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The Celery Farm Natural Area in Allendale

How the Celery Farm Was Saved

By MARTHA WEBSTER

IT WAS one of those quiet, golden afternoons in early September. The sky was cloudless, the air motionless, the sun warm and hazy.

I stood on a small footbridge, looking out over a long marsh. Stretching in front of me was a wide canal bordered on each side by marsh grasses and cattails, a few low shrubs and trees and masses of purple loosestrife past their peak and glowing bronze in the mid sunlight.

Far to the left, the grasses and small waterways gradually gave way to a dense woodland. To the right, the wetlands stretched to a farmer's distant field. Behind me was a field of brilliant goldenrod alive with butterflies and bees.

Through my binoculars, I took a closer look at the wide canal. Far

down among the grasses stood a great blue heron, delicate and full of grace. In the center of the canal, groups of wood ducks and mallards swam about and dabbled lazily.

A killdeer poked about on a mud-bank and, low overhead, a young marsh hawk was gliding in large circles. Its wings spread wide and its head thrust downward, it was scanning the marsh for signs of a potential meal.

This scene was so full of serenity, interest and beauty that it would have kept me spellbound anywhere I happened to find it. What was astonishing was that it was only a few minutes' walk from my front door — and my front door is in a highly developed section of north Bergen County.

I live in the town of Allendale, in which there are two industrial parks, a large, bustling shopping center, several office buildings and many old and new residential areas. Two heavily traveled thoroughfares crisscross the town, which is bordered on the north by Route 17, a major state highway leading from the New York Thruway to the massive shopping malls of Paramus and the heavily industrialized areas of south Bergen County.

Yet, incredibly, in the center of Allendale is the 80-acre marsh and woodland called the Celery Farm Natural Area, which has been acquired by the borough and designated a wildlife refuge that is to be left in its natural state for the health and pleasure of many forms of life, including the human.

To my knowledge, it is the only municipal park in New Jersey, or perhaps the nation, consisting solely of a beautiful wetland teeming with wildlife and surrounded on all sides by the familiar trappings of suburbia.

The story of how this came about seems worth telling for many reasons, for new and better methods of protecting our valuable inland wetlands are being debated in both the State Legislature and in Congress. Also, Green Acres financing, which is part of the Celery Farm story, is scheduled to be on the state ballot again this fall.

Most important, perhaps, is a remarkable cooperative effort, spearheaded by two men, that drew upon every segment of the community and could be used as a model by other towns interested in preserving a bit of their natural surroundings.

These two men — Edward Fitzpatrick, the former Mayor of Allendale, and Stiles Thomas, an ornithologist, birder, conservationist and lifelong resident of the borough — will be honored next Friday at the annual meeting of the New Jersey Audubon Society in Cape May. They will jointly receive the society's Conservation Award.

The award, presented annually to one or more individuals who have made a significant contribution to conservation, was given to former Gov. Brendan T. Byrne last year for his role in preserving the New Jersey pineplands.

The Annandale story probably begins during Mr. Thomas's boyhood. He grew up in a house across the road from the Celery Farm, a marshy

area that was a flourishing produce farm between the World Wars. The enterprise was closed out in the 1940's after the land was sold to a developer.

In the years that followed, the farm reverted to its natural state, a haven for wildlife and nature lovers. Mr. Thomas spent many hours there, first as a hunter and later as a birder and naturalist.

In 1956, he began to approach conservation organizations and government agencies with the idea of acquiring the area and preserving it as a refuge and peaceful oasis in the midst of the rampant development that was rapidly transforming Allendale and neighboring towns from country villages to full-fledged suburban communities.

For many years, Mr. Thomas's efforts were unsuccessful. However, public interest and education in environmental affairs gradually increased, and in 1976 the Allendale Planning Board, of which Mayor Fitzpatrick was a member, issued a new Master Plan designed to update the original 1952 plan.

