

Caouette CR Property Conditions Report

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By Dan Stimson, SVT Assistant Director of Stewardship

Introduction

Caouette Farm in South Acton consists of approximately 10.2 acres of uplands and wetlands, which are a combination of farmed fields, a large mill pond, and surrounding wetlands and woodlands, with property frontage on Stow/Maynard and Martin Streets. The northeastern portion of the parcel, known as the "Bike Path Area" (1.7118 acres), will include the yet to be constructed terminus of the Assabet Rail Trail and is excluded from the conservation restriction. It should be noted that the creation of this area occurred after the first two photography visits of the baseline documentation report process. Photographs previously taken, which include this portion of the property, are kept intact in the baseline report, however where applicable they have been annotated with "Bike Path Area" to differentiate them from photos of the remaining Conservation Restriction Area.

The 54-acre Stonefield Farm to the south and west is owned by the Caouettes' relatives, the Simeones, who lease the Caouette fields as an extension of Stonefield Farm's operations. The property provides scenic views of working farm fields and the old mill pond from within the property as well as from nearby roads and in the future, likely from along the extended length of the Assabet Rail Trail.

Historical Value

The following text has been provided by Anne Forbes, who prepared a report on the historical value of the property during the Town's protection efforts for this property.

The Simeone-Caouette Land: a Historical Perspective, A. Forbes

The agricultural land beside the mill pond in South Acton has been in continuous farming use for over three hundred years – a phenomenal record in this age of declining agriculture and expanding residential development. Its association with the town of Acton dates back to 1701, when three partners, Ephraim and Samuel Jones and Jonathan Knight, bought 600 acres around "the great falls" of Fort Pond Brook. The Jones brothers dammed the brook to form the mill pond, harnessing the water power to run small colonial mills that were Acton's first industrial enterprises in our earliest village, "Mill Corner", long before the 1735 incorporation of the town. Each of the partners established a large farm. Jonathan Knight's farm was located west and southwest of the brook, and his 1710 house still survives at the end of Martin Street. Ephraim Jones's farm covered Faulkner Hill and stretched south along the east side of the pond from his fulling mill at the dam. Samuel Jones, Jr. ran a saw mill, opened a tavern and store by 1750, and had a large farm that extended south and west to the brook and the pond. His farm included today's Maple Street, lower Stow Street, and the 15-acre parcel that will again be the subject of an Acton Town Meeting article on October 25.

Samuel Jones's descendants continued to operate his homestead farm for four more generations, but in the 19th century they also developed parts of it for residential neighborhoods and for more industrial and commercial ventures. The houses on the first

block of Maple Street were built on former Jones land in the 1840s after the Fitchburg Railroad came through, and Maple Street was extended west in 1860 by Elnathan Jones, Jr. and his brother-in-law Francis Conant to become the small Victorian subdivision they named "New England Village."

The late-19th century owner of the Jones farm, Elnathan Jones, Jr., with his in-laws expanded the original Jones store into Tuttle, Jones & Wetherbee, owners and builders of Exchange Hall. His other ventures included the South Acton Lumber Co. on Maple Street in about 1870, and a small wood-frame 1892 factory on what is now the Simeone-Caouette Land. That three-story building complex was located close to the north side of the mill pond and adjacent to the Marlborough Branch Railroad, which had been built south from the Fitchburg line through Maynard to Marlborough in the early 1850s. The factory was demolished in the 1930s, but part of its support structure is still there next to the railroad bed that will become part of the Assabet River Rail Trail. A wide cart path can still be seen leading toward the factory site from the base of Stow Street opposite the former Jones lumber company.

Even during the years that the factory was in operation – first for processing "Morocco" leather, then for producing ice-cream pails and for weaving cotton strapping -- farming continued on the Jones land south of Stow Street. In the late 19th- and early 20th centuries the property pastured the cows of the Jones dairy farm, a regional dairy managed by a superintendent who resided at the Jones Tavern. In 1964 the Jones family heirs sold the land to Angelo and Antoinette Simeone, and today the unbroken chain of farming on this ancient and beautiful land is continued by the operators of Stonefield Farm.

