

A Fond Farewell

The year was 2007, and Rural Lands had recently moved to Sheep Hill from Spring Street. The pond had been built, the farmhouse renovated, and the chicken coop dismantled. Cathy Talarico, our longtime Assistant Director, had just joined Rural Lands after a long stint at the Center for EcoTechnology.

"On my first day I was greeted with a warm hug from then Executive Director Leslie Reed-Evans, and I remember thinking that things would be very different here, and indeed they were."

Cathy's wide-ranging skills have been a good fit. Leslie remembers her joining the Rural Lands family during a period of expansion. "The move to Sheep Hill and the subsequent growth in visibility, programming, and interest in conserving land meant that the existing office position was no longer purely secretarial," she said. "I really needed a partner."

"Cathy immediately embraced the duties of welcoming visitors, organizing programs, helping manage land and grant projects, and keeping the office in order."

Early on, Cathy employed her trade skills in drawing up the plans for bringing electricity to the barns and, years later, coordinating the boardwalk construction. Cathy capably handled all this work, while frequently going above and beyond.

"She did the thousand small things behind the scenes that made the land trust go," former



Executive Director David McGowan said. "From washing dishes after an event to clearing mud from the beaver deceiving device at Josiah's Pond. Ever conscientious, ever dutiful, Cathy greatly contributed to the larger conservation work of Rural Lands."

While her administrative chops and work ethic will without-a-doubt be missed, Cathy's warm presence at the office will be missed more. For 16 years, visitors to Sheep Hill from near and far have been greeted by Cathy's friendly face.

"Her familiarity, in the familial sense, and deeply caring relationships with our membership is unparalleled," Executive Director Robin Sears said, echoing a sentiment from McGowan: "At annual meetings, Cathy knew everyone by name and thoughtfully ensured that all attendees were warmly welcomed."

Cathy, your constancy, warmth, and dedication to Rural Lands is unmatched. Thank you! We wish you a most restful and joyous retirement, with new adventures to come.



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Who We Are

Williamstown Rural Lands is a private, non-profit, member-supported land conservation trust. It was founded in 1986 to address the loss of open space and public access, the disappearance of family farms in the Williamstown area, and to encourage responsible development.

Our mission is to conserve and promote natural and working landscapes in Williamstown and its environs for the benefit of our communities and future generations.

At Sheep Hill, we work in the Mary and Craig Lewis Center for Nature & Local Heritage, and visitors can enjoy displays in the Jack and Maureen Dietze Interpretive Center on farming, building, and nature. Read on to see how we manage to do all that.

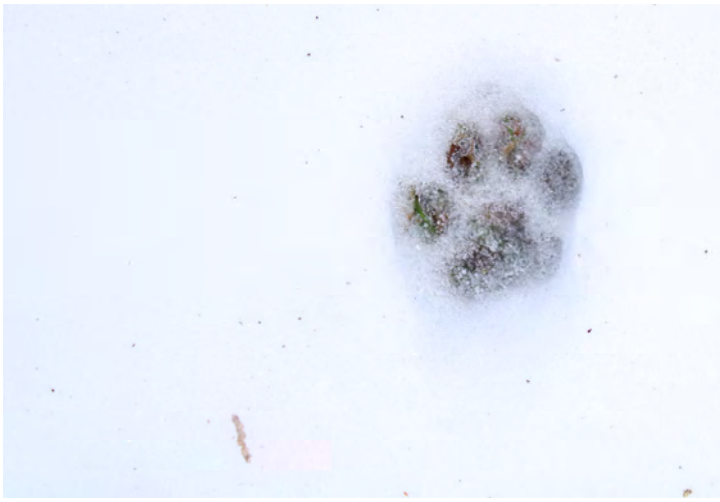
Land Acknowledgement

With gratitude and humility we acknowledge that we are learning, speaking, hiking and gathering on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people, the Indigenous people of this land. Despite tremendous hardship in being forced from here, today their community resides in Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all. We invite you to learn more about the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans at the tribal website: www.mohican.com.

Keep in touch!



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A Warm Welcome

Please join us in welcoming Kas Maroney to the Williamstown Rural Lands team as Assistant Director. She brings extensive experience working at nonprofit organizations in the cultural and social service sectors in Berkshire County, including building membership, overseeing public and private events, and fundraising. The selection committee felt that Kas' personable style, intuitive listening, and problem-solving skills will be a wonderful match for our team and community.

