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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classifications, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Babb's Beach

other names/site number Babb's Beach Amusement Park

2. Location

street and number 435 Babbs Road  N/A not for publication

city or town Suffield  N/A vicinity

state CONNECTICUT code CT county HARTFORD code 003 zip 06078

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature] 5/5/06  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register
  - See continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register
  - See continuation
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other, (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

[Signature] 7.12.06  
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action  
Edson H. Beall

Babb's Beach  
Name of property

Hartford, Connecticut  
County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in count)

Contributing	Non-Contributing	
4	0	building(s)
1	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
5	0	Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

RECREATION AND CULTURE/outdoor recreation,  
music facility, fair

**Current Functions**

VACANT/NOT IN USE

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**

NO STYLE

**Materials**

foundation CONCRETE  
walls WOOD:weatherboard  
roof ASPHALT  
other GLASS

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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### SETTING

The Babb's Beach property consists of an irregularly shaped, 7-acre tract of land located in the northwest corner of the Town of Suffield, Connecticut at 435 Babbs Road (State Route 585). The western boundary of the property fronts on Middle Pond of the Congamond Lakes, a group of three lakes that form the boundary between Suffield and neighboring Southwick, Massachusetts. The property is bordered on the north and south by moderately dense mid- to late twentieth century residential development. The northern residential area was initially developed by the Babbs family in the early twentieth century with a series of small camp cottages that were rented to sportsmen and vacationers during the summer. Several of the cottages were later expanded and converted for year round residences, but most were razed to make room for the large lakefront homes. Immediately abutting the property on the south is a planned residential subdivision of medium-size modern houses reached by Halladay Drive. The eastern edge of the property fronts on Babbs Road. On the opposite side of the road is an extensive active tobacco field associated with a mid- to late-nineteenth-century main house and numerous tobacco sheds and other agricultural outbuildings.

Most of the Babb's Beach property is flat and level with the surrounding property to the east and south. It descends steeply at the western end to a sandy beach that extends approximately 375 feet along the lakeshore and is approximately 75 feet deep. A ravine that accommodates a service road to the beach is located at the northwestern edge of the property. Numerous oak and pine trees dotted the landscape when the amusement facility was at its operational peak, but nearly all, with the exception of some along the north and west perimeters of the lot, have been removed. A modern split rail and post fence extends the width of the property's frontage along Babbs Road. An opening in the fence at the northeast corner leads to a gravel drive that provides access from Babbs Road to an informal parking area.

Four buildings that were part of the complex during the historic period are clustered in the northwestern quarter of the property. They consist of a large Dance Hall/Roller Rink, Arcade, Generator Building, and Shooting Gallery. The former Babbs House, which was originally constructed as an inn in the late nineteenth century and later served as a residence and store after the Babbs family acquired the property, stood immediately southwest of the complex. It was razed in August 2005 after the Town of Suffield determined that it was structurally unsound.

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### Dance Hall

The Dance Hall is the largest and most historically significant building on the property. It was constructed in the early 1930s and was the fourth building to serve as a dance hall at Babb's Beach. It is located in the north-central part of the property and is the most visible of the buildings from Babbs Road. The original parts of the building are a one-story, rectangular main block where the dance floor was located, a lower hip roof extension that wraps around the south elevation and east and west sides that housed the aisles and seating area surrounding the floor, and a shed roof extension in the center of the north elevation of the main block that incorporated the stage. Additions to the building include a shed and gable extension on the south elevation that provided an entrance area and rooms for a refreshment stand and bathroom facilities, a shed addition off the northwest corner that was used for storage purposes, and a gable addition on the northwest corner that housed a multi-purpose room for private parties and children's roller skating.

The main block of the building measures 120-x-50 ft. It has a double-pitched hip roof that is surfaced with asphalt shingles. A molded wood cornice divides the two pitches of the roof. The roof is supported by a steel beam and truss system attached to large square wood columns that form the major structural components of the load-bearing exterior walls. The eaves of the roof are open and overhang slightly. Immediately below the eaves on the south elevation and east and west sides of the building is a band of paired and single awning windows with Craftsman-style multi-pane glazing and simple wood surrounds. The exterior walls are covered with wide drop, or novelty, siding.

The original extension that projects from the south elevation and east and west sides has a hip roof that is surfaced with composition roll sheeting. The openings in all the bays were originally open, but were fitted with removable four-light storm windows in the mid-twentieth century to protect the interior of the building from the elements during the winter months. The extension on the north side of the building that houses the stage measures approximately 48-x-16 ft. It has a shed roof and drop siding exterior wall fabric. Rectangular window openings pierce the sides of the extension and contain lattice grills and screens that are boarded in the winter and opened to provide cross-ventilation in the summer.

In the early 1970s, shed roof and gable entrance additions were constructed on the main elevation of the original building. The shed roof addition extends from the eastern half of the elevation and housed a refreshment stand, skate rental desk, and bathroom facilities. The

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entrance bay extends from the center of the elevation and has a gable roof overhang that is supported by square posts and curvilinear brackets. The door is a modern, two-leaf aluminum and glass commercial door. Similar double-leaf aluminum doors are located on the east and west sides of the building.

The multipurpose room addition and shed roof storage area additions on the northwest corner of the building appear to have been added in the mid-twentieth century. The multipurpose room addition is connected to the main building via a short gable hyphen. It has a gable roof with asphalt shingle surfacing and is clad with wide drop siding. Two double-hung sash windows are located on the north and south sides and a single three-light awning window pierces the west gable end. The shed roof addition has several boarded window openings with lattice grills and screens. Both buildings are constructed on wood piling and concrete pier foundations.

The main entrance of the building from the 1970s gable entrance addition leads to a foyer with a concrete floor. The original ceiling material in the foyer has been removed because of water damage and the roof framing is visible. The foyer empties into the hall and seating area that surrounds the dance/roller rink floor. The bathrooms and refreshment stand that were located in the 1970s shed addition in the southeastern part of the building have been removed. The dance floor is framed by an arcade of arched openings and square posts. A railing and knee wall runs around the perimeter of the floor between the post supports. The dance floor is in excellent condition and consists of at least two layers of tightly fitted, tongue-in-groove hardwood on a foundation consisting of concrete piers and wood timber joists. A ceiling constructed of wood framing with attached acoustical tiles hides the steel framing of the main roof. Lighting for the dance floor consists of three circular spotlights and a number of single bulb lights with paper lanterns that hang from the ceiling on electrical cords.

The focal point of the dance floor is a classical revival bandstand located in the center of the north wall. It is set in an arched opening and is reached by a stair on either side. The rear wall of the bandstand is rounded and the ceiling presents the appearance of a half-dome. Tuscan columns that extend from the rounded wall support the ceiling. A decorative painted mural depicting a lake bordered by trees, cottages, and a mill is painted on the wall of the stage between the columns. A triangular room at the northwest corner of the dance floor served as the organists' room, but the organ is no longer in place. The multipurpose room is located off the northwest corner of the west hall. It is approximately 24 ft wide and 28 ft long and has a floor that is constructed of the same material as the main dance floor.

