

A Half-Century of Community Effort to Protect Nantucket’s Specialness

Jim Lentowski, BSLA, MLA
Executive Director, Nantucket Conservation Foundation, Inc.

Abstract

When those who are not especially familiar with Nantucket hear the name some react by calling to mind its connection to the country’s whaling past. But for those who through birth or good fortune have established a personal connection with Nantucket, mentioning the island elicits memories of past travel experiences, friendships made, family milestones shared, or times spent roaming moorlands, cranberry bogs, or miles of sandy beaches, rutted roads, and bike paths.

On Nantucket people are inevitably drawn to the outdoors. They come out to be rejuvenated by the island’s exceptional openness, expansive views of the sky, and rolling landscapes not hidden behind tall trees or buildings. The vista often extends miles away to the horizon, far out over the water that surrounds this exceptional place and isolates its people and natural rarities from “America.”

Over the past 50 years various segments of the community – nonprofit organizations and town agencies -- have worked creatively, cooperatively, and locally to better understand, protect, and perpetuate the island’s natural lands and the elements occurring on them. The result is that nearly 50% of the island is now permanently protected and available for residents and visitors to learn from and enjoy.

Introduction

Managing a region’s or community’s sustainability for the benefit of its residents provides us with an opportunity to learn from the experiences of others, hopefully avoiding the time and cost of reinventing the wheel. Networking as well as sharing information with those who will ultimately be impacted by planning decisions is a critical component of any well organized effort.

For those who are familiar with Nantucket’s reputation as an up-scaled summer vacation destination, fair warning. As hard we have tried, we haven’t come up with all of the answers. In fact, as you will read, some of our enviable successes have resulted in unforeseen problems.

A Remote Setting and Its History

Nantucket is an island located in Massachusetts. It lies about 25 miles south of Cape Cod, a sandy, hook-shaped peninsula that extends into the Atlantic Ocean at the southeast corner of Massachusetts. Nantucket is located 90 miles southeast of Boston and about 200 miles east of New York City.

All of Nantucket island is a single governmental unit that is governed day-to-day by five elected Selectmen and a Town Manager. Major policy and fiscal decisions are dealt with by an Annual Town Meeting in which all registered voters may participate. The Town of Nantucket, also its own county, includes three islands, two of which – Tuckernuck and Muskeget – are inhabited only during the summer months. The main island, called Nantucket – a name shared with the island's town center – is approximately 14 miles east and west and 4 miles north and south. It is a windswept, pork chop-shaped, glacially deposited 110-foot high pile of sand. Its shorelines are constantly being reshaped and eroded by hurricanes, ‘Noreasters, tides, rainwater, and wind. The island is one of the windiest places in the United States and is also known for the dense fog banks that can move in suddenly and linger during all seasons of the year. As islanders say, “Fog Happens.”

Before English settlement, the remote island was home to a large population of Native Americans coming from the Wampanoag tribe. Nantucket was first “sighted” by explorer Bartholomew Gosnold in 1602, but not settled until 1641, when a group of ten Englishmen purchased legal ownership for thirty pounds of silver and two beaver hats.

Many years after its English settlement, whaling put Nantucket on the map and is what many people usually think of when they hear its name. Author Herman Melville, in “Moby Dick,” described what he thought the island was like during that era:

“Nantucket! Take out your map and look at it. See what a real corner of the world it occupies; how it stands there, away off shore, more lonely than the Eddystone lighthouse. Look at it - a mere hillock, and elbow of sand; all beach, without a background. There is more sand there than you would use in twenty years as a substitute for blotting paper. . . . that people there plant toadstools before their houses, to get under the shade in summer time . . .”

Beginning in the late 17th century, whaling prospered for nearly 150 years. It made Nantucket a world center for shipbuilding and the services related to maintaining a fleet of small but incredibly sturdy sailing vessels which navigated to the remotest corners of the globe in search of whales. Nantucket’s captains and crews were widely regarded for their courage and determination. Due to economic opportunities created by this industry, the island’s year-round population swelled to nearly 10,000 people in 1840.