This from Kas herself: "I look forward to getting to know the staff, board, and Rural Lands members and donors and learning how to share my dedication to having a positive impact on the planet.

"I have a strong connection to and love for the outdoors and believe in the inherent dignity and worth of all beings. My friends and associates reportedly value my sense of humor, energy and commitment to my work. I am a mentor at 18 Degrees, a Berkshire nonprofit supporting children and families, through the Pittsfield Community Connection program, and chair of the Pittsfield Cultural Council. In my small art studio I create mixed media and fabric creations, often with found or repurposed materials. When not writing, reading or cooking, I can be found hiking, bicycling, or kayaking, camera and good cheer in tow."



(Photo: Linda Merry)

From the Executive Director

There's a bobcat in our midst. Tipped off by trail camera video and following hard evidence of tracks in the snow, Programs Director Dana Williams led a tracking team of families around Sheep Hill to explore the bobcat's haunts. Turns out, rabbits overwinter under the silo!

Keeping a healthy balance of nature conservation, outdoor recreation, and economic development is every year more critical as our region experiences more frequent and stochastic extreme—and just plain weird—weather events. We mustn't forget, though: change is constant.

Our local populations of hemlocks, ash, beech are succumbing to introduced pests and pathogens. While we mourn their loss, we can feel rest assured that other trees will fill in. Just as the engagement of new members, staff, and supporters of Rural Lands keeps us going as others move on. Still, we mourn the recent death of several giants of the Rural Lands family. Former board members Virginia Fletcher, Anita Barker, and John Craig will be remembered for their whole-hearted embrace of our mission. And Kelly Ryan, wife of former Executive Director David McGowan, will be remembered for her good cheer and supporting role during David's tenure.

We shall carry on, ever grateful for your confidence in our competence. You—our members, volunteers, supporting businesses, and partners—motivate us to protect the nature we need and steward access to the nature we love.



Thank you.

Robin Sears

WRL Executive Director

Land Stewardship

Summer work on the Pine Cobble Trail



I realized this trail project was different than past ones when I showed up to work on a Monday morning in June, my parking spot blocked by a pile of black locust timbers. Three-thousand pounds' worth.

They were destined for the Pine Cobble Trail. You know the one: summit views, gnarled pitch pines and quartzite outcroppings. Blueberries, huckleberries. This iconic trail has been a feature of local hiking guides since at least 1927. Though the alignment has drifted since then, sections of trail are old and worn from countless hikers trodding the same ground over and over and over. We set out this season to do some repair work: the timbers would be installed as steps through washed-out sections of trail.

The first thing I did after I stepped down from my truck was heft one of the logs. Barely budged. *Oh*

no. I started sweating and waited for our summer interns, Ellie and Al, to arrive. As they reminded me, there is strength in numbers, particularly when both of your interns are approximately six-foot tall and commensurately strong. We untangled the pile and arranged the timbers in a row. Cut them down to size and loaded them in the truck.

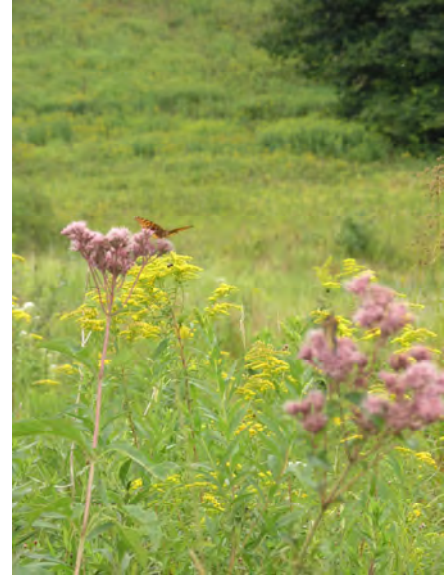
We called in reinforcements once we reached the trail. Volunteers came out on a Saturday, and the BNRC trail crew spent an entire day with us. We established a routine: Six people to a timber, giant sling looped underneath. *One, two, three, up!* Lift the log, walk for bit. *One, two, three, down!* Stop and rest. Hikers ambled by and marveled at our strength and daring.

Building the stairs took weeks. Al and I would dig an eight-foot trench and heave a timber into place while Ellie made gravel: she'd gather big rocks into a pile and smash them into littler rocks with a sledgehammer. These were poured around each end of the timber to secure it in place. Then we backfilled the step with soil and leveled the surface. Measured rise and run to determine the next step's placement. Began again, 20 times over. A good day yielded three stairs. A slow day, just one. We'd rotate tasks and swat mosquitos. Near the end, we lugged in a generator and drilled 1/2" holes through each log. We snapped a drill bit, bought a new one and kept drilling. Pounded two-foot pieces of rebar through each step.

