



# The Avon Land Trust

## QUARTERLY E-NEWSLETTER

Spring 2021

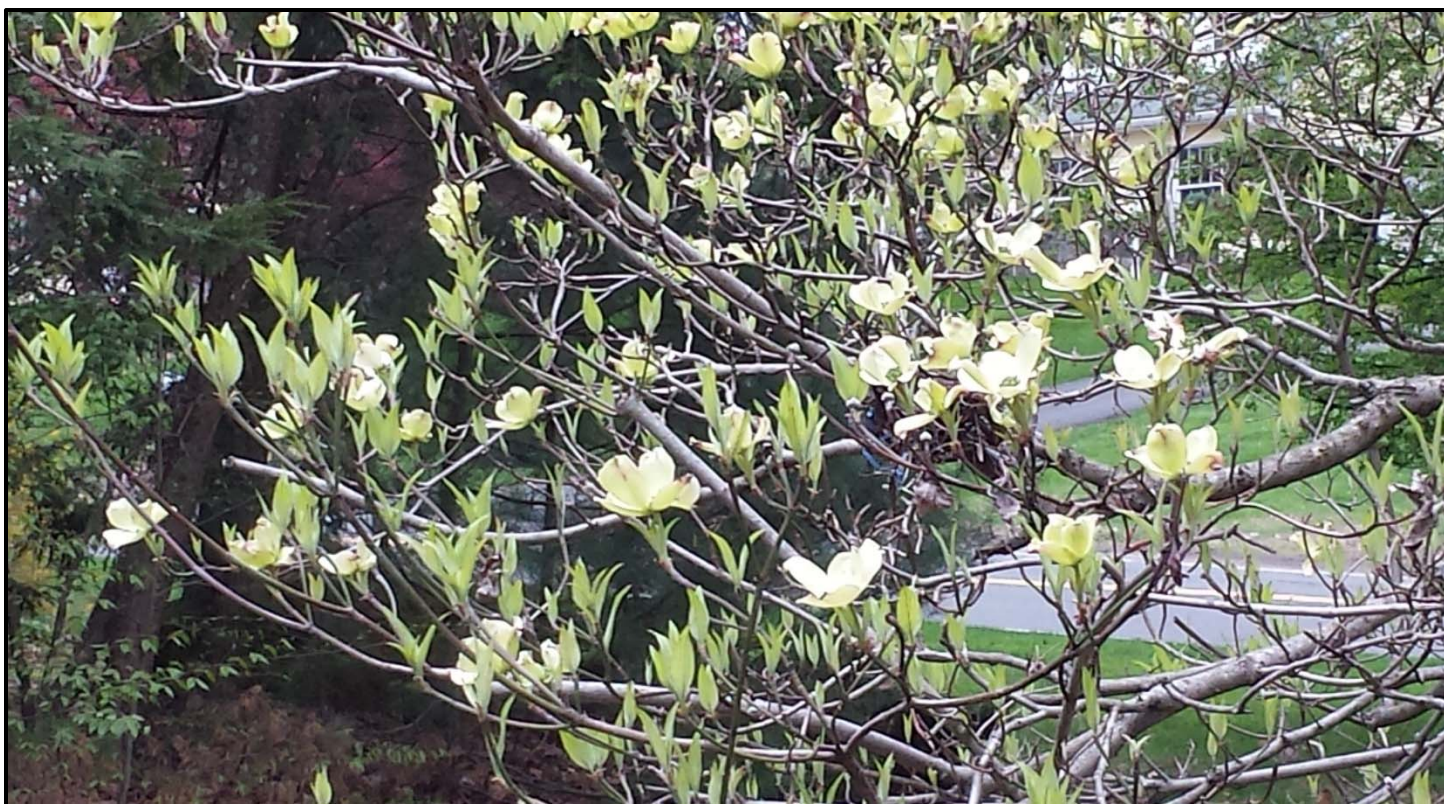
The Avon Land Trust is pleased to present to you the first edition of our e-newsletter! Not to worry though, we still plan to mail out our popular hardcopy edition to everyone in the fall!

We are also proud to introduce the expert work of our first Historian Laureate, Janet M. Connor. Many of our land trust properties have deep roots in the history of Avon, which Janet brings to life for us here, along with providing a wonderful appreciation of nature and beauty.

