

Hewitt Farm Committee Annual Report 2015/2016

11/1/2016



BACKGROUND

The 104-acre Hewitt Farm property was purchased by North Stonington in the fall of 2008 for \$622,890. This was the town's first major purchase of open space. The final debt payment was made in January 2014.

In December 2008 the Board of Selectmen appointed the Hewitt Property Committee to define the rules and regulations for the use of the property. In 2010 the committee's recommendations were approved at a December 10, 2010 Town Meeting and the committee's goal was accomplished.

In May 2011 the current Hewitt Farm Committee was appointed by the Board of Selectmen to manage and oversee the Hewitt Farm.

Our mission has been the following:

- maintain the property as a fine representation of traditional New England beauty
- encourage passive recreational use of the natural environment
- initiate enhancements that fit New England traditions
- continually encourage community appreciation of Hewitt Farm and seek public input

Members of the committee are appointed on an annual basis. Five of our members (Ellie Banker, Jack Brown, Richard Cooper, Ed Harasimowitz and Nita Kincaid) have been on the committee since its formation. Brian Banker was appointed in 2014 and there is currently an open alternate position.

More information about the Hewitt Farm is available on the committee's town website page:
www.northstoningtonct.gov/Pages/NStoningtonCT_BC/HFP/index .

ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING FISCAL 2015/2016

Completing the Dam Project

The March 2010 Northeaster delivered significant damage to the Hewitt Farm Dam. As a result of this storm the property was divided and public access was difficult, discouraging visitors. In September 2014 the dam restoration project finally began; by May 2015 the contractor had finished most of the work. During summer 2015, the town took on the remaining tasks, such as safety railings and site improvements. The Hewitt Farm was returned to its historical layout with a much safer dam, improved appearance and better accessibility.

Inviting Residents and Non-Profits to Enjoy Hewitt Farm

In celebration of this major improvement to the farm, the committee organized a town event, the North Stonington Harvest Festival. This was a September 2015 "re-opening" of the property to encourage increased use by residents and community non-profit groups. Hewitt Farm Committee members were responsible for making sure the property was in the best possible condition. The work involved installation of a park-style sign for the Route 2 entrance (thanks to a donation); an improved boat launch; a handicapped parking area; mowed meadows; removal of invasive plants in many areas; development of two new trails around the pond; and establishment of three usable parking areas. Committee members did much of the work and a very-appreciated town crew helped with important finishing touches in early September. The Harvest Festival had amazing attendance - more than 500 folks - thanks to a fabulous fall day, 24 participating town groups and successful publicity. The event displayed the farm looking its best in many years and attracted visitors who had never seen the property before, opening their eyes to its beauty and potential.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING FISCAL 2015/2016

Growing the Community Garden

The Hewitt Farm Community Garden was established in 2013 and quickly attracted many participants, as well as visitors. The Community Garden Association (a group of volunteers) oversees this area and has paid for all garden expenses with plot rental fees (\$25 per plot) and donations received from individuals and organizations such as Chelsea Groton Bank, the Rotary Club of the Stoningtons and the North Stonington Garden Club. In 2015 this area of the farm benefited from an Eagle Scout Project, by Boy Scout Roy Amaral. Roy constructed a handsome red shed that houses gardening tools and supplies, as well as a much-admired compost toilet purchased with further donations made to the Community Garden. All the garden plots were filled in both 2015 and 2016. In the spring of 2016, the plot rentals were filled so quickly that the association requested approval to add space for six additional plots in 2017 so that more members of the community could participate.



Enhancing the Hayfields

The 21 acres of hayfields on Hewitt Farm are well managed under a 2013 agreement with two local farmers, Ron Lewis and Mike Daniels. After clearing the edges of all four fields back to original borders, the farmers have created and maintained usable public trails, as well as improving the quality and production of the fields each year. This has been a win-win arrangement for the farmers and the town.

Overseeing Rental Properties

During 2015, **Buon Appetito** experienced a busy summer/fall season and requested expansion of parking areas. Working with First Selectman Mullane, we identified and marked property lines to provide extra spaces within the restaurants boundaries. Other necessary steps were outlined for the owner: removing a few trees, submitting a new parking plan to Planning and Zoning to obtain a permit, and then grading two areas adjacent to the existing parking areas. This work was approved and undertaken by the owner in 2016, with some changes still to be finished.

The **1750 Farm House** is a part of North Stonington's history and is recognized by the State Historical Preservation Office. It has been rented since 2008 to a family of five (tenants from the Seaport's ownership) for \$950 monthly. The committee inspects the house annually and maintenance issues are addressed. Recognizing the house's historical and architectural importance, the committee has begun an evaluation of its condition to identify future improvements needed to ensure appropriate preservation of the house, as well as to enhance its rental value.



