



A History of the Preserve Lands around Strouds Run State Park

A Brief History of the Athens Area

Early settlers discovered several mounds and ancient fortifications in this area, informing us that the Adena Indians once lived here. In more recent history, this was home to the powerful Shawnee Nation until the Treaty of Greenville in 1795 forced them to abandon their lands in southern Ohio. This followed the extended Northwest Indian War, also known as the French & Indian War, and opened up the "Northwest Territories" to settlement. This area included all of present-day Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota.

The Ohio Company of Associates, a land company, was formed in 1786. In 1787, it contracted for its first land acquisition from the Federal government, resulting in the establishment of Marietta as the first settlement in the Northwest Territory, in 1788. In 1792, it purchased 750,000 acres from the Federal government, which became known as the Ohio Company Purchase. As early as 1790, a special committee of the Ohio Company began considering what land to set aside for the support of a new university. In 1795, two townships

of land in the area (Athens and Alexander) were apportioned by the Ohio Company for the university. The Company divided the remainder of the land into shares in 1796, based on townships and 640-acre sections (one mile square). A peculiarity of this division was the establishment of "fractions." Nine sections of each township were redivided into 262-acre pieces of land that accompanied sections numbered the same. This was the only way they could divide the land evenly between shareholders. These fractions are unique to this land division by the Ohio Company.

The first settlers arrived in the Athens County region in 1796. They were especially encouraged to settle on the college lands so as to make them attractive, productive, and to pay rents for support of the institution. This land-leasing venture led to the founding of Ohio University, the first college in the Northwest Territory. The town of Athens was founded the following year. Settlers came by way of flatboats from Marietta down the Ohio River and up the Hocking River to the promontory where Athens is now located. The first local export industry was salt production in the area between Chauncey and The Plains. With the discovery of rich coal fields in the area, Athens County soon developed into one of the leading coal producers in the state. The Hocking Canal and railroads provided easy means for shipping coal to distant markets. Clay tile, and brick were other industries that brought prosperity to the area.

All the land in Sells Park, the Strouds Ridge Preserve, and Strouds Run State Park was part of the Ohio Company Purchase. All land in Athens Township (which includes none of the state park but all of Sells Park, the Riddle State Nature Preserve, and part of the Strouds Ridge Preserve) was allocated to Ohio University. Although not part of the later college land grant system, Ohio University was, in fact, the first land grant college. Ohio University originally divided Alexander and Athens Townships into farm lots, and the Village of Athens was divided into town lots. The farm lots were originally leased, then later sold. The land under Strouds Run State Park was entirely within Canaan and Ames Townships, which land was variously owned by John Paul Jones of naval fame and others but not Ohio University.

History of Sells Park

Sells Park began in 1939 when Edward and Laura Sells, who were developing a residential subdivision on the east side of Athens, split off 22 acres at the head of the hollow and donated it to the U. S. Forest Service. The assumption was, apparently, that this might eventually connect with other National Forest lands as part of the Wayne National Forest. The Wayne Forest headquarters were only three blocks away at the time, at the top of Euclid Avenue, on Dalton Avenue.

Utilizing the Civilian Conservation Corps, the USFS developed Sells Park with a dam, forming a pond, picnic facilities, trails, a pavilion, and restrooms. The fairly large pavilion was installed with eight main supporting posts across an old roadway on a hillside bench about halfway up the valley from Sells Pond. The restrooms were built at the eastern end of the dam for the pond, where the Birth Circle bench sits today. One trail was built circling the pond partway up the hill, passing by the pavilion and with a spur to the outlook, a promontory near the southwest corner of the park with a view of the Hocking River valley. Picnic tables and grills were distributed throughout the park along the trail loop.

Most of the park, largely steep slopes, had become deforested due to farming and grazing prior to this time. The USFS planted red and white pine to reforest some areas. Other areas simply grew up in native hardwoods. As the woods grew up, the pavilion, in its relatively isolated location, was concealed from public view. Resulting vandalism eventually caused the shelter and restrooms to be removed. Most of the picnic facilities simply decayed over time.

The USFS ceded the property to the City of Athens in 1974, and the City has administered it since. The park remained isolated from other public properties for 63 years until 2002 when the Athens Conservancy began working with the City to acquire property to connect it with Strouds Run State Park and to create an expanded preserve area. This effort created, in 2003, the 106-acre Dale and Jackie Riddle State Nature Preserve, which includes Hawk Woods and wraps around two sides of Sells Park. The effort also created the

COAD Tract of the Strouds Ridge Preserve, which added another 78 acres, which solidly connected the older areas, and the 104-acre Hope Drive Tract of the Strouds Ridge Preserve farther to the east..