The establishment of the first commercial oil well in Pennsylvania (1859) and a related decrease in the demands for whale oil products, resulted in whaling’s gradual decline and Nantucket’s population dropping to about 3,700 in 1880. Falling back on their agricultural heritage, those who chose to stay turned to sheep, cattle and horse grazing, which heavily impacted the island’s sparse vegetative cover and marginally productive soils. The original English settlers had previously set aside thousands of acres as pasture lands, called “commons,” which were nearly denuded by overgrazing caused by the presence more than 17,000 sheep.

By the beginning of the 20th century, commercial grazing had fallen off and Nantucketers were involved in modest agricultural activities that included dairy farming, vegetable farming for local consumption, and cranberry culture. Prior to World War II, approximately 2,000 acres were in various forms of agriculture. By the mid-1960’s, this number fell to less than 600 acres divided

between vegetable crops and cranberries. While the island's agricultural acreage has remained more or less constant since then, increasing oversupplies produced by cranberry growers nationwide may impact 300 acres of the island's still working cranberry bogs, a farming tradition that began in 1865.

Tourism, the Island's New "Industry"

Island tourism became popular in the late 19th century when people discovered that being on Nantucket during the summer months was far more pleasant than dealing with mainland heat. Air conditioning had not yet been invented and for those city dwellers who could manage to escape, romping in the ocean at Surfside or sailing up harbor in a catboat was a clear choice.

Summer cottages, hotels, and guest houses sprung up on the island, with the number of residences going from 1,800 in 1937 to 3,800 in 1966. Despite building activity, the year-round population remained more or less constant at about 3,500 with an increase to 16,000 when the visitors were added in during a typical mid-1960's summer season.

Nantucket's solitude, its historically important and well preserved collection of 18th and 19th century residential structures, exceptional museums and cultural opportunities, and diversity of "no charge," readily accessible, natural areas (i.e. beaches, moorlands, ponds fronts, forests, etc.) have tempted people for years. Surfcasting, swimming, sailing, motor boating, walking, bicycling, golfing, hunting, shellfishing, nature study, shopping, and people-watching are among the activities available to its seasonal residents and visitors.

Since 1900, many mainland families have traveled to Nantucket for the entire summer season. Back then, a trip from New York City meant a day's trip by rail followed by a five to seven hour steamer crossing from the port of New Bedford. Steamboats would arrive in late June filled with families who would occupy their summer homes through August. Then the family would return to their mainland residence and the house would be shuttered of the off-season. Short-term visitors were also coming to the island during the summer months, but limited by the demand for hotel rooms and guest house spaces.

Today people have a choice of much faster transportation methods: a 40 minute flight from Boston on a 9-passenger plane, an hour long jet flight from New York City; a 2 1/4 hour passenger and automobile ferry from Hyannis on Cape Cod; a 60 minute "fast ferry" trip from Hyannis; or a 15 minute air-taxi flight from Hyannis.

Over the past 25 years these transportation advances have made it possible to get to the island quickly and reliably. The result is that a family from New York, Boston, Washington, or elsewhere can now spend the summer months in their island home while the breadwinner commutes back and forth to Nantucket for a long weekend. Expanded short-term visitor lodging means that larger numbers of visitors can be accommodated on the island. Faster and more frequent boat service also brings day visitors who arrive on the island mid-morning and reboard the Cape Cod bound passenger fast ferries 4 or 5 hours later. With increased tourist activity and second-home construction, Nantucket's character has changed and with it the year-round

population has grown from 5,000 in 1985 to 9,500 in 2000, and more than 11,000 in 2013. Nantucket's high-season, combined summer population now reaches about 55,000 people.

Protection Efforts Begin

Concerted efforts to safeguard Nantucket's unusual historic and natural resources began in 1955, when voters established the second historic district in the United States. This was a radical step for a conservative group of New Englanders, but there was a sense that without strict regulation, a museum quality townscape would quickly be transformed into a collection of incompatible architectural styles. In 1971, those regulations were extended to include the entire island.

