

Greenville Local History Group Newsletter

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Vanderbilt Park—the Beginning

A pleasant September day – partly sunny (or, was it partly cloudy), upper 60s – greeted the attendees of this September meeting: Paul Augstein, Debbie & Rick Magee, Lew Knott, Donna Willard, Bob Shaw, Mary Heisinger, Donna & Walter Ingalls, Edna Huffman, Ken Mabey, Bette Welter, Margaret Donohue, Gail Biskupich, Rachel Ceasar, Richard Ceasar, Johanna & Robert Titus, Linda Berger, John Earl, Margaret & Paul Kelly, Peter O'Hara & John Garofalo, Flip Flach, Kathy Smith, David Tschinkel, Jen Nichol森, Krista Haushalter, Carolyn Savery, Susie Walsh, Christine Mickelsen, Stephanie Ingalls, Don Teator, and a couple more that totaled between thirty-five and forty.

For those of you who have used the George V. Vanderbilt Park (Greenville Town Park), or have done so with your children or grandchildren or friends, I wonder if you have ever wondered about the foresight needed to create a 156 acre park so close to the town's center and to own a park that has so much to do and with lots of room to spare. I might proffer that our Town Park captures the ideals of a rural town as well as any town park close-by, and perhaps a bit more. A property of historic significance, coupled with some old barns, recreation fields, farm fields, trails that go the Basic Creek, wonderful views of the Catskills Escarpment – what a prized asset this is for Greenville.

So, how did it come to pass? Debbie Magee presented her story and perspective

this evening; I could think of no one better to do so, considering Debbie's role in this tale.

Almost thirty years have gone by since the idea's inception. A whole program could be spent on the farm history before 1990 but this program starts at 1990.

Using Debbie's Power Point notes, here is a faithful recounting of the evening's tale.

In the Spring of 1990, property owner, Catherine Davidson (daughter of George V Vanderbilt), visited The Nature Conservancy's Eastern Regional Office in Albany, looking to donate a farm she owned in Greenville, NY (the Sherrill/Vanderbilt farm). The Nature Conservancy's ENY Chapter Director Peg Olsen and NYRO Development Coordinator, Deb Magee arranged to tour the property that summer.

In August, Olsen & Magee walked the 170 acre parcel, looking for any rare and endangered species that would justify TNC's intervention. None were found at the time. (American Chestnuts would be found later.) Result: still available.

About the same time, Iroquois Gas Transmission Company was constructing a Gas Pipeline through New York State. Iroquois was providing environmentally-based grants to the communities through which their pipeline was passing. Such a grant, in the amount of \$26,100 would be made available to Town of Greenville, if guidelines were met.

The Town Board formed Town Park Planning Committee (Denise Mulligan-

Chairwoman, Ken Elsbree, Nicole Ambrosia, Dick Ricci, and Dave Winn) to research ways to use the funds. One idea: new basketball courts in Norton Hill.

That committee found Debbie Magee. One idea: the Sherrill farm. It seemed to be an ideal location and had excellent potential. But a much bigger idea. Now to convince the Board.

Debbie Magee and Denise Mulligan met with Supervisor Bill Maxwell who, with the agreement of rest of the Board (Jeanne Bear, Barbara Valicenti, Ted Nugent, Chris Martens) agreed that the group should continue exploring the of purchasing the Sherrill Farm. Owner Catherine Davidson was agreeable.

Grant writing started – with over 1100 combined hours on the narrative and with the support from TNC. An award of \$126,000 was announced, with a catch: a deal with the landowner had to happen by November 22 (1991), a week away.

The Town of Greenville’s Town Park Planning Committee recommended that Town Attorney Joseph Stanzone begin negotiations with Catherine Davidson for no more than \$170,000 including attorney fees and closing costs.

Meanwhile the TPPC continued negotiations with Iroquois to secure more funding while at the same time facing Town Board scrutiny about concerns of cost to develop the location, visibility, and whether the people of Greenville really wanted a park. No pressure!

