

FLAT ROCK BROOK – A SUCCESS STORY by Norman Davis

Introduction

The wave of concern for our threatened natural environment that swept the country, and indeed the world, in the second half of the Twentieth Century, had its microcosmic counterpart in suburban Englewood, New Jersey. This is the inspiring story of how dedicated volunteers defied conventional wisdom and rampant development pressures to preserve in a largely natural state 150 acres within a short distance from the George Washington Bridge, the most heavily used vehicular crossing in the world. The Flat Rock Brook Nature Association (FRB), formed to protect these acres and to promote environmental education and awareness, will celebrate its Fiftieth Anniversary in 2023. FRB today provides access to nature through its trails and in the classroom to thousands of schoolchildren annually, and is a major natural resource for people of all ages.

Carpe diem is a Latin phrase meaning “seize the day.” Campbell Norsgaard and Priscilla McKenna and Kenneth King and so many others “seized the day” - when 1) forested land still remained, 2) State funding for land acquisition had become available, and 3) the environmental movement was gathering steam. It is worth noting that, within a short period of years after the land acquisition began, almost every acre of surrounding property had been acquired for residential development.

This paper seeks to describe the context, and outline the series of events, which created today’s thriving nature center so close to a major metropolis.

Geography

The land that has been saved is located on the back slope of the Hudson River Palisades, sloping downhill to the west. It is largely covered with second growth trees, with the original trees having been harvested for homebuilding and railroad ties after the extension of the Erie Railroad north from Jersey City and the foundation of Englewood in 1859. An extensive walking trail system provides access to hikers and nature lovers. The property also includes a nature center building and parking lot at the east end of Van Nostrand Avenue in a former rock Quarry, and a picnic area and children’s playground on Jones Road. There are two bodies of water, Macfadden’s Pond, now largely a swamp, and the Quarry Pond, adjacent to the nature center building. Its outstanding feature is the Flat Rock Brook itself, which flows through picturesque rock formations.

Politically it is located entirely within the borders of the City of Englewood, but adjacent to the Borough of Englewood Cliffs to the east. Englewood is about five square miles in area, with a population approaching 30,000, located in Bergen County, New Jersey. In its southeast corner, Englewood borders on Fort Lee, the western terminus of the George Washington Bridge.

Legally, the land is divided about equally between 1) property under long-term lease from the City of Englewood, and 2) property belonging to The Allison Trust, of which the Flat Rock Brook Nature Association is sole Trustee. The Flat Rock Brook flows through both properties. It originates in Englewood Cliffs, flows into Macfadden’s Pond and thence west downhill, under Jones Road, to end eventually in the Hackensack River, which flows into New York Bay.

The land leased from the City is in two portions, divided by the Allison property. Starting in 1927, in anticipation of the Bridge opening, much of it was acquired by the Paterno Construction Co., which laid out building lots and a street grid and sold the lots to individual owners. When the Stock Market crashed in 1929 and the Great Depression began, development ceased, and many of the lots were in time seized by the City of Englewood for non-payment of property taxes.

Local History

Bergen County, New Jersey's northernmost county, was largely rural prior to the opening of the George Washington Bridge in 1931. Direct access to New York City, however, transformed the County in time to its current suburban character. Englewood is somewhat unusual in that it was settled earlier, and became a fashionable venue, particularly for financial executives who built large houses on large lots. A 1924 publication lists 83 such properties, nearly all on the East Hill of Englewood. In the early Twentieth Century Englewood was known as "The Bedroom of Wall Street."

A significant population of African Americans settled across the railroad tracks, often to provide services to the owners of the estates, creating a community with large disparities of wealth, unlike other suburbs. An influx of more middle class population after World War II led in time to a political revolution in the late 1960's, with African Americans gaining in political influence. (A later influx of Latin Americans has yet to achieve such influence). At the time FRB was founded, Englewood was in the throes of this revolution. The main political controversy was over the location of new public housing, and the importance of land preservation fortunately was not significantly at issue. Today, the wealth disparity has nonetheless persisted, and Englewood's political and social makeup remains unique. FRB, however, is generally believed to be a significant community asset and public support remains strong.

