

## Stellata Natural Area: A New Feather in our Parks Cap by John Karel

MPA members have long applauded our statewide natural area program. It is one important way to protect special places and to perpetuate our Missouri masterpieces. In 2020, a significant acreage at St. Joe State Park in St. Francois County was designated as a new state natural area, an achievement even more exciting given the history of its locale.

At 2,077 acres, this new area is large, and it is in a park that many might consider unlikely for such resources. St. Joe is widely known for its off-road motorized recreation, with extensive acreage available because of previous mining and milling operations. How is it that more than 2,000 acres of this 8,000-acre park could be qualified as a natural asset of state significance?

As readers of *Missouri State Parks and Historic Sites* already know—surely all *Heritage* readers!—St. Joe experienced more than a hundred years of hard industrial mining. It was donated to the state in 1976, following a public announcement by the mining corporation and Gov. Kit Bond in December 1975.

It happens that this writer was on assignment on this very ground as that news was broadcast over the radio. I had been sent there to scout out general conditions and possible noteworthy resources. It was a cold and somewhat gloomy day, and the overall impression conveyed by the sprawling tract was anything but encouraging. The most prominent feature was the massive derelict

mill complex, beyond which stretched expanses of mine tailings



*Shortleaf Pine – Stellata NA*

and impoundments known to be unsafe. Most of the surrounding landscape, though basically wooded, was compromised by industrial debris, old railroad grades, ongoing timber theft, poaching, and incidental local dumping.

But even on that overcast December afternoon, a walking exploration of the western portion of the tract, across the Pimville Road, revealed a sizable area that was, at least relatively, much less damaged than the rest and had potential for restoration. Following transfer of the property, diligent and persistent labors by park staff and others to clean up, remediate, and prepare plans resulted eventually in a remarkable trans-

formation. The mill complex with its industrial structures became Missouri Mines State Historic Site, tailings areas and suitable adjacent lands became a motorized and water-based recreation complex, and beyond the motor areas an extensive system of trails for walkers, runners, cyclists, and equestrians was developed on old rail grades and other corridors. St. Joe/Missouri Mines took shape as a multidimensional park.

Parallel to these developments, another type of stewardship had been undertaken by park staff on portions of the new park, beginning with basic protections and trash removal, then surveys and analysis, and eventually an ambitious program of prescribed fire and selective thinning of overgrown and invasive vegetation. Decades of this work have now borne splendid fruit.

The Stellata Natural Area, named for a prominent species on the site, the post oak or *Quercus stellata*, is in the southwestern part of the park, beyond the off-road vehicle areas.



*Quercus stellata*

(See “Stellata” on Page 6)

## Park Briefs

**Sappington African American Cemetery State Historic Site** was dedicated June 5, 2021, in a ceremony attended by some 110 people, including many descendants of individuals interred there. Located near Arrow Rock it is the 92nd addition to the System. The cemetery has existed since at least 1856. In oral tradition passed down through his family, Emmanuel Banks, one of 24 enslaved workers held by Dr. John Sappington, shared that Sappington set aside one acre as a burial ground



*L-R: Teresa Habernal, Wanda Saboor, Sen. Barbara Anne Washington*

for his slaves before his death in 1856. In 1906, another half-acre was added to the cemetery as generations of African Americans with links to the Arrow Rock community continued to use it.

Teresa Habernal, President of the Sappington Negro Cemetery Association, first contacted Missouri DNR in 1991 about incorporating the site into the park system. Speaking at the ceremony, she described the process that culminated in the ribbon-cutting that many descendants proudly participated in. Others who spoke included Wanda Saboor and State Senator Barbara Washington, both descendants of the Parker Family from Arrow Rock. State Representative Tim Taylor and U.S. Congressman Emanuel Cleaver spoke to the importance of this

cemetery and the persistence of those who cared for it and protected its legacy. By 1880, African Americans comprised 51 percent of Arrow Rock's total population and had built much of the infrastructure and a thriving community, playing an important role in the area's history. To learn more about the site, please visit <https://bit.ly/3q20MhO>

**Rock Bridge SP threatened by housing development.** The Columbia City Council is scheduled to vote June 21 on annexation of the proposed Canton Estates development on the immediate northern border of the Gans Creek Wild Area in Rock Bridge SP into the city, where zoning allows for higher density development than in Boone County. MPA, Friends of Rock Bridge, and many other organizations and park advocates have testified at a series of hearings in opposition to the zoning and development as planned, because of the likelihood of adverse effects on the unobstructed scenic vistas of the wild area, one of only twelve such areas in the state and the only one so close to a major city, and on the water quality of Gans Creek, one of only 44 State Outstanding Resource Waters in a state with thousands of rivers and streams.

