

ST. GABRIEL'S MEADOW PRESERVE



Property Description

St. Gabriel's Meadow Preserve consisting of 7.9 acres on the East corner of Burns and Cartwright Roads was purchased by the Town of Shelter Island and the County of Suffolk in March of 2004 from the Passionist Monastery of Our Lady of the Isle. It was purchased mainly for its environmental and historic significance and to protect it from proposed development.

The property consists principally of a mowed grassy open field or meadow, with several mature maple trees, a row of young tulip trees set into the meadow, a row of ten mature cedar trees, and a mix of trees, shrubs and high grass. The NY State property on the south side is a 17-ft. wide strip with a one-lane paved road; the NYS Department of Environmental Protection (DEC) manages the strip and adjacent NY State property known as Foxen Point Tidal Wetlands.

Access

The public is encouraged to walk along and in the Meadow. Organizations and others desiring to use the Meadow for group events must obtain a permit from the Town Board for uses that are compatible with the Meadow and its setting. If you follow Burns Road to the water, you pass Wayside Park on the left, a picnic spot, and end up at the Burns Road Town landing on Coecles Harbor. This landing is the beginning of the Coecles Harbor Marine Water Trail.



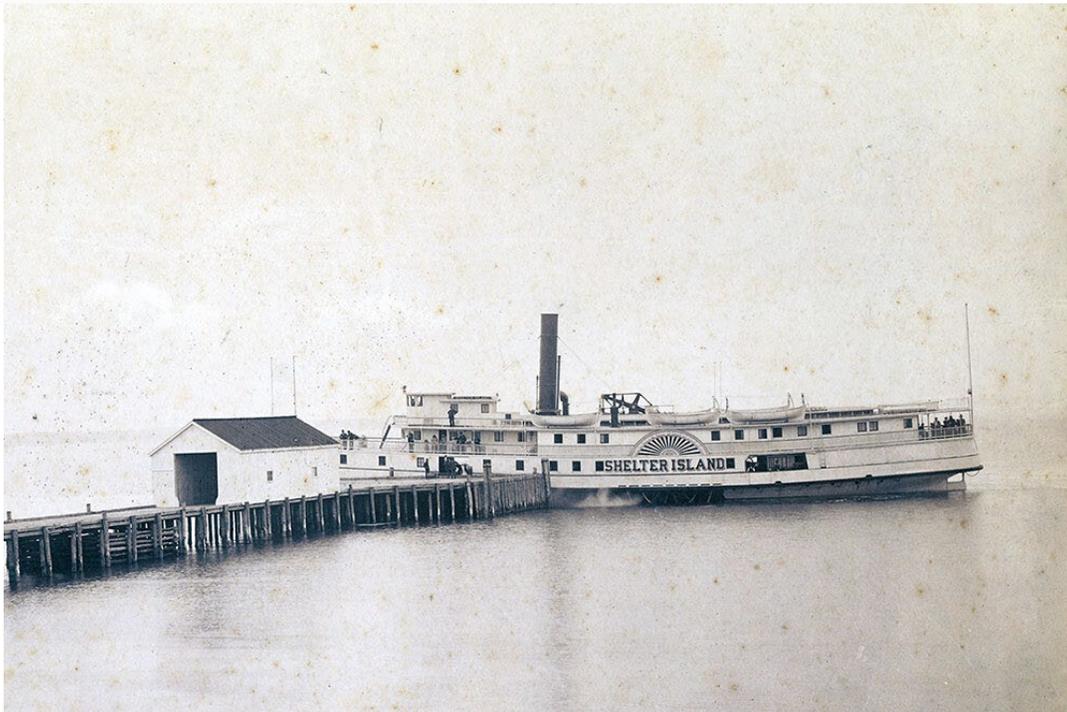
Catherine Aitken Burns & John Burns c 1850

History/ Prior Owners

Scheibler's Map from 1806 indicates the land belonged to Elizabeth Congdon. It was originally part of the Havens properties. In 1865 two Pot Works factories were built on the property: King, Roger and Company and Union Factory, both belonging to "men of this island." In 1866 a steam fish factory was erected by Horton and Fithian of Southold (Duvall, p. 171).

"Horton's old dock" along the shore in Coecles Harbor is referenced in Lillian Loper's summary of Coecles Harbor from 1920.

In 1872 Timothy and Amanda Congdon sold 30 acres to John Burns. John died on March 27, 1886 leaving the property to Catherine. Catherine Burns sold her property in 1900 for \$3,500 so that her oldest grandson, Walter could attend Cornell University. The Burns farmed the land from 1872-1900 when it was purchased by Abe (Abraham) and Miriah (Maria) Mitchell.



