



A hidden gem in a Pomfret, Connecticut pastoral setting.

New England's Hidden Gems

STORY & PHOTOS BY STAN WAWER

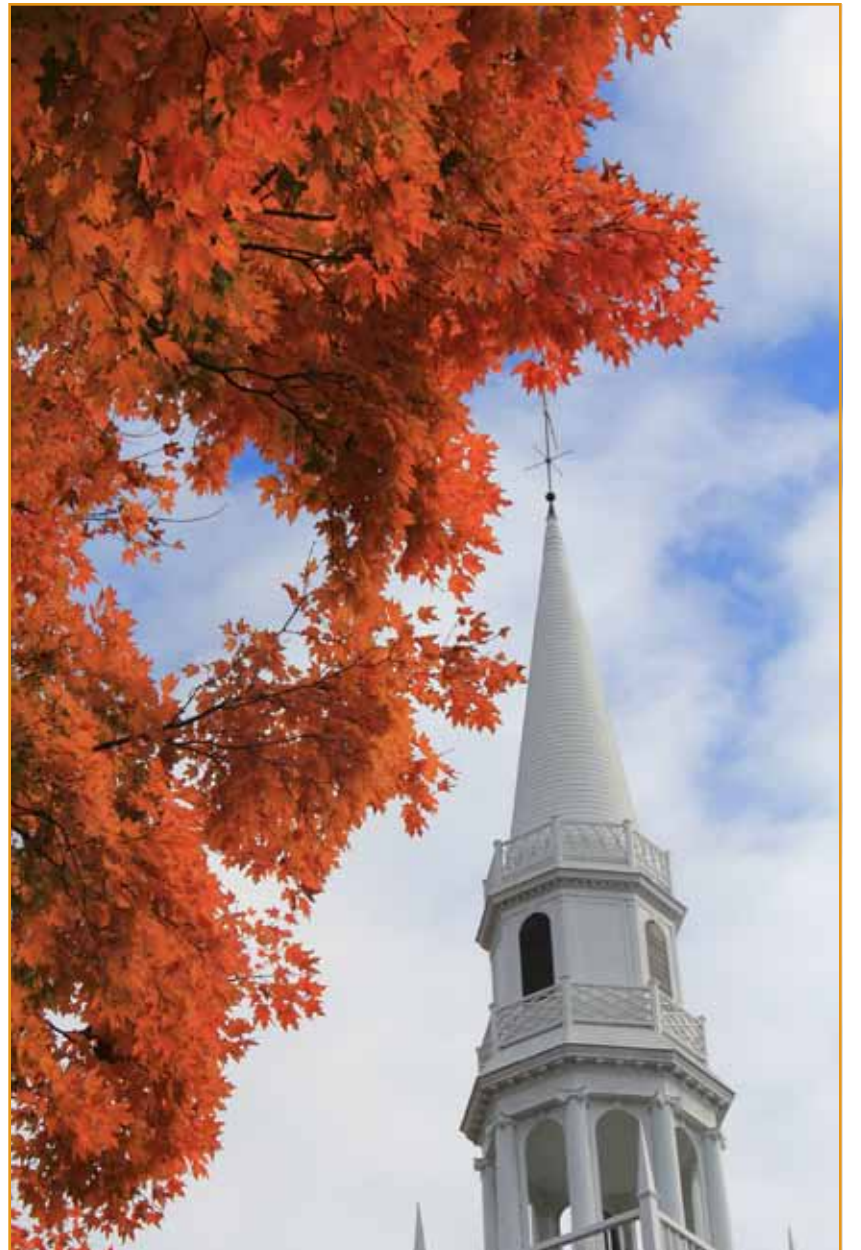
During my halcyon youth growing up in Connecticut there was a saying: “If you can catch a falling leaf before it hits the ground, you can make a wish. If you catch the leaf without crushing it, your wish will come true.”

I always wished that fall would never end. It’s hard not to be light-hearted and carefree when the air is crisp and nature fills your world with a carousel of intoxicating color.