Efforts to preserve open land began in 1963 when a coalition of respected seasonal and year-round residents, encouraged by the town's Civic League, decided to establish a nonprofit, member-supported organization they chose to call the Nantucket Conservation Foundation, an group that today would be referred to as a "land trust." Fortunately, for the Foundation and town, during the early 1960's, the only land that people considered worth developing was either in or at the edges of the town area or in one of the outlying summer-occupied residential settlements. The small group of land conservation visionaries appreciated that it wouldn't be long before the island's sparsely developed coastline and interior would be at risk.

Through connections made with the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) a team of natural resource experts and planners was assembled, including, then Associate Professor, Julius Gy Fabos. Members of that group spent the summer of 1966 documenting and analyzing the elements contained in a traditional natural resource inventory (topography, geology, soils, water, vegetation, climate, fisheries and wildlife, etc.). The results of this effort, which was funded by island organizations and agencies, were made available in a comprehensive Cooperative Extension Service report entitled the "Selected Resources of the Island of Nantucket." The publication was an effort to engage a diverse group of community leaders, year-round and seasonal residents in a series of wide-ranging discussions about the importance of resource protection and land conservation on Nantucket.

In 1968 the report was followed by an opinion survey conducted by Dr. Hugh C. Davis of the University's Department of Landscape Architecture. Professor Davis asked a reasonably sized random sample of island voters and seasonal residents a number of questions regarding their attitudes towards issues that could "... prove a helpful aid toward the perpetuation of the beauty, charm and unique quality of Nantucket Island." Professor Davis' reacted to the 91% "yes" response to his question asking if "more attention should be given to conservation matters on the Island?" by saying " 'Lopsided' is hardly a strong enough term . . . ", later acknowledging that "conservation" obviously meant different things to different people. It was also observed that a better understanding of issues involved in a resource planning process was emerging and there was a greater appreciation for the inevitability of change and the possible consequences of unmanaged change.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the Nantucket Conservation Foundation, relying on contributions of land once owned by its founding supporters, were boasting that nearly 2,500 acres had been protected. Those involved were spreading the message that the community could benefit in other

ways by protecting more open space. By 1971, the task of actually having to raise large amounts of money in order to buy conservation land became a reality. The Foundation's Board announced plans to raise \$625,000 — a huge amount by the day's standard — for the purchase of 625 acres being threatened by a large second-home development. At the time, the island had no land use regulations (i.e. Zoning which, after five attempts, was eventually adopted by Town Meeting in 1972). Fortunately, the Foundation's fundraising efforts were successful and that still talked about project served as a model for conservation purchases that followed.

In the early 1970's an innovative land protection idea involving Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard, and the Elizabeth Islands was being pursued at the national level. There was a feeling that community leaders and the islands' year-round residents were unwilling to take charge of their future and the protection of the region's poorly understood uniqueness. The proposal was to establish a Nantucket Sound Islands Trust commission. The commission would consist of local, state, and federal representatives acting under the supervision of the Department of the Interior. Its responsibility would be to guide future land use on each of the islands. Land would be placed into one of three categories: town controlled; a resource planning district with limited development potential; or "forever wild." Highly spirited debates took place over several years with the proposal ultimately lacking public support and being withdrawn. It did, however, leave islanders with an increased awareness of the consequences of inaction.

Throughout this time the Nantucket Conservation Foundation continued to pursue its goal of protecting land through local efforts. In the years that followed it has protected, through gift and purchase, a total of nearly 9,000 acres or 30% of the island's land area. Its 215 properties, including the Nantucket Field Station, a 2004 purchase from the University of Massachusetts for \$22 million and the just announced purchase of the Norwood Farm for \$19 million, are all open to the public for compatible and responsible use and enjoyment and available to encourage environmental research, awareness, and appreciation.

Additional lands have been protected by other nonprofit organizations and local public agencies. With the exception of a small state forest and even smaller National Wildlife Refuge, the island's protected open spaces, now amounting to more than 13,000 acres, have been preserved through local initiatives.

