



A History of the Winnapaug Farm Preserve





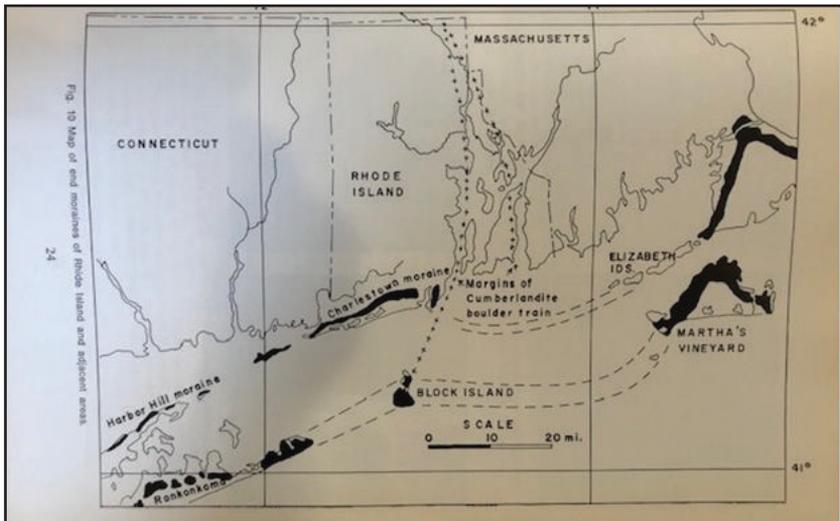
A History of the Winnapaug Preserve

The Winnapaug Farm Preserve is located on the south side of Route 1A (Shore Road) in Westerly, Rhode Island. The preserve, totaling 35.8 acres, consists of two primary parcels, separated by a laneway between Shore Road and Winnapaug Pond. A third smaller parcel is on the pond between the primary parcels and the Misquamicut community.

The Preserve consists of agricultural land, woodlands, freshwater wetlands, and salt marsh. Its boundaries are formed by Shore Road on the north, by Winnapaug Road on the west, by the pond to the south, and by a private residence and the Lathrop Preserve of the Audubon Society to the east. In keeping with the Westerly Land Trust's commitment to land preservation and responsible utilization, local farmers still farm the preserve today, planting corn in the southern most areas and harvesting silage from the pastures.

History of the Land

Much of the state's coastal shoreline, extending out to Block Island, was formed by the region's last glaciers some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. As the glacier melted and receded from the coast, it created the Charlestown Moraine and left an outwash plain south of the moraine, which is the flat landscape of the preserve. Winnapaug Pond and the surrounding salt marsh areas, with about 800 acres of water, were also created by the receding glacier.



New England Coastal Map showing glacial impact and the Charlestown Moraine
Source: *Rhode Island Geology for the Non-Geologist*

As it receded further inland, the glacier also shaped the landscape of the nearby Westerly Land Trust property, Dr. John Champlin Glacier Park. In contrast to the flat, rich plain of Winnapaug Farm Preserve, visitors to Champlin Glacier Park will find five miles of trails that wind their way through this excellent example of a pre-historic glacial moraine. Unlike the outwash area, this end moraine was formed when the glacial ice stopped receding. However, despite not moving, the ice continued to change within its location and as it did, it continued to move the earth under it, creating ridges, and the knob and kettle topography seen throughout Champlin Glacier Park.

Archaeological evidence, as well as written and oral history, tells us that, for thousands of years before the arrival of European explorers and colonists, this coastal area of Rhode Island was the home of the Niantic and Narragansett people. The Niantics lived in two groups: the Eastern Niantics in the Westerly area and the Western Niantics in southeastern Connecticut from the Pawcatuck River west to the Connecticut River. The Narragansetts were a much larger group and lived throughout all of Rhode Island.

Despite their differences, the Niantic and Narragansett people lived together for generations, largely as allies, guided by a strong spirit of cooperation and communal living. Their lifestyles were deeply rooted in a commitment to the protection and preservation of the natural resources around them, and they maintain these core values today, thousands of years later.

Life for the Niantic and Narragansett people would be forever changed with the arrival of European explorers and settlers. It is believed that in 1524, the Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano was the first European to meet the Narragansetts as he sailed along the eastern seaboard, starting in the southeast and eventually exploring present day coastal Rhode Island and Narragansett Bay. The Narragansett people welcomed da Verrazzano, and he described them as “most beautiful and have the most civil customs.”