Because this development is seen as a bellwether for others on private wooded or pastoral lands surrounding the park (many already owned by developers), and because the need for special planning to protect the environs of Rock Bridge has repeatedly been called for in visioning exercises and plans, MPA is joining Friends of Rock Bridge (FORB) and others in calling for a pause on all annexation, rezoning, and development proposals in the unincorporated area southeast of Columbia until the city council can secure an approved Southeast Area Plan with guidelines and regulations to protect the sensitive area outlined in the 2013 Columbia Imagined Plan.

**How you can help:** *Respond* to the MPA alert about the development (<https://bit.ly/3gpsvo6>) by sending emails to individual members of the Columbia City Council *by June 19*. *Sign the petition* for the Southeast Area Plan and find more information on the FORB website: [friendsofrockbridgemsp.org/current-issues/canton-estates.html](http://friendsofrockbridgemsp.org/current-issues/canton-estates.html)

And *plan now* to attend MPA's annual gathering at Rock Bridge September 11 to see the park and learn more about the issue.

### DNR Director Comer Passes.

Gov. Mike Parson announced the sudden passing of DNR Director Carol Comer, a key member of his



cabinet, on June 9. Having served as commissioner of the Indiana Department of Environmental Management under Gov. Mike Pence, she was appointed MoDNR director by Gov. Eric Greitens in January 2017, and continued to serve with Gov. Parson since he took over in 2018.

Since her previous experience in Indiana had involved nearly every aspect of DNR's responsibility except for state parks and she arrived during the centennial year of the system, she set and achieved her goal to visit every park and historic site during her first year, often in her free time on weekends, and became a devoted advocate for the system. MPA leaders visited with her at many events, including the dedication of Sappington African American Cemetery as Missouri's newest park just a few days before her passing. We send deepest condolences to her family and friends.

(See "Park Briefs on Page 4)



## State Parks Fare Well in Chaotic Legislative Session

by Mary Nemecek

The 2021 legislative session did not begin in the usual way. Still in the grips of a pandemic, House leaders cancelled the freshman bus tour of state parks and other facilities. The House then started the session by voting 46-105 against following CDC recommendations, so lawmakers did not have to wear masks. Later, the House cancelled session for the week of January 18 after several lawmakers and staffers tested positive for COVID-19.

As action resumed on the House floor the following week, the House canceled its invitation to Governor Parson to deliver his State of the State speech just hours before it was to occur. The event quickly changed venues and was livestreamed from the Senate chamber. Days later the Governor aired his displeasure over the incident, calling the cancellation a “stunt and petty show of arrogance.” The disfunction within the super majority was now documented in the Governor’s letter to his party.

On the legislative front, over 700 bills had been pre-filed. By early February, a perennial bill authorizing the sale of Eleven Point State Park (HB 1046) was starting to move in the Corrections and Public Institutions Committee and became MPA’s primary concern. During the hearing, bill sponsor Chris Dinkins, who represents Iron, Reynolds, and other mining counties, asserted that funds for the state’s purchase of the new park in Oregon County had been intended for the cleanup of mined areas. That cleanup is proceeding under EPA’s separate superfund. MPA and others testified during the hearing that the state had used a fund legally designated for projects intended to replace natural resources damaged by mining with equivalent lands elsewhere. Rep. Dinkins also repeatedly stated her bill was

intended to require the divestment of only the 625-acre strip under scenic easement along the Eleven Point River, when the legal description in the bill was clearly for the entire 4000+ acres. As misstatements and confusion continued, the bill was voted “do pass” out of both the Corrections and the Rules committees along party lines.

Since the Eleven Point bill was then eligible to be taken up on the House floor at any time, MPA and its partners turned to educating other legislators and citizens. More than 2,000 Missourians contacted their representatives in an inspiring show of support for the park and opposition to the bill. As the citizen response grew, the bill lingered in limbo, but vigilance was required to the end, lest it be brought up quickly or amended into another bill.