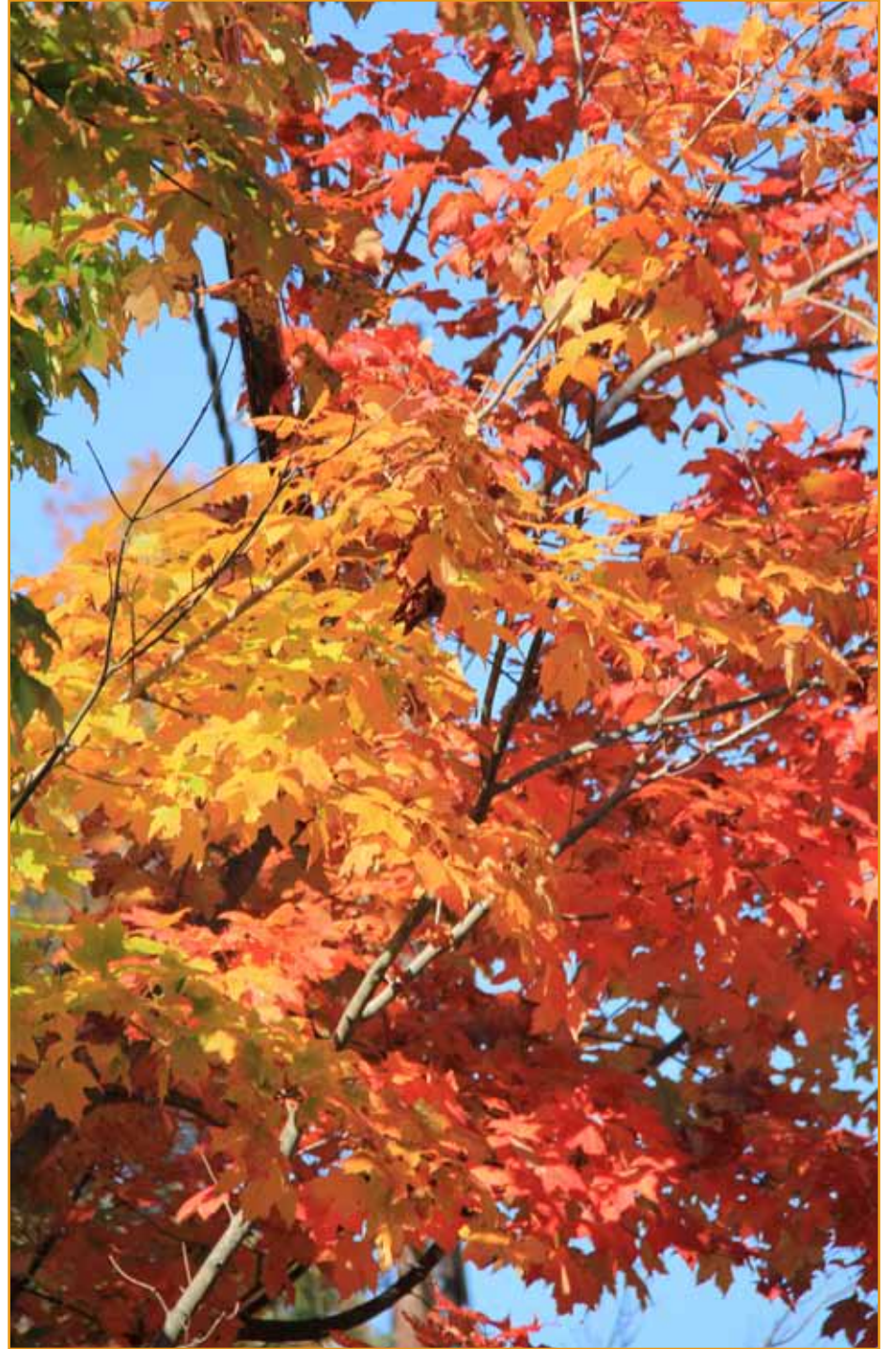
Last October, I returned to my New England roots for 16 days searching for the hidden gems of leaf peeping. With my wife as my driver, my search had me crisscrossing five of the six New England states. Rain on 10 of the 14 days (two days were traveling days) did not put a damper on my mission.

My quest commenced in the bucolic Litchfield Hills of Connecticut. There was a lot of color albeit peak season was still a week away. Life stands still in the Litchfield Hills, which include Litchfield, Kent, Cornwall, Sharon, Warren and Lakeville. Yankee Magazine (75th anniversary edition, September 2010) voted Kent the best place for foliage in New England. This entire area is a beautiful secret. If you visit during the week, you can avoid the crowds that swarm to places like the Mohawk Trail, the Molly Stark Trail and Route 100 through Vermont.

“The foliage is best the second or third week of October in the Litchfield Hills area,” said Janet Serra, director of the Western Connecticut Convention & Visitors Bureau. “The region in and around Litchfield is great for leaf peeping without the crowds,” she agreed.



This photo was taken across from the Litchfield village green with the spire of the First Congregational Church.



Kent Falls State Park in the Litchfield Hills of Northwest Connecticut, clockwise from left, great color near Thoreau's Walden Pond in Concord, Mass. and a drive through the woods in West Cornwall.

Rain, rain, go away, little Stanley wants to photograph. With heavy rain and no sun to brighten the leaves, day three was tough for photography. On day four, rain and fog covered most of New England as well as our entire three-and-a-half-hour drive from the Litchfield Inn to Ogunquit, Maine. I was getting angry with the rain gods. However, Route 9 heading toward Kennebunk and Kennebunkport (where former President George Bush and Barbara Bush still have a vacation home) delivered beautiful leaves in hues from golden to rust – a great off-the-beaten-path find.

