

Take a Hike!

Old Lyme Open Space Commission

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http://www.oldlyme-ct.gov/Pages/OldLymeCT_Bcomm/open_space

A walk in the woods, within Old Lyme's Open Space, is good for one's muscles, blood pressure, and natural curiosity. The landscape is full of life, both above and below ground, and holds hints about past uses of the land going back hundreds of years. Learning to spot these clues enables us to "read" the landscape and make our walks into the forests and fields more enjoyable.

We live in a very different landscape from the Paleo-Indians of 8,000 years ago. Wolves, bison, caribou and woolly mammoths are no longer with us in Connecticut, and many of the plants and insects we see today are from all parts of the world, brought here by ships, planes and even in shoes and clothing. Even the soil has changed as primeval forests were cleared and animals grazed in pastures on glaciated hills.

Take a Hike on these town open space properties ...

Champlain Farm South, 204 acres, located at the end of Meetinghouse Lane.

Look carefully, and you will see evidence of past human use. Under the now leafy canopy of deciduous trees, you can see the remnants of a pastoral landscape.

Walking along the trails of Champlain Farm South, see the skeletons of long-dead Juniper (Red Cedar) trees that sprang up in sheep pastures in the early 1800's. At that time, there were over 1.5 million sheep grazing Connecticut's hillsides. Since the sheep didn't care to eat these young cedars, they eventually filled the landscape. After the Civil War, the wool market declined and farmers moved west, leaving the local hills to revert to forest. Stone walls that held in livestock and marked boundaries now meander through the woods as markers of times past. The new forest overtopped the cedars, depriving them of the light they needed to survive, and they slowly died, leaving the skeletons we see today along these trails.

Another Champlain Farm South point of interest is the old roadway traveling along the ridge from the end of Meeting House Hill north toward I-95. Look carefully at sections of the road where it crosses exposed bedrock and you may be able to discover the tracks of old iron-wheeled carts that traversed the farms of the 17th & 18th centuries. They may have been carrying farm families to the church on Meeting House Hill near where the Old Lyme Country Club stands today!

Please be careful hiking in the preserve, as there are a few steep spots that may be slippery when wet.

Champlain Farm North, 65 acres, just north of the Old Lyme Inn, by way of Wyckford Road.

You'll find a typically rolling New England landscape here, sculpted by colliding continents hundreds of millions of years ago, and polished by glaciers over tens of thousands of years.

A short walk into the preserve will bring you to the Barbizon Oak. While you marvel at its age, consider that a mile of ice once stood where you stand today. At over sixteen feet in circumference, the 300 year old Barbizon is one of Connecticut's largest oaks and was named in honor of the Old Lyme art colony, created in the late 19th century as an American equivalent to the French Barbizon School of painting. Many of its artists worked *en plein air* across Rte. 1 on Florence Griswold's land.

The moving ice of the last (Wisconsin) glaciation transported hundreds of millions of tons of rock, sand, silt and clay across this land, smoothing some places and plucking stone from the bedrock in others to fill valleys where streams and rivers continue to sculpt the landscape today.

Try to imagine the site 10 to 12 thousand years ago as the glacier receded. Cold, howling wind whipped across a landscape almost devoid of trees except dwarf willows, nibbled by Caribou or perhaps Musk Ox. Maybe a small band of Paleolithic hunters camped here on their way to the shore, which lay a hundred miles to the south, to fish and trap for warm furs.

When Europeans arrived, they fell back on traditional practices from across the Atlantic: clearing the forest ("the howling wilderness") for pasture and crops, and building hundreds of thousands of miles of stone fences to establish land boundaries. The deforestation was so widespread and complete that only about 20 percent of New England remained wooded by the early 1800's at the start of the Industrial Revolution. Then the westward migration began, and much of the land was abandoned, reverting to forest again.

The preserve's main trail (red) was recently renamed to honor Diana Atwood Johnson. Ms. Johnson was a naturalist and a dynamic advocate for open space in her beloved Old Lyme, in Connecticut, and nationally. She served as Chair of the Old Lyme Open Space Commission for nearly 20 years, and most of the town's roughly 600 acres of open space has been described as having "her signature on it."

The geological and natural processes and human impact described above apply, as well, to these other Old Lyme Open Space properties:

[Ames Family Preserve](#), 195 acres, best current access at the end of Evergreen Trail (off of Boggy Hole Road). The Whippoorwill Road is flooded because of beaver activity.

[Bartholomew Open Space](#), 105 acres, located just north of the railroad overpass on Buttonball Road. Easy walking loop trail takes about twenty minutes. Parking for two or three cars is available at the trail entrance.

A tiny parcel called [Lords Wood B](#) provides access to the 185 acre Old Lyme Land Trust Lay Property. Two parking places are located on the right side of Lord's Meadow Lane in a designated graveled lot.

The Town of Old Lyme Open Space Commission, along with the Old Lyme Land Trust, is working hard to protect our vital open lands. These forest, fields and wetlands provide connecting corridors of green for recreation, habitat for wildlife, fresh air, clean water filtered by the soil and roots of trees, and a legacy for future generations.