After a long, snowy winter, it is finally springtime in Avon. Spring has historically been associated with new birth, the beauty of flowers, and the return of warm weather. Here you will find Janet's articles about the sights, scents, and scenery around Avon, and we invite you to enjoy the beauty of Nature after its long sleep.

Special thanks to Assistant Town Manager Grace Tiezzi for providing the distribution channel for our e-newsletters!

Rick Dubiel and Dr Robert Breckinridge  
Co-presidents, Avon Land Trust



White dogwood tree

(Photo credit: Janet M. Conner)

## *Avon Flora and Fauna ~*

### **Le Bon Printemps! a.k.a. The Good Spring!**

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate

Growing up in the suburbs of northern New Jersey, I experienced the four seasons for the first twenty years of my life. Summers went by so quickly, it seemed, and it was back to school again in the Fall. I recall the changes in the landscape, from tree leaves and grass in rich emerald greens, changing over to the magnificent colors of Autumn. Then leaves and grass turned brown and were soon covered in feet of snow. My dad plowed our long driveway with a Sears lawn tractor, and we kids built snow forts, ice skated, and went sledding. Somehow, we didn't notice we couldn't feel our toes as we stayed out so long playing in the cold. It's amazing I have ten toes today!

The coming of Spring was so wonderful as the countryside began to come back to life. My mother's yellow daffodils and white jonquils came into bloom to add cheer to the front walkway. The purple rhododendron burst forth in showy blooms that attracted bumble bees. The air now smelled sweet, and the sound of small airplanes had a different pitch in the warmer air. Birds returned from their long migration, and it was always fun to find a robin's nest with turquoise eggs inside. The smell of newly mowed grass, the fun of making dandelion stem necklaces, or finding a toad hiding in the stonewall awaiting nightfall for his dinnertime, are all part of my memories. In my mind's eye, I recall all the flowers being in bloom at the same time, though they came and went in their own time.

Twenty-two years ago, I chose Avon as our new home because it mirrored where I grew up in New Jersey. I love the Springtime in our bucolic town! I'm excited every year as soon as the snow recedes to find I already have little green or red sprouts of my Spring bulbs coming up. The crocus used to be the first, but the voles have eaten all of those! I see my beautiful purple iris is coming up, my forsythia has started to get some color on its stems, my mini daffodils, tulips, and grape hyacinth are waiting for the sun to warm the



earth just a bit more. There are already buds on our hardwood trees and the moss which covers most of our yard, to my husband's chagrin, is making a lovely green carpet.

The other day I saw two of 'my' chipmunks frolicking in the backyard, and I expect to see a new bumper crop of baby chipmunks. Of course, the red-tailed hawks that were born across the street, still patrol our yard so the chipmunk numbers never get out of control. I have not seen any black bear as of yet, but always keep an eye on the woods when I am outside. We had a red fox around last Fall, so perhaps he will grace our yard again. And there has been a bobcat for years just up the road. Every Spring, I put a hanging flower basket at the front door and the smallest cute birds nest there, making the tiniest white eggs. Over our front door, other birds build these magnificent nests of twigs and mud that stick onto the wood. I love to watch them come and go, feeding their young, and watching each fledgling leave the nest. Ah, it will be a Good Spring here in Avon!

## *Avon Natural Resources~*

### 23.1 Square Miles\* of Biodiversity

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



View looking west from Talcott Mountain on Avon below (Photo credit: Janet M. Conner)

In today's modernity, folks are no longer as dependent on the land as were our predecessors. We are so accustomed to just hopping in our vehicles and driving to the store to buy whatever we need or wish for, or ordering online. But let's take a step back in time to the early days of our town for some insight on how the town of Avon, evolved from farms, to an affluent bedroom community.



Quick history lesson: Avon was originally called Nod. It changed to Northington in 1750, as it was North of Farmington proper, and became a separate parish. Early settlers had established the first sawmill by 1711 and gristmill, thereafter, to support the settlers in the eastern part of the town, and there were settlers in the western area as well. Mills were needed for lumber to build homes and barns, and gristmills were needed to grind grain for food and livestock. Fast forward to 1830, when Avon incorporated as a Town after the success of the Farmington Canal allowed for commerce and communication with outlying towns. In those days, LAND was the most valuable commodity as it produced and supported the products that folks depended on for survival and later added income from cash crops.



