



Currents of Cooperation

The Forest Society partners for protection around Great Bay

by Karen Finogle



THE HEALTH OF GREAT BAY IS INCREASINGLY FRAGILE. CONSERVING THE SUPPORTING LANDSCAPE IS CRITICAL FOR IMPROVEMENT.

Nearly 70 years ago Gerald Smith drove through Durham on his way to be a judge at a local agricultural fair. Along the way he passed by a herd of Jersey cattle grazing in a field, with Little Bay and its salt marsh-fringed tidal waters as a backdrop.

“I said to myself, ‘if I ever live in this area, I’d like to own that place,’” Smith recalled. In 1955, he and his wife Dottie did just that, purchasing pastureland and a circa 1805 house on the shores of Royalls Cove and the Bay. They raised four children on that land and tended sheep and cattle for nearly 30 years.

The area around them has changed since then. Today, the Seacoast is the fastest growing region in New Hampshire. Route 4, which crosses the Smith property at the mouth of the Bellamy River, carries a constant stream of cars. An average of 2,230 acres of natural landscape per year has been developed in the region between 1970 and 2006. Yet, hay is still harvested on Smith’s open fields; only the Jersey cattle are absent. The pastoral scene that first captured Smith’s eye continues to exert a similar influence on commuters who pass by each day.

Fortunately, the Smiths aren’t interested in selling their land. They only subdivided a portion of it, giving 12.8 acres each to two of their children, Jeff Smith and Carol Smith Tuveson. They thought that was sufficient, until their older son, Gordon, suggested the family permanently protect the land from future development. It wasn’t hard for Gerald Smith to see the value in this. “When you figure all the frontage we have on tidewater and drainage into the bay, it had to be protected,” he said.

Drainage and runoff are particular areas of concern for biologists who monitor the health of the Great Bay estuary and its watershed. One of the largest and most pristine estuaries on the Atlantic coast, Great Bay is a melting pot for over 162 bird, fish and plant species, 23 of which are endangered or threatened. With 75 percent of New Hampshire’s growing population living within 50 miles of this jewel, the bay’s health is becoming increasingly fragile; a tenuous mix of saltwater and freshwater, laced with too much nitrogen. In the past 25 years, nitrogen concentrations in the bay have increased by 59 percent due to storm water carrying fertilizer and

other chemicals in runoff from impervious surfaces like blacktop pavement and concrete. Although the bay is flushed by 17 billion gallons of saltwater twice daily, eight tributaries spill their accumulated contaminants into it—limiting its resiliency. Too many pollutants can trigger algae blooms and compromise water quality, disrupting the health and longevity of plant and animal species.

In an effort to offset this, the entire Smith family sold four conservation easements on nearly 70 acres of land. The Nature Conservancy (TNC), which purchased the easements on behalf of the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership (GBRPP), assigned them to the Forest Society for management. One of the parcels, a 29.74-acre woodlot of oak-pine-hemlock forest is located up the road from the Smith homestead and managed for firewood. The lot abuts two other properties the Forest Society will own and manage as part of its system of reservations. The three remaining easements include 2,550 feet of frontage along Royalls Cove, which is at the mouth of the Bellamy River where it enters Little Bay, and 340 feet of frontage on Little Bay, as the northern part of the Great Bay estuary is known.

“We were all wowed,” Duane Hyde, TNC’s director of protection, said after he and other conservation leaders walked the property. “You have two tidal creeks on either side, and you have a salt marsh out on the cove and then mudflats. It just has great upland bird habitat, great waterfowl habitat, and an important salt marsh. It hit on everything that we love to see on a property.”

Hyde spearheaded the efforts to protect the Smith

property as a representative of not just TNC but also the eight other organizations and agencies, including the Forest Society, that comprise the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership. Established in 1994, the partnership has secured \$54.4 million in grants since its inception, directly protecting more than 4,800 acres of open space around the Great Bay estuary and facilitating the conservation of another 3,000 acres by individual partners. The partnership formed when overlapping public and private interests in land conservation around the estuary led to a pooling of resources and efforts.

