

Conservation Foundation seals the deal on Norwood Farm

Land Bank participation enables purchase of 207 acres, last large private parcel of land on-island



Photo courtesy Nantucket Conservation Foundation

PRESERVED: The gateway to Altar Rock, teeming with rare plant species and abutting hundreds of acres of open space owned by the Nantucket Conservation Foundation, the 207 acres of Norwood Farm will provide a unique visitor experience when trails are eventually cut by the Foundation, which last week purchased the property, with help from the Nantucket Islands Land Bank, to keep it forever wild.

By Joshua Balling
I&M Assistant Editor

Fifty years to the day after its founding, the Nantucket Conservation Foundation on Friday acquired one of the island's largest and most environmentally-important parcels of open space, paying the Jensen family \$19 million for Norwood Farm: 207 acres in the middle moors it had been eying for years.

The acquisition leaves just two significant properties remaining on the watch list of island conservation groups, Foundation executive director Jim Lentowski said: the 200-acre LORAN station parcel in Sconset decommissioned by the Coast Guard in 2010; and the 100-acre Federal Aviation Administration property in Madaket at the other end of the island declared surplus by the government in 2009.

The sprawling Norwood Farm property, bordered to the west, south and east by extensive conservation holdings, had until last week represented the largest unprotected, privately-owned parcel on Nantucket. It had been kept in an undeveloped condition since 1964 under the Jensen family's stewardship through the Norwood Farm Trust, but was placed on the market last year for \$26 million.

The Nantucket Islands Land Bank is partnering on the deal, and will pay the Foundation \$7 million for 76 acres of the property bordering its existing 47-acre Almanac Pond Road parcel following subdivision approval by the Planning Board later this month.

The newly-protected conservation area lies at the doorstep of Altar Rock, with road frontage on



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— David Poor
President, NCF

Polpis Road and Almanac Pond Road. Its natural features include forested uplands, shrublands, grasslands, rolling moorlands, kettlehole ponds and extensive wildflower habitats. The abundant freshwater wetlands and prime agricultural soils played an important role in the lives of the island's first human inhabitants, the Wampanoags, and later English settlement and the advancement of island farming, including some of the island's earliest cranberry bogs, Lentowski said.

"The moorlands, they're just incredible. There's mature oak trees, beautiful grasslands, a forested area with the kind of things you might expect in Squam Swamp or the Squam Farm area and then some. There are beautiful mature beach trees, sassafras and holly, and an incredible variety of upland plants. There are a couple of old cranberry bogs on the property, from when it was a series of individual farms," he said. "But the really wonderful thing about this property is the proximity. It's nine-tenths of a mile from the (University of Massachusetts-Boston's Nantucket) field station. You take that as a representative of the island's saltmarsh systems, and Norwood Farm as a representative of its freshwater systems, and you really have all the island's ecosystems represented in these two properties not even a 10-minute bike ride from each other. It's a tight little concentration of very diverse habitats that represents huge excitement in terms of scientific interest."

On top of the habitat preservation, protecting the property will

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Norwood Farm: Preserving the gateway to Altar Rock



Courtesy of Nantucket Conservation Foundation

This map shows the area purchased by the Conservation Foundation, the surrounding properties it owns and property the Land Bank is buying.

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contribute greatly to the quality of life not only for Nantucketers, but those who visit the island, Lentowski said. Due to its wetlands and other environmentally-sensitive topographical features, the property would have only supported about eight building sites – most likely with their requisite second dwellings, swimming pools, tennis courts and other amenities, Lentowski said – but they would have been enough to inexorably alter the viewsheds of the area, particularly north of Altar Rock toward Polpis Harbor, Pocomo and Great Point.



Photo courtesy of Nantucket Conservation Foundation

Even in the heart of winter the Norwood Farm property is a picture of quiet beauty.

