

Ready for Spring

Get Outside—Our Local Nature Preserves Are Waiting

by Monica McQuail, Willistown Conservation Trust Communications Specialist

Photos by Jennifer Mathes and Mary Hundt

As the air warms and the days grow longer, there is no better time to get off the couch and into the woods. Not only does getting outside offer a myriad of health benefits — including reducing blood pressure, improving mood, strengthening focus and increasing immunity — but it also invites us to observe the birds, insects and plant life that contribute to nature's beauty. And here in Chester County, we are lucky to have all sorts of parks and nature preserves to explore close to home, thanks largely to the many land trusts and parks and recreation departments dedicated to conserving open space.

This summer, consider participating in "GO WilMal!", a free summer adventure program spearheaded by the Willistown Parks & Recreation Department that stands for "Get Outside 'round Willistown and Malvern. You can register your child(ren) at Malvern or Paoli Libraries where you'll receive your field guide, and then you're ready to solve clues that will lead you to special stations along trails and parks in our area (some of which you'll find below), with the chance to win prizes. Visit www.willistown.pa.us for more information.

Ashbridge Preserve | Ashbridge Preserve is a 55-acre mix of early and mid-successional woodland, with old fields and open wet meadows. It contains the main stem of Ridley Creek, a small tributary, and associated wetlands and floodplains. This preserve is owned and

cared for by Willistown Conservation Trust, and is the center of many volunteer activities and water quality research. 1691 East Strasburg Rd., West Chester

East Whiteland Ecology Park | Designed as a passive recreational facility, Ecology Park exhibits various ecosystems that exist along a stream corridor. A 4-foot wide, stone dust pathway system meanders through existing woodlands and a wildflower meadow near Route 401 (Conestoga Road). A wooden boardwalk offers an elevated view of the park's surrounding wetland habitat. 206 Conestoga Rd., Frazer

Kirkwood Preserve | The majority of the 83-acre Kirkwood Preserve is grassland, which serves as an important haven for birds and other wildlife. The preserve also contains pedestrian and equestrian trails, a half-mile stretch of the Crum Creek, approximately 21 acres of wet areas, and 1.5 acres of upland and riparian woodland. Under the Willistown Conservation Trust's ownership and management, Kirkwood Preserve provides excellent habitat for a great number of species and the opportunity for people to enjoy an exquisite landscape in its natural state.

Recognized by Audubon Pennsylvania Area as an Important Bird Area (IBA), Kirkwood Preserve provides important habitat and resting areas for birds. Protected from development forever, nurtured by good land management practices, and blessed by a diversity of habitat and existing populations of rare, threatened and declining birds, Kirkwood Preserve is a treasure for many future generations to enjoy. 855 Grubbs Mill Rd., Newtown Square

Okehocking Preserve | Owned by Willistown Township, Okehocking Preserve is a 180-acre nature preserve with over five miles of trails, rolling hills, woodland and stream. Willistown Conservation Trust partnered with Willistown Township to secure the funding and permanent preservation of

this Willistown jewel.

Okehocking Preserve constitutes 155 acres of the 500-acre land grant from William Penn to the Okehocking band of the Lenni Lenape Indians, the first Native American land grant in the American colonies. Because of the constant fear of being removed from their grounds, the Okehockings petitioned the Provincial Council for a secure tract of land where they would no longer be mistreated. The Okehocking people were part of the Unami Clan, or Down River People, of the Lenni Lenape Tribe. Read more in the book, "The Down River People," written about the Okehocking and Lenni Lenape life in this area. 5316 West Chester Pike, Newtown Square

Randolph Woods & Duffryn Trail | Randolph Woods is a large passive recreation area owned by the Malvern Borough that features Duffryn Trail, owned by Willistown Township. The

wooded areas of this area contain numerous 'primitive trails' — unpaved packed — earth surfaces. These trails are well suited to walkers and hikers. Ruthland Ave., & Duffryn Trail, Malvern

