

Walk

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Trust member Reed Stewart handled the human history. "There's nothing that's pristine around here," he said. Stewart, whose family donated the land in the early 1970s, said that after taking down trees for fuel, building material and for clearing land, the forest shrunk to its nadir around 1840. Whereas Massachusetts was 70 percent clear then, today it's 70 percent forested again.

Mill Gate, Stewart said, was an industrial area in the late 1700s. All the nearby ponds — Bryant Mill, Russell, Soules, Sylvia Place — are man-made, part of an extensive hydraulic engineering system built to provide and maintain water power for mills. There were tack mills (copper tacks), a saw mill, a shoe factory. Iron ore smelting went on nearby, using bog iron, a natural product formed by water and algae action, and charcoal from local hardwoods for fuel. In addition to the ponds, there is a series of flumes — manmade channels — connecting water bodies to one another and providing a steady flow for mill wheels. When the ponds froze in the winter, they were cut for the ice industry.

Sylvia Place Pond was excavated as a reservoir to keep the water level high enough in the millponds. It's divided from Bryant Mill Pond by a long, solid, earthen dike — the reservoir is deep while the millpond is shallow — over which Sunday's party hiked.

Dyer and Stewart guided a party of about 25 people, with an age range of about 80 years, into the woods. The hike was billed as a family event, stressing both natural and human history, but the only children were brought by us. This was unfortunate since Dyer was clearly prepared for youngsters and equipped with a child-sized

layer of air. The fish and tiny animals stay in the low, unfrozen water or burrow in the mud to survive the winters. The pond isn't deep; you could walk across it.

In the woods the party saw white pines, yellow birches (the bark has a minty smell), red maples, and Chinese chestnut, whose fruit is covered with the most forbiddingly spiked casing imaginable. Anyone who puts these nuts to roast in the fire has worked for the privilege.

The reddish, coppery stain of the bog iron in the swampy land around the ponds is unnatural in appearance (it looks like somebody poured oil on the mud) but natural in composition, producing a low grade ore. Stone culverts, built like stone walls below ground level, empty now, once carried water to the mills. Some of the flumes are now fish ladders, built by the WPA in the 1930s, for the herking to make their way to the Jones River.

Dyer also pointed out seasonal forest plants: winter green, flowering arbutus (or Mayflower, the state flower), red barberry, partridge berry. Also noted were erratic boulders, a sign of the area's glacial geology, along with a low hill or kame; signs of animal life, a skunk's digging by the roots of a tree, empty nests high up in the white pines; the formation of soil from weathered rock, lichen, followed by moss, and pockets of dirt.

Princess pine, an ancient plant that descends from the times of the dinosaurs, covers the forest floor about six inches high. Later that day the kindergartner in the party would fantasize that at night the fern trees grew large again and summoned back the dinosaurs.

While for casual hikers Stewart Preserve made for an interesting afternoon's walk, for the trust it poses the question of how to manage conservation


Wilder times in Mill Gate

By Robert Knox
MPG Newspapers

In the 18th century settlers dug millponds and altered water-courses to power the mills of an area known as Mill Gate. By the 19th century, the land had been almost totally deforested.

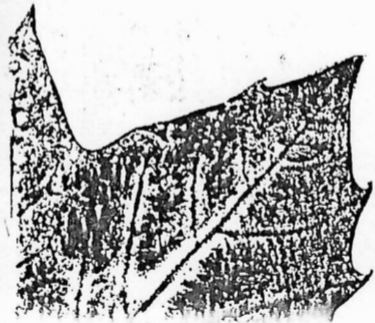
Today trees have grown up on a 13-acre site now called the Stewart Preserve off Elm Street in Kingston, and the old millponds have become home for aquatic life — from animals to algae. Shrubs that like wet ground (sweet pepper bush, high bush blueberry, speckled alder) grow along their shores, and on a mild fall afternoon "puddle ducks" swim on the surface, looking for food, while a great blue heron perches on a bank.

Plymouth County Wildlands Trust, a land preservation corporation with holdings throughout the county, invited the public on a guided walk around the ponds and through the wooded acres of the preserve Sunday afternoon. Naturalist Don Dyer of Cape Outdoor Discovery, which provides environmental education, invited participants young and old to scoop



participants young and old used dip nets at the bottom of shallow Bryant Mill Pond with dip nets and identified the tiny creatures that ran for daylight when dropped into a clear water basin.

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dip net.

With the weather turning cold — theoretically at least; Sunday was mostly room temperature outdoors, with a breeze coming up late in the afternoon — Dyer said that life slows down on land. “So in the water is where the action is right now,” he said. Some of the action, scooped up, swam like the dickens when it was dropped in the clear water basin: crustaceans mostly, Dyer said, amphipods, isopods, tiny snails, tinier leeches; and some insects, a damsel fly nymph, and sturdy “water boatmen” who wrap their bodies in a shiny

of how to manage conservation land that isn't pristine. The forest has changed considerably since the centuries before the Europeans, Stewart noted, and it will continue to change even if man does nothing to it. Should the trust do nothing and keep it “natural?” But what, at this point, is natural?

“Natural is the way it was when I was a kid,” Stewart said wryly.

Plymouth County Wildlands Trust holds guided walks on its properties about once a month. Next month's walk will be through West Shore Preserve in Plymouth.