



SPRING ISSUE

NEWSLETTER

Newton's land trust working to preserve open space since 1961

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The Story of Jolly's Hollow: How Conservation Land Builds Community

By Sarah Luria, Associate Professor, Department of English, College of the Holy Cross

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For years I have cherished the ability to walk off-road along Newton's aqueduct trail from the Four Corners area to Mason-Rice Elementary School. The highlight of that trip, as many lucky aqueduct walkers know, is the winding path through Jolly's Hollow, a secluded dell with a little stone bridge to one side and shaded by gloriously tall healthy trees. Though the path actually runs through private property, for the past many years a charming pair of signs have invited us in: "Welcome to Jolly's Hollow. Please keep to the paths. Beware of the gardener, she talks!" I always wanted to thank that chatty gardener, and would sometimes glimpse her among her gorgeous flower garden and ornamental trees, but I was too shy to tell her how much it meant to me to walk through her beautiful grounds.



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Jolly's Hollow Sign



PHOTO: COURTESY CHRONICLE/WCCB-TV US

Newton Conservators President Beth Wilkinson makes an appearance on Chronicle earlier this year talking about the Bracebridge Road conservation restriction.

My wish came partly true the other day, when I met someone planting 50 native low bush blueberry plants under the pine grove near the lip of the hollow where it borders Bracebridge Road. This was André Wilson, who grew up on the property after 1966 when André's father, Harvard physicist Richard Wilson, and mother, Andrée Désirée Wilson, moved there with their six children. (André is transgender and in tribute to André's enabling support has taken and adapted her name.) The elder Andrée was the legendary "gardener" who, during the 50 years she lived there, created this special place. Beginning in the 1990s, as Newton was becoming ever more subdivided, she and Richard began the extraordinary and arduous process that would eventually donate the Wilson Conservation Area to the city and put all but 0.4 acres of their remaining

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1.9-acre parcel under a conservation restriction that protects this legacy in perpetuity.

One important condition of conservation land is that there be public access. Andrée passed away in 2016, and the property will eventually be sold. Now, in a joint effort by the Newton Conservators and the Wilson family, an official path has been created that runs up along the pine-covered hill where I met André hard at work to enhance the family's gift to the city.

Trained in architecture and ecological restoration, André represents the latest generation of talented, articulate gardeners on this place. A few days after our meeting amongst the blueberry bushes, we sat down for an interview on a crescent-shaped bench by the lovely half-moon garden. We were joined by Beth Wilkinson, current president of the Newton Conservators, the nonprofit organization that administers the conservation restriction on the private land. Our conversation revealed more about the significance of Jolly's Hollow to the larger community, a story of how Andrée's garden and her commitment to her children and her trees grew to include her neighborhood, her city, and us.



Google aerial map of Jolly's Hollow where the red balloon shows the beginning of the walk northwest through the trees

us that used to be a “regulation size croquet court, except that it had two large trees and mom’s garden in the middle, so there were penalties for sending your ball there.” Wilkinson notes that “the views of these gardens from the windows of the house were very important to your mother,” who designed the gardens to be seen from indoors. So even “these are part of the conservation restriction; the views from the house are protected!”

The gardens and woods that Andrée developed were part of what was once an even larger Newton estate called “Mount Pleasant.” The Italianate house and its ample grounds were created in 1856 by real estate developer Roswell Turner. The 1895 Bromley Atlas of Newton (Plate 17) shows the property as an expansive estate bordered by Pleasant Street and Hancock Avenue. <http://www.newtonconservators.org/wilsonmaps.htm>. Neither Park Lane nor Bracebridge Road had yet been cut. The undulating land of the estate included circular drives and two ponds, connected by a stream that used to flow through the hollow under the stone bridge.

Jolly's Hollow lies between the Cochituate and Sudbury aqueducts. “Our parents were big aqueduct walkers, and they loved the public paths along them.” André remembers the family taking “a gorgeous walk once all the way to Wellesley.” Wilkinson points out that other cities along the aqueducts have accepted the state’s offer to make the paths legally accessible to the public—only Newton “has not made walking them legal.” Several private property abutters have blocked off access, and Jolly's Hollow is, in fact, a case in point. Earlier owners of the Wilson's property had put a fence across the Cochituate aqueduct path, which Andrée and Richard chose not to remove. It still stands there today. In the 1960s and 70s, André recalls, aqueduct walking was not the popular activity it is now. “We could always tell the rare aqueduct walkers because they had a befuddled look” as they wandered onto the Wilsons’ property in search of the way out. André would greet these fellow walkers warmly and point out an alternate route. In time, this invitation to cross her property would become a beloved institution.

