



*A History of the Eleanor F. &  
Edward W. Barlow Nature Preserve*





## A HISTORY OF THE ELEANOR F. & EDWARD W. BARLOW NATURE PRESERVE

On April 4, 2018, an 80-acre tract of forest and farmland located at the corner of Westerly Bradford Road and Dunns Corners Bradford Road was transferred to the Westerly Land Trust under the terms of the Eleanor F. and Edward W. Barlow Trust. The entrance is located on Westerly Bradford Road. The western boundary of the property is formed by the state-owned Newton Marsh, or Newton Swamp, while the southern property line is bounded by private property.



*The renovated house at Barlow Nature Preserve is now the Westerly Land Trust's offices and meeting space.*

Eleanor and Edward (Ned) Barlow wanted to see their land preserved to offer open space to the community and to be used for agriculture. Through their generous foresight and the collaboration between the Barlow family and WLT, the establishment of the Eleanor F. and Edward W. Barlow Nature Preserve ensured that their vision was achieved.



*Frontier Farm, along with Echo Rock Flowers and Vita Nova Compost, began bringing the Barlow Nature Preserve back to agricultural vibrancy in 2019.*

Throughout their lives, Eleanor and Ned Barlow's generosity went well beyond the gift of their property to WLT. In 2010, they gave over five million dollars to the Boys & Girls Club of Pawtucket, RI. In acknowledgement of the gift, a statement released by the club read, "Although the Barlows did not have children of their own, over the years,

their generosity has created hope and opportunity for thousands and thousands of youth." They also donated one million dollars to Rhode Island Hospital to establish the Eleanor F. Barlow Nursing Scholarship.

## **Record of Ownership**

Eleanor Barlow was born and spent her early years on "the farm," as her family called the property. When Eleanor was school age, her family purchased another home nearby and continued to spend weekends on the farm. Eleanor's father, Vincenzo Ferrante, purchased the 80-acre property in 1931 from Horace Nelder. Nelder inherited the property from his half-sister Eva, who had inherited it from her father, Nicholas Nelder.

Vincenzo (Vincent) James Ferrante was born in 1888 in Lettomanoppello, Italy, a small town in the Pescara region. He immigrated to the United States in 1910. In 1916 he married Maria Ricci, who had also immigrated from Lettomanoppello. They lived in New London, Connecticut, before moving to Westerly sometime between 1920 and 1925.

The farm would be the Ferrante family home for many years. The family included five children: Bartolo, Pasquale, and Lanora (Eleanor) and two other children who died as infants, a daughter Lancioletta, and





*A stove inside the Barlow Nature Preserve cottage.*

a son Nicholas. Vincent Ferrante died in 1969, and his wife Maria died in 1979.

Visitors to the site today might imagine what life would have been like for a family of five starting life living in the two-room, 400-square foot cottage that still stands on the property. It is likely that within several years of moving onto the property, the family built a larger home on the farm. Aerial photos of the property dating back to 1939, found on the Rhode Island Geographic Information System (RIGIS) website, show a larger structure located where the current home had been. This was likely the

home built by the Ferrantes. In 1985 Ned and Eleanor Barlow removed



*1939 aerial view of the property and surrounding area*

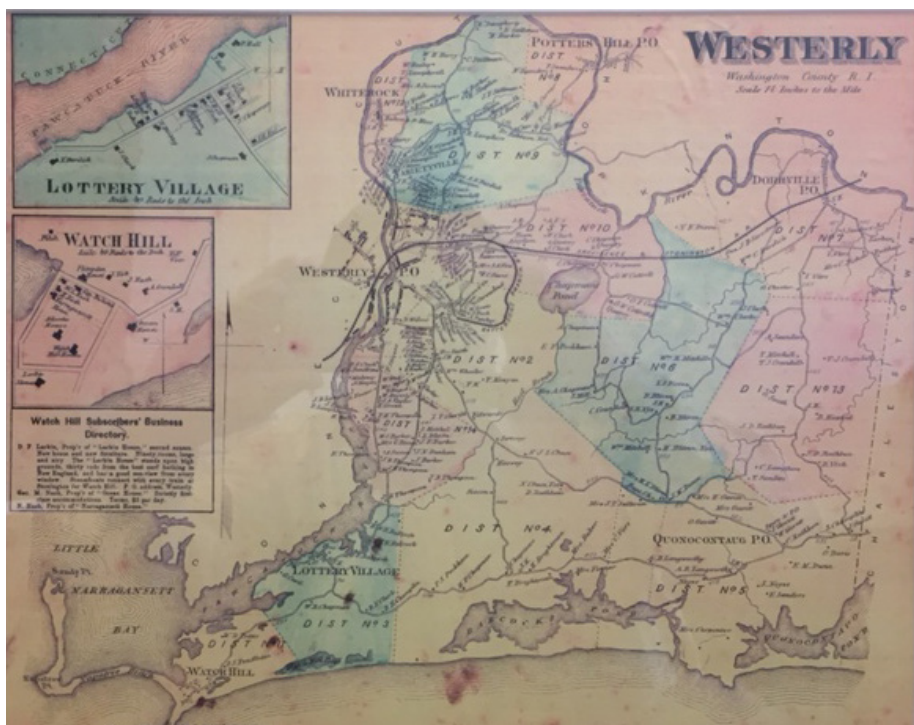
this old farmhouse and built a new house in its place.

