

Celebrating  
**50** years  
1964-2014

# THE LAY *of* THE LAND

News from the Madison Land Conservation Trust

SUMMER 2014



The Ox Pasture at sunset by Jack Donat, 2011 photo contest winner

## Madison's salt marshes: working for us then & now

“Hitch up the horse to the lumber wagon—we’re going down to the meadows today!” That’s how Carl Sonnichsen’s day often began in the 1890s. He was a boy then, growing up and working on a Madison farm.

There were many farms in Madison in those days, and most farmers owned at least a few acres of tidal marshland. They relied on the salt marsh hay for livestock bedding, insulation, fertilizer and cattle feed.

In fact, salt marsh grass has much more nutritional value for livestock than regular hay.

But harvesting and transporting the hay from the marshes to the farms was no easy undertaking! Farmers traveled by horse and wagon from as far inland as Rockland and North Madison to cut marsh hay from their parcels of land by the East River and Hammonasset.

Everything was done by hand. Workers mowed the hay using scythes—a strenuous undertaking that swarms of mosquitoes and green heads made even more unpleasant. Men often dulled the blades of two or three scythes a day while cutting through the tough hay. At night

*continued*



The Madison Land Conservation Trust maintains 35 miles of trailways with 22 trails, and protects over 1600 acres of land. If you would like to become more involved with the work of the MLCT, please contact Mike Maloney at [mike@maloneyllc.com](mailto:mike@maloneyllc.com).



they'd take the blades home to sharpen for the next day's work.

The farmers left the cut hay on the meadow for several days to dry out enough for raking—all the while hoping a storm wouldn't blow in. If it did, their hay would get drenched—or even worse, the high tides would carry it to a neighbor's meadow and deposit it there. There was more than one long-standing feud between Madison families over who owned freshly mown piles of drying hay in those days!

Once the hay was sufficiently dry, the workers would rake it into heaps of at least 100 pounds. Then they would slide two strong poles parallel under the heaps, so that two men could grasp either end, and carry the

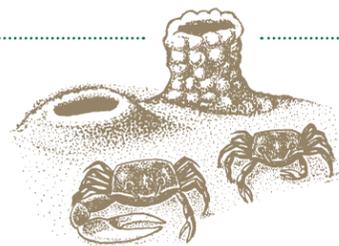
hay to higher ground. Finally it was loaded into wagons and brought back to the farm.

Carl did most of his marsh hay harvesting in the Hammonasset salt meadows, but the process was the same in the East River marshes—much of which is owned and protected today by MLCT.

Thanks to generous gifts from loyal donors over the last 50 years, MLCT has acquired more than 200 acres of salt marsh spread out over more than 30 properties, including Ox Pasture and Fence Creek Marsh. (Judd Field, a one-acre piece of Fence Creek Marsh, was our very first property. It was donated to MLCT by Florence Judd in 1964.)

### Fascinating facts: Salt marshes

- **Diamondback terrapins** (turtles), inhabitants of some of our local marshes, were hunted nearly to extinction for their meat in the 1900s. MLCT is working closely with local scientists who are studying terrapins on our properties. Research is focused on the effort to halt the decline of the turtles.



- You can see **fiddler crabs** scurrying across the Ox Pasture Trail and marsh at low tide. Male fiddler crabs have one claw that is much larger than the other—they use it to attract mates and threaten other males.

### Why do we need marshes?

There are many reasons why we need to protect our marshlands. They are among the most productive ecosystems on earth. In addition to being the basis of the marine food chain, they serve as spawning grounds for many varieties of finfish and shellfish. Migrating birds use marshes for nesting and resting sites.

And if we do our job safeguarding them, the marshes will, in turn, protect us by filtering harmful pollutants from runoffs and buffering coastlines from flooding and erosion caused by dangerous storms like Sandy and Irene. So don't plan on harvesting any of that hay!

### Read more MLCT history

Many of the facts in this article were taken from an interview that Ray Wiswell, the first Chair of MLCT, conducted with Carl Sonnichsen in 1965, when he was about 85 years old. Find the transcript, as well as articles about Carl and Florence Judd, donor of MLCT's very first property, written by **Linda Nietlisbach** (*thank you Linda!*). Find it all on our website at [madisonlandtrust.org](http://madisonlandtrust.org). Click on the **Finding History** link.

