



AVON LAND TRUST

Winter E-Newsletter 2022



Have you ever noticed the deafening quiet and stillness after a new-fallen snow? The majesty of a winter landscape never ceases to awe me. Trees, with their branches outlined in white snow carefully balanced upon them, lend a magical touch like sparkling fairy dust. The pine boughs, laden down by the weight, take on their own splendor. Streams and brooks trickle stone-cold clear beneath their frosty blanket, and ponds freeze over in an opaque veil. Ground vegetation is transfixed in crystalline stasis, yet in this forbidding icy world seemingly frozen in

time, there is life. Avon is now adorned in its winter finest, and both people and wildlife, are going about their day.

Welcome to the Avon Land Trust winter newsletter! In this edition, are articles on a variety of topics melding history with the natural environment. We invite you to join us for our 2022 Winter guest speakers via Zoom on Avon Free Public Library site. There is also a Special Feature article as our lead offering. As always, we welcome new members and would be grateful for your financial support to allow ALT to continue its mission of land preservation and nature trails for everyone!

ALT – NEWS

- The Trust is pleased to announce the acquisition of a new parcel of land located at 100 Woodhaven Drive in the last quarter of 2021. The parcel is an acre and was purchased by Logan H. Do. Many thanks to our co-presidents Dr. Robert Breckenridge and Mr. Richard Dubiel, for their efforts in securing this property, and to Avon son, Attorney Paul Potanka.
- The Land Trust held an early winter hike on December 4th, co-sponsored with Avon Parks and Recreation. Land Trust board member and Hike Chairperson Paul Schned gave the introductory remarks, and Board Member Christine Graesser led the group of hikers. The trail was in excellent condition thanks to the dedicated work of Scott Lewis, and volunteers like Gerry LaChance and Bob Bishop. The hike was a great success, and more hikes are being planned for Spring and next Fall.
- The Avon Land Trust Board of Directors awarded a 2021 Volunteer Recognition Award plaque and gift card to Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate, for her work on our digital newsletters and her Land Parcel History project at their November 10, 2021 meeting. The Land Parcel History project is a research work compiling the ownership history of over three hundred years on our thirty five properties. The project will culminate in a booklet that will include photos, information about habitats, vegetation, wildlife and

land use. We expect this booklet to be available in early 2022 if grant funding is awarded!

SPECIAL FEATURE- The Art of Nature



It would be the understatement of the century to say that John and Chrissie Desopo love their home and their community. Unless you have actually been fortunate enough to visit the inside of their beautifully restored Greek-Revival home, you might not know that they also love Nature...not just plants and flowers, but animals too.

The photo above is the Desopo's family room. To me, it is like one of those kid's picture challenges where you have to find a hidden object. One could stand motionless, just this room alone for a couple of hours, just taking in all it has to offer. There are John's antique tools and woodworking machines, and some cacti in the windows. But what attracts me, are the woodland animals perched or hanging around the room. Can you find the bear cub? LOL There is also a ram's head mounted on the wall, a 'flying' male mallard duck, and a pheasant suspended from the ceiling. The most impressive woodland animals, in suspended animation, are a raccoon and a fox who are just lounging on offshoots from a sturdy wood support beam. These seem so real (because they ARE real), that they look as though they would like to have a conversation with you. And that's exactly how I think the Desopo's want you to feel-at home.

The home is truly like a museum of natural history, however, it has warmth and character. The stuffed animals in the family room are not the house's only wildlife residents. In the parlour, there is a magnificent elk bust protruding from the wall, right over their sofa! Talk about a conversation piece! He, too, looks as though he wants to ask you to sit down for a cup of tea and talk about the news of the day. In the Desopo's dining room, there is also another bear cub on the wall, just stopping by for a cocktail or so it appears. The kitchen sports some rainbow trout adorning the oven (don't you have some too?), and some framed beetle bugs on the dishwasher. It's about the Nature, not the appliances! And at the junction between two rooms, where there are two fireplaces at right angles, are a squadron of fanciful art deco winged-frogs hanging from the ceiling. Why not? The whole house is eclectic!



