Letchworth State Park Middle Falls

The Natural Beauty of Letchworth State Park & Silverlaken Estate

FAMILY TRAVEL

— by Deborah Williams

Letchworth State Park is a true Western New York gem and has been voted the country's best state park—a most deserved honor. It has been dubbed "the Grand Canyon of the East."

It is a park that has its all: magnificent scenery, three waterfalls, a fascinating history on display at the park's museum, a one-of-its-kind nature trail designed for people on the autism spectrum, a most special country inn, restaurants, campgrounds, a large swimming pool, a stocked trout pond, kayak tours on a dramatic river, a hot air balloon company offering amazing trips and spectacular photos over the falls, campgrounds, cabins, and a most dedicated staff.

But it does not have a lake. Growing up, summer vacations were always a cottage along a lake, usually in northern Ontario but sometimes in New York's Adirondacks.

Silver Lake

My latest travel discovery completes the Letchworth circle. Just ten minutes from the park is Silverlaken Estate, a unique resort on the shores of Silver Lake—a special lake that comes with its own sea serpent legend. Both the park and Silverlaken are an easy 90-minute drive south of Buffalo.

The Silverlaken property also has quite a history. In the mid and late 1800s, nearby Perry was a thriving mill town and Silver Lake was a popular tourist destination for church retreats and private camps.

The water from the Silver Lake outlet provided the hydropower for a dozen textile mills in what is now Perry's Main Street (now a good place for dining options). Silverlaken's lodge building was the summer retreat of the Traber family who owned a large mill in town.

Mills began to close after engines replaced hydropower by the time of World War I and the property fell into disrepair for decades. Mike Bellamy, the estate's current owner, spent his childhood on the lake and worked at his family's marina during his teen years.

After a career spent in Asia, Bellamy and his family returned to Silver Lake and set upon the task of creating this most distinctive place. It boasts 27 units including a treehouse, canvas cabins, lakeside tents, a tiny house, a bubble dome, a retro camper, cottages and cabins with kitchenettes, bathrooms, and fire pits. There is internet but no television.

There are complimentary kayaks and paddleboards for exploring the lake, a sauna, a play area, and the makings of s'mores in each unit waiting for a fire to create this summer treat. There are benches for just sitting by the lake.

Since it opened in 2020, it has garnered a wealth of complimentary reviews and return visitors. Visitors praised the cleanliness, comfort, and value.

Our lakeside cottage was named in honor of Mary Jemison, a most remarkable woman who takes us back to Letchworth

Silverlaken Cottage

Glen Iris, Letchworth State Park

Mary Jemison

State Park where she is buried. The cottage would be good for a family of four and came with a cute green refrigerator, microwave, dishes, and a coffee maker.

To talk about Mary Jemison, we need to tell a bit about remarkable William Pryor Letchworth. The Senecas gave him their greatest honor and adopted him into the Wolf Clan in 1872 and named him Hia-wa-ye-is-tah, "the man who always does right."

The park's creator first spotted the area one day while returning from a trip to New York City on the Erie Railway. A newsboy came through the cars with handbills touting the upcoming bridge as "the longest and highest wooden bridge in the United States, if not in the world; and one of the grandest views on the Western continent."

He soon set about buying a large house he had seen near the gorge and as much land as he could. Letchworth liked the word iris, a synonym for rainbow, and named his estate Glen Iris. He continued to buy land in the valley.

From the beginning, Letchworth not only shared the beauty of Glen Iris with family, friends and the public who journeyed by train, but during the summer he also brought children from Buffalo orphanages for two-week stays in the fresh air. He always intended Glen Iris as a place where the public would be welcome.

Letchworth retired early from his Buffalo business and devoted himself to social reform. His efforts bettered the lives of thousands of Native Americans, the poor, juvenile delinquents, prisoners, epileptics, the blind, and the mentally ill.

He was an early conservationist and transformed the once scarred landscape into a place of unspoiled beauty. Nearly every species of North American tree grows here, thanks to Letchworth.

The park's creator was also determined to preserve the region's rich Native American lore. In 1871 he relocated the last remaining Genesee Valley Seneca Council House near Glen Iris. After months of planning, Letchworth conducted the Last Council of the Genesee to rededicate the Council House on October 1, 1872. No such council had been held for 70 years, and none has been since. But the building has a place of honor near the Glen Iris Inn.

He extended invitations to descendants of Native American leaders. Spectators included former U.S. President Millard Fillmore and a descendant of the famed Native American leader, Red Jacket.

Two years later, Letchworth had the remains of Mary Jemison—the legendary White Woman of the Genesee—moved from Buffalo to the council house grounds.

From her birth in 1743 on a ship in the North Atlantic, she had a dramatic life. The ship was enroute from Ireland to America. During the French and Indian War, she was kidnapped by a Shawnee war party as a 12-year-old girl. The rest of her family was killed.

She was later adopted by a Seneca family. She became fully assimilated, marrying a Delaware man and, after his death, a Seneca man and had children with both. She lived out her long life as a Seneca in the shadow of the gorge. She died in 1833 and was buried on the Buffalo Creek Reservation.

When the reservation was closed and the burial ground threatened, Letchworth had her body taken to his property, a full ceremony was held at the Seneca council house, and she was laid to her final rest in 1874. A statue was erected marking Mary Jemison's final resting place. She is depicted with long braided hair and with her baby strapped to her back.

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Your Guide to
Choosing Childcare
A Special Section Dedicated To Helping Parents
Find Quality Care To Fit Their Family's Unique Needs

Autism Trail, Letchworth State Park

Autism Trail, Letchworth State Park

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The one-mile-long Autism Nature Trail opened in October 2021 and is the first ever nature trail specially designed to engage people on the autism spectrum and those with other sensory disorders. It is also wheelchair, power chair, and stroller accessible and has features for all ages. There are eight stations at various intervals offering a range of experiences from quiet engagement to active exploration and adventure.

Visitors are welcome to go on self-guided hikes anytime the park is open. There is also programming with trained staff at scheduled times. Check the website for dates and times.

The trail is next door to the Humphrey Nature Center which opened ten years ago and is another must-see for park visitors. The 5,000 square-foot educational facility focuses on sustainability and environmental education. It includes meeting space, classrooms, a butterfly garden, rest rooms, and interactive exhibits that promote activity within the park. Park ranger led walking and other tours begin here.

Children are encouraged to become New York State Junior Naturalists by completing an activity booklet. They are available at the Nature Center where badges are awarded for completion of the activities.

Travel Tip of the Month: For Letchworth State Park visit parks.ny.gov or call 585-493-3600. For Autism Nature Trail visit autismnaturetrail.com or call 585-237-0270, ext. 2002. For Silverlaken Estate visit silverlaken.com or call 585-237-8556.

Deborah Williams lives in Holland, NY and is a veteran travel writer whose work has appeared in national and international publications. She is the recipient of the Society of American Travel Writers' Lowell Thomas Gold Travel Writing Award.