



Etched in Slate Valley

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In just three years, a growing network of singletrack mountain bike trails and gravel routes has been carved into the historic landscape near Poultney.

Story by Connor Davis, Photos by Chuck Heifer.

I'm pedaling up a dirt road in Poultney, a quiet town in southwestern Vermont perched along the New York border. The air is just right: warm, but not too warm; humid, but not too humid. Farms wait around each bend in the road—scattered with cows, sheep, goats, chickens and the occasional herd of deer. The sun flickers through tree branches like an old lantern as it lowers deeper and deeper into the distance.



Pro trailbuilders and volunteers have created a mountain bike network of singletrack, flowing trails at Endless Brook. At the top, stop for a rest and a view of Lake St. Catherine.

Underneath my revolving tires I notice the bright brown dirt is, now and then, accompanied by an almost-black substance. This substance also appears on the sides of the road, and I roll past a pile of it every minute or so, confused. In all my years as a Vermonter, I've never seen anything like it. Then I remember: I'm not just in any valley; I'm in the Slate Valley.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, ambitious Vermonters and immigrants from all over Europe took advantage of Poultney's rich slate deposits—mining the resource wherever they could, typically crafting it into roof shingles, and making a living in doing so. A handful of Poultney-based groups continue to work in the slate industry, but like many trades, this one has diminished over the years.

The Slate Valley has evolved in many ways, one of which is an emphasized shift towards outdoor recreation. Recently, a valiant effort has been made to reimagine the unique and attractive landscape.



One of the forces behind Slate Valley Trails, Tim Johnson also rents bikes out of his shop, Johnson and Sons Bikeworks, in nearby Hampton, N.Y

On my May ride, I'm joined by Tim Johnson, one of the hardworking locals behind this movement. Johnson is the president of Slate Valley Trails, a nonprofit founded in 2015 with three goals: "Build community among local individuals, organizations and businesses; support the local economy by promoting the region as a place to visit, with improved access to trails; and encourage the positive health benefits of being active outdoors." This group has worked tirelessly, and the results are, without a doubt, showing.

"It's really exciting," says Johnson, a tall man touting a large, black beard with a giant smile tucked underneath. "When I think about cycling and outdoor activities in general, I think about how we can get more people

engaged—particularly at the entry level. What I appreciate about this area is that we have those possibilities. We have Lake Catherine State Park, Green Mountain College, and fantastic topography fit for all levels of expertise."

The Slate Valley trails are all about diversity of terrain. On one end of the spectrum, the area's endless backroads provide a wide array of scenic routes known as the Gravel Ride Network. Slate Valley Trails has mapped out many of these rides (16 so far) for the public to easily navigate. Some rides are more moderate, as short as 8 miles, while others tip over the 50-mile mark and are characterized by more rigorous hills and terrain. Folks newer to biking can rent gear from local shops and embark on relaxing cruises and die-hard riders can pedal across the entire Valley—therein discovering an underrated and less-traveled pocket of Vermont.

Meanwhile, there's a growing network of top-notch single-track trails catering to adrenaline-chasers. Built mostly by hand, these trails exist thanks to local volunteers as well as two Vermont-based trail builders: [Hardy Avery's Sustainable Trail Works](#) and [Brooke Scatchard's Sinuosity](#). At the Endless Brook zone, riders of all abilities can enjoy 7 miles of well-groomed trails that weave through lush woods just outside of Lake Saint Catherine State Park (make sure to go take a dip in the lake after riding there).

Down the road at the Delaney Woods zone, in the town of Wells, 3.5 miles of slightly more challenging trails await—full of playful terrain shaded by hardwoods. Looking ahead to 2019,

Slate Valley Trails intends to build 10 more miles of multi-use trails in East Poultney: the next chapter in the organization's ongoing story.

"The Slate Valley Trails show off the backyard fun potential here, and all around Vermont," says Ryan Carr, who works in the Adventure Programming Department at Green Mountain College. He's also on this early-May ride with us, full of enthusiasm and optimism for this growing recreation destination. "Our trails mix well-built, fast singletrack, remote byways and country road cruises that invite everybody to come out," he says.

