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**Sent:** Wednesday, May 29, 2019 6:22 PM  
**Subject:** Hermitage Natural Area

A Progress Report - - and plea for volunteer help in weeding.

To the 80 or so people who have volunteered their time to help design, create, visit, implement and maintain the Hermitage Natural Area and it's native wildflower and grass meadow (or said they'd like to), and the Trustees of New Castle Common who own the property and agreed to pay the contractors:

take a look at the changes!

Since 2016 we've cleared invasive plants and vines, planted seeds from 60+ native species, created trails for walkers/dog walkers/birders/runners and Carrie Downie school students, created 3 outdoor classrooms for the two adjacent schools and added 5 more acres to the property.

Before and after: In October 2016 we removed 50 ft of weeds near the camera and opened a path to the marsh.



Now vines are gone and the area at the bottom of the hill on the left is filling with tall grasses and wildflowers. The area on the right with shorter grasses and flowers is less filled and is a target for invasives



If you're able to help for 1/2 to 1 hour to pull mile-a-minute weeds at 10 A.M. on one or more of the following days it would be very helpful:  
Sunday June 9, 16, 23  
Saturday June 22

We pulled these weeds in the area near the 'outdoor classroom' last year before they dropped ripe seeds. It worked. There were almost none of these plants there this year. Let me know if you may be able to work, or just look around if you don't want to weed.

#### PROGRESS/FAILURES =====

The gradually expanding vision for the project was:

- Trails for walking/birding in a natural setting — DONE
- Some birdwatchers do use the area, for example during the Christmas bird count.
- Build a viewing platform for birding and observation of the marsh — ON HOLD due to vandalism. See below
- Clear the area below the parking lot to create a meadow that could be maintained by mowing yearly or 1/2 part per year — DONE
- Replace alien plants in the meadow with natives believing that "native plants attract native bugs which attract native birds" — DONE
- Plant flowers that are pollinators or known hosts to desirable bugs and butterflies — DONE
- Clip tree-killing vines, then pull them off trees after some months or a year or two — DONE near the meadow, not started in other areas
- Kill invasive oriental honeysuckle bushes; DONE in forested area near meadow
- Plant understory native trees (winterberry holly, hornbeam, witch hazel, redbud ...) very slight success, see below
- Acquire adjacent DiMondi property which had plans for 10 houses. DONE

Removed invasive bushes in the forested area. SHOULD START.

Plants in the former DiMondi property next to the school needs to be addressed. Only the northernmost third has been cleared. Beat back the invasive plants which show up each year to let the natives take over. This remains a problem— ON GOING Planting of desirable plants should continue.

Mother nature may/will bring surprises, but the meadow portion of the project is approaching the maintenance phase.

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When the project began with a suggestion in 2016 by then Trustee Dorsey Fiske to create hiking trails, the area adjacent to the parking lot was an impenetrable mix of 8' high Japanese knotwood, briars, multiflora rose, oriental honeysuckle bushes and vines. The parking lot is adjacent to the green push pin on the right of the picture, at the end of the fire lane next to the school. Creating the trails was the easiest part of the project.



Volunteers helped in the vine removal. Then with the realization of how beautiful the area was came the idea of turning part of it into a wildflower/glass meadow inspired by Longwood's meadow garden. Planning, plant selection and plant ID help came from Tom, Greg, Doug, Russ, Lenny, Karen, Jim W, Sue, Anna, Kate, Madeline, and Travis. Jim M did wetlands delineation, George & crew placed the information sign, Barry and Desiree offered bug ID, Christopher, Selden, Lena and Ted provided first person recollections of the Hermitage mansion before its destruction, and many people provided weeding, planting or chainsaw help, including: Alice, Bill, Bruce, Carol, Cathy, Chuck, Dawn, Donna, Dorsey, Ed, Ed, Gail, Janet, Ken, Laurie, Lois, Mitch, Pam, Phee, Rita, Susan, and Suzanne.

There have been success and failures and some vandalism problems

#### SUCSESSES

These include setting up the OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS at Carrie Downie which the kids are now using 5-6 times weekly for varied purposes: classes, reading, core curriculum use (looking at bugs & leaves) and running in the after-school boys and girls run clubs for 4th and 5th graders. The logs used in the classrooms were from the Hermitage property

or provided and delivered by MSC.



The outdoor classroom set up for the New Castle Elementary (former William Penn High school) has yet to be used, but the principal is interested in discussing it.



INVASIVE REMOVAL was initially by bushhogging/mowing/'forestry cutter'/downed tree removal. Contract work was done by Tree Inc., Antonio Landscaping and SOLitude Lake Management. Subsequent invasive work was done by volunteers and Red Tail Restoration,

Two very useful techniques for killing bush honeysuckle are: 1) yanking up the young plants by the roots in winter when the ground is moist, or 2) drilling holes in larger bushes and squirting gelled Roundup in the hole. As a result, there is no spread of herbicide to surrounding plants. Thanks Jim W ! (The picture is of drilling the alien version of devil's walking stick).





