

VILLAGE VIEW

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Gold. It wasn't many years ago the price was \$35 an ounce; now it tops \$300. As a result, there's renewed interest in gleaning from old mines and streambeds the flakes of precious metal still washing from secret sources within the earth.

Some old mines, rich lodes worked out a century or more ago, are being reopened to harvest the now profitable tailings. Back in the hills, although it's still unusual, you'll occasionally find a hopeful person panning and screening, perhaps as much for fun as for profit.

You might even try it yourself; now summer's over, Cape Codders are starting to think about heading for the mountains. It's a reward, an annual treat we all ourselves; we know we've earned it. Maybe you could hunt for gold while you're up country.

Is the precious metal still to be found in New England? The answer is: "Some." How much? Nobody really knows. According to certain authorities, there are streams in the green mountains of Vermont, in western Maine, and in New Hampshire's White Mountains yielding enough to make the time and effort worthwhile.

Should you want to try your luck, you could pan in the Swift River, in Broad Brook, or hunt out your own stream. That's how veins were found in the past.

Panning for gold is tricky; like most activities that look simple, there's a knack to it. You'll need a flat-bottomed pan with shallow sides. A trowel is helpful. A magnifying glass is handy if you want to take home only gold.

Once you choose a likely-looking stream and have brought your equipment to a place where the water is shallow, put into the pan a small amount of material from the streambed or the river bank, and submerge the pan in the flowing water. To break up lumps, knead with your fingers. Now, with the pan still under water, agitate its contents in a brisk back and forth rotary motion; the coarse gravel will rise to the top.

This gravel should be raked off with your fingers and discarded. Size your residue in this manner several times. Now, moving gently, agitate the pan in the water with the same rotary motion, but tilt it slightly to permit the heavy minerals at the bottom to concentrate in the sharp bend made by the side and the bottom of your pan.

Because you'll still have too much sand remaining, you'll need to wash out more. To accomplish this, tilt the pan slightly forward with the lip just below the surface of the water. Dip the pan in a forward, upward, then backward motion so the water washes away the lighter upper layers of sand. Once you get the hang of this motion, you can speed this part of the washing by sweeping off the top sand with the back of your fingers.

Alternate the rotary agitation with the washing action until only heavy minerals remain in the pan's bend. At the end of the washing, use your thumb to scrape off lighter sands as they separate from heavier minerals. Finally, with only a small quantity of water in the pan, give it a light, quick swirl to cause the mineral concentrates to tail out. These you can then examine with your hand lens to see if any gold flakes flicker among the residue.

It takes practice and skill to pan quickly and accurately; important as this technique is, even more important than expert manipulation of the pan is proper interpretation of the results. Many amateurs simply save all their tailings, store them in small plastic bags (carefully marked to identify the exact spot they were obtained, of course) and wait until later to carefully study each collection for flakes of gold.

One such prospector discovered when she got her samples home and began screening them that, although she had found no gold at all, she had gathered a great many small garnets. The octahedral crystals were not much larger than the head of a pin and without question they have no monetary value; on the other hand, she says when she looks at them with her ten-power glass, a whole new world is revealed. There are rewards other than financial in prospecting.

In addition to the garnets she found smoky quartz crystals, magnetite and topazolite, a yellow or green variety of garnet. Most of the crystals she brought home are imperfect since they've been tumbled by the stream, but her pleasure is nonetheless great.

perhaps one reason she is enjoying prospecting gold has been the total experience. She and her husband, encouraged by their back-packing mountain-climbing college-age son, decided to try camping at a state park. Because of its proximity to one of the streams they've heard is a good potential source of gold, they chose Calvin Coolidge State Forest Recreation Area at Plymouth, near Rutland, Vermont.

Sixty campsites, including 35 lean-tos, are available here at the nominal fee of \$4.50 a night for out-of-staters. They chose a lean-to that faced southwest and spent two nights there, cooking their meals at the fireplace and enjoying their outdoor home-away-from-home.

Available nearby were flush toilets, hot showers (8 minutes for 25 cents), and plentiful fresh water. There were no trailer hookups for water, electricity or sewage. They felt completely isolated from the world of humanity, sharing their campsite only with the small animals of the forest.

Their lean-to was a roofed shelter, closed on three sides and fully open on the fourth. Its 10' x 13' wooden floor stood about 15" off the ground. They loved it.