According to *A History of The Narragansett Tribe of Rhode Island*, a little over 100 years later, following the Pequot War in 1636 - 1637, Massachusetts colonists purchased a significant amount of land from the Pequots. This acquisition in turn sparked a growing interest in acquiring Narragansett land. But with only a few exceptions, efforts over the following years to purchase land from the local Indigenous people were largely unsuccessful. Then, in 1661, a company of six men from Newport, Rhode Island, purchased a tract of land from Narragansett Chief Sosoia. This exchange is often referred to as the “Misquamicut Purchase.” The tract of land was approximately twenty miles long by ten miles wide, comprising about 20,000 acres, and included what is now Westerly, Hopkinton, Charlestown, and Richmond.

Early Preserve Property History

Local land records of the present day Winnapaug Farm Preserve prior to 1830 cannot be traced specifically; however, records from 1830 show that John Barber sold a 275-acre parcel, including land that is now the preserve, to Silas Greenman and George Greenman of Stonington, Connecticut, for \$3,400. Despite the lack of prior ownership records, we can surmise from details in this deed, that the property had been owned by John Barber's parents or relatives.

For example, the 1830 deed states that John Barber “reserves the right to himself and family the right of burying in the family burying place on said farm.” Gravestones in this burial ground, including those of his parents, offer strong evidence that the property had been in the family as far back as 1806, and most likely prior to that. This Barber Burial Ground, Rhode Island Historical Cemetery Number 5, is located on the Winnapaug Farm Preserve.

In the deed, John Barber describes the property as “my homestead farm on which I now live.... containing 275 acres.” The words “homestead farm” suggest Barber may have inherited the property, and a search through Barber family history provides considerable evidence that this is quite likely the case. Numerous records including land transactions, family wills, and historical maps of the area dating to the earlier 1800's also lend support to the likelihood that this property had been in the Barber family for some time prior to 1830.

In 1835, the property, complete with a house and other buildings, was sold by the Greenmans for \$4,000 to Case Chapman and Case Chapman Jr., both of Westerly. For many years thereafter, this property was known as “the Case Chapman Farm.”

In 1866, this 275-acre farm and a smaller 14-acre tract were sold by Case Chapman to Pardon S. Peckham for \$10,125.

Three years later, Peckham purchased a neighboring 200-acre parcel, including a “dwelling house, barn and crib” from Oliver Greene and his wife Sarah for \$6,000. The Greenses had purchased the property for \$4,735.50 in 1865 from Beriah H. Lawton, the guardian of Eliza A. Lawton. Interestingly, language in the deed reveals that both the Lawtons and the Greenses had come to Westerly from North Kingstown. Records also show that this property abutted the westerly boundary of the Chapman Farm. The deed refers to this property as “land known as the Lawton Farm,” which quite likely gave rise to the naming of nearby Lawton Avenue

These transactions also introduce a new name and resident to Westerly, Pardon S. Peckham. According to *The History of Washington and Kent Counties, 1889*, prior to coming to Westerly, Pardon Peckham lived in Coventry, Rhode Island. He arrived in Coventry in 1848 and he and his brother became prominent businessmen and successful mill owners. In 1867, Peckham gave his interest in their business to his brother and moved to Watch Hill “where he remained five years on account of his health.”

In 1872, Pardon Peckham went back into business in Coventry with his son, presumably leading to the 1873 sale of the entirety of his 489-acre property (the two large parcels consisting of 275 and 200 acres and the third small tract of 14 acres) to local residents Albert Langworthy and his wife Abby Crandall Langworthy. The price for the property was \$16,000. Based on boundary descriptions, it is estimated that the property ran from the eastern border of the present day preserve westerly to Crandall Avenue and from the ocean and pond northerly to varying distances past Shore Road. The 35.8 acres that are now the Winnapaug Farm Preserve was part of the original 275-acre parcel and comprised the southeast corner of the 489-acre property.