Outside the Desopo house, locals are familiar with their auspicious gardens, evocative of early European country gardens. Beyond the vegetation, there is a koi pond that also supports various frogs, tadpoles, and other amphibians. Their yard is a manicured wilderness, and is its own Nature preserve. I've included some photos of various wildlife creatures that stop by the gardens for its solitude and perhaps a drink from the two ponds, below. My favorite are the barn swallows that nest every year in the Desopo's garage. Watch out if you are ever standing between the back door of the house, and the first bay of the garage! That is the swallow's flight path and although they are masters of aerial maneuvering, one can't help wanting to duck when they fly by so close to your head.

The Desopo's home and gardens are an ode to Mother Nature. Chrissie is the personification of her! Their home's message is simple: love Nature; love life; love one another. But they don't take themselves too seriously. How many homes do you know of that have gargoyles as greeters?



Photos: The Desopos, used with permission

“The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*

<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/3460613-nature?page=1>

Avon Flora and Fauna ~

Wildlife Hibernation in Wintery Avon

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



Photo: JMC/ALT

Slowly, almost imperceptibly unless one is really paying attention, different species of our native wildlife disappears from our landscape for hibernation. My first clue that animals are preparing for winter, is when I notice several squirrels in my yard tirelessly finding and burying acorns. One saw me watching him, and it was almost like he was waiting for me to go, so I wouldn't see where he hid his food! I noted another acrobatic squirrel perilously going out on the smaller branches of an oak tree that still held onto some leaves. He would snag them and put them in his mouth, then use his highway-in-the-sky network of branches to go back to his nest, and add more padding of leaves for winter insulation. How do

they know to do that? Squirrels don't hibernate, but need shelter to survive. The chipmunks in my yard, from sunrise to sunset, are scurrying back and forth putting food into their burrows. According to the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection website ¹, chipmunks sleep for long periods in winter, but will wake to eat now and then. I also notice before a storm, dark-eyed juncos descend on my yard frantically searching for tiny seeds. These birds don't migrate, but when the snow is deep, they will go under my deck for shelter and whatever food they can find on the bare ground.

I was falsely under the impression that black bears hibernated throughout the winter. According to DEEP: "Black bears are not classified as true hibernators but their body temperature is lowered and heart rate slowed during winter denning. Denning enables bears to overcome unfavorable weather conditions and lack of food during winter. Denning bears do not eat, drink, urinate, or defecate. However, they will usually wake up if disturbed during their winter dormancy." ² In a cursory view of their website, I noted the following animals hibernate: bats, woodchucks, snapping turtles, eastern box turtle, salamanders, Eastern spadefoot, five-lined skinks and others. Some animals such as snakes, 'brumate' meaning they are awake, but inactive. These animals find places to ride out the winter such as frogs that burrow into the mud of a pond, or secreting themselves under woodpiles or the like. Speaking of frogs, I learned on the Connecticut Woodlands website, this interesting tidbit: "While ice crystals form in some parts of a hibernating frogs' body, high concentrations of glucose present in a frog's vital organs keep them from freezing (nature's antifreeze!)" ³ I thought that



Photo: JMC/ALT

¹ Connecticut Department of Environmental Energy and Protection, <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Wildlife/Fact-Sheets/Chipmunk>

² Ibid., <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Wildlife/Fact-Sheets/Black-Bear>

³ Connecticut Woodlands, <https://www.ctwoodlands.org/environmental-education/wildlife-winter>

was fascinating! Other woodland animals are active year-round, however, they will have periods of time when they hole up in their dens, burrows, or shelters until the weather improves a bit. These include raccoons, opossum, red fox, cottontail rabbits, and deer. Food sources for these animals is much more challenging to find in the winter.

Through evolution over the millennia, animals have gained the ability to adapt to extreme weather conditions, food scarcity, encroachment by humans, and still manage to reproduce and thrive. The Avon Land Trust facilitates wildlife in various ways. For instance, milkweed is grown on several of our land parcels to provide a food source for monarch butterflies that migrate in winter. When trees fall across dedicated hiking paths on our land parcels, they are sawn into smaller sections and moved off to the border areas. These felled trees then provide food sources for insects and habitat for ground dwellers. The Trust also installs duck nesting boxes to facilitate breeding on two of our parcels with ponds.