A December 1991 Town Board meeting saw dozens of people braving inclement weather to show their support of the project. Attendees included a wide array of Greenville area individuals, business, and groups. A local organization pledged monetary support and the Greenville Boy Scouts offered to assist with the construction of a hiking/nature trail. Finally, Town Board members, led by Councilwoman Barbara Valicenti, confirmed support for this project.

By February 1992, things were taking shape. In a big step, Councilman Ted Nugent made

the motion to allocate \$44,000 of the Town’s park development funds toward the acquisition of the property. The Town Board unanimously approved the motion. The Board further authorized the committee to begin fundraising activities pertaining to the acquisition.

TPPC Chair Denise Mulligan noted that “public support for the park project is building with several community groups, businesses and individuals pledging monetary support and volunteering their time and services.”

A March informational meeting was held at a nearly packed GCS HS auditorium. The following financial numbers were given:

- The appraised value of the Sherrill Farm was \$340,000
- Sale Price: \$230,000
- Iroquois Grant: \$150,000
- TOG Park Dev Fund: \$44,000
- **Funds to be raised: \$36,000**

Also, at this meeting, it was announced that: half of the property would be used for outdoor recreational space (including baseball fields, soccer fields, a playground, a nature trail & a picnic area); the other half would remain “forever wild.”

There were objections: loss of tax base, cost of maintenance, finding different uses for the grant funding, among them. Meanwhile, the Greene County Landfill proposal, heading to Greenville, caused the Town Board to have no time to help with grant assistance.

In April, the TPPC reorganized as a 501-3C Corporation for Not-For-Profit Status and renamed the Greenville Citizen’s Park Committee. This enabled the organization to legally and primarily raise funds for the purchase of the Sherrill Farm property for a park. Officers included: Denise Mulligan-Director/President; Kenneth Elsbree-Director/Vice President; Nancy Priputen-Director/Secretary/Treasurer; Colin Tumey-Director; Debbie Magee-Adviser.

Between February and September of 1992, there was a flurry of activity to raise the additional \$36,000 needed for the acquisition of the Sherrill Farm Property. The

Adopt an Acre Program was in full steam and several local businesses did fundraisers as well. Balsam Shade Resort hosted a Wine & Cheese Reception; The Greenville Arms hosted an elegant five course dinner prepared by local Chef Audrey Hynes; Sunny Hill Resort hosted a golf event; and even the Local History Group gave a donation (just to name a few)! A fundraiser was held at the intersection of Routes 81 and 32, where passersby dropped donations into cans to the tune of \$1400.

One student, Jenny Raskopf, age 10, wrote this poem:

We Need a Park

If there's one thing that Greenville needs
Then it's a nice Town Park.
And I would stay and play there,
At least til it got dark.
Soccer, baseball and footballs fields
Oh, it would be so grand.
But if there's anything we need right now...
Its money for the land.
If we had the park, kids could do fun stuff...
But we don't have the money (at least not
enough).
We really need contributions: a penny, a
nickel or dime.
But please be sure if you have it, you get it in
on time.

In late winter, a Iroquois grant of \$150,000, written by Magee and Mulligan, was awarded and presented to the Town Board.

In an unsettling and shocking personal slap, Debbie was told by Supervisor Maxwell, upon accepting the grant, that "thanks... we need to ask you to now step aside from this organization," citing her Town of Westerlo residency. Maxwell relented only after Town Attorney Joe Stanzione vociferously protested and the audience backed that sentiment.

(dt note: this would not be the only instance of this unwelcoming attitude over the next few years. Why? I have no explanation)

Fund-raising projects and volunteer support continued at a high level, with the Adopt An Acre effort an especially productive one.

Finally, On September 3, 1992, Catherine V. Davidson, Trustee of the Revocable Trust of Catherine V. Davidson (est. May 9, 1991), sold the Sherrill Farm containing 156.623 acres to the Town of Greenville. The George Vanderhoef Vanderbilt Town Park was established.