Tobacco shed at Woodford Farm/Pickin' Patch on Nod Road with crops in foreground (Photo credit: Janet M. Conner)



Avon Creamery 1908 from the Clinton B. Hadsell collection at the Avon Free Public Library/Connecticut Digital Archive

Most people have heard of Federal census records for population counts. But one of the other tools that Historians and others consult, is something known as 'Non-population Agricultural schedules.' These schedules are useful, along with other documents, as a window into the past. For Connecticut, these records were compiled from 1850 to 1880. The categories covered include acreage divided into tilled, pasture, orchard, woodland, grassland, including value of the land, labor costs and fencing. Then livestock including horses and mules, oxen, milch (milk) cows, 'neat' cattle, and their products in gallons of milk, pounds of butter, and cheese. Next is sheep and lambs and the number of fleeces and weight of wool,

followed by swine, poultry and egg production. These are followed by cereal crops: barley, buckwheat, oats, rye, wheat and Indian corn. Then peas and beans (pulse), flax and hemp (fibers), sorghum and maple (sugar/molasses), hops, potatoes (Irish), and tobacco [cash crop]. Orchard crops of apples and peaches are denoted by bushels produced. Depending on the year of schedule, other categories include vineyards/wine produced, market gardens, bees/beeswax and forest products. As you can see, the land was the natural resource that supported other natural resources of plants and animals for the farmers and their families. Just think about growing and making everything you need from food to clothing to furniture right in your own backyard! Over time, Avon created more 'mill seats' for sawmills and gristmills, and clothier's works and carding machines took textile production off the farm, and into the manufactory. Avon began to quasi-industrialize with the advent of a steam powered sawmill and the railroad came thru town in 1849, putting the

Farmington Canal out of business. Avon had a cotton thread company, a joint stock corporation creamery, and a fuse company, however, it never became an industrial center.

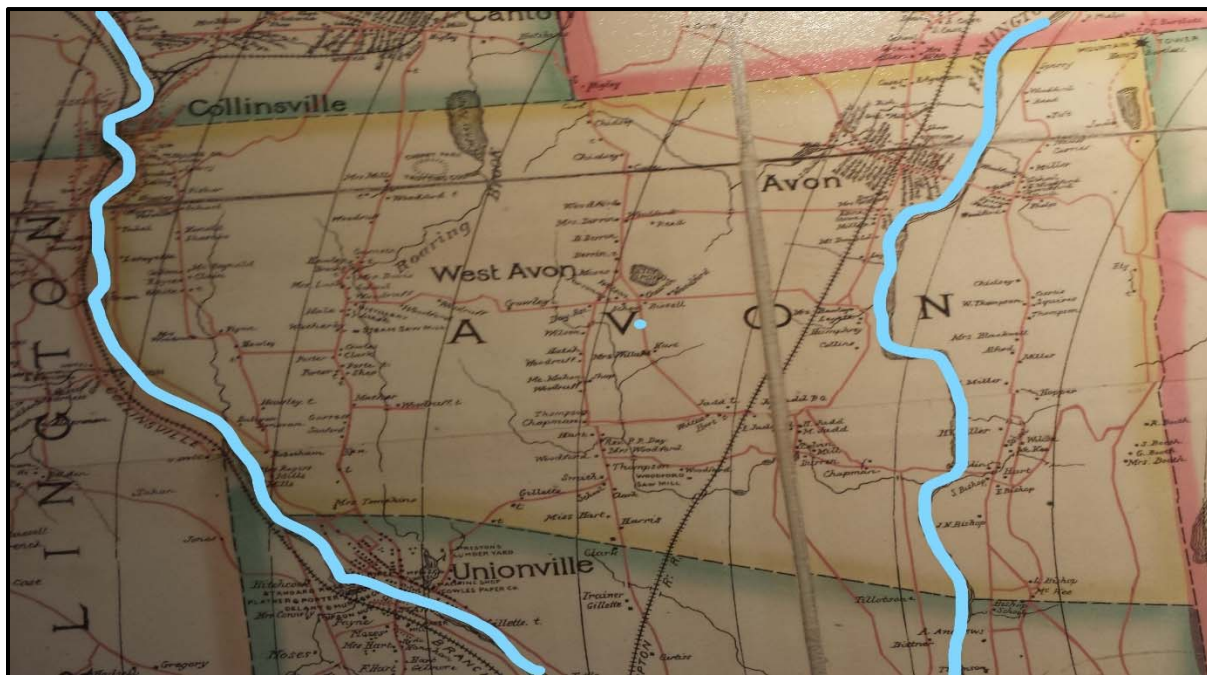
Today there are but a few working farms left in Avon that are nostalgic reminders of days of yore, when farmers worked sun up till sun down, utilizing the natural resources for sustenance long before commercial stores. Our town is still rich in natural resources of beautiful land - woodlands, grasslands, wetlands, fertile soil and traprock, a vibrant river, ponds and brooks, vegetation, a small quantity of livestock, and plenty of wildlife. The Avon Land Trust works to preserve land, habitat, and the natural resources therein.

