

Mildred Flower Hird Preserve: East and West



Property Description

The Mildred Flower Hird Preserve, purchased in a bargain sale from Grandma and Partners, LLC., consists of two properties located on both sides of Manhasset Road in the Village of Dering Harbor. Grandma and Partners is managed by the Hunt family matriarch, Esther Hird Hunt.



According to Esther, in a 2020 interview with the Shelter Island Historical Society, the large woods to the east of Locust Point Road was broken off from the land to the west of Locust Point Road when she and her husband, Bridgford Hunt wanted to build their home there in the 1970s. Grandma and Partners was formed when the family considered preserving the wooded property to the east of Locust Point Road. Rather than sell all the property for preservation at once, the family decided in 2001 to preserve the west parcel closest to Julia Dodd Creek,

in collaboration with Suffolk County, the Town of Shelter Island and the Village of Dering Harbor. In 2005 the family chose to preserve the east parcel as well.

The west parcel consists of 13.7 acres and reflects old growth woodland extending west from Manhanset Road to the wetlands of Julia Dodd Creek. This property has sensitive wetlands and marshes bordering Julia Dodd Creek and serves as the headwaters for the creek which flows into, and opens up to, a beautiful view of Dering Harbor.

The east parcel consists of 17.1 acres and also reflects old growth woodland extending from Manhanset Road on the West to Gardiners Bay Country Club and Island Way on the east. The property includes the remnants of a long berm, an old firebreak, stretching the length of the property from north to south.

Access

Access to both properties is from Manhanset Road where designated parking areas are clearly marked. There is a short path on the west side, and a longer circular path on the east side. The woodlands are fairly open and accessible for walking.

History/Prior Owners

Samuel Hird purchased his first 1.25 acres on Dering Harbor shores, adjacent to Julia Havens [Dodd] Creek, from the Island Realty Company in 1912. Samuel emigrated from England at the age of 20, worked in multiple weaving mills until he purchased his own mill in Passaic, New Jersey, and perfected the manufacture of serge, a sturdy twill which was the predecessor to denim. He eventually owned over 70 acres in Dering Harbor. When the Island Realty Company was liquidated around 1920, “unimproved acreage was divided on a pro rata basis among the shareholders or sold off in sizable blocks to Samuel Hird and Forrest Towl.” “In a letter dated April 7, 1974, Mr. Henry E. Hird, son of Samuel states ‘it was he [the father] that helped to organize the golf club and put \$8,000 into the project for which, when the club folded up, he received eighty acres of woodland for his investment.’” (Herman, Stuart, *The Smallest Village: The Story of Dering Harbor 1874-1974, 1976*, pgs. 81, 128).

Prior to 1920, the liquidation of the Island Realty Company, and the formation of the Village of Dering Harbor, the property went through many ownerships. Professor Eben Horsford who married the heir to the Sylvester properties, Mary L’Hommedieu Gardiner, closed the Menhaden fish factories in 1872 and sold “two hundred pleasantly wooded acres” (Herman, p.17) to Erastus Carpenter of the Shelter Island Land Company for formation of the Shelter Island Park Association in 1873. The Park Association was similar to the Shelter Island Camp Meeting Association area known as Prospect in that it attracted summer people who either rented or purchased property for use during the summer months.

In 1892 the Manhanset Improvement Company took over, and Shelter Island Park became Manhanset Manor. The Manhanset House with all its amenities and outbuildings had become the main attraction. When a fire destroyed the second Manhanset House in 1911, the 180-acre tract was auctioned off to a group of Manhanset cottagers, prominent members of the New York Yacht Club, in 1912 for \$38,000 (Herman, p. 65). The Manhanset Improvement Company was dissolved, and the Island Realty Company was formed and struggled until its 1920 liquidation.



Stories

Esther Hird Hunt, an honored member of the Shelter Island community, named the Preserves after her mother Mildred Flower Hird. “I named it for my mother, not that she was a great naturalist, and she certainly wasn’t a hiker. But she did care about nature.” Mrs. Hunt said in a 2019 Shelter Island Reporter Profile (SIR 11/21/19).



Mildred Flower and S. Ainsworth Hird had three children: Elizabeth, Samuel, and Esther. They were the third generation of Hirds to live in Dering Harbor, according to memories shared in *An Island Sheltered* (Priscilla Dunhill, 2002, p.107). “The three Hird children scalloped in the creek, played tennis, [and] sailed on the *Selina II*, a broad-beamed catboat so wide a picnic table could be spread on deck.”

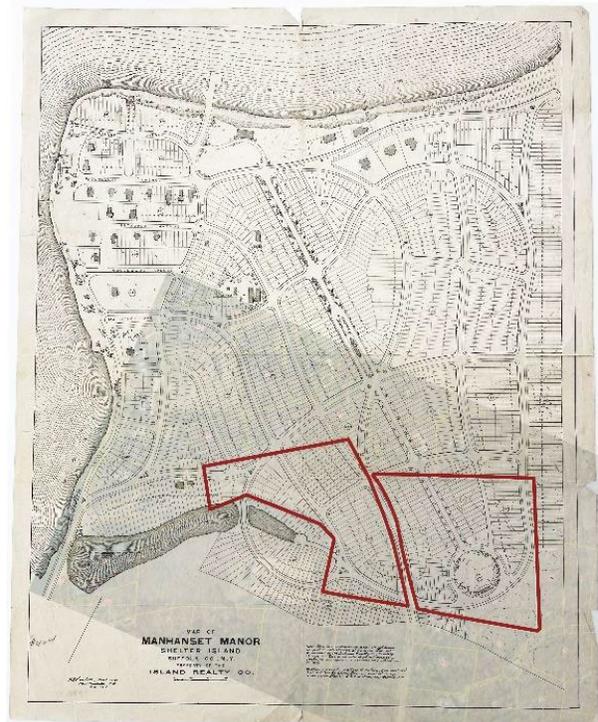


An aerial map overlaid over the Manhanset Manor map shows how much of the land has been preserved in the Dering Harbor area (red lines outline Preserves).

