



A History of Sunnycres Preserve



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In 2016, the Westerly Land Trust (WLT) acquired 18.5 acres of farmland on South Woody Hill Road in the Dunn's Corners section of Westerly. South Woody Hill Road is accessed off of Route 1 approximately one quarter mile east of the intersection of Route 1 and Dunn's Corners-Bradford Road. Entrance to the property is approximately 3/4 of a mile from the entrance of South Woody Hill Road on the right, at what is known locally as Saunders Corner.

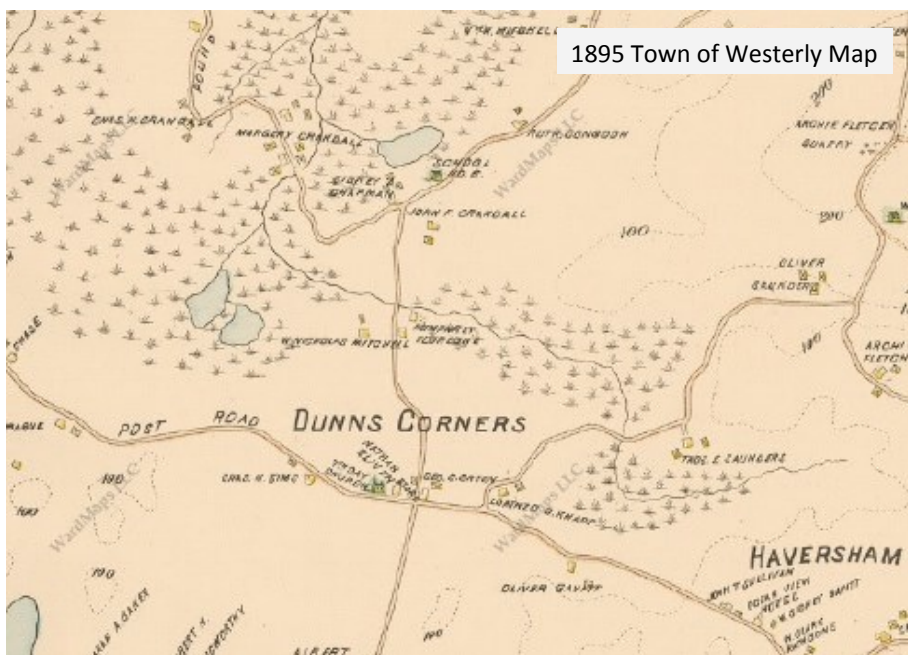


The property, named Sunnyacres by the Saunders family, was once part of a larger farm that had been in the Burdick and Saunders families dating back to 1857. The WLT purchased the property from Ellen Madison, a direct descendent of the Saunders family. The WLT is most appreciative of Ellen's patience through the land purchase process; her willingness to work through the details allowed the land trust to protect this beautiful land forever.

Funding for this acquisition was provided by the Bafflin Foundation, the Forest and Francis Lattner Foundation, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The early recorded history of this area of Westerly begins with the Misquamicut Purchase of 1661. The land was purchased from the Narragansett Indian Chief Sosoia and remained Misquamicut until 1669 when the town was incorporated and the name Westerly was adopted, owing to the geographic location of the town in the colony of Rhode Island. At that time, there were believed to be only about thirty white families settled in the area. Many of the descendants of these first settlers still live in the area today. In fact, the surnames of Wilcox, Saunders, Babcock, and Burdick are four of the first settlers directly tied to the history of Sunnyacres.

The Dunn's Corners area of Westerly takes its name from John K. Dunn who came to Westerly from Block Island in 1838 and purchased a farm from Thomas and Hannah Noyes. The property, known then as the Arnold Bliven Farm, sits on the northeast corner of the four corners intersection (most recently, the location of the store, Benny's). The property remained in the possession of the Dunn family for over forty years, leading to the naming of the intersection and the surrounding area as Dunn's Corners.



