

ROCK AND ICE

ISSUE 209 | APRIL 2013

CONNECTICUT CHOP WAR

IS HISTORY AND THE FUTURE
LOOKS INCREDIBLE

CIRQUE OF THE CLIMBABLES

SHAPING DESTINY

HOW IAN POWELL
REVOLUTIONIZED
CLIMBING

BLACK CANYON BETA

THE UNFORTUNATE TRUTH CLIMBING & ARTHRITIS

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[PAGE 74]

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DISPLAY THROUGH APRIL

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Silas Finch pulls above the urban winter doldrums. Good edges mark the clean face on an unnamed two-pitch 5.9 at West Rock.

Ceasefire

*A new wave is bringing bolted climbing
to Connecticut, of all places.*

STORY BY BRIAN PHILLIPS
PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER BEAUCHAMP

I crimped on the tiny flake and felt it flex under my fingers. I was oozing sweat, adrenaline and doubt. Why did I get myself in this situation—risking injury or death just for a first ascent of a lousy route on an obscure cliff? My only protection was a shallow placement of the smallest nut I carried, and, from 50 feet above the bone-cracking talus, I doubted that it would hold anyway in the chossy rock. Thankfully, I finished the climb—swearing under my breath, more angry than relieved. I promised myself never to do anything that stupid again. I never climbed that route, on the lichen-covered east side of Lantern Hill in North Stonington, Connecticut, again, and I doubt anyone has.

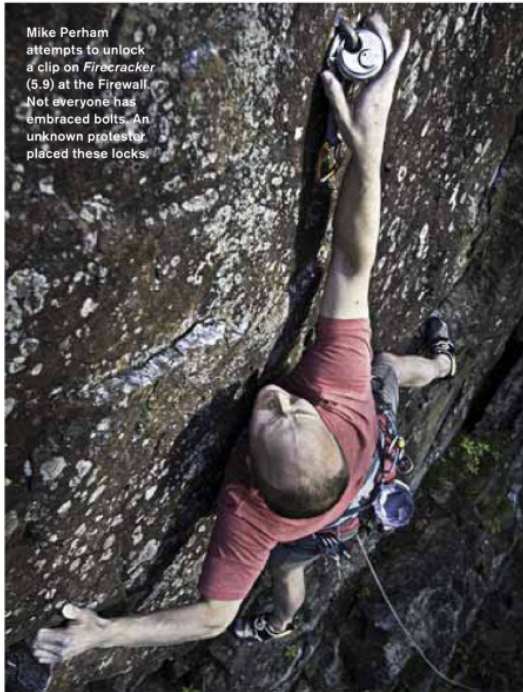
Fast forward 14 years. I reach around an arete, clip a bolt, and pop across a feet-dangling traverse. No worries. No big deal? It actually is a big deal, because the route, *La Mesa* (5.9), is a sport climb in Connecticut, a state where putting “bolt” and “climb” in the same sentence is a relatively new and still controversial concept.

Times are changing. There are now 60 new sport climbs and mixed sport-gear routes in six different crags located in central and eastern Connecticut, and they are widely considered a welcome addition, as there are

few places to sport climb in New England. Farley Ledges in Massachusetts and Rummy in New Hampshire are the only places within reasonable driving distance.

Connecticut has a long trad-climbing history, dating from the 1920s, with pioneers like Fritz Wiessner, John Reppy, Sam Streibert, Layton Kor and Henry Barber putting up some of the early testpieces. Wiessner and Roger Whitney’s *Vector* at Ragged Mountain, a 5.8+ done between 1933 and 1935, was considered one of the hardest routes in the country for over 15 years. Climbers such as Mike Hintz, Bob Clark, Ken Nichols and Al Rubin established many of the trad routes chronicled in *TRAPROCK: Connecticut Rock Climbs*, by Nichols, published in 1982. Hard routes came to the state when Bill Lutkus free climbed *May Day* (5.13) at Ragged Mountain in 1989.

First ascents were ground up and often with marginal gear. This ground-up ethic persisted in the state for decades, well after bolts began to proliferate elsewhere in the country.



Mike Perham attempts to unlock a clip on *Firecracker* (5.9) at the Firewall. Not everyone has embraced bolts. An unknown protester placed these locks.

Connecticut climbers proudly cling to their tradition of bold gear climbs and notoriously stiff grades although the cracks here (unlike in the bullet, gear-friendly horizontal fissures of the nearby Gunks) are often thin, rotten or nonexistent.