MPA also kept close tabs on HJR 55, another bill sponsored by Rep. Dinkins, to increase the size and politicize the Conservation Commission. After a hearing jam-packed with opponents, it seemed headed for bi-partisan defeat in the Conservation and Natural Resources Committee. Then, before the vote was taken, the Speaker of the House added more members to the committee, and the measure passed on an 11-8 vote. Once in the Rules Committee, however, action was “postponed,” and it never came up again.

Yet another bill (SB 40)—this one to hobble DNR, the parent agency of state parks—was even more worrisome and confusing to the very end. The initial version prohibited DNR from raising any air, land, or water protection fees, or making any rules stricter than federal standards. Along the way it was amended to eliminate vehicle emission inspections in three counties bordering St. Louis. The fiscal

note on that item alone was up to \$1.5 million/year plus the potential loss of \$52 million in federal highway funds for not meeting EPA air quality standards. The amendment was considered so egregious it was sure to sink the bill. At first glance that is what happened; SB 40 failed to pass out of the Fiscal Oversight Committee for lack of a second. But two days later it rose again, was quickly passed out of committee, and by noon the same day passed the Senate in a 23-10 party-line vote.

“If signed into law,” warned the Joplin Globe, “history will identify this bill as the worst piece of legislation ever produced by Missouri lawmakers, and that is a high bar to pass.” Yet once in the House the bill moved quickly through committees, including fiscal review, and was still alive on the last day but did not make it to the floor. In a highly disturbing twist, however, the language eliminating emissions inspections and threatening a \$52 million loss in highway funding—the provision that it was thought would surely sink the entire bill—was amended onto HB 661 with an odd caveat that would sunset the measure in three years if federal highway funds were lost. It is now sitting on the Governor’s desk waiting to be signed into law.

On the positive side in the chaos of the closing days, a bill (HB 369) containing several measures sought by MPA and other conservation groups managed to squeak through in the very last hour. A prescribed burning provision would limit the liability of landowners for damages or smoke from burns conducted according to a proper plan unless proven to be negligent; Missouri was one of only five states without such a law.

(See “Session” on Page 4)

### ("Session" from Page 3)

A feral swine provision includes a fine of \$2,000 for release of swine to the wild. Both measures are important for the health of our state and our state parks. The bill also authorizes DNR to acquire the Antioch Cemetery in Clinton, a Black cemetery still accepting burials. MPA did not take a position on the cemetery, as MSP has yet to review it for suitability as a state park.

Highly sought by DNR and MSP was inclusion in the state parks budget of authority to issue some \$60 million in revenue bonds to enable new or upgraded campgrounds, lodging, and other facilities that could be repaid within ten years by earnings of the new facilities. Revenue bonds had been used years ago (e.g., the Emory Melton Lodge at Roaring River), but the projects now authorized in twenty-two parks statewide will be a major advance for the system. For a list, <https://bit.ly/3cyhclZ>



*Emory Melton Lodge at Roaring River, built with revenue bonds*

Also important for the park division is the restoration of funding from the Artists and Entertainers Trust Fund for the Historic Preservation Revolving Fund after its having been eliminated for three years.

It was a legislative session of high stress, often baffling, chaotic, and disappointing, including in the behavior of certain lawmakers, with one censured, one expelled, and another pending criminal charges. For state parks and for MPA, how-

ever, it was in many ways productive, with the overwhelming support of Missourians standing up for our state parks and a legislative team and coalition functioning more effectively than at any time in years. We look forward to the fruits of the restored funding and new revenue bonds. Enjoy your time this summer in Missouri's state parks. They are a treasure and the work to protect and enhance them goes on.

### ("Park Briefs " from Page 2)

#### Eleven Point State Park Lawsuit

The state's brief in its appeal of the 2020 Oregon County circuit court decision ordering the state to divest itself of the new park along the Eleven Point National Scenic River (see Heritage, Dec 2020) was filed March 26 in the Southern District Court of Appeals in Springfield by Attorney General Eric Schmitt on behalf of MoDNR. It was accompanied by an Amici Curiae (friends of the court) brief filed by a bipartisan team of pro bono attorneys led by former governor Jay Nixon on behalf of ten conservation and environmental organizations, including MPA and the Conservation Federation of Missouri.

