



## **Land Protection and Stewardship in Weston**

*By Brian Donahue*

*(edited by Land's Sake on 4/20 to focus on stewardship and land protection for Earth Day 2020)*

In 1953, the town established a Committee to Investigate and Report on the Matter of a Town Forest. Within a few years, several small tracts of Town Forest had been acquired, planting the seeds of more than 2,000 acres of open space that we own today. Weston at that time was a town of dwindling farms, fading estates, and a few other seedpods--of residential development. The genetic map by which Weston would unfold was laid down in the early 1950s by two critical decisions: residential zoning, and open space acquisition. The upshot is the suburb we see today: two-thirds detached houses on large lots and one-third schools, golf courses, and protected open space. The first half of this period, 1953-1977, could be called the era of *land protection* in Weston. The next quarter-century, running into our own time, has marked the era of *land stewardship*.

Beginning in 1955 Weston began acquiring town forests on Highland Street, in Jericho, and on Sudbury Road. In the same year the Weston Forest & Trail Association was established to educate townspeople about the forests and maintain trails within them. Dr. William Elliston was the leader in all these efforts. From the start, the strategy was to acquire large tracts of backland at reduced prices, leaving the owner with street frontage increased in value.

Let us turn now to the era of stewardship, or “community land management.” During the decades that land was being acquired to protect “rural character,” genuine rural activity in Weston was disappearing. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Weston was a town of active farms and managed woodlots, but productive land use largely ceased during the middle part of century. In the past 50 years, Weston has rapidly grown up in wild forest even as it has suburbanized. Very little open farmland is left, and you could count the remaining private farms on one hand--Danforth, Anza, Dickson, Carter, ...?

Weston in the 1950s had an extensive network of riding trails left over from the estate era. Equestrians in town played an active role both in protecting land, and in maintaining the basic trail system. As more conservation land was acquired, many smaller walking trails were added by the Weston Forest & Trail Association. The leading figure in this work has long been George Bates, who along with Hugo Uytterhoeven and others laid out trails, acquired easements over private land to allow access and connect the pieces, and got the whole system properly marked and mapped.

Trail maintenance began as a volunteer effort, and many people continue to help out in various corners of town. But volunteers alone were found to be inadequate to the task of keeping the trails clear, especially following storms such as the heavy May snow of 1977. In 1979 Forest & Trail decided to hire someone--me, actually--to maintain the trails on a regular basis removing windfalls and cutting back encroaching branches and brush. The following year Land's Sake was formed and has performed this work ever since, under the direction of Forest & Trail. Taking care of trails has proven a good way to introduce Weston's young people to conservation land. Besides the work done by Land's Sake, the trails have been improved by occasional Eagle Scout projects as well.

Although most of Weston's "open" space is forested, there are also three dozen small fields on public land scattered around town. Most are only a few acres, amounting to perhaps 100 acres in all. These fields provide a lingering element of rural character along our roads, and lend real charm to some of our better-used conservation areas such as Cat Rock, the Weston College land, and the Sears land. At the same time they provide diverse habitat for grassland and shrubland species not found in deep forest. For some years the fields were mowed by the Highway Department, until the job was delegated to Green Power Farm in the mid-1980s. The mowing duty came to Land's Sake along with the rest of Green Power in 1991. Many of the fields are not mowed until August, to allow time for ground-nesting birds to fledge their young.

Mowing fields and maintaining trails for scenery, wildlife, and passive recreation is about what one would expect a suburban town to do with its conservation land. But in Weston things took a new twist with the birth of community farming and forestry. Market gardening, timber harvesting, and an ethic of active land stewardship have become part of our heritage as well. This story began in 1970 with Green Power Farm on Merriam Street, and a man named Bill McElwain. Green Power started as a volunteer effort to grow vegetables for the inner city, but within a few years the town acquired the land (for municipal purposes) from Weston College and McElwain was hired by the newly-formed Youth Commission. Green Power grew to about 15 acres, and apple cider and maple syrup were soon added to the program. The aim of these projects was to involve middle school and high school students with agriculture, and to send low-cost food to urban shelters and lunch programs.

Green Power was transferred to the Conservation Commission upon the demise of the Youth Commission in the mid-1980s, and in 1991 the program was merged with Land's Sake. That organization had been incorporated as a non-profit in 1980, with three central aims: to provide ecologically responsible management for town farm and forest land, to actively involve young people with that land, and to generate as much income as possible directly from sales of products and services. Land's Sake was founded primarily by Martha Gogel and Doug Henderson, who saw an opportunity to build upon what Bill McElwain had begun. The resulting

arrangement, by which Land's Sake contracts with the Conservation Commission, Weston Forest & Trail, and private landowners to carry out a range of land stewardship and educational projects, has proven reasonably efficient and stable.

Land's Sake got its start farming the Case "40 Acre" field in 1981, under the auspices of the Arnold Arboretum. Over the years a successful farmstand and pick-your-own business has been built up, employing young people and largely paying its own way. Harvard pushed the Arboretum to sell the land, and the town bought 35 acres for \$3.5 million in 1986--the largest land deal in Weston's history at the time (and not much less than what had been spent to acquire over 1,000 acres a mere decade before). With the Green Power land on Merriam Street and Concord Road, Land's Sake now cultivates about 25 acres. In any given year 15-20 acres are growing organic fruits, flowers and vegetables, while the rest rotates through soil-building cover crops.

Partly by design and partly by chance, Land's Sake has developed a new model for community farming of suburban open space. The farm strikes a balance between commercial rigor and educational and social purposes--a fruitful marriage of conservative and liberal precepts. It is run by hard-driving professional staff, but also employs and educates interns in their twenties and middle school students. Crops are cultivated by a judicious combination of power equipment and intensive hand transplanting, weeding, and harvesting. On-site retail sales pay most of the bills, but in addition some 20,000 pounds of produce are shipped every year to the city food security network, a donation underwritten by the Town of Weston. Small, irregular fields interspersed with ornamental plantings make an attractive blend of working market garden and arboretum, a place where visitors feel welcome to go for a stroll. Here is open space stewardship that looks terrific, engages people with the land in many ways, and all but pays for itself. Land's Sake is now internationally recognized, and frequently hosts visitors who hope to try something similar in their own communities, ranging from Rhode Island to Tuscany.

During the past half century Weston has emerged as a national leader in land protection and stewardship at the local, community level. This did not happen by chance, but because of the foresight and persistence of Bill Elliston, Bill McElwain, George Bates, and many others who poured themselves into the cause. These people did not always agree on which land was most important to protect, or how best to care for it, but they did share an unshakable conviction that hanging onto a decent amount of farm and forest land, and encouraging townspeople to stay in touch with that land, is vital to our community. Whether the coming generations of Weston conservationists are willing to devote themselves to this land with the same vision and tenacity will determine what is to become of this noble heritage.

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