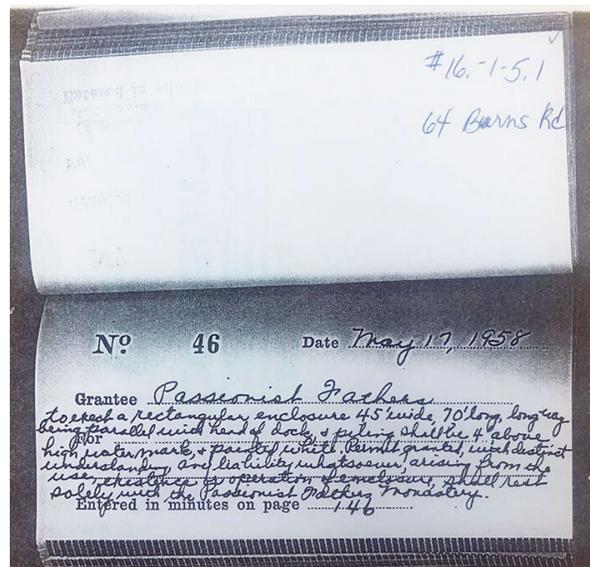
Abe Mitchell was a captain in the late 1800s-early 1900s of the side-wheel steamers belonging to the Montauk Steamboat Company. Two of the steamers, the Shinnecock and Shelter Island, steamed from New York to dock at the Prospect and Manhasset hotels.

In 1906 the Mitchells sold the property to Ollie (Oliver) Wells.



In 1911 Ollie Wells sold it to Saint Paul of the Cross Province of the Congregation of Passionists, a religious order of priests and brothers affiliated with Our Lady of the Isle Church. The property was purchased with the intent of building a high school and preparatory seminary. When this proved undoable, the property was used as a summer retreat for the priests “resting from their missionary activities.” Ordained Passionists stayed in the Burns’ farmhouse while seminarians stayed in a bungalow built shortly after the land was purchased.

When the Passionists bought the property, it consisted of the large area on higher ground starting at Cartwright Road and extending up to the Burns’ farmhouse. East of that, it was low lying marsh land extending to Coecles Harbor. In the late 1950s early 60s, a wooden bulkhead was built along the length of the waterfront on Coecles Harbor and soil was carved from the property’s higher ground to fill the swampland facing Coecles Harbor.





In 1963 the Passionist opened St. Gabriel's Spiritual Center for Youth in response to the thrust of Vatican II, the unprecedented growth of New York City and the suburbs, and the desire to serve Catholic youth. It was the only Passionist center dedicated to full-time ministry for high school students.

In 1988, Saint Paul of the Cross Province announced that, due to declining numbers of clergy, it would no longer be able to staff St. Gabriel's (Shelter Island Reporter, July 22, 1993). A small group of priests and private individuals came to the rescue. In July 1989 it officially became St. Gabriel's Youth House, a non-profit organization affiliated with, but not financially supported by the Passionists.

The Shelter Island Fire Department moved the Annual Chicken BBQ to the property in 1988 (see separate story on "Firemen's Field and the Chicken BBQ"). Part of the use agreement with the Passionists was to repair or replace a section of split rail fence each year. By the time they got to the last section, it was time to start all over again. Due to the COVID pandemic the BBQ was not held in 2020 for the first time in over 50 years. The first one was held in 1964.



By 2016 the Shelter Island Historical Society’s annual car show had outgrown the society’s grounds and moved to St. Gabriel’s Meadow. The Antique and Classic Car Show became a joint effort between the Shelter Island Historical Society and the Shelter Island Fire Department with about 300 antique and unique cars displayed annually. Like the Chicken BBQ, it was an annual event until the COVID pandemic in 2020 and 2021 prevented the activity.



According to James Dougherty, Community Preservation Advisory Board chairperson at the time, in 2001 a prospective developer filed for a lot line change separating the 8 acres from the main Passionist campus. The plan was to subdivide the land into seven building lots with one acre of parkland. After three years of negotiations, with

support and financial help from the Shelter Island Fire Department and four neighbors on Burns Road, the Town and Suffolk County purchased the property.

In 2009 the youth center closed. The remaining property south of the meadow was sold to Pandion Development Corporation in 2015. It will be developed into 5-acre home sites.

How did the two homes wind up on the property? (Contributed by Larry Lechmanski) Homer and Betty Griffing purchased the strip of property along Cartwright Road from the Mitchell’s in the early 1900s. The property ran from Burns Road along Cartwright all the way to where the State-owned property is now. They lived in a farmhouse on the corner property of Burns and Cartwright Roads.



Homer had a boat building shop by the Maple Tree of what is now 38 Cartwright Road, Edith Lechmanski's home. The shop was called "The Cabin." Lawrence, Homer's father, and Homer built flat bottom scalloping boats called "Sharpies." According to Ronnie Mitchell, who said he spent many hours fascinated by the work going on in the little building, the boats were unique because the transom was inside a well in the back of the boat instead of on the stern. When the corner property was sold to the Passionists in the 60s, the Cahill family rolled "The Cabin" over behind the Harbor Inn (now...#45 Burns Road). The Cahill's added a bathroom and made it into a rental cabin. The building is still there today.

Around 1950, Homer dismantled the farmhouse on the corner property and used the wood to construct the home on 36 Cartwright Road. You can still see the raw cut beams in the house when you go downstairs. The foundation to the old farmhouse remained and was used by the local children to play army games. When Edith, Homer's daughter married Eugene Lechmanski, they were given a portion of the property. According to Edith's son Larry, first they lived in a 50' x 10' trailer on the property. The winters were very cold.

