



## *A History of Dr. John Champlin Glacier Park*



## **History of Dr. John Champlin Glacier Park**

The Dr. John Champlin Glacier Park became one of the Westerly Land Trust's special lands in 2004 when the Lathrop family sold 173 acres to the Westerly Land Trust. The land trust sold 38 acres to Newbury of New England in a prearranged agreement with the remaining 135 becoming the preserve. Grants from RI DEM and DOT made it possible to preserve most of the property in its undeveloped state. It lies between the Shore Road and Tom Harvey Road and boasts to have over 5 miles of trails, unique geological features, an awesome view of Block Island Sound and its own Chestnut Tree orchard. Exploring the recent history of this land sets the stage for where it is today.

It is believed that the earliest people to come to this site were Native Americans who arrived as the most recent glacier retreated (about 8000 BC) and the environment became more hospitable. They occupied the area for thousands of years. Exact dates are unknown but when Europeans came to America, the Narragansett Tribe was well established here. Native Americans would have hunted game in the tundra plain that existed in what is now Block Island Sound, until rising sea levels flooded that area. They would have taken advantage of shellfish, shad and finfish as well as upland game. At some point, they began agricultural use of the glacial outwash plain, which are now the Audubon Society of Rhode Island's Lathrop Preserve and the Westerly Land Trust's Winnapaug Farm Preserve.

The Narragansetts occupied this land until 1632 when they were defeated in a fierce struggle with the Pequot Tribe in the Battle of Mystic. Then in 1637 with the help of the English military led by Captain James Mason, the Pequots were defeated, and the Niantics and Narragansetts were said to reoccupy this area.

With the arrival of European immigrants, the land was acquired and used for agriculture. It was probably part of the grant by King Charles II to Pendleton, with the farm headquarters located in what is now Avondale. At a later time, the farm was part of the Israel Chapman Farm that extended from the Pawcatuck River in Avondale to Weekapaug. With the passing of generations, the farm was divided among descendants and the current site was part of the Case Chapman Farm. Dr. John Champlin purchased 250 acres in 1916.

Dr. John Champlin was a local physician, an astute businessman and a real estate investor. He lived at 9 Granite Street in Westerly, where he had a small private hospital prior to the creation of the Westerly Hospital in 1925.

Dr. Champlin also started and ran the Westerly Automatic Telephone Company, the first automatic dial telephone company in the country.

Dr. Champlin built a resort on the site of the farmhouse called the Oaks Inn in the present location of the Champlin Woods Condos. The Inn included

hotel rooms, a restaurant and

a stable of horses for guests to ride.

There were 15-20 miles of woodland paths created for horseback riders.

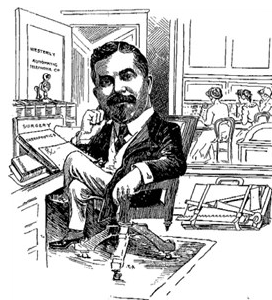
Bayberry bushes and red rambler vines covered much of the land.

In 1928 a group of Watch Hill summer residents looking for a safe place to horseback ride established the Watch Hill Riding and Polo

