



Johnson Farm - A Legacy Forever

By Steve Knauth

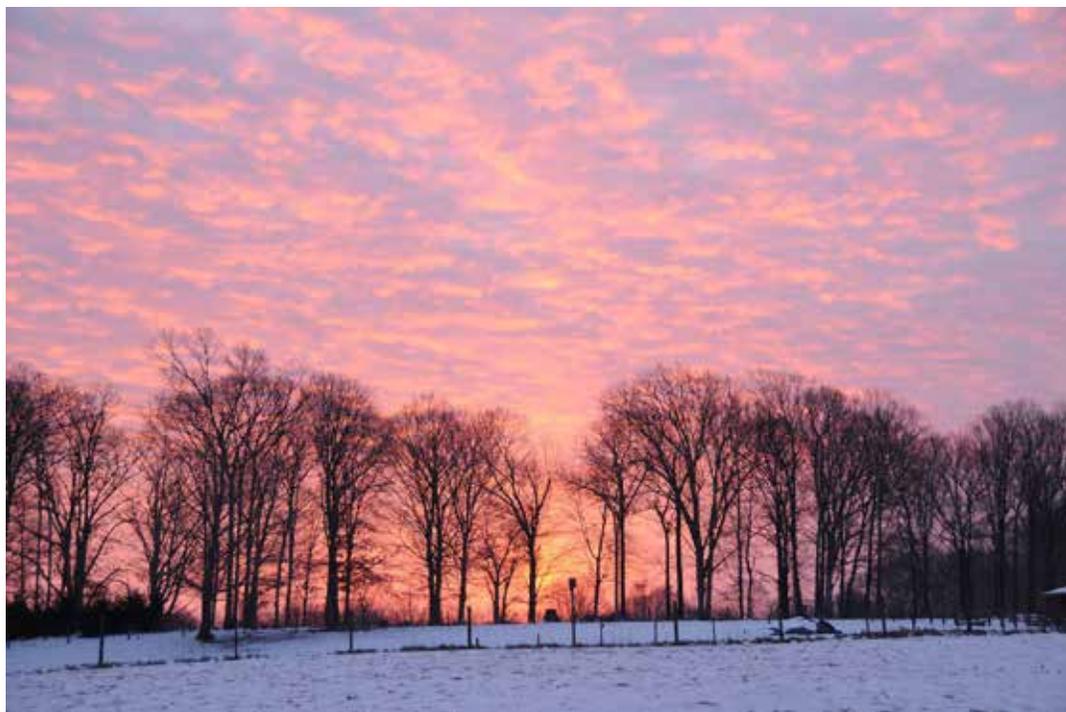
A single trail leads from the parking lot on Read Hill Rd. through the woods to a 60-year-old hilltop farm with hay fields, orchards and gardens, a sheep barn and a chicken coop. This is the Johnson Farm, the Essex Land Trust's 49-acre upland property overlooking the center of Ivoryton with rolling hills of meadow land, a stand of planted white oaks and several acres of natural, lowland, young-growth forest.

The Essex Land Trust first acquired the development rights to the Johnson Farm in 2008 from owner and land trust supporter Murwin Johnson and recently in 2015 acquired outright ownership from Murwin's wife, Polly Johnson.

It's a priceless piece of open space in the heart of the village.

It's also where Murwin Johnson spent his life, farming the 50 acres he bought for a dollar from his parents in 1955, tending the apple and pear trees he planted with his own hands, gathering in the produce he and his wife, Polly, grew, raising his livestock and harvesting the hayfields. It's where the Ivoryton native, son of Axel and Mabel Johnson, gazed with a farmer's eyes out over his fields through the seasons, through the years, through his life until he and his land became inseparable.

And then he left it all to us, to the present and future peoples of his town. When Johnson sold the development



A winter scene by photographer Jody Dole.

rights to the land trust in 2008, he said: "I just want this land to be around for the next generation of kids."

In 1948, when Murwin was 19 years old, his family bought 130 acres of farmland from the Bull family, prominent in village life at the time. Seven years later Murwin, now a graduate of University of Connecticut School of Agriculture and home from the Korean War, bought 50 acres of that land. Holding down a full-time job for the state department of agriculture as a dairy inspector, he planned to farm "as a hobby," he later said. "I never dreamed of doing it full time."

Johnson's career with the state lasted 30 years; that of the farmer lasted a lifetime.

The first thing he did was build a coop and raise chickens for eggs. Then, he built a small barn, acquired a flock of

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sheep and went into the wool business. Vegetable gardens and orchards were planted and cultivated over the years, yielding annual harvests of green beans, tomatoes, corn, apples, pears, raspberries, and blueberries, much of which was canned and preserved.