I know what you're thinking because I thought it, too. *Is all this really worth it?* And the intuitive answer — in my brain — is a watercolor swirl of pink and white laurel blossoms, gray swaths of quartzite and oaks, endless green leaves and the fire of the afternoon sun. These memories, scaffolded along my neurons after countless hikes up East Mountain, fade against an incoming linear argument: Pine Cobble Trail, nearly a century old. Thousands of hikers per year. Millions of footsteps up to the hills, down and home again — all possible largely because of a simple old footpath in the woods. Does it seem worth it to you?

- Dan Gura, Stewardship Director

Programs



Four Seasons of Nature Exploration

Sheep Hill is a wonderful place to explore with kids at any time of the year. Josiah's Pond, the hedgerow, Hemlock Brook, and the 24/7 Nature cabin are free and nature-filled kids wonder zones. In 2023, kids logged 1420 hours with us climbing hills, building shelters, being scientists, and imagining new lands and communities. See what their journey is like through four seasons of nature exploration at Sheep Hill.

Winter – Depending on the week, the meadow is either scraggly with goldenrod stems and dried grasses or gracefully smooth under snow. To Nature Explorers in our Winter Vacation program, it's all fun when you are part of a flock of migrating birds. Heading "south" to Pine Town, we've just flown over the first river when someone yells out, "Tornado!" Everyone dives for dips and behind grass tufts, giggling as they survive their first migration challenge.

Spring – The Nature Explorers gather at Pine Town for provisions before the three science teams set off to their study sites. The question for the week: where are the coolest spots on the hill? One group is off, thermometers and data sheets in hand, to their site, Bullock's Ledge, stopping along the way to look closer—ever observant and curious—at things that catch the eye. Noted: a small green tree-like plant from the age of dinosaurs, water collecting in a rut that swirls with rainbows colors, and a white paper-like sheet of dried algae. At last, we arrive and pull one thermometer from the mud of an intermittent stream and the other from underneath a log. Which one do you think was colder?

Summer – A rebellion is stirring in The Nature Kingdom. "Prepare for war," the King and rebels shout in harmony. The King's guards prepare their magic to subdue the People, and the Rebels make potions of hay-scented fern and goldenrod to counteract it. "But wait!" the Queen exclaims, "I have an idea!" A diplomatic mission to the palace ends with a truce: the Nature Kingdom splits into two countries with a trade hall of peace in the middle. The people return their focus to shelter building and potion making.

Fall – The pond has a mystical hold on Woodchucks, who are constantly drawn to it and sometimes have trouble staying out of it! But today there are animal crackers on the line, just enough motivation to lure some Woodchucks away from the late blooming tadpoles and water scorpions. Instead, they wander over to The Plant Lady, who will give them tasks, and crackers. Woodchucks love a challenge. First, there is a 30-second frenzy to collect as many cool plants as they can. They turn up flowers in all the colors of the rainbow, new plants that none had yet seen. Each plant is gleefully presented; outstretched hands receive animal crackers in return. The plants are pressed to become artwork next week. Now, let's go find a frog.

– Dana Williams, Programs Director

Upcoming at Sheep Hill



Wending our way through MCLA Professor Eric Doucette's dichotomous key to Berkshire trees, Winter Tree ID workshop participants discover the finer points of plant anatomy: Which is the leaf scar, which is the bundle scar? (Photo: Lacey Walker)

Events

Repair Café with SWCA, April 27
Sheep to Shawl Cultural Festival, May 4
Annual Meeting of Members, May 18

Natural History

Owl Prowl, February 24
Invasive Species with Joan Edwards, March 16
Natural History Walks and Guided Hikes, starting late March
Firefly Night, June 29

Kids Programs

Winter Vacation, starts Feb 20
Woodchuck Wednesday, starts April 3
Spring Vacation, starts April 15



Master shearer Fred DuPaul spins tails and tales at Sheep to Shawl Festival in 2022.

Sheep to Shawl Cultural Festival 2024

Mark your calendars for May 4 to witness sheep herding, sheep shearing, sheep impersonations ... you get the idea. We celebrate the region's rural life with natural fiber spinners, weavers, and artisans; farmers, musicians, and magicians. Come for the sheep, food, and fun and leave with a sense of community and newfound appreciation for your beloved wool sweaters and socks.

