



A History of Grills Preserve



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The Grills Preserve, located in the community of Bradford, is the largest Westerly Land Trust (WLT) property, covering approximately 544 acres. Entrance to the preserve is at the end of Bowling Lane where there is a parking area and trail map. The preserve is bounded to the north by about 2 1/2 miles of winding frontage on the Pawcatuck River, to the south by Amtrak railroad tracks, to the east by the old Bradford Dyers Association (BDA) mill, and to the west by McGowan Brook.



This outstanding property became part of the Westerly Land Trust through a series of individual parcel purchases between 2003 and 2006. The largest parcel, 482 acres, was acquired in 2003 from Richard Grills and his son, Michael. The preserve takes its name in recognition of the Grills family. The Grills family also owned land across the river in Hopkinton that the Hopkinton Land Trust acquired and its two preserves use the Grills name as well. The Grills family purchased the BDA mill and adjacent property in 1974 from a group of senior management investors, led by Ernest J. Chorney, Sr., then President of the mill, who purchased the mill from the Bradford Dyers

Association in 1963. The other land purchases making up the Grills Preserve include a parcel of 32 acres from Jake and Mary Keena, and parcels of 16 and 14 acres purchased from Fredap Realty Trust, a remnant of Penn Central railroad. Funding for the purchases included grants from RI Department of Environmental Management and the Nature Conservancy, as well as the generosity of several private foundations.

This history of the preserve begins prior to the arrival of the first European settlers. One can make the assumption that the earliest people to come to these lands 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. Although exact dates are unknown, the Narragansett Tribe was well established here when Europeans came to America. The Narragansetts remained until 1632 when they were defeated in a fierce struggle with the Pequot Tribe of Southeastern Connecticut 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 Eastern Niantics and Narragansetts of Southern RI were said to reoccupy this area as well as some Pequots who found refuge with them.

Around 1660 in Newport, RI, a private company was organized by six men to buy land and they purchased the area we now know as Westerly from the Narragansett Chief Soso, who was at one time a Pequot. The tract of land was approximately twenty miles long by ten miles wide, comprising about 128,000 acres. In 1661, the first settlers took possession of their land called Misquamicut and agreed to divide the original tract into eighteen shares. The land transaction is often referred to as the "Misquamicut Purchase" and included what is now Westerly, Hopkinton, Charlestown and Richmond. The present day Town of Westerly was incorporated in 1669.

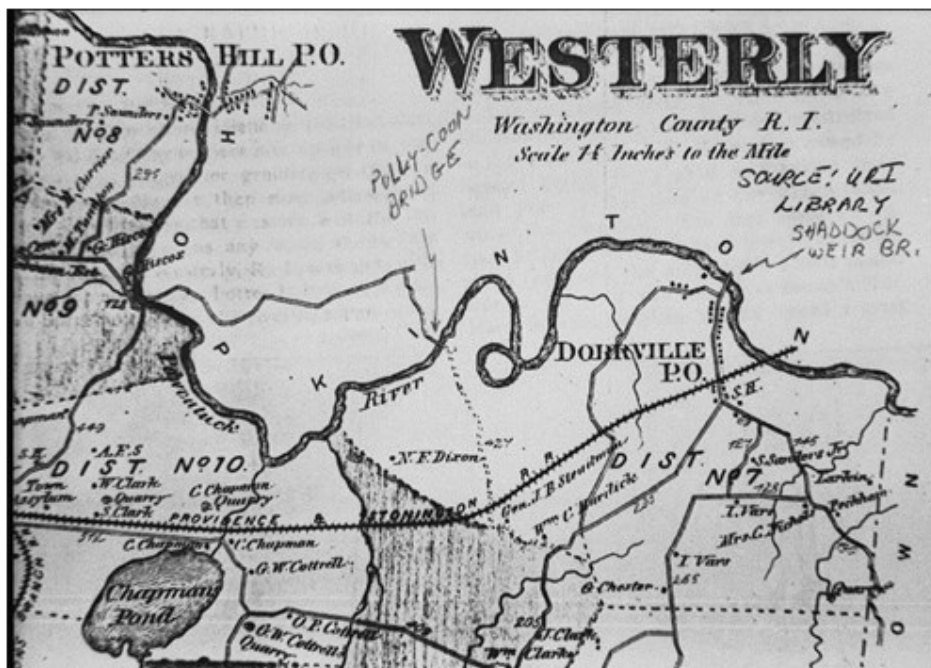
Following the land purchase, Edward Larkin, living in Newport at the time, acquired one quarter of one share, approximately 1800 acres. Larkin's parcel included the land which comprises the Grills Preserve. Today, the remains of the stone foundations of the original Larkin farmhouse and barn, believed to have been built during the 1660's, can



