



# AVON LAND TRUST

## Autumn 2023 E-Newsletter



Welcome to our fall issue! This autumn season ushers in the beauty of splendid colors and a changing landscape. It's a time for comfort food, school and sports, and family time. We invite you to enjoy the colorful foliage from a scenic vista on our network of hiking trails (see our website), to enjoy all that the season has to offer. Also check below for our upcoming events. Please enjoy our newsletter and this magnificent season. We hope you will join us! We welcome new members and volunteers as we celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year!

### Co-President's Note:

On a recent morning, the two Co-Presidents and a volunteer tackled a good-sized project at the barn. Later that afternoon I smiled to myself as I recalled the morning. In addition to the satisfaction of a job well done, there were jokes exchanged and camaraderie, exercise, fresh air and vitamin D/sunshine. I had a hunch about the additional benefits of volunteer work, so I checked PubMed for any medical research on the subject. Sure enough, it confirmed that there is "good evidence of a reciprocal relationship between volunteering and well-being". I've also heard at least three separate anecdotal reports that it can be very therapeutic to pull out invasive plants!

### ALT Events:

Monday, 10/9/23 11:00 am

Hike on Wellner Family Conservation Area – 2 miles – easy/moderate  
Start behind Petco –buy your own lunch at Puerta Vallarta afterward

Saturday, 10/21/23 10:00 am – 1:00 pm

Hike to Tower Toot at Heublein Tower  
Start at Hazen Trail

Free, but please register with Avon Recreation and Parks

Tuesday, 10/24/23 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Award-winning film "Chasing Childhood"  
Thompson Brook School Auditorium

This feature-length documentary explores how free play and independence have all but vanished from kids' lives, supplanted by digital social lives and relentless perfectionism leading to record rates of anxiety and depression. Free play, ideally outdoors and unsupervised by adults, is critical for children to develop essential life skills like grit, independence, and resourcefulness. Help change the tide by attending this important event.

Free, but please register here:

Wednesday, 10/25/23 7:00 pm – 8:00 pm

Halloween Special: Local Gravestone Restoration with Randall Nelson  
Avon Free Public Library Community Room

Free, but please register with Avon Free Public Library

Saturday, 11/4/23 10:00 am  
Sub-Edge Farm hike with canal expert Carl Walter – 3 miles - easy  
Parking lot on Tillotson Road  
Free, but please register with Avon Recreation and Parks

Wednesday, 11/8/23 10:00 am  
Horse Guard State Park hike– 1.5 miles – moderate to difficult  
Parking lot at 245 West Avon Road  
Free – ALT

Saturday, 11/18/23 10:00 am  
Pinnacle Rock and Rattlesnake Mountain – 4.4 miles – difficult  
168 Colt Highway, Farmington (Rte 6)  
Free – ALT

Thursday, 11/30/23 7:00 pm – 8:00 pm  
Dreaming Big: Tales of Nod Road and the Avon Towers with ALT’s own Scott Lewis  
Avon Free Public Library Community Room  
Free, but please register with Avon Free Public Library

Wednesday, 12/13/23 10:00 am  
Nepaug Forest – 6 miles – moderate  
Nepaug Forest Parking lot on Rt 202 (3.1 miles from Rte 44/202 intersection)  
Free - ALT

## IF THE WOODS COULD TALK

### *Family Hiking Trails-The Wellner Family Conservation Area and Avalon Parcel*

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate and Scott Lewis, ALT Board



'Cathedral Valley' Wellner Family Conservation Area by Scott Lewis

The Avon Land Trust acquired the adjoining Avalon and Wellner properties in 1996 and 1997, respectively. The first parcel is 14.25 acres, the latter is 14.93 acres. These parcels are located off West Avon Road in the Avalon development, and bounded on the north by the businesses on the Albany Turnpike. Let's allow our imaginations to picture what this land once looked like back in the early days of our town. Historic maps and census records indicate that the northernmost farm on West Avon Road was owned by Isaac Baldwin. His farm had sixty acres. He had one horse, one cow, two oxen, two other cattle, four sheep, two pigs, and produced forty bushels of rye and eighty bushels of oats according to the 1850 non-population census. His farm may have been part of the Wellner parcel. Heading south, the prominent names from the early 1800s and onward for generations, was the Chidsey family, according to maps and censi. They are the namesake of Chidsey Brook and Chidsey Road. According to the Avon history book by Frances L. Mackie, it is noted that Abraham Chidsey settled at the northernmost part of West Avon Road, near present day Albany Turnpike in 1797. There are two existing houses at 55 and 99 West Avon Road attributed to him that are listed on the 1997 Architectural Survey by the Connecticut Historic