We are **seeking volunteers** for festival planning and on festival day.
Please contact Robin (rsears@rurallands.org).

On the Ground

Student Collaboration on Indigenous Peoples Day

The Williams College Native American and Indigenous Student Alliance members Daisy Rosalez, Berenize Garcia Nueva, and Brenda Diego (R-L) enjoy the gratification of a beautiful day and successful event at Sheep Hill. The students organized a luncheon and public event at Rural Lands's Cold Spring site to celebrate Indigenous Peoples Day and the unveiling of our new interpretive panels at the site. Bonney Hartley, Tribal Historic Affairs Manager of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohicans, facilitated an offering at the spring. Afterwards, attendees enjoyed a luncheon featuring indigenous ingredients and dishes prepared by Chef Melissa Baehr, proprietor of Indigenous Deliciousness.



"Mailbox Hill" is Permanently Conserved for Farming

We are grateful to The Trustees of Reservations for their contribution towards conserving farmland and farming in Williamstown. Their purchase of a conservation easement from Rural Lands on our Mailbox Hill parcel on Oblong Road provided critical funding for this acquisition, supplementing the generous donations from 82 families in the area.

"What's a conservation easement?" you ask, and why is it necessary?

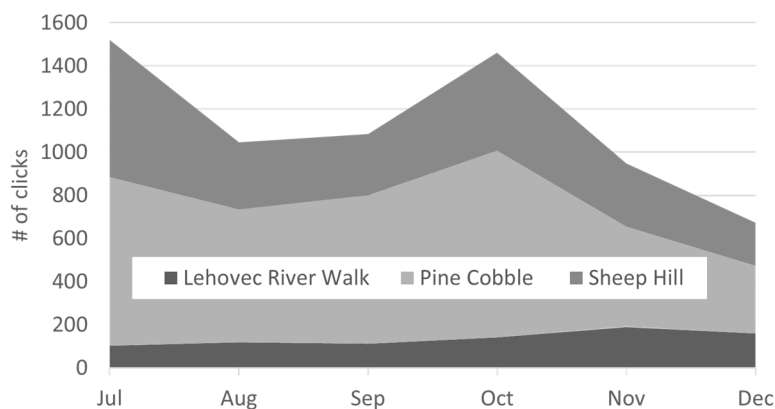
As a qualified land conservation organization, WRL holds land for public benefit, as we do on Oblong Road. The public benefits on this parcel include enjoyment of the viewshed, preservation of the town's rural character, and coldwater habitat conservation. Simply holding the title to a property, however, does not ensure its permanent conservation. We have sold the development rights on this parcel to The Trustees in the form of a conservation easement. That entity now holds those rights in perpetuity, much like we hold easements on nine other parcels owned by others in Williamstown. While this parcel is leased to farmers, we are planning to provide public access to a portion in the near future.

Thank you to our members!

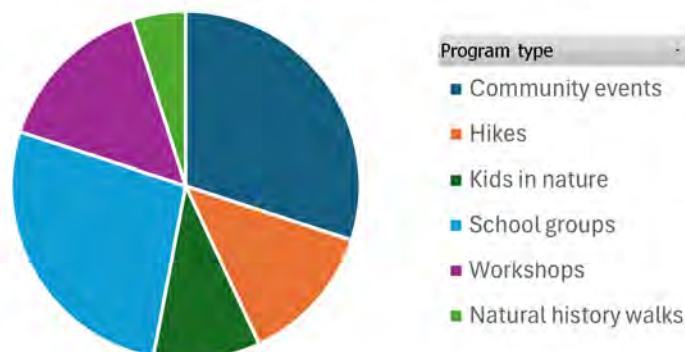
Williamstown Rural Lands is a non-profit, member-supported land conservation trust. We rely on members—people like you—to help us conserve and promote the forests, fields, and farms of Williamstown. You keep your finger on the pulse of our community, inform conservation priorities, and provide outdoor recreational opportunities. You help to secure ecosystem function, farm land productivity, and trail safety and accessibility. Thank you!

Ever wonder about your impact? You helped make nature accessible to the 36 people per day using three of our trails (six month average) and the 989 people participating in our programs in a year.

Number of clicks on our trail counters



Proportion of participants in 2023



We invite you to consider renewing your membership, making a donation, or arranging a bequest today.



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