HEWITT FARM FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

In 2012 the Hewitt Farm Committee requested that the town include a Hewitt Farm "Expense" line for \$5000 (Public Works/Highway/Hewitt Farm). A Hewitt Farm Income line already existed (Other Revenue/Rent for Hewitt Property) and this showed almost \$40,000 in annual rental income. The expense line was added to allow the committee to track expenses related to property maintenance and improvement.

YEAR	INCOME	EXPENSE
2012/2013	\$41,286	\$5,254
2013/2014	\$41,292	\$3,327
2014/2015	\$37,965	\$1,739
2015/2016	\$39,322	\$3,280

Above figures were taken from North Stonington budget and audit documents.

Two of the farm's leased properties had recent rent increases due to date-related escalation clauses:

***Southeastern CT Water Authority** has leased the Hewitt Farm wellfield since June 1965 with a right to renew for three successive periods of 25 years in 1990, 2015 and 2040. In addition a rental increase is calculated every five years based on the Consumer Price Index Urban. In July 2015 the lease was renewed and income from the well was increased from \$6215 to \$7586, which will prevail until 2020.

*The **Buon Appetito** lease was signed in June 2011 with an annual rent of \$19,800, locked in for five years through June 30, 2016. As of July 1, 2016, the rent increased to \$22,800 (a 15% increase). Each year hereafter the rent will increase by 3% until termination on June 30, 2050.

The restoration of the Hewitt Farm dam was completed in May 2015. Most expenses related to this Capital Project were paid by August 2016, with a small retainage remaining.

There are two future projects to be undertaken at the farm. These may require Capital Project funding. For the past few years, the committee has attempted to determine what could and should be done about the Cabin and Greene Gables, two empty buildings at Hewitt Farm. It is likely that any actions would require approval at a town meeting and would necessitate funding above and beyond Hewitt Farm's \$5000 line item.

- The small "fishing" Cabin at 3 Hewitt Rd. has been vacant since September 2014, when the tenant from 1997-2014 moved. The building is a rustic, camp-like structure with no foundation and little insulation. Much work would be required to make this a viable rental property or to transform it into a useful structure such as a small visitor's center with bathrooms. Given the small size and poor construction, there may be no cost-benefit in trying to work on the existing building.
- Greene Gables has been empty since 1997, has been described as in poor shape then, and has deteriorated significantly since. At the time of the December 2010 Town Meeting, it was voted that no work should be done on the building. (The issue discussed was that a plan would be needed first.)

In 2012 the North Stonington Historical Society notified the town of its interest in saving and utilizing Greene Gables, based on historic and cultural importance. The town paid to have Greene Gables tested by Mystic Air in 2012 and learned there are hazardous waste materials present, in addition to its poor overall condition. In 2013, the Historical Society formed a special committee to further evaluate the building. Since that time we have received much historical information on Greene Gables, but no viable suggestions for uses of the structure or for funding a restoration. Without identification of a worthwhile use for Greene Gables and subsequent approval by the town, the committee is unable to move forward with a plan and we remain concerned about the risks associated with this structure.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HEWITT FARM SUPPORTERS

On the very positive side, we have been fortunate that many improvements have been made at the Hewitt Farm without cost to the town. Volunteers and committee members have put in much work to keep up the property and we continue to receive wonderful donations from local non-profits.

- Boy Scout Troop 71: the Bicentennial Trail Bridge, picnic tables, garden shed and three more Eagle Scout projects planned for 2017
- Girl Scout Troop 63813: refurbishment and maintenance of the Butterfly Garden
- The Grange: Bluebird and Bat boxes in many locations
- North Stonington Garden Club: funding the rear entrance Welcome sign and most trail signs, including more to come soon.

We greatly appreciate the support, generosity and creativity of these community groups. They have made major contributions to this very special town property.

GOALS FOR FISCAL 2016/2017

The Hewitt Farm Committee has identified the following priorities for 2016/2017:

1. Replace weakened beams in the basement of the 1750 Farm House
2. Develop a plan for improvements to the 1750 Farm House
3. Formulate specific, actionable recommendations for the Cabin and Greene Gables
4. Support the North Stonington Garden Club's creation of a Hewitt Farm Nature Trail and three Troop 71 Eagle Scout projects
5. Explore options for outdoor bathroom facilities
6. Continue to encourage and support activities and events at the farm by working closely with the schools and town non-profits

