

Haley Farm inspires many with its beauty and history, from grazing cows to preservation battles

Story and photos by Judy Benson

Ospreys nest near one of the main trails. Miles of cut stone and natural rock walls course through the fields and forests.

Wildflowers bloom where hay and corn once grew, creating havens for goldfinches, monarchs and bumble bees. Trails meander through cedar groves, upland woods, past ponds and golden-green salt marshes.

“It’s just beautiful here,” said Sue Holbrook, as she hiked past Palmer Cove and the osprey family that makes its summer home at Haley Farm State Park.

A resident of Oklahoma, Holbrook was in the area visiting her aunt. Remembering Haley Farm from her last visit 20 years ago, she decided to return that July day.

Gordon Gruetzmacher is one of the Haley Farm regulars. He lives a short walk from the park and comes frequently to trek a four-mile loop.

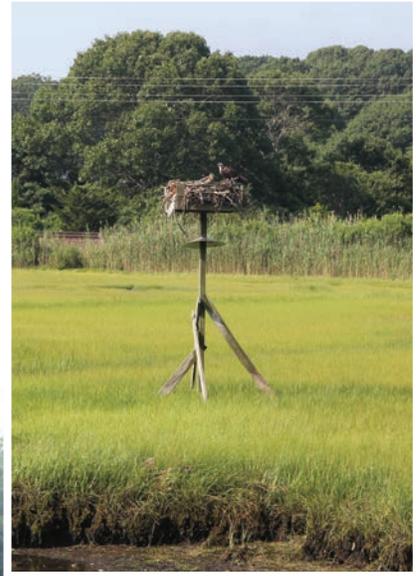
“I like to check on the ospreys, and I like the solitude,” he said.

While Haley Farm has many fans, perhaps there’s none more ardent than Sidney Van Zandt of Noank. She’s also the ideal guide for telling the park’s story, from its days as a working farm in the late 19th through mid-20th centuries, to the landmark preservation battle that led to its designation as a state park in 1970. Now, a new chapter is being added to her narrative, as the 250-acre park is set to join a collection of nearby state-owned lands and waterways in the Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve.

“The whole place is a favorite spot,” said Van Zandt, who’s led dozens of hikes there since the mid-1960s and still moves at a pace that belies her 87 years. “I’ve been living this for so long.”

Setting out on an August morning, she pointed out the foundations of barns from Caleb Haley’s farm, then a pond that provided ice to keep milk cold, then the remains of a circular path where racehorses exercised. While she is well versed in that part of the land’s history, Van Zandt’s passion emerges in full force when she skips ahead to the

Right, An osprey looks out from its nest over the Palmer Cove marsh at Bluff Point.



Many of the stone walls at Haley Farm are made of large boulders hauled by ox-drawn stone pullers.

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Haley Farm's former hay and corn fields are now wildflower meadows that attract many birds, bees and butterflies.

mid-1960s. It was then that a developer sought to buy the farm to build a complex of duplexes, and she and other locals came together to stop it. Their successful effort of fund-raising, lobbying and eventually enlisting state support landed her on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1970 beside one of the farm's stone walls, under the heading, "Battles Won."

"Haley Farm is my heart and soul," she said in the accompanying article.

The group that began as the Save Haley Farm Committee in 1965 soon evolved into the Groton Open Space Association, with Van Zandt as its first president. Today, she serves as GOSA's vice president. Many more preservation victories would follow that first one at Haley Farm that set the course.

"When we first started this," she said, "the town said no, we need this development. Then, there was no protection of marshes. You just filled them in to get more land."

As she trailed hugged the fenced-off tracks where Amtrak trains traverse, Van Zandt paused. The tracks were first laid in the late 1800s, when dairy cows grazed the fields.

"Here's the tunnel for the cows to get through to the other side," she said, motioning toward the dark passage.

Further ahead was a footbridge built over the tracks in 1999. On the other side is a trail leading to Bluff Point State Park, another of the CT NERR properties. Together with two other parcels owned by GOSA and the town, more than 1,000 acres of contiguous land is preserved for wildlife and watershed protection, a rarity on the highly developed Connecticut coast.

"They're all basically one place," said Van Zandt. "It's all connected."

Today, Haley Farm is well loved in all seasons, by cross-country skiers and snowshoers, birdwatchers, bicyclists, horseback riders, families with babies in backpacks and strollers and hikers young and old. The variety of paved, crush stone and

dirt trails—none that would be rated higher than "moderate" in difficulty—make Haley Farm accessible to people at all levels of ability. Among recent visitors were Martha Reynolds of Ledyard and Erika Sproul of Canterbury, now retired from their jobs at nearby Fitch High School.

"We used to walk this all the time when we both worked at Fitch," Reynolds said as they paused at the sign near the park entrance with historic photos of the ox-drawn stone pullers used to create the massive walls.

For Van Zandt, the pending designation of the CT NERR with Haley Farm included is another significant milestone in its history. It will be better appreciated for its connections to the other NERR properties and its value for filtering the waters that flow into Long Island Sound. Research and monitoring that the NERR will bring will further enhance its profile as an environmental and educational resource. But she believes it will also be a vehicle for telling an important story for the CT NERR, one about the evolution of people's attitudes towards the environment.

"I think it's very helpful for people to know what the mentality of the people running the town was towards conservation," she said. "It was all about development. There was no effort to control stormwater, it would just go wherever, and wetlands were wastelands. To me, this place is about the history of protecting water."

MORE INFORMATION:

Connecticut DEEP Haley Farm State Park website: <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/State-Parks/Parks/Haley-Farm-State-Park>

Map of Haley Farm State Park: <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DEEP/stateparks/SkysTheLimit/haleymappdf.pdf>

Groton Open Space Association: <https://www.gosaonline.org/>