How did Julia Dodd Creek get its name?

Looking at old maps of the Dering Harbor area, you often see Julia Dodd Creek or Julia Havens Creek. How did the creek get its name? It appears to be named after Julia Dyd Havens Johnson “born free on Shelter Island between 1808 and 1815 to an enslaved woman named Dido and an unknown white man.” According to the Sylvester Manor website, Dido was enslaved by Nicoll Havens until slavery was abolished in New York (1827). Dido married Comus Fanning who was granted manumission in 1796 upon Phinias Fanning’s death.

Comus who had returned to Shelter Island to work for Sylvester Dering around 1800, and by 1820 had saved enough money (\$750) to purchase 21.75 acres north of what was then called Wilkinson Creek. A week after the sale, Sylvester Dering fell from his horse and died. Dering’s widow Esther Sarah Havens Dering signed a document confirming the sale of the



land to Comus, protecting him from legal conflicts. The property owned by Comus Fanning was the largest freehold owned by a black man on Shelter Island at that time.

He was married to Dido and lived on the property with her and her daughter, Julia. Upon Comus and Dido's death, Julia was the sole owner of Comus' land that later would be developed as part of the Village of Dering Harbor. Over the years members of the Gardiner and Horsford families of Sylvester Manor purchased the land back until there was little land left. Julia worked as a house-keeper at the Manor and other Shelter Island estates. By 1880 she was forced to enter the poorhouse in Greenport until the summer when the Horsfords returned. Julia eventually moved to Eastville in Sag Harbor, possibly with members of her deceased common-law husband Morris Johnson but was buried in the Sylvester Manor burying ground near Dido and Comus.

Information gathered from "The Manor: Three Centuries at a Slave Plantation on Long Island" by Mac Griswold, 2013, and the Sylvester Manor website (viewed 5/19/21):
<https://www.sylvestermanor.org/comus-julia-dido>



SHELTER ISLAND REPORTER - 11.25.2019 - AROUND THE ISLAND Esther Hunt cuts ribbon opening Mildred Flower Hird Preserve - By Julie Lane



Under a light rain that increased steadily last Friday afternoon, more than 50 people gathered on the side of a road in the Village of Dering Harbor. They were paying homage to a woman and her family who made it possible to preserve 30.8 acres of land that will forever remain as an open space.

Esther Hunt sat under a tent-like structure, cuddled in a warm blanket but eager to greet the many who arrived to watch her cut the ribbon opening the site to the public. It is currently the largest walkable public open space site, with 13.7 acres on the west side of Manhasset Road purchased from Ms. Hunt in 2001. It is adjacent to a pond that flows into Dering Harbor. Another 17.1 acres to the east purchased in 2005 represents what Community Preservation Fund Advisory Board Chairman Gordon Gooding called “pristine woodlands.”

The parcels were purchased with money from the Community Preservation Fund, the Suffolk County Division of Parks and Recreation and the Village of Dering Harbor.

“When we work together as one team, nothing else matters,” Mr. Gooding said, introducing the many partners who helped make the two preserves a reality.

They included former supervisor Jim Dougherty, who got the ball rolling back in 2001. He credited Assemblyman Fred Thiele Jr. (I-Sag Harbor), whose legislation created the CPF. Money for the CPF comes from a 2% tax that buyers pay when purchasing East End properties and is used in turn to purchase open space for preservation and fund water protection programs.

Mr. Dougherty pointed out that had the property been sold to a private developer, with two-acre zoning in place, the site could well have seen construction of many houses.

Instead it is perpetually preserved for public enjoyment and serves to recharge the aquifer from rain and snow.

Former Dering Harbor mayor Tim Hogue, another partner with the town in bringing to fruition the deal to purchase the property, was also on hand. Mr. Hogue said that had Ms. Hunt not agreed to negotiate an agreement that would keep the property perpetually available as open space for hiking, she and her children might have benefitted mightily from a transaction with a private developer. It was their generosity that made the preserves possible, he said.

Suffolk County Parks Commissioner Phil Berdolt and principal environmental analyst Nick Gibbons also attended. Mr. Berdolt said the county has been happy to be a part of the acquisition and called it “a great piece of property.”

Vanessa Rojano, an aide to Suffolk County Legislator Bridget Fleming (D-Noyack), brought a proclamation honoring Ms. Hunt.

Others who deserve credit for bringing the purchase and subsequent stewardship program to the site include Gary Gerth, Gerry Siller and Art Williams, all of whom have occupied the supervisor’s office.

Credit also goes to the late Alan Shields, the artist who died in December 2005, and was credited as being a major force behind the acquisitions.

Town Board officials and Highway Supervisor and Public Works Commissioner Brian Sherman along with members of the CPF Advisory Board and Dering Harbor Village Deputy Mayor Karen Kelsey were also present. So, too, was Richie Surozenski, who had a long career with the village, treating it, in his words, as one large estate, handling snow plowing, grass cutting and many other maintenance jobs necessary to maintaining its character.

Julie Lane has been a reporter for Times Review Media Group since 2000 and has covered Shelter Island since 2011. She holds an undergraduate degree in journalism and political science from the University of Rhode Island and an MBA from Long Island University.

