October Farm Riverfront

We who live in Concord today benefit from the foresight and generosity of those who came before us and permanently protected the landscapes—the woods, fields, and river corridors—that add so much to the town’s character and are now part of our community’s common wealth. Thanks to them, many of Concord's most valuable lands remain open and green for us and future generations. Today we have a rare opportunity to add significantly to this legacy, preserving forever one of the most important remaining unprotected natural areas in Concord.

For centuries, the property we seek to save has been recognized for its rich, varied habitat and beauty. The Concord Land Conservation Trust considers it perhaps the single highest priority parcel in town for preservation. Composed of 80 acres, this land includes more than a mile of riverfront at the great bend of the Concord River, where the river makes its final turn to the north around Ball’s Hill. More than 100 years ago, the noted ornithologist William Brewster purchased this land to save it from the developer’s axe. Today we have an opportunity to do the same thing—except that, this time, we can do it once and for all, with your generous support.

This is an ambitious project. To succeed, we will need to raise over $6,000,000, requiring substantial investment by Land Trust members, neighbors, the Town of Concord, and other entities. The Land Trust strongly believes that the property’s present and future conservation values warrant this undertaking, and that we must act today, or our opportunity will be lost.
Ecological Significance

With its ample water and topographic and vegetative diversity, the land is outstanding wildlife habitat and is a part of a larger natural vegetative area that has long been identified by the Town as a priority for protection. Spotted salamanders, wood frogs, spring peepers, and blue spotted salamanders, a state-listed species of special concern, breed in the ponds and vernal pools. A wide variety of waterfowl, shore birds, birds of prey, and warblers and other songbirds abound there during the summer and the spring and fall migrations. “What a phenomenal spot,” observed David Sibley—author of the leading guides to North American birds—after a walk on the property.

Important in its own right as wildlife habitat, the property is even more important as part of a much larger whole. Along the opposite, eastern bank of the Concord River, upstream and downstream, an uninterrupted natural area, much of it National Wildlife Refuge, extends for several miles. Because the river’s turn at October Farm is so pronounced, the land around Ball’s Hill bulges into the opposite bank, forming a crucial part of this important wildlife corridor and making its conservation necessary if the corridor is to be preserved. It is also a critical link with the more than 1200-acre Estabrook Woods to the west, and serves to connect these two large and ecologically important areas. As a keystone in this network of open space, the landscape provides intact and unfragmented forest cover that buffers critical habitats and allows movement between them. Furthermore, it receives a high rating—rare among unprotected properties in Concord—for resiliency in the face of climate change and thus the possibility of maintaining plant and animal diversity over the long range, according to The Nature Conservancy’s resiliency model adapted by Mass Audubon to the local region.

Historical Significance

The forested landscape of hills, ponds, and riverfront we see today was formed fifteen thousand years ago at the end of the last Ice Age, when the retreating glacier left its mark on the land around Ball’s Hill. Deposits from glacial streams formed a line of hills that parallels the Concord River along the property’s southern and eastern boundaries. At the southwestern edge, Holden Hill rises sharply from the river. Near its two saddleback summits, groves of paper birches add variety to the predominant...
white pines and oaks. The next in the line of hills, Dakins Hill—lower and with four distinct summits—is separated from the river by a low-lying wooded area that floods in high water. Ball’s Hill, the highest and last of the hills, rises steeply from the riverbank where the Concord River makes its turn to the north. From Ball’s Hill to the northeastern edge of the property, the river is bounded by a wet wooded area known historically as Holden’s Meadow. To the north of the hills, a series of kettle ponds, large shallow impoundments, and vernal pools provides striking topographical variety.

Long before European settlers arrived here, this area was valued for its rich, varied habitat. It was one of five sites where Concord’s original pre-Algonquian inhabitants hunted, fished, and gathered and the only one of those five identified in a Survey by the Concord Historical Commission as “undisturbed.” For that reason alone, the Survey judged that the land should be “a major candidate for preservation.”

Thoreau made note of the landscape’s distinctiveness in both books and journals. Shortly after setting out on the voyage recorded in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Thoreau and his brother stopped to pick late berries on Ball’s Hill before taking leave of Concord from that point, describing the Hill as “the St Ann’s of Concord Voyageurs.” Almost 20 years later, in a journal entry for March 1859, he wrote of sailing on the river toward these “shining russet hills . . . [in] early spring dress” with “Ball’s Hill on the verge of this undulating blue plain, like some glorious new created island of the spring,” a sight that affected him “as something altogether ethereal.”

