of the festivities in the ball room as soon as she completed her chores at setting up her assigned tables in the dining room. She danced until almost twelve when she hurried to the first floor to begin waiting on the tables. After the meal, she would clear her tables and hurry back to the ball room for more dancing which continued until three or four or even until daybreak.

Prior to the coming of the automobile horse drawn vehicles were used exclusively to bring guests to the hotel from the nearest rail connection; usually Garrettsville. The Erie Rail Road was the favored transportation from Cleveland, Warren or Youngstown. At the turn of the century the Cleveland and Eastern Traction Company established interurban service from Cleveland to Garrettsville via Chigrin Falls. The branch to Garrettsville left the main line at Steels Corners and passed through Hiram before reaching Garrettsville. The rails dipped into the valley and Garrettsville to terminate in the town. But technical difficulties prevented the cars from negotiating the hill upon their return trip therefore the terminal was moved to the top of the hill; some distance from the center of town.

For this reason, it was never really competitive with Erie for the passenger traffic into Garrettsville; especially for passengers going to the Cascade House or Nelson Ledges. Although the more frequent daily runs of the interurban may have caused some people to choose it rather than the Erie.

Much of the Nelson Ledges land was purchased by the Silicon Sand Company in 1908 and part of it was turned into a sand quarry. Blasting by the Sand Company eliminated Cascade Falls and part of the beauty of Nelson Ledges disappeared forever. The State of Ohio desiring to preserve the remaining beauty of the Ledges started to purchase the land in 1920 with the first parcel and continuing to the third purchase in 1948. The land and Ledges were developed as the Nelson Ledges State Park. For a time there was camping but that was terminated in time and the park was dedicated to serve as a recreational area for picnics and outings.

The Cascade House continued to serve the public until the mid 1950's when declining interest and use made it unprofitable. Its decline had been gradual from the first two decades of the twentieth century and by the time it closed its doors it was very evident that its usefulness as a hostelry was at an end. The old hotel was taken over by the State of Ohio which tried unsuccessfully to make use of it but deterioration and vandalism took its toll. The Portage County Historical Society took interest in the structure for a short time with the intent of using it as a museum. It spent considerable money to renew the roof but the condition of the structure was such that much more money was needed to complete the restoration. This, the Society did not have and they had to give up the project. Finally in 1980 the old Cascade House was demolished by the State and a very interesting part of Nelson Ledges ceased to be.

Nelson Ledges State Park continues to be popular as a recreational site; as a picnic site, for family and group outings and for an opportunity to explore the interesting rock formations. However, the Cascade House and the Cascade are no longer to be found there, now they exist only in our memories.

THE HISTORY OF NELSON LEDGES

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