The Ferrante family history reflects the familiar story of immigrant families in Westerly and beyond. Life was undoubtedly a struggle for these families, even in the best of times, but at this point, the country was in the middle of the Great Depression. The Ferrante family history suggests that they might have felt its effect. While in Westerly, early records show that Vincent worked as a stone cutter for Sullivan's Quarry in Bradford, RI, but in later years his occupation was listed as farmer. The history of the local quarry industry found on the Babcock-Smith House Museum website recounts that "after decades of growth and prosperity, the granite industry was dealt a crushing blow following the crash of the stock market on October 29, 1929. Sales dwindled and the business fell into a decline from which it would never fully recover." Might this slowdown in the quarrying industry have led to Vincent's change in occupation? Family history also tells how Maria Ferrante loved gardening and especially growing blueberries that she sold to restaurants, including some in New York City. Given the times, you might wonder if selling blueberries was born as much out of necessity as her love of gardening.

Following the death of her parents, sole ownership of the property transferred on October 4, 1980 to Eleanor Barlow from four other Ferrante family members: Bartolo Ferrante, Patrick Ferrante, Louise Bader Ferrante, and Luanne Ferrante. Bartolo and Patrick (Pasquale) were Eleanor's brothers; Louise was Patrick's wife and Luanne was their daughter. Ned and Eleanor Barlow resided in Rumford, Rhode Island. Over the years, they would use the farm as a summer retreat, hosting family visits and enjoying all the simple pleasures that life on the farm had to offer. Relatives still talk about the number of tomatoes that Ned grew at the farm and the jam and jelly that Eleanor preserved on the cast iron stove still standing in the small cottage. Ned died in 2010, and Eleanor died in 2016.

#### 1894

Tracing earlier ownership of the property begins with the purchase by Nicholas Nelder from William Pendleton on March 15, 1894. There are



*Town of Westerly circa 1870*

two interesting notes involving this deed: 1.) the price was recorded as only \$12; and 2.) subsequent transactions regarding the property list the date of this sale as 1904.

## 1890

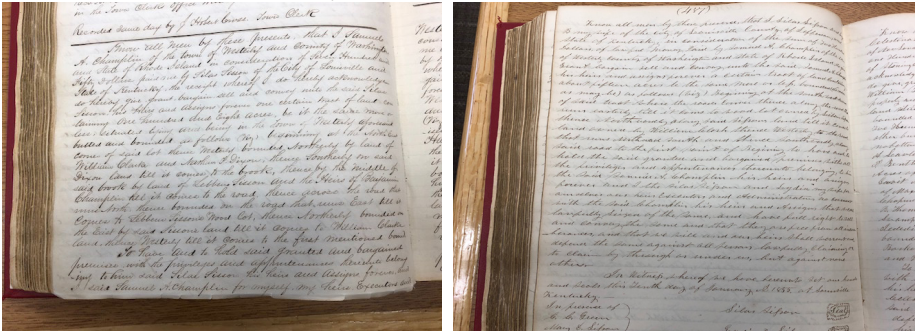
William Pendleton purchased the property from William Clark and his daughter, Fanny, on November 26, 1890, for \$800. This is the first time that records of the sale include reference to a house and other improvements on the property. Earlier transactions are not as clearly identifiable to the current property, but they do include enough similarities to reasonably assume that they included the Barlow property. These earlier transactions, dating back to 1830, also involve many names of Westerly's earliest families.

## 1852-1855

The most recent of these transactions occurred on January 10, 1855, when Silas and Seydia Sisson sold 90 acres to William Clark for \$600.

All subsequent sales of what we now call the Barlow property list the size at 80 acres; however, all but one of the boundaries identified in this sale are consistent with the boundaries of the property identified in subsequent transactions. The exception is the northern boundary. Rather than bounded on the north by Westerly Bradford Road, the property sold in 1855 was bounded by the land of William Clark and Nathan Dixon. Historical maps show the property on the north side of Westerly Bradford Road owned by William Clark, so it is quite possible that at the time of this sale the property extended to the other side of the road and this piece may have been sold separately. Regarding the history of Westerly Bradford Road, and its use as a boundary, it is interesting to note that while there is reference to the road dating back to the mid-eighteenth century, as recently as 1897, land records refer to it as the “new road.” This might raise the question as to when it was formally recognized as a road and/or used as a land boundary. The prior sale of the property detailed below also provides additional evidence that would indicate that this is the Barlow property, or at least includes it.

