

# East Rock Park



Whitney Avenue exit  
from a park drive

*Location: A tract of over 400 acres of which almost three-fourths lies in Hamden. The park is roughly bounded by Whitney Avenue, Davis Street, State Street, and the Mill River.*

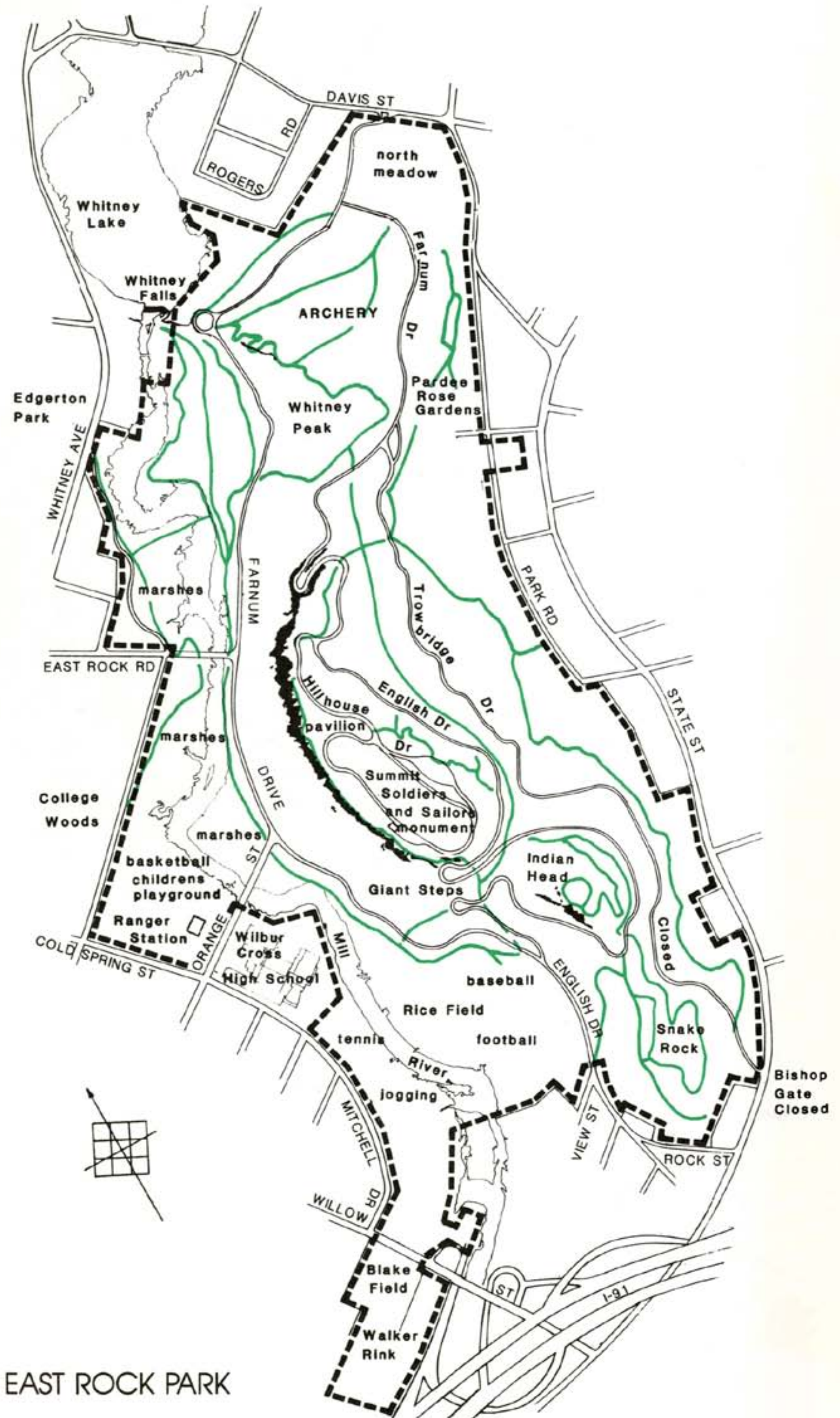
*Transportation: Bus: State Street to Bishop Gate or to entrance to skating rink at Blake Field; Orange Street to Cold Spring Street, enter at Trowbridge Gateway; Whitney Avenue to Cold Spring Street, down to Livingston Street, College Woods entrance to park.*