Current Land Use

The property is largely in agriculture. In the southern portion of the property, off Martin Street, is a field of approximately 1.8 acres. Just less than one acre of this field is contained within the Caouette CR, while the remaining portion is located on an adjacent parcel, also protected by a CR. On the north side of the mill pond, off Stow and Maynard Streets, are an additional approximately 5.2 acres of fields. The fields are split into three sections. Separating the north and south portions of the property is a mill pond and bordering vegetated wetland. A newly renovated wooden bridge spans Fort Pond Brook, just west of the impounded section, allowing crossing between the fields.

Recreation is still light on this property, as it is newly acquired by the Town of Acton. During visits some horse tracks were evident, and neighbors were seen walking their dogs on the perimeter of the fields. Future plans for recreation include a trail that will integrate with the adjacent Assabet Rail Trail.

At the time of writing, there is a cleanup underway at the property. Prior to the town's purchase of the property and as part of its due diligence, it conducted an environmental site assessment. Subsurface testing in the area of the former manufacturing facilities revealed unacceptable concentrations of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), lead and arsenic in soil.

Environmental response actions at the site, conducted by the town in accordance with MassDEP's hazardous waste site cleanup program, primarily involved the testing and removal of contaminated

soils, with the excavation subject to an Acton Conservation Commission Order of Conditions. A hardened access drive was created from the Stow/Maynard Street frontage and equipment was used to remove topsoil from the area of land just north of the brook, along the eastern portion of the property. This is detailed in the photos from the February 16, 2012 baseline visit. Pictures of the land prior to the commencement of this work were captured in the November 30, 2011 baseline visit. Between December 2011 and January 2012, approximately 655 cubic yards of contaminated soils were excavated and transported off-site for disposal in a landfill. Post-excavation testing revealed unacceptable residual levels of a PAH(benzo(a)pyrene) in a relatively small area, and additional soil excavation of approximately 20 cubic yards is planned for late March 2012 to remove these soils for off-site disposal. That work will be followed by the addition of topsoil, seeding and planting of shrubs and trees.

Topography and Soils

The topography is generally flat and low lying, rising only slightly as it furthers from the brook. Slopes are 0-3% nearer the brook, rising to 3-8% further away, with a small corner in the northeast classified as 15-25%. During one visit, a large portion of the fields nearer the brook were ponded and the majority of the fields were quite wet. The northern fields are all designated as Prime Farmland Soils by the USDA NRCS. According to the NRCS, Prime farmland is land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops and that is available for these uses. It has the combination of soil properties, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields of crops in an economic manner if it is treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods. In general, prime farmland has an adequate and dependable water supply from precipitation or irrigation, a favorable temperature and growing season, an acceptable level of acidity or alkalinity, an acceptable content of salt or sodium, and few or no rocks. Its soils are permeable to water and air. Prime farmland is not excessively eroded or saturated with water for long periods of time, and it either does not flood frequently during the growing season or is protected from flooding.

Soil types include SCIO Very Fine Sandy Loam, Merrimac Fine Sandy Loam, Woodbridge Fine Sandy Loam, Raynham Sandy Loam, and Ridgebury Fine Sandy Loam.

Natural Communities

The majority of the property is being utilized for farm land, and the presence of natural communities is limited to a buffer along the brook. This buffer, typically more than 50' wide on the north side and more than 25' wide on the south side, is comprised of red maple swamp with a thick shrub understory present throughout. The buffer serves the important purpose of protecting the water resources from the adjacent farm land.

Wildlife, Rare Species and Associated Habitat

There are no known occurrences of rare species or habitat on the property. Canada geese and mallards were common on the mill pond during all visits. The brook and pond also provides good habitat for typical local wildlife such as muskrat, beavers, mink and otters, however none of these were observed during the visits. The wooded corridor along the water may also serve as connective link for terrestrial wildlife moving through the area. The open fields likely serve as hunting habitat for raptors such as red-

tailed hawks, where the trees around the fields' perimeter offer perching opportunities. They also typically serve as good habitat for small mammals, songbirds and invertebrates. Fish species are unknown, however the lack of shade along the brook both throughout the property and along nearby stretches of the brook make it unlikely that it serves as a coldwater fishery resource.