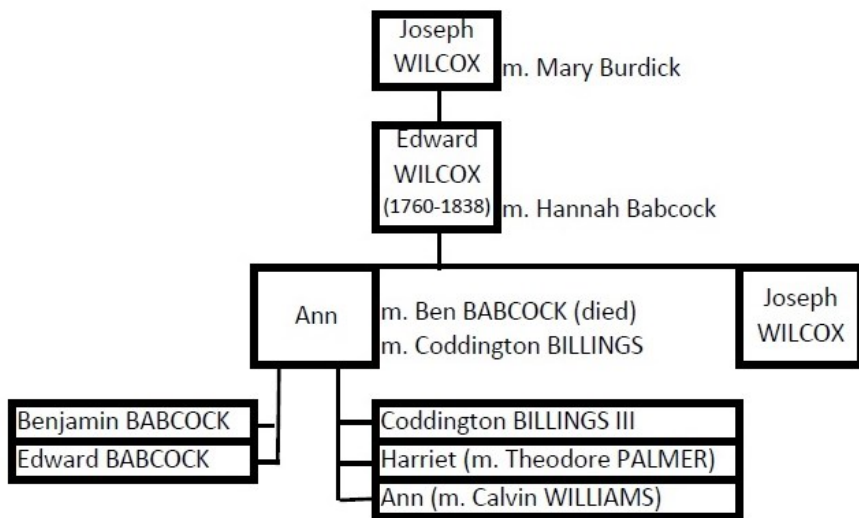
Less commonly known is Saunders Corner, the sharp turn on South Woody Hill Road, that is named after the longtime residents - the Saunders family. This corner is still used as a point of reference by the Dunn's Corners Fire Department.



Ownership records of the Sunnyacres property reveal that it was once owned by Edward Wilcox, a resident of Charlestown, RI and the Lt. Governor of Rhode Island from 1817 to 1821. He was born in 1760 and was the son of Joseph and Mary Burdick Wilcox of Westerly. His lineage can be traced back to the family patriarch, also named Edward, who immigrated to Aquidneck Island in 1638. Prior to his election as Lt. Governor, Wilcox served for a number of years as a representative of Charlestown to the state General Assembly. Beyond his political life, records also show that he was the second President of the Phenix Bank in Westerly, where he served in that capacity for ten years from 1823 to 1833. In 1811, Wilcox purchased the home of Joseph Stanton, Jr., known today as the Wilcox Tavern on Route 1 in Charlestown. It is thought to have been built around 1730.

Complete records of the ownership of land including Sunnyacres could not be traced. However, Edward Wilcox ownership was

identified through a Rhode Island Supreme Court case from May 1843: Coddington Billings and his wife Ann vs. Joseph M. Wilcox et. al. Ann Billings and Joseph Wilcox were the children of Edward Wilcox and his wife Hannah Babcock Wilcox. Daughter Ann was first married to Benjamin Babcock, and they had two sons, Benjamin and Edward. Her husband died and Ann then married Coddington Billings of New London, Connecticut around 1823-1825. They in turn had three children, a son, Coddington III, and two daughters, Harriet and Ann.



According to the 1843 court case records, Wilcox owned 45 individual parcels of land covering nearly 2000 acres in Washington County, the vast majority (approximately 1500 acres) of which were in Charlestown. The remaining parcels were in Westerly, Richmond, South Kingstown and Block Island.

Edward Wilcox appears to have died in 1838 without a will and it is quite likely that this court case involved the distribution of his properties between the children. A review of the court documents also suggests that Joseph Wilcox was deceased at the time of the case in that properties were identified as awarded to "Joseph Wilcox heirs." Whatever the impetus, the results show that Joseph Wilcox heirs were awarded nearly 1140 acres while Ann