Surrounded by children of Greenville, Town officials and visiting dignitaries dedicated the George Vanderhoef Vanderbilt Park. Taking part in the unveiling of plaques thanking all members of the community who helped make the project possible were: Town Supervisor William Maxwell, Citizens Park Committee President Denise Mulligan, Ann Davidson and Robyn Birmann (Mr. Vanderbilt's granddaughters), Catherine Davidson (Mr. Vanderbilt's daughter), Citizen Park Committee Members Ken Elsbree and Debbie Magee, and Iroquois Gas Company ELPEP Director Gary Davis

Debbie thanked the people of this community who supported this project financially, spiritually, and physically. The George V. Vanderbilt Park, she said, is a shining example of the strength and compassion of our wonderful town. People in our community now have a place to picnic and to hike; our children have a playground and ball fields to play baseball, basketball and soccer; organizations can hold events; weddings can be held in the barn; and, if you're so inclined, you can just sit on a park bench and enjoy the beautiful views.

She especially acknowledged the other park committee members for their tenacity and creating today's gem of Greenville: Kenneth Elsbree, Denise Mulligan, (late) Dick Ricci, David Winn, Nicole Ambrosio, Joseph Stanzione, Nancy Priputen, Debbie Teator, Don Teator, Cecile Plattner, Kathy Brennan, Stacey Byrne, Dave Dively, Jyl DeGiovine, Sue Brown, Brian Mulligan, and Colin Tumey,

(the end)

Thank you, Debbie, for recapturing those early days of the park.

Back to my thoughts.

I had asked Debbie last year about doing a program about the history of the Town Park. She demurred, agreeing to cover the history she knew well which was the early 1990s. Perhaps, another program will detail 1995 to present. The big picture is that Greenville area residents have overwhelmingly supported and now enjoys our town park. Every day I drive by on Rt 32, I cannot help but think how much Greenville is improved and bolstered with this asset.

However, I also remember the two waves of purges where volunteers were told to get lost, sometimes not that kindly. And that is on top of the usual “warm” discussions that happen when parties with different interests try to shape what is best for the park (essence of life, right?). Fortunately the last decade has been kinder years for the people who try to steer the park toward good interests of the Town. This makes what Deb Magee engineered a highlight, indeed, these thirty years later.

If there are other perspectives on these years, I welcome them and would strive to add them to a more complete historical record.

The October 14 meeting (**North Bam at the Park, 7:30**) will officially unveil the GLHG 2020 Calendar. I think it a worthy blend of older and newer photos. However, the distinctive section of the calendar, the recognition, will mark ninety years of the Greenville Central School District, noting the skills and dedication of its teachers. Twenty-three individuals have been chosen to represent the “connections with influential teachers whose lessons still reverberate within us and who have served as role models throughout our lives.” I am striving to have these teachers attend and to be recognized.

Calendars are available for sale at Kelly’s, Library, GNH, and Tops at \$10 each. A meeting special will be available at the meeting.

The 23 teachers to be recognized:
F. May Shaw, Muriel Wooster, Eberhard “Ed” Volmar, William Ransom, Mary Lou Birk, Helen Brown, Robert Tyrrell, Ron Frantz, Charles Welden, Art Thorman, Leonard “Red” Sutton, Herb Ford, James “Coach” MacTavish, Gail Richmond, Vince Seeley, Eli Shapiro, Bonnie Persico, Henrietta Rice, JoAnn Simmons, Margaret Bogardus, Gretchen Coyner, Linda Davies, Muriel Faulkey.

I will keep my presentation short, hoping instead to allow audience participation in the recognition of these teachers – those pictured and even those not.

***Greenville Day: The Tenth Greenville Day is September 28, with a free kids’ carnival the evening before. Small town flavor at its best. Please consider participating. Should I remind you, ahem, that many of the activities are at the George V. Vanderbilt Park.
***Krista Ingalls Haushalter contributed a box of goodies from her cleaning out the basement of her parents’ house. I will inventory and welcome the addition to the files.
***A thank you goes to Stephanie and Christine for the baked goods, juices and water I keep advertising in the newspaper pr pieces. Stephanie and Christine keep delivering. In case you had not thought of it, thank them for providing a nice finish to the evening.

Take care,

Forgive a lack of photos. There are plenty of clippings from the newspapers of the times. If interested, contact Debbie Magee or me.