

St Mary Monastery and the St Scholastica Priory Critical Link Conserved in Petersham

When the East Quabbin Land Trust and the Religious Lands Conservancy first visited the St. Mary and St Scholastica communities in 2007, the residents had never considered conserving their land. The members of the St Mary Monastery and the St Scholastica Priory, who share this land, have been living a simple, contemplative life surrounded by the beauty of their 200 acres of field and forest in northern Petersham since 1985. The Benedictine traditions of the communities place great value on the solitude, quiet and peace of this natural setting with its abundant plant and animal life—values shared by those hoping to conserve the property.

For the Town of Petersham and the East Quabbin Land Trust, this wooded property is a critical link that will enhance recreation and wildlife corridors in Petersham. “This is the last link needed to connect the biologically rich Tom Swamp area through mature forests to the tower lookout at Prospect Hill and other parcels owned by Harvard Forest,” said Bob Clark, Chair of the Conservation Commission and Open Space and Recreation Committee.

Motivated by their love for this place—so conducive to finding the loving God who created all of this beauty—the St. Mary and St. Scholastica communities began working with the East Quabbin Land Trust to craft a conservation restriction to protect their property from future development. Signed in June of 2010, the conservation restriction partners the Town of Petersham and the East Quabbin Land Trust with the two Benedictine communities in permanently protecting 155 acres of the property. The sale of the conservation restriction will provide the St. Mary and St. Scholastica communities with much-needed support for continuing their monastic way of life.

“Psalm 148 is part of the prayer sung every morning by our community and reflects the attitude of Benedictine monks and nuns towards their monastery property.” Said Sister Mary Frances Wynn. “All creation praises God. Created things reveal the beauty and goodness of their Creator; they are entrusted to us by God to preserve and reverence. In a very real sense Benedictines don’t “own” their land, they are stewards: custodians and guardians of the household of God.”



The property gently slopes to the west from North Main Street in Petersham, perfect for walking trails through the woodland. Near the road are several wetland areas, and intermittent brooks take water from snow melt or heavy rains down towards Nelson Brook, just to the north of the property boundary. Maintaining clean water flow is critical to the health of Nelson Brook, a cold-water stream that supports native fish populations.

The East Quabbin Land Trust was pleased to be part of this conservation success. “This is a clear example of how a local land trust can be responsive to the communities it serves and advance land conservation”, stated Stan White, EQLT Board President. “The East Quabbin

Land Trust recognized the great importance of this property and spearheaded the transaction negotiations and fundraising.”

Funding of this initiative was done via a “sale” of the conservation restriction. The St. Mary and St. Scholastica communities offered the conservation restriction at a bargain price, donated funds from their own coffers, and were very active in the fundraising to gather the amount needed. Funding of this sale was completed by donations from the Benedictine communities’ supporters, and by the generous support of over two dozen individuals, the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership, the Fields Pond Foundation, the William P. Wharton Trust, the George H. and Jane A. Mifflin Memorial Fund, the Landmarks Foundation, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity grant program.