



March Mosaic by Shirley Winer

Our new address at the Bullitt Reservation: 332 Bullitt Road, Ashfield, MA 01330. 413.628.4485. hilltown-land-trust.org

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## Katie Theoharides Returns to Washington

For personal reasons, Katie Theoharides, our Executive Director since last July, has decided with her husband to return to Washington, DC. Wil Hastings, President of Hilltown Land Trust, said, "We will sorely miss Katie, but understand why she needs to return to Washington. Her term with us was woefully short but very productive. We wish her the best." ♦

## Charting a New Course with a New Partnership

The partnership between the Hilltown Land Trust and The Trustees of Reservations has raised the need to better define our conservation vision and to identify goals and focal areas for our conservation efforts. While both organizations have done significant land conservation in the region, we needed a joint plan to guide where the partnership will invest conservation resources, how it will target proactive protection and where it could most effectively protect natural resources of importance to both parties.

This past winter, workshops were held with the HLT board and committee members plus three staff members of The Trustees of Reservations. They were facilitated by Katie Theoharides, the former executive director for the Hilltown Land Trust.

As an added consideration before setting new goals, Katie shared her background in planning for land conservation in a climate change future. She highlighted some of the resources in the Hilltowns that were most threatened from climate change, including coldwater stream habitats, spruce-fir forests, and maple trees. Land trusts could be part of climate change adaptation

by working to increase landscape connectivity, and by protecting large, intact blocks of land to protect a diversity of habitats and species, and to allow species space to relocate when necessary.

Early on in the workshops, the group identified some joint partnership goals:

- ▶ Increasing the amount of land protected through our organizations and other partners
- ▶ Using meaningful, strategic, and scientific conservation planning
- ▶ Working with landowners and the community to increase recognition of the importance of land conservation, natural resources, working forest and farm lands.
- ▶ Building a strong partnership that works effectively to fundraise, conserve land and lead by example.

The workshops stirred up many ideas, ideals, values, visions, wishes and caveats about the future of the Hilltowns and the role our partnership might play. We cannot conserve everything! How do we make the best choices? How do we enhance habitat preservation, farm and forest viability, resources for wild and human life? How do we enlist the support of the Hilltown residents? The lists covered many sheets of paper plastered all over walls and windows. *Continued on page 3* ▶

*From our new HLT brochure:*

**What We Believe in:**

*\*The land and people of these Hilltowns, which are among the Commonwealth's greatest treasures.*

*\*Supporting working farms and forests that sustain our communities and rural livelihoods and should continue to be part of this landscape.*

*\*The value of connecting people to the outdoors by providing recreational opportunities and encouraging a deep love of nature.*

*\*Building a network of protected lands and waters that support resilient native plants and wildlife, clean water and recreational opportunities.*

*\* The importance to our lives of place, and of protecting the natural and cultural resources that make this place so special.*

## ASHFIELD *by Molly Babize*

*With the HLT's recent affiliation with The Trustees, Ashfield, Chester, Conway and Windsor have been added to our focus area. We featured Chester in our last issue, feature Ashfield here, and will feature Conway and Windsor in future issues.*

The Town of Ashfield sits in the foothills to the Berkshires, west of Conway on Route 116 and north of Goshen on Route 112. Typical of the hilltowns of western Franklin County, its forty square miles are steeply rolling and largely wooded. Heading west from Deerfield and the Connecticut River Valley, Route 116 climbs to an elevation of 800' by the eastern town line and another 400' to the center of the village, before continuing west to Plainfield and beyond. Peter Hill, at 1830', sits near the junction of 112 and 116, providing one of several ridgelines that rim Ashfield Lake and the center of town. The South River flows from Ashfield Lake to

the east, where it joins the Deerfield River and eventually the Connecticut; the other major tributary to the Deerfield is Bear River. The other half of town—from Peter Hill southwest—falls within the Westfield River watershed, with Ford and Billings Brooks feeding into the North Branch of the Swift River.

In the 1730s, the legislature in Boston voted to create "Canada townships"—buffer communities that would protect the valley settlements during the French and Indian War. Survivors of an ill-fated 1690 expedition to Canada and their heirs were awarded rights to land in what was then the Massachusetts frontier. In 1743, these Proprietors settled along the Bear River, and named their community "Huntstown," in honor of the Captain who led the expedition. In 1765, Huntstown was incorporated as Ashfield, and by 1776 the population had grown to 628.

Life was not easy, but the settlers built sawmills and gristmills along the flashy streams. By 1855 there were 14 sawmills throughout town. Subsistence farming grew into substantial industries: by 1840, Ashfield was the leading wool-producing town in the county, and there were several distilleries that produced peppermint oil and cider brandy from ample orchards in Apple Valley. Ashfield's dairy farms became the leading producers of butter and cheese in the county.

Eventually, 14 schoolhouses defined the various villages throughout town. As with many hilltowns, population peaked in the early 1800s, before the Midwest opened up and revealed lands much easier to farm. Ashfield's population was 1,832 in 1830, but by 1940 had dropped to 872. Population in the early 21st century has only just approached that of 1830.

