

7/9/2014 [The Valley Breeze](#), Marcia Green

Inside Blackall Preserve is a bit of hidden history



The hide-away pond is a sparkling treasure that's shared between the town and Highland Hills. Looking for an apartment? Two hundred garden style apartments are coming here to fill a reported shortage and especially to benefit employees of the corporate park. (Valley Breeze photos by Marcia Green)

CUMBERLAND - Nestled on one of the prettiest, most historic roads in town, Old West Wrentham Road, is the town-owned Blackall Preserve.

There's no sign, no designated parking and no trail markers. But it is town-owned land that's fully available for public use.

Joe Pailthorpe, who heads up fundraising for the Cumberland Land Trust and whose house backs up to the land, was my guide on a hot, June day. We parked at the edge of the road and entered at a break in the stonewall on Old West Wrentham between pole numbers 53 and 54. The trail is well established, a shady walk through woodlands packed with history.

First a note about Old West Wrentham Road itself. Like the short pieces of Sneece Pond Road off Nate Whipple Highway, Old West Wrentham Road is a curved piece left on its own after a straighter West Wrentham Road was established. It's easy to miss, but shouldn't be.

Resident Michael Magee's well researched notes find three antique homes owned by generations of the Cook family starting in 1632 and the suggestion that the F. Steele Blackall land includes "a remarkable variety of dry masonry structures" including stone walls, remnants of outlying buildings, pens, sluice runs, heaps of stone and mausoleum-like structures attributed to the Levi Cook Farm, circa 1803-1857. He urges exploration to find the locations of the Jonathan Sweet and H. Jillson houses both depicted on this land on the 1838 map of the town.

Still standing are the elegant homes known as the 1742 Elder Nathaniel Cook House at 9 Old West Wrentham; the 1772 Ariel Cook House at 7 Old West Wrentham; and 1808 Davis Cook House at 12 Old West Wrentham.

Joe steered me along the pathway that the 20th-century Blackall family once used as a horse trail, then along the back of the office park and down to the sparkling woodland pond covered in lily pads. We spent about 90 minutes, including time for walking partway around the pond. I quickly noticed that trails beckoned in several directions. I kept up with Joe, but you may want to note landmarks as you explore the side trails.

Former Cumberland resident Holly Applegate is a Blackall who grew up in this idyllic setting where family members rode horses, swam and skated at the pond, and traipsed through acres of woodland. If you look closely, you'll spot remnants of a fence that edged the riding trail that Holly told me family members referred to as Hazel's Downs, because it was created for her grandmother, Hazel Blackall, in the 1950s.

About a decade ago, her family had hoped to develop condos for over-55-year-olds with a golf course on the property but gave up in the face of neighborhood opposition. She says now that selling to the town instead was a good solution. The \$250,000 price tag was well below market value, many noted at the time.

Cumberland acquired 120 acres here in two steps. The first 69 acres were purchased from the Blackall family in 2003 using a \$250,000 grant from the state Department of Environmental Management. An added 50 acres came as a gift to Cumberland from developer Highland Hills in 2009.

Joe, who was a leading opponent of the original development plan, is moving forward with a town resolution that names the property The Blackall Family Preserve. He says the Cumberland Land Trust is proposing that it work with a member of the family to create a sign, develop some parking and make other improvements.

All the trails I've visited so far have some evidence of all-terrain vehicle activity, but none as much as this one where one area was a muddy mess of criss-crossed tire marks that made the trail nearly impassable. Joe has hopes for better policing once Highland Hills brings builds its 200 garden-style apartments on 30 acres behind Cintas and Numark on Highland Corporate Drive. Those apartments will overlook the northwest edge of the pond, offering a view of the water and protected town land across the way. Very nice!



Striking a pose on the Blackall trail that he's come to treasure is guide Joe Pailthorpe, who lives nearby.



Near the pond, all-terrain vehicle operators have made the trail nearly impassable, a problem that Joe Pailthorpe says he hopes will end with the coming of upscale apartments by Highland Hills.



Listen for the bullfrogs and enjoy the tranquility of this pond where Blackall family members once swam and skated.