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### Arcade

The Arcade was constructed about 1940 and is located immediately west of the Dance Hall/Roller Rink. It is a simple rectangular hip roof building with a wood frame structural system and poured concrete foundation. The roof is surfaced with asphalt shingles and the exterior walls are clad with wood drop siding. There are three, three-light windows on the facade (south elevation) and north elevation, and two eight-light windows on either side. A shed roof overhang with square post supports extends the length of the facade. It covers three bays of sliding track doors constructed of vertical boards. The interior of the Arcade consists of one large room. The ceiling and interior walls are unfinished. The building is in fair condition and is currently used for storage purposes. None of the original amusement equipment remains.

### Shooting Gallery

The Shooting Gallery was constructed about 1950 and is adjacent to the Arcade. It has a front-facing gable roof and a rectangular plan. The roof is surfaced with asphalt shingles and the exterior walls are clad with wood drop siding. The front gable end has a shed roof overhang that extends to cover two bays of double-leaf, swinging wood doors. The building is constructed on a foundation that consists of wood pilings on concrete blocks. The interior of the Shooting Gallery consists of a single room. The ceiling and interior walls are unfinished. The building is in fair condition and is currently used for storage purposes. None of the original shooting gallery equipment is in place.

### Generator Shed

The Generator Shed was constructed about 1950 and is located behind the Arcade. It is an approximately 8-x-10 ft, concrete block structure with a gable roof. The roof is constructed of wood trusses and is surfaced with asphalt shingles. Wood drop siding covers the gable ends. The north side of the building has a single door opening and one Craftsman-style casement window. A larger access door was located on the east side of the building, but it, along with a portion of the southeast corner of the building, has been removed. The generator, which sat on an interior wood platform, has also been removed. The building is currently vacant and in poor condition.

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### Beach

The beach is a contributing landscape feature. It extends approximately 375 feet along the lakeshore and is approximately 75 feet deep for most its length. The white sand is now overgrown with a variety of plants and grasses. The hillside leading down to the beach is terraced with four ranks of random stone walls and a poured concrete retaining wall at the foot of the hill that were installed by the Babbs family during the early twentieth century. There are no surviving elements of the various boathouses, bathhouses, and swimming platforms that were constructed for patrons during the historic period.

(end)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B removed from its original location.
C a birthplace or grave.
D a cemetery.
E a reconstructed building, object or structure.
F a commemorative property.
G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the last 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
previously listed in the National Register
previously determined eligible by the National Register
designated a National Historic Landmark
recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey
recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1898 to 1955

Significant Dates

1898 - property acquire by Curtis Babb
c. 1932 - Dance Hall erected

Significant Person

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Nelson Babb, Sr.

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
Other State agency
Federal agency
Local government
University
Other

Name of repository

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### SUMMARY

Babb's Beach is eligible for listing in the National Register under Criteria A and C at the local level in the area of Entertainment/Recreation and Architecture. The property possesses significance as a relatively rare surviving example of the type of small amusement parks and outdoor recreational facilities that sprang up on the outskirts of the nation's urban centers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was established by Curtis Babb, who purchased a large tract of land along Middle Pond of the Congamond Lakes in 1898 for the purpose of developing a seasonal fishing camp for recreational sportsman. Over the course of nearly a century of operation, Babb and his successors—son Nelson, Sr. and grandson, Nelson, Jr.—expanded the facility to provide a variety of family entertainment, including a swimming beach, bathhouses, boat rental facilities, refreshment stand, picnic grounds, ball field, amusement hall, shooting gallery, and one of the largest and most popular dancehalls in the Connecticut Valley region. At its operational peak, the facility hosted as many as 3,000 visitors on a weekend day. The surviving buildings, especially the Dance Hall/Roller Rink, are tangible remains of this once important recreational venue.

### Historic Context

#### Early Development of the Congamond Lakes Area

Babb's Beach is located on the eastern shore of Middle Pond, one of three lakes that form the Congamond Lakes. Before European settlement of the area, Native Americans frequented the shoreline of the lakes and gave them the name "Congamuck." The spring-fed lakes and fertile surrounding land began attracting European settlers in the late-seventeenth century. During the Colonial period the Great Brook outlet on Middle Pond was dammed and used to power grist and saw mills. A powder mill, established there during the latter part of the eighteenth century, supplied gunpowder to the Colonial forces during the Revolutionary War. The importance of the lakes as a natural resource prompted a long-running border dispute between Massachusetts and Connecticut that was not resolved until 1804 when the lakes and some surrounding landing in present-day Southwick were ceded to Massachusetts and created a jog in the otherwise straight border between the two states. In the early 1830s, the lakes were incorporated into the Farmington Canal, which ran from New Haven, Connecticut to Northampton, Massachusetts. The route through the lakes included a 700-foot-long floating bridge that carried the canal towpath over a portion of Middle Pond. When it was completed in 1835, the 78-mile canal was the longest in New England. As was the case with most projects of its kind, however, the canal

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quickly ran into financial difficulties because of competition from a growing network of railroads. In 1846 the canal company was granted permission by the State of Connecticut to reorganize as the New Haven & Northampton Railroad and began constructing a rail line along the canal right-of-way north from New Haven. In March 1850, the line, which was popularly known as the "Canal Road," was completed to Granby, Connecticut, and by 1856 through service had been established to Northampton. One of the stations constructed on the line was the Congamond Station in Southwick, Massachusetts (Bicentennial Committee 1970:51-58; Dodge ca. 1968; Karr 1995:70-71).

During the nineteenth century, the area surrounding the Congamond Lakes was developed for agricultural purposes. Tobacco leaf production was the leading cash crop, but subsistence farming, dairying, and vegetable production were practiced as well. Beginning in the early 1870s, ice harvesting on the Congamond Lakes became an important element of the local economy. Cold winters and the spring-fed water of the lakes combined to produce a high-quality ice that was at first transported by railroad to New York and other cities throughout the Northeast. In 1879, the Berkshire Ice Company purchased the former canal property along the lakes from the railroad and subsequently erected five large icehouses. Located along the western shore of South and Middle ponds, these immense buildings were thought to be the largest icehouses in the United States at the time and could store up to 225,000 tons of ice. The industry remained strong until the widespread adoption of mechanical refrigeration in the 1920s and 1930s. All of the icehouses subsequently fell victim to arson or were razed to make way for residential development (Babb ca. 1960; Davis 1955:185-186).

