



*FRIENDS OF CANONCHET FARM NEWSLETTER, SPRING 2025*

## President's Report

Another spring arrives and our stalwart volunteers remain hard at work, clearing invasive privet, porcelain berry, bittersweet, Korean Raspberry, and multiflora rose from both sides of the Nature Trail and from what we hope will become the Narragansett Tribal Three Sisters Garden, located at the western edge of the grassy upper meadow of Canonchet Farm. It will be exciting this Spring to see the progress that has been made in this area, not only in the future garden plot but also in the immediate garden surroundings where our volunteers work has revealed a mini apple orchard that had been crushed under the weight of the invasive vines. In the 40 by 60-foot garden plot, two thirds of the total area have been planted in native wildflower plants and flowering cover crop plants, purchased by means of a generous grant from the RI Wild Plant Society. In conjunction with the South County Museum's textiles emphasis, we hope to grow native dye plants like flax in the remaining third this year. These plantings are intended to be only a 2025 initiative, necessitated due to the soil testing results for the garden plot which had resulted in an extremely acidic PH finding, unsuitable in the short term, for growing food. The garden plot has already been treated once with lime last fall and will again be treated by April 1st. This should result in about a point increase in PH toward the goal of 5.5 or 6.0, which is the ideal level for growing healthy vegetables. We have applied for another grant from the RI Foundation that would fund the construction of a solid deer and groundhog/rabbit fence around the garden that we hope to install during the fall of this year. If all of our moving parts come together as we anticipate, the garden will see its first planting and harvests in 2026.



*A Winter View of the Garden Site*

Our volunteers are largely responsible for the transformative views visitors now enjoy while walking the Nature and other trails like the one above looking from the west at the Three Sisters Garden site. They have cleared most of the trail edges to a distance of six feet on either side, revealed many yards of colonial era stone walls, planted more than sixty native trees in areas that had been inaccessible because of the tangle of invasive shrubs and vines, and rebuilt some of the rapidly decaying boardwalks. The beautiful views of the two fresh water lakes across from the town beach from their southern and eastern shores stand out as noteworthy achievements from hundreds of man and woman hours over the years that eliminated the invasive plants that blocked the views and clogged the waters' edge. Since 2016 our volunteers have contributed 6,891 hours of their time and the monetary value of these volunteer hours in Rhode Island according to the website [independentsector.org](http://independentsector.org) amounts to \$196,889. When that monetary calculation is added to the nearly \$80,000 in member contributions during that same time period that was spent upon trail maintenance and habitat restoration, it is a truly impressive result for our organizations' environmental efforts.

## Volunteer Spotlight: Bob Stepanian



***Bob Stepanian (right) with fellow volunteer Jake Brown after they cleared brush from around an old well discovered during a work session***

In this and in upcoming newsletters we want to highlight our volunteers and Bob Stepanian, long-time Board member and volunteer, is a perfect example of the dedication and hard work that characterizes our team. Bob is a retired chemical engineer and has been a permanent Narragansett resident since 2004. He joined the Friends of Canonchet Farm in 2014 and almost immediately began to volunteer for the work crew on Saturday mornings. He also joined the Board in 2016. He likes the volunteer work because of the educational opportunity of identifying invasive and native plants, the camaraderie with the other volunteers and the healthy, out in the fresh air in the woods working environment. His other goal is to be a part of the work to improve the condition of the farm and see it be enjoyed by the Narragansett and



South County community in the years to come. Bob has been a vital member of our volunteer work crew and can usually be found with a root slayer shovel or rake in hand working every Saturday on the property.

## Our Partnership with South County Museum

We are often asked questions on the trail by walkers whether we are part of the South County Museum. We are not-instead, we have a ten-year stewardship arrangement granted by the Narragansett Town Council in 2019 to care for the lakes, Nature Trail, and forests of Canonchet Farm. Our mission has been and will continue to be the removal and eradication of the invasive plants that infest these areas and to work to restore the native ecosystem. The restoration efforts have included clearing and rebuilding stone walls, repairing and replacing deteriorated boardwalks, removing thousands of invasive shrubs and vines, and planting native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. This effort has included maintaining and restoring several gardens on the grounds of the South County Museum and working to eliminate invasives such as the knotweed behind the ruined Sprague estate stable across from the Metz exhibition building.

