Twentieth-Century New England Land Conservation: A Heritage of Civic Engagement, Edited by Charles H.W. Foster. 2009 by the Havard Forest. Reprinted by permission of Harvard Forest.

There was yet one more story of collaboration.

Counting the tidal shores of Great Bay Estuary, New Hampshire's modest coastline covers some 150 miles. The estuary is one of the largest on the Atlantic coast and, stretching ten miles inland, one of the most recessed. Geologically, it is a drowned river valley of tidal waters, deep channels, and fringing mudflats. The estuary receives its fresh water from seven major rivers. Three of these rivers — the Lamprey, Squamscott, and Winnicut — flow directly into Great Bay. The others — the Bellamy, Cocheco, Oyster, and Salmon Falls — flow into Little Bay and the Piscataqua River. With Great Bay's average depth of less than nine feet, the changing tides make a dramatic difference. Its 8.9 square miles shrink to less than half that area during low tide, leaving much of the bay exposed as mud flats.

By the mid-1940s, the productive, species-rich estuary had become a quiet backwater, polluted with decades of sawdust, industrial discharge, and raw sewage from upstream mills and towns. A state government panel offered many recommendations, including pollution cleanup, improved fisheries, better access, and a Great Bay Authority to help develop the area. It also suggested setting aside thousands of acres as a state park and game preserve. While improvements to water quality eventually came about through sewage treatment facilities, most of the commission's other recommendations were ignored or forgotten.

The area surrounding the estuary, however, didn't remain a quiet backwater. From the 1970s through the 1990s, the population of Rockingham and Strafford counties jumped 86 percent. The two counties lost I average of 2,230 acres of natural landscape per year to development. Loss of open space was eroding the traditional small-town atmosphere Id destroying diverse upland and estuarine habitats throughout the region. The complexity of the land-use and ownership issues, and the sheer size of the challenge, required a mobilization of a kind not seen before along the coast.

While the fight over Aristotle Onasiss's proposed oil refinery in 1973 galvanized local appreciation for Great Bay and its resources, scientists working on a larger scale would later put the estuary on the map for conservation. In 1986, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan – ratified by the United States, Canada, and Mexico – identified Great Bay as one of only a handful of focus areas for waterfowl migration. Great Bay's abundant wetlands and associated uplands provided critical waterfowl wintering, migration, and production habit, according to the plan.

Three years later, some of the leading opponents of the oil refinery successfully petitioned state and federal agencies to designate Great Bay a National Estuarine Research

Reserve. The designation in this program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) helped secure funding and resources for land protection, research, stewardship, and conservation measures both in the water and its surrounding lands. Also in 1989, the North American Wetland Conservation Act (NAWCA) was established by Congress. NAWCA's intent was to help conserve wetland ecosystems that are critical to waterfowl and other migratory birds, fish, and wildlife. The act provided rods and encouraged partnerships in priority areas identified in the 1986 waterfowl plan. Great Bay was one of those priority areas.

Around the same time, big changes were afoot with the largest landowner on Great Bay: Pease Air Force Base. The former Strategic air Command site was slated for closure by the military, and a myriad questions arose about the future use of the base's 4,000-plus acres, including prime shorefront on Great Bay. Judd Gregg, governor at the time, helped lead transition efforts that culminated in establishment of commercial and industrial park, an international airport, and a federal wildlife refuge. In 1992, Great Bay National Wildlife Refuge was established, consisting of about 1,100 acres of the former base—including seven miles of shoreline on the bay.

By 1994, the opportunities presented by the Research Reserve, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and NAWCA had caught the attention of what would become an extraordinary partnership for land protection around Great Bay. Spearheaded by The Nature Conservancy, the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership -- an affiliation of nine organizations and agencies — secured funding for its first two properties: 176 acres in all on Durham Point, right in the area once eyed for the oil refinery.

From the fall of 1994 through April 1997, this consortium embarked on a long-term strategic planning effort, and defined its project area as 272,000 acres in 24 towns around the estuary. The resulting *Habitat Protection Plan* identified 14,200 acres of high-value habitats and has served over the years as a blueprint for the Partnership's progress. Following completion of the plan, the group of conservation entities formalized the collaboration. A key decision at the outset was to avoid creating a new institution with its own legal standing. The Partnership's principal partners would consist of Ducks Unlimited, Great Pay National Estuarine Research Reserve, New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, The Nature Conservancy (N.H. Chapter), Society to or the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Great Bay National Wildlife Refuge) and the U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service. A crucial component was the inclusion of associate partners (local land trusts and county conservation districts) and community partners (twenty-four municipalities and nine additional conservation organizations). From the beginning, the group had done tremendous work in the grass roots.

The Nature Conservancy, the group decided, would manage the federal grants and negotiate land acquisitions on behalf of the Partnership. But central to its success would be a culture of making decisions by consensus, a model that reinforced a focus on common goals and broad-based solutions. Robert Miller, who led the Conservancy's land acquisitions for the Partnership's first ten years, urged partners to "leave the bowling shirts at the door" — referring to shirts with affiliation logos -- and fostered a spirit of cooperation.

In 1997, the Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership was awarded a prestigious award from the EPA's New England region, the Environmental Merit Award. The Partnership was recognized as an effective and energetic start-up conservation entity using science to guide land protection efforts with willing sellers.

In the first thirteen years of its existence the Partnership secured $54.4 million in federal funding — a staggering amount, most of it from NOAA, with the support of Senator Judd Gregg — which it leveraged to generate even more funding sources, including other federal, state, and municipal programs, and private donors. To date, the Partnership has protected more than 4,800 acres in the Great Bay region, including nearly 1,000 by conservation easement, a total of seventy-six deals.

"We couldn't wait for institutions to do it. There were no other similar partnerships when we started," said Dea Brickner-Wood, the Partnership's coordinator, and she could have been speaking more broadly, for the Forest Society at the turn of the century, for the Extension Service, for the Silvio Conte Refuge, for the Harris Center, for the history of land conservation in New Hampshire. "We had no manual on how to do this."

"There are a lot of ideas out there that go nowhere — ideas every bit as smart as the Trust for New Hampshire Lands," Lewis Feldstein had said a decade earlier. "This idea could have been nibbled to death if each person took a chunk out of it. But people worked together and in the end, we were all reminded that our collective action can accomplish great things."

NOTES

THE FIRES OF CHANGE: Excerpted and adapted from articles by Martha Carlson and Richard Ober in *Forest Notes* and Ober's *People and Place: The First Hundred Years*. Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, 2001.

WISE AND CURRENT USE: Includes adapted material from "Current Use" by Richard Ober, Liz Lorvig, and Isobel Parke, originally published in *People and Place*.

WATER'S EDGE: Includes excerpted and adapted material from "Reclaiming New Hampshire's Waters" by Suki Casanave, originally published in *People and Place*.

TRUST IN NEW HAMPSHIRE LAND: Excerpted and adapted from an essay by Ralph Jimenez and originally published in "Land for New Hampshire," the final report of the Trust for New Hampshire Lands and the Land Conservation Investment Program. Includes adapted material previously published by Richard Ober.

ALL IN: Includes excerpted material from "The Great Bay Resource Protection Partnership" by Eric Aldrich of The Nature Conservancy.