### **American Amusement Park Industry**

The establishment of the Congamond Lakes area as a popular recreation destination is related to larger trends in the history of leisure in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Labor reforms during the Progressive Era led to shorter working days and higher wages that created more disposable income among the working class. The value of leisure time was stressed as a way to promote the health and well-being of employees and many industrial employers implemented Saturday half-day holidays. Extended vacation time, although usually unpaid, also began to be offered on a regular basis. At the same time, the expansion of the nation's railroad and intra-urban trolley car systems and, later, the adoption of the automobile as the primary form of personal transportation put more places within easy reach for day trips (Library of Congress n.d.).

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The combination of these factors gave rise to a wide variety of new businesses designed to cater to America's increasing thirst for entertainment and recreation. Popular urban entertainments included live theater, vaudeville acts, circuses, Wild West shows, and motion pictures. A wide variety of sporting events were introduced during the period and found devoted audiences and participants. They included horse, foot, bicycle, boat, and motor racing; team sports such as baseball, football, and basketball; and individual contests like boxing, golf, and tennis (Library of Congress n.d.).

Amusement parks began to appear on the outskirts of the cities to cater to those seeking more participatory activities. Often promoted by railroad and trolley companies to increase ridership on weekends, these operations were typically located in attractive natural settings that often were anchored by bodies of water, and provided bathing, picnic facilities, dance halls, restaurants, games, and a few amusement rides. Among the most notable on the east coast were Coney Island, New York and Asbury Park, New Jersey, which had the added advantage of offering excellent swimming beaches and developed extensive boardwalks with all types of modern amusements (Library of Congress n.d.).

Small, family-run amusement parks found their greatest success during the first three decades of the twentieth century. By 1919, there were approximately 1,500 parks in operation throughout the country. By 1935, however, with the country in the throes of the Great Depression, only about 400 of those parks remained. Many more went under during World War II. The industry revived during the immediate postwar era as servicemen and their families sought to return to the life they knew before the war. One of the more popular innovations during the period was the establishment of Kiddielands, which capitalized on the postwar baby boom. The revival of the industry was short-lived because of the rapidly changing societal landscape. A number of factors, including the introduction of television, urban decay, desegregation, and suburban growth took a heavy toll on the aging, urban amusement parks (NAPHA 2005).

The full adoption of the automobile, construction of the interstate highway system, and implementation of passenger air travel made it easier for Americans to experience new areas of the country. Trolley systems and railroads that had supported many of the parks went bankrupt or were discontinued. During this era, Walt Disney introduced the theme park concept at Disney Land. His idea was develop on a massive scale to attract visitors from around the world and produce an experience that was far different from the traditional midway. The idea of theme parks caught on at the expense of the small traditional amusement park, which found it difficult

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to compete with regional franchises like Six Flags, which spread throughout the country during the 1970s and 1980s (Library of Congress n.d.; NAPHA 2005).

### Early Recreational Development of the Congamond Lakes

Local entrepreneurs began capitalizing on the bucolic setting of the Congamond Lakes soon after the arrival of the New Haven & Northampton Railroad in the 1850s. By the early 1860s Frederick E. Abell had established a popular picnic ground known as Point Grove on a 50-ft high knoll at the northeast end of Middle Pond. Hathaway Grove, a second public picnic ground, was established in the 1870s or early 1880s at the site where Babb's Beach was later developed. Recreational boating became another important draw for the lakes region. In 1875 Abell began offering sightseeing excursions on the steamboat *Morning Star*, which could accommodate up to 100 passengers. About the same time, the Saunders family established a rowboat rental business at the south end of Middle Pond. The Saunders Livery is still in operation today, making it one of the longest continually run businesses in the Congamond Lakes region. The railroad contributed to making the lakes a popular recreational destination by offering regular day trip service from surrounding industrial-based towns and cities, including Westfield, Springfield, Northampton, New Haven, and Hartford. One of the first major recreational facilities constructed on the lake consisted of a large wood picnic pavilion and hotel that were built in 1887 near the southern end of Middle Pond. The pavilion featured a high tower that afforded panoramic views of the lakes and surrounding countryside (Davis 1955:180–184).

The popularity of picnicking at the Congamond Lakes reached its hieght during the 1890s. The following excerpt from a 1924 Springfield *Republican* newspaper article provides a recollection of that time:

“Southwick Ponds [Congamond Lakes] were the Mecca of summer picnics from June until September. The old ‘Putty’ road or ‘Canal’ road of the N.Y., N.H. & Hfd. R.R. in the old picnic days did a thriving business running special trains every few days through the summer and numbers varied from small church gatherings to a large number—into the thousands. The railroad had a long siding at the ponds and on the rise of ground just east of the tracks was a big pavilion and grove where refreshments were served.

These picnics at the ponds were of all shades—both from the standpoint of behavior and appearance of the individual. There were usually one or two colored

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organizations from Hartford or other large communities and hundreds of negroes took part in the festivities.

These picnics usually attracted other hundreds of curious and interested white spectators and all too often there was apt to be plenty of booze available not far from the grounds. Good order was perhaps the general rule but at times there were some rough parties in which knives figured or better perhaps, disfigured" (Davis 1955:184).

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the natural character of the lakes began to change as they became the target of real estate developers who platted small lot subdivisions for the development of summer cottages for rent. Among the most frequent renters were sportsmen who came to fish for the abundant variety of freshwater species found in the lakes. Originally intended as vacation rentals, many of the cottages were later converted into year-round residences.

### **Development of Babb's Beach**

One of the local residents who sought to capitalize on the increasing tourist traffic to the lakes was Curtis Babb. In 1898, Babb who had previously been employed in the ice harvesting business purchased a tract of land on the Suffield, Connecticut side of Middle Pond from the Warner family. An adjoining tract was purchased in 1905, at which time the Babb property extended east to present day Babbs Road and north from Halladay Drive to the Massachusetts border. It included the former Hathaway Grove picnic ground and a two-story wood frame building and horse barn that were constructed in the 1870s or early 1880s. The building was originally constructed as an inn to house guests of Hathaway Grove, but had been most recently used as a boardinghouse for ice workers during the winter. Soon after acquiring the property, Babb began building rowboats and a series of cottages that he intended to rent to visiting fishermen. He also constructed a house for his family that included his wife, Viola, and son, Nelson (Crane 2003; Town of Suffield:38:547, 40:302).

The business was almost an immediate success. The primary clientele consisted of sportsmen from Springfield and other cities in the Connecticut River valley, but it was not unusual for people from as far away as Boston and New York to make the trip by train. To better serve his patrons, Curtis Babb purchased a steam launch named *Mascot* to pick them up at the station and deliver them to Babb's Beach. The *Mascot* was also used for sightseeing trips on the lakes and

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during the winter to pull ice cakes for the Berkshire Ice Company. The former boarding house was operated by Curtis Babb as the Cottage Grove Inn. The Babb family spent most of its time there during the summer attending to guests. Soon after the inn was established, Viola Babb began selling refreshments and fishing supplies from one of the back rooms of the building. The Babbs also established a picnic area, playground, and bathing beach to cater to the families of the sportsmen during their stay (Crane 2003).

