

OLD LIMA BEAN FIELDS

Property Description

In December 2004, the Peconic Land Trust purchased 7.2 acres of the 14.5-acre preserve that was overgrown with old nursery stock, located at the northwest corner of Cobbetts Lane and Manhasset Road in Dering Harbor. The County requested the purchase because it could not act fast enough to close the project by the owner's (Alastair G. Tedford) required deadline. At the time, in order to fund the acquisition, the Trust received donations from local residents for a portion of the purchase price. In April 2005, the Trust sold the property to Suffolk County; the Town of Shelter Island purchased the adjacent 7.3 acres of the Preserve from the same owner. The remaining third of the property was subdivided for development. At the entrance to the Preserve is a bright red engine that had been in use in the 1950s to pump water over the fields. There's roughly a three-quarter mile trail through the Preserve wherein you'll pass through a canopy of cedar trees.



Access

Corner of Manhasset Road and Cobbetts Lane with parking off road on grassy aprons.

Prior Use/History

The two sections of this acreage were part of an 1800s legal settlement between Brinley Sylvester (Nathaniel Sylvester's grandson) and William Nicholl II. The suit involved an issue over who owned the manor (now referred to as "Sylvester Manor") and the surrounding land. As part of the settlement, William Nicholl II deeded 1,000 acres plus another 40 acres of the Sylvester farm to Brinley Sylvester.

Subsequently, this acreage passed to Thomas Dering (his wife was Mary, daughter of Brinley Sylvester) and then to several heirs and trustees. In the 1950s, the property was purchased by Sylvester Prime who set up the Shelter Island Farmers Lima Bean Co-operative, Inc.. The parcel was finally deeded to Alastair G. Tedford who sold one section of the preserve to the Town.

In the 1950s a group of ten farmers formed a cooperative, headed up by Sylvester Prime, to grow and thrash lima beans. Each member put up \$3,500.00. The ten members of the cooperative included: Evans K.Griffing, Elliot, Albert and Dan Dickerson, Everett Tuthill, Frank Mysliborski, John Garr, Anton Blados, Sylvester Prime and Dick Moser. As told by Evans Griffing, a former Town Supervisor. In the beginning the cooperative was taking its beans to a plant in Mattituck and the Moriches where they were cleaned and frozen.

Subsequently, the partners were convinced to go into the freezing business themselves. With a loan of approximately \$275,000 at 4 percent interest from the Federal Farm Loan Association, they set up an ammonia freezing plant with a holding room that could store about 4,000 cases of beans. The process was labor intensive with loading bean stalks into trucks; taking the pods off the vines; and thrashing the beans onto a conveyor belt where they were steam-blanching and then frozen. Every night, beginning around midnight, the whole plant had to be blanching with live steam to kill the bacteria. Afterwards, the floors would be treated with disinfectant. Operating six days a week, 24 hours a day during the growing and harvest season, the cooperative employed more than sixty workers—housewives, baymen and farm hands.



A good acre of beans could produce 2,200 pounds of shelled beans. When the process worked well this little cooperative could pack over a million pounds of beans in eight-ounce, ten-ounce and two-pound packages a week. The beans were packaged for labels such as Libby, McNeil & Libby, Wheat Valley, Archley, Snowcrop and Seabrook Farms.

All went well for the first few years until 1954 when three separate hurricanes hit the Island with a vengeance. Beans were blown over; the fields were muddy; and electricity failed. This was followed by mildew and the Mexican bean beetle. The crop was decimated and the

cooperative folded. Eventually, the buildings and equipment were auctioned off and in 1958 the Town bought the plant and turned it over to the Highway Department.

The properties were subsequently used to grow shrubs and trees as nursery stock for Blaise Laspia's Shelter Island Nursery on St. Mary's Road until that business closed. Some nursery stock, plants, trees and the old pump remain.

Looking back and to the future of a historic piece of land

Open Space Snapshot | Road to preservation a rocky one for Tedford property, now in need of stewardship

BY TED HILLS | STAFF REPORTER

The Reporter continues with its "Open Space" series this week with the Tedford open space property.

WHERE IS IT?

The Tedford open space property is 14.5 acres on the northwest corner of Cobbetts Lane and Manhasset Road and is jointly owned by the town and Suffolk County. The property extends about 1,350 feet west of Manhasset Road and from Cobbetts Lane to Our Lady of the Isle Cemetery to the north.

WHAT'S IT LIKE?

Before the purchase, the land was described in an appraisal summary report dated March 26, 2004 as being "mostly cleared with gently rolling topography." But plants have been allowed to grow freely over the years and much of the property has since become a tangle of vines and branches. The very thick vegetation that covers sections of the property makes it difficult to explore. "That area is full of invasives," Town Supervisor Jim Dougherty explained. "If we get the invasives out, it could be much more user-friendly."

WHAT'S ITS HISTORY?

But the invasive species and unchecked natural growth hasn't consumed all the remnants of the property's past. There are corridors of more lightly vegetated land that used to separate the plots of growing areas when the property held Shelter Island Nursery's stock and from when the land was used as a farm before that. In the 1950s and 60s, the farm was used primarily to cultivate lima beans under the ownership of Sylvester Prime.

An old abandoned engine and irrigation pump that was once used to irrigate crops sits, wrapped in vines, on the southeastern edge of the property.

In 1999, Alastair Tedford purchased the 20.5 acres at auction and in 2003



TED HILLS PHOTOS

This old irrigation pump and diesel engine was once used to irrigate crops on the Tedford property.

offered the town development rights in order to prevent any further building — he at one point hoped to run a horse farm on the property. He at first agreed to sell the development rights for \$700,000 — the town would pay \$210,000 and Suffolk County would supply \$490,000.

That deal fell through, however, when the Planning Board insisted on imposing strict guidelines for the use of pesticides on a parcel, even though the legality of that move was called into question. After designating 6 acres for his own subdivision, Mr. Tedford later presented the town with an offer to sell the remaining 14.5 acres outright for \$1.8 million in the spring of 2004, though he required that the deal be completed by

the end of the year.

Suffolk County agreed to join the town in making an offer of around \$1,766,000, with each paying half. The remaining approximately \$34,000 needed was supplied through private donations.

However, as Mr. Dougherty explained, the "county is very cumbersome" in officially approving land deals, "and it became clear they couldn't meet the end of the year deadline, so the Peconic Land Trust agreed to be an interim buyer with the town." The property was split into two 7.25-acre parcels; the town purchased the easterly section and the trust purchased the westerly parcel. The county then bought the land from the trust by the following April.

HOW WILL IT BE USED?

Mr. Dougherty thought that removing the invasives should be a part of the property's management plan. "That's on the list, and ... at this point when we don't seem to be doing deals anymore, we might as well spend the two percent money on stewardship and clean them up. I'm delighted that we saved it when we did, but [the stewardship] is overdue."

Though removing the invasives is a consideration, Mr. Dougherty added, "The main purpose of these open space deals, I think, is to preserve Shelter Island's character, preserve the aquifer and moderate development pressure a little bit."



COURTESY GOOGLE MAPS

An aerial view and approximate drawing of the boundaries of the 14.5-acre Tedford property on the northwest corner of Cobbetts Lane and Manhasset Road.



Some parts of the property, like this border along Cobbetts Lane, is a tangle of vegetation and nearly impenetrable.