

The Merriam Farm Conservation Area Grand Opening

This story begins in 1719 when a trail ran through here, connecting Chelmsford to Londonderry through uninhabited wilderness. A manned Block House was built for the protection of travelers near the Cutter / Merriam farm you see up and across the street. This was in the town of Old Dracut in the Massachusetts Bay Colony at the time, and the incorporation of Lowell from a small corner of Chelmsford didn't happen for another hundred years.

The northern boundary of Massachusetts was established by Royal Decree in 1740, and the Town of Pelham was incorporated in 1746 to bring together several communities with contested ownership. During this time there was a Cutter family living in Menotomy, Massachusetts, now known as Arlington. They moved to Hudson, NH around 1770 with their sons Seth and John. Seth fought in several battles of the Revolutionary War, but John was too young. Seth eventually settled in Pelham and became a lawyer and prominent citizen.

Their older brother Richard Cutter Jr. remained in the Boston area and around 1790 purchased 86 acres of land in Pelham from widow Martha Brown of Boston. Richard's wife was a member of the Brown family so there may have been a connection there. John purchased the property from Richard 1792 for 78 pounds, 8 shillings and began clearing the land which would remain in the Cutter family for the next 25 years. He discovered signs that soldiers who manned the old Block House cultivated a garden nearby.

John Cutter, his son Benjamin Franklin Cutter, and grandson Frederick Augustus Cutter constantly improved and expanded the farm, became tree and horticulture experts, and rode a wave of prosperity serving the needs of rapidly growing Lowell in the 1800s. Frederick Augustus died in 1901 and there was no clear heir to carry on the farming operation. Of his three surviving sons, only Ben remained in the area, living next door to here where the farm stand is today. Ben helped his mother Susan run the family farm across the street and operated a milk delivery business.

In the fall of 1916, a fire broke out that destroyed Ben's home and the Hillman carriage shop behind it. You can't tell today but there was a mill pond right next to Mammoth Road right up to the junction of Mammoth and Marsh roads. Ben and his family moved in with his mother Susan for a month and then relocated to Lowell. Susan moved next door with her daughter Clara and husband Harry Jack. Susan had generously provided them with Cutter land to build their house on when they were married just the year before. Local sources say the finish millwork for that house was in the Hillman carriage shop when it burned. The Cutter farm was now vacant.

Susan's Daughter Virginia married Clifton Merriam in 1914 and they were physical education instructors living in Bristol RI at this time. Virginia loved the outdoors and farm life, and convinced Cliff to take over the now vacant Cutter farm. They moved in April 1917, and this began 99 years of Merriam family ownership. Cliff became a dairy farmer, raising cattle, hay, and produce as needed to support the family.

New land was added to the original Cutter farm, and these acquisitions were traditionally named after their previous owners. These included the Gage Lot, the Wyman Field, the Lovett Farm, the Marsh Pasture, and the Barker Meadow. In 1918 Susan Cutter purchased a 110-acre lot on Sherburne Road across from Long Pond from Martina Gage. She was the daughter of Daniel Gage who's family was from Pelham and built an industrial empire harvesting ice and firewood. Martina owned a vast amount of land in many surrounding towns including 10 percent of Pelham, and in 1935 willed all her lands to the towns they were in.

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When Susan died in 1944 the so-called Gage Lot went to her daughter Virginia Frances Merriam who ironically was named in honor of Virginia Frances Gage, a cousin of Martina. Virginia and Cliff Merriam had two children, Frederic, and Martine, and both were strongly influenced by their mother's love of nature and the outdoors. The Gage Lot, Lovett Farm, Marsh Pasture, and Barker Meadow went to son Frederic when Virginia died in 1973, and in 2006 the Gage Lot was dedicated as the Frederic Cutter Merriam Conservation Area.

The original Cutter farm and Wyman Field went to daughter Martine in 1973 and was later divided among her children. Martine's daughter Ellen and husband Duane Nadeau inherited a 37-acre portion of the original Cutter farm along with the Wyman Field, and in 2008 the Martine Merriam Bannister Conservation Area was dedicated. Another 25-acre parcel located in between these two conservation areas was acquired by the Conservation Commission from the estate of Charles Jack. You know the combined 172 acres of conservation land as Cutter Woods, with a parking area off Sherburne Road and miles of hiking trails.

In 1922 Charles Lovett lived in the house you see next door. He subdivided a lot of about 4 acres for his home and sold the remaining 39 acres and a barn to Cliff Merriam. The barn was originally built for dairy cows, horses, and carriages, but wasn't used for decades. Cliff only used it for storage of hay and farm implements. In 1941 Cliff purchased an adjacent 4-acre pasture from heirs of the Marsh family, located behind today's farm stand, bringing the total up to about 44 acres.

Cliff died while clearing brush on this land in 1962, and farmer Charlie Zolkos helped Virginia keep the fields mowed until around 1973. Cliff's son Frederic Cutter Merriam inherited the Lovett Farm and Marsh Pasture in 1973, and the Nietupski family next door began raising corn on a large scale plus a few smaller crops. In 2010 my wife Carol and I with a different middle name (Frederic Sanborn Merriam) inherited this land and called it our "Back 40."

When Paul Gagnon on the Pelham Conservation Commission approached us in 2016 about acquiring the property for conservation purposes it was an easy decision. Coming up with a name for the area was also a no-brainer. It's been exactly 100 years since dairy farmer Cliff Merriam brought this property into the family where it remained for the duration. I played, worked, hiked, and enjoyed the wonders of nature on this land for 77 years, and now it is time to pass the pleasure along to future generations of hikers, runners, mountain bikers, horseback riders, geocachers, bird watchers, snow shoers, cross country skiers, snowmobilers, and dog walkers.

Frederic Sanborn Merriam
October 16, 2022