Commission. They are estimated to be circa 1800. As noted on the 1830 map, other Chidsey family members located nearby included Bartholomew, Anson, and Jacob Chidsey. Later generations included Andrew and Hector Chidsey. Today the street addresses are 39 Avalon Drive and 33 West Avon Road.

If the woods could talk, they would tell of the Baldwin sixty-acre farm and the Chidsey's farms comprising over three hundred forty acres in 1850, and their livestock and crops. The Chidsey farms had horses, cows, oxen, pigs and sheep. Their crops included rye, corn, oats, potatoes, and they produced butter, cheese and wool. The Wellner and/or Avalon parcels may have been part of the Chidsey farms. It's hard to envision those farms of yesteryear where people toiled, lived, raised families, and passed on their land for decades. The Land Trust is very pleased to be the stewards of these early farm properties. What follows is a description written by our Trail Master and Board member, Scott Lewis:

"The 15-acre Wellner Family Conservation Area, also known as the Wellner Preserve, is located behind Petco in Avon. The land was donated to the Avon Land Trust in 1997 as a gift by Dr. Murray and Susan Wellner of West Hartford who wanted the land to be preserved in its natural state to support native species and wildlife. Hiking trails in the preserve are accessible from the trailhead next to a parking area behind Petco. The blue trail takes the hiker first past the stone marker that identifies the tri-town boundary point of Avon, Canton and Simsbury. The trail then leads into a beautiful fern-lined valley, called 'Cathedral Valley', which is a natural amphitheater that affords peaceful solitude despite the proximity to Route 44. The valley has more spaced-out trees than is typical in the forests of this area with hemlocks and pine trees prominent along the path. Another trail leads from the start of Cathedral Valley up to the ridge that goes all along the perimeter of the Wellner parcel. On the north side of the perimeter trail is evidence of a sand quarry from long ago.



Porcupine on tree. Photo: Scott Lewis, ALT

Adjoining the Wellner Family Conservation Area is the Avon Land Trust's parcel that surrounds the Avalon Drive development that was acquired in 1996. On the western side of this parcel is the Nancy Nation trail that is accessed from the perimeter trail (i.e. yellow trail) that is in the Wellner preserve. Shortly past the start of the Nancy Nation trail is a viewpoint looking east to the Metacomet Ridge and the Heublein tower. The trail then descends into a small valley surrounded on three sides by hills; still-visible barbed wire fence posts are evidence that this land once served as cow pasture. The eastern side of the land trust's Avalon parcel is largely wetlands which provides an important habitat for wildlife. Nancy Nation, who passed away in 2019, was director of Christian education at West Avon Congregational Church for 23 years, founder of the Safe Rides organization in Avon, and was active in the Rotary Club's outreach program."

Including both the Wellner Preserve and the adjoining Avalon parcel, the Avon Land Trust maintains 1.5 miles of hiking trails in an easily accessible area that provides an escape to nature. We invite you and your family to visit these parcels to experience their beauty first hand. Parking is available behind Petco, and a kiosk with trail maps will be installed within the next two months.

## SPECIAL FEATURE

### *CREATING A NATURE PRESERVE*

#### Girl Scout Gold Award Project

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate and Rick Dubiel, ALT Co-President



The Land Trust was very fortunate to benefit from all work completed by local Girl Scout Makena Logan, in the process of attaining her Gold Award. Makena, rallying help from her parents, neighbor, Garden Club and ALT volunteers, created a new wildlife preserve and trail at our barn property at 160 Huckleberry Hill Road. The ambitious project had many components, such as clearing a trail through thorny invasive barberry to connect with the town trail, installing a plank walkway over a muddy section, planting a pollinator garden, erecting a bat house and screech owl nest box, planting two mulberry trees, and erecting interpretive signage.