Green Acres

In 1961, the Green Acres Program was established by the State of New Jersey to meet the need for land conservation in the face of sprawling economic growth. The voters thereafter approved a series of Green Acres bond issues providing funds for land acquisition. Englewood was one of many municipalities to successfully apply for and receive Green Acres funding, both for land acquisition and construction of the nature center building. The availability of State funds was crucial to the eventual success of the project.

Campbell Norsgaard

Possibly the first person to take seriously the possibility of preserving the woods from development was Campbell Norsgaard, who lived on South Woodland Street, with the woods in his backyard. In 1966 Norsgaard began badgering City officials about saving the woods. He was a Norwegian who devoted his life to spreading the gospel of nature through films, books, lectures and other projects. He had escaped from occupied Norway in dramatic fashion during World War II, and ended up as a successful producer of television commercials in NYC, before devoting his life to nature. He created some of the original woodland trails, and started working with other local activists to draw attention to the opportunity for preservation.

Land Acquisition

A group called "Green Lands for Englewood" was founded in 1966 to promote the idea of preservation. This group devoted considerable time and effort to finding ways of overcoming inertia and public opposition, through publicity and discussion groups, in order to achieve their goal. It was not always an easy sell. The idea of using local tax dollars for vacant land acquisition, for example, is not immediately appealing to many. And there was fear in some quarters that drawing attention to the wooded property might attract unwanted visitors.

A member of this group was Priscilla McKenna, who was also an officer of the Englewood Area League of Women Voters. The strictly non-partisan Englewood League in those days undertook thorough studies of important local political issues and had a degree of influence in the community. Under McKenna's leadership the League ultimately took a strong public position advocating City acquisition of the former Paterno properties for preservation purposes. A flier explaining the League's recommendation was distributed City-wide in 1968. The first application to the State for Green Acres funding in 1967 was prepared by League members McKenna and Lorraine Cohen, and signed by Mayor Austin Volk.

A strong supporter of the land acquisition was Dr. Kenneth King who was elected to the Englewood City Council in 1967 and served for six years. King was a PhD and expert in the then new science of computer applications. Under King's leadership the Council was persuaded to begin purchasing the various properties, using State Green Acres as well as matching private funding. The process of land acquisition, conducted by Englewood City Solicitors Sylvia Pressler and Arthur Lesemann, proceeded slowly, requiring nearly ten years to complete, requiring condemnation in some cases.

Creation of Flat Rock Brook Nature Association

In the meantime, enthusiasm and support for the project continued to grow regardless. In the spring of 1969, the Englewood City Council established an Englewood Conservation (soon to be renamed Environmental) Commission, chaired initially by Priscilla McKenna, charged with managing the land acquired and recommending a program for public use. The new Commission established policies for proper maintenance, damage repair, and passive public use of the newly acquired properties. Environmental education classes were initiated, some led by Campbell Norsgaard. Neighborhood meetings were held to build support for the land purchases and to raise funds for this purpose. New trails were created. All of this led by 1973 to the creation of a new independent not-for-profit entity initially called Englewood Nature Association, but soon renamed Flat Rock Brook Nature Association (FRB). The first public meeting, at which officers were elected, was held in March 1973. A regular newsletter was initiated. Slide shows and films were shown. The basic direction FRB would take was set in its first year. Its mission was seen to be twofold: 1) the protection and maintenance of the land, and 2) the creation of an imaginative program for environmental education. Peter Brooks, a trained naturalist, was hired as City Environmental Officer and effectively FRB's first Executive Director. A 25 year lease of the land from the City to FRB for \$1 a year was negotiated.