The sheep became a focus, and Johnson raised 35 or 40 of the Border Leicester breed, known for their superior wool, which he sold to a customer in Maine. Sheep bred in the winter, produced lambs for the spring.

Hay, used for feed and mulching, was another major component of the Johnson farm, and it was raised in the wide-open fields we enjoy today. For years, the harvest was baled and sold locally, first at Prann's feed and grain store in Centerbrook and then, in later years, at Essex Hardware.



Over the years, Johnson shared his farm with the community, something he truly enjoyed. Local school children began making what became annual visits to the farm in the spring, watching as the sheep were sheared for their wool, helping to collect eggs and learning the benefits of farming naturally, using organic fertilizers.

I spent an hour with Murwin Johnson one warm summer afternoon. We walked from his house to the barn under the hot sun, turned past the chicken house, from which the sounds of hens emanated, and entered a welcome ramble of shade trees, tall oaks overlooking a well-worn dirt road. There's a light breeze blowing under the canopy. One lone



Johnson Farm Steward Dana Hill inaugurating new granite bench donated by the Rotary Club of Essex.

Wolf Oak stands out, a towering old tree, surrounded by mature trees that would be good for timber, says Johnson. The road opens to a further field, and a perfectly formed maple tree that stands by itself, green against the brown hay.

Beyond the field, a line of trees marks the path of a stream where the property ends. The sky is blue, the field is brown, the distant trees are green, and there are birds singing. "It's really a beautiful spot, and every day is different," he says to me. "And I

just have the feeling my Mother and Dad would love to have seen it kept open."

Murwin Johnson, "a farmer at heart," passed away in November of 2012. "He loved farming and the open space that he worked to create and preserve, seeing it as a connection to the soil on which we live," said ELT president Jim Denham. "Now present and future generations have the chance to see the land as he did. What a wonderful legacy to leave behind."



Johnson Farm is open for public access with parking only at the Read Hill Road entrance. Trails are still being developed in wooded sections but paths have been marked in the open fields.

Butterfly Habitat Planned for Cross Lots

A few aspiring lepidopterists, from the branch of zoology that deals with butterflies and moths, are working on developing a butterfly habitat in the Land Trust's Cross Lots Preserve. With the generous assistance of landscape architect, Anne Penniman, board members Bob Nussbaum, Tom Rutherford and Barbara Burgess will be inaugurating this 1200 square foot bed in



Spring Azure on New Jersey Tea

mid-May. Located on the field that is beside the stone wall rising from the parking lot, the team will install approximately 850 plants comprising 22 different varieties of perennials and shrubs.

According to Bob Nussbaum, "We will have sweeping masses of plants of varying heights. While some demonstration gardens feature a limited variety and are designed more to educate people about the plants to use to attract butterflies to their home garden, we want to do that as well as provide a large-scale habitat." The butterfly project fits in with the Land Trust's wild life habitat focus for Cross Lots.

The emphasis is on native plants including hyssops, milkweed, indigo, coneflower, asters and many more. The plan is to include good forage plants for caterpillars that will encourage the butterflies to stay rather than just visit. And the selection of plants is also designed to provide a good sequence of blooms across the seasons.

The butterfly habitat was kicked off this past spring with the help of Valley Regional High School students during their Community Service day. Essex builder Joseph Shea transported three truckloads of leaf mulch from the Town landfill.

Anyone interested in helping with this project should contact Barbara Burgess at the following email address: bburgess13@comcast.net.



A.J. Shea Construction delivering leaf mulch



High School students during Community Service Day



The new butterfly habitat plot ready for spring



Pearl Crescent with Aster



Monarch Butterfly



By Steve Knauth

It takes a team to make it happen.

Land trust volunteers working with the Essex Boy Scouts and backed by two civic organizations and a pair of anonymous donors teamed up to tackle a field project to enhance the trust's latest property acquisition.

Eagle Scout Dan Ryan spearheaded the building of a foot-bridge that now spans a portion of the Falls River and completes a bog walk at the new Pond Meadow property in Ivoryton. The 18-acre parcel of woods and wetlands opens officially this spring.

In April 2015, not long after the property was purchased, Essex Land Trust (ELT) volunteers Bob Nussbaum, Tom Rutherford, Geoff Furtney and steward John Cosenza walked the property. "We circled along the borders trying to avoid the bogs that characterize a large portion of the acreage," Furtney recalled. "We all saw the potential for a bog walk to carry hikers above the extended wetlands and much of the conversation was about practical ways to build it."