We left Ogunquit under gray skies but finally saw the sun as we hit I-95 heading south toward New Hampshire and Massachusetts. By the time we stopped in Concord, Massachusetts, the sun was shining brightly. I was able to capture quintessential fall color in front of Concord Town House. Around the corner and down the road, colorful leaves gleamed in Minute Man National Historical Park, site of the beginning of the Revolutionary War and the “shot heard round the world.” Memories of my past colorful autumns were replayed in the beautiful foliage in front of us as we drove through the University of Connecticut

campus and Storrs, where I spent a good part of my childhood. The red, gold and yellow hues were vibrant in the small towns of Columbia, Coventry (site of the Nathan Hale Homestead), Andover and Bolton, which we drove through on our way to Southington.

I was given a tip by a local to check out Castle Craig inside Hubbard Park in Meriden. It was definitely a hidden gem. I returned a week later and it was spectacular, as was the wine trail in Wallingford. Pomfret, Connecticut has a plethora of little known gems well off the beaten path. Bob Wood, a childhood friend, drove me through the back roads around a number of out-of-the-way leaf-peeping sites in Connecticut's charming northeast corner. We toured the back roads of Pomfret and Woodstock, walking through brush deep into the woods. “You're not going to see any better foliage in New England than what you see in this area,” Wood said. “Just take a walk anywhere into the woods around here and you'll see nothing but beautiful leaves – and you won't hear a car for hours.”

My wife and I saw some excellent foliage driving up from Connecticut through west-





This magnificent color was taken in front of the Concord Town House. Below, a flag flies over more beautiful foliage in Concord and a hidden gem in a clearing off the beaten path in Pomfret, Connecticut.

ern Massachusetts and southern Vermont. We also enjoyed some color along Royalton Turnpike Road off of Vermont 12. This road is another local secret with little traffic and lots of leaves with the potential for excellent photographs.

In Vermont, we finally discovered an area draped in a mantle of radiant color. Driving along Common Road, a rural farm route in Waitsfield, we witnessed some of the most vibrant colors of the trip. And this was just the beginning. Continuing up to Sugarbush Ski Resort, I almost had a religious experience. Sugarbush was quintessential Vermont — reds and orange mixed with yellow and green. Wow! I found my final hidden jewel in Willimantic’s St. Joseph’s Cemetery where my parents are buried. The trees were in full color amid the calm and serenity of the cemetery.

How to Find the Foliage and Lose the Crowds

Check the summer weather. If New England has a wet summer, the peak season will probably be around the third week of October. If the summer is dry, the leaves will more than likely peak the first week of October. Generally, the more north you go, the earlier the leaves change. Avoid the leaf-peeping crowds by going to small towns and hitting the back roads. You will see spectacular foliage. Set your GPS system and explore. You can’t go wrong no matter which back road you take.

Where to Stay

We enjoyed the Paul Newman room at the Interlaken Inn in Lakeville, Connecticut. Excellent dining, Lake Wononscopomuc, the state’s deepest lake, is across the highway; hiking and biking trails and beautiful fall foliage.

The Litchfield Inn in Litchfield is one of Connecticut’s finest and with new owners it features renovations, theme rooms, superb dining in the Bantam Bistro, and is near Lake Waramaug.





From the top, clockwise, looking down Common Road in Waitsfield, Vermont, St. Joseph Cemetery in Willimantic, a small town in Connecticut's northeast corner, and Sugarbush Ski Resort in Vermont where the color was the most vivid even though it was raining.



The Beachmere Inn, on the famed Marginal Way ocean walk in Ogunquit, Maine, is only a short distance from Perkins Cove's shops and restaurants.

Fan House, a charming B&B close to Woodstock and Killington. Ask for the room on the right at the top of the stairs. Enjoy wine and a good book in front of the wood-burning fireplace, and gourmet breakfasts.

Do Not Miss

Lunch at Bob's Clam Hut on Route 1 in Kittery, Maine. There should be a law against fried clams this sweet.

Barnacle Billy's in Ogunquit, Maine. We've driven to Ogunquit to dine on Maine lobster here every time we've traveled to New England since 1988. It's 80 minutes from Boston's Logan Airport. George and Barbara Bush also love the food. We were told George comes by boat and Bar-

bara by car.

Sundaes at The Beach (now Wells Beach Burgers and Ice Cream) in Wells, next to Ogunquit. The best lobster roll ever — a quarter pound of Maine lobster meat lightly dressed and served on a grilled bun. Add the excellent fries and a scoop of Kennebunkport Kailua Chip ice cream (free with the lobster roll) and that's as good as it gets. The owners handcraft the award-winning ice cream on site.

For more information on New England fall foliage, visit www.yankeefoliage.com.

All information is accurate at the time of publication but prices, dates and other details are all subject to change. Confirm all information before making any travel arrangements.

Travel Editor Stan Wawer is a La Verne resident, a member of the Society of American Travel Writers and editor of his own travel blog, www.travelwithstan.blogspot.com. Address all travel-related questions to his blog.



Clockwise from top, a colorful wooded area on Mountain Road in Norfolk, Connecticut, a stream reflecting the trees on Mountain Road and the grounds of the First Congregational Church in downtown Litchfield across from the village green is dressed in fall colors.