Yet as time went by, many climbers grumbled on forums about the lack of safe leads. Others wanted to keep the cliffs bolt free, and most routes were accessible via top rope, so top roping became the norm. For years everyone accepted top roping as the only alternative.

None can write about Connecticut climbing without discussing Ken Nichols. Climbing in Connecticut since 1972, he is credited with putting up the state's first 5.12, *Chain Reaction*, in 1985. Some of his leads were controversial or wildly complicated, using tied-off hooks and multiple ropes, and I've seen him pad the base of a cliff with mattresses dragged from his car (though he ultimately decided against that particular lead). Nichols is also probably the most infamous bolt chopper in the country. There's even a web page, www.stopken.org, dedicated to outing him. Any time a bolt is cut in all of New England, Nichols is blamed—and he has in the past admitted to chopping them in various states. He has been physically assaulted, called every name in the book, and arrested and prosecuted. Among his friends, though, Nichols is a patient mentor. A posse of climbers, both young and old, regularly ropes up with him, and he welcomes anyone who is willing to incur the wrath of those who shun him.

In July 2007, in Orange County Court, Massachusetts, Ken Nichols

pleaded guilty to trespassing and no contest to willful destruction of property, according to Rob Sullivan on stopken.org. Charges had been filed after Ken was caught chopping *Mass Production* (5.10d) at Farley Ledges. As reported by Sullivan, Ken agreed to pay \$249.99 in restitution and to undergo 24 months of probation, was banned from entering five Western Mass crag areas, and was forbidden to chop any another bolt anywhere. Of course, the last stipulation is unenforceable outside Massachusetts.

At 64, though, Ken has seemingly mellowed, as evidenced by the fact that bolts have now been prevalent throughout Connecticut for five years without being smashed with a hammer. Nevertheless, when I asked what he thought of the bolted routes that have now appeared at Chatfield Hollow, in Killingworth, he replied, "You know what I think. I think they should be destroyed."

First ascents were ground up and often with marginal gear. This ground-up ethic persisted in the state for decades.

I've climbed in the state for 25 years, mostly in the eastern part, and have witnessed a few first ascents I'd consider free solos, where the climber placed some gear but was in groundfall range for the majority of the route. Are these climbs trad first free ascents, free solos or bouldering highballs? Most climbers never repeat these runout leads because they are unwilling to put life and limb in jeopardy. In 1995 a climber broke his back leading *Zen Master* (5.10), an unprotectable climb at Lantern Hill.

Should the person who first led (or free soloed) a route get to dictate that everyone who follows uses the same style? That point is argued ad infinitum on climbing forums nationwide, but the

maxim of "no retro-bolting" has been the accepted standard. However, in Connecticut it was taken a step further and in 1993 all fixed gear, including pitons, was removed or smashed regardless of who put it there, how it was placed, or if it was needed for a safe lead. Old pitons removed included ones on *Main Street* and *Hemlock Grove* at Ragged Mountain, both put up by Fritz Wiessner in the 1930s. Throughout the 1990s, gear was replaced and chopped multiple times. Although no one admitted to it, Nichols was banned from Ragged Mountain Foundation property.

Ken Nichols' take on it is, "They were led"—later—"without the fixed gear, so it is no longer needed."

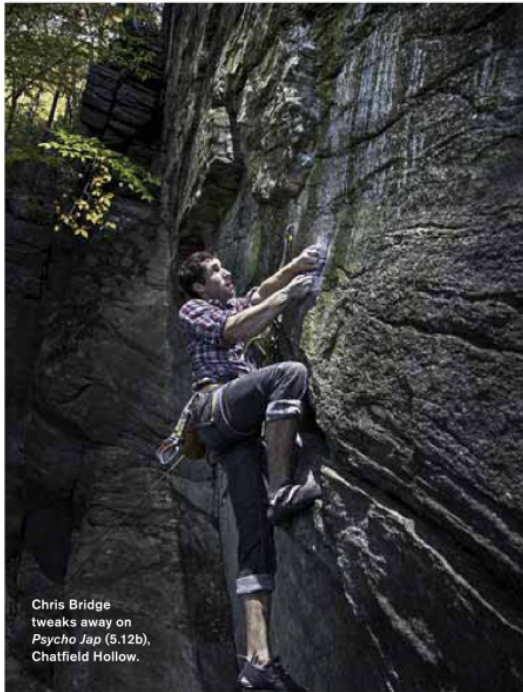
Connecticut gained the reputation as either the most ethically pure climbing state or the most backward climbing state, depending on your point of view. Many felt the state was held hostage by the views and actions of one person.