Attorneys for the local landowner plaintiffs in the case filed their response May 13, supported by two amicus briefs from the Missouri Farm Bureau Federation and a number of Oregon County individuals and organizations. Those were followed by a final reply from the state filed June 4. MPA leaders regard the state's briefs as well grounded in defense of the integrity of both the park and the scenic easement, and the plaintiffs' case as hanging tenuously on a misconstruction of the purposes of a state park. It is now up to the appeals court to set the date for oral argument, likely later this summer. Stay tuned.

**Katy Trail Sedalia Link.** State park officials, the city of Sedalia, and Katy Trail Sedalia Inc.

celebrated the completion May 27 of a \$2.1 million, three-mile-long connector closing a cap in the Katy Trail that has existed since 2001 when the Katy Trail was first opened in Sedalia. Since then, long distance trail users have had to travel on city roads for more than three miles. Now hikers and bikers traverse newly constructed trail on a combination of DNR-owned and city-owned property and easements. The new trail also links with Sedalia's historic Katy Depot. The complex project, which required long years of negotiations on a series of proposed plans, is now considered a model partnership involving project design, financing, and construction.

#### Washington SP Preserve Mis-

**souri Award.** The Thunderbird Lodge at Washington SP was presented with a 2021 Honor Award June 8 by Missouri Preservation, a statewide alliance of individuals, organizations, and preservation commissions that educates, supports and advocates for historic preservation. Recently restored following damage during a 2017 flood, the lodge was originally constructed in the 1930s by CCC African American Company No 1743, which built most of the rustic native stone and wood buildings in the park. Inspired by the park's many Native American petroglyphs, the company members named their barracks Camp Thunderbird and incorporated the thunderbird motif in the stone facing at the gable end and even in the lodge's handmade iron door hardware. The major restoration addressed numerous less than adequate renovations over the years, returning the lodge much closer to its historic character.



## **MPA 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Gathering** **Rock Bridge Memorial State Park, September 11-12, 2021**

Join us at Rock Bridge Memorial State Park for the 39<sup>th</sup> MPA annual gathering with a special focus on **Friends of State Parks and Partnerships**. We'll be at Rock Bridge all day on Saturday, featuring a discussion with Friends of Rock Bridge and a panel on Strengthening Park Partners in the morning, educational tours and hikes in the afternoon, and dinner at Billy Gilbert Memorial Shelter with evening program. Note that the members and board meetings Sunday morning will be at Stoney Creek Hotel.

Book your own lodging at Stoney Creek Hotel in Columbia by August 20, 2021 (call the front desk at **573-442-6400** and ask for the MPA rate of \$115 for the weekend of September 11<sup>th</sup> (MPA has a block of rooms for Sept. 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>). A campground is available at Finger Lakes State Park (17 miles north of Rock Bridge Memorial State Park). Also note the **September 3rd cut-off date for annual meeting registration with meals** (Saturday lunch and dinner).

### **Saturday, September 11 at Billy Gilbert Memorial Shelter, Rock Bridge Memorial State Park**

- 8 - 9 am** Registration and Networking
- 9:00 am** Welcome to MPA 39th Annual Gathering  
Friends of Rock Bridge Memorial State Park Presentation
- 10:15 am** Break
- 10:30 am** Panel Discussion - Strengthening Park Partners
- 12:00n** Lunch
- 1:30-4 pm** Behind-the-scenes tours and educational hikes of Rock Bridge Memorial SP and Gans Wild Area
- 5 - 6 pm** Happy Hour: Billy Gilbert Memorial Shelter
- 6 - 8 pm** Dinner and Program: Billy Gilbert Memorial Shelter

### **Sunday, September 12 at Stoney Creek Hotel, Columbia**

Breakfast on your own (if staying at Stoney Creek Hotel, continental breakfast is provided)

- 8:30 am** Annual meeting of members
- 9:30 am** Meeting of MPA board of directors (all are welcome to attend)
- 12:00n** Adjourn

### **Flat Rate Registration with Event Counts for Planning**

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Full (meals, tours) \_\_\_\_\_ persons @ \$50 \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_ Total. \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Special Dietary needs (indicate) \_\_\_\_\_