In early December, while I was outside in my yard, I heard the honking of a flock of geese overhead that were now in formation to head South for the winter. I marvel every time I witness these winged wonders of Nature. I ask myself questions such as, how do they choose the leader of the formation? Why are fowl imbued with internal GPS navigation and humans are not? Do they stop at a Denny's along the way for a quick stack? Somehow these amazing animals fly thousands of miles round trip, and return to the exact pond or lake from which they left.

Nature is AWESOME!

Avon's Natural Resources ~

Stonewalls, Stone Foundations, & Monuments – The Strong, Silent Types

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



When thinking about natural resources, rocks probably don't come to mind first. But when thinking about rocks from a historical perspective, they collectively, were an abundant and free commodity. Few of us today pay any attention to the multitude of stonewalls that are ubiquitous around not only our town, but throughout New England. Back in the day, farmers couldn't plant any crops without first clearing the land. This was arduous, back-breaking, soul-crushing labor that paved the way for generations of families to live off the land. So, what did most farmer's do with these stones, rocks, and boulders? Some were 'tossed' into borders or relocated to form boundary lines on their land, or to divide pasture land for livestock. These are aptly referred to as *fieldstone* walls.

These rocks and boulders were pushed near the surface by millions of years of volcanic activity and then carried by glaciers. Stonewalls are comprised of rocks that contain many types of minerals and have different design forms. I consulted work by Dr. Robert Thorson, Professor of Geology, UCONN at Storrs for information. I liked this quotation: "However, no matter where they

are located, walls assume a common form when the three main factors of bedrock lithology, glacial handling, and cultural action are similar. In the process of reading the walls, they become clues to landscape history.”⁴ Avon has stonewalls still remaining in many woodlands and on former farmland. They represent vestiges of an earlier time in Avon’s agrarian past.



Photo: JMC/ALT

Stonewalls were not the only used for field stones. They were also used as foundation stones and basements for early houses. There are some old homes in Avon with fieldstone foundations and some with red sandstone foundations. Red sandstone was also used for the foundations (water tower) and buildings (forge) at Avon Old Farms School,⁵ and our Town Hall complex.⁶ There was a quarry on the property of the boys school, which is now defunct and filled with water, that provided the raw material for stone masons to cut into blocks.⁷ Red sandstone was also used for some walls as in the photo of a landscape border at the West Avon Congregational Church’s garden. Fieldstone was, and is, also used for functional and decorative purposes such a fireplaces, chimneys, and even entire homes! Another use is for headstones and monuments as seen above. The obelisk has a sandstone base.



Photo: JMC/ALT



Photo credit: PAK

Rocks, in earlier days, were also used for mill dams. The photo at left shows the remains of a mill dam on Nod Brook. Avon’s earliest mill grant dates to 1711 and the last mill went out of use over two hundred years later. Today, to the trained eye of archaeologists and geologists, these rocks in stonewalls or just scattered on a former mill site, are remnants of yesteryear that tell the story of their lives. Who knew rocks were so verbose?



“Everything is flowing -- going somewhere, animals and so-called lifeless rocks as well as water. Thus the snow flows fast or slow in grand beauty-making glaciers and avalanches; the air in majestic floods carrying minerals, plant leaves, seeds, spores, with streams of music and

⁴ <https://stonewall.uconn.edu/investigation/classification/toward-a-stone-wall-taxonomy/taxonomy-domain/>

⁵ Historic Buildings of Connecticut, www.historicbuildingsct.com

⁶ <http://artsfvac.org/about-us>

⁷ Ramsey, Gordon, Clark, *Aspiration & Perseverance, The History of Avon Old Farms School*, (Avon Old Farms School, Inc., Avon, Connecticut, 1984) 129

fragrance; water streams carrying rocks... While the stars go streaming through space pulsed on and on forever like blood...in Nature's warm heart."⁸ - John Muir