By 1911, Curtis, who was about 60 years old at that time, relinquished the daily operation of the business to his son, Nelson. Born in Massachusetts in 1890, Nelson worked for a time as a chauffeur in Springfield and as a local builder before taking over the Babb's Beach operation. He also was employed as a marker for the ice company during the winters. In 1915 he married his wife, Olive, with whom he had two children, Barbara born in 1917 and Nelson, Jr. born in 1918. Through the terms of Curtis's will, Nelson and Olive were granted full ownership of the business and property in 1926 (Bureau of the Census 1911 and 1931; Crane 2003; Town of Suffield:60:78).

Under Nelson's management the focus of the operation shifted from providing accommodations to visiting sportsmen to developing a full-fledged family amusement park with a wide variety of entertainments. In 1915, the year of his marriage to Olive, the Cottage Grove Inn was more than doubled in size to create living quarters for the couple and a dedicated space for a store for selling refreshments and supplies. About the same time, Nelson Babb converted the horse barn into a dance hall by installing a floor and stage. Dances were held every Sunday during the summer season and drew large crowds from nearby Massachusetts towns where dancing was prohibited on the Sabbath (Crane 2003).

Competition from other similar establishments on the lakes, including Miller's Beach, Balch's Beach, and Smith Beach, prompted the introduction of new facilities and amusements that were under constant review and subject to change with each new season. In the 1920s Nelson constructed a bathhouse and a dock with a large boathouse and made improvements to the beach by erecting a concrete retaining wall along the shoreline. He installed a variety of swimming platforms, diving boards, and slides on the lake. The popular beach played host to a variety of aquatic meets, including the New England High Diving Championship, which used a high board mounted on a raft in the lake. Nelson purchased a Chris-Craft speedboat and offered thrilling, though short rides around Middle Pond. Among the more notable amusements installed by Nelson was a water toboggan slide that Nelson erected on the hillside behind the house. Patrons could rent a toboggan and experience a drop of some 30 feet before the toboggans shot out into

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the water. After a few seasons, however, the run was removed because of safety concerns. Another attempt at innovation was the installation of a whirl-a-gig, or merry-go-round, on the lake. A cement platform was constructed off shore to support the ride. Bathers spun the ride by grabbing and pulling a circular railing until it reached speeds that threw them off by centrifugal force. It too was abandoned after a while because dizzy riders who fell in the water were often disoriented and sometimes had trouble finding the surface. (Babb n.d.; Centennial Committee 1970:133; Crane 2003).

The dances, which continued to grow in popularity during the 1920s and 1930s, were the most profitable element of the business. This reflected the national craze for dancing that was at the time sweeping the country. The advent of big bands that played popular jazz and swing music and the introduction of new athletic dances like the Lindy Hop, Fox Trot, and Charleston made dancing a central focus of social life among young people in search of freedom of expression in the post-World War I period. The Babb's dance hall initially featured local bands such as Happy Harrington's Band from Springfield and Al Mason's Melodians from Northampton that made a circuit among the dance halls in the area, including the Butterfly Ballroom in Springfield and Riverside Ballroom in Agawam, Massachusetts. Later, when the Big Band Era was in full swing, nationally prominent bands headed by Tommy Dorsey, Harry James, Sammy Kaye, Kay Kaiser, and others were booked at the dance hall and drew huge crowds (Babb n.d.; Crane 2003).

In the early 1920s Nelson Babb demolished the old horse barn and erected a larger dance hall in its place. The building was rectangular in plan and had a central bandstand and wood floor. In the mid-1920s that building was expanded in response to the growing attendance of the dances and to accommodate a second bandstand. In the early 1930s, while overall business suffered from a decrease in attendance because of the affects of the Great Depression, the dances remained so popular that Nelson decided to construct the even larger dance hall that stands on the property today. His design for the building included an unobstructed 50-foot span over the dance floor that required a steel truss roof. He hired laid-off steel workers from nearby West Springfield to construct the roof and local labor to help with the erection of the rest of the building. The bandstand was placed in the center of the rear wall of the dance floor and consisted of an oval band shell that was designed to improve acoustics. A pipe organ was located in a raised, triangular platform at the northwest corner of the dance floor. A one-story hip roof extension with arched openings was constructed around the front and two sides of the building and provided a corridor around the dance floor, seating areas, and a refreshment stand. Originally the openings in the extension were screened for ventilation in the summer and boarded in the winter, but as time went on glass windows were installed (Crane 2003).

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Despite the success of the dances, Babb's Beach, like other area recreation complexes suffered a decline in revenue during the early years of the Great Depression. In an effort to attract more visitors, Nelson formerly incorporated the business as Babb Amusement Park, Inc. and embarked on another building campaign to offer a wider range of amusements designed to give Babb's Beach a competitive edge over other operations on the Congamond Lakes. He constructed the existing amusement arcade and shooting gallery buildings at the north end of the dance hall. The arcade was called Babb's Playland and over time featured a variety of mechanical games, including bowling, pinball, record making, and photograph machines. The shooting gallery provided patrons the chance to test their marksmanship on a variety of whimsical targets. The refreshment stand attached to the house was expanded considerably into a full service snack bar. A ball field and new children's playground were added to the picnic area (Babb Amusement Park, Inc. ca. 1955; Crane 2003; Town of Suffield:67:249).

The most significant addition to the business during the 1930s was the introduction of roller skating in the dance hall. The idea was generated by Leo Doyle, a traveling roller skating promoter and salesman, who approached Nelson Babb about using the dance hall for roller skating. Since dances were held only on the weekends, Nelson was intrigued by the idea and immediately agreed to allow Doyle, whose real name was Doodlebaum, to begin roller skating operations on the weekdays. The Babb's Dance Hall offered an excellent floor for skating and the rink soon gained a reputation as one of the best in the Connecticut Valley region. For a time it served as the home of the Connecticut State Amateur Roller Skating Championships (Crane 2003).

Roller skating first became popular in the United States in 1863 when James Plimpton, a Massachusetts businessman, invented the "rocking skate," which made it easier to turn. By the 1880s roller skating had become a widespread passion and many communities created public skating rinks. Among them was the town of Suffield, which converted a floor of its 1862 Town Hall into a roller rink in 1884. After a decline in the twentieth century, roller skating again became popular in the 1930s as better skates were introduced and modern roller rinks were built. In 1937, the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association (RSROA) was formed by a group of skating rink owners to promote roller skating and establish good business practices for skating rinks. Show skating similar to traditional figure skating events helped to popularize the sport. The first United States Artistic Roller Skating Championships were held in 1939 (Gelbert 2002; Sheldon 1886:405; Skateland n.d.).

