

## *West Newbury in Winter: Sleighs, Sleds, Skates, Skis, Family and Friends*

Amusements made possible by long wintery months of ice and snow have in good measure vanished as West Newbury warms in this era of climate change. In 1924, a commentator in the [Newburyport Daily News and Herald](#) recalled long-gone times before the 1870s when as a boy he skated several times across the mouth of the Merrimack between the Newburyport wharves and the Salisbury shore. “Then the one horse sleigh was in its prime and glory,” he wrote. “No matter how cold it was, a fellow did not mind ‘Jack Frost’ if he had a pretty girl alongside of him as his partner, gliding over the crystal path. ‘But they, too, have changed.’”

Snow paths in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries [could be preferable](#) to dirt (or mud) roads. First on the list of expenses in the Town’s inaugural [Annual Report](#), issued for FY 1838, was “For breaking Paths in the Winter of 1836-7 ... \$307.55.” A large, weighted horse- or ox-drawn roller was used to create a smooth, hard, groomed snowy road surface. Horses wearing [nonslip shoes](#) propelled sleighs as well as wagons and coaches with runners exchanged for wheels. [Larger loads](#) could be moved more quickly and easily over largely frictionless rivers and snow paths.

Sleighting parties took full advantage of the glistening snow paths. An 1884 report in the *West Newbury Messenger* described a sleighting party of about 24 young people who on one mid-March Tuesday left here at 1 p.m. for Lawrence, stopping at the “Essex House, where they amused themselves with music and conversation, until supper was announced,” and arriving home at 11 p.m. The tavern on Deer Island at the Chain Bridge was “a [famous rendezvous](#) for sleighting parties in winter, it was especially attractive when a supper or a dance closed the festivities of the day.” At West Newbury’s [Albion Hotel](#), sleighting parties “[feasted and danced](#) in rays thrown by the heaped up logs in the wide mouthed furnaces.”

Snowfall sometimes outpaced those breaking snow-paths, leaving households snowbound. John Greenleaf Whittier’s famous poem [Snow-Bound](#) described a December week in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when his [family homestead](#) across the Merrimack in Haverhill was buried in snow. Once the animals were fed and chores completed, the household spent fireside hours entertaining each other in ways hard to imagine in this era of electronic screens: “We sped the time with stories old/Wrought puzzles out, and riddles told....”

West Newbury’s hills, then open fields, were ideal for sledding. In December, 1893 the *West Newbury Messenger* reported that “Pipestave hill is a grand coasting rendezvous, and a large pung [a low box-like sleigh], with steering gear attached, is used, and a slide obtained that is more than a mile in length.” An earlier notice in the same paper observed, “Organized coasting parties have made the neighborhood in the vicinity of the training field ring with their merry shouts, and old and young have enjoyed the sport alike.”

Hills in Town also served as “Alpine” ski areas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1950s, a ski run operated on [Brake Hill](#) across from the area now occupied by the middle and high school campus. It featured a single rope tow line and had no run out area aside from the pond adjacent to Main Street. In 1972 when it purchased the Cushing Academy complex the Town [acquired a downhill ski operation](#) consisting of a ski shop building and tow lines on the north side of Pipestave Hill—which voters [declined to operate and maintain](#).

Skating, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and even sledding can now be enjoyed only in snatches as weather permits. Never to be repeated are the days when a “West Newbury young man accomplished the feat [in January 1891] of skating from Haverhill to West Newbury in fifteen minutes.” In the early 1970s the Town’s Park and Recreation Commission established a lit [skating rink](#) near what is now Hand Tub Lane. This, however, succumbed to a variety of factors, not least unreliable freezing conditions.

A cherished event bridging the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries was [Mill Pond’s](#) Winter Carnival. It began in [1985](#) with a hayride through snow-covered fields, sledding, skating, and “just visitin’.” By the 1990s Winter Carnival entertained hundreds of townspeople not only with skating, sledding, and sleigh rides, but also Frosty the Snow Man and professional performers. In the 2000s the Mill Pond Committee began planning for inclement (*i.e.*, warm) weather. “If there is no snow or ice for sledding or skating,” [they said in 2000](#), “the puppet show and [Friends of Our Trails] programs will be held as scheduled.” In [2013](#) the “annual Winter Carnival ...at Mill Pond was held despite difficult, unseasonable, conditions. Although there was no snow, the pond was frozen for ice activities....” The Town’s most recent Winter Carnival was canceled due to weather conditions in [2019](#).

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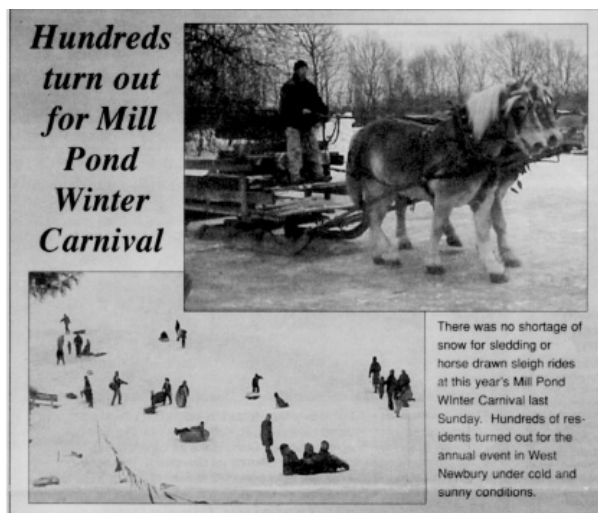
Snow Roller Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Source: [Snow-Bound](#) by John Greenleaf Whittier



Pipestave Ski Area 1972 Source: [MACRIS Historic Sites Survey](#)



Source: 3/1/2003 [West Newbury News](#)