Silas Sisson and his wife, Seydia, were from Louisville, Kentucky. Although locals will certainly recognize the Sisson name, a search of Sisson family history in Westerly, as well as in Rhode Island, found no mention of Silas Sisson. However, there may be a connection to the local family and specifically to the area around the Preserve. Land records and maps show that one of the owners of considerable property around this area was a gentleman by the name of Libbeus Sisson. A report prepared in 1978 by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation



Pages from Land Books at Westerly Town Hall. Pictured are the deeds transferring land from Champlin to Sisson in 1852 and back to Champlin in 1855.



Commission, *Historical and Architectural Resources of Westerly, Rhode Island*, includes a photo and description of the Libbeus Sisson house located on the present Dunns Corners Bradford Road. This home, a two-story Greek Revival dating to 1855, is still standing today and is located on the western side of the road immediately south of the Timber Creek RV Resort.

The same day Silas Sisson sold 90 acres to William Clark, he also sold 15 acres to Samuel Champlin, for a total of 105 acres sold. The boundaries of the second parcel indicate that it was on the eastern side of Dunns Corners Bradford Road, more or less adjacent to the Barlow property. Less than three years earlier, on August 31, 1852, records show Samuel Champlin sold 108 acres to Silas Sisson for \$750. Two clues led us to believe that the 90-acre piece could have been the Barlow property: 1.) the description of the geographic location, and 2.) the similarity in acreage between the 1855 transactions (105 acres) and the 1852 transaction (108 acres).

### 1830

The oldest ownership records found that maybe linked to the property are admittedly the most speculative. These transactions date back to 1830 and involve the Champlin family. The trail begins with a history of the Champlin family found in a *History of New England Families*. It states that “in the spring of 1830, he (Benjamin Champlin) bought a farm in the eastern part of the town of Westerly which, with land subsequently purchased around it amounted to 300 acres. It was afterward known as the ‘Benjamin Champlin Estate.’” In 1850, 20 years later, land records show the sale by Benjamin R. Champlin of his interest in the estate of his father, Benjamin, to Samuel A. Champlin, who is presumably the seller of the 108 acres to Silas Sisson in 1852. This transaction, involving Samuel and the younger Benjamin Champlin, includes three separate parcels, the first of which could be the Barlow property. Its description reads “said personal estate is our said Homestead Farm and consists of Stocks and Farming Utensils.” Might the homestead farm be referring to some or all the buildings still standing at the Preserve? And although no acreage is given, two of the boundaries are consistent with subsequent property sales: “Southerly

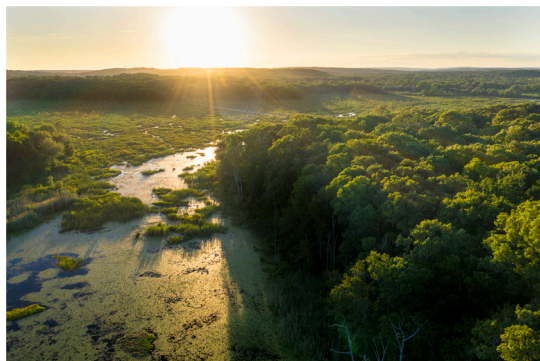


derives from long-time resident James McGowan, who lived on the north side of the Westerly Bradford Road directly across from the Preserve. James was born in 1855 in Dalbeattie, Scotland, and immigrated to the United States in 1883. In Westerly, he worked as a stonecutter. According to his obituary in the Westerly Sun, he died at 84 and had lived in the area for 58 years.

## Environmental Aspects

The Preserve is part of the Tomaquag Brook-Pawcatuck River watershed, which is designated as a Sole Source Aquifer and groundwater recharge area. McGowan Brook runs through a corridor of freshwater wetlands in the central portion of the property which drain to the Newton Swamp Management Area, managed by the State of Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM).

Newton Swamp Management Area is comprised of 111 acres of shrub bog and marsh habitat. It is part of the much larger Aguntaug (Chapman) Swamp which is the largest contiguous freshwater wetland complex in the state of Rhode Island. This wetland complex as a whole is comprised of



*Newton Swamp*

many different wetland types including bog, fen, shallow marsh, red maple and an Atlantic white cedar swamp. McGowan Brook drains through the management area flowing north to the Pawcatuck River. The entire management area is wetland comprised of approximately 20% (22 acres) shallow open

water and 80% (89 acres) as dense shrub bog.