## NATURE

In part, their geologic history makes New Haven parks the special places they are. A red sandstone is exposed around the base of East and West rocks, in Fairmont Park, as well as throughout the north-south lowlands of Connecticut. It was deposited by streams in an elongate rift valley that formed 210 million years ago at the beginning of the age of dinosaurs when Africa started to pull away from North America. The sandstone accumulated here during a period of 40 million years. About 170 million years ago molten material from below the Earth's crust moved up along cracks in the sandstone and solidified into large sheets of black traprock, which, because of its iron content, weathers brownish orange. The rocks were then tilted a little further toward the east and eroded to roughly the present land surface. The last glacial advance about 30,000 years ago did the final landscaping. The traprock, being resistant to erosion, forms hills which made excellent sites for Indian lookouts, and forts. Because in the early days these areas were not easily settled, they are ideal for parks. East and West rocks, Black Rock Fort, Fort Wooster, the Palisades in Nathan Hale Park, and Bishop Woods are all traprock ridges. The spectacular "picket fence" effect of East and West rocks and the Palisades is the result of columns that have broken away from along shrinkage cracks that formed during cooling just after the molten rock solidified.

South of East Rock itself are two secondary summits. Indian Head is part of the East Rock traprock, while the highest parts of Snake Rock are held up not by traprock but by resistant sandstone. Striations on the sandstone near Bishop gate and at the summit of Snake Rock indicate the glacial ice came from the northwest. East Rock was quarried for its traprock before the 1880s. The most visible scar is Corner Quarry, bounded on the east by the Giant Steps.







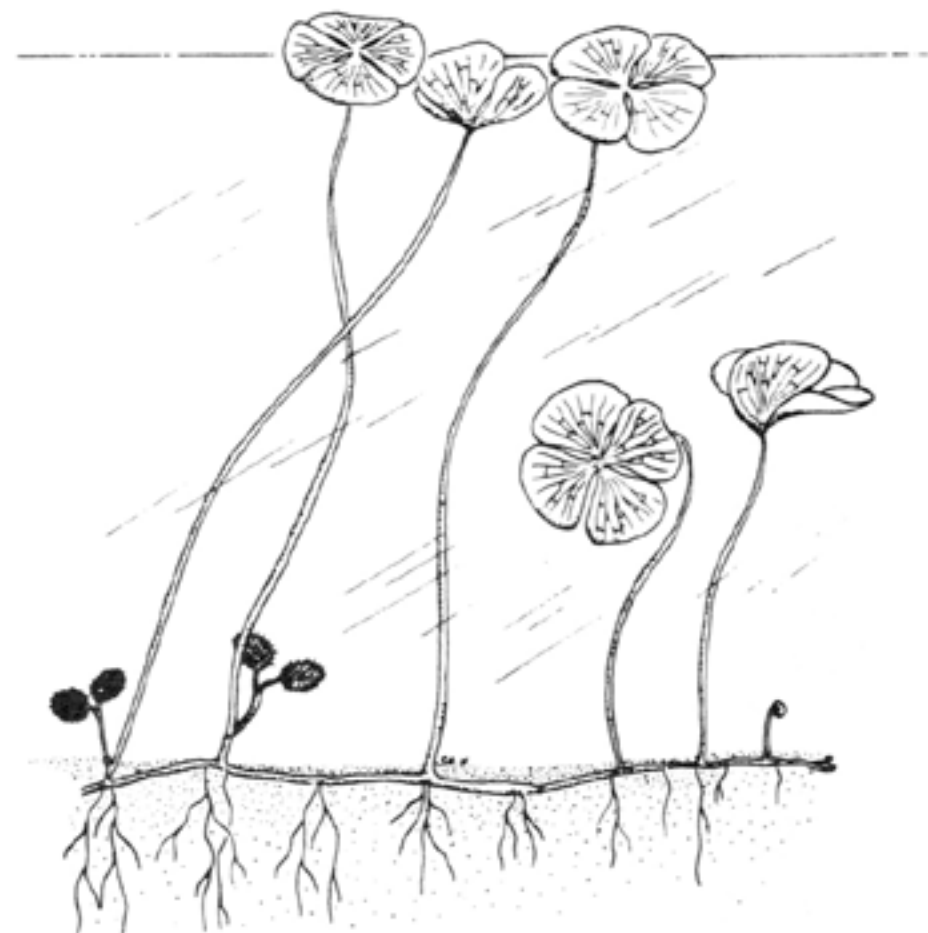
Pin oaks act as indicators of the low flood plain. Shrubs such as nannyberry and silky dogwood form dense thickets at the river's edge; these are blanketed with multiflora rose, a perfect habitat and food supply for nesting birds, particularly cardinals and mockingbirds. The rich soil deposits of the river allow spring wildflowers such as trout lily, Dutchman's breeches, and trillium to cover the pathsides. Black willows, with clumps of branches extending from gnarled trunks, thrive along the river bank. Other hardwoods are scattered among the dominant red, black, and pin oaks. Two cattail marshes provide cover for many nesting and migrant birds as well as food and shelter for muskrats.

The water shamrock, actually a relative of the fern, is unique to the plant world. Plants from Lake Whitney and Bantam Lake are the original stock from which all the water shamrocks in the United States arose.