Starting in 2008, bolts began appearing around the state, both on new sport climbs and also on some trad climbs to protect runouts. The bolts provided opportunities for many new routes and scattered the increasing number of climbers away from the heavily trodden Traprock ridges and across the state. None of those involved in the bolting wanted to be identified in this article due to the state's contentious past.

The initial bolting was done in 2008 by a few climbers, clandestinely equipping some "secret" crags like Bear Rock in Durham and Pine Ledge in Deep River. The first officially approved bolting, also in 2008, was in the town of Southington when the C3 Connecticut Climbers Coalition, a



Michelle Chappel
grapples with
Garbajstan (5.11c/d),
Bear Rock.



Chris Bridge
tweaks away on
Psycho Jap (5.12b),
Chatfield Hollow.

group of loosely organized climbers, obtained permission from the town to place bolts on the Firewall on Bradley Mountain. In 2010 and 2011, other cliffs like Ross Rocks in Killingly, West Rock in New Haven, and even one of the more popular crags in the state, Chatfield Hollow in Killingworth, started getting bolts. There was no overt organization or any agreed-upon bolting policy by the climbing community. Routes were cleaned and bolted top-down—a practice considered anathema to Connecticut tradition but a method that ensures that bolts are placed where needed instead of only where the leader can get a stance or hang off a hook.

For a relatively small state, Connecticut has quite a concentration of climbing. Ken Nichols' 1995 guidebook *Hooked on Traprock* covers 2,786 routes, and that only includes the Traprock cliffs of central Connecticut. To put it in perspective, the current New River Gorge guidebook lists 2,500 routes. Granted, many of the Traprock routes are mossy or chossy runoff 5.2 to 5.5s Nichols' first ascents.

Can sport routes exist in Connecticut without aggravating trad climbers? Bear Rock is one example that suggests they can. An overhanging 70-foot cliff in the Cockaponset State Forest in Durham, Bear Rock was seldom climbed until bolts appeared in 2010. Most of its gneiss is rather chossy, and the cliff overhangs so much that it is hard to top-rope. As a sport-climbing area, however, Bear Rock is perfect—with well-defined crimpy holds on steep rock. Now home to nine sport routes ranging from 5.7+ to 5.12a, with most in the 5.11 range, Bear Rock sees groups of a dozen climbers on a weekend. That is more traffic than it drew in an entire year before the bolts.

For harder sport routes and mixed trad/sport lines, Chatfield Hollow State

Park in Killingworth is the place. Here local climbers have put up new lines or added bolts to existing top-rope lines to produce 15 new bolted routes on the main cliff and nearby Feather Ledges. One such transition from top-rope to sport climb is the classic *Shape Shifter* (5.12c), first put up by Whitey (John) MacLean in 1990 and considered by some to be the best 5.12 in Connecticut. Climbs here are mostly in the 5.11 to 5.13 range.

Firewall on Bradley Mountain in Southington now offers a large number of routes squeezed into a relatively small cliff. About 15 routes or variations have been bolted on the 70-foot-high Traprock face. Firewall is one of the few places where some trad routes (albeit seldom-climbed run-out ones) were retro-bolted, and it is one of the only places where bolts in recent years have been chopped (and replaced).

The Town of Southington approved the placement of bolts here, but it can be argued by ethical purists that no town council permission should trump long-established climbing tradition of not retro-bolting trad routes without the first ascensionists' permission. The bolting advocates argue that the routes bolted here are different lines that are a few feet away

from the originals and that this little-climbed cliff was improved by the bolts and by organized trail work, installing fixed anchors, and cleaning loose rock. The route *Fresh Bag* (5.8) was bolted over a former trad line called *Forest Fire* (5.8), and bolts also appeared on the trad line *Smoke Out* (5.7).