\* <http://www.city-data.com/city/Avon-Connecticut.html>

## *History Beneath Our Feet~*

### Along the banks of the Farmington River in Avon

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



Driving Chart of Hartford and Vicinity, Published by Albert A. Hyde & Company, New York 1884

The Farmington River meanders around Avon, flowing southerly along the border of Huckleberry Hill/Burlington town line, and actually does a U-turn in the center of Farmington, and then flows back through Avon paralleling Route 10 thru Cider Brook and East Avon sections. Have you ever walked along the riverbanks or viewed the river from the bridge on Route 44? While the scenery is resplendent in any season, what you may not know is the history that happened along the river and its banks.

Native people used the river and its floodplain for survival. The river provided a food source, hydration, and water for the crops. Archaeologists have found artifacts along the riverbanks used by Native people in early Avon. In the June 2011 Lower Farmington River and Salmon Brook Wild and Scenic Management Plan, there are three campsites, a discovery of "lithic scatter", and even a Native village noted along the river.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, a Paleo-Indian site was unearthed during the replacement of the bridge over the river at Old Farms Road and Waterville Road dating 12,500 year ago!

Many folks have heard about the Underground Railroad and may know that Farmington was considered the "Grand Central Station" for its location, and 'conductors' who guided them. This was a clandestine

<sup>1</sup> Lower Farmington River and Salmon Brook Wild and Scenic Management Plan, June 2011, Figure 28 Cultural Landscape, Prehistoric Archaeological Sites



operation to move enslaved people, 'passengers', along a route to safety in Canada. Early Avon (Northington) men, were part of this operation as well. Under the cover of darkness, the fugitives were guided along the banks of the Farmington River from Farmington and through Avon. "Phineas Gabriel in Avon was an agent, escorting or directing fugitives north along the Farmington River, perhaps as far as Granby or West Suffield."<sup>2</sup> It was a perilous journey making their way by moonlight, three miles north to Avon to make their connection to the next conductor.



Connecticut Digital Archive from the collection Avon Free Public Library, donated by Gladys August. Photo copy by F. Dwight Douglas/Karl Klauser original

The Farmington Canal was dug by hand by mostly Irish laborers and operated roughly twenty years between 1828 and 1848. It ran right through the center of Avon! The towpath, on which mules and people walked towing canal boats, ran in long sections mostly parallel to the Farmington River. There was an aqueduct stone bridge that carried the canal, mules, and boats up and over the river from the Farmington side to the Avon side. Today remnants of the abutment walls can still be seen from a little access area on Waterville road, just over the town line and also on the opposite side of the river. The undated photo at left shows a group of people enjoying a riverbank picnic with the aqueduct ruins in the distance. Ah, the lazy days of yesteryear!

The next time you drive over or perhaps walk along the Farmington River in Avon, you might think of the footsteps of others who walked here. Though you can't see their imprints, they have left their mark on our Town's history, of what happened along the river banks long ago.

