

17

RAVENSWOOD PARK HIKE

KEY AT-A-GLANCE
INFORMATION**LENGTH:** 4.56 miles**CONFIGURATION:** Loop**DIFFICULTY:** Moderate**SCENERY:** Hemlock and hardwood forest and views of a lake, historic quarry, and magnolia swamp**EXPOSURE:** Mostly shaded**TRAFFIC:** Light**TRAIL SURFACE:** The carriage roads are covered with finely crushed stone; all other trails are of packed earth, except for stretches of boardwalk.**HIKING TIME:** 2 hours**SEASON:** Open year-round 8 a.m.–sunset**ACCESS:** Free**MAPS:** Posted at the entrance**FACILITIES:** None**SPECIAL COMMENTS:** The park's rare swamp magnolias bloom in early spring, making this an ideal time to visit.**WHEELCHAIR TRAVERSABLE:** The carriage roads of Ravenswood are wheelchair traversable.**DRIVING DISTANCE TO BOSTON****COMMON:** 34 miles

IN BRIEF

Tucked into a corner of Gloucester, Ravenswood Park offers miles of hiking through a landscape left largely untouched since mass transit came in the form of a stagecoach. Following centuries-old footpaths, carriage roads, and a boardwalk through a magnolia swamp, this hike rambles through woods to reach Fernwood Lake before passing the cabin site of “The Hermit of Ravenswood” and two granite quarries.

DESCRIPTION

As rich in history as in rare and beautiful species of flora and fauna, these 600 acres have been maintained in their natural state thanks to the inspired vision and generosity of the Gloucester businessman Samuel Elwell Sawyer.

Gloucester's Ravenswood Park would never have been had the City of Boston not foiled Sawyer's original plan of establishing the park in Boston's neighborhood, West Roxbury. In 1853, Sawyer and his business partner James Houghton, purchased a 73-acre parcel known as “Old Sumner Farm,” quickly registered the land as “Monteglade” and set to work realizing their vision of 22 houses situated on a wooded park called Ravenswood after the castle in Sir Walter Scott's *The Bride*

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UTM Zone (WGS84) 19T

Easting: 360639

Northing: 4716890

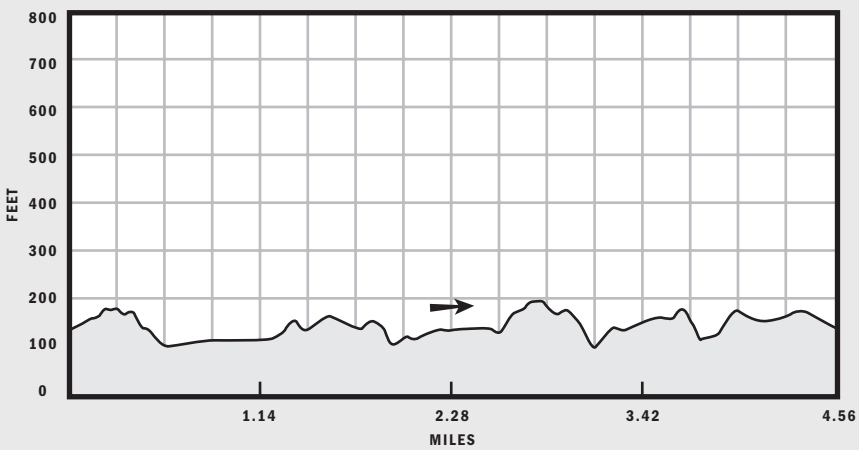
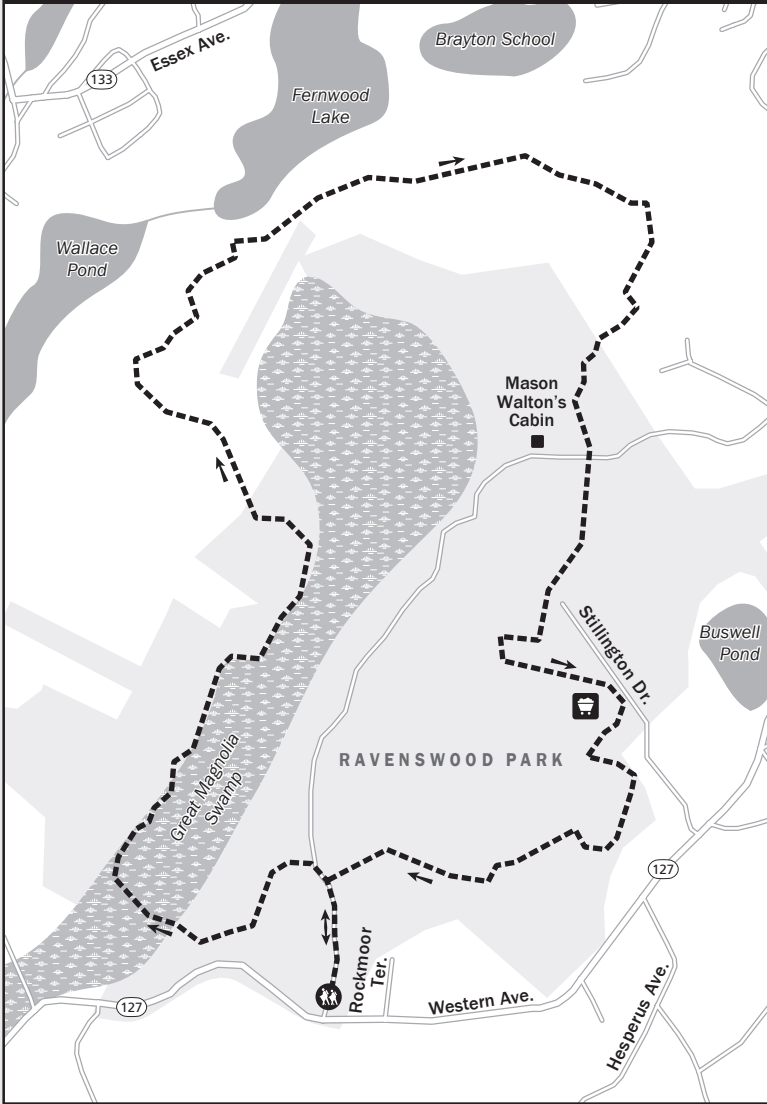
Latitude: N 42° 35' 31"