Two trailer loads of barberry were pulled, and manually hauled uphill for disposal!

The pollinator garden will attract bees and butterflies and currently consists of black-eyed Susans or rudbeckia, golden rod, and autumn aster. The garden was outlined with stones. In addition, a new picnic table has been located near this garden, under a young black walnut tree.



Two old stonewalls border the newly blazed pathway, that leads from the barn down to beautiful Hawley Brook. Just across Hawley Brook on town property there is an old hydraulic ram pump that once pumped water uphill to the barn and house. Marge Dubiel, who donated the land to ALT, would recount how as a little girl, she would sometimes be sent down to prime the pump if it ever stopped.

The Avon Land Trust is forever grateful for the efforts of Makena and her team in creating a natural wildlife preserve and trail for all to enjoy. This is an outstanding example of community service! It is wonderful when folks partner with the Land Trust to offer their time for the betterment of our lovely town. Our motto is: "Future generations may not remember our names, but they will certainly be glad we were here."

(Please contact the Land Trust if you would like to volunteer for, or contribute toward future projects here or elsewhere. Materials and labor are needed to build a wider raised walkway.)



## AVON FLORA AND FAUNA

"You build a barn and the birds will come!"

(Desopo)

*A story about barn swallows and chimney swifts*

By Chrissie Desopo and Janet M. Conner



The very kind and generous Chrissie Desopo, of local garden and historic house fame, graciously offered to send photos and do a write up about the barn swallows I have seen at her property. On one visit I was standing just outside the open barn garage doors, and birds kept whizzing by my head! I was told these were barn swallows and they were regular guests at the Desopo's place. What follows are Chrissie's own words, detailing what happened after she and her husband John built a beautiful carriage-style barn garage to complement their lovely home. This is

an example of a true love and respect for our wildlife.

"Hundreds of barn swallows were as excited about our new barn as I was. Every spring we would see the arrival of six or seven barn swallow families. They set up shop and got busy gluing together their mud nests. Securing them to the beams, shelves and walls. They were efficient little builders. Perky, cheerful and a delight to watch. We developed a deep bond. They worked quickly and got right down to laying their eggs and perching on their carefully crafted nests. Devoted and loving, you couldn't ask for a sweeter bird to inhabit your barn. We were all one big, happy family. They would chirp and greet us whenever we entered the barn. It was the highlight of our day. Both Mom and Dad were equally involved, bringing food in on a regular basis once the babies hatched from their eggs. Barn swallows have two nestings per summer. It gets loud and raucous as the babies mature. Poop all over the vehicles makes quite the mess, but we love them so much that we look the other way. We have had hundreds of barn swallows in over the years and all went well until recently. This summer, we had six nests in the barn. All seemed to be going as planned until we noticed that one of our cats was losing his hair and was incessantly scratching himself. I thought fleas. But then John and I would go into the barn and would start itching all over. We looked into the air as the parental birds were flitting about and we saw millions of mites in the air! Our barn swallow dreams were shattered! Researching our nasty mite infestation, we found out that mites are a diverse group of arthropods in the same class as ticks. Some mites live on the nests, while many live on the birds. Their primary food source is blood. Mites can infest the fledglings to the point that they jump out of the nest at an immature size and die. Just dreadful! We let the babies mature and fly away, as we scratched ourselves raw. What we do for our birds! We emptied out the barn contents, scrubbed and disinfected every inch of its interior, pulled down the nests and vacuumed 10 times over. Then, we shut the doors. The second nesting would not be happening in our barn this year. Our feathered friends came back and were persistent to say the least. A group of 20-30 swallows hovering above the barn doors and diving in the second the door was ajar, they flew in with real purpose! They were mad that we closed them out and we were sad that we had to. Next year will be a new start for fresh nests and hopefully we can keep the mites at bay!" THANK YOU, CHRISSIE.