The South County Museum is a separate entity from the Friends of Canonchet Farm, and it has a permanent lease to operate in this location, also granted by the Narragansett Town Council. We have a strong beneficial partnership with the Museum which enables us to utilize the Metz building for our educational events and our annual meeting. The Nature Trail passes just to the south and west of the Museum's buildings and one of its overgrown pastures. Future plans are to tear out the remnants of the fence line between the Museum and the Trail and replace it which would enable the Museum's animals to utilize that pasture once again, thus bringing the goats and sheep within close viewing range of the Trail walkers.



*View of the Fence Line Between Trail and Museum*

## A Historical Reminiscence: Riding and Flying – Two Stories

Longtime member, volunteer and town resident John Miller who recently passed away had written this reminiscence of Canonchet Farm from the previous century:

- A Narragansett police officer named Fred Ford had a piper cub which he kept at Canonchet. He would take off on a field where new houses are now. He apparently kept his plane in a barn at the north end of the field probably just west of the South County Museum's caretaker's house. One day when the atmosphere was most likely heavy, Fred decided to take three friends (Chet Lecomski, Walter Mazika, and "Tiger" Wright – the first two lifeguard supervisors and Tiger a famous athlete locally) for a ride. A problem emerged quickly: not only was the air heavy but so were Fred's three passengers. As the piper cub raced northwards towards the barn it lacked adequate lift and instead of flying over the barn roof, the plane hit the building's face. Inasmuch as no one was badly hurt, the crash elicited more jokes than consternation.
- The other incident concerned the summer camp my aunt, Marion Miller, ran on the farm. I had just turned seven so my memories are dim, but we did things like swimming at Sand Hill Cove and games at the farm. The main thing was riding horses and the stables. The person in charge of the equestrian activity was called Captain Thompson. He was a Russian émigré and his real surname was Obolensky (a fairly common name for Russian royalty). Of course, I was just a little tyke so my one (and only) recollection is of Captain Thompson cantering on another horse next to mine with his arm round me. Sadly, Captain Thompson got caught up in the Avie Sprague marital merry-g-round and eventually committed suicide.

## Updates

### **Vernal Pond Study:**

The Audubon Society of Rhode Island has entered its second year of Vernal Pool Monitoring with the main objective of expanding its efforts to outside organizations such as the Friends of Canonchet Farm! Since this is the first year we are monitoring this location in Narragansett, the data collected will act as a baseline where we can compare and see trends in the previous years. The overall objective of this project is to ensure that vernal pools all over Rhode Island are productive and healthy and they stay this way as we see impacts of climate change. Volunteers spend at least 30 minutes at these vernal pools noting down egg masses from the two amphibian species, Wood Frog and Spotted Salamander, and flipping rocks and logs see what other Herp critters are hiding underneath them. The monitors visit their assigned pools every week measuring the number of egg masses produced throughout the season. Monitoring season starts the first week of March and ends the last week of May."

### **High Marsh Restoration**

#### **From Wenley Ferguson of Save The Bay:**

We had a productive fall at Canonchet Farm salt marsh and worked on the restoration activities from early November into early January when the deep freeze began. Beginning in November, we began hand-digging new drainage features called runnels and opened up some clogged ditches in areas where water was impounded on the marsh platform. Later in the month, the RI Dept of Environmental Management's Mosquito Abatement Coordinator delivered their low-

