

Newbury's New Tucker Mountain Town Forest

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Tucker Mountain Town Forest Management Committee

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Good afternoon and thank you for giving me a few minutes here to speak about Newbury's new town forest and about the important role the Vermont Land Trust played in bringing about the acquisition. I'm Tom Kidder, co-chair of the Tucker Mountain Town Forest Management Committee.

In December of last year, the Town of Newbury closed on 636 acres of land that includes Newbury's beloved Tucker Mountain, establishing the Tucker Mountain Town Forest.

Thanks to the help of the Vermont Land Trust, we are proud to have the opportunity to be stewards of this property and to help it become a treasured natural preserve for our community.

The land is an important part of Newbury's history. The top of the mountain was cleared by 1808, creating its famous 360 degree view. In his *History of Newbury*, Frederick Wells describes it:

“The highest cultivated land in town, long called the ‘Mountain Carter place,’ from which is a *prospect* of vast extent and variety, lies a mile or two northwest of the hamlet of West Newbury.”

Mountain Carter was a nickname for James Carter who built a homestead near the top. The name was soon changed to Tucker Mountain when John Tucker bought part of Carter's farm. For close to 150 years, farmers grazed cattle and sheep on the top meadows and lower down along its slopes. There are many cellar holes and stone walls to be found and a private cemetery lies just beyond the eastern boundary.

That view described by Wells has been preserved over all these 200 plus years. Visitors are drawn by its wildflowers, grassy meadows, and magnificent views which include the White Mountains to the east, the Waits River Valley and mountains to the west, south to Wright's Mountain, and north to Woodchuck Mountain, the highest point in Newbury.

Families have hiked, skied, snow shoed, and ridden horses to the top from the time it was cleared. It's always been a popular picnic spot. Newbury and Bradford schools lead children up the mountain every fall to learn about their natural environment and deepen their attachment to nature.

The property is home for deer, moose, bear, beaver and many smaller critters. A vernal pool lies near the top and a year-round brook flows through an expansive wetland of beaver ponds and swamps.

In the early 1970s, Tucker Mountain was for sale, and word got out that a real estate development company was eyeing the property. Phil and Ginny Leach, who had homes in Massachusetts and Fairlee, Vermont, decided to purchase the land in order to protect it. It had always been a favorite place for Phil and Ginny and their family, and Phil proposed to Ginny there in 1940.

The Leaches donated a conservation easement to the Vermont Land Trust for the property in 1992. They wanted to be sure the land was protected and well managed for years to come.

Most recently, in 2015, Phil and Ginny Leach's children and heirs, who collectively owned 636 acres of Tucker and its surroundings, began discussions with the Vermont Land Trust and the Town of Newbury with the goal of selling the land to the town at a reduced price while keeping it preserved and protected. The assessed value was \$705,000 but the Leach's offered it for \$461,000. Of that, the town would pay \$25,000, the remainder to be covered by grants and contributions. In September of 2017, the proposal was put to the Newbury residents for a vote and it passed. A second vote was petitioned and again, the decision to purchase passed handily. The land was transferred from the Leach family to the Land Trust in September of 2018, then from VLT to the Town of Newbury on December 12, 2018.

Throughout the process, the Land Trust has been there to offer support, meeting with local citizens and the selectboard and attending town meetings. They have spent endless hours in negotiations. They have provided timber inventories and ecological studies, created maps, and

their forester has inspected the land and its boundaries. He recently walked the roads with several of us, suggesting approaches to managing erosion and removing invasive species.

The town will manage the town forest with the guidance of a management committee and help from the Newbury Conservation Commission. Other dedicated volunteers will pitch in to build trails, make signs, work on road improvements, and plan activities. The town forest will provide opportunities for recreation and education—involving local schools and other conservation minded groups—and bring some income from well-managed logging operations. The project offers a new way for Newbury citizens to unify and bond for a common goal. Truly, it has already brought diverse members of our community together as we dream and plan for what the Town Forest will become.

Since 1992, the Vermont Land Trust has played a prominent role in preserving and protecting this land, especially in shepherding through the transfer of the property to the Town of Newbury. They developed a thoughtful, reasonable and responsible conservation management plan and brought all parties into agreement, which was not an easy task. They were a tremendous help with fundraising, especially in securing grants and leading our fundraising committee to generate funds for the land purchase and to get us started with a stable management fund. The Vermont Land Trust made the Tucker Mountain Town Forest possible, and we are deeply grateful to them for all they've done not just for Newbury, and we know the establishment of the Tucker Mountain Town Forest is just one of many steps they have taken on behalf of conservation and preservation of land for our beautiful state of Vermont.