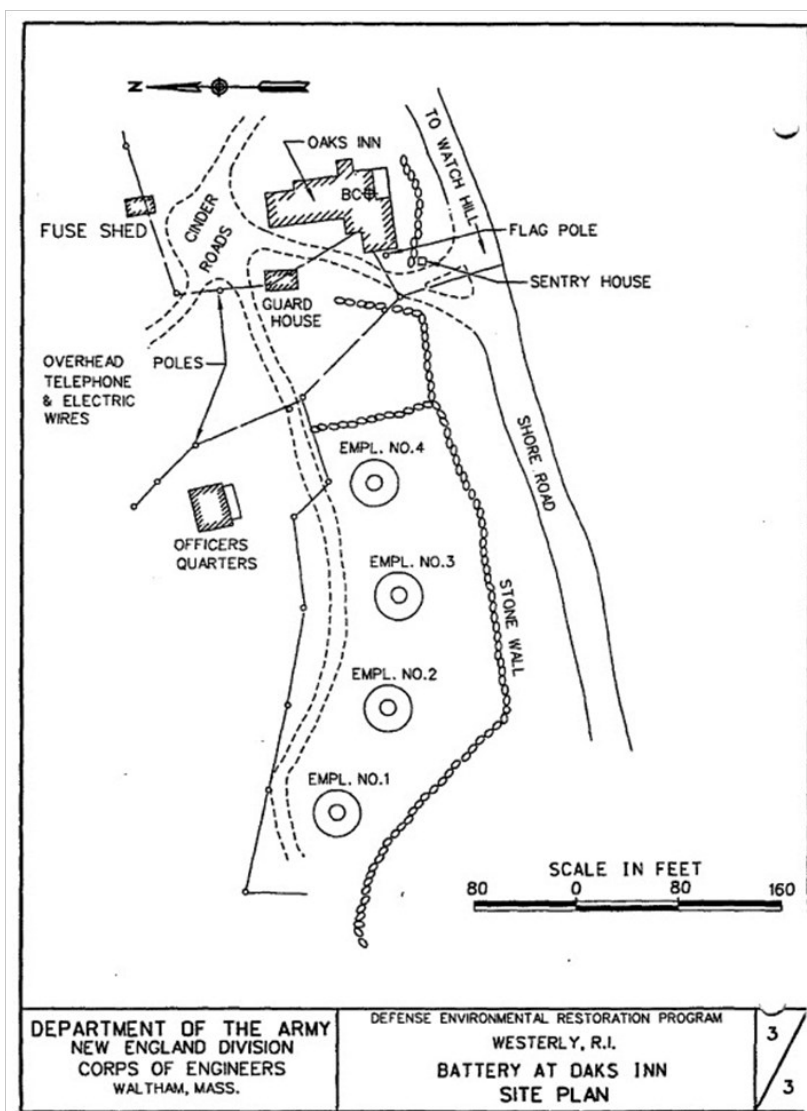
Club. They leased a 200 acre tract of land from Dr. Champlin where they built a new stable for 30 or more horses and members paid a fee to use the horse stalls, tack and feed rooms. There were other outbuildings including one for grain, a blacksmith shop and a riding ring. The stable and outbuildings were painted green with orange trimmings. Polo fields were across Shore Road where Audubon's Lathrop Preserve is now located.

In 1929 the Club signed a lease on the former Oaks Inn and renamed it the Riding Club Lodge where rooms were rented and meals served. Each year the Club seemed to make some improvement or addition. The newly leased Riding Club Lodge was enlarged by a wrap-around awning with sliding windows to take advantage of the ocean breezes. They opened a tea garden and because it was bordered by a horseshoe shaped hedge of evergreen shrubs and variegated flowers, it was called the Horseshoe Tea Garden. The garden featured hot and cold teas (since it was Prohibition), assorted sandwiches, cakes, and biscuits with honey.

In 1933 the Watch Hill Hunt Club took over the operation of the property as an affiliate of the Branch of Hunt View farms of Bryn Mawr, PA. They brought in a new trainer and instructor with the thought of building up the sport. Unfortunately, the trend died out. The end of the Riding Club can be attributed to the economic losses of the Depression, increased competition from rivals and a lack of continued interest by the Club founders.



In 1935 the property was leased to Joseph Grills and Dominic Nigrelli who returned the lodge back to the Oaks Inn and offered lobster, steak, chicken and shore dinners. The Inn operated until immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 when the military seized the property. Then in 1942 a coastal defense battery WWII military reservation site was established. A four gun 155mm gun battery on Panama mounts were installed on the top of the glacier moraine. The Inn was used as barracks for the soldiers manning the battery and maintaining a submarine watch along the coast.





FEATURE NO.	FEATURE DESCRIPTION
1.	FORMER OAKS INN BUILDING LOCATION WITH ABOUT A HALF A DOZEN POSSIBLE DEBRIS PILES
2.	CLEAR AND FLAT RECTANGULAR AREA WHERE A BARN USED TO BE
3.	SMALL BUILDING-POSSIBLY A FUZE SHED
4.	OFFICER'S QUARTERS
5.	PROBABLE PANAMA GUN EMPLOYMENT
6.	CIRCULAR FEATURES OF UNDISCERNABLE PURPOSE
7.	TWO PROBABLE CONCRETE SLABS, APPROXIMATELY 30' BY 90'
8.	DRIED UP POND
9.	FORMER TROTTERING RING BARELY DISCERNABLE
10.	CLEARED AREA ADJACENT TO SHORE ROAD; WAS THERE PRIOR TO MILITARY'S USE