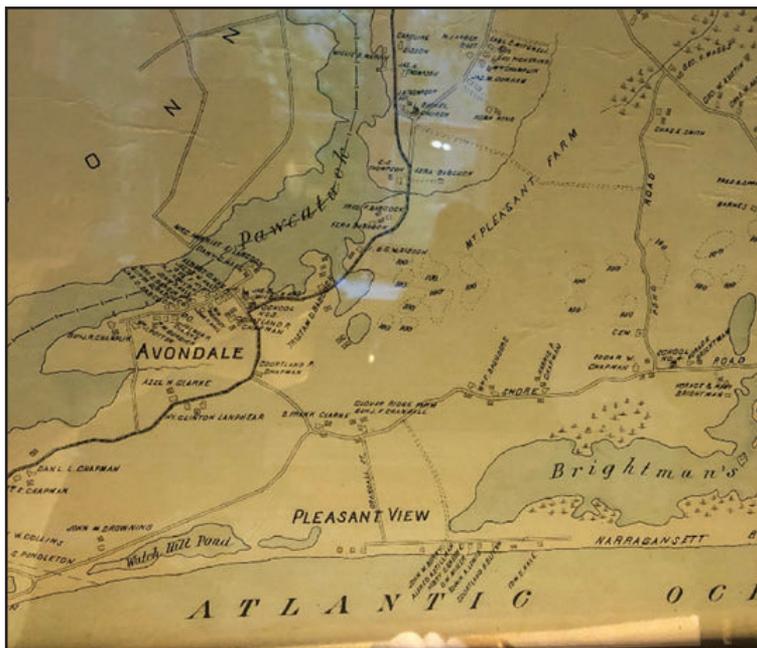
In November 1876, the Langworthys gifted the entire 489-acre property to their daughter, Alzada Langworthy, likely as a wedding gift, as she had married William Franklin Saunders a month prior. The Saunderses made their home at the farmhouse that stands across from the preserve today. Land records indicate that around 1900 the Saunders family began selling building lots, especially that land located south of Shore Road, and continued for 50 years until the vast majority of their property was sold.

These sales led to the transformation of what was largely a farming area, then known as Pleasant View, into the seasonal resort community of today, Misquamicut.

Fortunately, the Saunders family retained the property across from their farmhouse, preserving their farm and access to the pond, as well as the ocean view. In time, the family turned their attention to ensuring the conservation and protection of this land.

In 1988, they gave an easement through the property to the Audubon Society, providing access through their land to the Lathrop Audubon Nature Preserve that abutted the Saunders' farm to the east. Then, over a 10-year period from 2000 to 2010, the family, working together with the Westerly Land Trust, generously gifted this beautiful property to the Land Trust ensuring its preservation as open space and as a protected wildlife habitat in perpetuity.

Local Area History



Source: Everts & Richards, *Topographical Survey of Southern Rhode Island* 1895

This 1895 map of the coastal area of Westerly offers a view of the Misquamicut area just prior to the start of its development as a summer resort community and reveals many of the details of the original preserve property as well as the history of the surrounding area.

The residence of W.F. Saunders is shown on the north side of Shore Road. The house has been beautifully restored and stands today across from Winnapaug Farm Preserve. It was also identified on earlier maps as the homesite of previous owner Pardon Peckham and was likely that of prior owners as well. Based principally on its style, a survey conducted in 1978 by the Rhode Island Historical Society estimated that the farmhouse, as it looked then, dated to circa 1855.

The map reveals that in 1895 the area was largely farmland, much as it had been since the time of the earliest Indigenous people. Farms were likely planted with various crops, although there were also many dairy farms. In fact, the Mt. Pleasant Farm, identified in the center of the map, was said at the time to be one of the finest dairy farms in the state. The farm was started and owned by Fredrick P. Babcock whose residence is shown on the map near the farm notation.

An 1889 lease agreement between William and Alzada Saunders and Charles Tucker of Westerly offers a look into farming activity on the Saunders' property. The Saunders' lease to Tucker included a farmhouse and the "Lawton Meadow" and "Lawton Pasture" section of their property. It also allowed Tucker to use the cow barn on their farm, which the lease referred to as the "Case Chapman Farm." Apparently, somewhere on the Saunders farm there was an icehouse, as the lease also gave Tucker the right to its use. While its exact location is unknown, it is believed it would have been somewhere north of Shore Road behind the Saunders' house. To what extent the Saunderses farmed their land is uncertain; however, 1910 census data regarding the Saunders' residence included two farmhands and a servant, indicating that the land was being farmed and these employees likely lived at the farm.

