Fox Bluff Conservation Area
Site History

Introduction

The Fox Bluff Conservation Area is located in southeastern McHenry County, Sections 14, 23, 24 & 26, Township 43 North (Algonquin), Range 8 East of the Third Principle Meridian. The northern half of the site is located within the corporate limits of the Village of Cary. The southern half of the site is located within unincorporated McHenry County and is the location of the former Camp Algonquin. The site is bordered by Cary-Algonquin Road to the west, the Fox River and small tract residential subdivisions to the east, Cold Springs Road to the north and small tract residential subdivisions to the south.

Fox Bluff Conservation Area is composed of two separate parcel acquisitions from 1997 and 2004 by the McHenry County Conservation District. The first acquisition in 1997 was acquired through condemnation proceedings. In the mid 90s, a land area of 163 acres along the east side of Cary-Algonquin Road was identified and platted by a private developer for a 325 single unit residential subdivision. Shortly after acquisition in 2003 the District approved a Master Plan for the 163 acre Conservation Area. The Master Plan aimed to strike a balance between offering passive recreational opportunities, such as, hiking, nature observation, and access to the Fox River with development of infrastructure that would support natural resource base educational programming and rental opportunities and the conservation, management, and restoration of significant natural plant communities.

In 2004 the District had the opportunity to submit a sealed bid for acquisition of an additional 116 acres south of the Conservation Area. The property was known as Camp Algonquin, a camp facility that offered various outdoor learning opportunities to an array of individuals and groups. Owned by Metropolitan Family Services, the marketing of the property was targeted at numerous land use groups, including residential developers. Upon successful acquisition of the property, the District in turn agreed to a lease with the McHenry County YMCA for utilization and programming of the camp facilities. The lease with the McHenry County YMCA ended in 2011 with the YMCA of McHenry County declaring bankruptcy.

The purchase of the Camp Algonquin site was a combined effort between the District and the County of McHenry. Collaboratively the two groups were seeking to help the other with identified needs. The District targeting the preservation and protection of natural resources associated with the site and the County recognizing the need to secure a potential transportation corridor option, the groups combined their resources to successfully acquire the property. The County contributed approximately 12% of the purchase price in order to secure a Grant of Easement of Way for a future transportation crossing over the Fox River.

Recognized as the first white settlers of McHenry County, the Gillilan family crossed the Fox River and set-up camp along the west side on November 18, 1834. The Gillilan family was entering a wilderness only 2 years removed from the end of the Blackhawk Wars, yet still belonging to the Indians according to
Federal laws. It wasn’t until 1836 that McHenry County was formed from the entire northern half of Cook County. The newly established County stretched from Lake Michigan west to its current day boundary. In 1839 the land mass of McHenry County was split in half with the eastern portion forming Lake County.

At the time of the Gillilan arrival the family consisted of Samuel (husband), Margaret (wife) and their 8 children. The exact location of their first winter encampment and log home that followed is debated among historians, however, the consensus believes that the encampment and settlement was somewhere within sections 23, 26, or 27 of Algonquin Township. Following their arrival, one of their daughters, Deida died in 1835, becoming the first documented death of a white settler in the County. Deida was buried in the family cemetery, located in the southwest corner of Section 23 on the west side of what would become Cary-Algonquin Road. In 1837 Samuel passed away and was buried in the family cemetery, leaving Margaret as a widow in the wilderness of the newly formed McHenry County.

Margaret would remarry to a gentleman named Thomas Hooper, only to have the marriage result in a divorce shortly after it began. After the divorce Margaret assumed the Gillilan name again, (which was very unheard of at the time) and never attempted to remarry. As a widow, Margaret secured title to 417 acres in Sections 23 and 27 of Algonquin Township where she would live on the family farm until her death in 1890.

Soloman and Elizabeth Hamilton owned the northern quarter of Fox Bluff during the mid to late 1800s. The Hamiltons built a farmstead on the east side of Cary-Algonquin Road in the far northwest corner of the Conservation Area. George and Elizabeth Lowe purchased the property from the Hamiltons and continued to improve the property for farming. By the 1920s the Lowes had begun dividing the property and selling various portions. The riverfront subdivision, Cold Springs, was created as a result of the sales. Another result of the sales was a newly constructed estate home built in the 1930s down the hill from the original farmstead. The large estate house was used as a summer home by the Weinress family. Further south, property was being developed by the John Plain Company in the 1950s. The development included a large home situated next to a stream that was modified to create a series of open pools and ponds, along with additional recreation buildings, pond and parking lot adjacent to the river.

In the 1960s a group of businessmen converted the original farmstead and surrounding property into a ski resort equipped with ski runs, tow ropes, lights, and snow making machines. A Swiss-style chalet was built next to a barn within the farmstead. The chalet contained a ski shop, ski school headquarters, restaurant, and cocktail lounge. The remodeled barn contained a ski rental and repair shop, ski patrol headquarters, changing rooms, and nursery. The ski resort continued to operate until the mid 1970s when it was eventually closed and remodeled into a cozy music venue called Harry Hope’s. Performers of the venue included: Muddy Waters, Steve Goodman, and Mary Travers. The club operated until 1981 when it was eventually moved to Elgin. Prior to the closing of the ski resort, the property continued to expand its recreational opportunities with the establishment of the Fox Trails Country Club. The Club underwent numerous name changes over the years, but basically the programming and activities remained similar. Developed in the 1960s to offer summer activities, the entire northern half
of the conservation area was included as part of the club. The estate house that sat downhill from the original farmstead was converted into a clubhouse. Locker rooms, concession stands, three swimming pools, and two tennis courts were added to the area around the clubhouse. The Country Club offered: swimming, water skiing, tennis, horseback riding, team sports, children activities, and dances. The Club continued to operate into the 1980s before closing.