The group also realized they would need a bridge. When the trail blazers reached the Falls River end of the property, they found themselves blocked by the stream flowing from the river and the so-called "fire pond", an emergency water source for the fire department. The conversation immediately turned to the need for some sort of a bridge, Furtney says. "Without a way to cross the water, it was a beautiful - but dead-end - walk."

Help came in the form of a 16-year-old Eagle Scout,



Dan Ryan. Ryan and his father contacted Rutherford, the land trust's Chief Steward, asking if there were any field projects that could meet Eagle Scout criteria. "We said, yes - if you'd like to build a bridge by the gazebo over the water to complete the loop," Furtney recalls. "We met Dan and his dad, John, and they were immediately enthusiastic."

Measurements were taken and Ryan worked with the ELT supporters to develop initial plans and a budget. After making his way through the intricacies of town government to obtain the needed permits, the Eagle Scout was ready with a final plan. It called for a wooden span 30-feet long to be built in sections, anchored at either end with sturdy cement pilings fortified with rebar. At the request of the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Commission, the floor of the span was built above the flood elevation of this flood-prone area.

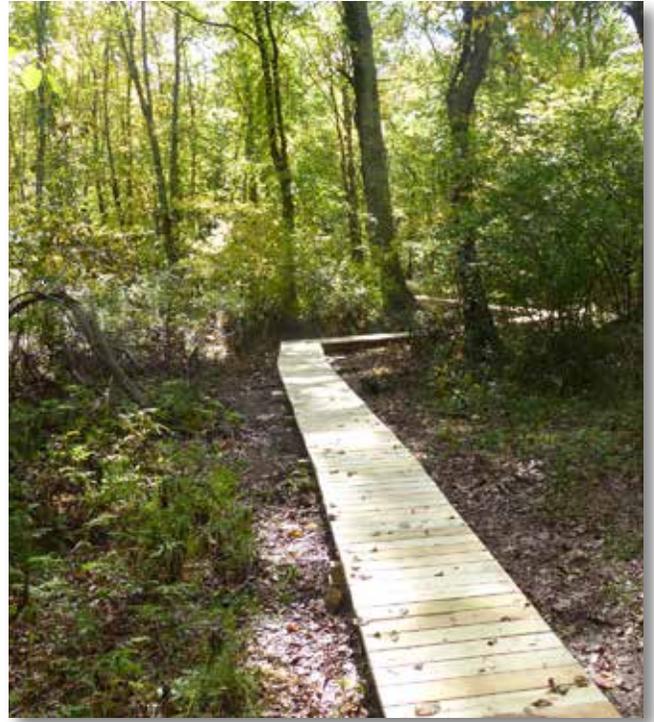
A fundraising initiative was organized and both the Essex Foundation and the Essex Community Fund contributed, along with two individuals. In the fall, field-work began in earnest. Ryan organized his scout troop, ordered the materials and went to work. The bridge project was finished "exactly to spec by the end of the month," says Furtney.

The completed bog trail at Pond Meadow stretches about 450 feet along the property's western border. The trail is a single loop starting at the gazebo, leading on to Ryan's bridge, which spans an otherwise impassable bog

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and continues on into an area of old-growth forest and wetlands. The new Pond Meadow Preserve offers visitors a wonderful ecology, protected by the swampland with at last count over 15 significant tree species on the looping trail...from elm to tulip trees, stands of beech and ash... and four different species of oak.