Although most of the dairy farms have sold off their herds, there is an active and growing agricultural economy in this Right-to-Farm community. The Agricultural Commission lists more than 30 farms that offer locally grown products, from fresh maple syrup in March through apples in October. A local dairy makes their own yogurt; additional products include goat cheese, honey, fruits, beef, lamb, flowers, fleece, eggs, vegetables, and nursery stock, all of which can be found at the Ashfield Farmer's Market on Saturday mornings from Memorial Day through October.

Life in the historic village centers around several "third places" where residents gather—the Ashfield Hardware Store, County Pie Pizza, Neighbor's, the Belding Library and Elmer's Country Store. The town common is the home of the annual Fall Festival, held over Columbus Day weekend, featuring local crafts, foods, games and music. Ashfield Lake House overlooks the spring fishing derby and winter hockey tournaments, as well as the beach (open to Ashfield residents).

The rich legacy of woodlands, farm fields, wetlands and streams includes more than three dozen properties totaling nearly 2,500 acres in conservation through the Franklin Land Trust. It is also home to several properties of The Trustees of Reservations: Chapel Brook, Bear Swamp, and most recently the Bullitt Reservation, now home of the Hilltown Land Trust and Highland Communities Initiative. ✦

## CONFESSIONS OF A FORESTER AND HLT BOARD MEMBER *by Lincoln Fish, a consulting forester*

Much of my fascination with woodland comes from its capacity to record past events and memories in physical form. When action is taken on a landscape, natural or human made, the story of that action remains there, often for generations. This is especially true of trees, many of which live longer than we do. Trees respond rapidly and opportunistically to changes in available sunlight. There is great satisfaction in watching the thinnings and harvests become part of that story, told by the developing configuration of the trees.

Just a few years into my life as a forester, a woodlot where I had marked the trees, supervised the harvest, and fussed over, was later sold and developed. Trees I hoped would flourish were gone. Woods roads graded and protected from erosion now driveways. The carpet of regeneration now lawn. The story I was part of had come to an abrupt end.

After I saw a few woodlots swallowed by suburbs, I did a harvest for an elderly Williamsburg woodlot owner. Riding horses and enjoying her woods was a big part of who she was. She couldn't bear the thought of those trails not being there and spoke about wanting her forest to stay a forest after she was gone. I knew folks with the same need to see land stay undeveloped. When we founded the Hilltown Land Trust, hers was the first property we acquired. Tall, spreading oaks still grow there. Our haul roads are ready to be used again, and make excellent trails in the meantime. This story will go on. The feeling of accomplishment is tremendous.

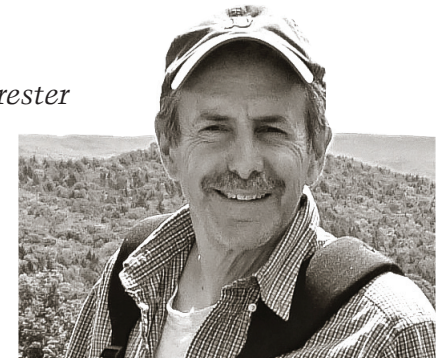
A woodlot is where the older generation passes down its knowledge of the forest and where the younger generation learns. Those of us who work the woods

know the back roads and the woodlots along them. We know who has worked there and roughly how long ago. We may know what was cut and what mill the logs went to. The story is a blend of human labor interacting with nature that will still be told by the woods when the landowner, logger and forester are no longer—unless survey flags and suburbs appear.

Part of the reason many foresters are involved in land protection is to conserve the resource base we work on. But there's more: I have hopes and aspirations for the woods I have worked with. I hope that there will be somebody there in the future who will understand what has been done, will put something of themselves into the structure of that forest and in turn, pass it on.

On wild wooded land, a forester learns to work with a fixed amount of sunlight and space, dividing it up in varying patterns between trees left to grow. What you leave is not only your work, but a record of how the trees respond to your work. We watch new shapes and configurations of forest grow, some are expected and some are a complete surprise. It's as close to art as many of us get.

Returning to a woodlot, you find your work staring you in the face. Like much of life, if you have the courage to look, you can see your strengths and your shortcomings. Some jobs will show that you have to dig a little deeper to understand. Some places perhaps you tried too hard or not hard enough. And on some sweet returns the trees are more vigorous, more thrifty, yes better than they would be had you not worked there. The forest responds or it doesn't, it is an unbiased mirror reflecting the quality of your effort,...as long as the forest is allowed to stay.



Our Hilltowns are a wonderful blend of the actions of nature on a landscape, the effect of people who own that landscape, those who work it, and the slow passage of time. As a place where nature, labor and history are all highly valued, the Hilltowns are a refuge from the fast and transient modern world. The land and the people are integral to this place, it wouldn't be the Hilltowns without both. We need to keep land undeveloped and we need to keep those who work the land, whose work is largely responsible for the landscape we know. ✦

### Charting a New Course, cont'd:

The workshops finished with our first serious mapping exercise, having isolated five "Resource Values" that will guide our planning in the future:

1. Ecological Lands
2. Agricultural Lands
3. Working Forests
4. Lands Important for Water
5. Scenic Lands

Katie used GIS data and maps that already exist to represent the values we identified across the landscape. We were then able to see where the areas with the highest concentrations of the five resources are located. From these maps we identified areas on which to focus our proactive conservation efforts in the future.

It was a transformative exercise. There is much planning work yet to be done. We thank Katie Theoharides for her leadership and map skills! ✦