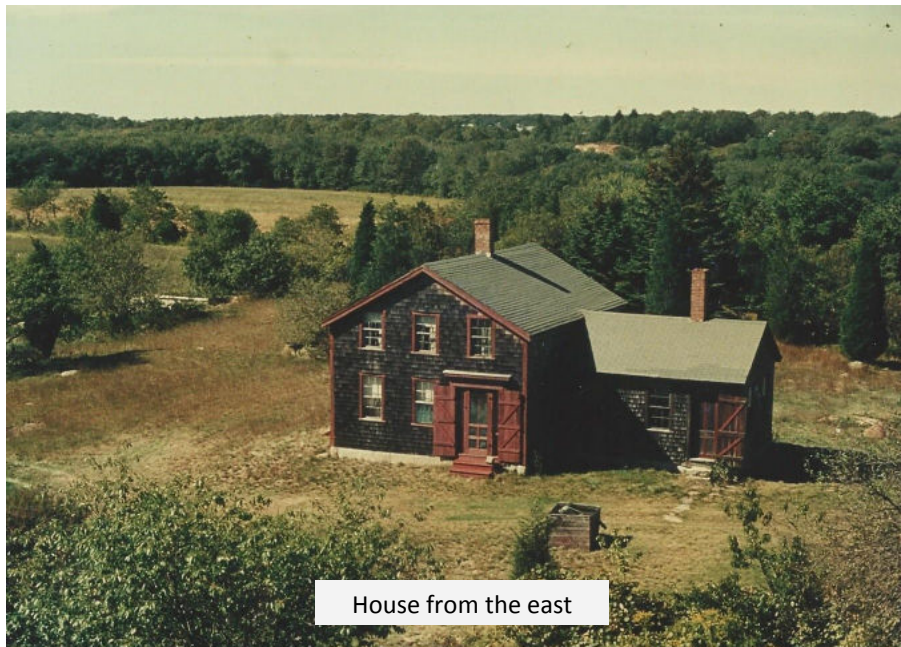
received approximately 695 acres. In addition to the parcels given to the children, three parcels were awarded to a Thomas Hoxsie.

Court records show that Wilcox owned 11 properties in Westerly totaling approximately 191 acres. These were divided between the Joseph Wilcox heirs (93 acres) and Ann Billings (98 acres). One of the properties awarded to Ann Billings was 58 acres of the Hall Farm in Westerly. Sunnyacres is a piece of the Hall Farm. In March 1858, the Westerly Land Evidence records show the sale of the Hall Farm to Benjamin Burdick of Charlestown for the “sum of \$850” by a group consisting of Benjamin Babcock (presumably the son of Ann and grandson of Edward Wilcox) and Ann’s three children by marriage to Coddington Billings: son, Coddington Billings III and wife, Mary; daughter, Ann and husband, Calvin Williams; and daughter, Harriet and husband, Theodore D. Palmer.

According to “The Early History of Dunn’s Corners,” Benjamin Burdick built a house on the property in the 1850’s and left it to his daughter Abby and her husband, Joseph Saunders. The remaining 40 acres of the Hall Farm land include properties on either side of the preserve as well as the open fields to the west of the preserve. Descendants of Joseph and Abby Saunders still own some of this land.

Joseph and Abby Burdick Saunders raised eight children in their home on the property. They left the farm to their eight children, who then signed it over to two of the brothers, Rudolph and Claude. The two brothers remained on the farm. Rudolph and his wife, Elizabeth, stayed in the house and raised two daughters, Eloise and Florence. Eloise never married and throughout her life stayed close to the farm. Her memoir, *SUNNYACRES*, offers a unique, personal accounting of subsistence farming and everyday life in the early twentieth century. Florence married Albert Madison and moved away from the farm but remained in Westerly. Florence enjoyed a long career as a mathematics teacher in Westerly and raised three children; Robert, Ellen, and Sarah. Through family property divisions, it is the majority of Ellen Madison’s portion that the Westerly Land Trust now calls

the Sunnycroft Preserve. Robert Madison and Ellen Madison still own houses on neighboring parcels.