A New Land Conservation Model

In 1983, frustrated that land protection efforts were falling behind because of a strong economy and a related building boom (the construction of nearly 300 new homes a year), the town's planning director devised an innovative solution to collect funds needed to compete with other buyers and purchase additional public recreation and conservation land. The idea became known as the Nantucket Islands Land Bank, the nation's first such effort. Town Meeting, and the state Legislature authorized a 2% surcharge on all future private real estate purchases. Taxes, now totaling approximately \$11 million per year, are collected by an elected, five-member Land Bank Commission which is responsible for purchasing and managing town-owned lands using available resources. In addition, several years ago, recognizing that the Commission was falling behind in its ability to compete for the purchase of choice undeveloped parcels, voters authorized a \$25 million bond that was used to supplement the land acquisition budget. To-date, the

Commission has protected nearly 3,000 acres, including the island's only two public golf courses.

Local Conservation Partnerships

For a community its size, Nantucket has an uncommon concentration of nonprofit conservation organizations and public conservation agencies. This stems from the passion for open space shared by its year-round and seasonal residents who are protective of the island's magnificent landscapes and exceptional natural resources. These groups, led by the Foundation and Land Bank Commission, have similar names and goals, but utilize different approaches and shared constituencies. They all work closely with each other and cooperate on many different projects, at many different levels, and fill complementary, non-competing roles.

Other land conservation groups include:

The **Nantucket Land Council**, founded in 1973, is a member-supported organization that acquires and enforces perpetual Conservation Restrictions. These restrictions legally limit the eventual development of a private landowner's property. The Land Council now holds restrictions affecting more than 1,300 acres. It also supports scientific research and carefully reviews development proposals which have been submitted to the town's Planning Board and Conservation Commission.

The **'Sconset Trust** was organized in 1984. It, too, is a member-supported organization that acquires undeveloped land for conservation purposes within Siasconset village, an attractive seasonal neighborhood on the east shore of the island. To-date, the Trust has protected 130 acres through gift and purchase. In 2007 Trust supporters paid \$4 million for the relocation of the historic Sankaty Head Lighthouse which was being threatened by shoreline erosion.

The **Massachusetts Audubon Society**, separate from the National Audubon Society, is a state-wide group and one of the nation's most respected member-supported conservation organizations. Mass Audubon owns sanctuaries on Nantucket totaling 947 acres.

The Trustees of Reservations is another member-supported, nonprofit organization which protects conservation properties across Massachusetts. Established in 1891 it is the country's oldest land trust. On Nantucket, it owns 987 acres, most of which are located on the barrier beaches south of Great Point, the island's northernmost tip.

The **Nantucket Conservation Commission** is an appointed town regulatory agency whose primary purpose is to enforce state and local wetlands regulations. The Commission also manages several town-owned pond access sites.

Other active island conservation partner organizations/agencies include the **Maria Mitchell Association** whose interests are focused on natural history, science, and education; the **Nantucket Field Station**, managed by the University of Massachusetts/Boston for research and education; the **Linda Loring Nature Foundation** which hosts environmental education programming on its property; the **Nantucket Garden Club**, an influential group of seasonal and year-round residents which promotes environmental awareness and whose members generously

support island conservation initiatives; the **Nantucket Community Preservation Committee** which administers taxpayer-funded grants for open space protection and other community purposes; and the town's **Park and Recreation Commission**.

The Future of Resource Protection and Its Challenges

Now that nearly 50% of the Nantucket's land area is protected in some way or other, the focus of the Conservation Foundation and other open space landowners has shifted. New priorities include studying the natural and cultural resources occurring on these lands. This leads to the preparation of management plans that will insure the continued existence of numerous rare and endangered plants, insects, and animals known to occur on Nantucket, the Massachusetts county that has the largest number of rare and endangered species.