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The improvements that Nelson made during the 1930s allowed the business to stay solvent through the years of the Great Depression and World War II. After the war, Babb's Beach again experienced a period of relative prosperity. Upon returning home from a four-year tour of duty in the armed forces, Nelson Jr. began assisting his father by assuming more responsibility for running the business. Like his father, Nelson, Jr. sought out new forms of entertainment to keep up with the latest trends. Roller skating remained a very popular element of the business, but live entertainment for the dances became problematic as the popularity of the Big Bands began to wane and booking fees rose. As an alternative, Nelson, Jr., introduced "record hops" that consisted of playing recorded popular music on a sound system he installed in the dance hall. The record hops were very successful in the 1950s and early 1960s, drawing as many as 750 people to the dance hall during the height of the season (Babb n.d.; Crane 2003).

In August 1955, a devastating flood caused by torrential rain from the remnants of Hurricane Diane did extensive damage to nearly all businesses on the Congamond Lakes. The Babb's Beach facilities on the lakefront, including the bathhouse, boathouse, diving and swimming platforms, and dock all suffered significant damage. The remainder of the summer season was lost as Nelson, Jr. began the process of rebuilding. Several businesses on the lakes never recovered from the storm (Bicentennial Committee 1970:98; Crane 2003).

Despite Nelson, Jr.'s best efforts, Babb's Beach began a slow decline in the early 1960s from which it could not recover. The fate of the business mirrors that of other similar small amusement facilities throughout the nation that lost popularity because of evolving societal trends. With the death of Nelson, Sr. in 1964, the business lost its most innovative force and Nelson, Jr. was left to keep it going. By the end of the decade roller skating remained the only profitable element of the business. In the mid-1970s, the Town of Suffield Recreation Department approached Nelson, Jr. about acquiring the property for use as a town-run recreation area. In 1977, Babb Amusement Park, Inc. conveyed the property to the Town of Suffield as owner, subject to a lease where Nelson, Jr. retained the rights to operate the skating rink and continue to live in the house until he chose to leave. The skating business experienced problems during the decade when it lost accreditation for not being of regulation size as determined by the RSROA. The decline of the facility continued until 1997, when finally, after multiple code infractions were brought to Nelson, Jr.'s attention by the town building inspector, he chose to discontinue the operation altogether. Nelson, Jr. continued to live in the house on the property until he moved in 2003. In October of that year, a local organization called the Citizens Restoring Congamond (CRC) entered into a 20-year lease for the property with the Town of Suffield. The CRC is currently raising funds to restore the former Babb Rink for use as a skating

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rink and multipurpose community facility. Recently, the Town of Suffield determined that the former Babbs House was structurally unsound and the building was razed in August 2005 (Citizens Restoring Congamond 2003; Connecticut Death Index 1949–2001; Crane 2003; Town of Suffield:147:789).

### National Register Criteria Justification

The Babb's Beach property is eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion A and C in the area of Entertainment/Recreation and Architecture. The facility has important historical associations as a locally important recreational complex in the Connecticut River valley. Its historical development reflects national trends in American history as an example of the type of small amusement and recreational parks that sprang up throughout the country during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The surviving buildings, including the Dance Hall/Roller Rink, Arcade, Shooting Gallery, and Generator Shed, together with the beach and surrounding property, represent a relatively rare and intact collection of this type of development.

Under Criterion C, the property derives its primary significance from the Dance Hall/Roller Rink. It is a rare surviving example of a historic vernacular dance hall. During the early twentieth century dance halls were constructed in towns and cities throughout the country to accommodate the national passion for dancing among the nation's youth. These buildings took a wide variety of forms, ranging from architecturally elaborate designs found in many larger cities to utilitarian barn-like structures that were more typically found in rural areas. Constructed in the early 1930s, the Babb Dance Hall falls into the latter category. It was the third building to serve as a dance hall on the property and its development was spurred by a need to provide more space to house growing crowds during the Big Band Era. It was constructed by Nelson Babb, Sr. and features a double-slope, steel truss roof that allows for a span of some 50 feet and was designed to avoid placing obstructing structural members in the dance floor area.

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n.d. Volume 60, Page 78. On file, Town of Suffield, Suffield, CT.

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1931 Fifteenth Census, 1930. Washington, DC.

(end)

Babb's Beach  
Name of property

Hartford, Connecticut  
County and State

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreege of Property 6.97 acres

### UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

	1	8	6	8	6	2	5	1	4	6	5	5	4	3	9
	Zone		Easting				Northing								
2	1	8	6	8	6	2	1	5	4	6	5	5	3	4	1

3	1	8	6	8	6	2	5	1	4	6	5	5	3	7	2
	Zone		Easting				Northing								
4	1	8	6	8	6	2	3	0	4	6	5	5	2	7	2

See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

### Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Stephen Olausen

organization The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc. date September 2005

street and numbe 210 Lonsdale Avenue telephone 401-728-8780

city or town Pawtucket state RI zip code 02860

### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

#### Continuation Sheets

#### Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resource

#### Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

#### Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

### Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO)

name Town of Suffield

street and numbe 83 Mountain Road telephone 860-668-3849

city or town Suffield state CT zip code 06078

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### UTM References (continued)

5. 18-686147-4655249
6. 18-686082-4655295
7. 18-686077-4655364
8. 18-686135-4655402
9. 18-686123-4655428
10. 18-686155-4655444

