



French's Ledges and Farnum Trails

Plainfield, NH

Uses: *hiking, mountain biking, skiing, snowshoeing*

The 1½ mile French's Ledges Trail is part of an extensive trail network built by property owner Ira Townsend through his conserved property and adjacent lands. The red-blazed French's Ledges Trail ends at the bald top of French's Ledges, where you can take in spectacular 360-degree views of Croydon and Grantham Mountains, Mt. Ascutney, and the village of Meriden. Yellow- and blue-blazed trails provide alternate, shorter routes up to the Ledges, while these and a number of unmarked trails allow for endless combinations of routes for exploring and exercise.

Adjacent to the Townsend property lies the Plainfield Town Forest's Farnum Lot, with its views of Mt. Ascutney and an active beaver meadow. A blue-blazed 1.2-mile loop trail circles the lot; and a number of other unmarked trails cross the property. The Townsend and Farnum Lot properties are contiguous with several hundred acres of surrounding undeveloped land – providing not only trails for recreation, but also excellent habitat and species biodiversity, including mink, fisher, deer, and many bird species.



Photo #1 *French's Ledges in autumn*

Directions:

From Route 120 in Meriden, turn west at the yellow flashing light onto Main Street and go 0.8 miles, over the hill past [Kimball Union Academy \(KUA\)](#) and down to a covered bridge. Turn left onto Colby Hill Road, going through the covered bridge. There are three trailhead options beyond this point, marked on the map as "North," "Middle," and "South."

• **North Trailhead:** From the covered bridge go 0.4 mile on Colby Hill Road to a small pull-off on your left for the start of the French's Ledges Trail.

• **Middle Trailhead:** From the covered bridge go 0.9 mile on Colby Hill Road and turn left onto Columbus Jordan Road. Parking will be on your right along Columbus Jordan Road, half a mile from its junction with Colby Hill Road. The blue-blazed Farnum Loop Trail enters the woods about 25 yards from the parking area across a mowed field to the west. On the other side of the road, to the east, is a yellow-blazed connector trail that links with the French's Ledges Trail, bringing you to the Ledges in just over three-quarters of a mile.

• **South Trailhead:** A small pull-off on the left side of Columbus Jordan Road, 0.9 mile from the junction with Colby Hill Road, serves as the trailhead for a blue-blazed trail on presently-unconserved land, leading 0.6 mile to French's Ledges.

Exploring French's Ledges and Farnum Trails:

French's Ledges and other Townsend Trails:

Ira and Sara "Sally" Townsend have lived on their property on Columbus Jordan Road in Meriden for nearly 60 years, taking great care of its managed forests, fields, and ponds. Their historic 1803 house was once the home of an early Plainfield patriarch, Hezekiah French (1744 – 1832), after whom French's Ledges are named. In the mid-1960's, Ira Townsend was working at the nearby Kimball Union Academy when the school needed a cross-country skiing course. Mr. Townsend began clearing and maintaining trails, and has been at it ever since. In 2002 he made his popular trail network a permanent community asset through a 143-acre conservation easement with UVLT. "Ira just wanted to be sure the trails are available for people to use in perpetuity," said his wife Sally.



Photo #2: *Woodland trail to French's Ledges*

The entire Townsend trail network is perfect for hiking and snowshoeing, and most of it is readily accessible to mountain bikers and cross-country skiers as well. Nevertheless, the very northern end of the French's Ledges Trail is somewhat steep and quite wet, thus suitable only for bikers and skiers with advanced skills. Additionally, the final section of the French's Ledges Trail, on KUA property and leading up to the Ledges themselves, is decidedly too steep and narrow for bikes and skis. However you travel, ascending this final section on foot is well worth the climb for the fine views that will be your reward. The 1,310-foot-high open Ledges are also a destination site in the Vital Communities' Valley Quest educational treasure hunt project.