## *If The Woods Could Talk~*

### The Woodsman of Avon Old Farms School

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



The woodland landscape in early Spring looking downhill to a walking path

<sup>2</sup> Horatio T. Strother, 'The Underground Railroad in Connecticut', page 171

Arguably some of the most pristine and beautiful woodland in Avon, is private property owned by Avon Old Farms School. In the early 1920s, Theodate Pope Riddle began to buy up the remaining farms along Old Farms Road, including the former milling community of Sleepy Hollow, land. She was the architect and builder of the school and amassed about 3,000 acres of land. The school opened in 1927 and closed for a period of time in the 1940s. Mrs. Riddle devised a 'Deed of Trust' under which the school would operate under new management. One of her stipulations, was that a 'Forester' be employed to manage and care for the school's vast woodlands.

The duties of this job are noted in Section 30 of the Deed of Trust: "The Forester shall be a practical working woodsman, who shall be qualified to instruct the boys in woodcraft and in the elements of Natural History."<sup>3</sup> The woodsman was responsible for caring for the trees, plants and wildlife on the property. He was not allowed to chop down any large trees that were not dead and for clearing underbrush to protect against fires. It was he, who was held accountable for any damage to the to the forest.

Mrs. Riddle hired a man from Maine in the 1940s with a background as a guide, as he knew forests intimately. This man started a club at the school known as the 'Nimrod Club' that is still in existence today, with new teachers supervising these students. Being a member of this club taught young men forest management, the use of the ax and later the chain saw, small game hunting skills, animal husbandry, fishing, fire prevention and suppression, along with community service and camaraderie.

The school property today is not as expansive as it once was. However, even at 900 acres of the original 3,000 acres, it still provides habitat to woodland animals and birds. There is also a pond known as Beaver Dam Pond, which provides another habitat for fish, amphibians, and water fowl. This pond was also the power source for the early mills in the area. In addition, there is a defunct quarry on the property that was the source of the redstone used for foundations of the buildings on the school campus.

Mrs. Riddle, in her quest to preserve 'her' forest and to use it as a natural laboratory for educating young men, also fostered early conservation in Avon. The members of the Avon Land Trust today are like-minded individuals who understand the value of our woodlands, waterways, and habitats. We endeavor to preserve land to maintain Avon's natural beauty and hope you will consider supporting us.

## *Conservation*

Another early Avon conservationist was the late Ostrom Enders. Mr. Enders was keenly interested in waterfowl. "After his retirement from Hartford National Bank, Mr. Enders developed an extensive breeding program for rare species of North American waterfowl at his home in Avon. He participated in the reintroduction of species into areas where they had become extinct or endangered. Several of these species were given to the National Zoo, Washington, D.C., where their descendants are still present."<sup>4</sup> Mr. Enders had three ponds dug in front of his home on Cider Brook Road. The home was demolished, but on the Google map below, one can still see the outline of one former and two current ponds.

Mrs. Enders was a member of the Hartford Garden Club and her husband was an honorary member. Their 'Northington Farm' garden was featured in the Smithsonian Archives of American Gardens, catalog #Ct 705.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Enders "...had a fabulous bird sanctuary at their home, as well as sheep, lambs, and a mule."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 'Theodate Pope Riddle and the Founding of Avon Old Farms' by Brooks Emeny, copyright Avon Old Farms School, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Garden Club of Hartford -The First 100 Years 1916 – 2016, Pg. 58, [http://www.gchartford.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/GCH\\_Centennial-Book\\_FNL-3\\_LR.pdf](http://www.gchartford.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/GCH_Centennial-Book_FNL-3_LR.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pg. 96

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pg. 125



Mr. Enders passed away in 1994 and the following year, 2.65 acres of land at the juncture of Bishop Lane and Cider Brook Road, was donated to the Avon Land Trust. Today, ALT maintains blue bird nest boxes and milkweed for monarch butterflies on this property. I think Mr. Enders would be proud.

*Please consider a donation of land to Avon Land Trust for conservation.*

**We welcome volunteers and members!**



### **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. 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, and enhance our town's environmental and historic resources, and scenic beauty.
- To acquire through donations and purchases additional land to be preserved in its natural state.
- To maintain wildlife habitats on our properties.
- To provide public access to appropriate properties, for the public enjoyment of nature.
- To actively seek wetlands, woodlands, meadowlands, and ridgelines which have unique scenic, historic, scientific and ecological significance for Avon
- To promote the conservation of open space, an appreciation of nature, and stewardship of the environment.