The old hollow that André remembers is markedly different from what we see today. The tall trees that shade it now

Gazing at the back yard, André's memories came flooding back: “I’m like my mother in that places generate the stories. I don’t remember things or events in isolation; I remember them when I’m walking through this place.” André points to the lawn and kidney-shaped “bird bath garden” before



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

André Wilson has replaced invasive plants with new native plants.

District Commission (MDC) mowed. Gail Burgess, whose family owned the property prior to the Wilsons, remembers it being “very wild back there,” covered with thickets of blackberries and brambles.

Wilkinson remarks that the entire grounds were “a big playground,” and André agrees, but adds that after 1966 that playground was private, used by the Wilson children alone. The neighborhood was “a very different scene” back then, André explains. There were not many kids in the neighborhood, but older teenagers cavorted in the back woods and had drinking parties on the “Big Rock” by the Cochituate Aqueduct and left the area covered with broken glass. To protect their children, André and Richard felt the need to fence their property off. André recalls feeling particularly vulnerable. André remembers being bullied from the first day of school at Mason Rice in 1966. “I was a little girl, who knew she was a little boy.” The sheltering thickets of Jolly’s Hollow were a welcome refuge.

The Wilson children grew up and moved away (André lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan). Around that time, André says, the neighborhood began to develop more of a community feeling. Bracebridge and Hancock Streets began holding two block parties a year, and André was inspired to make her property more accessible: “At some point the fences came down”; eventually a formal invitation was made, announced by the friendly signs, to cross the little stone bridge and follow a new path she and Richard created that skirted the hollow and cut across their front lawn. “My parents valued their privacy,” André says, “but their lives were enriched beyond expression by the people who literally walked into and through their lives as they walked through 15 Bracebridge Road. I know this because people now tell me about encountering Mom and sometimes even Dad in the garden and stopping to chat, and then coming back another

were much smaller then. “It was much sunnier and hotter.” Grass grew plentifully and the Wilson children insisted that paths be mowed on what they called “the big hill” so they would have a thrilling network of sledding trails in the winter. Charlie Worden, who grew up on Pleasant Street in the 1950s, recalls building a ski jump there. Both aqueducts, woodied now, were also sunny and topped by grass that the Metropolitan

day for tea on the front porch.” As their parents grew older, the Wilson children were glad to know that their parents were not isolated, but rather surrounded by friends who watched out for them and the house.

The new path has been created to maintain public access without coming so close to the future owners’ front door. As André works on this project, people often stop, eager to share their memories of the place. “When I talk to people on the path, the sense of gratitude and of wonder, that a homeowner would do this is overwhelming. It is so striking, and it is one reason I spend so much time out there. It amazes me to hear what people say.” One teen-ager reported that he took this path to get to Mason Rice every day for six years and thanked André for being able to walk through the woods to school. The larger Wilson Conservation Area is particularly valuable because it is so useful; it offers a beautiful short-cut to Mason-Rice School, the Newton Centre Playground and T stop. What a pleasant way to run an errand!

Conservation ecologist Aldo Leopold argued that the way to increase stewardship of our environment is to extend our Golden Rule — “Do Unto Others” — to include the land on which we live. In an extraordinary way, André Wilson embodied this ethic. Her desire to protect her children and give them a beautiful place grew into a desire to protect it and share it with others: “My mother had a vision of a different world, where people give without asking for something in return, because it changes everything. My parents opened the path,” André continues, “because they believed in making private space more porous. And they believed that private citizens needed to take responsibility for making public spaces (and services) more accessible and functional.”

Such generosity can inspire each of us to think of how we might actively improve the experience of our neighborhood. Indeed, friendly gestures seem to be on the rise in Newton as doggie bowls, book boxes, and even benches for passers-by to enjoy a rest are popping up on private front lawns. Each of these acts adds pleasure to our “walking city.”

“My mother thought of herself as a citizen of the world,” Wilson concluded as the sun set over Jolly’s Hollow that evening. “I simply would suggest to you, and more broadly to others, that we consider how much more each of us can do to make this world a more welcoming place.”

Information about the Wilson Conservation Area and how to contribute to the upkeep of the new path can be found at the Newton Conservators website: <http://www.newtonconservators.org/wilson.htm> or on the renewal form on page 6. ■