I have never been able to tell the difference between barn swallows and chimney swifts so I consulted the National Audubon Society's website. I learned that these birds are actually not related. The general



distinction is that swallows have some iridescent colors, whereas, swifts are mostly light gray. Another difference is in the shape of their wings; swallow's wings are thicker near the body and tapering, and swift's wings are skinny and long and "fluttering". In addition, their nests are built differently; swifts can adhere a collection of sticks with saliva to a vertical wall, and swallows build mud nests often times inside buildings, under eaves, and garages! The defining distinction is that chimney

swifts, as the name implies, will dive into chimneys to roost after gorging on flying insects at dusk. Both birds are incredible aerial acrobats! (See:

<https://www.audubon.org/news/is-swallow-or-swift>)

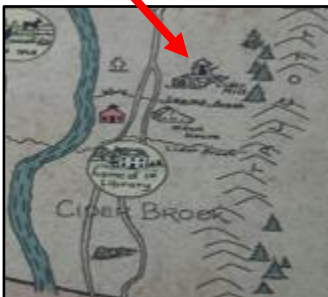
The Avon Land Trust is hoping to secure grant money to build a ground-level mock chimney that will also function as a kiosk. These aspirational projects are only possible with donations of money from organizations or community members, and come to fruition with the help of volunteers. Please consider the good work that ALT does in enhancing habitat and nesting opportunities on our parcels and other locations by installing both blue bird boxes, bat boxes, and hopefully a chimney swift hotel! We need your support to continue in these endeavors with volunteer hours and membership. Thank you!



## AVON NATURAL RESOURCES

### *Apple Time in Avon's Early Days*

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



(Map: Avon, Connecticut-An Historical Story by Frances L. Mackie, Avon Historical Society, 1988)

Autumn is quintessentially apple time. Today we go to the store or roadside stand to buy our apples. Back in the early days of Avon, apples were an orchard crop on many farms. At harvest time, the apples were picked and made their way into pies, cakes, cider, hard cider, and cider brandy. The 1830 map of the Town of Avon (left), shows a cider mill that was located in the Cider Brook section of town (see arrow). There were also four distilleries; one in East Avon near Nod Brook, two in Lovelytown near Roaring Brook, and one on Huckleberry Hill near Hawley Brook. Many farmers had their own cider presses.

The mills no longer exist, but thanks to historical photographs, maps,



Avon Free Public Library / Hadsell, Clinton B. Photo

probate records, and journals, we get a glimpse of what apple time was like back in the day. At left is a photo from the Connecticut Digital Archive titled 'Ben Miller's apples'. The Millers lived on Waterville Road near the cider mill. Truman Harlow Miller was an earlier owner. Our Town Historian, Nora O. Howard, made this notation taken from the diary of old-time resident, Frank Hadsell. "On [May] 26 [1900], I paid [\$] 1.25 for the cider I had from Ben Miller in the fall. It was my practice for years to get 5 gallons, which Mother and I drank until it became so sour, we did not care for it." In the journal entry of early resident Guy Thompson (CTDA), there is a recipe for sweet pickles using apples from 1818.

The Avon Land Trust has four properties along Waterville Road. In the early days the original settler families of Hart, Miller and Bishop owned land here. The four properties today are numbers 485, 535, 549, and 635 Waterville Road. The Lusk family of Lovelytown operated a tavern at which 'high wines' were sold, which were made at the distilleries. ALT owns property a little further south at 5 Old Wheeler Lane and 330 Lovely Street thru which Roaring Brook flows. On Huckleberry Hill, John Woodford, an early settler and tavern keeper, had a cider house and Romanta Woodruff had a high-output distillery. The Land Trust owns property at 160 Huckleberry Hill Road (where the barn has an old cider press), and also two parcels at 369 and 373 Huckleberry Hill Road, very near the old Woodruff distillery site.

Ownership of these properties preserves the historical heritage of these families, and their houses and farms. In addition, it preserves woodland, former meadowland, and wetlands and its' inherent wildlife and their habitats. This aligns with the Avon Land Trust's mission statement: "To actively seek wetlands, woodlands meadowlands and ridgelands which have unique scenic, **historic**, scientific and ecological significance for Avon." Only one of our properties currently has a structure on it, an 1820s barn. However, it is not just what is seen on a property today, it is also about what was once there. Preservation is about the

past *and* the future. It is imperative that we, as a society, recognize the intrinsic value of saving open space as the historical record is the story of the inception of our town, its people, and its heritage. As Historian for the Avon Land Trust, I am very proud to be a part of this worthy organization's efforts.