In an unusual and farsighted move, the planners proposed a new zoning category: Wetlands. The change, they wrote, reflected the "need to prohibit or restrict development in the area along the Allendale Brook . . . known as the Celery Farm area, in which an extensive peat bog and water-retention area are located . . . This recognizes the ecological value of such wetlands, as well as the need to protect future buildings against flood hazards."

Shortly after the Master Plan was adopted, Mayor Fitzpatrick and Mr. Thomas joined forces and began seeking ways to bring the Celery Farm under municipal ownership. It was agreed that the borough should apply for Green Acres funds, but this involved a lengthy, technically intricate process.

A key ally was found in 1978, when Mr. Fitzpatrick and Mr. Thomas enlisted the aid of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, a statewide nonprofit group formed in the 1960's to help local governments set aside natural areas for conservation. Darryl Caputo, then assistant director of the foundation, visited Allendale several times, advising borough personnel on procedures for obtaining state funds and negotiating with the owner for the purchase of the property.

Meanwhile, under the leadership of Mr. Thomas and the Mayor, broad support from the community began to emerge. A report on the history and ecology of the Celery Farm was prepared by a group of citizens and widely distributed. Local newspapers began to write favorably of the project, and the Fyke Nature Association, a local nature group, volunteered to maintain the area.

When letters of support were requested by the Borough Administrator, they poured in from residents, public officials and civic groups. Many individuals wrote of their personal experiences and the pleasures that the sights and sounds of the marsh had given them over the years.

One young man who had grown up in a house bordering the farm wrote

of "the awe and wonder of the hundreds upon hundreds of geese sweeping over our house each fall, trumpeting the end of summer and the beginning of winter with their harsh calls," and of ducks, muskrats, giant snapping turtles and "two perfectly white wild swans who reigned over the marsh for a number of years."

On a beautiful Saturday in May 1979, the Fyke association conducted a well-publicized field trip through the marsh, taking birders, nature lovers and others on tours led by experienced guides (one of the guides was Stuart Keith of Ramsey, the world's champion birder). They found many species of birds nesting and feeding, wildflowers on every side and long vistas of great beauty.

In December of that year, Mr. Caputo's efforts led to the sale of the Celery Farm to the Conservation Foundation. Some of the land was donated, resulting in a low price for the foundation and a tax benefit for the owner. The foundation agreed to hold the property until the borough had Green Acres funds, then to sell it to the borough at the same low price.

In August 1980, a public hearing was held at Borough Hall. An enthusiastic, standing-room-only crowd of residents attended, and those who spoke were unanimous in their approval of the acquisition. A representative of the Junior Woman's Club announced that her group planned to raise funds to improve the refuge.

The state approved the application for funds early in 1981, and in March the borough completed the purchase from the Conservation Foundation. Not one voice was raised in dissent.

On June 13, 1981 — another sparkling blue day — an official dedication ceremony was held at the site. On the dais were Mayor Fitzpatrick and other Council members, officials of the borough and the Conservation Foundation and J. Nevins McBride, the land's former owner.

Throughout the official speeches, a veery sang from the woodland and a yellow warbler flitted about in a hemlock tree.

Since that day, Mr. Fitzpatrick has stepped down as Mayor. However, Mr. Thomas has continued to serve as unofficial coordinator of efforts to maintain and improve the refuge.

Work projects conducted by volunteers have cleared and smoothed trails, built footbridges, hauled away trash and litter and made a small dam to control the water level.

In July, Mr. Thomas was appointed by the Allendale Council to the newly created post of Marsh Warden. His job will be to continue doing what he most enjoys — overseeing the marsh and making sure that it remains a peaceful refuge.

How to get there: The entrance to the Allendale Celery Farm is on the east side of the Franklin Turnpike just north of Cottage Place. There is a small parking lot marked only by a large blue trash can decorated with hand-painted celery stalks. The trail into the marsh begins at the edge of the parking lot. Binoculars and sturdy walking or hiking shoes are recommended.