In contrast to the rich deposits near the Mill River, the soil of the summit is thin, stunting the vegetation. Here is found the unusual post oak, unique to Connecticut. It is recognized by the squared lobes of its leaf and its shrublike appearance. Below the summit beautiful examples of beech trees, with their odd root parasites called beechdrops, dot the landscape. Magnificent oaks dominate the forest vegetation, but there are also hickory, tulip trees, basswood, and birches among some other hardwood. Hemlocks are another grand addition to the landscape. Mountain laurel, maple-leaved viburnum, and arrowwood viburnum are woody shrubs forming dense understories in this region and bursting into full color in the spring. The yellow flower of the witch hazel shrub brightens the late fall landscape.

The bird life of the park has made it famous far beyond the boundaries of the city. One of the key links in the bird migration route, over two hundred species of birds have been recorded in the park, many of which are rarely seen elsewhere in the state. A main attraction is the spring migration of over twenty species of warblers. Located at the top of the rock is the only known fish crow colony in the area. They can be distinguished when making their characteristic "quack" instead of the expected "caw." Otherwise, they look like any crow.

Mammals and reptiles thrive in the park and forage in the surrounding residential area. Skunks, raccoons, and opossum live in the park year round. Muskrats inhabit the cattail marshes. Probably red fox dwell in the forested areas. Bats may be seen in the summer dusk, and a rarely seen flying squirrel may be mistaken for a bat. Moles, shrews,



Water shamrock



mice, and rats hide from human sight. Along the shores of the river are small fish, seldom reaching six inches in length. The smallest, the fourspine and ninespine sticklebacks, are only one to two inches long and have spiny projections on their backs, the number of which determines their name. These fish live close to Whitney Dam. Farther downstream swim the banded killifish, which grow to four inches and are grayish with darker stripes. Downstream even farther are found the mummichop, which can stand the pollution and saltiness of the river. Less resistant to oxygen-poor water is the tidewater silverside, which also likes a bit of salt but can't live in polluted water.

Larger fish live in the middle of the river. Golden shiners can grow to a foot. Goldfish, carp, and pumpkinseeds are the usual catches of fishermen below the dam in early summer. Large-mouth bass, a fisherman's delight, have become more common in recent years. In the spring the alewife, a member of the shad family, can be seen spawning.

## HISTORY

After centuries as a wildlife habitat visited occasionally by hunting Indians, the area that now forms East Rock Park was first invaded by the white man in the nineteenth century. Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin and originator of assembly line manufacture of guns, built his factory in

Footbridge over  
the Mill River





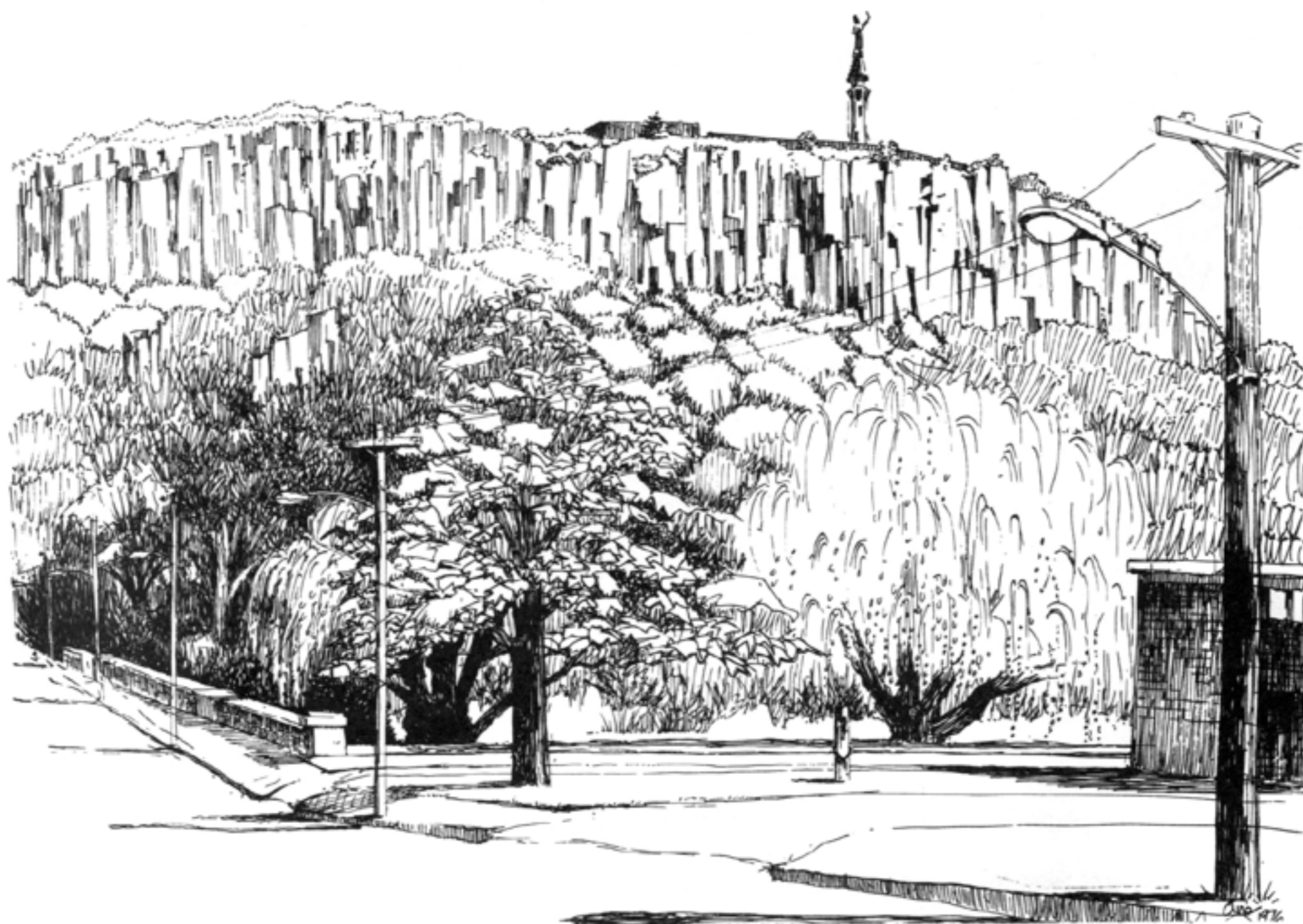
1798 on the Mill River just below the present dam. It is now the site of the Eli Whitney Museum and is listed on the National Trust for Historic Places.

