

VERMONT

••• Friday, June 30, 2006 • Metro Editor Patrick Garrity 660-1897 or (800) 427-3124 • Page 1B

Student research leads to Oakledge Park signs

By Jill Fahy

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Tyler Kieft used to think of Burlington's Oakledge Park as most visitors do — a scenic spot on the bike path with a picnic pavilion and some cool rocks by the lake.

But then, in 2003, he and 11 other Vermont high school students began digging into the past and found a treasure trove of history about the public park in the city's South End. The pavilion? It was once the site of an elegant manor house belonging to one of Burlington's most prominent families. And those rocks by the lake?

Signs unveiling

An unveiling of new interpretive signs at Oakledge Park will be held at a 4:30 p.m. ceremony today at the park. Gov. Jim Douglas will be joined by former students who created the signs; Governor's Institutes of Vermont students; and Jean Olson, director of the Governor's Institutes of Vermont.

They're 500 million years old.

Now, three years later, the students' discoveries

See **PARK**, 6B

PARK: Student project leads to signs

Continued from Page 1B

are on permanent display at the park in the form of interpretive signs. The placards are interspersed throughout the park and are meant to offer a window on the past that stretches back centuries. Dozens of period photographs, interesting factoids and directional maps make up the seven signs that will be unveiled today during a ceremony at the park.

"Doing this proved to me what it's like to discover something new," said Kieft, of Essex, a 19-year-old sophomore at the University of Rochester in New York. "It's that feeling you get when you find this stuff out and you want to share it with someone."

The Oakledge project in which Kieft participated was part of the Science and Technology Governor's Institute — an intensive summer learning program for Vermont high school students. Thirty-six students participated in the week-long summer program, which focuses on acquiring experience related to the environment.

A group of 12 students, including Kieft, were assigned in 2003 to study Oakledge's natural environment. Beyond that objective, no one, including University of Vermont geology professor Paul Bierman who taught the program, knew where their work would take them.

"That was the fun part," Bierman said. "You never quite know where you're going to end up every time."

Rooting through UVM's special collections and archives from Shelburne Farms



JILL FAHY, Free Press

One of Oakledge Park's new interpretive signs shows a picture of a manor house that stood where the pavilion stands.

and The Burlington Free Press, the students found old photographs and documents dating back to the late 1800s. They learned that the park was once part of a 200-plus acre estate owned by Dr. William Seward Webb. The grounds included a farm, where one of the park's parking lots stands, and a rambling manor house with a sweeping vista of Lake Champlain.

The property later became a public resort, with a dozen cabins nestled in the woods, then a private club before the city of Burlington turned the grounds into a public park in 1971.

Bierman said the students were enthusiastic about the project from the start. Not sure where the manor house stood, the group borrowed a metal detector and found the metal footings — all eight of them — for the former porch.

"It was the image I'm left with whenever I think of this project," Kieft said. "It was just like the thrill of discovery to think this patch of grass, which is so unassum-

ing, was a site of great history, and now it's gone."

Near the manor house was a golf course that is also gone, but hints of it remain in the topography, as Bierman pointed out during a walk through the park this week. It isn't hard to imagine the raised bumps on the extensive lawns as former tee boxes or greens.

Once their research was complete, the students made mock-ups of their own interpretive signs, but they wanted the public to benefit from their new knowledge and took it a step further. The students' research was reproduced in the signs that were crafted by the Lake Champlain Basin Program and installed by the city.

Bierman said he hopes park visitors who read the signs will look at Oakledge Park within a new context — one that mixes outdoor fun with a sense of history.

"For me, it's a place I knew," Bierman said of the park, "but I got to know it a lot better."

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