The amount of progress seen since Slate Valley Trails' founding three years ago is not by coincidence. It's been earned through a wild amount of hard work, both indoors and outdoors. The group has cooperated extensively with state officials, private landowners, and the Vermont Mountain Bike Association. It has put forth countless hours acquiring grants, building and cleaning up trails, spreading the word locally and regionally and hosting events. (Speaking of events, make sure to check their Facebook page for updates on weekly group rides).

"We're all volunteers. It's not a job," says Johnson, whose day job is owning and operating Johnson and Sons Bikeworks, just down the road in Hampton, N.Y. "We see some people putting in 10 hours a week, and some people putting 10 hours a summer. These are both extremely valued people in my eyes, because if you're willing to put in time, that is just so awesome."



At the end of our gravel ride Johnson, Carr and I veer onto the D&H Rail Trail, named after the 1,581-mile Delaware and Hudson Railway that, once upon a time, ran through Poultney and exported a large portion of the area's slate. In place of the old rails, this long and straight trail—perhaps Slate Valley Trails' most famed gem—snakes between tall, strong trees and rolling meadows full of sun-kissed grass. It's a perfect representation of the change that's taken place in Poultney and the perfect end to our ride.

We pedal down the trail for miles, conclude back in town, and say our goodbyes. It's dark now. The breeze cools down and disintegrates the warm, humid air. The moon is nearly full, and the stars are emanating into the night sky one by one. My love for Vermont has always been strong, but as I pack up the car and travel home—listening to the crackling public radio, reflecting on the bike ride in the Slate Valley—that love manages to grow, yet again.

A WEEKEND IN SLATE VALLEY

The valley that stretches west of the Green Mountains and northeast of the Taconics is where much of Vermont's slate was mined. Now it's a quieter part of the state, often overlooked by tourists but home to a growing network of more than 20 miles of multi-use trails. Plan to spend a long day or stay overnight. There are gravel roads, singletrack and rail trails to ride. Camp out at Lake St. Catherine

State Park. Cast a line in the lake or venture across the border to explore Granville and some of New York state's quieter towns.

Ride & Run

Since 2015, Slate Valley Trails has built and marked a series of singletrack and double track trails along with 10 more miles of mountain bike trails that are slated to be done by this fall. Much of that work will be completed by Sustainable Trailworks' Hardy Avery (who helped develop Stowe's Cady Falls, the Trapp trails, Perry Hill and many others).

The best singletrack riding is out of Endless Brook (7 miles of trails east of Lake St. Catherine State Park) and Delaney Woods in Wells where 3.5 miles of purpose-built trails spill out near Little Pond. There are also more than 155 miles of gravel riding and 16 mapped routes. Start with Birdseye Views, a 22.4-miler. To see maps of both the dirt and gravel routes, or to connect with one of the regular Thursday group rides, visit slatevalleytrails.com. On July 8, join the Slate Valley crew for a summer social.

For a different kind of riding, try the D&H Rail Trail (for a map, visit Traillink.com) which runs from Castleton College nearly 20 miles south to Rupert. At present, the D&H is in two sections: the northern one peters out just south of Poultney where it hits the New York border, but a connection is in the works. The southern section begins in Granville, N.Y. and runs to West Rupert.

Camp & Stay

Make a weekend of it and camp out at Lake St. Catherine State Park, just away from the Endless Brook trails. The 117-acre park is right on the lake, one of the largest and prettiest in the area, and has 50 tent and RV sites and 11 lean-tos. You can rent canoes or kayaks there too. The Bentley House is a classic B&B in Poultney and just across the New York border, head to Granville, N.Y. for the Station House B&B (located in an old train station) or the historic Sheldon Mansion.

Eat & Drink

Tot's Diner is a classic in Poultney and the place to go for a hearty breakfast before hitting the trail. Sissy's Kitchen in Middletown Springs is another great place for breakfast, to stop in from your gravel ride for a sandwich or to pick up a take-out dinner (try Thai curried salmon with lentil salad). For a real treat, book one of the Saturday farm-table dinners at Dancing Ewe Farm in North Granville. Owners Luisa and Jody Somers make most of the meal, including their Tuscan-style cheeses, from what they harvest on the farm, and serve it at long tables. For a brew and a burger try Tap's Tavern in Poultney or head to Granville to sample Slate Town Brewing.