It wasn't until the 1960s, when the property belonged to the Passionist Fathers that the foundation was demolished and filled in. That was the same time the entire area east of the Burns farmhouse was built up with fill and they built the Monastery buildings.

According to a document from the Shelter Island Historical Society archives, "The Cabin" wasn't the only building moved from Homer Griffing's lot to the Harbor Inn.



Converting the barn to living quarters, 1947



The Margiottas

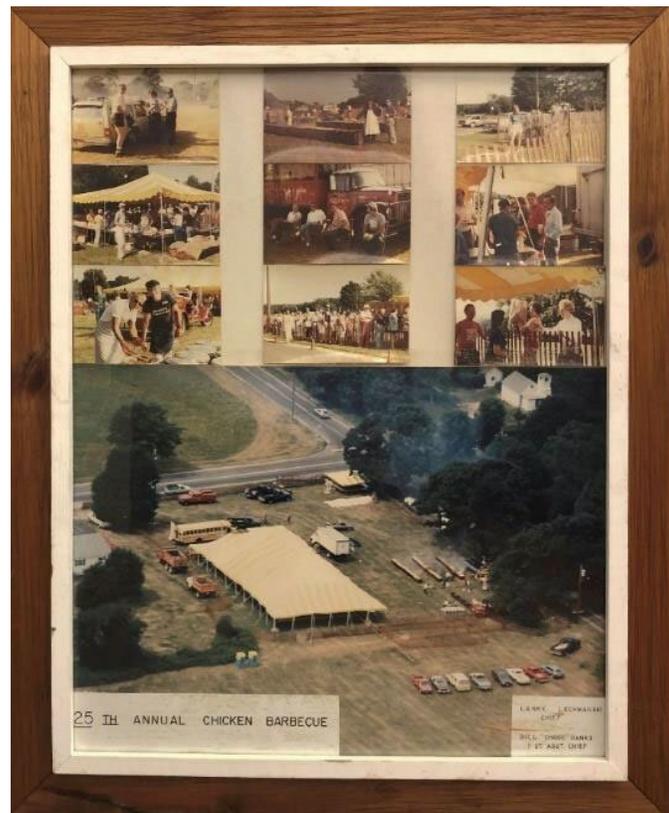
When the Margiottas grandmother in Brooklyn died, grandpa needed a place to live, so they purchased a small cottage, built by Homer Griffing, located across the road. The Margiottas felled two locust trees, stripped them, set the cottage atop the logs and rolled it across the street to its present location. The Margiotta family ran the Harbor Inn as an Italian restaurant and cocktail lounge until 1961.

FIREMEN'S FIELD AND THE CHICKEN BBQ ... a conversation with Larry Lechmanski

Many people associate St. Gabriel's Meadow Preserve with the Annual Fireman's Chicken BBQ—and because the Fire Department supported the purchase of the property, this piece of property has been referred to as "Firemen's Field." The Chicken BBQ wasn't always held at St. Gabriel's Meadow. The first BBQ was held in 1964 at Alfred Tuthill's Boat Yard. They expected an attendance of 250 and had 750. For two years afterward, it was held at Coecles Harbor Marina and when it outgrew that location, it moved to the farm which is now known as Klenawicus International Airport.

According to Larry, when they could no longer use Klenawicus, they negotiated with the Passionists to use the section of the property that was formerly Homer Griffing's homestead. The fire department had to supply their own insurance rider for the week. In addition to the insurance, the fire department agreed to replace 100 feet of the split rail fence surrounding the property annually for the Passionists. Over the years, by the time they replaced the last section of fence, it was time to start all over again.

The BBQ was moved to St. Gabriel's in 1988. That year Larry arranged for a friend to fly over the field to take an aerial photo. He wanted to have a record of exactly where everything was placed for the following years. He hoped this would eliminate any arguing about where things were placed. A 20" x 24" copy of the photo still hangs in the Heights firehouse. 1988 was the year of a severe drought. You can tell by the brown grass in the photo. As the charcoal pits heated up, they set the grass on fire in the field. Luckily, the firetruck was there to put out the fire before any of the public arrived. To this day they always have a firetruck available. Normally they sell about 2,200-2,300 dinners. One year they reached 3,000; there was no food for the volunteers, and they had to order pizza.





Annual Chicken



Displaying the 1975 barbecue tee-shirt is fireman Skip Tuttle.



Accepting a check from Chief Steve Lenox and Herb Sherman are auxiliary members Renee Jernick, Patty Lenox, Betty Tyboert, Ann Beckwith and Judy Sherman. (1975)



The First Annual Chicken Barbecue is enjoyed by a hungry crowd at Alfred Tuthill's Boatyard in the big boathouse. Can you find someone you know? (1964)



Strikers can even be found at the annual barbecue. This "chicken" displayed it's rights at the 1986 event.



Packing up the chicken to go, Cathy French and Miriam Gaffney fill up bags at the take-out tent during the 1994 Chicken Barbecue.



Shucking corn for the big event, this gang of volunteers went to work early in the morning on barbecue day.