# LEGEND

PROJECT BOUNDARY

FEATURE LOCATION



## PLATE 3

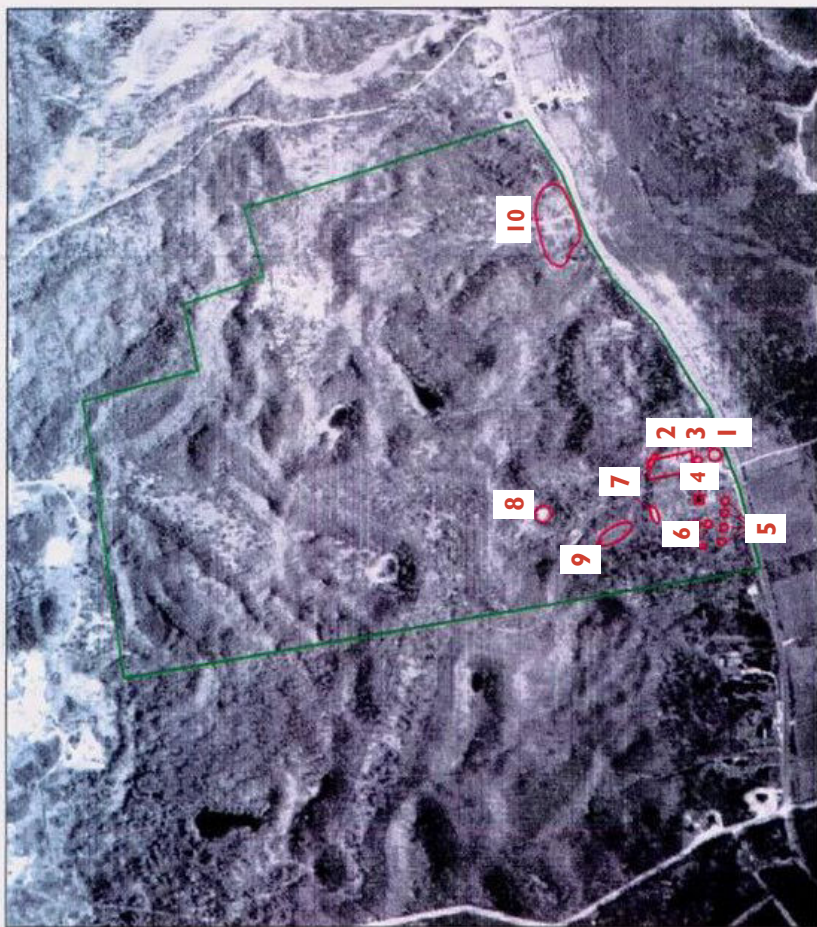
OAKS INN BATTERY SITE  
WESTERLY, RHODE ISLAND  
WASHINGTON, COUNTY  
DERP-FUDS #D01R049101  
AERIAL PHOTO INTERPRETATION

NOT TO SCALE

PHOTO DATE: JULY 1975  
17-44-1000 1403

DATE OF PHOTO: 1951

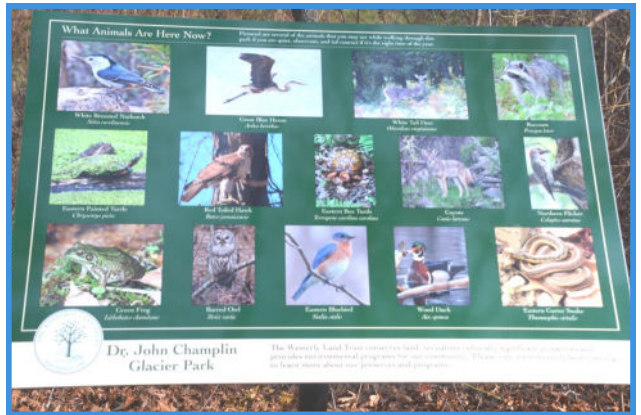
VIEWPOINT: 44°N 075°W; 100M; 200 1 131



After the threat of a German invasion of Misquamicut Beach and of marauding submarines subsided, the property reverted to Dr. Champlin. The Oaks Inn, however, never re-opened and was eventually torn down.

Dr. Champlin died in 1938, leaving the property in Trust for the lifetime of his second wife. At her death in 1995, title to the property passed to the grandsons of Dr. John Champlin: Dr. John Champlin Lathrop and Francis Cummings Lathrop. They and their children sold the land to the Westerly Land Trust in 2004 to be preserved as the Dr. John Champlin Glacier Park.