Arnold Saunders Farm, south of 'big hill,' a.k.a. "mouse hill," ca. 1887

still be seen in the preserve to the west of Big Hill on the White Trail. And while it has yet to be found, near the farmhouse there is also said to be a small Larkin family cemetery (Westerly Historical Cemetery #521) with a number of small, unmarked headstones near where the farmhouse once stood.

Land records following the purchase by Edward Larkin are few. One town deed record from 1728 shows the transfer of 160 acres to John Larkin, reportedly a direct descendent of Edward. Additionally, there is an extensive Larkin family history that states the “original Larkin homestead” passed down through various descendants of Edward Larkin. Beyond these records, ownership of the preserve property is somewhat in doubt until around the mid-1800’s, although it is not unreasonable to assume that much of the property continued to be passed down through family members. There are two key documents, however, that provide some insight into property ownership in the mid-1800’s. One record of ownership after the purchase by Edward Larkin appears in 1870, when D. G. Beers & Co. published an Atlas of Rhode Island. This atlas includes a map of Westerly showing that much of what is now Grills Preserve was owned by the Hon. Nathan F. Dixon and Gen. J. B. Steadman. A second document is a map of The Estate of Jirah Knowles, published in 1831. This map shows the property that is



1870 Map

the northeast section of the preserve and, according to the map, totals approximately 114 acres. These three parcels are believed to make up a significant portion of the preserve property today.

From these 1800's records, and prior to its purchase in 1911 by the Bradford Dyers Association, records suggest that the Hon. Nathan F. Dixon property was subsequently owned by Walter P. Dixon and then Nelson E. Brown. Of note, records also refer to the Brown property as the "old Daniel Larkin farm." This would seem to provide evidence that at least some of the land had remained in the Larkin family until sold to N. F. Dixon. A search of Steadman property ownership shows reference to the prior ownership as the Hiscox Farm.

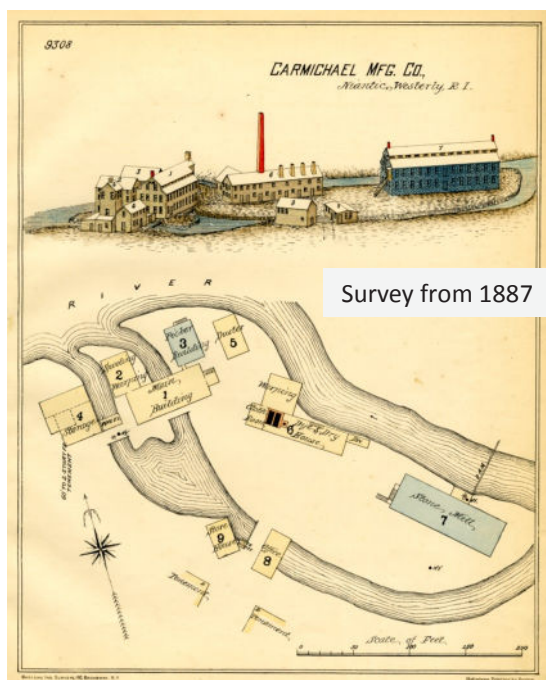
Not to be left out of this history is the coming of the railroad adding even more names to the narrative. Marking the southerly boundary of the preserve, the railroad was completed over the period 1832-1837. At the time, it was called the Providence and Stonington Railroad. A station was established near the beginning of Vars Lane and named the

Charlestown and Hopkinton Station. A seemingly odd name for a station that was in Westerly.