- The **rotten egg smell** of the salt marsh comes from anaerobic bacteria that break down the organic material.
- Scientists believe the ability of salt marshes to **capture and remove carbon dioxide** from the atmosphere may help slow the rate of climate change.
- More than 50% of Connecticut's **salt marshes have been lost** to human development since colonial times.



MLCT membership form from the 1960s

### Finding History

The last issue of the *Lay of the Land* asked readers to share stories, photos or artifacts from the Land Trust's 50 year history. We were thrilled to receive an immediate response from **Lauren McManus** who wrote, "My grandfather, Ray Wiswell, was one of the MLCT 'Founding Fathers.' I have books in my attic that he put together in the 60's and 70's labeled MLCT. I would be happy to donate them to you as you might recover some information of interest."

Wiswell's binders have a wealth of records, maps and letters from those early years of the Land Trust including the transcript of the interview with Carl Sonnichsen about harvesting salt marsh hay that our cover story is based on. There are samples of the first membership form (above). And there are newspaper clippings, including one announcing the opening of the very first MLCT trail (Blinshed Loop Trail) and an inaugural hike in May 1968 attended by 75 people. *Thank you Lauren, for sharing this time capsule of history with us.*

If you have artifacts from the Trust's history, we want to see them! **Send your stories and photos to us at: [info@madisonlandtrust.org](mailto:info@madisonlandtrust.org).**

### Your donations at work

The Madison Land Conservation Trust relies on your generous gifts and the donation of hundreds of hours by volunteers. These resources of time and money enable the Trust to protect nearly 1700 acres of woodlands and wetlands, and maintain more than 35 miles of trails for hikers to enjoy. Here are some of the ways your gifts have been used this year:

- **4+ miles** of improved trails
- More than **20** new green and white trailhead signs
- **600+** metal trail markers
- **15 yards** of stone installed in the new Summer Hill trailhead parking lot on Summer Hill Road
- **4** reported sightings of bald eagles on the newly marked Paper Mill Trail
- **300** people attended **9 hikes** led by expert naturalists
- **2 gallons** of donated coffee and **4 dozen** donut holes shared by hikers

**We couldn't do it without you. Thank you!**

Madison Land Conservation Trust

JOIN OLD AND NEW FRIENDS FOR FOOD & COCKTAILS

**Celebration by the Sound**

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 6TH  
from 6-9 pm at the Surf Club

Tickets for the event are \$35  
RSVP at [event.celebrations.com/LandTrust50th](http://event.celebrations.com/LandTrust50th)  
by August 1

#### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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## Madison Land Conservation Trust



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## TAKE A HIKE!

### 2014 Hikes and Events

**SEPTEMBER 21 AT 3:00 PM**

#### **Marsh Walk with Julie Ainsworth Ox Pasture Trail**

Salt marshes are one of the most productive ecosystems on earth. Discover how plants and animals are adapted to survive in this ever-changing environment. Also, learn about research into the nesting behavior of diamondback terrapins, the only turtle species to live in the brackish waters of tidal marshes. Boots and long pants are a must for walking on the marsh. No dogs please.

**OCTOBER 5 AT 7:00 PM**

#### **Autumn Moonlight Walk Garvan Trail**

Bring a flashlight and join us for an evening stroll on the Garvan Trail at the Surf Club. As always, a bagpiper will lead the way. After the walk, refreshments will be served in the Surf Club

building and prizes will be awarded for the Trail Hike Challenge. Members of the Astronomical Society of New Haven will set up telescopes on the deck for viewing the moon, planets and stars in the night-time sky.

**NOVEMBER 7 AT 7:00 PM**

#### **Annual Meeting with Tom Wessels Memorial Town Hall**

This two-part program will begin with Tom Wessels's keynote presentation at the MLCT Annual Meeting, to which all are invited. Wessels is the author of *Reading the Forested Landscape, A Natural History of New England*.

**NOVEMBER 8 AT 9:00 AM**

#### **Forest Forensics with Tom Wessels Summer Hill Trail**

The second part of the program will

take place the following morning. Tom will lead a hike on the MLCT's Summer Hill trail. He will introduce us to the science of forest forensics, interpreting the landscape by taking a closer look at the arrangements of plants, landforms, and historical relics. We will learn to unravel the complex stories etched into our forested landscape.

#### **50TH ANNIVERSARY TRAIL HIKE CHALLENGE**

**ADVENTURERS** Hike 14 trails and receive an MLCT hat

**EXPLORERS** Hike all 22 MLCT trails and receive a hat plus a special gift