“A key element of the philosophy of the partnership has been decision making by consensus,” said Paul Doscher, the Forest Society’s vice president of land conservation. “We bring all the science and priorities of the partners to the table and make decisions as a group. Protecting the bay, its wildlife and the water resources that support that wildlife have been a mutual goal since the beginning.”

The partnership’s principle partners also include Ducks Unlimited, Great Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, NH Audubon, NH Fish and Game Department, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service. Together, they work with a wide network of community partners to pursue the purchase of land or conservation easements on important parcels. While TNC brokers all the transactions, the primary partners decide which agency or organization should take ownership of the property or easement. This



CONSERVATION EASEMENTS ON LITTLE BAY FRONTAGE
WILL GUARANTEE NO FURTHER DEVELOPMENT.



cooperation, the ability to check special interests at the door and collectively approach agencies like the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration (NOAA) for funding, has been pivotal to the partnership's success.

"The Great Bay is one of the most extraordinary environmental resources in our state and ensuring the protection of this important ecosystem is critical," New Hampshire's Senator Judd Gregg said. "The tremendous efforts of the Partnership and its many federal, state, and citizen partners have resulted in the conservation of expansive tracts of lands and habitats, making Great Bay one of the most successful conservation projects in the country. Because of the work conducted by the Partnership, generations of New Hampshire residents and visitors will be able to enjoy the bay for many years to come."

Protecting Great Bay seems to hinge on partnerships of all sorts. Like the Smith family, the Langley family of Durham granted two easements to TNC in late 2006 on 86.9 acres of land that has been in their family for five generations. One parcel, a 55.3-acre tract with 3,200 feet of frontage on Little Bay, has been farmed since the late nineteenth century. Now the site of the Langley Bison Farm, it will continue to be managed for agricultural purposes.



EMERY FARM IS A POPULAR DESTINATION FOR BLUEBERRY PICKING

The other parcel is a 30.6-acre woodlot located off Longmarsh Road in Durham. Seen as "one of the holes in the donut" of existing conservation land, it features 1,400 feet of frontage on Crommet Creek, a tributary of Great Bay. The GBRPP transferred the easement to the Forest Society to form a contiguous area of management and monitoring. The Forest Society's Dame

Forest Reservation sits on the opposite, western shore of Crommet Creek, and another property to the east of the woodlot will be transferred to the organization as an addition to the Reservation. A network of trails and footpaths weave throughout the properties, traversing near beaver ponds and wetlands into a mixed forest of red oak, white pine, and hemlock. The Langleys will continue to manage this lot for timber, although the land is open for public recreation.

The Forest Society also helped protect another high-profile property in the area by working with the Town of Durham, TNC and NRCS to acquire conservation easements on 59 acres of Emery Farm, also visible along the Route 4 corridor across from the 130-acre Wagon Hill Farm owned by the Town. Emery Farm has been in owner David Hills' family for 11 generations, and his deep affection for the land inspired him to permanently protect it through a bargain sale of the easement.

In the next 20 years, an estimated 80 percent of the state's population growth will occur on only one third of its land area—the southeastern region including Great Bay and 1,000 square miles of its watershed. Estuaries support more than half of the living matter found in the world's oceans and provide opportunities for recreation and sustainable resource use. With land prices increasing 61 percent since 1998, Doscher says there is a lot of work that remains to be done to maintain the bay's health. "While the Partnership has protected many of the key places it has identified as deserving conservation, many more opportunities to work with other landowners remain," Doscher said. "Continued support from Congress, through the auspices of Senator Gregg, will remain essential if the job is to be successfully completed."

Gerry and Dottie Smith's dining room windows look out onto Little Bay. The times when they would drop the kids off at Nannie Island in Great Bay proper to go oystering are behind them. They are still connected to its waters though. A familiar boat passes by, and they will comment on it. Those things don't change, but Smith is adamant. "It's absolutely essential that [the Partnership] try to get as much shore property as they can to protect the bay," he says. When he looks out to the water, he can't help but notice the cars passing by on Route 4—and how many more there are than when he first moved here.