## HISTORY BENEATH OUR FEET

### *A Local Legend and ALT'S Connection*

By Janet M. Conner, Historian Laureate



Image: Clipart Panda

There's something about nights this time of year that can be kind of spooky. This is the perfect season to recount one of Connecticut's folklore legends. The land trust has a stake in the story by virtue of its location, but we will get to that shortly.

The legend has been told and retold in many books and publications is basically this: On a dark moonlit night in the year 1777, a French paymaster was headed to Saratoga, New York with saddlebags full of gold and silver for the troops. The troops were in support of General Washington's army. The paymaster stopped in Canton, at the Hosford House which was an inn and tavern located just off the Albany Turnpike. The story goes that after his meal and drink, he headed up to his room with the saddlebags, but was never heard from again! The French officers, upon not receiving the rider and his payload, dispatched a search party to the Canton inn. The innkeeper insisted that he had seen the paymaster leave on his horse early in the morning. A hundred years later, the Hosford House burned to the foundation and supposedly human bones, without the head, were found. One account says that metal buttons similar to a military uniform were found near the body. Furthermore, various versions of this story mention the paymaster's horse's hoofs being cut off and thrown into the nearby swamp! Still further, there is an account of a diamond dealer being decapitated and thrown into Cherry Pond, which sounds like an embellishment on the original legend!

Where it gets really spooky, is that there have been many reports of farmers riding their teams through Canton at night, and their horses being "spooked" by the appearance of a headless horseman with his horse's eyes alight, riding west toward Saratoga, his cape trailing behind in the wind. Fast forward to today, there have been reports of motorists also encountering this ethereal spirit on his steed, and causing them to nearly runoff the road!

Now to the connection the land trust has to this legend. The Land Trust has a 4.5 acre parcel of land at 24 Delbon Lane, that has frontage on Secret Lake. We erected two wood duck nest boxes there several years ago. The lake is quite expansive with cottage-style homes on Secret Lake Drive with water access. There is a vast area of swamp on the west and north sides of the lake. This provides habitat for amphibians, waterfowl, and aquatic species. The lake was originally called Cherry Pond, thought to have been named for a native person, Chief Cherry, who lived on the ridge at the Canton town line which was also namesake of the old Cherry Park fairgrounds. The lake was renamed Secret Lake, perhaps because of this folklore legend, and the secrets it may hold.

For further reading see:

'Meeting a Ghost in the Suburbs' Alan Sternberg, *The Hartford Courant* (1923-); Hartford, Conn.: 31 Oct 1984: B1  
Canton Sesquicentennial Committee, 1806-1956, accessed via archive.org

'The Headless Horseman of Canton', *Damned Connecticut*, Ray Bendici, <https://www.damnedct.com/the-headless-horseman-of-canton/>

# *Happy Autumn from the Avon Land Trust!*

For membership information see: <https://avonlandtrust.org/membership/>

For volunteering or questions:

The Avon Land Trust

PO Box 267

Avon, CT 06001

860-670-8036

Email: [trustavonland@gmail.com](mailto:trustavonland@gmail.com)



## **THE AVON LAND TRUST HISTORY AND MISSION STATEMENT**

The Avon Land Trust was founded on May 23, 1973 in order to conserve and hold in trust the natural resources of the Town of Avon – woodlands, fields, lakes, rivers, open spaces and its plant and animal life

**Mission:** - To preserve and protect undeveloped land in Avon, in order to enhance our town's scenic beauty and its environmental and historic resources. - To promote the conservation and management of woodlands and open space. - To acquire through donations and purchases additional land which can be preserved in its natural state. - To maintain wildlife habitats. - To provide public access to appropriate properties for public enjoyment of nature. - To actively seek wetlands, woodlands meadowlands and ridglands which have unique scenic, historic, scientific and ecological significance for Avon.