

The Cape Gazette: Barefootin'
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Delaware Wildlands celebrates 50 years of conservation

By Dennis Forney



Photo by: Dennis Forney Peter Martin, director of Delaware Wildlands operations in Kent and Sussex counties, stands inside the kitchen of the new guest house at the Roman Fisher Farm. All of the lumber and cabinetry in the structure comes from mature loblolly pines harvested from the Great Cypress Swamp.



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“In 1936 a large-scale ditching project attempted to reclaim more of the unburned swampland for farming by digging a 20-foot wide canal to divert water from the Pocomoke River to Indian River, with many miles of feeder ditches. The water level was lowered to some extent, but the great swamp is still here, a stubborn, melancholy wilderness whose mists rise like the ghosts of its vanished cypresses while buzzards wheel overhead. On dark cloudy days there may be heard from the depths of the swamp, it is said, the sound of the ‘Old Man’ riving out his shingles, hour after hour, as he used to do. He is a ghost.”

– 1938, **Federal Writers Project, Guide Book to Delaware**

One of the great defining characteristics of Delaware is a conservation spirit that has contributed immeasurably to the state’s quality of life. Because of great foresight by people of former generations, the greatest majority of the state’s ocean coast in Sussex County is owned by and accessible to the public. Cape Henlopen, Delaware Seashore and Fenwick Island state parks control most of the all-important beaches while other areas are part of the various coastal communities. Hundreds of millions of dollars come into Sussex County each year in the pockets of tourists anxious to enjoy the wonderful pleasures of the beach.

Fifty years ago, the same conservation spirit that led to protection of our beaches led to the creation of a private conservation organization known as Delaware Wildlands Inc. Founded by Ted Harvey, the organization is dedicated to permanently preserving and protecting great natural areas in Delaware. Over its five decades, Delaware Wildlands has been involved with the permanent conservation of hundreds of thousands of acres of Delaware land for the benefit of wildlife and, ultimately, all of us.

Last Sunday, Delaware Wildlands hosted a picnic at its Roman Fisher Farm on the edge of the Great Cypress Swamp. Described in the opening paragraph above, the swamp is now only about one fifth of its size when the English surveyors Mason and Dixon first had a look at the estimated 50-square-mile swamp in the late 1700s. Most of the magnificent cypress trees, soaring to heights well above 100 feet, have long since been felled for lumber and cypress shingles. It’s not unlikely that the cypress boards used in the original 18th century Bethel Church building in Lewes - the focus of this column last week - were milled from trees out of the swamp.

With an eye toward preserving one of the Delmarva Peninsula’s largest and most distinctive natural features, Delaware Wildlands, in its early years, acquired thousands of acres of the swamp. In the decades since, the organization has acquired thousands more acres, so that now its swamp holdings number in excess of 11,000 acres. That acreage is thought to be the largest contiguous, privately held piece of property on the peninsula, providing headwaters for several rivers include Indian, Pocomoke and St. Martin.

Bald eagles are a common sight in the Great Cypress Swamp, as are whitetail deer, which have come to thrive in its protective forests.

When Delaware Wildlands came on the scene in the 1960s, centuries of timbering and draining for agriculture were continuing to shrink the size of the swamp. When the earliest English settlers had cut down the most accessible of the centuries-old cypress trees to help build a growing Eastern Seaboard, the resourceful entrepreneurs started mining trees. The wood of cypress trees, growing

typically in swampy settings, is highly resistant to rot and decay. That's why it was so valued for shingling roofs and the outside walls of houses.

Cypress shingles clad many of the Lewes Historical Society's preserved structures, and Rehoboth Art League's Homestead Mansion in Henlopen Acres continues to stand, since its original construction in the 1700s, because of cypress shingles and lumber. After they had felled most of the standing cypress trees in the swamp, the old lumbermen discovered that cypresses that had fallen over into the ooze of the swamp through the centuries retained their structure. Using thin iron rods, men would push through the surface of the swamp to locate fallen trees and then dig them out and haul them to mills, dragged behind straining teams of oxen.

In 1930, during a droughty summer, legend has it that an exploding alcohol still secreted deep in the swamp during those years of prohibition started a fire in the dry and accumulated peat of the swamp. With plenty of fuel in the ground, the fire burned for months, even breaking out occasionally in the middle of cornfields created from drained areas of swamp. That fire led to the swamp being called Burnt Swamp for many decades. Draining and clear-cut timbering in the swamp ended with the arrival of Delaware Wildlands, which continues to manage those lands with a conservationist attitude.

New buildings on the Roman Fisher Farm - just west of Gumboro on the edge of the swamp and a more recent acquisition by Delaware Wildlands - show an addition of sustainability to the conservation approach. According to Peter Martin, who directs Delaware Wildlands operations in Kent and Sussex counties, a gathering building and guesthouse have been constructed largely with loblolly timber selectively harvested from the swamp.

"We realized we were losing a lot of valuable timber in the swamp as it reached maturity and fell. With the assistance of sustainable forestry practices, we have been able to identify areas of mature timber that we could take - before it was lost to nature - and use for our own purposes as well as sell to generate the funding necessary to manage a tract as large as the Great Cypress Swamp. We haven't built a single building until we had the money in hand. It's that kind of approach that will allow us to keep doing the important conservation work we're about."

In many areas where pines are being harvested, new cypress trees are being planted, and, in the edges of the swamp - like behind the Roman Fisher Farm - 50-year-old cypress trees are thriving because of the conservation spirit and vision of the people involved with Delaware Wildlands.