Photo #3: *Plainfield Elementary School students on French's Ledges*

Photo #4: *View of Meriden from French's Ledges*



Returning to the Townsend trail network, a nice loop can be made using the yellow-blazed trail along the property's southeast boundary. This trail follows the former access road to KUA's abandoned ski tow gear house, another of Ira Townsend's projects. You may notice underfoot some strange, lightweight brownish "rocks," many of them streaked in rainbow colors. These are "clinkers" – the residue from the burning of soft coal – that were used in building the ski tow access road. The other-worldly look of the

clinkers has led some local trail users to refer to the old ski tow road as the "Meteor Trail." Beyond the gear house to the north are two small upland ponds with a narrow land bridge between them that function as vernal pools and provide amphibian breeding habitat.

Farnum Loop Trail:

The Farnum Lot is named for the original homestead once occupying the property. According to *Choice White Pines and Good Land: A History of Plainfield and Meriden, New Hampshire* (1991, by Philip Zea and Nancy Norwalk), Merrit Farnum (1798 – 1854) was “the King of Plainfield’s sheep farmers,” who kept 600 sheep on his 700-acre spread on the west side of French’s Ledges.

The conservation of this 78+ acre property is an excellent example of the power of a small group of people taking a stand to protect a valuable community resource. Neighbors in the Columbus Jordan Road area organized, pledged their own funds, wrote letters, and applied for grants to purchase the Farnum Lot. They put in place conservation restrictions through UVLT and then donated the land to the Town of Plainfield for forestry and recreational purposes. In addition to private donations, the project received funding from the Mascoma Savings Bank Foundation and the NH Sierra Club. The Farnum Loop Trail is maintained by the Plainfield Trailblazers, a community volunteer group.

The Farnum Lot has good soils; and the former pastureland has grown into a productive woodlot on moderate terrain. Stone walls found throughout this property (and the Townsend property as well) demarcate the edges of former agricultural fields. Traveling the Loop Trail in a counterclockwise direction you will soon come to the north boundary of the Farnum Lot, along which you will see a stone wall with a line of large oaks and maples, an old woods road running along it just outside the property. On the southwest side of the loop an old cellar hole and some large granite fence posts are further evidence of the property’s history.



Photo #6: Cellar hole, Farnum Lot

Photo #5: Stone wall, Farnum Lot north boundary

Farther on you will cross a small seasonal brook which flows through the length of the parcel, augmented by several small tributaries. Three distinct wetland areas stretch along the course of the main brook, including two abandoned beaver ponds. From the stream, you will ascend to the unmaintained, Class VI Farnum Road. Follow the Farnum Road east, back to Columbus Jordan Road. The parking area will be about a hundred yards up the road to your left.



Links:

Valley Quest program:

www.vitalcommunities.org/ValleyQuest/ValleyQuest.htm

Trail Use Guidelines

- Carry out what you carry in.
- Stay on the trail and use only designated trailhead parking areas.
- Stay off trails during spring melt, when soils are soft and easily eroded.
- Be respectful of other trail users and be courteous to trail neighbors.
- Control your dog(s). Do not allow dogs to disturb livestock, wildlife, or sensitive natural areas. Pets are not allowed on some trails.
- Close farm gates behind you.
- For your safety during hunting seasons, wear blaze orange.
- Follow [Leave No Trace guidelines](#).

Trail Maintenance: The [Plainfield Trailblazers](#) maintain the French's Ledges trails with the assistance of the landowner and students from [Kimball Union Academy](#) and the [Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth](#). The [Plainfield Trailblazers](#) maintain the Farnum trails in collaboration with the Plainfield Conservation Commission.

While these trails are available for community use free of charge, their maintenance depends on the good stewardship and financial support of users. Donations for the trail program may be sent to: Trails, Upper Valley Land Trust, 19 Buck Road, Hanover, NH 03755 or [donate online](#).

Please contact UVLT Vice President Stewardship [Pete Helm](#) (603-643-6626) to report trail maintenance needs or recommendations.