

## LONG WHARF NATURE PRESERVE

In 1957 after two decades of work, the portion of I 95 in New Haven was finally completed and Governor Abraham Ribicoff opened the expressway to traffic in January 1958. (66 years ago)

One small spit of land, however, just off the highway and in front of the New Haven harbor was left, created by construction digging, dredging, and filling. Eventually it evolved into an expanse of marshland and a small woodland area dominated by Cottonwood trees -- the result of natural self-sowing.

The Garden Club of New Haven and the New Haven Land Trust saw this as an opportunity to create a preserve, a protected oasis for natural flora and fauna, a habitat for migratory birds. Conservation was a vital imperative. They described this joint project as "the creation of an urban seashore rescued from commerce and reclaimed for nature in New Haven, Connecticut."

After a number of years of concerted lobbying efforts at the city and state level, in the early 1990s, the City of New Haven and the Department of Transportation finally approved the conservation of this land and officially deeded it to the Land Trust, designating it as the **Long Wharf Nature Preserve**.

Then the work began. In 1996, a Garden Club steering committee was formed, which met on the third Monday of each month to plan the extensive design of this 22-acre area and to brainstorm about how to raise funds for the project.

Club members cleared debris, removed invasive plants, designed walkways, built footbridges, installed an information kiosk with panels, illustrating marsh, seashore, and harbor environments, and designed brochures for self-guided tours. They also planted a variety of salt-tolerant, drought-resistant trees and small shrubs, such as red cedar and viburnum.

In 1999, Lauren Brown of the Land Trust worked on securing a \$10,000 grant from the Long Island Sound License Plate Fund for permanent signage, trail markers, and handout brochures.

In all, they created five habitats: mud flats, a salt marsh, a beach area, a wildflower field, and the upper woodlands. It is a diverse Ecosystem of many native plant species which have become a haven for birds, butterflies, and insects. It has also become a quiet, welcome destination and respite for hikers and walkers, photographers, and birdwatchers.

From its creation, the site was visited frequently by school groups, and for the first time, in 1997, the city made the study of the New Haven harbor, part of the school curriculum.

After the preserve was created, one of our members, Gretchen Merkt, saw this conservation area as an opportunity to introduce students to our natural environment and to teach about environmental resources by developing an education program for elementary and middle school students.

Gretchen was a gifted teacher, trained at the Bank Street School. She described the program in this way:

"The Outdoor Education Program for New Haven Public School children at the Nature Preserve is learning firsthand about nature from nature itself. It is showing, touching, and feeling. It is wondering, discussing, asking, and, sometimes, figuring out the answer for yourself. For example,

why aren't squirrels here anymore? [*not enough acorns*] What does every living thing need to survive? [*food, oxygen and shelter*].

It was her belief that with their direct involvement, children learn more respect for living things and gain a greater understanding of life.

Each class that visited the preserve selected what they wished to study from 3 curricula — the beach area, trees and insects, or pollution and conservation. All aspects of the school curriculum were integrated into this outdoor program – language arts, math, art, and, of course, science. The overall emphasis was on problem-solving and logical thinking -- the basis for a good education.

Gretchen reported to the club in October 1998, that, despite miscellaneous school activities, vacation days and inclement weather, there were as many as 1000 children involved in the program in the past year. Additionally, some summer school classes availed themselves of the opportunity to explore the preserve with a GCNH guide. Usually, the children involved were in grades 2 -7 but on occasion high school classes requested a special program.

When Bonnie Sullivan and I first joined the club in 2000, we were enlisted to help teach and lead groups of school children through the preserve. It was fun to watch them search for shells and horseshoe crabs on the beach; to help them identify shad bushes, cottonwood trees, bayberry bushes, and how to avoid poison ivy; and to marvel at the huge bags of trash that they collected in one hour -- bags filled with everything from cigarette butts and plastic bottle caps to foil wrappers and miscellaneous socks. They learned how important it was to Save the Sound.