Other less famous but more picturesque characters sought refuge on top of East Rock. A hermit retreated there only to freeze in his cabin one bitter winter. Later, a man quarried the rock and built an unprofitable pleasure resort called Mountain House. After the resort failed, a silversmith and his wife retired to the privacy of the rock, only to be murdered by a local criminal.

The next occupant, a flamboyant character named Stewart, converted the dwelling into a more elaborate resort. When this venture failed, he closed the roads leading to his rocky fortress and began to construct an ark as insurance against another Flood. The City of New Haven, which had been trying to buy the rock from the stubborn Stewart, exercised its right of eminent domain and bought the property for \$13,000 in 1884. The beginning of the park dates from this purchase.

## PARK

In 1877, Noah Porter, then president of Yale College, mobilized interest in converting East Rock into a public park. He organized meetings which resulted in the formation of an independent,



East Rock and Orange Street bridge over the Mill River

nonpolitical, self-perpetuating Board of Commissioners to oversee park acquisition and operation. Concerned citizens gave time, raised money, and solicited donations of land in order to realize their dream. Yale College gave twenty acres, called College Woods, which they had used as a source of firewood. Six other donors gave almost seventy acres. Acquisition of the rock itself was begun by the city and took fifty years and one hundred and twenty-five separate negotiations. Because Donald G. Mitchell's design for Edgewood Park had been so successful, he was asked to lay out East Rock Park.

Generous donations by the Farnham, English, Trowbridge, and Hillhouse families provided funds to build the four principal drives which carry their names. In 1922 the Pardee Gardens and Greenhouses were built from a trust fund set up by William S. Pardee in honor of his mother. In the early 1950s, the English Memorial Shelter was built at the edge of East Rock cliff in memory of Henry F. English, who served for sixty years on the Board of Park Commissioners. The Trowbridge Gateway, dedicated in 1976, provides a landscaped, pedestrian entrance to the park at the corner of Orange and Cold Spring streets. Two years after the founding of the park, in response to a citizens' petition, the city erected the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument at the summit. This 112-foot shaft honors New Haven men who died in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the War for the Union. It is in memory of Henry T. Blake, first president of the New Haven Park Commission. In 1987 the monument was restored and rededicated.

## SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS

*Pardee Greenhouse and Rose Garden:* Located on the Hamden side of the park on Park Road at Farm Road. The Rose Garden boasts a beautiful array of flowers from early spring until late fall. The highlight of the garden is its unique display of many varieties of roses with a twice-life-size, tiered wedding cake of roses as the focal point. Many brides and grooms come to be photographed in front of it. See Park Rangers chapter.

*Ranger station:* There is a relatively new ranger station and large shelter in the College Woods section of the park. See Park Rangers chapter for details about the activities provided.

## RECREATION

*Hours:* The park is closed from sunset to sunrise.

*Playgrounds:* For ages three to twelve, fenced-in areas in College Woods and at the Cedar Hill end of Rice Field.