While not directly a part of the Grills Preserve, the history of the land would not be complete without looking at the development of the mill and outlying lands. The “mill privilege,” the right to use a water source to drive a mill, was first established at the site in the 1790’s. The first mill, a wooden structure, was built in 1819 by Joseph Knowles. The mill’s operations centered on the processing of wool in what was described as a “custom carding and cloth dressing mill.” The mill burned down in 1846.

That same year the site was leased to Dr. John Weeden of Westerly; he subsequently purchased the property in 1851. In 1857 Dr. Weeden sold the property to his father Wager Weeden. With an ever-increasing demand for woolen products, Wager Weeden expanded the mill operations and in 1863-64 built a new mill out of granite, most, if not all of which, was brought to the site across the river from Hopkinton and through what is now the Grills Preserve. Operations at the mill apparently went well into the mid 1880’s, operated first by the Niantic Woolen Manufacturing Company and then by the Carmichael Manufacturing Company. Operations under Carmichael shut down in 1886.



In 1902, the mill was bought by James Pike, from Sterling, Connecticut. Pike, who owned a dye plant in Sterling, built a wooden addition to the mill and expanded the operation to include the dyeing of cotton. James Pike died in 1910 and the mill was inherited by his son, William Pike. Shortly thereafter, William Pike sold the mill to a firm from Yorkshire, England, the Bradford Dyers Association. At the time, it was reported that the English firm was planning to build one of the largest dyeing plants in the country.

The English company's decision to establish a mill operation in the United States was driven by the fact that the United States was imposing an onerous tariff on imported foreign finished goods. This placed foreign companies at a significant disadvantage trying to sell their products in this country. However, once the decision had been made to establish an operation here, the next question was where. Key factors such as water volume, flow, and quality were vitally important to the success of the operation. The company looked at numerous sites throughout the northeast. The mill site on the Pawcatuck River offered the best solution.

With the purchase of the mill, the company also began acquiring properties adjacent to it along both sides of the Pawcatuck River. Their plan was to purchase approximately 800 acres. To accomplish this plan, they hired the New York City law firm of McLaughlin, Russell, Coe & Sprague to represent them. And early in 1911, Rufus Sprague began the process of buying up property, much of which is now the Grills Preserve. Legend has it that Mr. Sprague chose to dress as a farmer when he met with the various land owners, perhaps in an effort to "endear himself" to the locals. Unfortunately, while there are various newspaper articles and official deeds regarding these land transactions, there are no pictures or accounts of Mr. Sprague in his farmer's attire.

Westerly's deed records show numerous purchases made by Sprague in February 1911. Purchases include one from Carrie Brown, referred to as the "old Daniel Larkin farm", previously owned by the Hon. N. F. Dixon and then by Walter P. Dixon. A second purchase was made from Mary Gardner and Mary Douglas, with its ownership history



1950's Aerial Photograph

tracing back through Gen. J. A. Steadman and a reference to the “old Hiscox farm.” The purchase of this property also gave the owner the right to build a rail spur to the existing railroad track. Sprague also purchased rights of flowage and flowage damage to numerous adjacent properties, including some in Charlestown and Hopkinton. In total, the land purchased by Sprague provided the Bradford Dyers about one and one half miles of property along the south side of the Pawcatuck River. Having purchased the land, the English firm renovated and expanded the mill, adding over 200,000 square feet and establishing the mill as one of the most expansive plants of its kind in the country.

The land purchase also included the property that is now Bowling Lane which was used to build homes for many BDA mill workers. In 1920 the company built an athletic field called Douglas Park, complete with parking and grandstand seating for nearly 300 spectators. The field was used to hold soccer games and was eventually home to the



Bowling Lane in the 1920's

BDA baseball team that competed in the old Westerly Twilight League. The field and grandstand are long since gone. In their place stands a large pine barren, just a short walk on the Orange Trail from the preserve entrance.