Athens Trails wrote the first formal trail plan for the area in 2003, and work began to renew and expand the trail system, resulting in today's Athens Trail system, which includes the Athens Trail, Rockhouse Trail, Finger Rock Trail, and connecting trails. All of these trails are based in part on pre-existing ones, but long stretches of the Rockhouse and Finger Rock Trails are completely new. The more recently built Trace Trail makes use of a portion of the original Chillicothe-Marietta Stage Road that passed through Athens in the early 1800s. The efforts of the Athens Conservancy and the City of Athens working together resulted in connecting the Athens Trail System with Strouds Run State park, providing a gateway directly from the city to many miles of trails.

Over the years, the City of Athens made improvements, including benches, a picnic table, an emergency call box, and an expanded parking lot. The ramp to the dam was completed in 2016.

As the park's woodlands grew up, with its proximity to adjacent residential neighborhoods, invasive exotic plants became a significant problem in the park.

History of Strouds Run State Park

Dr. Clarence L. Dow initiated the project that resulted in Strouds Run State Park and Dow Lake. Dow was a professor of geography and geology at Ohio University from 1936 until his death (at sea) in 1955. He and others began advocating for a project to create a park area with a lake in 1942.

In 1945, the Ohio State Legislature passed legislation to purchase 5,000 acres of land for the Athens State Forest and a lake. The expectation at the time was that it would border part of the Wayne National Forest, which had grown to 77,000 acres by 1942, with one of five purchase units (where they were authorized to buy land) just north of the park. Today, over 150 acres of the state park lie within the national forest proclamation area but only 274 acres within the unit were ever purchased by the National Forest Service, with no part

bordering the state park. Most of the land of the park is in Canaan Township, Athens County, but a small part is in Ames Township. However, additional preserve land not owned by the state is situated in Athens Township.

When the state began purchasing land for the Athens State Forest, the entire area was divided into small farms, with a few churches and family cemeteries. The first purchases of land were made in 1946 in what is now the southeast corner of the park. Purchases were made steadily until 1950, then continued from 1953 to 1958. As of 1958, 1,946 acres had been purchased. After this time, only one more 60-acre purchase was made, in 1965, to ensure that the park's lands were contiguous – this connected the Crumley Tract, on the western end of the park, to the rest of the lands. Since then, further purchases have been made by the City of Athens, Athens County, and the Athens Conservancy, resulting in another 434 acres of protected land.

In the 1950s, tree plantings were made to reforest old farm fields and pasture. These plantings were mostly white pine, but also included many red pine, some Scotch, pitch and shortleaf pine, some tamarack, and some baldcypress. The red pine and the Scotch pine have mostly died out, while the tamarack has disappeared.

The state accepted the first bids for the Dow Lake Dam construction in 1955 but work did not begin until 1957. The dam and other lake construction were completed in 1960. The lake opened in 1961, but was not dedicated until 1962. The beach was built in 1967. Improvements made at the park included a boat ramp, a campground, a swimming beach, and three open-air shelters.

The state thickened and reinforced the dam in 2014 and 2015.

Ohio University authorized a 124-acre natural resource lab at Strouds Run State Park in 1961 but withdrew support for it in 1975. However, many OU classes and students have continued to use the park in their classwork.

As with Sells Park, Strouds Run has had serious problems with invasive plant species, especially garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*). Every year, efforts are made to control these. Both the Athens Conservancy and the Friends have also spent money for employees removing invasives.

The Friends of Strouds Run State Park was created in 2006. It has conducted an archeological study on the park and commissions water quality studies at the main inputs to the lake. It also created a kiosk/shelter at the Hickory-Trace Trailhead and provided an accessible water fountain by the swimming beach. The group has constructed half a mile of ADA-accessible nature trail on the north shore of the lake, and is working to extend it another 0.3 mile. The group developed a number of museum-quality interpretive signs that can be found along trails. Much of the other trail signage in the park also was created and installed by the friends group.

Other Preserves

Since 2003, a number of additional preserves have been created bordering Sells Park and Strouds Run State Park by the Athens Conservancy, the City of Athens, and Athens County. As mentioned previously, the Athens Conservancy worked with the City of Athens to acquire COAD tract of the Strouds Ridge Preserve and the Dale & Jackie Riddle State Nature Preserve, both in 2003. This partnership also resulted in the Hope Drive tract of the Strouds Ridge Preserve in 2004.

The Athens Conservancy also acquired the 75-acre Blair Preserve, with 55 acres in 2004 and 20 acres in 2006, and the 49-acre Tucker Run Preserve in 2011. The Conservancy created a complex public access/conservation easement to create the 269-acre Baker Preserve east of the park (although not bordering it) in 2008, and worked with the County to buy the 27-acre Della Drive tract east of the State Police office in 2013.

The Conservancy then acquired the 140-acre Mary Beth Zak Lohse Preserve in 2018, a new (as-yet unnamed) 440-acre preserve east of the park in 2019 (which connects the Baker Preserve with the park), and a 42-acre addition to the Zak Lohse Preserve is pending.

The Athens Conservancy is still actively working to protect land in the Dow Lake watershed and in the immediate area.

www.friendsofstroudsrun.org