Since its purchase, the Westerly Land Trust has developed many trails on the property, some reestablished from the old riding trails. In 2015, after years of raising adequate funds, the WLT was able to design and install over a dozen educational signs along these trails



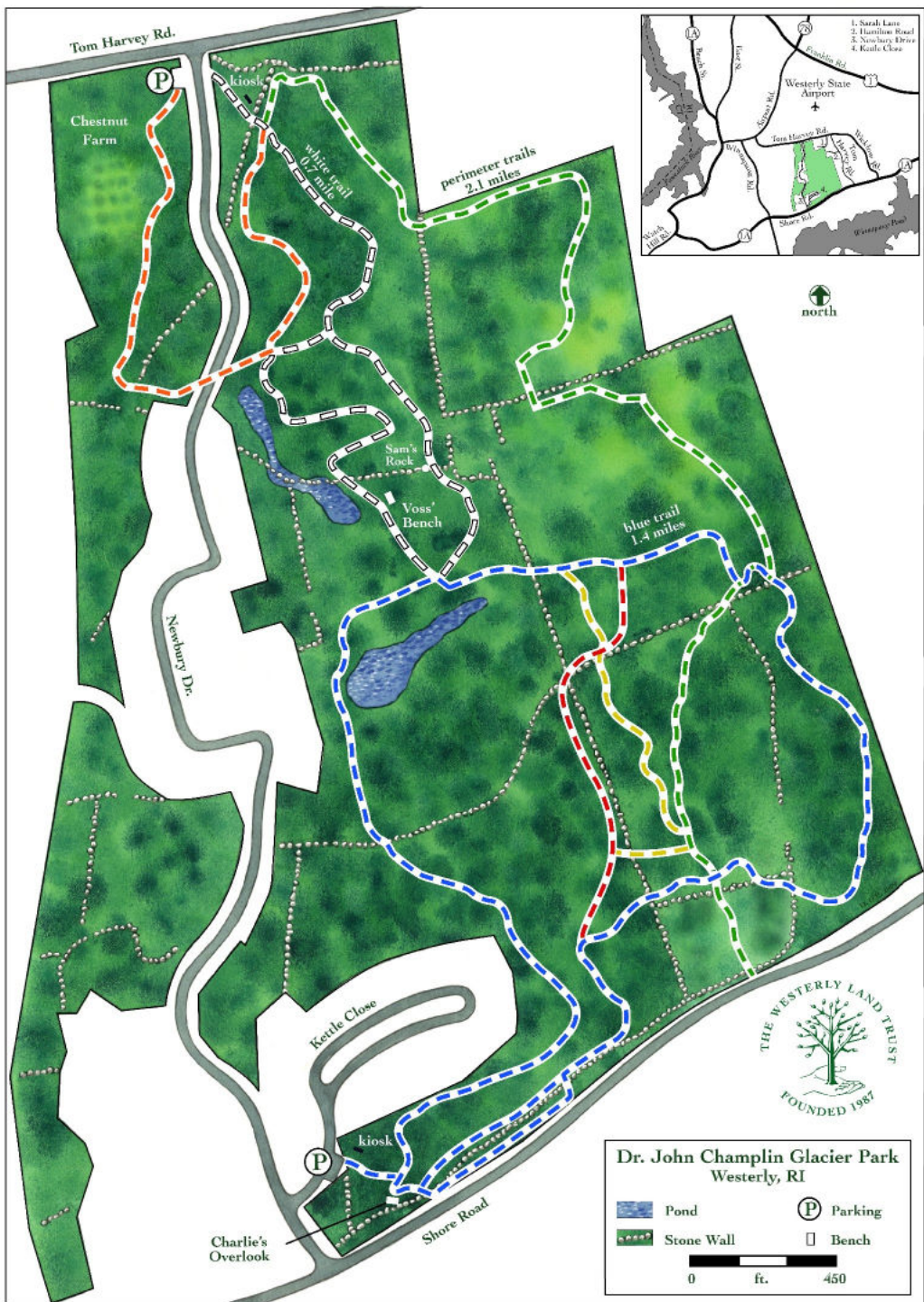
identifying historical, cultural and geological significances throughout the land. Now hikers can walk through the preserve and imagine how the land once looked and was formed. The overlook that the military used to watch for invasions now provides visitors with a vista of Block Island Sound and reveals evidence of the last two ice ages.

To achieve our land stewardship goals for 2015, the WLT performed a forest rehabilitation project with the help of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The project created habitats for rare New England Cottontail rabbits, many song birds and other species that benefit. Some more dense areas of the preserve were thinned to help promote new growth to occur and reduce trees that were damaged or diseased.

In a different section of the preserve and in concert with the American Chestnut Tree Foundation, over 50 blight resistant chestnut tree saplings were planted in 2007 on the northwest side of the property. Many of them have matured into American chestnut trees helping the effort to bring the chestnut tree back into an area where they were once strong and populous.

We invite you to explore this special place while reflecting on its history.







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