

The Story of The Lakefront Property

On October 20th, 2011 at 3:58 pm, St. Aidan's rector, Susan McGarry, and vestry

member, James Barber, recorded a quitclaim deed signed over from the Elizabeth Rees Trust to St. Aidan's Episcopal Church. The deed gave ownership of 10.14 acres of lake front property in Washtenaw County (Bridgewater Township) to St Aidan's Episcopal Church. With a small amount of driveway and parking space renovation, the purchase of a port-a-john, the removal of several trees at the entrance for safety and the removal of two unsafe derelict structures, the land will become useful for day use prayer and nature spirituality retreats as well as environmental education.

St. Aidan's will have the privilege of using this pristine property for spirituality and the responsibility for protecting and preserving its fragile lakeside and wetland environment. This responsibility will be shared with the Legacy Land Conservancy (LLC), a local conservation land trust to whom Betty gave a conservation easement prior to donating the property to St. Aidan's.

Representatives of St. Aidan's were involved in negotiating future building and use permissions with LLC before their contract with Betty was finalized. LLC, through their director, Susan Lackey, and their board, expressed a desire to work with a religious organization in land conservation hoping that our successful relationship would provide a model for other religious organizations that might also engage in conservation and environmental protection projects.

St. Aidan's with Northside already has some experience in caring for environmentally sensitive land. We have been doing that on our wooded slopes on Broadway for decades. The needs of the lakeside property are different than the Broadway property. According to our designer, Craig Terrell of Land Architects, we have six diverse ecosystems on this small ten-acre plot. Three of them are wet-land systems. In addition, there are examples of lakeside and upland slope habitats. The trees range from old oak groves and shagbark hickory to swamp oaks and willows. We have identified 50 species of plants and trees, some of them quite rare.

On Broadway, we are working to make our woods healthier in an eco-system restoration after extensive disturbance that began early in the 19th century through logging and farming. The lakeside land needs conservation more than restoration. Though Betty and her former late spouse built a house there, they did it with the intention of disturbing the land as little as possible. They even hand dug the basement so they wouldn't have to bring in large equipment and trucks. Theirs was the first permanent residence on the property. They never established a lakeside lawn. Instead they accessed the lake by trails. As a result, most of the property remains undisturbed. The house burned down in 1982 and was not rebuilt. There are a few patches of nonnative flowers planted in their flower gardens that still come up each spring, but the kind of invasive species eradication we practice on Broadway will not be necessary there.

The planned driveway improvement is actually on an existing driveway that is more than 60 years old. This driveway serviced a temporary campsite that belonged to a neighbor before Betty and her husband purchased it. The driveway is stable yet needs improvement so it can accommodate a small amount of parking, can be safely accessed from the rural road that is adjacent to the land, and so it could provide access to an emergency vehicle should someone have an accident on the land. Most of this startup work will need to be done by professionals so it represents a financial expense rather than a physical commitment on our part. The yearly maintenance of the land will be minimal after the initial set-up. We anticipate some trail clearing to make more of the property accessible to nature enthusiasts, but these will be

modest. The lakeside is beautiful and though there is no dock, light portable boats, canoes, or kayaks can be launched from the shore. Betty's old sailboat is still parked on the land.

There is a backstory for this venture. Betty approached a few members of the congregation at a parish dinner in the Fall of 2008 with descriptions of her land. Most of us had never heard about it before. In the Spring of 2009, after a Wednesday Bible study, several of us visited the land with her. Later that summer, she indicated to me that she would like to leave the land to St. Aidan's with the understanding that we would conserve it. I encouraged her to engage in a process with St. Aidan's vestry to explore the possibility of taking the land. It is customary for most churches to immediately sell real property when it is donated to them unless it is adjacent to the church property. Thus began an extended process of exploration. Betty approached the vestry early in 2010 with the proposal that St. Aidan's receive this land. The vestry appointed a task force to study the possibilities for ministry on the land and the responsibility it would represent.

After the task force examined the land and approached the township to see if there was a process to determine if we could get a special use permit for church use, they recommended we accept the land. The taskforce listed these possibilities for its use: Services in a natural chapel, Peaceful reflection, Fellowship, Retreats, Religious education, Nature education, Environmental service, and Recreation.

The vestry weighed whether this expanded environmental ministry would enhance our ministry or whether it represented too much responsibility for our small congregation. In March of 2010 they voted to sign a gift contract with Betty with a number of contingencies. These included getting the church use permit, and permission from the bishop and the Standing Committee of the diocese. There were many steps along the way including the design plans required for meeting the safety needs of the township. The township required us to wait for the conservation easement to be completed before our permit would be considered. Though we made our formal application in November of 2010, we did not receive the special use permit until May 2011. Junior Warden Sue Pfoutz and I made a presentation to the standing committee in May and in June both the bishop and standing committee gave their consent. It took until Mid-October for the diocesan lawyer to finally give her approval.

In addition to the land task force, a number of St. Aidanites, including our two naturalists, Stephen Uche and Ed Trager, have visited the land and expressed enthusiasm for its beauty, environmental value, and potential for ministry.

This potential is now ours to develop. If you would like to contribute to the start-up development of this project, please make your donations to St. Aidan's marked, "Lakeside land development."

Respectfully Submitted, Susan McGarry, rector, St. Aidan's