ground pressure excavator and work began clearing the invasive plant, *Phragmites australis* from Crooked Brook. And Crooked it is! The narrow meandering brook carries freshwater from the watershed to the south of the Narrow River into the marsh. Over the past 30 or so years, *Phragmites* has clogged sections of the brook causing the freshwater to overflow its banks, creating ideal conditions for *Phragmites* to grow in the marsh. The dense stand of *Phragmites* has outcompeted all other native vegetation where the brook leaves the red maple swamp and enters the marsh. Ben Gaspar, Save The Bay's Restoration Ecologist, operated the excavator, specially designed to work in marshes without sinking into the marsh, and removed the *Phragmites* and their dense roots from the brook. He also used the excavator to clear a clogged ditch that parallels the power line berm. This berm and its clogged ditch prevented water from draining off the marsh and caused large areas of the salt marsh grasses to die off and the marsh platform to slowly sink. In the early spring, we will continue hand digging in this section of the marsh to connect more of these ponded areas to one another via hand-dug runnels. We expect that these newly drained areas will begin to colonize with the salt-tolerant pickleweed, an annual salt marsh plant that is very salt tolerant. We will pause work this summer and begin work again in early September as well as conducting vegetation monitoring to compare conditions pre and post-restoration activities.

## New Mystery Trail

Frequent walkers on the Nature Trail may have noticed last fall that a new trail loop has been completed on the western segment of the trail just east of the bridge over Crooked Brook. There has long been a spur trail here that led back to a pretty overlook of Crooked Brook and a faint trace from there that tracked eastward along a stone wall paralleling the Nature Trail, but previously it petered out without rejoining the main trail. Well, that is no longer true. Some unknown party has completed the loop for this trail and it now rejoins the Nature Trail where it makes a sharp right through the stone wall and up the slope toward the back of the Museum. The Friends of Canonchet Farm cannot take credit for this trail, but we applaud its designers' contribution to the walking options of the property. Be sure and check it out next time you are there.



*Mystery Trail rejoining main trail*



## Educational Walks and Talks, Spring 2025

As always, I will send out notification closer to the date of the events with a link to the online signup. Visit [Canonchet.org](https://Canonchet.org) and Friends of Canonchet Farm on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/focanonchetfarm) for more information. We try to keep these walks limited to a maximum group of 30 to enhance the experience and make sure everyone can hear the walk leader.

**Sunday, April 6, 1:00 p.m. - The Geology of Canonchet Farm:** Professor Beth Laliberte returns once again with her evergreen presentation and walk describing and identifying the geologic features of Canonchet Farm. If you've missed this walk in the past, here is your chance. There will be a short presentation in the South County Museum followed by an hour long walk. Friends of Canonchet Farm is sponsoring this talk and walk, and it is free and open to the public.

**Saturday, April 19, 1:00 p.m. - Vernal Ponds:** Ethan Paiva from the Audubon Society will lead a walk to Canonchet Farm's large vernal pond in which he will describe this year's monitoring program and identify various reptiles and amphibians which inhabit such ecosystems. Friends of Canonchet Farm is sponsoring this talk and walk, and it is free and open to the public.

**Saturday, May 24, 1:00 p.m. - History of Canonchet Farm:** Jim Crothers, Executive Director of the South County Museum emeritus will return with his popular and informative history of Canonchet Farm from colonial days to the twentieth century. Meet us inside the South County Museum's Metz Building for the talk. Friends of Canonchet Farm is sponsoring this talk and walk, and it is free and open to the public.

**Sunday, June 1, 1:00 p.m. - Edible Foraging in the Forest:** Brett Ayette, local natural foods expert, will lead a walk along the Nature Trail identifying native edible plants and explaining their preparation and nutritive value. We will meet and begin our walk at the South County Museum parking lot. Friends of Canonchet Farm is sponsoring this walk, and it is free and open to the public.

Not yet scheduled:

1. **Stars and Planets Viewing** on the lawn with speaker and telescope from Frosty Drew Observatory in Charlestown.
2. **The Stone Walls of Canonchet Farm** with local historian Jay Waller

## A Final Word

On behalf of the entire Friends of Canonchet Farm Board and our members, I thank everyone who supports our efforts to restore and enhance Canonchet Farm lakes, trail, and woodlands by providing generous donations. We cannot do our work without you, and we are very grateful. We have recently concluded our 2024 Annual Appeal, and I want to thank all of you who made a donation. Of course, we welcome donations at any time, so if you'd like to support your local environmental organization you can do so via PayPal at our [website](https://www.paypal.com/donate/?url=https%3A%2F%2FCanonchet.org) or by mail to Friends of Canonchet Farm, P.O. Box 418, Narragansett, RI 02882