Longitude: W 70° 41' 54"

Directions

From Boston, take Storrow Drive East, following signs for US 1 north. Merge onto US 1 north via the ramp on the left to cross the Tobin Bridge. From US 1 north merge onto I-95 north. Take Exit 14 (MA 133) and follow it 3 miles east toward Gloucester to MA 127. Turn right onto MA 127 and follow it 2 miles to the entrance.

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Magnolia Swamp is named for the rare and beautiful Sweetbay Magnolia.

of *Lammermoor*. But in short order Boston claimed rights to the property by eminent domain and with strokes of a pen Sawyer and Haughton's Monteglade was lost.

Shocked by the seizure and what they felt was grossly insufficient compensation, Sawyer and Haughton sued the city. Subsequently, the court ruled in Boston's favor, virtually bankrupting Haughton. Defeated but not deterred, Sawyer turned his sights from Boston to Gloucester, where he quickly set about acquiring land near his family's homestead at Freshwater Cove.

Sawyer recognized opportunity in the vast acreage to the west of the town center. Made up of woodlots grown in since the adoption of coal furnaces, the region included an old stagecoach road that has long since been replaced by the Eastern Railroad, the cellar remains of a slaughterhouse, and a 1777 vintage "pest house" built to curtail repeated outbreaks of smallpox. Negotiating deal after deal, Sawyer acquired a total of 205 acres for what amounted to \$2,969. But, as Sawyer's holdings grew, so too did his frustrations. When the town's fire department failed to adequately respond when fire consumed his woods, and his cousin stonewalled him, by demanding an exorbitant price for a lot, Sawyer halted his campaign. The shooting of his dog in an altercation was the final straw.

Yet, despite his disillusionment, Sawyer's altruistic passion remained as strong as ever. When he died suddenly two years later, the town's paper featured his will in its entirety on its front page. In it, Sawyer instructed that nearly his

entire fortune of \$350,000 was to go to charity. Of this, \$60,000 was to be held in trust to provide for the maintenance and expansion of Ravenswood Park. In 1993, the park trustees entrusted the property to the Trustees of Reservations. An ongoing success, the park continues to grow.

From the parking lot, hike northwest on Old Salem Road—the gravel road that bore Lowe’s stagecoaches traveling to and from Boston in the 1700s. Running parallel with stone walls, the path soon meets Magnolia Swamp Trail on the left. Follow this narrower trail west under hemlock boughs, uphill to start, then downhill as it winds southwest.

If hiking in June, you will find the mountain laurel in full bloom. Heavy with white blossoms touched with pink, these elegant bushes dress the woods as if for a formal occasion. As the trail descends to wetland, the density of laurel increases.

Arriving at Magnolia Swamp, the trail transitions to boardwalk as it continues across the wetland. Lush moss grows on the edges of the narrow path, and thick shrubs close in on the sides. After taking you a fair distance through this wet zone alive with butterflies and frogs, the boardwalk terminates at the southeastern end of the swamp. Here you step onto earth again and continue along the granite ledge rimming the wetland.

A short distance ahead, the ledge gives way to an obstreperous chunk of granite protruding from the upland. The only way around is to ford the swamp or take the boardwalk built to accommodate the rock’s complex contours and the trees growing from its crevices.

Reconnecting with the ledge, the trail continues below hemlocks and beeches. Blue jays flit in the foliage, scolding as you pass. Looking to your right, you may notice nylon netting enclosing a section of greenery. This fencing protects the tender shoots of sweetbay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*) from grazing deer. Undulating northward, the trail reaches a junction where the Magnolia Swamp Trail turns to the right and the Fernwood Lake Trail starts on the left.

