

WALPOLE WOODS

The property known as Walpole Woods consists of approximately fifty acres of mixed woods on the east side of route 129, 2.5 miles from the junction of routes 129 and 130. The land was a gift to the Damariscotta Area Recreational Alliance (DARA) by Gordon and Roberta Merriam, whose Blueberry Farm lies contiguous to the property on the western side of route 129, extending to the Damariscotta River. Mr. Merriam, a retired foreign service officer, purchased the property in 1945. Walpole Woods was gifted to DARA in 1963 with the intention “that trails could be opened up to the public for walks and enjoyment of woodland, springs, mosses, and wild life, etc. In winter the trails could be used for snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.” There would be “no commercial use of the property apart from woodland operation on a selective-cutting, sustained-use basis. Prominent features of the property include a woodland road along the south border and another bisecting the property; a small stream flowing into a pond created by a berm; an old gravel pit; a dug well of uncertain ancestry; and a large glacial erratic. Two walking trails have been created, utilizing parts of the roads.

In 1978 DARA was dissolved, and the property was conveyed to the town of South Bristol with the same purpose and restrictions as previously prevailed. In 2003 the Damariscotta River Association assumed ownership of the property.

In 1753, Jonas Fitch moved to Bristol from Boston, acquiring land including the present Blueberry Farm and Walpole Woods and building a log cabin at Fitch’s Point. Jonas was born in or near Boston in June, 1718 and was an officer under General Winslow, building forts on the Kennebec River. In 1756-1759 he was captain of a militia engaging the Indians in the last of the French and Indian Wars. By inheritance, he was a shareholder of the Pemaquid Proprietors whose land holdings dated to the Pemaquid Patent of 1633, establishing his claim to land in Bristol, some of which he declined, believing that the established settlers had the better title to the land.

This was a time of many conflicting land claims. During the eighteenth century there was an influx of predominantly Scotch-Irish Presbyterians fleeing the poverty of their native homes for the promise of free land along the coastal rivers of present-day Maine. Sturdy people these were, accepting the challenge of a forest wilderness, harsh winters and sometimes hostile natives. Theirs was a subsistence life style, clearing the woods for farms and gardens and sending the wood to Boston and Scotland. Indian uprisings led to the abandonment of settlements for varying durations until the end of the final French-Indian War in 1760. Overlapping land grants had been made by Indians, by royal charter, and by proprietary claimants. The Kennebec Proprietors of 1749 traced their claims to a 1629 grant to the Plymouth Pilgrims, subsequently purchased by Boston businessmen in 1660. A settler, or his family, could claim ownership of a disputed property after sixty years of residence. Agents of outside claimants

demanding payment for “their” property were distinctly *persona non grata* and encouraged to leave the area. Finally in 1813, a commission of the Governor of Massachusetts, after over eighty years of complaints by Lincoln County settlers, adjudicated the conflicting land claims and awarded most of the land to the established settlers. The Kennebec Proprietors obtained six square miles of land near Moosehead Lake as compensation.

Jonas Fitch died in 1819. He had six children, one of whom, Timothy, inherited Blueberry Farm. He built the existing house about 1798. Timothy died in 1826, and the property passed to his daughter, Prudence. She married Captain Joseph Brown, Jr. of Edgecomb, who sailed from New York bound for the coast of West Africa, where he was lost at sea in 1856 at the age of forty nine. Joseph’s father had been a Spanish sea captain, Emmanuel Joseph de Gardo, who married an Edgecomb girl, Mary Winslow, whose parents insisted that the Spaniard change his name to Joseph Brown. Prudence and Joseph, Jr. had four children, and the property remained in the Fitch-Brown family until 1921. Probate of Joseph Jr.’s will in 1857 valued the real estate at \$2,500, goods and chattels at \$315 and rights and credits of \$2,744, totalling \$5,559, to be divided among his wife and children. Like others of its neighbors, stone walls and a barn foundation attest to a history of subsistence farming in addition to Joseph’s mariner career.

According to neighbors Paul Kelsey and Berkley Weston, whose collective memories extend back about sixty-five years, there have been few changes to the property. The pond was created by Mr. Merriam. The abandoned gravel pits once contributed to the maintenance of Bristol roads. Limited logging fed local sawmills, and an undated photo shows logs stacked by the roadside. No agricultural activities have occurred since the property left the Fitch-Brown family in 1921. Paul recalls active farms and fields to the east and southeast of Walpole Woods, since abandoned along with the remains of old foundations.

The DRA is committed to maintaining the legacy of Gordon and Roberta Merriam to the people of South Bristol in accordance with their vision, and the property can also serve as a natural science laboratory for its school children.

There is a place of trees --- grey with lichen.
I have walked there
thinking of old days.

--Ezra Pound