Pine Ledge is located down a bone-rattling dirt road in the Cockaponset State Forest in Deep River. It is another previously little-known and seldom-visited crag that now draws up to 20 climbers on a weekend day to clip bolts. Climbers from as far away as New Haven and Rhode Island, 60 miles and over an hour away, regularly

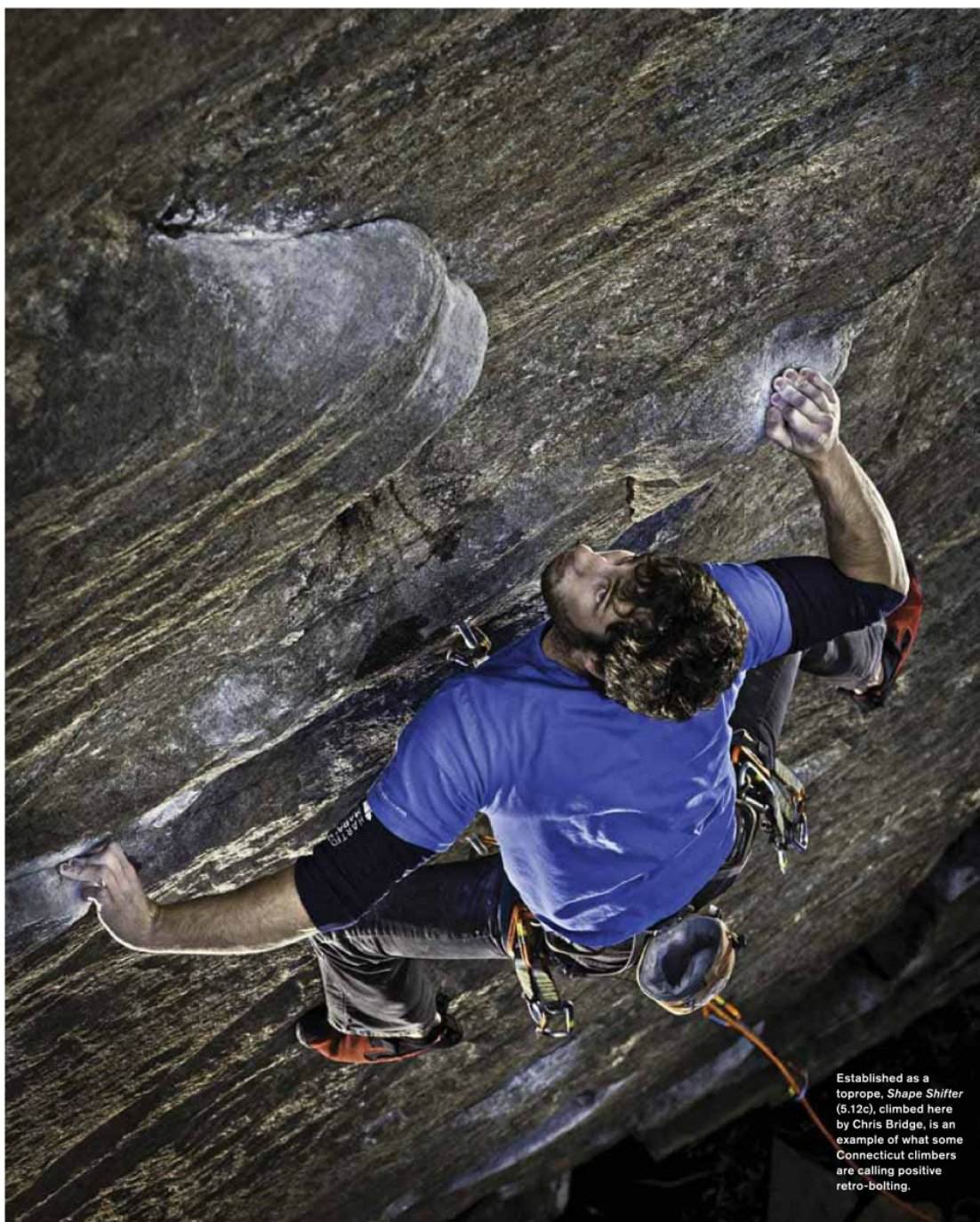
climb here. With good rock but little in the way of cracks, all routes are bolted. Climbing here involves surmounting a series of well-bolted Gunks-like overhangs. A dozen really fun routes here range from 5.7 to 5.11b, with most in the 5.10 range.

Ross Rocks in Killingly is a microcosm of Connecticut climbing. It has classic top-rope climbs, trad climbs, and a few recently added sport climbs. While longtime Connecticut climbers come here, Ross is mostly frequented by Rhode Islanders, as it is four miles over the border. With four cliffs up to 85 feet high, it's the closest crag of any size to Providence within an easy 25-mile, 40-minute drive.

