



Newsletter, Spring, 2021

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Greetings to all of our dedicated volunteers, friends and supporters!

Spring is in the air after a long, cold, and trying winter during which the weather and the epidemic kept us shut in and isolated from our family, friends, and favorite activities. Our own volunteer activities, focused primarily upon working to clear invasives from the nature trail, came to a grinding halt at the end of last November and since then we have only been able to work together three times. Our current work has been focused on clearing the thicket of invasive shrubs and vines surrounding some of the magnificent specimen trees in the north meadow bordering Anne Hoxie Lane just east of the South County Museum.

Informally known to our dedicated crew as the FOCF "Free the Trees" campaign, this work reverses a decade-long period of neglect that allowed the base of many of these trees to be



totally obscured to a height of eight feet or more, by privet, multiflora rose, oriental bittersweet and porcelain berry vines.

We hope to finish this phase of work this month and return to the nature trail clearing in April and early May before the mosquitos hatch!

The nature trail has gotten a lot of use this winter. Every time I've walked it, I've encountered dogs, runners, and walkers of all ages. The people are usually masked and respectful of social distancing, but obviously enjoying this woodland gem in the heart of Narragansett.

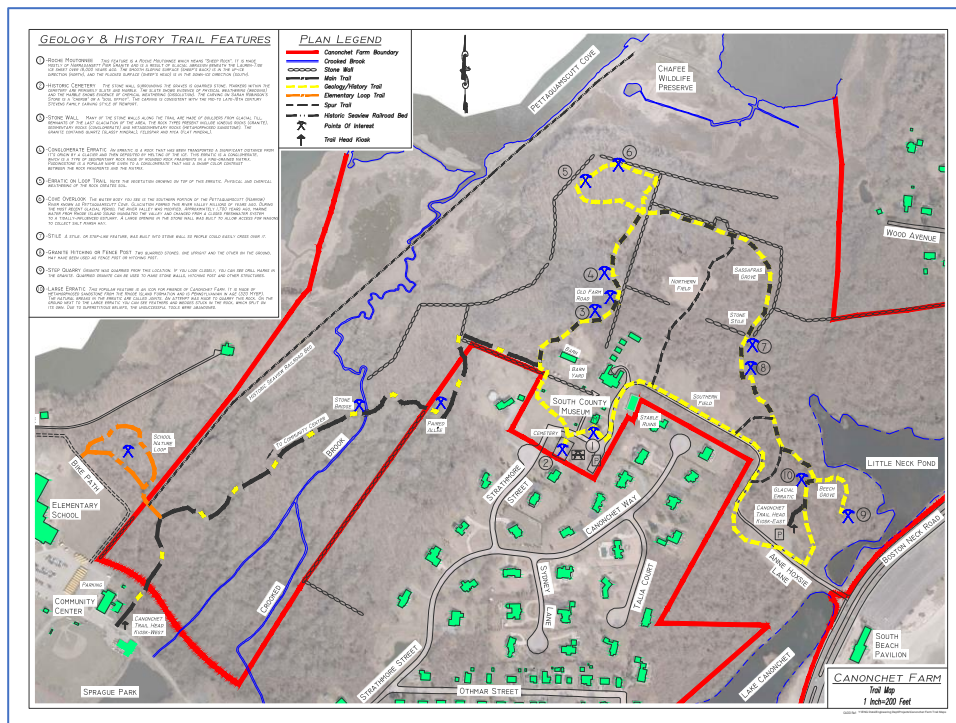
The eastern trail segment from the beach parking lot to the South County Museum has been cleared almost entirely of invasives at least 10 feet on either side of the trail and the views of the Narrow River beyond the stone wall are spectacular.

There is still much to be accomplished on the western segment of the trail, however, and the Spring mud season impacts certain areas a great deal. We have installed 35 cedar-slice steppingstones in some of the worst areas to encourage walkers to stay on the trail and keep from sinking too deep in the mud.