BDA was a vibrant mill employing up to 1500 workers at its height. Fires, market changes and failing ownerships in the early 2000s changed its course. The mill is presently unoccupied.



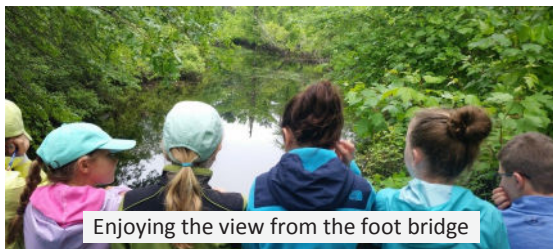
Bradford - 1940 - Champions
Westerly Twilight Baseball League

Tracing the history of the mill and preserve property ownership reveals an interesting and colorful tale of changes to the name of the community as well. The first name of the area, dating to the early 1700's, is widely reported as "Shattuck's Weir." Shattuck (sometimes spelled Shadduck) was a Native American who lived and fished by the falls in the Pawcatuck River, presumably just below where Rte. 216/91 crosses the river today. To catch fish, Shattuck would spread a weir, or fish trap, across the river. At the time the river offered an abundance of fish including salmon, trout, pickerel and alewives, also referred to as "buckies." But the biggest catch of the year occurred during the annual spring shad run when they came up river to spawn.

The Shattuck's Weir name stood until around 1846, when William Arnold, who then owned the mill and was a strong supporter of the suffrage leader Thomas W. Dorr, renamed the village Dorrville in Dorr's honor. After the Civil War the Niantic Dyeing Company bought the mill and village. Around 1871, the Hon. James M. Pendleton, a Westerly resident and member of Congress, was instrumental in changing the name to Niantic, presumably in recognition of the new owners. This name stood until it changed to "Bradford" after 1911 due to the next mill owners, the Bradford Dyers Association and their respective town in Yorkshire England.

There are a few unique features in the Grills Preserve worth highlighting. A walk along the river on the preserve's Blue Trail, starting near the mill site, reveals a major engineering project undertaken by the mill owners in the 1950's. As was common practice then, the mill would pump its industrial waste directly into the river - in those days over 7 million gallons a day. A 1952 environmental assessment of the river conducted by the state of RI showed the worst recorded pollution levels in the Bradford area near the mill.

Responding to this study, and working with the URI engineering department, a system was built in an effort to control this pollution. The system was called "lagoon-ing." The project involved building an interconnected series of manmade canals, running alongside the river, roughly two miles long and covering 30 acres along the river. A concrete sluice gate was built at the end of the canals to control the outflow, before the water made its way into a natural "didle hole" and then finally into the river. (There are various colorful stories and local lore as to the origin of "didle hole." One being that it was named after a man who drowned in the oxbow.) The waste from the mill would take nearly 2 weeks to go through this chain, allowing for the dissipation of many of the pollutants before reaching the river under the large bridge over the sluice gate. Much of the sluice gate structure remains in place today. This system



remained in operation until the late 1970's when the company built its own waste treatment system. When you navigate through the Grills Preserve trails you will pass along these old lagoons. Two small bridges, both on the Blue Trail, have been erected over these canals; a small foot bridge built by Boy Scouts in 2006 passes over a spillway closer to the mill and a wider bridge is over the sluice gate.

Further along the river, at the oxbow and just off the preserve's Blue Trail, you will find Kedinker (or Kedinka) Island. How the island got its name remains a mystery to this day. As to the formation of the island, there is some local "tradition" that suggests that beavers built a dam so large that it redirected the river to the south around the dam and then back to the river, creating the island.