### Verbal Boundary Description

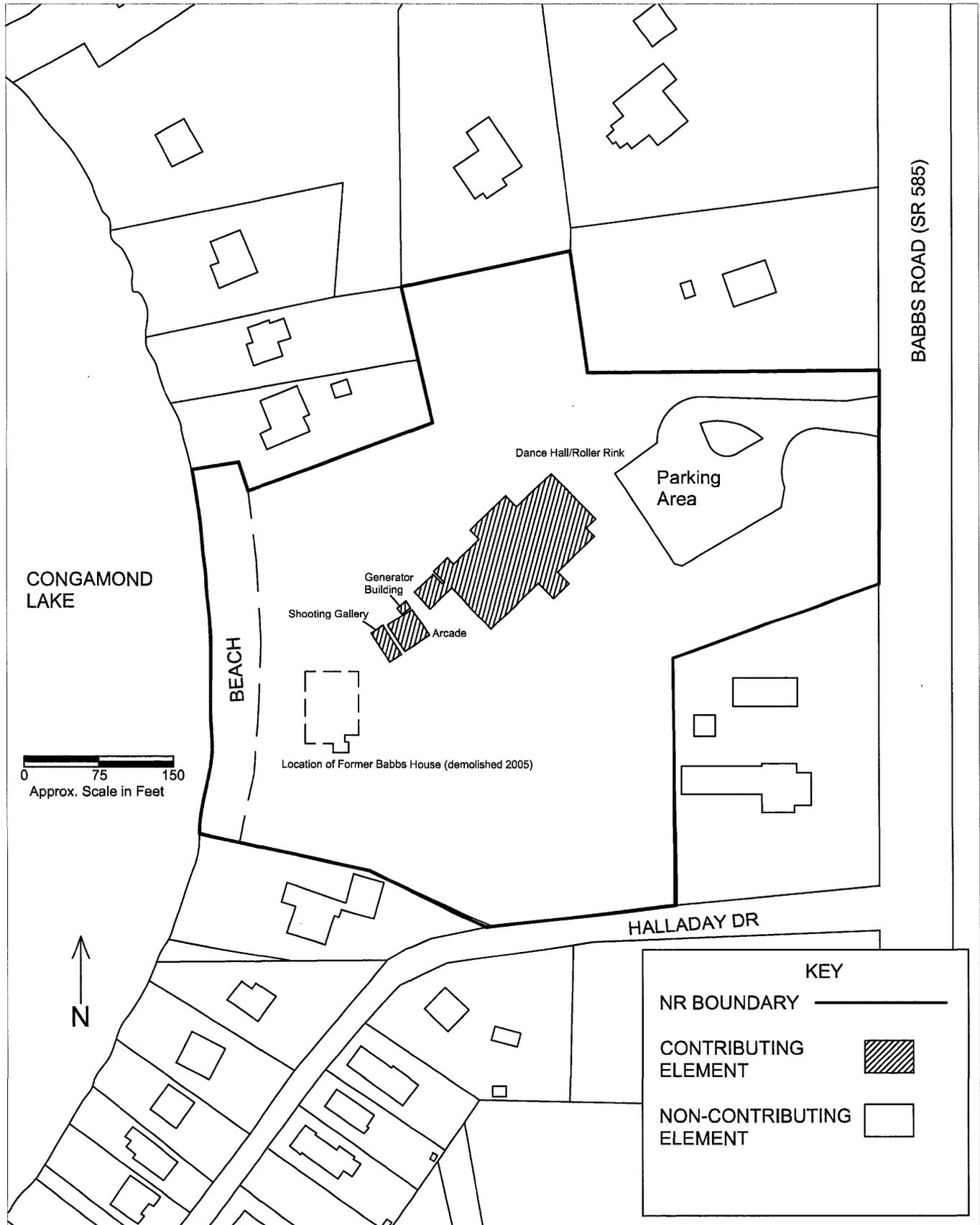
Property consists of all of lot 49, block 1, map 2H as recorded on the Property Appraiser map of the Town of Suffield Connecticut, comprising 6.97 acres.

### Boundary Justification

The boundary conforms to the limits of the property owned by the Town of Suffield and comprising all of the remaining components associated with the historic Babb's Beach Amusement Park, including the Dance Hall/Roller Rink, Arcade, Shooting Gallery, Generator Shed, and beach.

(end)

# BABB'S BEACH SITE PLAN



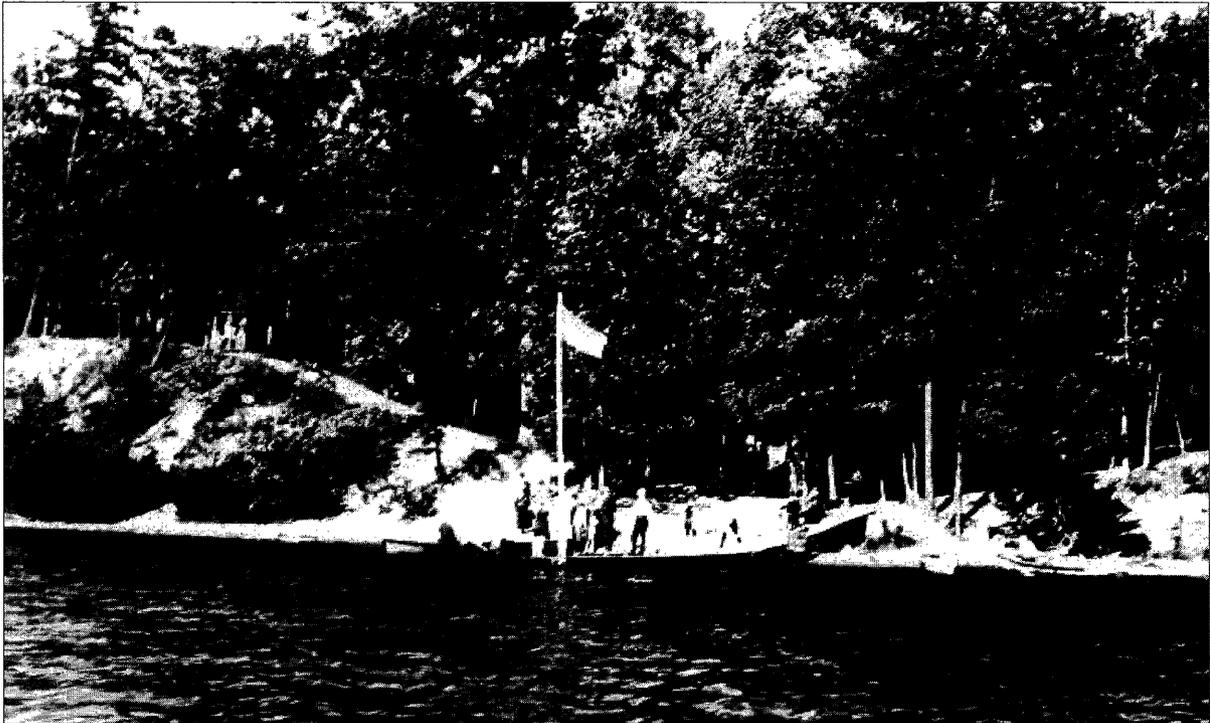
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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**Babb's Beach 1914**

