

October 7, 2014 Special Supplement: **PETERBOROUGH'S 275th**

OUR LAND

Conservation: Seeing the natural world

By Francie Von Mertens

Land conservation over Peterborough's 275-year history definitely reflects changing views of land and natural resources.

Survival in the early years required extracting as much value as possible from the land: the rugged individualist was seen as conquering nature for food, shelter and livelihood.

Land was cleared and wildlife hunted and trapped to the extent that local species like beaver, wild turkey and moose disappeared.

The industrial revolution occurred along rivers where waterpower ran the mills. Factory discharge fouled rivers to the extent that the Merrimack was called "Merrimuck."

Aggressive clear-cutting in the White Mountains caused soil erosion that clogged waterways and forest fires when slash left behind supplied ready tinder.

That sums up the first 175 years of land use!

Extraction, not conservation.

However, it was over-extraction—especially in the scenic White Mountains popular to tourists—that led to a growing concern about land use near and far.

Land conservation back then typically was for parks and recreation, not to protect natural resources like forests, clean water and wildlife habitat.

In 1891, Peterborough made history when the donation of three acres atop Pack Monadnock resulted in New Hampshire's first state park.

Miller State Park was an early example of what would become a dominant trend: private generosity for public benefit.

A still earlier example was the 1862 donation of Putnam Grove (Putnam Park today) to the town by Catherine Putnam.

In 1914, Adele Foster Adams gave nine acres to the town for a "public playground" (Adams Playground today).

As clear-cutting and fires up north continued, advocates for large-scale conservation often invoked the economy. Legislators who dismissed using public funds to conserve land were talked into it when tourism and waterpower (not clogged by soil erosion) led the argument.

One hundred years ago, as the passenger pigeon—the most numerous bird species on earth—went extinct through overhunting, federal legislation opened the way for public funding of land conservation. The White Mountain National Forest resulted soon thereafter.

It took time for state and local funding to follow. More polluted waterways; Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" call to action; and a major real estate boom in New Hampshire that consumed farms, scenic views, and the open spaces the state is known for.

The history that Catherine Putnam began, of townspeople acting to conserve land, became the hallmark of conservation in Peterborough—but first a slight detour in that story.

North of town, along Route 202, there's a rustic sign on the south side that reads "PETERBOROUGH CONSERVATION AREA." The 1966 Town Report notes that the land was taken by tax deed when the landowner stopped paying taxes on what was no doubt considered unproductive wetlands.

The newly appointed Peterborough Conservation Commission—one of the first in the state—erected a sign announcing the town's first true conservation land, 57 acres appropriately known as "Swamp Woods."

And appropriately that first conservation property was wetlands. Conservation science was a growing field of knowledge that recognized the exceptional natural resource value of wetlands.

Conservation of privately owned land took off locally in the 1970s by means of conservation easement deeds whereby landowners voluntarily give up certain development rights—with the stated intention in the deed language of conserving certain natural resources.

Recognizing the public benefit of land conservation, federal tax incentives were enacted at that time to encourage conservation easements on land with those values.

State funding joined the cause in 1987 and resulted in another surge of local land conservation.

By my count, 1976 up to the present, 38 families in Peterborough have conserved their land through conservation easements, totaling some 4,700 acres.

Every property colored green on Peterborough's open space map has a different but similar story—of townspeople choosing to safeguard land and its resources for future generations.

The conservation record of the Bass extended family has many stories and includes 800 acres of private land including the Rosaly's Farmstand property, as well as donated land including Adams Playground, Casalis State Forest, the Raymond Trail, and expansion of Miller State Park well beyond those first three acres.

Reflecting citizen surveys that consistently support open space, the Town's 2003 Master Plan called for creation of an Open Space Committee as well as town funding to support conserving land with high conservation value.

The town established a capital reserve fund that has assisted several projects, the most recent one completed four months ago in partnership with the Harris Center.

Open space protection today includes partnering with local land trusts like the Harris Center and Monadnock Conservancy.

Constant to the Peterborough story is the land ethic of townspeople: landowning families but also neighbors joining to conserve land near them; volunteers on committees as well as member-supporters of land trusts; donors to conservation projects and respondents to town surveys.

As for the economic argument of old, it still holds. Towns with the most conserved land typically have lower taxes; and New Hampshire's open spaces contribute an estimated 25% of the state's overall economy.

Peterborough's history of land conservation has many local heroes, past, present, and continuing on.

(Author's note: A lot of this history was gleaned from Jim Collins and Dick Ober's chapter on New Hampshire in "Twentieth-Century New England Land Conservation," Charles Foster editor, 2009.)