

The Creation of Teaticket Park

by Margaret Hough Russell

Acquiring Joe's Driving Range for its open space in the congested commercial strip that defines Teaticket today may seem a departure for The 300 Committee Land Trust, since the driving range and miniature golf course had their own share of pavement along Teaticket Highway. It wasn't a departure at all, said board member Victoria Lowell, who was the land trust's first administrator and served on the Falmouth Planning Board for nearly 10 years. Conserving green space in every part of Falmouth has always been a goal of The 300 Committee.

"In the back of my mind, I always wondered what would happen to the property," Ms. Lowell said. "Raleigh Costa and Chet Krajewski (of the Teaticket Civic Association) were always fighting for Teaticket with such passion. Teaticket residents were feeling overwhelmed by all the development. Residents had reason to feel overwhelmed: the village has the most commercial development, the densest housing developments, and the least amount of protected open space of Falmouth's villages. While critics argued that acquiring the land for a park would take it off the tax rolls, builder Mike Duffany, also a 300 Committee board member, pointed out that the alternative use today would be a large commercial structure, very likely with apartments above. By right, a developer could build a dense housing project, but wetlands in back would push all the development toward the road. "Such a large project would be more of a burden than an enticement," Mr. Duffany said, "it would be the wrong place at the wrong time."

Before it closed in the fall of 2011, Joe's Driving Range had been a fixture in the village for 60 years. Many in town were familiar with the site: the street-front parking lot with its large sign, miniature golf, and golf shack. Unless they hit balls on the driving range, however, they were likely unaware of the open space that stretched down to the back of the property. "What impressed us was how big the parcel was. It's obvious when you get back in there and look toward the highway," said Leonard Johnson, president of the land trust. Moreover, the low area where golf balls landed usually flooded after a heavy rain. Left alone, that area would revert to a natural wetland, another value to The 300 Committee.

So when Bill Vieira, owner of the driving range with his wife, Donna, was ready to retire a few years ago and sell the business his father had started in 1951, Ms. Lowell and her colleagues at The 300 Committee were eager to negotiate. They reached agreement to buy the 10.7 acres in December 2011 for \$1.65 million. (It was appraised in 2009 for \$1.8 million.)

The Teaticket Civic Association was thrilled. Acquiring the driving range to create a public park "was the golden opportunity to try to reclaim a bit of the past and provide a vision for the future," said Cheryl Williams, who grew up nearby in Maravista and is a co-president of the association. "We had talked for years about what would happen to the property...our hearts were in this from the beginning." Another resident described the proposed park as "a breath of fresh air," a place for peace and serenity.

The 300 Committee knew the town wasn't in a position to buy the parcel or maintain it, so the land trust decided to proceed on its own. While acquiring the land wasn't a departure for the land trust, creating a park was a new challenge, especially for a site that would be very actively used. The structures and pavement in front would have to be removed, the landscape restored, and a plan for long-term maintenance developed.

The 300 Committee hired a landscape architect, Stephen Stimson Associates, and formed a steering committee of Teaticket and East Falmouth community and business leaders and held several community meetings to solicit ideas and feedback. "We wanted to work with them on the design, so it reflected their vision of what the park should be," said Jessica Whritenour. She had become administrator of the land trust when the process was getting started. The land trust wanted to preserve the wetland and to have handicapped access; the rest was "a blank piece of paper," she said. Suggestions included a large amphitheater for band concerts, outdoor classroom and picnic grove.

The amphitheater idea was quickly dropped. Throughout several meetings of the steering committee, the consensus was clear for a natural park, a tranquil setting where residents could take a walk, watch the bird life or have a picnic. The 300 Committee and Teaticket had a shared vision, and "that was huge for getting the project off the ground," Ms. Whritenour said. The conceptual plan depicted a streetscape of shade trees with benches, bike racks and a small parking area, a handicapped-accessible path winding through a meadow of native grasses and groves of trees, and a picnic area and outdoor classroom at the back, near the Teaticket Elementary School. Visitors would cross the restored wetland on a boardwalk and watch wildlife from an observation platform.

With a goal of raising \$2.25 million to acquire the land and build the park, The 300 Committee launched a fundraising drive in 2011. Commitments over three years from private donors and approval of a state PARC grant application for \$500,000 plus \$250,000 from the Community Preservation Act assured the land could be purchased.

