Cumberland's hidden trails: Explore the natural beauty of Franklin Farm

As you follow the trail at Franklin Farm, turn around and look back toward the farm buildings and you'll feel transported to rural 1850 in Cumberland. (Valley Breeze photos by Marcia Green)

By MARCIA GREEN, Valley Breeze Editor

This is the third in a series about the walking trails of Cumberland.

CUMBERLAND – After my several trips into the woods, Franklin Farm’s trail was a sunny trek encircling 44 acres of meadow, planted gardens, house and barn.

Every step seemed to offer up a new vista – purple and yellow wildflowers, exploded cat-o-nine tails, waving grass, and the little pond alive with frogs and hosting a single mallard.

Pam Trillo, the farm’s vice president, and Denise Mudge, who oversees educational programming and volunteers, escorted me around the mile-long perimeter walk that Frank Matta and his famous tractor keep clear on a bi-weekly basis.

Denise and Pam, like the Cumberland Land Trust members, are urging the town’s residents to stop over and enjoy the rural feel of this intact 19th-century farm. Park near the barn where a sign is posted. The trail is a loop that starts behind the barn or over by the front garden near the utility shed.

Be bold, and enjoy this property. The place is so homey it might feel like trespassing, but this is town property and like the other conservationists I’ve met, Denise is convinced that the more the public enjoys the land, the more folks want to ensure it’s protected.
Denise lives up on Tanglewood Drive overlooking the farm fields, and grew up in the neighborhood as well.

She says she’s glad to hear the after-supper sounds of children let loose by their parents for a good run.

Cumberland purchased this rare example of an intact, 68-acre farm in 1994 for $1.1 million, spending $550,000 from an open space bond, while a water protection grant picked up the other half. Under the deal, the Franklin family retained the home and use of the property, but the barn area and fields became the responsibility of the town.

When the last family member died, Rhodey Franklin, the town bought the 12-room house and remaining acres of land for $425,000.

First plowed by the Metcalf family in the 1700s, the farm was later added to the National Register of Historic Places.

The farmhouse here, a mid-19th century Greek Revival-style, is joined by an early-19th century timber-framed barn, a circa 1903 dairy barn, and a 20th-century garage.

Today it’s operated by volunteers, the Historic Metcalf-Franklin Farm Association that has so far relied on donations for restoration work on the barns with the help of students of the Woonsocket Area Career and Technical School.

When I was there in early June, a killdeer, a type of plover, was sitting on a nest of eggs at the end of a garden row. Overhead, it was easy to spot red-wing blackbirds, and Denise reports tenants in the bluebird boxes installed by Boy Scouts. Sit quietly on the flat rock by the pond, she urges, to see the variety of birds inhabiting the fields.

She’s also spotted deer, especially at dusk, foxes and coyotes.

Walking the fields just might lure you toward the vegetable gardens where produce is raised for the Rhode Island Community Food Bank.

Output was low last summer after the drenching rains and scorching heat, so the 17,000 pounds could double to the 2012 level of 34,000.

Drop by any Monday or Thursday evening beginning at 5:30 p.m., and as the sun sets over the fields, you’ll be put to work harvesting whatever vegetable is ripe that week.

Moving forward at the farm, just this year the town secured a new matching grant from the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission to fund a master plan for the future handling the house, barns and outbuildings.

All buildings will be inspected from top to bottom, including interior features and finishes, photographed, preliminary drawings created, preliminary costs tallied and priorities suggested.
Pam Trillo, right, and Denise Mudge, are among the many who keep the farming operation going to supply the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. Denise also helps coordinate the summer camp program here for children.
Bluebirds are a rare backyard sight, but you'll find them at Franklin Farm, says Denise Mudge, where they prefer the expanse of meadowland.