At the beginning of the last century, the property became a focus for the observation of wildlife, particularly birds, and the preservation of their habitat. William Brewster bought Ball’s Hill in 1891 to preserve a stand of large white pines and, over a period of years, acquired a total of 300 acres between Monument Street and the Concord River to the north and south of Ball’s Hill Road, naming it “October Farm.” Brewster loved looking at birds and listening to their songs. He was the founder of the Nuttal Ornithological Club and the American Ornithologists’ Union, the first president of the Massachusetts Audubon Society and the long-time curator of the ornithological collection at Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology. Although the
farm’s main house was located on Monument Street, Brewster often stayed in a cabin he built on the riverbank at the base of Ball’s Hill. There, we can still see the stone foundation of his cabin and the remains of his fireplace, canoe sheds, and the small boat landing dug into the bank. “It is my custom,” he wrote in his journal, “when sleeping in the cabin to open a little window by the side of my bed when I first awake to enjoy the early morning singing without the trouble of rising at an inconvenient hour.” Brewster’s many volumes of birding journals, excerpts from which were published posthumously in book form as October Farm and Concord River, make the area around Ball’s Hill of special significance.

**Recreational Value**

A network of trails, suited variously for walking, running, cross-country skiing, and horseback riding, extends throughout the property. A broad trail with gentle contours runs along the river frontage. Narrower paths with short, steep ascents and descents that would be an adventure on cross-country skis follow the ridge line of the hills and wind around their flanks.

There are fine views from many points throughout the area. The summits of the hills offer vistas of the river, the forested far bank, and the large impoundments of the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge. Looking inland, there are long views across the kettle ponds and large patches of wetlands. From a boat on the river the view of the hills rising from the water’s edge is the same view, unbroken by houses or other structures, that Thoreau found “ethereal” 150 years ago.

Because this land has been privately owned, only a lucky few have had the chance to wander up and down its hills and along its river banks. If we succeed in this effort, these experiences will be available for all. This beautiful landscape will become part of Concord’s shared natural land resources, along with Wright Woods, the Town Forest, the Upper Spencer Brook Valley, to name a few—places we treasure and care for as a community, knowing they will also enrich the lives of those who will live here after we are long gone.
The Threat, and the Importance of Conservation

The owner of the property has decided to sell, and if the land is not preserved, it will likely be developed as a residential subdivision, causing severe environmental disturbance. New houses would loom over the river, destroying the view that delighted Thoreau. The trail network would be disrupted; the wildlife habitat, fragmented.

A market appraisal, assuming a planned residential development of five estate lots, values the property at $7 million. The landowner offered to make a conservation bargain sale at a price of $6.4 million. The Land Trust subsequently negotiated a further price reduction of $400,000, bringing our need down to $6 million plus funds to cover acquisition costs and future stewardship needs. This year’s Town Meeting voted $2 million towards this project for open space and water supply and the Land Trust began a campaign to raise the rest. We have been greatly encouraged by the enthusiastic response to the fundraising; people understand how critical it is to protect this spectacular property and have stepped up accordingly. Even with this excellent progress, though, we still need to raise over $700,000 before December 15, 2016, the closing deadline.

With the generous support of our members and others who value the woods and fields of Concord, the Land Trust’s acquisition of the October Farm riverfront will accomplish a long-held goal—the preservation of the natural open area around Ball’s Hill for public use. The hills and kettle ponds will remain as they were when Brewster listened to morning birdsong from his cabin. The views that Thoreau admired will endure. The landscape, in brief, will remain as it is—except that, for the first time since its purchase by Caleb Ball in 1750, it will be available for the use and enjoyment of the public.

Thank you for your support.
About the Concord Land Conservation Trust

The Concord Land Conservation Trust (CLCT) is a private, non-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization devoted to the preservation of open land in the Town of
Concord. Founded in 1959, CLCT has seven trustees and over 650 member families.
CLCT seeks to conserve the natural resources of Concord and the town’s traditional
landscape of woods, meadows, and fields.

Since its inception, CLCT has acquired through gift or purchase over 900 acres
and holds conservation restrictions on an additional 265 acres. All of this land will be
protected from development and remain in its natural state forever; once property or a
conservation restriction on property is acquired by CLCT, it is never relinquished. An
affiliate, the Concord Open Land Foundation (COLF), was founded in 1988 to engage in
conservation transactions where the land acquired, or a portion of it, may be subsequently
sold or swapped.

In acting to preserve open space, CLCT concentrates on large tracts that provide a
critical mass of protected land, parcels that abut or link other protected properties, parcels
in areas of the town where open space is scarce, and agricultural land. As Concord
becomes more and more developed, conservation opportunities are rapidly diminishing,
so when preservation is possible, CLCT uses every tool available to protect our most
important remaining open spaces. In addition CLCT pursues its goals of conserving and
maintaining land through educational programs, seasonal walks, land stewardship and
public outreach.

CLCT is funded entirely by annual membership dues and donations by members
and friends. Contributions of any size are always welcome and are tax-deductible to the
fullest extent allowed by law.

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Tel: 978-369-6526     Email: info@concordland.org
Campaign to Preserve the October Farm Riverfront

Enclosed is my gift to the Concord Land Conservation Trust towards the effort to preserve the October Farm Riverfront.

___$50 ___$75 ___$100 ___$200 ___$500 ___other

Please mail your donation to: CLCT
P.O. Box 141
Concord, MA 01742

OR

Donate online at www.concordland.org

All donations are tax-deductible as allowed by law