Pick up the Fernwood Lake Trail, hiking northeast, and leave the wetland behind. Following blue markers, this trail passes through property outside Ravenswood’s borders.

Crossing hillocks dotted with granite boulders of every shape and size, the trail passes through young beech groves varied by sassafras and laurel. Shortly, the narrow path spills into a wide clearing where trails radiate in all directions. Looking across to the right, you will see a bold blue dot marking the way. Continue on the Fernwood Trail to, travel east on what is an old carriage road.

Passing abandoned farmland on the left reclaimed by oaks and maples, the carriage road rolls on to soon reach a T-intersection. Blue arrows painted on a beech point east and west. Follow the right-pointing arrow and hike eastward. Through woods to the left, you will see the waters of Fernwood Lake. On this stretch of road, keep an eye out for exposed stone worn by the horse-drawn traffic of Jonathan Lowe’s stagecoach company which by 1805, ran multiple trips daily to Boston and Gloucester and stops in between.

Turning east, the trail bends away from the lake, which is still visible to your left. Aside from some dips and short climbs, the trail follows a level route, usually paralleled by ramshackle stone walls. Several paths split off on either side, but follow blue markers to stay with the Fernwood Lake Trail. After passing a path that bears uphill to the left, you will notice that the trail is marked with both orange and blue; pay this no mind.

Arriving at a clearing, hike left onto a dirt road to pass great piles of granite before crossing to the right where blue markers point the way to Ravenswood's border.

Back inside the park, the trail descends a hill thick with slender birch and beech saplings. Reaching lower ground, you will encounter patches of mud and giant lichen-covered boulders.

Before long, the Fernwood Lake Trail comes to a four-way intersection where it meets Old Salem Road and Evergreen Road. It was near here that Mason A. Walton, better known as "The Hermit" kept house in a small log cabin he built with the landowner's permission in 1884.

A most gregarious hermit, Walton was highly educated and, prior to moving to the woods of Gloucester for health reasons, fully engaged in civic matters. Until the death of his wife and only child in their home state of Maine, Walton had campaigned vigorously for the Democratic Party and Maine's "Greenbackers." Far from reclusive, he sought communion with all walks of life. Every morning for the 33 years he spent living in these woods, Walton walked to town for breakfast and to sell goods he made from woodland plants.

He welcomed all visitors and received literally thousands, as is documented in the guest book he kept. Two of his most notable callers were a black snake that he fed saucers of milk, and Concord native Henry Thoreau. He and Thoreau had much in common, both being naturalists and writers. Two of Walton's published books are *A Hermit's Wild Friends* and *Proof That Animals Reason*.

From the intersection, continue hiking southeast on Evergreen Road. This broad gravel route, like Old Salem Road, once served horse-drawn carriages. Sweeping through hemlock woods, this elegant way soon leads to Quarry Road. Turn left here to take up this new route eastward. Pass the Ledge Hill Trail and continue a short distance farther to arrive at the quarry and another entrance to the park. Long abandoned, the water-filled quarry now functions as a grand home to rare amphibians.

Follow the narrow Ledge Hill Trail as it traipses up the left side of the man-made pool then makes a southern retreat into the woods. At the next junction, marked 9, turn left to follow a somewhat vague trail running downhill through a madness of glacial waste.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, the trail bends right to head south. Here, the way becomes more distinct as it approaches the park boundary and a house to the left. When you come to marker 8, bear right to head back uphill. Winding north and northwest on this narrow path, you pass more gray boulders, freakishly

In June, mountain laurel is in full bloom.

festooned with enormous ear-shaped fungus.

Soon the path joins the Ledge Hill Trail at a particularly massive rock. Turn left at this juncture to hike gently downhill. Following the route edged with small stones, you promptly come to a boulder that looks as soft and inviting as a worn sofa. Beyond this odd furnishing, the trail descends past a vernal pool. After rising again and easing by another small pond, the trail emerges from the woods at Old Salem Road just opposite the start of the Magnolia Swamp Trail.



NEARBY ATTRACTIONS

Hammond Castle, one of Cape Ann's most celebrated attractions, is located almost immediately across the street (MA 127) from the entrance of Ravenswood Park at 80 Hesperus Avenue. Built in the 1920s by inventor John Hays Hammond ("The Father of Remote Control"), the medieval-style castle offers for self-guided and prearranged tours. The castle is open seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. June 23 through Labor Day. Visit www.hammondcastle.org for a schedule of special programs and events. To book a tour, call (978) 283-7673.

If you are interested in great theater, you might want to coordinate an afternoon of hiking at Ravenswood with an evening performance at the Gloucester Stage Company. The theater's season runs from May to September. For information on its current productions, schedule, or to purchase tickets, visit www.gloucesterstage.org or phone (978) 281-4433. The Gloucester Stage Company is located at 267 East Main Street in a one-story brick building.