Rushton Woods Preserve | The center of Willistown Conservation Trust's Community Farm and Bird Conservation Program, Rushton Woods Preserve is an 86-acre treasure with mature woodland, open meadows, a creek and Rushton Farm. It was first conserved in 1986 by Elizabeth and William Van Alen when conservation easements were fairly new to the Chester County area, and later conserved piecemeal before the property was fully purchased by Willistown Conservation Trust. Audubon Pennsylvania identified the Rushton Woods as a prime stop-over and nesting habitat for many migratory songbirds. 911 Delchester Rd., Newtown Square



Ashbridge Ridley Creek

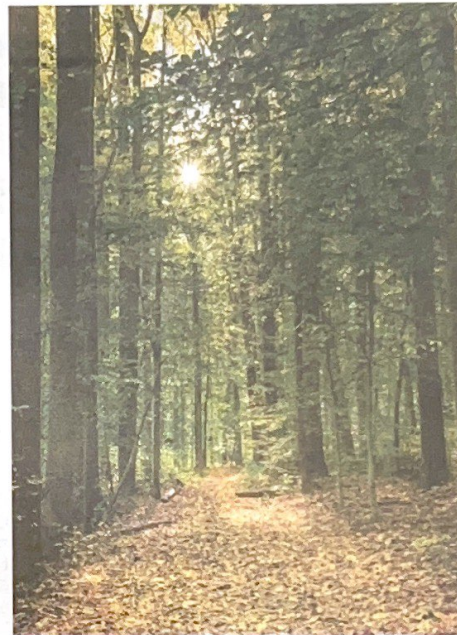
Serpentine Preserve | Serpentine Preserve includes 49.1 acres of woodland and meadows. Serpentine Preserve is so named because of the ecologically significant Serpentine Barrens located there. It is also an important buffer and open space addition to the 126 acre Natural Lands' Willisbrook Preserve. 143 Line Rd., Malvern

Willisbrook Preserve | The 126-acre Willisbrook Preserve, owned by Natural Lands, includes over 20 acres of the Willistown Serpentine Barrens, a rare ecosystem unique to this area. These barrens support a diverse variety of plants, including serpentine aster, round-leafed fame flower, and warm-season grasses. Read more. 143 Line Rd., Malvern

Looking to get outside and give back? For volunteer opportunities, Willistown Conservation Trust

invites you to join them for their Stewardship Volunteer Day, which is held every Thursday from 9 am to 12 pm at one of our three Nature Preserves.

About Willistown Conservation Trust: Found 20 miles west of Philadelphia, Willistown Conservation Trust focuses on 28,000 acres within the watersheds of Ridley, Crum and Darby Creeks of Chester and Delaware Counties. Since 1996, the Trust has permanently conserved over 7,500 acres, including three nature preserves open to the public: Ashbridge Preserve, Kirkwood Preserve, and Rushton Woods Preserve, which is home to Rushton Conservation Center and Rushton Farm. The Trust offers six nationally renowned programs for public engagement and research: the Bird Conservation, Community Farm, Education and Outreach, Land Protection, Stewardship, and Watershed Protection Programs. www.wctrust.org.



Rushton Fall Hiking sunburst



Okehocking sunset



Okehocking Fall Powwow Field

Land Conservation

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by Erik W. Hetzel, AICP/PP, LEED AP
Director of Land Protection and Public Grants

Willistown Conservation Trust

This article is the first in a series that explains how the Willistown Conservation Trust (WCT) works with willing landowners who voluntarily agree to conserve land for the preservation of natural resources and the rural heritage of our countryside.

As a community we are proud that visitors arriving in the Willistown Conservation Trust's program area for the first time are smitten by the beauty of our countryside. Driving west from Philadelphia through its suburbs, one notices dense suburban neighborhoods dramatically giving way to open meadows, split rail fencing, grazing horses, and Chester County vernacular stone barns and buildings. A similar visual transformation happens traveling east from West Chester. Strip malls and gas stations start to thin out while expanses of grasslands and wooded hillsides begin to appear.