West Rock in New Haven is up to 300 feet tall, with spectacular views of downtown New Haven, Yale University and Long Island Sound. Sitting high on a hill above the Connecticut River Valley, the cliff has exposure to rival that of the Gunks. Unfortunately, as an urban crag it also has problems, such as people throwing things off the cliff and car break-ins. While West Rock is notorious for loose rock, many sections of solid rock just need some cleaning and traffic. Route development is ongoing here and the area has potential for some great multi-pitch routes.

With the exception of the Firewall, bolting has not come to the Traprock crags of central Connecticut, home to the most classic Connecticut climbing areas: East Peak, Pinnacle Rock, Cathole and Ragged Mountain. Instead, discussions by the Ragged Mountain Foundation (RMF), a climbers' group that owns and administers the Ragged Mountain area, have so far mostly been about replacing the bolts and pitons that were chopped on historical routes in the 1990s. The consensus among the RMF board is to restore them slowly.

Can sport routes exist in Connecticut without competing with trad climbers for limited rock?



Established as a top rope, *Shape Shifter* (5.12c), climbed here by Chris Bridge, is an example of what some Connecticut climbers are calling positive retro-bolting.



Largely ignored in the past because of its loose rock, nonexistent pro and urban setting, West Rock is home to Connecticut's airiest routes and even offers a few multi-pitch lines. Kevin Sweeney basks on an unnamed 5.9.

When Nichols was asked how he felt about the plan, his answer was a terse, "That's not a good idea." The discussion was dropped with no threat to chop them.

So where does the future of Connecticut climbing stand? In a perfect world, the climbing community will come together and agree on a comprehensive bolting policy somewhere in the middle of bolting anything/everything and no bolting at all. Hopefully we can find a reasonable approach, but so far nothing has suggested that this kind of cooperative spirit will prevail. Simply discussing this article with six fellow climbers stirred up such discontent that they all stated that they didn't want to be quoted or identified, and one e-mailed *Rock and Ice* urging the magazine not to print this story (the other climbers were amenable, but wanted to distance themselves).

Yet the bolted climbs are no secret: They have been discussed on the Facebook group Connecticut Rock Climbers UNITE! and the routes at Chatfield Hollow State Park are published on Mountain Project and YouTube.

Can sport climbers and their bolted routes coexist with trad climbers and their trad routes? Time will tell, but so far it looks like extreme intolerance may be a thing of the past. Perhaps it will finally become possible for everyone to get over our differences and climb.

I still climb trad in Connecticut, but my days of leading runout routes are done. My interest is tempered by time and age. As a full-time climbing bum, however I manage to climb in Connecticut three to four times a week, usually happily clipping bolts.

Brian Phillips is spending his retired years trying to get to all the climbs throughout the world on his bucket list.



West Rock, overlooking New Haven, is up to 300 feet tall.

[CONNECTICUT > LOGISTICS]

[GUIDEBOOKS]

The bolted routes, both sport and mixed, are on six different crags located in the central and eastern part of the state. Even with good directions, finding them can be the crux of the day. The latest (2002) guidebook, *Rock Climbing Connecticut*, by Dave Fasulo, does not cover the newly bolted routes.

It does provide good directions on how to get to these cliffs. Fasulo is working on updating his guidebook to include these new climbs. Detailed route information is currently available at: www.climbri.com/CT-Sport-Guide.htm

[GEAR]

A 60-meter rope and a dozen draws will get you up and down all of the sport routes. But before heading up any bolted routes that you are not familiar with, be aware that some require removable protection.

[RECOMMENDED SPORT ROUTES]

Bear Rock

Chosstaclular (5.10c), FA Chris Beauchamp 2009
Morozyvo (5.10b), FA Chris Beauchamp 2008
Recollections (5.12a), FA Chris Beauchamp 2009

Chatfield Hollow

The Bloody Beetroots (5.11b/c), FA Greg Shyloski 2011
Shape Shifter (5.12c), FFA Greg Shyloski 2010
Fat Elliot (5.11c, requires some gear), FA Nate Labieniec 2011

Firewall

Playing With Fire (5.11b), FFA unknown
Dalha Wanna (5.10a), FFA unknown
El Chiste (5.13a), FA Dan Yagmin 2012

Pine Ledge

Jamie (5.10b), FA Chris Beauchamp 2009
Kickapoo Joy Juice (5.11a), FA Chris Beauchamp 2010
Syndication (5.10a), FA Chris Beauchamp 2009

Ross Rocks

La Losa (5.8), FFA Brian Phillips 2010
La Mesa (5.9), FFA Brian Phillips 2010