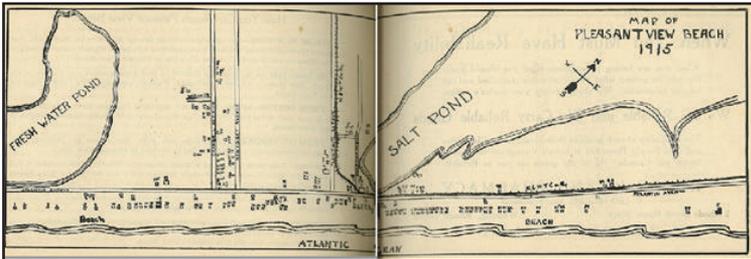
The map also helps locate the northern boundary of the original 275-acre parcel and brings to light more local history. The eastern and western boundaries of the original 275-acre parcel that now includes the preserve can be defined more or less by Winnapaug Road to the west, by the Lathrop Audubon Preserve to the east, and by the pond to the south. The northern boundary is defined in several deeds as bounded "by a driftway, leading from Champlin's Wharf to the Post Road." The boundary ran more or less in an east / west direction along this driftway until it came to a "large rock formerly called the Joshua Thompson southeast corner."

The map shows a road (in the map legend not pictured, it is called a private road) running from very near the present location of the Westerly Yacht Club to Pond Road; Pond Road is likely the origin of today's Tom Harvey Road. While not Post Road as mentioned in the deed, there is considerable evidence that this road is the driftway named in the deed.

First there are numerous sources, including a series of papers delivered before the Westerly Historical Society in 1915, 1916, and 1917, that refer to Champlin's Wharf and its location, essentially describing the location of the Westerly Yacht Club. This was also the site of the "old town dock." No doubt many Westerly residents likely know the "Joshua Thompson southeast corner" as Thompson's Corners, or the intersection of Watch Hill Road and East Avenue.

Second, the map also shows a very short route from the river to the beginning of the driftway, the start of which appears to be today's Babcock Road. To reach this starting point, simply head straight from the yacht club up Sosoa Lane to East Avenue and then up Babcock Road.

The arrival of the 20th century brought about dramatic changes to the shoreline area, shown on the 1895 map as Pleasant View Beach, as it was transformed from farmland into a seasonal, summer resort community with a new name, Misquamicut. The Saunders family helped to lead this transformation.



1915 Map showing the development of Misquamicut - then known as Pleasant View Beach - along Atlantic Avenue Source: *The Illustrated History and Directory of Pleasant View, 1915*

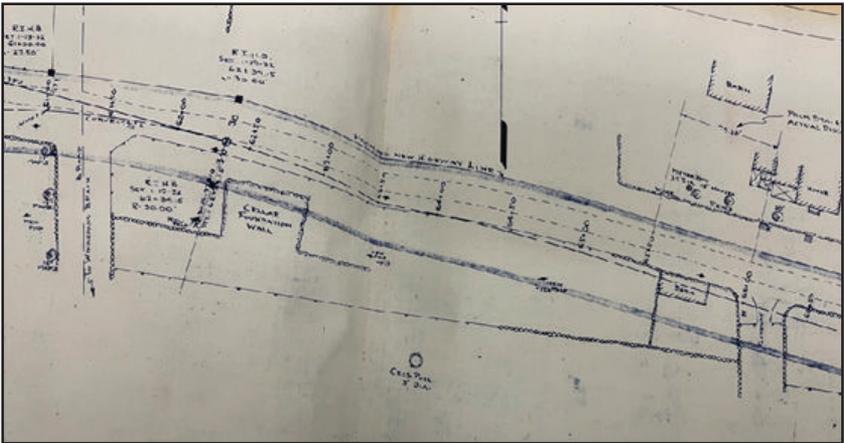
In 1915, *The Illustrated History and Directory of Pleasant View* included the above map and a directory including 130 residences (designated by numbers on the map) in the Misquamicut beach area. Look closely and you can also see the tracks of the Norwich & Westerly Traction Company electric trolley running down Montauk Avenue and turning east along Atlantic Avenue. The track, built in 1908, first connected Norwich, CT, to Pleasant View; in 1912 it was extended to connect to Weekapaug.

Land records show that many of the residences shown above were located on lots sold by the Saunders family. Based on property descriptions in these records, these lots probably would have constituted most, if not all, of the 200 acres that comprised the “Lawton Farm” with its boundaries running north from the oceanfront across Shore Road and running west from Winnapaug Road to Crandall Avenue.

Records also show a number of oceanfront lots sold by the family that, while their exact location cannot be determined, deed descriptions suggest were located generally consistent with the east / west bounds of the preserve property. These lots may have been part of the “14-acre marsh lot” included in the original 489-acre purchase.