This oasis of rural landscape amidst a burgeoning metropolitan area has not happened by chance. It is the result of many landowners who love the land and have decided to permanently protect it.

The Willistown community and surrounding areas enjoys a land conservation ethic that has developed over the past 40 years. With help from the founders of Willistown Conservation Trust, a few visionary landowners protected their land from development back in the early 1980s. These brave landowners paved the way for numerous others who have since added their land to this reservoir of open space, creating an extraordinary haven for people and wildlife.

The critical mass of protected land in the Willistown area preserves a particularly beautiful and special part of Chester County. The area is rich with gently rolling hills, streams, woodlands, and an agricultural history marked by farmhouses, barns, mills, and pastureland. The undeveloped land in our program area provides refuge for such a diversity of birds that the Audubon Society has designated it as an "Important Bird Area", part of a global

network of places recognized for their outstanding value to bird conservation.

The Trust's program area is comprised of the headwater (upstream) areas of the Chester, Ridley, and Crum Creeks, and encompasses portions of 6 municipalities in Chester and Delaware Counties (including a significant portion of Malvern Borough, where the Trust holds the conservation easement on the Randolph Woods Preserve). Despite the nearly 7,200 acres already protected in our program area, encroaching suburban development still threatens our countryside. The Trust has identified over 4,000 acres of critical lands which remain vulnerable to development. If these lands are not protected, much of what remains of our rural landscape eventually could be transformed by forms of development that threaten to destroy the scenic beauty of the pastoral landscape and the rich ecological resources that make this place so special. The primary tool used to protect land from development in the Trust's program area has been the conservation easement.

A conservation easement is a flexible tool that protects land while leaving it in private ownership. It is a legal and binding agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization (such as the Willistown Conservation Trust). The easement exists in perpetuity, is recorded with the deed to the property, and applies to all future owners. As holder of the easement, Willistown Conservation Trust agrees to see that the restrictions detailed in the easement are upheld in perpetuity.

What Are the Typical Restrictions?

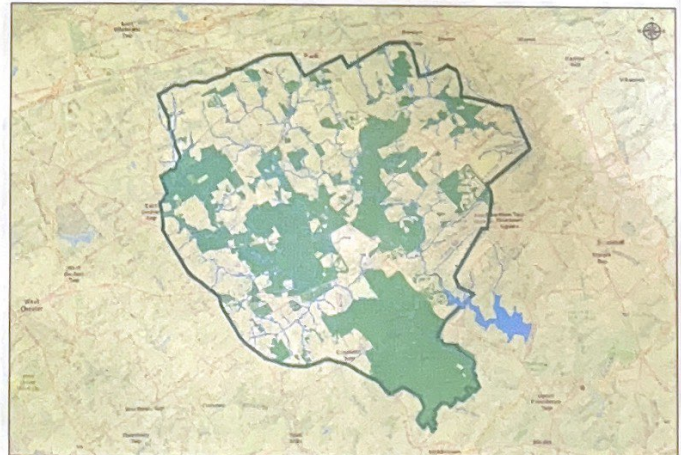
Under the terms of the conservation easement agreement, the landowner agrees to restrict certain future uses of their property. Each easement is uniquely tailored to the specific property and needs of the landowner. Typical restrictions are designed to:

- Protect the special natural, historic, and scenic features of the property such as woodlands, wetlands, streams, open spaces, hillsides, historic buildings, and scenic views.
- Limit the future development of the

What is a Conservation Easement?



Protected Lands 1979



Protected Lands 2022

property. Future building sites may be designated depending on the size of the property and its special features, and the needs of the landowner.

- Prevent harmful activities that could damage sensitive environmental features, such as intense land development, quarrying and excavation, and the dumping of solid or liquid waste.

How do Conservation Easements Benefit the Community?