If The Woods Could Talk ~

Native People on Whortleberry Hill Long Ago

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



Avon Land Trust is the steward of six land parcels on roads with Native American names. Two of the parcels are on Sepous Road and four are on Pequot Road, both on Huckleberry Hill, formerly Whortleberry Hill [same fruit]. Now, I had assumed at first, that these Native names were just randomly assigned. Wrong! I had known, by some reading of local history, that the Tunxis Indians (now Tunxis Native Americans), were in the Farmington Valley. The photo⁹ at left is a monument to the Tunxis Indians dated 1940, in Riverside Cemetery. The meadows on Meadow Road in Farmington are where Tunxis were known to have lived, as well as the Tunxis

[Plantation] golf and country club, and Tunxis Community College namesake. What I did not know until researching for this article, is that the name Sepous is synonymous to Tunxis. According to an online listing, 'Tribes in Connecticut' by the Connecticut State Library, the Tunxis were located eight to ten miles west of the Connecticut River, along the Farmington River.¹⁰ The Town of Farmington historical marker states: "On December 1, 1645, the Court voted "that the Plantation cauled Tunxis shalbe cauled Farmington." The Pequots (Mashantucket), on the library site, were found west of the Niantic River,¹¹ however, according to Dr. Kathy Hermes, Professor of History at CCSU, the Pequot's range was not as far as the Farmington Valley.

I began to wonder who named our Town roads this way? These two roads are newer, comparatively speaking, as Huckleberry Hill became more populated. I consulted the 'Lower Farmington River/Salmon Brook Wild and Scenic Management Plan', June 2011, for a map to see if there had been any Native activity in the area of these two roads. I also used a Google Map to follow the Farmington River and to pinpoint both Sepous and Pequot Roads, and compare them to the less detailed map in the study. Sure enough! At the bend in the river where it flows easterly, and then a sharp turn to the south, there is coloration that "meets some of the archaeological predictive criteria".¹² Bingo!

⁸ <https://www.earthdayquotes.com/nature-quotes/john-muir-quotes>

⁹ Connecticut Digital Archive, Mills Photograph Collection of Connecticut, 1895-1955 (PG 180)

¹⁰ <https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/nativeamericans/cttribes> (DeForest, John W. History of the Indians of Connecticut from the Earliest Known Period to 1850 [CSL call number: HistRef E 78 .C7 D4 1991]., pg. 52.

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 58.

¹² Lower Farmington River/Salmon Brook Wild and Scenic Management Plan, June 2011, Fig. 29 Cultural Landscape, Potential Archaeological Sensitivity Areas, K. Feder & J. Harmon; DEP; TeleAtlas (DPS); FRWA. Prepared by J. Bolton, FRWA; 05/11.

The Land Trust records on these properties indicate they were a part of the 'Tunxis Plantation Camp' that was destroyed in the big flood of 1955. 'Tunxis Plantation Camp' was not Native American however. It was a small, seasonal development comprised of scores of small parcels along the river, with small cabins or camps, according to our co-president, Rick Dubiel, whose family has lived on Huckleberry Hill for 100 years. I think it is marvelous that the Land Trust has these parcels in its care. This means that the Trust will protect the land from development, perpetually.

History Beneath Our Feet ~

Avon's Oldest Cemetery – Cider Brook

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



Photo credit: Findagrave courtesy of the Avon Free Public Library, Oct. 26, 2016

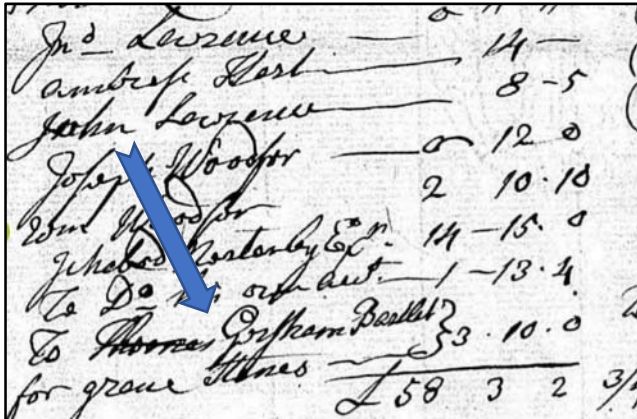
To really learn about a town's early history, one of the best resources is its cemeteries...literally *history beneath our feet!* Cider Brook Cemetery is our town's first and oldest cemetery. It is tucked away deep in the woods on a sloping hillside, and is a place of serenity and reverence. The oldest burial there is Joseph Woodford, born in 1645 and died in 1710. The Woodford family is one of Avon's earliest settler families. There are other early names here such as Miller, Bishop, Hart and Wilcox who owned homes and farms in Cider Brook section along what is now Waterville Road/Route 10. Mr. Woodford actually lived at the juncture of today's Route 10 and Route 4 in Farmington with his wife Rebecca Newell Woodford, who died 1711, and is interred here. Their house still stands, but time has ravaged it beyond salvation, I fear.