Interestingly, each of the records reviewed regarding oceanfront lots includes the right of the Saunders family to access the ocean in order to harvest seaweed. And, in keeping with the law of the time and prohibition, each lot sold from 1920-1933 strictly prohibited the keeping and/or sale of alcoholic beverages on the property, with the penalty being forfeiture of the property back to the seller.

In the mid 1930’s, the farm underwent several changes to make way for the reconstruction of Shore Road. The engineering drawing below shows the reconfiguration of the road and the impact to the property. The changes, largely on the south side of the road, are also explained below.

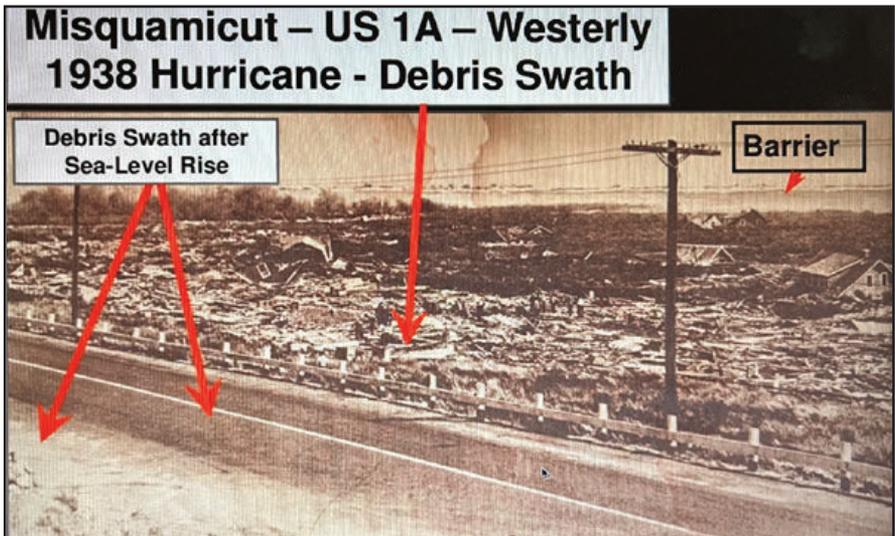


State engineering plans showing the 1930's reconfiguration of Shore Road reveal several changes made to the old farm.

The drawing shows a barn at the top of the laneway along what was then the existing road edge. Prior to the roadwork, this barn was moved across the street; it was torn down some years later due to its poor condition. Also shown near the intersection of Shore Road and Winnapaug Road is an old foundation for a building now gone, most likely another barn. Given the proximity of this foundation to the “Lawton Farm,” this might have been the cow barn that Saunders leased to Charles Tucker in 1889 as described earlier. Also shown are various stone walls and a fence to the east wall of the laneway that are no longer on the property, most likely removed during this time.

Lastly, the drawing also shows the beginning of a path or laneway bounded by two stonewalls in the field directly across Shore Road from the residence. This path extends south beyond the stonewalls to the edge of the pond. As seen in the drawing, a section of each of these walls had to be removed to make way for the road

On September 21, 1938, Westerly was struck by a historic hurricane. The photo below, taken after the storm, looking south southeast over the preserve from Shore Road, shows homes and debris washed from the beach area and floated into the field.



Source: Prof. Jon C. Boothroyd. URI Climate Change Symposium, November 18, 2011

Unlike today when severe weather forecasts come days in advance, this storm struck with little to no warning. Wind and rain began to hit the town around 1:00 PM and by mid afternoon the wind had grown to sustained speeds of between 125 -130 miles per hour; gusts were reported to have reached up to 200 miles per hour. These devastating winds lasted several hours.

The storm's impact was catastrophic. *The Hurricane: September 21, 1938: Westerly, Rhode Island and Vicinity~ Historical and Pictorial* (Westerly, RI, 1938) reported that 130 lives were lost across southern Rhode Island and Connecticut as a result of the storm; 57 were Westerly residents. The storm destroyed 1,000 houses and cottages between Mystic and Narragansett.

The Misquamicut area of Westerly was the hardest hit area of town and was essentially demolished. The Westerly Sun reported that there were 41 deaths and 369 homes destroyed in this area of town, with 282 of the homes located on Atlantic Avenue.

Visiting the Preserve



Looking over the preserve: A long past, snow-covered winter day showing a wellhead at the top of the laneway and a summer day in present times with the pasture mowed and corn planted.