New Building

In November 1974, following the approval of a new Green Acres bond issue, FRB applied again to the State for funds to partially finance the construction of a Nature Center building on the Quarry site. A Building Committee was formed and fundraising started for the necessary matching funds. A new parking lot was built and the City of Englewood extended Van Nostrand Avenue to connect with it. A new pond was excavated. It took until 1980 for the new building to be designed, funded, built, and opened for occupancy.

The new Nature Center contained a large high-ceilinged meeting room, an office, a library and other facilities on the ground floor, and an apartment on the second floor. A solar heating unit, using then new technology, was included, but never functioned satisfactorily. In following years, the various improvements have included adding a greenhouse area, solar panels that work, and notably the "A Walk in the Woods" exhibits (see below).

The Quarry

The new building, parking lot, and adjacent pond are located in an abandoned stone quarry which the City had acquired from Paterno in 1927 and used as a police firing range. The area is overlooked by a steep cliff, from the top of which there is an extensive view to the south and west. It had been used by various groups for picnicking and other activities. It was also a dumping ground and the rocks were covered with graffiti. After acquisition by FRB, it was cleaned up, and in 1989 a new boardwalk trail was built directly under the cliff providing access for wheel chairs.

Allison Woods

William O. Allison, a major property owner in the area and the founder of Englewood Cliffs, died in 1924 and left a will specifying that a 75 acre property known as Allison Woods in Englewood was to be preserved in its natural state for the benefit of mankind. He established the Allison Trust to carry out the terms of the will. Unfortunately, the appointed trustees and their successors attempted on several occasions to break the will and develop the land. The final such effort, in 1977, alleging insufficient funds available for maintenance, was successfully opposed by the City of Englewood. In 1988, Flat Rock Brook Nature Association, thanks to the pro bono efforts of local attorney Bruce LaSala, was appointed sole Successor Trustee, effectively ending the threat of development. FRB assumed responsibility for the Allison Woods trails and for the lowland picnic area on Jones Road.

Macfadden's Pond

An 1876 map shows a pond created by damming Flat Rock Brook at a high point. The pond still exists and can be viewed from the Red Trail, but, after dredging in 1976, it has over the years silted up and is essentially a marsh today. In later years, the FRB Board considered dredging again to preserve the pond's beauty, but eventually abandoned the idea due to the expense and difficult logistics. A wooden bridge built by anonymous benefactors across the concrete spillway enables hikers to walk all around the pond. The name comes from its former inclusion in the estate at the corner of Linden Avenue and South Woodland Street once owned by the eccentric physical culturist Bernarr Macfadden.

Environmental Education

FRB's second major focus from the very beginning has been on environmental education. Starting with hikes led by volunteer trail guides and speakers on relevant topics, its offerings have expanded over the years. Today, FRB provides an extensive range of programs for school groups, onsite and in the schools, a summer day camp program, and also a full range of indoor and outdoor programs available to persons of all ages. Schools from a wide radius have for four decades bussed students to learn about nature at FRB.

The volunteer trail guides are an essential element in the educational program. They come from many surrounding towns and various walks of life. Today they are carefully instructed and supervised by FRB's Education Director, but prepared curricula have been used from the start.

A special feature is FRB's Raptor Exhibit, located in the Quarry. In 1989 a permanently injured red-tailed hawk was acquired, and today several live birds of prey, unable to survive in the wild due to injury, are kept in cages for display.

Fundraising

Initial financial support from the City of Englewood and from Green Acres was substantially implemented by private donations, which have been considerable over the years and remain the organization's primary source of revenue. Direct City funding to pay for an Executive Director ceased in 1983. An Endowment was established in the early 1980's to provide additional income. Major funding at present comes from FRB's Annual Fund drive and from a newly created annual Awards Dinner. Additional funds come from program fees, membership dues, the apartment rental, building rental to outside groups for special events, and an annual 5K Run on the trails.