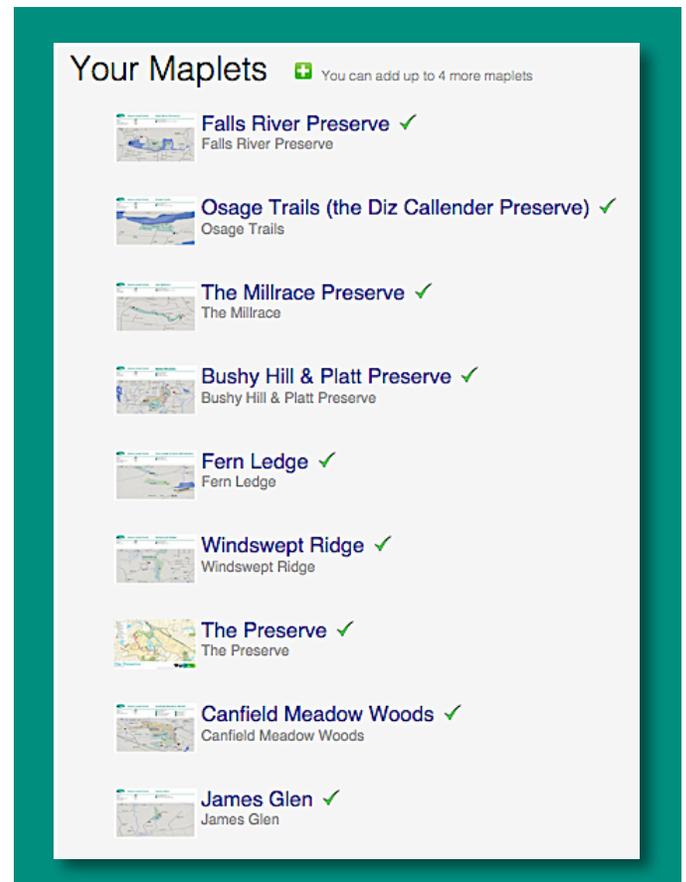
ELT Briefs

Property Trail Maps on Maplets

Maplets is an iOS and Android application for offline maps of national parks, state parks, zoos, ski resorts, trail maps, transit systems, university campuses and more. The Essex Land Trust has created an account on this App where all our trail maps are stored. The way to use this application is to download the application onto your smart phone (one time cost is \$2.99).

Accessing the application, one selects “your location” and maps are then listed in terms of proximity to where one is located. Once a map is selected, you can locate yourself on the particular property, making it much easier to know where one is and how to reach a specific destination. We have installed 16 Essex Open Space properties on the Maplets App.

The applications can then be used for any number of maps that are available. At last count there were nearly 12,000 different downloadable maps. Maplets is a product of Zaia Design and is available for your iPhone, iPad or Android devices.



Coming Events – Mark Your Calendar!



Roots of the Republic: Revolutionary Trees and the Birth of America

Monday, March 7 Essex Town Hall, 29 West Avenue, 2 pm

A joint lecture with the Essex Garden Club. Author Eric Rutkow whose book "American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation" tells the extraordinary story of the relationship between Americans and their trees. As symbols of liberty, community, and civilization, trees are perhaps the loudest silent figures in America's complicated history. Without trees, there would have been no cities, ships, railroads, stockyards, wagons, barrels, furniture, newspapers, rifles, or firewood. In an entertaining and informative presentation, Rutkow re-conceives America's historical relationship with the trees and forests that shaped the development of the nation.

Vernal Pools and Emerging Life in The Preserve

Saturday, April 9 The Preserve East Entrance parking lot off Ingham Hill Road, Essex, 9 am

Join ecologist and Ivoryton resident Bob Russo on a hike in the Preserve in a search for salamanders, frogs, and plants emerging from the long winter. He will guide you to a few of The Preserve's vernal pools and describe the biological and geological features that make these areas so unique and bountiful. Meet at the first access parking lot. 1-1/2 hours duration. Easy to moderate terrain. Bring boots. Open to all ages. Bad weather cancels.

Essex Land Trust Annual Meeting

Thursday, April 14 Hamilton Hall, Essex Meadows, 5:30 pm 30 Bokum Road, Essex

Join us for the ELT's festive Cocktail Party and Annual Meeting. Light food will be served. Tickets (\$30) for the cocktail buffet (5:30-6:30) will be available at the door. Business meeting and presentation that follow are free to all. Non-members are welcome.

Birding and Nature Walk in The Preserve and Essex Meadows Property

Saturday, May 16 The Preserve East Entrance parking lot off Ingham Hill Road, Essex, 9 am

ELT president and birder Jim Denham will lead a 1-1/2 hour walk through the Essex Meadows fields and into the new Preserve property. The timing will coincide with the peak of bird migration and breeding season, so expect to see and hear dozens of species around this very diverse landscape. All levels of knowledge are welcome. Essex Meadows will provide refreshments at the conclusion of the walk. Easy to moderate walking on trails. Meet at the first access parking lot. Bad weather cancels.

Early-summer Kayak Trip, Concert and Picnic

Sunday, June 12 Main Street Park, Essex 3:30 pm and 5:30 pm

Join us for an afternoon of activities at Essex's Main Street Park. A kayak/canoe trip into peaceful Essex coves will be led by Phil Miller. Boating participants should register and launch their crafts prior to the 3:30 pm departure time (high tide is 6:22 pm). A safety boat will accompany. All others are invited to join us following the boating at the Park at 5:30 pm for a BYO Picnic and concert by the Corinthian Jazz Band. Parking is available on Main St. and behind the Essex Post Office. Bad weather cancels.

Hike at Pond Meadow Preserve

Saturday, June 25 Parking area at Comstock Field, 9 am Park Road, Ivoryton

This new ELT property has three distinguishing aspects: an abundance of old trees, a swamp traversed by a 450 foot elevated walkway/bog-walk... and when the trees are leafed out there is a double canopy not unlike a rain forest. The property comprises 18 acres and includes a bridge over a stream that flows into the Falls River. Rain/thunderstorms cancel.

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