For information about Vermont campsites, reservations and locations, write State of Vermont, Dept. of Forests, Parks

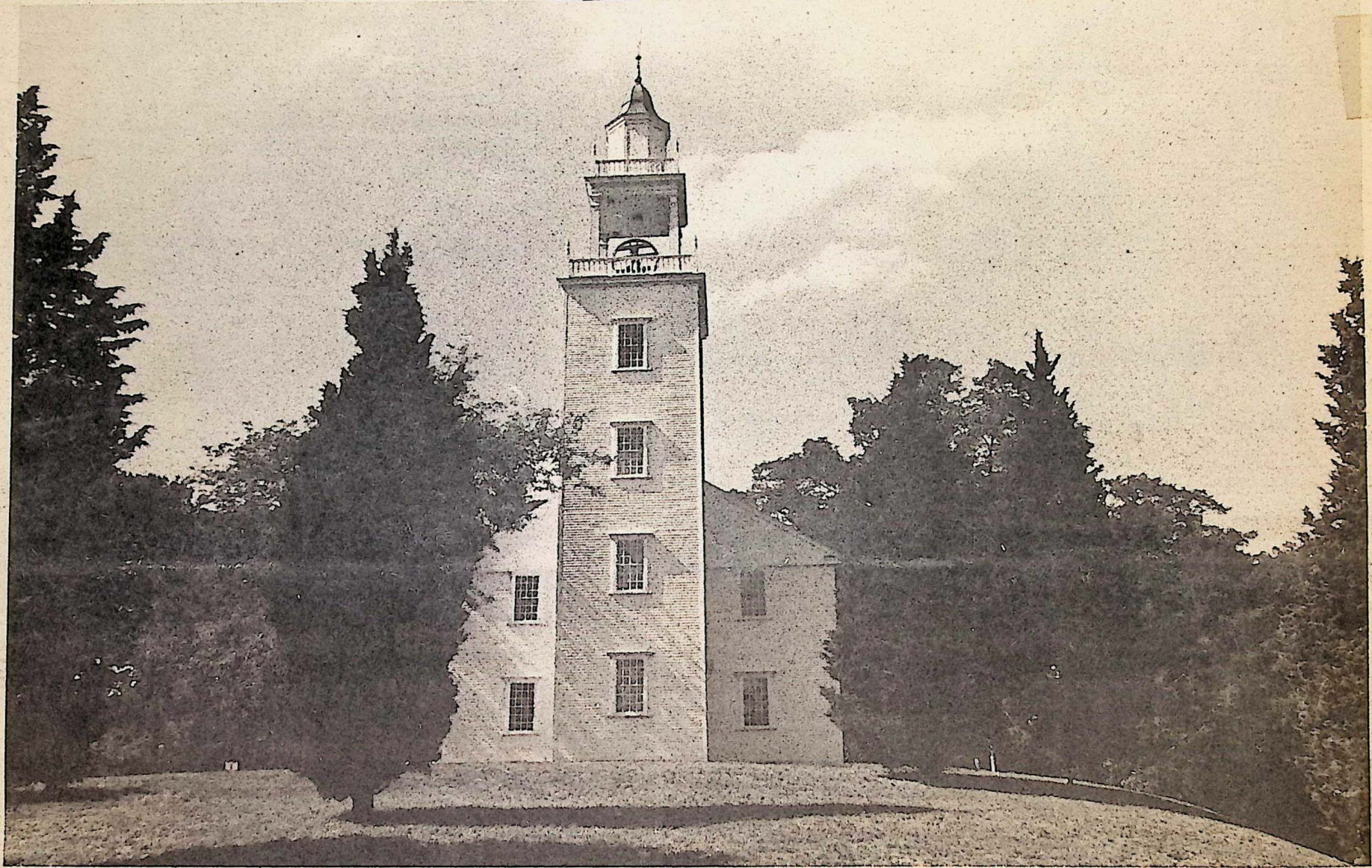
and Recreation, Montpelier, Vt. 05602. The campgrounds open officially on Friday before Memorial Day and close Tuesday following Columbus Day; dates are subject to change pending weather conditions.

For those who doubt their gold-panning proficiency and prefer working on dry land, there's Ruggles Mine at Grafton, New Hampshire, within an hour's drive of Calvin Coolidge State Park. Here, at the oldest mica, feldspar, beryl and uranium mine in the United States, prospectors armed with hammers and chisels chip away at the sides of the open mine looking for crystals and gems. Patience is required to gather any stones of value but the mine is a fascinating place for any "rock hound" even if gemstones are no part of the loot.

There's an admission charge to enter the mine, but no limit to what may be carried away; the display of crystals at the mine's entrance is ample proof of the remarkable finds others have made exploring among the rubble of Ruggles Mine.

Is there gold in Ruggles Mine? There might be; the only way to find it is to look. But one word of caution. Whether you pan for gold or dig for it, chances of finding enough to pay for your time and energy are remote. If your search for gold is strictly for pleasure, it's practically guaranteed you'll carry home a treasure trove.

Of memories. Of healthy exercise. Of experiences in the great out-of-doors. Those things might well be worth more to you than all the gold in "them thar hills."



The West Parish Congregational Church, picturesque landmark in West Barnstable. (Photo by Mark Cote)