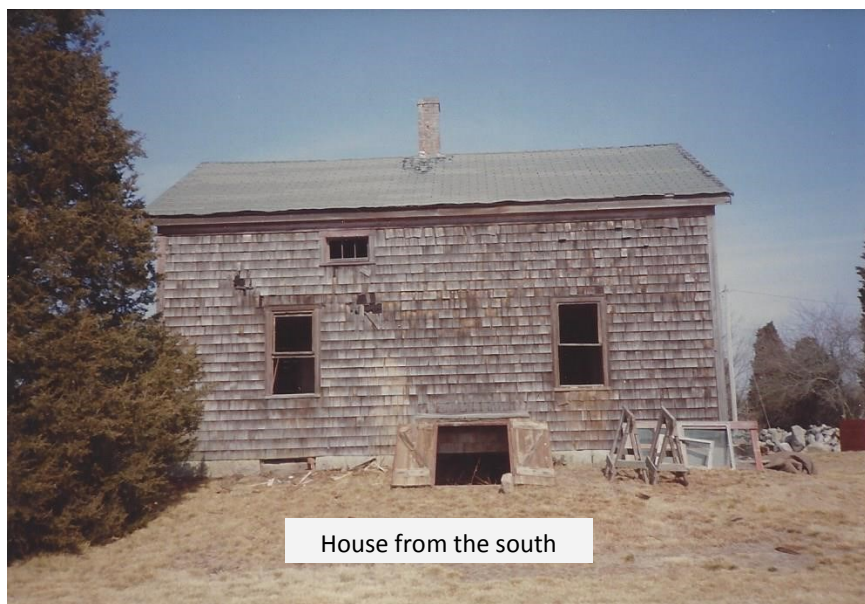
House from the east

Entering the preserve from South Woody Hill Road are the highest elevations of the property and where the historic farm homestead once stood. From here the property slopes gently south across the field, which makes up nearly two thirds of the acreage. At the south end of the field you will reach Washdam Brook, forming the southern boundary. This brook eventually flows all the way to the Pawcatuck River. On the eastern side of the field, wet woodlands follow the same slope down to the brook.

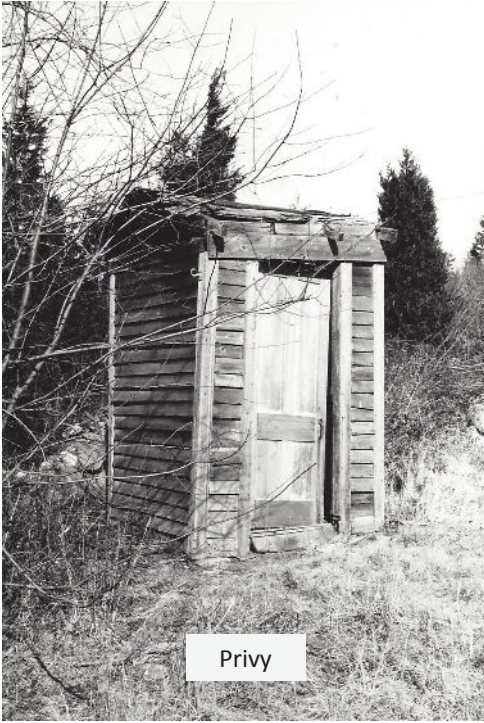


The original farm structures remaining at the preserve today are the water well, on the left

near the top of the entrance drive, and remains of the granite stone foundations for the family home, barn and corn crib. With these remains, and a little imagination, you can easily envision a bustling, small family farm from a much simpler, bygone era. The original 1850's farm home was most likely built by local tradesmen; the family recalls that the structure had been a combination of post and beam and the more current stud construction. The home stood until it was dismantled by preservationist David Bowyer in 1991, 134 years after it was built.



