

# Old Saybrook's Founders Memorial Park: It Takes a Village

Judy Preston 2022

After fourteen years and five town administrations, Founders Memorial Park came to be.

The park exists on a mound of dubious content: the former town dump. It has variously been known as "Malcolm's Mountain" (for former first selectman Malcolm Smith); "Ray's Ridge" (for former first selectman Ray Catowski); and "Barbara's Bunker" (for former first Selectman Barbara Maynard). I'm told by those in the know that the site was a popular meeting spot for teens, and have it on good authority that George Maynard taught Barbara how to shoot a rifle here (for the purpose of keeping the rat population down).

I remember searching for short-eared owls over Ragged Rock marsh in January on an Audubon Christmas Bird count from this site. We buried our boots in warm piles of composting vegetation to stay warm. And in 1997, having walked from North Cove Outfitters downtown, we launched the Old Saybrook Land Trust, from what I called "Mount Saybrook" – the best view of the estuary -- to draw attention to the extraordinary natural resources of the town and beyond.

Once a dump on the outskirts of town; now a park with the best view in the area. Regardless of its name or sordid history, what once was marginalized land has been transformed, and a lot of people made that happen.

## History

In the year 2000, Old Saybrook, after collecting 21 acres, deemed the area Founders Memorial Park to honor the original Saybrook Colony settlers. The first land donation came from Robert Clarke in 1989, with additional parcels donated by members of the 10<sup>th</sup> generation of the direct descendants of that family. The Clarks were one of the ten families that were the original settlers of the Saybrook colony between 1635 - 1660. The "colony" at that time included present day Lyme, Old Lyme, Westbrook, Chester, Essex and Deep River.

## Process

In 2001 a grant to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sought funds for the Connecticut Brownfields Redevelopment Initiative, which included a provision for adding greenspace in the Town of Old Saybrook. The proposal for a public park was initiated in 2004; there was also collaboration and an agreement with the Trust for Public Lands. Funds to develop the park came, in part, from the estate of Sarah Ann Martin, who bequeathed property on South Cove for conservation purposes, and because that location was not suitable for public access, they were applied to the Founders project. A Park Committee was created: Ken Soudan, Leta Fontes, Jerry Brophy, Bill Peace, and Barbara Guenther. The Park Goals: passive recreation, education and conservation. The town celebrated the opening of Founders Park on September 22, 2008.

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It's not hard to imagine why "conservation" was a key objective to creating Founders Park: one only need look at the view to understand that it is situated in a most extraordinary place at the mouth of the Connecticut River and Long Island Sound. Were it not for the shifting sandbars at the river mouth, this valley may well have gone the way of the Thames, Quinnipiac, or Housatonic Rivers, with industry, commerce, a city skyline, and no dark sky at night.

Instead, we find ourselves in awe of the view that we *can* take in – an intact, functioning system of salt, brackish and freshwater tidal marshes, islands, sand spits, and wooded hillsides. I often wonder how many people have come before us – all the way back to the Clarke family, and the native Americans before them, that looked upon this place and couldn't help but think about the bounty and beauty that this sight encompasses.

And because it is worth reiterating, let me list the environmental distinctions that this River and Sound region captures:

- **1973 CT River Gateway Conservation Zone (Gateway Commission)**
- **1991 Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge**
- **1993 The Nature Conservancy Last Great Place**
- **1994 Wetland of International Importance** under the Ramsar International Convention
- **1987 Estuary of National Significance, Long Island Sound, (National Estuary Program)**
- **1998 American Heritage River, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)**
- **2007 State of Connecticut Greenway along the estuary of the Connecticut River**
- **2012 National Blueway America's Great Outdoors Initiative**
- **2022 National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR)**

## Return of the Natives

And so it was fitting that the objective for landscaping this site was to use native plants that would complement the natural landscape in the lower river. Native plants, once established, can thrive without chemical inputs – fertilizers, pesticides, and even irrigation – meaning that this site is not a source of pollutants to the surrounding landscape. And the fruits, berries and even leaves of these plants are important to wildlife – including insect pollinators that are increasingly making the news as the critical link in a food web that includes you and me.

Founders Park is also intended to be a demonstration site; a place where visitors can see what native plants look like, with the hope that it will encourage others to adopt ecologically sensitive landscaping practices at home. Sustainable landscaping is a tangible way that we all can participate in living compatibly on the planet with other species.

## Volunteers and a Legacy

So, once the dump was safely capped and reconfigured, a park began to emerge. At first it was a lot of dirt, and dust, soil mounds, and strewn boulders. A truckload of plants arrived from

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Acer Gardens, and the planting began. There were plastic kiddie pools filled with water from an Old Saybrook fire truck, and lots of plastic jugs, wheelbarrels, and tools. That was over ten years ago.

In the interim, there has been Barbara Guenther, and a group of volunteers. Barb is a social network. She has cajoled the group into a finely tuned, jovial, and incredibly effective team. To this day, every Friday during the growing season, these folks continue to battle invasive species, lug mulch, pull out and replace plants, and otherwise create solutions where problems were suspected. They meet every Spring to plan, and in the Fall to celebrate with a potluck at the Park.

Today we have a garden shed with a rain barrel (the only source of water), a detailed account of the Park's plant species – both planted and volunteer – thanks to Bob Lorenz; an informational brochure, educational signage, benches – we have a Park to be proud of.

Thanks to the village that made this possible – Ray Allen and his team at Parks and Rec, First Selectman Carl Fortuna for lending his support; former Town Planner Christine Nelson for her well-crafted experience, Larry Bonin from Public works (who created the stone wall).

Without volunteers, this park would not have come into being, nor would it still be maintained for the benefit of visitors today. Please consider lending your support. Contact the Town of Old Saybrook Parks and Recreation Department: <https://www.oldsaybrookct.gov/parks-recreation> (860) 395-3152. You can't beat the view.

*Judy Preston created the original native plant plan for the park*