Event Counts: Please choose a Saturday Activity and Confirm Meal Count

#Persons \_\_\_\_\_ Gans Wild Area Hike (Moderate/High Physical Activity) #Persons \_\_\_\_\_ Saturday Lunch  
 #Persons \_\_\_\_\_ Rock Bridge Memorial SP Tour (Low Physical Activity) #Persons \_\_\_\_\_ Saturday Dinner

Make check payable to Missouri Parks Association and mail with form by Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup> to Missouri Parks Association, P.O. Box 8531, Kansas City, MO 64114. If you would like to register online and pay, please visit ***https://bit.ly/3v8Xh9S***. For questions email: ***kendra.wallis@missouriparks.org***

MPA will continue to monitor the incidence of (COVID-19) in the region. MPA will follow guidance from local health departments and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regarding gatherings. The CDC recommends those who have not been vaccinated keep 6 feet apart and wear face masks where Social Distancing isn't possible. Most of our gathering will occur outside; however the meetings Sunday morning will be inside in a spacious room. Our members may choose to wear face coverings to the Sunday morning meetings even if vaccinated.





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*Stellata Natural Area  
Park Budget Fares Well  
MPA Gathering at Rock Bridge*

[www.missouriparksassociation.org](http://www.missouriparksassociation.org)

### ("Stellata" from Page 1)

Though the park lies within the general St. Francois Mountains region, it is not in the well-known igneous knobs sector but rather in the less mountainous Oak Woodlands Basin portion, underlain with ancient dolomite bedrock.

A variety of natural community types clothe these gentle hills, with the most extensive acreage classified as dry and dry-mesic chert woodlands. These rocky open woodlands have an overstory of moderately spaced oaks, featuring post oak but including several others, plus scattered hickories and, in the eastern extension, fine stands of shortleaf pine.

These woodlands can be especially appealing in autumn, with displays of wild asters and russet-tinged little bluestem grass. A more limited upland community here is the dolomite



glade, but these rocky openings boast a noteworthy denizen, the prairie iris (*Nemastylis geminiflora*),

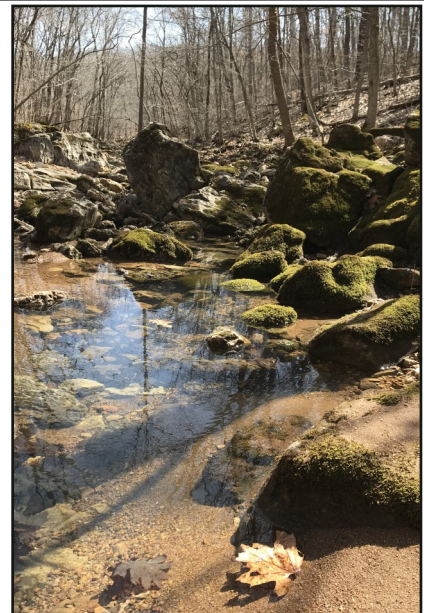
which brightens the spring landscape with its celestial blue blossoms.

Very significant to this natural area is the virtually complete watershed of a small but high-quality stream, Harris Branch, west of Pimville Road and mostly out of earshot of the motorized zone. Some stretches of Harris Branch are intermittent, with water flows often sinking below the surface as a losing stream; but others are perennial, with permanent pools and small springs, and home to several native fish species.

Some of these pools, lined with moss-covered rock ledges, provide ideal habitat for breeding amphibians, including the coppery-hued dwarf American toad. During their mating season in the greening time of April, it can seem that the whole valley is filled with the musical but primordial sound of their trilling choruses.

The Harris Branch valley floor also supports limited but very appealing stands of bottomland forest with tall white oaks and some sugar maples, plus pawpaw and spicebush in the understory. You can sometimes glimpse, and hear, barred owls, broadwinged hawks, and pileated woodpeckers in the shelter of these groves.

The walking and bicycling trail loops through and along the natural



*A Harris Branch pool*

area, and although the paved path is admittedly a non-conforming feature, it serves as a most convenient and pleasant access to enjoy this special landscape.

The old St. Joe tract may have seemed like a scruffy orphan of dubious public value in 1975, but with hard work and creative care it has emerged as a premier resource embracing all three aspects of our state park mission, recognized for cultural, recreational, and now also natural history importance.

Hope you can visit soon!