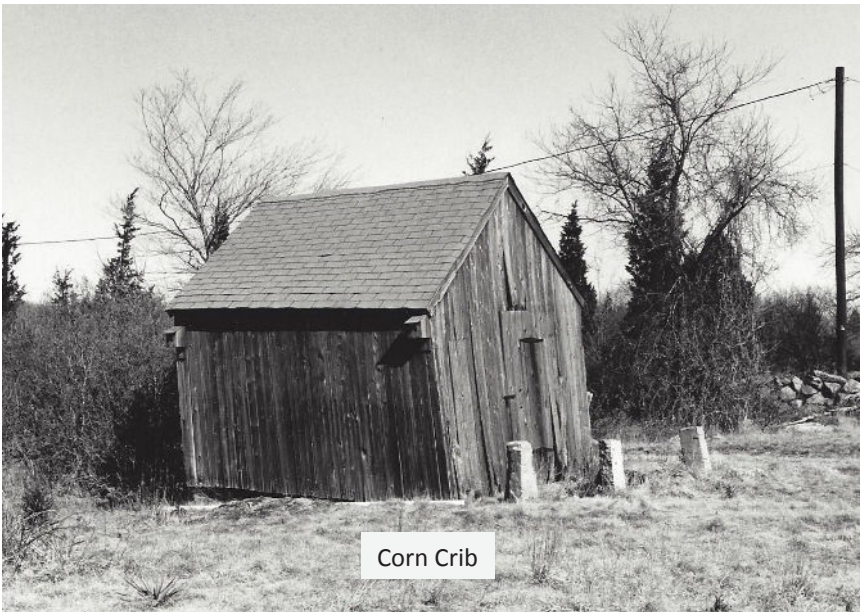
The Madisons have provided us with more details of the old farm home. The section of the house over the cellar hole was a 1 1/2 story structure with two bedrooms and parlor on the first floor, and three small rooms on the second floor. The attached stone ell structure to the side served as the foundation for the kitchen, pantry, and wash room. There was no running water, no indoor plumbing, no electricity, and no telephone. Two wood burning stoves, one in the main house and one in the kitchen, provided heating. The cellar of the main house was used to store a variety of food stuffs including potatoes, homemade canned foods and jellies; all likely harvested on the farm.



Privy

No indoor plumbing meant no indoor bathroom. The privy was located on the north side of the house, to the right of the ell structure. Unfortunately, this structure was destroyed in the 1938 hurricane. The family recalls that Albert Madison replaced the privy with one that had belonged to Mrs. Burdick for whom he had once worked.

The five granite posts north of the house were the foundation for a small corn crib that stored feed for the chickens. A short walk down the hill and to the right of the cellar hole, you will find the



Corn Crib

remains of a granite stone foundation for a barn. According to the Saunder's family records the original barn burned down. When it was rebuilt, it was smaller and had a shed roof to shelter one or two cows and horses. There was also a pig pen just south of the barn. Looking southward from the bottom of the hill, there is a beautiful, wide open field covering approximately 12 acres. Over the years the families used the field to grow potatoes and vegetables as well as hay and corn. On a small family working farm everyone helped, even the grandchildren, and shucking corn was a chore that to this day brings back the memory of painful thumbs for Ellen Madison.



Present day farming

Over eighty native plant species can be found at the preserve including wild flowers, woody plants, trees, mosses and ferns. The combination of various plant life and wide-open field provides an excellent habitat for butterflies and birds. Visitors may also encounter a wide range of wild life. It should be noted that private hunting is permitted on the preserve during Rhode Island hunting seasons.

Under the stewardship of the Westerly Land Trust, the preserve will maintain its agricultural mandate and continue to be farmed, with twelve acres protected as farmland forever through a conservation easement held by the United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service. This protected land offers educational opportunities for visitors to learn about the social and economic heritage of the Westerly community, the conservation benefits of native plants and wildlife, sustainable agricultural methods, and how they complement one another.

Visitors are welcome to enter the preserve to observe the old foundations, overlook the fields and enjoy the southerly view.

We celebrated adding Sunnyacres as our 30th preserve during our 30th anniversary year in 2017. Westerly Land Trust members could not resist gathering on its field to document this occasion.





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Sources for this history are available upon request.