If one studies a cemetery's residents, one can learn much by examining the available data both on tombstones and in cemetery records. For instance, early epidemics can be discerned by finding multiple people who died in the same year. Such epidemics included spotted fever, smallpox, typhoid fever, etc. Some clusters of dates don't reflect epidemics, but rather transmissible maladies such as dysentery and consumption, a.k.a. tuberculosis, and the like. To verify if the person who happened to die in a specific year, was indeed related to a specific disease, historians can consult a town's mortality schedules or death certificates. Newspaper obituaries are also a primary source for information not only about a person's life, but perhaps also their demise. Church records are yet another source. These statistics, while grim, are enlightening. In the early years there were a remarkable number of infant deaths due to lack of inoculations, accidents, and sometimes failure to thrive. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are many octogenarians, nonagenarians, and some centenarians, interred in Cider Brook.

I took a Graduate course at Central Connecticut State University titled 'New England Burial Grounds'. I chose to focus on Cider Brook Cemetery for my research work. I had already known this cemetery is the final resting place of many of early Avon's (then Northington), Revolutionary War soldiers. There are twelve men interred here who fought for our nation's Independence. I learned in my research there are also men buried therein who fought in the French and Indian War, the War of

1812, the American Civil War, and other wars. But what caught my attention about this cemetery especially, was its unique and interesting tombstone carvings.

My favorite tombstone is that of the Reverend Ebenezer Booge (1716-1767), shown in the photo at the beginning of this article. Reverend Booge was the first pastor of The Second Congregational Church, colloquially known as 'The Lord's Barn.' The Reverend's tombstone was hand-carved by Gershom Bartlett. He was known for his cartoon-like images showing a lightbulb-shaped head, and somewhat unique wings. Another characteristic feature, is the resemblance of the continuous line for the eyes and nose to an 'eye' of the sewing accessories, hook and eye. ¹³



Funerary art, reflecting various religious and cultural beliefs through time, are represented in Cider Brook. These carvings are yet another insight into a town's early belief systems.

On viewing Reverend Booge's estate papers (Ancestry.com), I found an entry of the payment to Gershom Bartlett for two gravestones [there is also a footstone], for 3 pounds, 10 pence. That is roughly about \$4.00 in today's U.S. dollars. Try doing that today!

The Reverend's inscription reads:

*Here lies interred ye
Body of ye Revd. Mr.
Ebenezer Booge ye late
Prudent Pious & Faith
full Pastor of ye Church
Of Christ in Northington
Who Departed This Life Febr. 2d 1767* ¹⁴



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THE AVON LAND TRUST HISTORY AND MISSION STATEMENT

The Avon Land Trust was founded on May 23, 1973 in order to conserve and hold in trust the natural resources of the Town of Avon – woodlands, fields, lakes, rivers, open spaces and the plant and animal life living therein.

¹³ The Farber Gravestone Collection, American Antiquarian Society, <http://farber.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet>

¹⁴ www.findagrave.com

By doing so we hope to retain the natural charm of our town. Future generations may not remember our names, but they will certainly be glad we were here.

Mission: - To preserve and protect undeveloped land in Avon- By doing so, to enhance our town's scenic beauty and its environmental and historic resources. - To promote the conservation and management of woodlands and open space. - To acquire through donations and purchases additional land which can be preserved in its natural state. - To maintain wildlife habitats on said properties. - To provide public access to appropriate properties and in so doing provide public enjoyment of nature. - To actively seek wetlands, woodlands meadowlands and ridgeland which have unique scenic, historic, scientific and ecological significance for Avon.