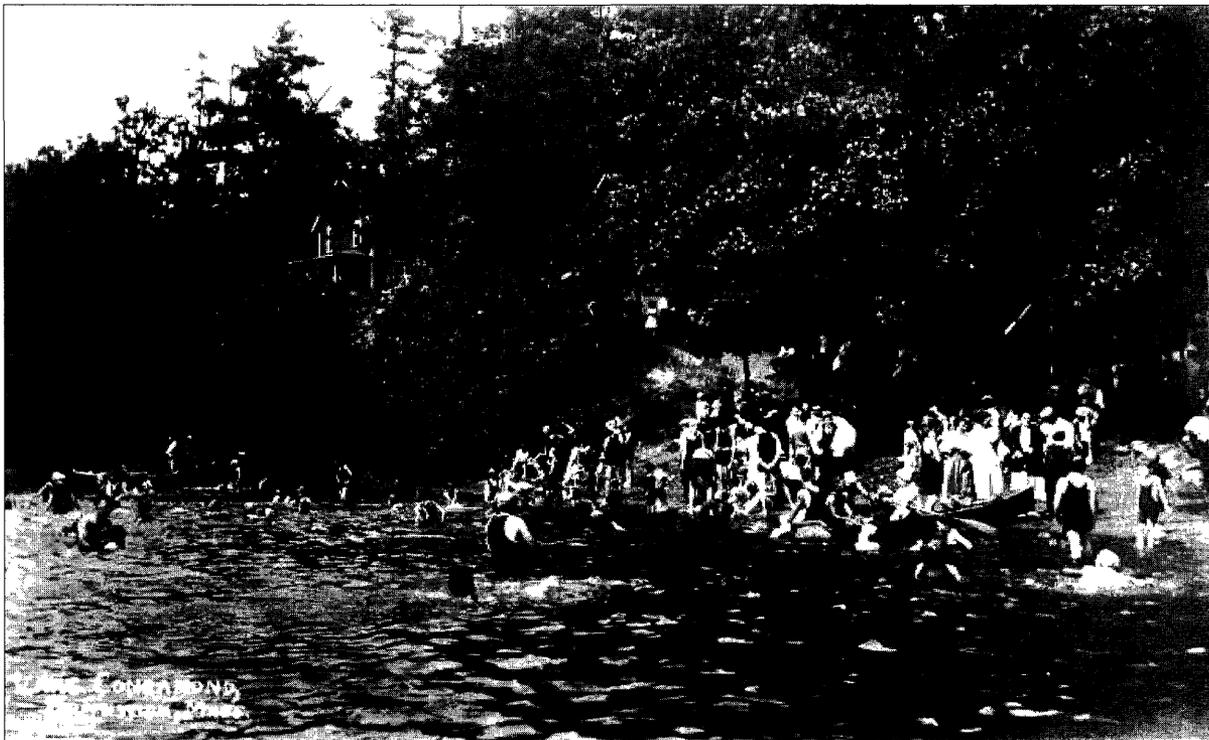
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**Babb's Beach 1920**

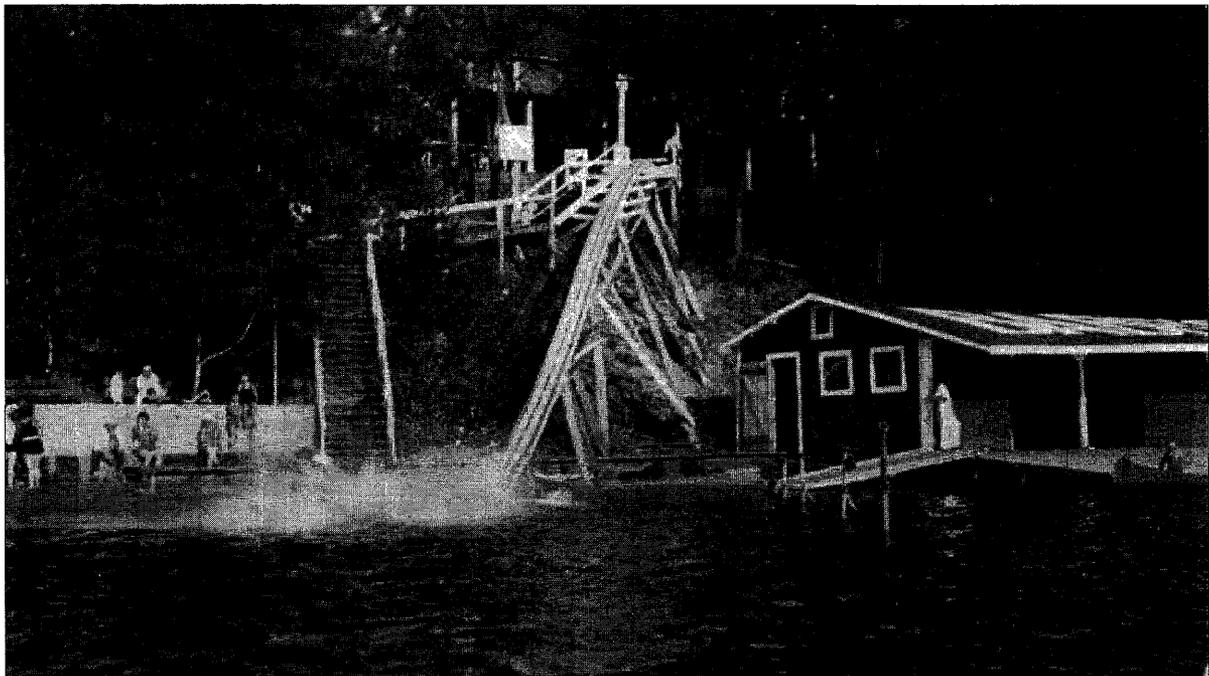
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National Park Service

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**Toboggan Waterslide on Babb's Beach ca. 1934.**

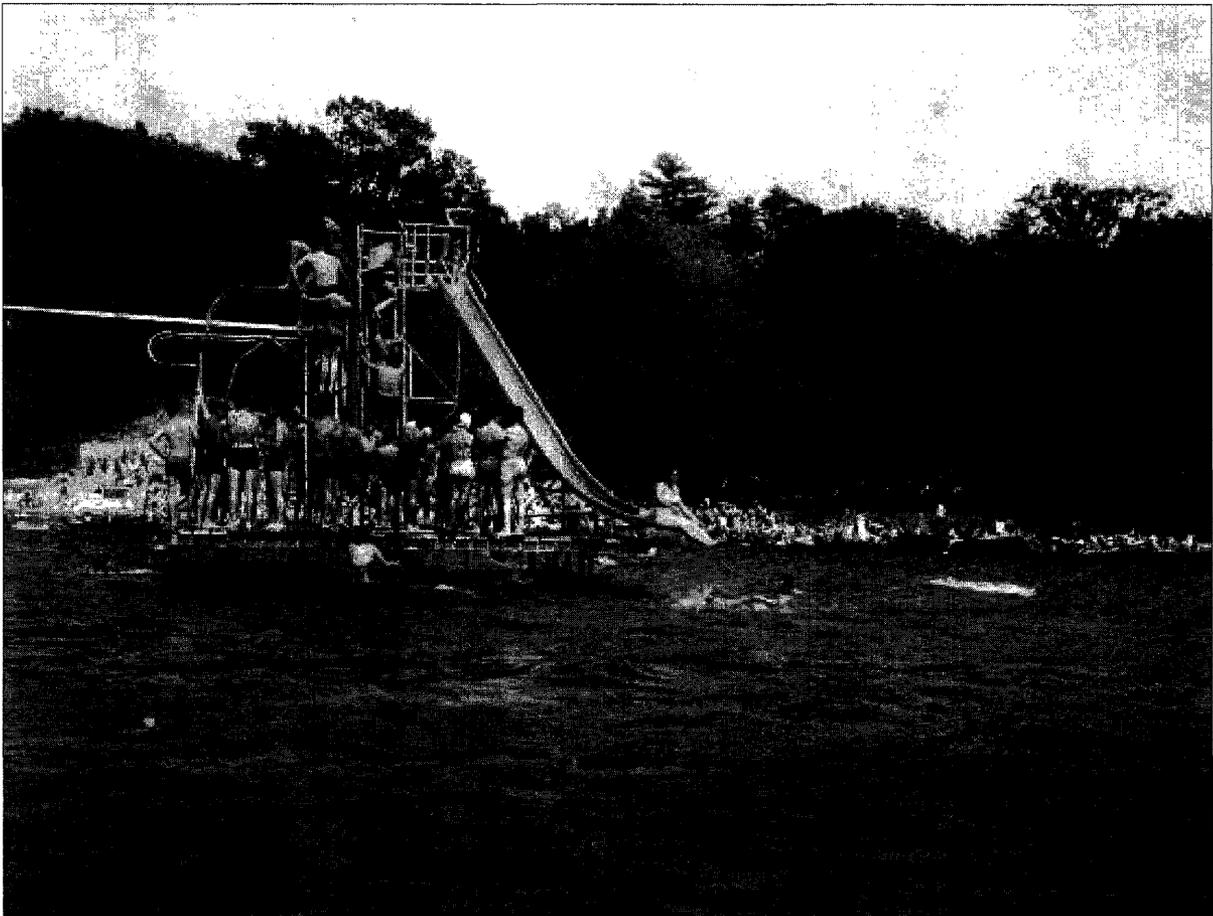
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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**Babb's Beach 1961**