From the beginning until recently, a major source of funding each year was the Flat Rock Brook Holiday Sale in early December, which required a sizable volunteer effort and attracted considerable community support. The Sale featured a wide variety of gift items, including trees and wreaths, a silent auction, and homemade food items. The three-day event was also something of a social gathering. In 2015 the Holiday Sale was ended, in the belief that the substantial staff and volunteer effort involved could be more productively employed otherwise.

Grants for specific projects have been significant over the years. Among the many grant donors are Community Chest of Englewood, the Schenck Foundation, the Taub Foundation and Suez Water Company.

A Walk in the Woods

The interpretive building was significantly enhanced in 2012 with the creation of museum-type exhibits designed to prepare visitors for "A Walk in the Woods." The central feature is a life size replica of a Northern Red Oak with various wildlife including an Eastern Screech Owl. Exhibits depict life in the meadows, the forest, and the pond, stream and wetland. Each exhibit has interactive puzzles, information fact cards, and flip-books on the flora and fauna found in that habitat.

Flat Rock Gardeners

The areas around the building and the parking lot contain native plants which are tended by the volunteer FRB Gardeners. In 1992 the Garden Club of Englewood, as winner of a national competition, received a \$20,000 grant to build a "Backyard Habitat for Wildlife" along FRB's Quarry boardwalk trail. The Gardeners were charged with implementing the project, which emphasized the desirability of planting indigenous flora to benefit wildlife.

Deer Problem

In recent years a growth in the number of deer living on the property has led to severe reduction in the undergrowth, which is a long-term threat to the health of the forest. Various options were considered for reducing the deer population, culminating in 2016 in a decision to fence them out. It is planned in the near future to erect an 8 foot fence around much of the property for this purpose.

Staffing

Over the years, FRB has normally employed an Executive Director, a Land Manager, an Education Director and an Office Manager. It currently employs also a Development Director, a Naturalist and an Accountant. Executive Director Steven Wiessner, who has been in place for more than ten years now, has brought to FRB a new level of professionalism and energy. The major ongoing expense of the organization is for the salaries and benefits of this minimal staff.

Priscilla McKenna

The role of Priscilla McKenna in the creation of FRB cannot be overstated. It was she who responded to Campbell Norsgaard's appeal and led the multi-year effort which led to the protection of the land and its transformation into the invaluable resource it has become. It is unlikely that such success could have been achieved without her relentless efforts and her leadership. In January 1981, she was quoted in The New York Times as having devoted "15 years of stubbornness" to achieve her goal. In addition to leadership, financial support provided by Priscilla and her husband, Malcolm, was substantial, and her success in enlisting other major donors was crucial. Englewood, while no longer "The Bedroom of Wall Street," was, and still is, home to many people with means.

Volunteerism

An inspiring aspect of this story is the thousands of hours of volunteer effort which have been and continue to be expended in support of FRB's dual objectives. Considering the volunteer trail guides, the event planners, the fund raisers, the gardeners, and the members of FRB's Board Committees, our expert staff is fully aware that they could not do it alone. FRB's Board has 30 members, drawn from several area towns and varied backgrounds, most of whom make some time contribution outside of monthly Board meetings.

Long-Term Land Protection

In 1998, the \$1 a year lease from the City of Englewood was renewed for another 25 years. In the 1990's the City of Englewood, at FRB's urging, created a new Open Space zoning category, to include all FRB property. Theoretically some future Council could refuse to renew the lease and reverse the zoning change for the City-owned land, but it would not be able to ignore the anti-development provisions of the Green Acres grants. The Allison property is secure due to FRB's sole Trusteeship.

FRB Timeline

- 1859 Englewood founded
- 1931 GW Bridge opened
- 1961 State Green Acres program started
- 1968 Land acquisition started
- 1973 FRB founded
- 1980 Nature Center building opened
- 1988 Allison Woods acquired
- 2012 "A Walk in the Woods" opened