Near the western entrance of the trail where the new bike path extension comes within 25 feet of the existing path, severe erosion continues to be a problem caused by the combined runoff from the soccer field and bike path. The area downslope from the bike path has become badly rutted and walkers need to practice caution when walking there. FOCF has proposed a solution to this problem and with town approval we will relocate the trail in this area up into the dry woods just to the east of the existing trail.

The proposed new path will bypass approximately 75 yards of the current trail and rejoin the existing trail near the first boardwalk. Our volunteer crew will be clearing the new path in the next several months and we will then let nature take its course and let the woods regrow over the old path.



One last notable improvement achieved through our partnership with the town of Narragansett, particularly with Steve Wright, director of Narragansett Parks and Recreation, and Glenn Blacklock, staff engineer, has been the comprehensive update of the antiquated and incomplete map of

Canonchet Farm. The new 22 by 30, full-color map featuring all the trails in the property is now on display in the trail kiosks at the eastern and western entrances.

Tom Hoagland

INVASIVES BOOKLET

The Friends of Canonchet Farm have been fighting the rising infestations of knotweed, phragmites, privet, bittersweet and porcelain berry along the lakes across from Narragansett town beach and along the 1.3-mile nature trail that has linked the beach and the Narragansett Senior Center since its founding in 2007. Over the years the organization has also sponsored numerous educational walking tours with notable authors and naturalists to reach out to those who are passionate about fighting threats to our environment and involve more South County residents in the battle. Due to Covid-19 these efforts had to be suspended but we are proud to announce the printing of a 16-page, four-color illustrated booklet identifying 13 of the most invasive vines and shrubs infesting the forests, fields, and yards of South County.

This booklet is intended for homeowners and students who are concerned about the degradation of our environment by these plants and the damaging effects these invasive plants have on our native plant community and the insects, birds and animals that are dependent upon them. Each page details identifiable characteristics of the invasive plant such as its growth habits, its favored growing conditions, how it spreads in our fields and forests and most importantly, how to eradicate them.

Due to the generous contributions made to FOCF in memory of Ray Kagels, the booklet will be free and available for all interested residents at many South County libraries, Narragansett Town Hall, the Senior Center, the Parks and Recreation office, South County Museum, the Mallon Outreach Center at URI and many other locations in South County beginning this month. We also intend to make it available online at the Narrow River Preservation Association and Friends of Canonchet Farm websites. If you'd like a copy sent to you, send an email request to tom.hoagland963@gmail.com.

This issue of the newsletter brings you the first of two parts of the recently compiled history of our organization authored by FOCF Board Vice President Carol Prest. We also want to acknowledge the contributions made to this effort by long-time Board Treasurer Richard Vangermeersch and past Board President Kathie Kelleher.

The History of the Friends of Canonchet Farm

By Carol Prest, February 2021

Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." The Friends of Canonchet Farm is just that, a group of thoughtful, committed citizens and they have indeed made Narragansett a better place. This is their story.

The Place

Often referred to as the hidden gem of our town, Canonchet Farm is located on the southern end of Narrow River along the shore of Pettaquamscutt Cove. It has 174 acres of forest, meadows, saltwater and freshwater marshes. Crooked Brook meanders through it and empties into Pettaquamscutt Cove. Two freshwater ponds, Lake Canonchet and Little Neck Pond, lie to the east.

The bedrock (sedimentary rock) formed 300 million years ago was intruded in some locations by volcanic granite 275 million years ago. Colonial-era granite quarries now act as vernal ponds. The bedrock is covered with glacial material deposited during the last glaciation, which began to recede 14,000 years ago. Boulders from that glacial till have been used to erect the lichen-covered stone walls that run throughout the property. Coyotes, owls, deer, fox, amphibians and snapping turtles are some of the wildlife that call this place home.

The Canonchet Farm property has a rich history. The land was home to the Narragansett tribe for thousands of years. Indeed, it was named after Chief Canonchet, an important Narragansett sachem. In 1658 and 1659 the Pettaquamscutt Purchase turned large tracts of land over to the white settlers from the Narragansetts.