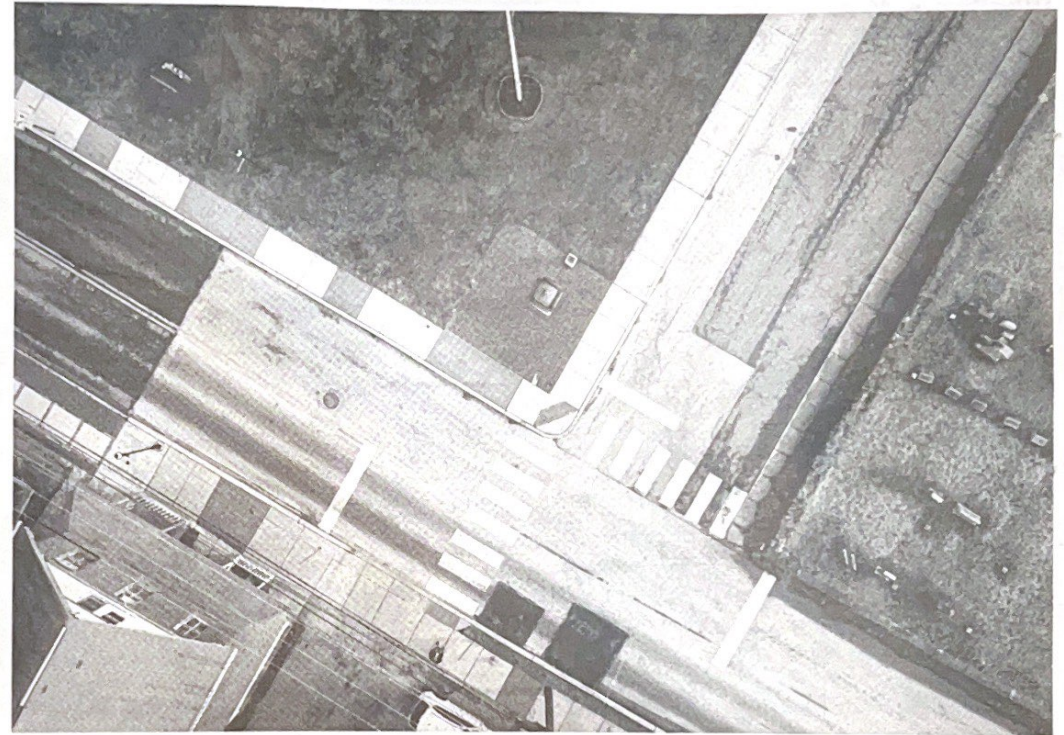
Conservation easements serve to protect our area's important natural and scenic assets – its water resources, wildlife habitats, agricultural lands, open space, historic structures, trails, and scenic views – without the need for appropriating public funds. Lands under conservation easement remain in private ownership and do not require public funds for support and maintenance. Because conservation easements are granted in perpetuity, the community can depend upon eased lands as permanently protected open spaces – a lasting result not possible through zoning or other land use regulations.

How do Conservation Easements Benefit the Landowner?

Landowners who donate conservation easements derive immense satisfaction from knowing that the scenic and natural resources of the land that they have lived on and cared for will be protected for the use and enjoyment of future generations.

Conservation easements often provide families with the opportunity to plan together for the future use of the land, thereby avoiding possible conflict and misunderstanding later.

Neighboring landowners who donate conservation easements on adjacent properties can provide mutual protection against unplanned development and share the benefits of protecting larger



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resource areas such as watersheds, woodlands, and scenic landscapes.

Landowners who donate conservation easements generally are eligible for certain financial benefits through the reduction of federal income, gift, and estate taxes.

In the next issue of The Malvernian, we will explain the easement planning process, and describe how the Trust works with landowners to define and execute conservation vision for their land.

"Editor's Note: Most of the approximately 100 acres of forest at the Malvern Retreat are currently zoned for single family homes arranged in a street grid pattern. The woodlands are not protected from development. DSF"



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