There are two short, easily walkable paths that will take visitors to Winnapaug Pond. The first, located in the woodlands starting just east of the laneway, runs straight to the pond. The second begins just inside the pine trees also located east of the laneway stone walls. This trail goes through the trees and turns onto a mowed trail that also is a short, easy walk to the pond.

As you walk the Preserve fields, imagine going back in time back over 10,000 years, when the entire area would have been buried under a glacier, at one time extending out to Block Island.

Or imagine the area as it was when Indigenous people lived here. The area would have been their home during the warmer months when they would live on this coastal plain along the shore, farming, hunting, and fishing the ocean and Winnapaug Pond.

There would likely have been a community of several hundred people living in small temporary homes made from bark, reeds, and grass. Crops would have consisted mostly of corn, beans, squash, and melons. The ocean and the pond would have provided a bounty of fish and shellfish. In the colder months the people would have moved inland, choosing a location near a pond or lake that would provide fresh water and ice fishing. Winter homes, or longhouses, were much larger, permanent wooden structures, each providing shelter for as many as twenty families.

Most recently, from the 1940s through the late 90s, the preserve was the site of Winnapaug Day Camp, a summer day camp for local area children. The camp was run by Donald Allison and his wife Virginia, who was the granddaughter of William and Alzada Saunders. Camp activities took place in the two most eastern fields and included crafts, baseball, archery, golf, tennis, and kickball. Boating and swimming were offered on the pond. In its later years, the camp was run by two generations of the Kitchen family: Arthur and his son Charlie. These men were also direct descendants of the Saunders family. The Westerly Land Trust is most grateful to Charlie Kitchen who still lives in Westerly and shared many family documents, as well as fond memories, contributing to the preparation of the Winnapaug Farm Preserve history.

As noted earlier, the preserve includes Rhode Island Historical Cemetery Number 5, the Barber Burial Ground. Over the years the cemetery had fallen into a state of disrepair and neglect; today's visitors will find the site has been artfully restored and carefully maintained by Westerly Land Trust volunteers.

The oldest marked grave is that of John Barber's mother Mrs. Thankful Barber. Her death, at age 74 on June 21, 1806, indicates the Barbers owned the property by at least then. John Barber's father Nathan Barber Esq., who died June 2, 1816, in his 84th year, is also buried here. The fact that both of his parents are buried here strongly suggests that the farm had been their property. Also buried here are Barber's first wife Sally Wilcox, who died at 44 on July 5, 1810, his brother Capt. Nathan Barber, who died Sept. 19, 1835, age 76, and his brother's wife Mary Barber, who died Jan. 16, 1818, in her 60th year.

Interestingly, John Barber, the property owner in 1830, and his second wife Barbara (Maxson) Barber are not buried here. They are buried in Hopkinton, Rhode Island.

Visitors to the preserve will also find a lengthy stone laneway running through the property from Shore Road to the south, and a group of three large cairns in the westernmost section of the property, separating the pasture from the cornfield.

Little is known regarding the history of the laneway, although there is some thought that it dates to when the Barbers owned the property. There is no doubt, however, that use of the path was highly valued and protected by the Saunders family.

A 1910 legal record regarding the property indicates it was used by the Saunders family as a boating access to the pond. The document reserves the right for the Saunders family to "pass and repass" this strip of land that runs from "Shore Road to Winnapaug Pond at the present boat place" and ensures their right to "erect a boat house on the shore of the pond." The document also paints a picture of the land at that time, referring to the path as bordering the "westerly side of the orchard lot and the pond meadow."

As evidenced in other legal documents, the family also included language to ensure they protected their right to use the laneway to access the pond to collect seaweed, a valuable commodity used as fertilizer.

The three large cairns were built by Westerly Land Trust volunteers, using stones gathered from the preserve cornfield. Cairns have been built since biblical times, standing as landmarks, navigation aids, burial markers, or serving other purposes.

The most common origin of the word cairn comes from the Gaelic term meaning “heap of stones.” In this case, however, perhaps a lesser-known origin is more appropriate, and that is the Native American term “Wa-wa-na-quas-sick” which means a “place of many good stones.”

As any New Englander who has worked the land knows all too well, if nothing else, New England is undoubtedly a “place of many good stones.”

The Westerly Land Trust is committed to the conservation of open space and the protection and enhancement of the environment, agriculture, and water resources as well as the community’s “sense of place.” We encourage everyone to visit the Winnapaug Farm preserve, recall its history and enjoy this beautiful property.



The Westerly Land Trust
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