Canonchet Farm was part of that deal and Thomas Mumford (1615-1692) and later William Robinson (1693-1751) and his descendants farmed this property until it was sold to the A. & W. Sprague Company in the 1850s.

William Sprague was the first president of the Narragansett Town Council, years after having served as governor of Rhode Island and later as senator from Rhode Island.

He and his first wife, Kate Chase Sprague, built a magnificent 64-room summer mansion on the property in 1863. In 1909 the mansion burned in a spectacular fire. Avice Calvert Sprague Wheaton Borda, the sister of Sprague's widowed second wife, Dora Inez Calvert, continued to farm the land. Eventually, in 1974, after a long legal battle, the Town of Narragansett bought the property from a developer to prevent a housing tract from being built.

Thus began the long, arduous, and often contentious journey to decide what the best use of this "hidden gem" would be for the people of Narragansett.

Friends of Canonchet Farm

For the next few decades, there was no shortage of ideas and proposals for this prime piece of property. In the early years, new municipal buildings, a new school, expansion of Sprague Park, an 18-hole municipal golf course, a bike path, and an exercise trail were all considered by the town council. In addition, a firefighters' museum, a small passenger train, paddle-boats, a bandshell and a pedestrian bridge to the beach were also proposed but ultimately discarded. The town council finally created a committee to develop a master plan in 1993.

In 1985 the South County Museum was invited and agreed to move to a nine-acre portion of Canonchet Farm. Over the next two decades, meetings, discussions, and proposals continued to swirl about but never achieved consensus. In 1990, the clearing of overgrown fields and landscaping the trails began under the direction of Clarkson Collins, the town's director of community development.

Steve Courville, spokesperson for the Narragansett Polo Club next proposed creating a polo field on twenty acres of the Canonchet property in 2006. Many trees would have to be cut down and the landscape would have been substantially altered. This proposal generated a series of meetings and studies to examine and debate the proposal. It also became the catalyst for the development of the Friends of Canonchet Farm group. The battle between the developers and the conservationists was on.

As the planning board began to study the proposal, meetings took place where citizens could express their feelings about the pros and cons of the plan. In one such response, Bill Bivona, chairman of the Narragansett Conservation Commission, invited the public to join him for informational discovery walks on January 1 and 2, 2007, at the Canonchet Farm property and over 50 people participated. Then Bill and Nancy Bivona and John Miller organized a meeting at the Community Center on January 11 for people to come and discuss their opposition to the polo field, and more than 45 residents attended. The result of this meeting was the birth of the Friends of Canonchet Farm.

A small group of people remained after the meeting and they agreed to form FOCF's first board. They were a talented group; some of their areas of expertise included law, horticulture, geology, biology, accounting, and landscape design.

The first board members: were Tom Fortier, president; Charlie Lee, Vice President; Kathie Kelleher, secretary; Richard Vangermeersch, treasurer; Jack Casey, John DiPanni, Joanne Garceau, Bill Ise, Robert Leeson, Tara Flaherty and Anne Richardson. Kathie and Richard are still dedicated board members today.

The aim of the group was to improve, manage and preserve Canonchet Farm as a natural area in partnership with the public. Within two months the group had grown to over 100 members. They registered as a 501c3 nonprofit corporation, recruited some grant writers and volunteered to help the town manage Canonchet Farm. Four of their members, (Charlie Lee, Tom Fortier, John DiPanni and Anne Richardson), were also selected to join the Town's Canonchet Farm Master Plan Review Committee. This committee met from Sept. 2007 to March 2009.

The early bi-monthly FOCF meetings were often highlighted by spirited discussions as the board worked to find a common vision for an alternative plan to the polo field proposal. In May, 2007, the town council, after many meetings and citizen input, rejected the polo field plan. This initial victory set the stage for FOCF's next phase in determining and implementing their vision for Canonchet Farm.

To Be Continued ...