

Column #1

CELEBRATING PLACE: 30th Anniversary Notes from Blue Hill Heritage Trust

A Local Land Trust Is Born – and Thrives

By Jim Dow, Executive Director, Blue Hill Heritage Trust

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of Blue Hill Heritage Trust. To help celebrate this milestone, this weekly column will share the story of the Trust's work over the last three decades, as well as information about the places it has conserved, the opportunities that its lands offer for education and recreation, and the challenges ahead. This week we begin with a brief history.

In 1985 a far-sighted group of local residents got together to discuss how to ensure that some of the Blue Hill Peninsula's special land resources were conserved for the long-term benefit of present and future generations of residents and visitors. Prompted by a controversial 36 unit condominium project proposal on Peters Point on Blue Hill harbor and the absence of any town land use planning or zoning, these discussions led to the creation of Blue Hill Heritage Trust.

This founding group had diverse backgrounds but a common interest in the well-being of their community. Most of the names are familiar to those who have been here a while: Jean Nickerson, Peter Clapp, Rufus Candage, John Milliken, Rod Cookman, Paul Birdsall, Crosby Brown, Wes Barton, Ken Taplin and Ellen Werner.

The concept was simple: find a way to balance land development with land conservation. The approach was consistent with New England tradition: take private action for the public good. As the Trust's founding president Jean Nickerson put it in a Weekly packet article in 1985 that announced the forming of Blue Hill Heritage Trust, "It's not that we're against growth or economic development or residential development. It's just that some of the land should be preserved as open space".

The newly formed trust played no role in ending the condominium controversy- that project died for various other reasons. The founders were instead focused on the future, optimistically but with modest expectations. Local land trusts were a new type of non-profit organization. There was no certainty that their creation would be effective, much less become a successful, enduring community institution, but no one else – neither town governments nor other local entities- was engaged in this work.

This all-volunteer undertaking began business by seeking donations of land or conservation easements from landowners that shared their belief in the value of land conservation. The donations quickly began- first a gift of land on Toddy Pond in Penobscot by Jerry and Di Hinckley, prominent Blue Hill residents, then a gift of conservation easement on a shorefront property in Brooklin by a very conservation-minded landowner. But it wasn't long before the issue arose of whether the Trust should purchase unusually significant parcels of land.

In the early 1990's the Trust's Board of Directors was asked to help solve a legal dispute between the Town of Blue Hill and a local land developer, who was proposing a controversial development on the western slope of Blue Hill Mountain, by buying the land from the developer. They accepted the challenge. After organizing and completing the Trust's first capital campaign, they completed the purchase.

Though donations of land or conservation easements remained important, the purchasing of land with funds raised from people who cared about this place thereafter became another tool for the Trust to use in conserving special places throughout the Peninsula. Subsequent capital campaigns led to the acquisition of land around Fourth Pond in Blue Hill, on Caterpillar Hill in Sedgwick and along Patten Stream in Surry, among other places.

After fifteen years, largely because of its success, the Trust had outgrown its all-volunteer structure and hired an executive director to manage its increasingly complex business. It also began giving increased attention to the land management side of its business (what we call stewardship), as well as to the development of walking trails and outdoor programs that invited people onto these conservation lands. This evolution of our organization has continued more recently with national accreditation in 2013 and a merger with the former Conservation Trust of Brooksville, Castine and Penobscot in 2014.

Now, 30 years later, Blue Hill Heritage Trust has worked with willing landowners to conserve 150 parcels of land totaling over 7000 acres, all forming what amounts to a "community commons". These lands are located throughout the Blue Hill Peninsula, in each of the seven towns, from Surry to Castine. They offer the public twenty five miles of free walking trails as well as access to fresh and salt water. They protect scenic views, wildlife habitat and agricultural soils. They provide shared community spaces where people can learn about or just enjoy the wonders of our landscape. They support the economic underpinnings of a local economy that depends on seasonal residents and visitors who come here because of the outstanding quality of our Peninsula's natural assets and the quality of life found here.

Next week: The Mountain.



Photo Caption: Founding (and current) Board member Peter Clapp cut the ribbon to open one of the Trust's early public trails at their Kingdom Woods property in 2004.



Old Photo Caption: This photo accompanied a Weekly Packet article in 1985 about the forming of Blue Hill Heritage Trust. Jean Nickerson (center), the founding president, accepts the corporate seal from attorney George Eaton, signifying the Trust's legal status as a new Maine non-profit corporation.