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**Dance Hall/Roller Rink shortly after it was constructed ca. 1932.**

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**Babb's Beach Graceful Skating Contest, August 25, 1936.**

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

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**Happy Harington band before a performance in the first dance hall about c. 1922.**

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**Record Hop in the Dance Hall/Roller Rink, 1960.**

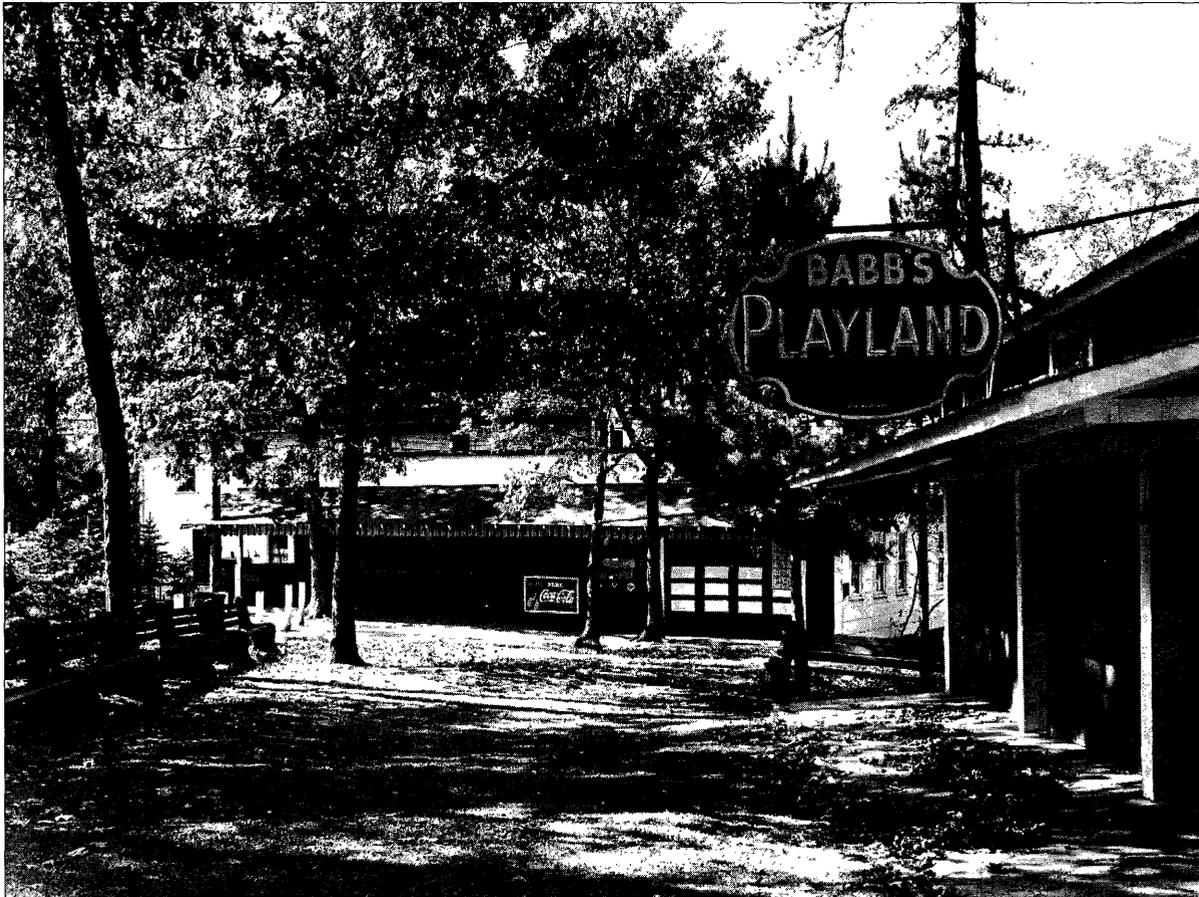
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**Babb's Playland and Store ca. 1946.**

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### LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Babb's Beach
2. Hartford County, Connecticut
3. Stephen Olausen
4. November 2004
5. PAL, 210 Lonsdale Avenue, Pawtucket, RI 02860
6. Context view facing southwest from Babbs Road showing Dance Hall/Roller Rink (right) and former Babb's House (demolished August 2005).
7. Photo 1 of 9

Items 1 through 5 are the same for the remaining photographs

6. View of Dance Hall/Roller Rink facade and east side, facing west
7. Photo 2 of 9
  
6. View of Dance Hall/Roller Rink facade and west side, facing northeast
7. Photo 3 of 9
  
6. Interior view of Dance Hall/Roller Rink showing dance floor, facing northeast
7. Photo 4 of 9
  
6. Interior view of Dance Hall/Roller Rink showing bandstand, facing northwest
7. Photo 5 of 9
  
6. View of Arcade facade and east side, facing northwest
7. Photo 6 of 9
  
6. View of Shooting Gallery facade and west side, facing north
7. Photo 7 of 9
  
6. View of Generator Building east elevation and south side, facing northwest
7. Photo 8 of 9
  
6. View of beach, facing north
7. Photo 9 of 9

(end)

# BABB'S BEACH PHOTO LOCATIONS