Tracing its roots back to the 1800s, Camp Algonquin emerged from the Progressive Era as a permanent camp to help treat ill and under privileged women, children, and babies of Chicago. Established on 20 acres located adjacent to the Fox River, the camp was supported by the Chicago Bureau of Charities, Chicago Board of Trade, Chicago Tribune, Oak Park churches, and numerous private donors. The camp was situated within a heavily wooded, hilly landscape that once belonged to Margaret Gillilian and was previously known by Algonquin villagers as a frequent destination for picnicking.

Camp Algonquin began operations immediately after acquisition, housing campers in tents and utilizing the Fox River for washing and bathing, while at the same time developing permanent infrastructure to accommodate the ever growing demands of inner city poverty. Within the first 3 years of operation, the Chicago Tribune had funded and built 3 large buildings (Tribune Buildings 1, 2, 3) situated at the edge of a bluff overlooking the Fox River. Located down the hill from the Tribune buildings and closer to the river, the Chicago Board of Trade Recreation Hall, swimming pool, ice house, Swift cottage, Wells cottage and an isolation hospital were all being constructed during the first few years of the camp. The Oak Park Churches funded and constructed a summer cottage (Oak Park cottage) looking out onto the river that was a great example of what a camp cottage of the time could be.

In 1910, Jens Jensen, the well regarded landscape architect, was hired to produce a plan for the grounds of Camp Algonquin. During a visit to the camp Jensen shared a story as to why so many of the forest trees were bent over towards the river and not in the direction of the prevailing winds. Jensen goes on to say that this is a frequent feature of trees found in the vicinity of Indian camping grounds and comes from the fact that when the trees were saplings they were used by Indian mothers for the swinging of their papooses. A detailed site plan from Jensen dated February 1911 depicts 16 buildings, swimming pool, council ring, vegetable gardens, native landscaping, pedestrian paths / trails, carriage roads, benches and bridges. The Jensen plan is the earliest known drafted map of Camp Algonquin.

In 1921 a 5 acre parcel adjacent to Camp Algonquin was purchased as the new location for Camp Harlowarden. The camp housed children who required additional supervision by nurses and doctors due to severe illnesses or malnutrition. The following year a large building was constructed to house 40 boys and 40 girls including bunk rooms, wash rooms, and living space. In part to overcrowding, 2 additional bunk cottages (Patten 1, 2) were built for Camp Harlowarden in 1927. The boys were moved out of the main dormitory and into the cottages were washrooms were added in 1929 and living space in 1932.

A 1929 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map identifies by name and location nearly 2 dozen buildings within the camp. Over the next half century the camp continued to expand with the addition of numerous cottage and support buildings along with programmed services and activities. In the 1980s the camp received
significant additions to both building needs and land holdings. Improvements included, a new dining hall, camp office, Activities Center, winterization of several buildings, and the addition of 60 acres north of the existing property holdings.

Camp Algonquin exposed children and adults, in many instances for the very first time or at least while only at camp, to activities such as swimming, canoeing, campfires, sing-alongs, and elementary tasks such as chores and scheduling. The most recent focus of Camp Algonquin was, “to enable students to experience transformative education by living and learning together in closeness with the natural environment.” Available curriculums included: environmental studies, team building, and crafts.

In 2002, the McHenry County Conservation District began a Master Plan process for the Fox Bluff Conservation Area (Camp Algonquin had not yet been acquired at this time), and was approved in February 2003. The Master Plan is the result of the cooperation of several groups including the Planning and Development Department, Staff Master Plan Task Force, Public Master Plan Task Force, and the Board of Trustees. Based upon site observations, natural resource data collection and mapping, public and staff input, a general description of the recommendations can be summarized as follows:

- Conserve, manage, and restore significant natural plant communities, including wetlands, fens, wet prairies, upland prairies, savannas, and woodlands.
- Provide primary site access off of Cary-Algonquin Road and secondary access off Cold Springs Road.
- Provide passive recreational trails for activities such as hiking, nature observation, and access to the river for fishing, canoeing, etc.
- Develop a water theme natural resource educational trail system that highlights different elements of the sites hydrology.
- Provide continued staff scientific research and education.
- Develop appropriate local multi-use trail connections to Cary Park District trail system in Hoffman Park, connections to a sub-regional trail system along Cary-Algonquin Road and Klausen Road., and a possible connection to Camp Algonquin.
- Develop appropriate District and site historical/cultural recognition.
- Provide unique recreational opportunities in the form of a seasonal conference “barn” center. Utilizing reclaimed barn timbers and wood from past District structures to construct a rental facility for wedding receptions, family events, company uses, District programs, etc.
- Develop the infrastructure that will support the natural resource based educational programming and rental opportunities. Provide a variety of shelters and typical site amenities.
In 2003 a phased development approach of the Master Plan began with the construction of the secondary public access point off of Cold Springs Road. The planned improvements included: parking lot, picnic shelter, restroom, drinking fountain, and trail access to the Fox River. In addition to the trail to the Fox River, only one additional section of trail was opened from the parking lot west to the intersection of Cary – Algonquin / Cold Springs Roads. The Fox Bluff Conservation Area was opened in a limited capacity to the public in the fall of 2004.