Continuing southerly on the Blue Trail will bring you to the site of the Polly-Coon Bridge. The name Polly-Coon derives from two women land owners, Patty Coon and Polly Burdick, who lived in Hopkinton in the area of the bridge. The first Polly-Coon Bridge, constructed in the mid-1800s, was built so that

teams of oxen could haul granite slabs from the small Opie quarry in Hopkinton down to the railroad station in Bradford. This bridge washed out in the 1880s and was replaced by a new bridge in 1893; it's unknown when this second bridge was removed. The current Polly-Coon Bridge was made possible by a Trails Grant from the State of RI to the Hopkinton Land Trust and the Westerly Land Trust in 2013. The bridge connects the two "Grills Preserves" and makes it

possible to walk from Bowling Lane in Westerly to Chase Hill Road in Hopkinton.

As you approach the bridge from the Westerly side, you will find a large, manmade stone cairn. This structure was built in 2013 by the CCC, a group of Westerly Land Trust volunteers, to identify the bridge trail and to commemorate the flood of April 2010. The top of the cairn at approximately 8 feet, marks the highest level of the flood on the Westerly side. On the Hopkinton side of the Polly-Coon Bridge



Polly-Coon Bridge 2013



Stone Cairn 2013

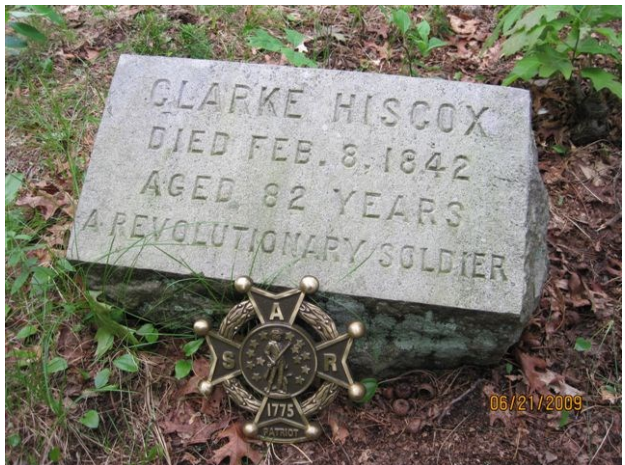
a carved stone identifies the high water mark. Without this natural floodplain area, the elevated waters would have continued downstream and likely caused more considerable damage in Westerly.

Near the oxbow in the river there is a small marked historical cemetery, Westerly Historical Cemetery #17 – Clarke Hiscox Lot. There are 15 burials within this plot. Frederic Denison recorded this lot in 1867-8. Clarke Hiscox, Revolutionary War veteran, who served



under Colonel John Cooke in the State Militia Regiment, is among those buried. He helped defend RI after the State militia troops left to join the Continental Army in 1776. Hiscox died in 1842 at the age of 82 and was buried on his family's farm along with his wife, Sarah, and other Hiscox family members. Stephen Saunders (1722-77), which is another prominent Westerly name, is also buried there.

"Big Hill," located just off the Red Trail along the southerly side of the preserve and near the site of the original Larkin farm, is one of the highest spots in Westerly. At approximately 150 feet above sea level, a walk to the top of the hill offers outcroppings of exposed bedrock along



the way as well as beautiful sweeping vistas in every direction from its peak.

Visitors looking to explore the various plant and animal life in the area will certainly not be disappointed. In 2008, the 9th annual RI BioBlitz organized by the Rhode Island Natural History Survey (RINHS) was hosted by the WLT at the Grills Preserve. Over a 24-hour period, a total of 115 participants identified 1,113 species. The RINHS called it a “record breaking year” with some especially interesting finds including plants never before seen in the State.



Hunting is permitted at the Grills Preserve as stipulated in the annual RIDEM hunting regulations. In 2016, a handicapped accessible hunting blind was built by a local Eagle Scout. It can be found on the short Red Spur off the Orange Trail in northeast section of the preserve.

In all, the Grills Preserve, covering more than 500 acres, offers visitors over 7 miles of trails and old farm roads, historic sites, and natural beauty. The Westerly Land Trust encourages everyone to visit this beautiful property; whether to relive its history, to explore its natural beauty, or to simply take a quiet walk and enjoy the solitude.



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