**PLANTING:** At Kate's suggestion, I ordered seed for 60+ species of grasses, flowers and understory trees from Ernst Conservation Seeds in Pennsylvania. The good news is that seed from more than half of the species have germinated and more are still coming. For example, columbine and golden alexanders came up the first time this spring. Redbud seeds from the Read House gardens did germinate after 3 month refrigerator storage and are now 1-3' tall! I am planting them where I have killed oriental honeysuckle bush. (See below)





Many of the flower and tree seeds did not germinate, or if planted in trays did not survive transplanting. For example volunteers last fall planted winterberry, hornbeam, spicebush, dogwood and witch hazel seeds in the area where the understory had been grazed by deer. Few if any seedlings came up. Nor did they germinate in trays after pretreatment by storage under cold moist conditions for 2 months. A higher success rate has been with 'live stakes' by rooting clippings of pussy willow and osier dogwoods during spring pruning (Thanks Sandy and Jeff).



**VANDALISM.** A simple wooden footbridge installed the first year was apparently an insult to some ATV users who sawed the bridge into pieces and first hid, then carried them away. Replacing the bridge with concrete stepping stones provides a workable alternative that has so far remained in place. However it makes it questionable whether it is worth spending \$20-30,000 on a bird watching platform near the marsh as we had proposed if it could be easily damaged. Are we willing to catch and prosecute the vandals?



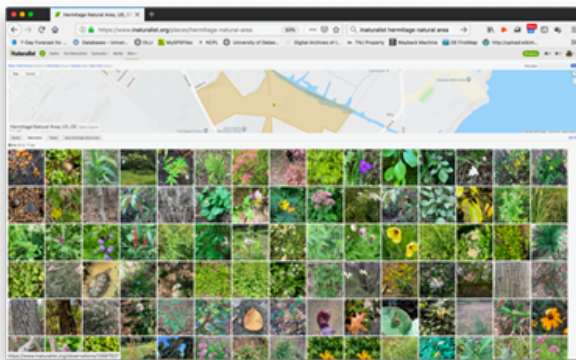
Before and after vandals sawed and removed the plank bridge.

## PROPERTY ACQUISITION

The 4.74 acre DiMondi parcel (shown in blue) was purchased in November 2017 to keep open a space contiguous to the property we own, and prevent it from being developed into a 10 home subdivision. The top third has been partially cleared. The bottom part is nearly impenetrable; trees in it are dead or being damaged by vines. Clearing should be done carefully. A small section in the northern part had native dogwood (osier?), elderberry, American holly and sassafras trees that would have been lost by clear cutting.



The area has many species of plants and bugs. A useful way to learn to identify both and know where they are (or were) is iNaturalist. (Thanks Greg M.) To date about a hundred species of plants, bugs and animals have been identified, mostly in the meadow area. The observations are visible online as the named area “Hermitage Natural Area” at <https://www.inaturalist.org/places/hermitage-natural-area> Click on ‘observations’, then chose to display a grid or a list or a map.





HISTORY: The Hermitage was a tenant farm from the 1700's to the 1950's Christopher Schroeder wrote a paper at UD in 1991 on the building with information of one of the owners (Nicholas Van Dyke). Amazingly, Schroeder still had the paper and accompanying photographs. [http://nc-chap.org/resources/schroeder\\_hermitage.pdf](http://nc-chap.org/resources/schroeder_hermitage.pdf) The last owner of the property, Lena Deemer, bought it in the 1950's, and it was their furnishings that were in the photographs in Schroeder's paper. She says it was her favorite house. She recalls a swimming pool behind the buildings that connected the house, ice house and stone barn. Her son Selden still has vivid memories of the place.



The house in 1991 with the ice house to the left. Now, only the ice house remains.







The Megginson family lived in it and operated it as a farm from the 1920's through the 1940's. Ted Megginson's recollections tell about the barns and chicken houses, apple orchard, pig, and pheasant pens, pasture, wheat fields, a pond not now existing which was a source of the ice stored in the ice house, visits to the privy which may have been at what now looks like a sinkhole, and hunting ducks on the marsh for twice weekly duck dinners! Look at an oral history interview:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dcnli3D33M8>



He recalls when the circus came to town the horses and elephants would be kept in the 'pastureage' area between the house and the railroad and they would drink from the horse trough between the stone barn and the "granary.

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One of the pleasures of walking at the Hermitage is seeing the volunteer plants which show up. My favorite this year is “Blue Eyed Grass” which appeared in many spots at the bottom of the meadow. Here is one patch with a little mile-a-minute at the back.