"It is such an improvement to the quality of life out here compared to what it would have been had these properties been developed into the future and sold off," Lentowski said. "You see the contiguity of these properties, all of them hooked up to existing large tracts of conservation property, and it's just incredible. From a habitat-protection perspective, there's huge value there, which is often taken for granted on the island, but is so rare in the state and the rest of the country. Sandplain grasslands are globally-endangered habitats. They just ain't making them anymore. We can go out today and start walking for miles on dirt roads and trails that don't exist anywhere else. Nantucket serves as a conservation model not only in the commonwealth but also in country."

The entire Norwood Farm Trust property encompasses 241 acres. Two building sites totaling 22 acres have been retained for family use on Almanac Pond Road. Another 12-acre Polpis Road building site will continue to be held by the Trust, although the Foundation has a 24-month option to buy the property for \$2.5 million if it can raise the money, Lentowski said.

Making a list

Over 45 percent of the island has now been preserved by the island's conservation groups, including the Foundation, Land Bank, Land Council, Sconset Trust, Mass Audubon and Trustees of Reservations. The Conservation Foundation alone owns 30 percent of Nantucket, over 9,000 acres, including many of the most visited and photographed areas on the island: Coatue, Sanford Farm, Tuppy Links, Head of the Plains, Eel Point, the Middle Moors, the "Serengeti" off Milestone Road, and the Milestone and Windswept cranberry bogs.

Eight years ago it undertook an extensive inventory of the island's remaining open space, targeting the properties most in need of protection, and those it would like to add to augment existing properties. Norwood Farm was near the top of the list, as was the 110-acre UMass Field Station in Quaise, acquired by the Foundation for \$20 million in 2004; 270 acres of sandplain grasslands and coastal heathlands on Eel Point owned by Linda Loring, protected by the Nantucket Land Council through



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a \$14 million development restriction in 2006; Bartlett's Ocean View Farm, half of which the Land Council protected through a \$6 million conservation restriction in 2004; and the Coffin family's 119-acre property off Milestone Road in Sconset home to the Old Sconset Golf Course, acquired by the Land Bank and Sconset Trust last year for \$16 million.

"Some time ago, (the late) Grace Grossman inspired a review of what was left on the island in terms of open space. We did a survey of virtually every piece of va-

cant land on the island (more than 14,000 parcels at the time), and developed an opinion of whether it was a development parcel or something that should be put in conservation, then figured out which was the right conservation group on the island to take the lead on it. We wanted to make sure we were not competing but working together," Conservation Foundation president David Poor said.

Lentowski credited Poor with working tirelessly to get the Norwood Farm deal done, and the rest of the board for committing to the purchase.

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The Foundation, which paid \$4 million at closing and will transfer the vast majority of the Land Bank money to the Trust following the sale later this month, has 18 months to complete the deal and will be reaching out to existing and new supporters for help, with the hope of a generous response from those who value the island's open lands and endorse the actions taken by the Foundation and other groups to preserve them, Lentowski said.

Poor agreed. "We started in 1963 by preserving landscapes, with the idea that Nantucket was a beautiful place. What we continually discover, however, is how important Nantucket is from a science standpoint. On Nantucket, the rare is common. We're used to it. We're spoiled rotten. These properties are available 24/7. There's no other place in the world Joe the Plumber has access to the most beautiful parts of the island like we do here. You don't have to be Mr. and Mrs. Gotrocks," he said.

"This is really the chance for everyone to contribute to the legacy, for everybody to be a part of this. This doesn't happen automatically. People have gotten a little bit used to the fact that somebody else is going to do it. This only happened because people (Time, Inc. executive Roy

Larsen, "Rip" Nelson, developer and S&H Green Stamps heir Walter Beinecke and others) in 1963 had a vision, and others stepped in over the years. It's up to all of us now. All of us need to get together to complete the legacy, complete the challenge."

"A privilege"

Julius "Reb" Jensen, the trustee of the property, expressed his pleasure with the deal this week.

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Norwood: Science a growing NCF mission

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"It's been a privilege for the family to protect and manage the property for about 50 years, and we're delighted with the opportunities the Foundation has spoken of for the island community as a whole to be able to enjoy the various qualities this really remarkable property contains," he said.

