

BHHT Column #1

Blue Hill Heritage Trust Celebrates Its 25th Anniversary

By Jim Dow, Executive Director

2010 marks the 25th anniversary of the founding of Blue Hill Heritage Trust. To help celebrate that milestone, this column will share over the next few weeks the story of the Trust's history, work and accomplishments as well as information about the places it has protected, the opportunities that its conservation lands offer for education and recreation, and the challenges ahead. This week we begin with some history.

The Blue Hill Heritage Trust was founded in 1985 by a group of local residents who were looking for a way to counter the increasing development pressures that were threatening to alter the character of the Blue Hill peninsula, epitomized by a condominium proposal on Peter's Cove in Blue Hill. The idea was simple and consistent with New England tradition: take private action for the public good. In this case that meant working with willing landowners in the free market system to conserve lands that had special value to the community as a whole, that provided public benefit as well as some balance to the necessary development activities on other lands. The names of the founding Board members are familiar ones: Peter Clapp, Paul Birdsall, Rufus Candage, Ken Taplin, Rod Cookman, Ellen Werner, John Milliken, Crosby Brown, Wes Barton, and Jean Nickerson, the first President.

Land trusts were a relatively new type of local community non-profit organization and here, as elsewhere, people were not sure what to make of it. Yet the founders decided that it seemed worth a try as a way to have some positive impact on the inevitable changes in the local landscape, especially since the culture of coastal Maine communities did not welcome town or state land use ordinances or other governmental involvement in private land.

Two primary tools were available to the Trust, then as now: acquisition of full legal ownership in a parcel of land or acquisition of a conservation easement interest. Conservation easements are perpetual legal restrictions on the future use of privately owned land that are monitored and enforced by a land trust. They were still a relatively new legal instrument in 1985.

All-volunteer and new to the world of land conservation, this new land trust began business by seeking donations of land or conservation easements from landowners that were sympathetic to its mission. The donations soon began. Jerry and Di Hinckley donated 13 acres of land on Toddy Pond in Blue Hill, the Trust's first owned land. Shortly thereafter Lucy Chamberlain donated the first conservation easement on her 17 acres shorefront property in Brooklin.

The donations continued steadily over the years. Members who supported this work were recruited to help fund the organization, as were volunteers to help with the work. Eventually the need to purchase some particularly significant tracts of land became apparent.

In the early 1990s the Trust was asked to help resolve a dispute between the Town of Blue Hill and the landowner of a 19 acre parcel on the western slope of Blue Hill Mountain, who was

proposing a controversial development, by buying the land. It did so, successfully completing its first major fundraising campaign. Other capital campaigns followed in 1997, 1999-2001 and 2008, resulting in the acquisition of a variety of lands, including the Kingdom Woods Conservation Area, the Cooper Farm on Caterpillar Hill and other land on Blue Hill Mountain.

The summit of Blue Hill Mountain was bequeathed to the Trust by Louise Frederick in 1998. This immediately became the centerpiece of the Trust's properties. It was also the place where it began providing public walking trails. Now it offers 13 miles of trails on a variety of conservation lands throughout the Blue Hill Peninsula.

Local farmland conservation became one of the Trust's primary initiatives in the late 1990s and it gained statewide recognition for its leadership in that work when it was awarded the Land Heritage Award by the Maine Coast Heritage Trust in 1999. 1999 also marked the beginning of the Trust's "Walks and Talks" program, a series of outdoor educational outreach events centered on conservation lands and natural history that continues to attract people of all ages each year. With the hiring of a full-time Executive Director in 2001, the Trust took another step forward, realizing the need to build and maintain an organization that would be able to fulfill its perpetual obligations. It found a permanent home in 2005 when its board of directors voted to purchase the William Carleton House on the corner of the Mountain Road in Blue Hill.

The Trust has now protected 5524 acres of land, including 2132 acres of conservation land owned by the Trust and 3392 acres protected by 53 conservation easements. These lands include undeveloped shoreline, scenic views, blueberry fields, wetlands, forests, ponds, working farms. They are places where both residents and visitors hike and hunt, capture a view, launch a boat, picnic with the kids, observe wildlife, grow local food or just find some simple peace and quiet. They are places that help protect the character of the landscape that plays a fundamental role in our local economy and our quality of life. They are our community commons.

This summer we are going to celebrate the Trust's birthday, and all the people who have given it life, with a series of special events, including an anniversary party dinner, dance and silent auction on July 17th and a family focused Mountain Day on August 8th. (More information about these can be found on our website at www.bhhtmaine.org). We hope you will join in the celebration.