The next phase, to create the park, would require creativity and substantial help from Teaticket. The partnership between the land trust and the civic association was new to both organizations. Businesses and residents rose to the challenge. "Help percolated up. People came to us with ideas," Ms. Whritenour said. Bob and Paula Crane, owners of Crane Appliance, a few buildings down from the driving range, hosted two fundraising events. Bryan Anderson, owner of Teaticket Market, also nearby, came up with the idea of selling certificates at the cash register. Other businesses joined in, netting a few thousand dollars. An East Falmouth family saw the certificates at various shops and decided to ask for donations to the park instead of gifts for their two young boys' birthdays. Friends and neighbors brought more than \$600 to the party, and a match from the boys' father raised another \$500.

A big hit, generating buzz about the park as well as funds, were three pasta suppers with raffles and silent auctions at The Navigator, co-sponsored by The 300 Committee and the Teaticket Civic Association. Ms. Williams, Mary Little, Paul Affsa, and Fernanda Lopes, who share the duties of president, pitched in with other volunteers. Mary Bishop of Trotting Park Road, long an activist for her village, offered to put on the pasta suppers with her friend Ms. Lopes. The two chefs are veterans of numerous scholarship fundraisers held at The Navigator, which is the clubhouse of the Portuguese-American Association. The two women have their work down

to a science. “We can prepare 400 meatballs in two hours. We’re like a factory,” said Ms. Lopes. The 300 Committee organized the silent auctions and raffles. The second dinner in the fall of 2012 drew a sellout crowd of 200 people and raised more than \$5,000.

In total, \$1.5 million was raised through fundraisers and donations that ranged from small to major gifts.

Two years after purchasing the driving range, The 300 Committee embarked on the first phase of construction of the park. The heavy equipment of Gary Sylvester Movers arrived to raze the buildings and remove the old pavement. Lawrence-Lynch Corporation was responsible for all the earth-moving: bringing in dirt, grading the slope for the handicapped-accessible pathways and installing the new parking area.

Meanwhile, Grafton Briggs Landscaping installed irrigation lines, staked out the meandering path, seeded grass and planted 68 trees. Both companies donated a portion of their work, alternating their time at the site. The landscaper’s father would have appreciated the effort. An amateur photographer, Grafton Briggs Sr. contributed numerous photos of village landmarks to Raleigh Costa’s *Recollections of Teaticket*, which was published in 1986.

Cedars and holly, both native trees, were an obvious choice for landscaping. It was The 300 Committee president who pushed for elm trees. A big fan of the large shade trees, Mr. Johnson remembered reading in *Recollections of Teaticket* that the state removed a long line of elms when the main road was widened in the 1950s. This was a chance to bring elms back to the village.

With the trees planted and grass seeded, the critical task for the summer of 2013 was watering. A schedule was set up for a month of watering, shared, once again, by 300 Committee and Teaticket vol-

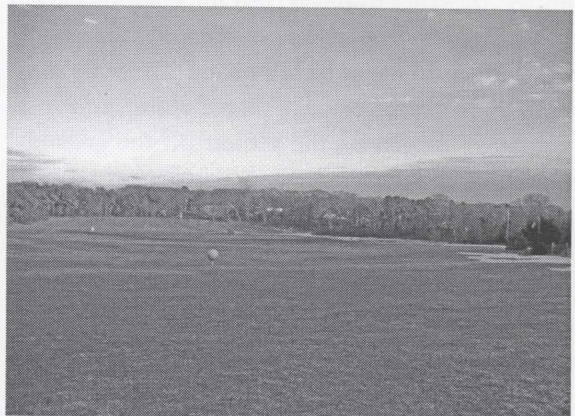
unteers. Ms. Whritenour estimated that more than 700 hours were devoted to the job.

That volunteer spirit continues with maintenance of the new park. Volunteers will pick up trash; Mr. Crane has offered to haul it away. Jeff Hamilton, owner of Hamilton Tree and Landscape and a former 300 Committee board member, has volunteered to mow the grass in the streetscape and along the paths for several years. A Falmouth High School student, Michael Wheeler, took on the work of cutting back bittersweet to free up beach plum at the back to earn the rank of Eagle Scout.

Phase Three of the project will open up the back of the park to visitors, with the outdoor classroom, picnic grove and a trail, creating more opportunities for Eagle Scouts and other volunteers.

Last winter, in a joint meeting of selectmen and the planning board, a greenway linking the town conservation area on Little Pond and Teaticket Park was proposed. It was a new suggestion for town officials who, for the most part, tended to think it was too late to improve the aesthetics of Teaticket.

Asked about the proposal, Ms. Whritenour commented, “Look what this project inspired!”



The back of the driving range, 2011. The two white spheres are yardage markers. Courtesy Stimson Associates.