Newton Swamp is used primarily by wetland wildlife, particularly waterfowl and other wetland birds. The area is managed to support wood ducks and several nest boxes are maintained by RIDEM Fish and Wildlife. In the fall, several species of duck can be seen in the area

including wood, black, mallard, and ring-necked, as well as Canada geese. Beavers can be found in the rivers and streams in this area, and several other species of fur-bearing mammals such as mink, muskrat, and river otter are also known to inhabit Newton Swamp.

In November 2018, in collaboration with the University of Rhode Island, a Baseline Documentation Report on the Preserve was prepared. The report provides a general overview and analysis of the conservation values of the property and includes a topographical soil analysis, agricultural and water resources, and a list of various wildlife and vegetation observed.

Of note, the report highlighted that the Preserve is located within a designated Sole Source Aquifer and groundwater recharge area, and that the groundwater resources found on the property are classified as GAA, which, according to RIDEM, are those that are known or presumed to be suitable for drinking water use without treatment.

### **Present Changes to the Preserve**



*Field at Barlow Nature Preserve*

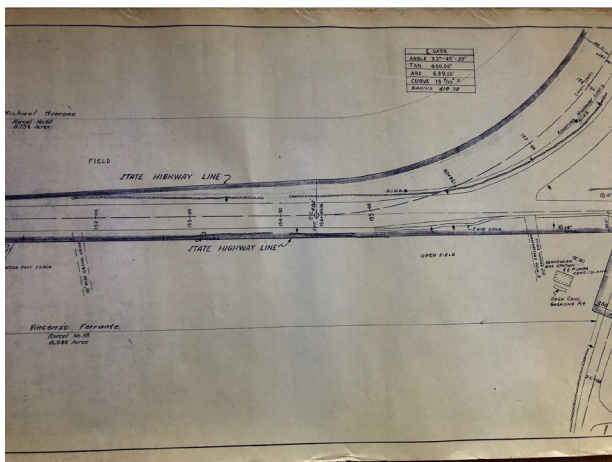
In 2020 the Preserve became the new permanent headquarters of the Westerly Land Trust. The single-family home on the property was renovated into meeting and programming spaces, staff offices, and a kitchen to accommodate small events. The conversion used green building initiatives consistent with the WLT's conservation mission, which will also help reduce annual operating costs of the building. The project was made possible by funding from private foundations and by donations of labor and materials from supportive members and businesses.





*Barlow Nature Preserve's cottage (left) and barn (right).*

Moving its operations to the Barlow Nature Preserve allows the WLT to build on its successful education program by adding hands-on elements of agriculture and farming. Since its inception in 2016, more than 2,000 students have benefited from environmental and conservation-based education provided by the WLT. Programs here will be centered around the importance of farming, agriculture and local sustainability. In effect, Barlow Nature Preserve will be both the textbook and the classroom for these programs.



*Plat no.911, filed in Westerly's Town Clerk's office on April 30, 1954, featuring the location of the "abandoned gas station and 2 pumps."*

Visitors to the Preserve will find, in addition to the WLT office, a small barn, a wood-working shed, a two-room cottage dwelling, an outhouse, a two-car garage, an outside brick oven, and two working wells. Aerial photos from 1939 also show a fairly large, cleared area in the northeast corner of the property.

In fact, several undated engineering drawings and plat layouts of the property were uncovered during the renovation of the house. One of

these drawings includes the outlines and descriptions of an “abandoned gas station & 2 pumps” in the corner of the property, which bears no impact on the environmental health of the land today.

Consistent with WLT’s mission, a key component of the vision for the Barlow Nature Preserve is to revitalize and reintroduce farming to the property by promoting sustainable farming practices and providing



*Left to Right: Stephanie Bennett of Echo Rock Flowers, Cassidy Whipple of Frontier Farms, James Cruso of Vita Nova Compost*

opportunities for farmers. For many years, Charlie Panciera and family hayed the open field. Then, in early 2019, WLT engaged three young, local farmers to bring the property back into agricultural production. With the proximity to a critical freshwater wetland habitat, the care for the soil and the issues of runoff are paramount. These farmers have all committed to environmentally sound farming measures and are implementing best practices in soil management as part of their farming agreements.

To support these farming efforts, the WLT partnered with USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) on plans for an irrigation system and the installation of a new deep well to accommodate vegetable crop production. Additional improvements include landscaping and updates to the farm outbuildings.

Two trail systems covering approximately 1.6 miles were created, one located on the east side of the property and one on the west. The trails offer visitors flat agricultural land, low-lying wetlands, and coniferous forest.

As the new home of the Westerly Land Trust, the Barlow Nature Preserve will become a true ambassador landscape for the organization. We look forward to a steady stream of visitors taking advantage of all that this unique property has to offer, from visiting the farm stand run by the farmers, to immersing themselves in agricultural and environmental programming. We are committed to the stewardship and protection of this land in perpetuity, providing valuable wildlife habitat and supporting agriculture and passive recreation.







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Sources for the history are available upon request.