Torrington: The Banner Town of the Most Picturesque County

An edited version of a late nineteenth century lantern slide show by Torrington photographer, John Norton Brooks, produced from original Brooks’ lantern slides, original Brooks’ negatives and the original Brooks’ script. All of the photographs and the script are from the copyrighted collection of the Torrington Historical Society, Torrington Connecticut.

Introduction:

This document is a digital version of a lantern slide show created in Torrington Connecticut, around 1894 by John Norton Brooks. The original show features 71 photographs with descriptive text. This edited version includes 12 images and descriptive text from the original show.

John Norton Brooks (above) in his home at 152 Litchfield Street, Torrington, using his glass plate camera to copy a print. Brooks may have used a similar technique to produce some of his 3x4 inch lantern slides. This image is a modern gelatin silver print from Brooks’ original 4x5 inch glass plate negative.

John Norton Brooks was born in the town of Goshen in 1870. His father and uncle owned the general store in the center of town. However, in 1872 they established Brooks Brothers Bank in Torrington and re-located there. As a young man J.N. Brooks became interested in photography, and worked with the newest technology: gelatin dry plate negatives, a type of photographic negative on a glass plate. The negatives that Brooks used ranged in size from 4x5 inches to 5x8 inches. With an avid interest in nature scenes, Brooks traveled throughout Torrington and
Litchfield County capturing images of his surroundings. Around 1894, Brooks converted many of his negatives into lantern slides and arranged them into a lantern slide-show to illustrate the beauty of Litchfield County and the history of Torrington. Brooks wrote a script for the show and he presented the show to groups in Torrington and surrounding towns using a projector lit with a gas flame.

Brooks started working as an errand boy in Torrington’s Brooks Brothers Bank when he was just 16 years old. However, the same lure of new technology that drew him into photography also drew him to other employment. Before settling into a banking career, he worked as a printer, an electrician, and telephone man. He helped build the first x-ray machine in Torrington and was the first to string a telephone line in town. In the 1890s Brooks was an avid bicyclist and helped form the Torrington Wheel Club. Later he was one of the first Torrington residents to own an automobile and it’s not surprising that Brooks became one of the first auto mechanics in Torrington. Over time Brooks was drawn back into the family’s banking business later becoming president of Brooks National Bank and the Torrington Savings Bank. Brooks’ interest in the welfare of the community led him to become a leader in many community organizations and also influenced him to enter politics. From 1914 to 1916 he served the state as a representative from Torrington, and later served four terms as a state senator where he lobbied for many issues including better and safer roads. Brooks passed away in 1941 on the family farm in Goshen after a colorful life and fascinating career.

Note:
There is no surviving title for the Brooks’ lantern slide show but taking a phrase form his written script, the show is here named Torrington: The Banner Town of the Most Picturesque County.

Torrington: The Banner Town of the Most Picturesque County

A ca. 1894 Lantern Slide Show by John Norton Brooks
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Digital print version produced by Sierra Tillmann and Mark McEachern

The J.N. Brooks lantern slide show and script begins here:

The resident of Torrington will drive to the Berkshire Hills, take a trip to the Western States, or even journey to Switzerland, and on seeing some grand view or magnificent landscape, will exclaim. “If we only had such scenery at home.” We have, only on a smaller scale. The fault is not with the scenery, but with the people. They will not take the trouble to look up at pretty spots so near home, and when they do see an attractive view or sheltered nook, while passing along the highway, the scene is so familiar to them that they do not realize the beauty of it. I intend to show you to-night reproductions of a few of Litchfield County’s numerous bits of pretty scenery, with variations, including a few historical notes about Torrington.
My first view, (1) will be the gorge above West Torrington, near Crystal Lake, on the road to Goshen. If on a summer day you wish a cool spot in which to loaf, and where you can imagine yourself in some western ravine, this is the spot to go. It is a few rods east of the residence of Mr. W. A. Cowles, on the opposite side of the road, and is on the steam running from Lover’s Lane. The blank space on the right is a wall of solid rock, and you will notice that both sides are at the same angle, as if the gorge had been hewn out by hand.
A short distance below, this stream empties into the outlet of Crystal Lake, and a few hundred feet east of the junction are the remains of an old dam. This is in plain sight of the road, but in passing it is never noticed. If you will take the trouble to go to the edge of the pool under the dam, this is what you will be rewarded with. On the screen it makes an attractive picture. People have said to me, “It doesn’t look so nice when you are there, as it does reproduced with the lantern,” but as this is a photographic reproduction, the fault must be with the person, not the view.
Retracing our steps, and going around through Lover’s Lane, we come to this bridge with the stream running over the logs and rocks. If my horse had behaved more like a horse and less like some other animal. Or had even kept his head still, I think the result would have been more artistic, but I did not know until I had got home what a donkey he had make of himself and of me too, for that matter. There used to be a great many pretty spots on this road, before they cut the timber off.
(21) If, in the spring you want to exercise, take a trip to that celebrated spot, the birthplace of John Brown. It is somewhat picturesque and decidedly historic, and if Torrington has nothing else to boast of, she can always fall back on [it].
While at the John Brown house, on that spring tramp, you stand a pretty good chance of finding some of the handsome trailing arbutus for which the spot is noted. It takes some perseverance to get at this, under the leaves, but it seems as if these flowers have a tint and fragrance that you do not find in other localities.
Right here in the center of our town is a view that is seen by hundreds every day, yet if this was shown as a picture of some French village, and a lecturer killed about five or ten minutes in talking about it, you would consider it a fine thing and wish you could go and visit such places, and admire such scenes direct from nature. I have had Torrington people remark to me, “Why, where is it? I never saw that place before.”
(47) Torrington can also boast of its hotels, as the best in the State. Conley’s Inn is second to none, and every day people come out of their way from all points in the Naugatuck valley to stop at this house. The building is an ornament to the town, and is thoroughly appreciated by the travelling public, who realize what a good hotel means.
I am afraid you will have hard work to recognize this place, although perhaps one or two of the older citizens here may have seen it. We don’t notice the changes that go on in the town, as they come gradually, but when a person who has not seen our Main St. for 15 or 20 years, comes here, he cannot realize that it is the same place he left, years ago. It is not a great while since this street was a corduroy road through a swamp, and when the sewer was put in, the logs of this old road were found. Even in the winter, the street is not bad looking, and when the leaves are on all the trees it is very pleasant, that is, to strangers in town. Of course, the residents do not see it in that way.
A short distance west from the end of Hoffman Street is another small brook, that has not yet dried up. This is perhaps one of the prettiest spots on it. There is a gorge farther down, but in taking a picture of it my camera was moved, and the negative spoiled. Perhaps it was just as well, for there were several children on hand, who were bound to have there “picture took”, and some of their poses were, not quite up to date, according to Hills. It is sometimes comical to see the trouble children will take to get in front of your instrument, and it is awfully hard work to persuade them you don’t want them there.
Another spot that is a great pleasure ground for the young folks of Torrington is the glen at Daytonville. This is one of the few picturesque places that are known to people, and spoken of and pointed out. I believe this is considered one of the most romantic spots in the County, at least is was when I was young, the only trouble being that it is known by too many young couples at the same time.
One can easily get a hundred nice views here, this one being a sample. It is on the Housatonic River, and the cliff on the left is called Lover’s Leap. There is quite a romance connected to this place, about the man whose promised wife in some way refused him, and he to prove his love, and get himself out of misery, jumped off this high cliff to the rocks and water below.
This sunset scene is another one of the fine views of the river, and I am sorry I cannot show more of them. Why, there isn’t a country that can show up anything prettier than this. Or than this would be, if properly finished. As far as I am concerned, and I know others agree with me, I think we live in the banner town of the most picturesque County, of the best State of the Union and that America takes the lead in scenery as well as everything else.
Appendix:

(1) Original lantern slide from the Brooks show. The stream pictured is known today as Lover’s Lane Brook.

(2) Original lantern slide from the Brooks show. The stream pictured here is Nickel Mine Brook.

(3) Modern gelatin silver print from Brooks’s 5x8 inch glass plate negative. The negative is identified by J.N. Brooks as Lover’s Lane.

(21) John Brown House ca 1894. Scanned image from a Brooks’ 4x5 inch glass plate negative.

(25) John Brown House ca. 1894. Scanned image from a Brooks’s 4x5 inch glass plate negative.

(35) Original lantern slide from the Brooks show. This view was taken from Center Bridge looking up the West Branch of the Naugatuck River. The Turner and Seymour Company is pictured on the right bank. This image was made before the Prospect Street bridge was constructed.

(47) Original lantern slide from the Brooks’s show. This hotel on Main Street was later re-named the Yankee Pedlar Inn. It was constructed in 1891.

(49) Modern gelatin silver print from a Brooks’s glass plate negative. A view looking north on Main Street showing left to right: the corner of the Granite Block, the McNeil Block, the Conley Inn (i.e. Yankee Pedlar Inn) and the Torrington YMCA.

(58) Original hand-colored lantern slide from the Brooks lantern slide show.

(60) Original hand-colored lantern slide from the Brooks show. Daytonville is the historic name for the north end of Torrington. It got its name from its association with Arvid Dayton who had a reed organ factory on North Main Street. The stream pictured is the East Branch of the Naugatuck River.

(70) Original hand-colored lantern slide from the Brooks show. A scene on the Housatonic River

(71) Modern hand-colored gelatin silver print from a Brooks 5x8 inch glass plate negative. The view of the Housatonic River is identified by J. N. Brooks as the falls at New Milford.