

Stebelton Park at Rock Mill Named after Benefactor

Rock Mill sat vacant, in disrepair. After extensive archaeological excavation, Fairfield County Park District began restoration. Exterior walls, four above-grade floors and two sub-floors were renovated. In September 2012, a working replica of the 26'-diameter all-wood waterwheel was crafted and installed; it is the largest of its kind in the state. October 2016, work began on the milling floor and gearing. Spring 2017, Rock Mill ground grain again for the first time in more than 100 years! People from all over the U.S. and beyond visited to see the mill in action.

It all began when Robert 'Bob' and Rita Stebelton donated Rock Mill and the land on which it stands. An article in Lancaster Eagle-Gazette on October 29, 2003, quoted then-Director of Fairfield County Park District (FCPD), Dave Fey, saying "People already come from all over the country to see the mill and bridge. Stebelton Park, when completed, will attract even more people. This is a real treasure."

On October 16, 2017, Resolution #2017-49 was passed by Fairfield County Board of Park Commissioners to officially name the park Stebelton Park at Rock Mill (pronounced steeble-ton). In part, the resolution states the Board "wishes to recognize Robert and Rita Stebelton and the entire Stebelton family for their generosity to, and cooperation with, Fairfield County Park District". On Friday, November 27, Rita Stebelton and family members Rod, Ronda, and Roger met with Ron Packard, Chairperson of Fairfield County Board of Park Commissioners, FCPD Director Todd Younkin, Education Services Coordinator Marcey Shafer, and Media Coordinator Kimber Caito. It was then that Rita Stebelton was presented a framed copy of that resolution.

In a brief interview, Rita Stebelton related how she and her husband came to own the property. The former owner, Urcel Alspach 'was looking to sell.' Urcel asked Ronda's father-in-law if he knew someone who might be interested in buying the farm; he told Bob. Bob and Rita met Urcel and became good friends. "She was quite a lady!" Rita remembered fondly, "We brought her meals all the time and spent Sundays here eating with her. Bob's mother and my mother came, and they had a good ol' time chatting." After buying the property, in their generous fashion, they gave Urcel life estate.

Restoration of the mill began. Concrete footers and steel beams were installed to prevent the mill's collapse into the gorge. "Bob was working on it alone, with the kids and with Charlie his brother. The undertaking got to be a little too much," Rita recalled. Rather than allow it to decay beyond repair and lose the iconic mill forever, they decided to donate it to the parks.

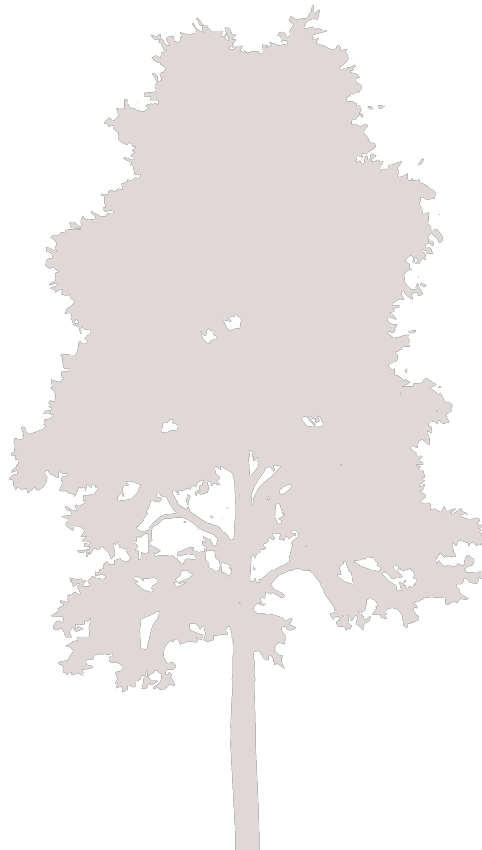
When asked how they felt about the park finally being named Stebelton Park at Rock Mill, each of their faces brightened and the words thrilled, pleased, good, wonderful, all jumbled together. The only sad moment of the occasion was, as Rita expressed, "Our only regret is that Bob is not here today to know that it was named. You didn't know him, but he was a character, a different man, let me tell you, and what he said went." Bob passed away in July 2016. It was obvious from the reactions of the entire family that Bob was a strong bonding influence in their lives and will forever be missed.



Rita then invited Marcey and Kimber to view her impressive collection of Rock Mill ephemera to help piece together even more of the mill's history. Much of that information will be used in educational programs and materials.

The park is open year-round, dawn to dusk, and is one of the most popular photo opportunity locations in Fairfield County. The gristmill is open only during special events and Rock Mill Days. During Rock Mill Days, May through October, the building is open 1pm-4pm Sundays and 11am-2pm Wednesdays and Saturdays. On the last Sunday of those months, there are milling demonstrations, weather permitting. Get more information at fairfieldcountyparks.org.

We hope each and every one of you reading this will come and enjoy Stebelton Park at Rock Mill!



*The original version of this article was published in November 2017.
The article was edited in April 2025 to update details of Rock Mill Days.*