Sustaining Nantucket's endangered natural resources and unique landscapes has created some interesting challenges. For example, several large acreage private properties, which were once accessible to the public, are now permanently off limits. As a result, residents and visitors, some of the nearly 55,000 people who inhabit the island during the summer months, are moving their recreational activities to protected natural areas. They assume that these accessible sites are permissible substitutes for their previously favored locations. Whether these are sandy shorelines vegetated with fragile American beach grass or sprawling interior heathland areas, many of Nantucket's protected open spaces host uncommon resources which have a relatively low tolerance for frequent, active group use, especially those involving vehicles.

The native vegetative cover occurring at many popular conservation properties was previously self-sustaining. Extended periods of minimal human use during the late-spring/early-fall growing seasons gave easily damaged plants an opportunity to reestablish themselves. Today the island's popular open spaces areas experience the effects of from increasing shoulder season tourism, more frequent visits by second-home owners who are staying longer or coming earlier, and use by larger numbers of year-round residents. By past island standards, the appeal of certain properties as "unspoiled" or lightly used destinations is changing. Thorough inventories, thoughtful planning and application of field-tested management strategies, monitoring, and increased user awareness and cooperation will hopefully slow and reverse this trend.

Not only do island conservation land managers have to protect threatened natural resources, they must identify effective ways of inspiring high energy, short-term seasonal visitors and summer employees to adopt Nantucket's long-standing tradition of respecting publicly accessible open spaces as their own and, in some cases, recognize the need to tone down their recreational expectations. Otherwise, today's uncommon resources an ease of access will become memories.

Conclusion: Continuing to Build Awareness and Appreciation

As well protected and managed as Nantucket seems to be, it has not reached the end of its resource protection road. In addition to priority properties that are left to be conserved using creative combinations of public and private strategies, there must be expanded efforts to heighten everyone's appreciation for the importance of safeguarding the island's specialness while accommodating appropriate types and levels of public use. This will certainly include strategies required to insure the sustainability of the island's unique natural habitats that include globally rare "sandplain grasslands."

In spite of the people/resource management challenges that are ahead of us, Nantucketers are optimistic. Considering where the island could have been had its leaders and community institutions ignored the early signs of change and the need for action, especially in the area of open space protection, Nantucket is way ahead of the curve and the envy of many communities in this country. Furthermore, Nantucket's long-time year-round and seasonal residents "get it." They understand how important quality of life is to them. They have been willing to stand up for it, vote for it, and pay to sustain it. And perhaps most importantly they very much want their children and grandchildren to someday enjoy the same experiences they've had on Nantucket!

The connection between Nantucket's incredible accomplishments and the community's information collection and distribution efforts that took place more than 50 years ago are hard to validate. Nevertheless, documenting existing conditions, identifying threats, explaining the needs of particular resources, and defining possible approaches for their protection got people thinking and more trusting of fellow islanders, fellow voters, fellow taxpayers who they didn't know well.

Like any well-designed planning process, those early public discussions added new words and phrases to the island's vocabulary at a time when "ecology," "environmental protection," and sustaining a community's "quality of life" were only concepts being talked about in the halls of universities. Fortunately, for Nantucket, its residents and the hundreds of thousands of people who annually visit the island, scholars and resource experts were invited to share these emerging concepts with a community that was open-minded enough to consider them and which has benefited greatly from that experience.

Jim Lentowski is Executive Director of the member-supported Nantucket Conservation Foundation, a position that he has held since being hired as the organization's first employee in July 1971. A native of Chicopee, Massachusetts, Jim holds both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Landscape Architecture from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Under his tutelage the Foundation's land holdings have grown from 1,200 acres to 9,000 acres, representing 30% of the island's land area. The Foundation's holdings include the 110 acre harborfront "Nantucket Field Station" which it purchased from UMass in 2004 for \$22M. The Foundation has an ongoing partnership with UMass/Boston to advance the Field Station's use for college-level studies and research focused on environmental issues. In addition to his on-island interests, Jim's professional activities include ongoing participation with the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) and serving as a founding Steering Committee member of the Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition. His efforts on behalf of land conservation have been acknowledged locally, by the Massachusetts House of Representatives and by his colleagues during the LTA's 2010 national meeting.