"We're particularly encouraged that the Foundation and Nantucket Land Bank have worked so closely together, and will be continuing to do so. This is particularly true since we've been life members of the Foundation for 40 years, and strong supporters of the purchase of the field station a few years ago. We really appreciate the help of the professional advisers we've had, like Arthur Reade, Jeff Blackwell, Art Gasbarro and Michael O'Mara. They've all played vital roles in bringing this together."

Lentowski credited the Jensen family for its commitment to conservation.

"This project really stemmed from the fact that we've had a relationship with the Jensen family for at least 35 years. It started with Reb's father, who purchased the property that we just purchased back in 1964 along with other title interests. We've been whittling away at that list of properties ever since. To his credit, most of them have ended up being protected as open space, while only a handful have gone the subdivision and development direction," he said.

Abundant opportunities

Because of their biological importance and sensitivity, the 131 acres the Foundation will retain will be thoroughly inventoried, which will result in an agency-approved land-management plan designed to accommodate a range of possible future uses. Among others, they may include Foundation-managed field-study opportunities for island teachers and students, visitor interpretive installations and presentations, wildflower walks, rare habitat management, investigations of early settlement and land uses, wildlife surveys, Native American studies, and access for carefully controlled, low-impact recreational activities.

It may be some time before the property is opened to the public, Lentowski said.

"I can't predict what the end-game is. It will evolve as we get on



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Trustee, Norwood Farm*

the property and discover what's out there. There are lots of sensitive things out there. We have to develop a plan that addresses periodic mowing to encourage certain plants and moth species. A moth inventory done on that property discovered several rare moth species. The scrub oak dominating the island has attracted certain critters there who are finding it's a great place to live."

A trail system will be laid out, he said, but one that takes into account the property's sensitive ecosystems.

"We don't want people marching through wetlands, but we hope to coordinate our trail system with the Land Bank. There should be interpretive opportunities from plants to bird species. There is a tremendous kettlehole pond that will have interpretive opportunities on it, and we suspect there will be an opportunity based on work done at the field station in recent months for archeological finds. We can't help but think there are some there because of the early English use, and before that the Wampanoags known to occupy this part of the island," Lentowski said.

"In terms of a place to take a group of students to get them to experience a variety of habitats on

the interior of the island, it's one-stop shopping. You can get a bunch of them in an hour."

Poor agreed.

"Norwood clearly is the crown jewel. More people may drive by the Coffin property, but Norwood is so iconic. Just stand on Altar Rock and look around. The geological aspects of the glaciers, the wildflower habitat, the species habitats, the landscapes, the early Wampanoag settlement, the farming settlement, the early cranberry bog, to have it all in one parcel... What we're particularly excited about is the chance to leverage what we've been doing with UMass-Boston, and pull in other groups as well," he said. "I think the whole theme of Wampanoag settlement has been underinterpreted on this island, and we'd like to do that on this property. There's a lot of focus on whaling on Nantucket, but less on early farming and shepherding. We'd like to do that on this property."

Evolving mission

The mission of the Nantucket Conservation Foundation has been evolving for years, from acquisition to stewardship, as conservation organizations have slowly protected the open space across the island. That will continue into the future on an even broader scale, Lentowski said, with so few highly desirable parcels remaining.

"Science and stewardship are a huge part of our mission today. For example, wildfire risk-reduction is quietly going on in the background right now," he said.

"We're trying to bring the best land-conservation science that's available to bear on foundation properties and on the island. We're excited that there is a new partner on the block in UMass, and it's excited about using Foundation properties for the kind of science they do. We feel a lot of what their interests relate to the needs of the island. I sense a certain amount of excitement here, that they are set to go," he said.

"Because we are the largest landowner on the island, there are certain capacities in our science staff, but they are limited. We've got these rarities that occur on Nantucket that we have a sense about, but certainly we could learn a lot more. We are already a national model for land conservation, but we'd also like to become a national model for land-conservation science."