Historic records document that in 1835, William Alexander McConnell arrived at an intriguing clearing on the banks of the North Branch of Nippersink Creek and spent his first night at the base of an oak tree. McConnell must have liked what he saw because he made claim to 480 acres in the southeastern quarter, and became the first documented settler of Richmond Township. (The oak tree, one of the largest in McHenry County, still survives today.)

In the spring of 1835, McConnell and his wife Elizabeth built the first building in the Township, a 16’ x 18’ log cabin. For fifteen years the McConnell’s and their three sons lived in the log cabin “built in the shade of a white oak.”

In 1852, McConnell built a Greek Revival house across the street and lived there as he amassed 1,400 acres, upon which he built a pickle factory, creamery, cheese factory, and several impressive barns. McConnell became one of McHenry County’s most prominent citizens as the first postmaster, school director of Richmond Township, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, and state legislator.

In 1999, the Conservation District began protection of the biologically and historically rich area. Despite decades of agricultural use, several important, high-quality natural communities still exist on the land.

Over time, three additional parcels were acquired, contiguous to the first North Branch Conservation Area opened to the public in July of 2008 and today encompasses 521 acres.
Recreation

can be protected while also allowing an opportunity for an excellent example of how a high-quality natural area. Additional, 30 different native fish species swim in its clear waters including eight pollution intolerant species like the state endangered or threatened species. In addition, the trail links the 26 mile Prairie Trail on the east Road and is designed for cyclists only. Permits required.

Overnight Bicycle Pull-Off Area

Because the trail within North Branch Conservation Area is part of the greater 530 mile regional trail system known as the Grand Illinois Trail. The trail provides visitors and neighbors an opportunity to hike, bike, horseback ride and snowmobile.

Bird Watching

Bird watching is popular in the restored grasslands and savanna. Eighty different species of migratory and nesting birds can be seen in the area. Visitors may spy meadowlarks, bobolinks, cedar waxwings, savanna sparrows, American woodcocks, wild turkeys, northern harriers, Baltimore orioles, and rose-breasted grosbeaks.

Picknicking

North Branch is an ideal place for picnicking after a hike or bike ride. A parking lot, restrooms and picnic tables are located at the main entrance off Keystone Road. Note: Fishing is not allowed along the banks of Nippersink Creek.

Historic Site

McConnell Farmstead

Situated between Route 173 and Broadway Road is the William Alexander McConnell Farmstead, a four acre home site of the first settler in Richmond Township. Early plat maps show McConnell owning portions of what is now protected within the North Branch Conservation Area. Through multiple purchases, both the unique natural communities and the historical aspects of the site are being preserved.

Tucked away in the extreme northeastern part of McHenry County lies 521 acres of preserved open space known as North Branch Conservation Area. Due to its biologically rich ecosystems, like the 125-acre wetland complex, 282-acre Genoa City Wetlands and Barrens, a Bur oak dominated savanna, and a 1.5 mile section of the North Branch of Nippersink Creek, the site is teeming with wildlife.

The lowland glacial moraine fen, seige meadow and marsh communities provide a haven for over 80 different species of grassland songbirds, ducks, hawks and shorebirds, including the state endangered or threatened species. In addition, a non-profit group, the McConnel Friends of the North Branch Conservation Area, which may include school field trips and educational opportunities that would reconnect visitors with local agricultural heritage specific to farm life and technology of the late 1800's.

Due to its clear, spring fed water and continuous sand and gravel bottom, Nippersink Creek supports more mussel species than any other Northeastern Illinois creek, including 11 state endangered or threatened species. In addition, 30 different native fish species swim in its clear waters including eight pollution intolerant species like the state endangered pugnose shiner and blacknose shiner.

These existing wetland and marsh areas also provide habitat for chorus frogs, leopard frogs, salamanders, Blanding's turtles and northern water snakes. Collectively, North Branch Conservation Area offers visitors an example of how a high-quality natural area can be protected while also allowing an opportunity for outdoor recreation.

The potential exists for future development of the McConnell farmstead, which may include school field trips and educational opportunities that would reconnect visitors with local agricultural heritage specific to farm life and technology of the late 1800's. Note: This area of the site is not yet open to the public.

Note: Fishing is not allowed along the banks of Nippersink Creek.

History

McConnell Farmstead

Situated between Route 173 and Broadway Road is the William Alexander McConnell Farmstead, a four acre home site of the first settler in Richmond Township.

Currently, a non-profit group, the McConnell Friends Foundation, is raising funds to restore the buildings on the site, which include the two-story 1870's Greek revival house, small barn, large dairy barn, hand-hewn threshing barn, milk house, chicken coop, granary, corn crib and hog house.

Early plat maps show McConnell owning portions of what is now protected within the North Branch Conservation Area. Through multiple purchases, both the unique natural communities and the historical aspects of the site are being preserved.
North Branch Conservation Area

The Nippersink Creek watershed is the largest tributary to the Fox River, which begins in Wisconsin’s Walworth and Kenosha counties and drains 50 square miles before crossing into Illinois. Genoa City Wetlands and Barrens, a 282-acre complex of wetlands, make up the northern half of the site, while the 132-acre Prairie Trail North Wetlands abuts the southern portion of the site.

Geology

The gently rolling topography, with the highest elevation at 850 feet above sea level, is a product of the Wisconsin glacier. As this last ice sheet melted around 14,000 years ago, it left behind ridges and mounds of the rocks, gravel, sand and soil that it had picked up and pushed along as it advanced. The North Branch Conservation Area sits on one of these landforms, known as the Valparaiso moraine. Its natural communities are all a result of the flow of the glacial meltwaters and the deposit of the soils they carried. There are 27 different soil types found within this site and underlying the soil is the bedrock formation of Silurian Dolomite, an extremely hard rock, resistant to erosion.

Ecologically Diverse Habitat

The North Branch Conservation Area contains a number of interconnected natural communities including sedge meadow, basin marsh, stream, savanna and prairie. Many of these communities are recognized and classified for their ecological importance in the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory (INAIL), McHenry County Natural Areas Inventory (MCNAI) and the Advanced Identification Wetland (ADID) study.

A 1.5-mile section of the North Branch of Nippersink Creek is recognized by all three of these classifications due to the high number of fish and state endangered and threatened mussel species found in the creek. Also within the boundaries of North Branch Conservation Area are nine significant wetlands that are registered in the National Wetlands Inventory.

1.5 Miles

NORTH BRANCH NIPPERSKIN CREEK

Natural Communities

- Savanna
- Prairie
- Wetlands
- Mink
- White Indigo
- Sandhill Crane
- White-Heelsplitter Mussel
- Pimpleback Mussel
- Plain Pocketbook Mussel

Textures Key

Basin Marsh
McConnell Farmstead
Graminoid Fen
Marsh
Prairie
Savanna
Sedge Meadow
Water
Wet Prairie
Woods

Symbols Key

Drinking water
Information
Parking
Picnic Area
Restrooms
Multi-use Trail
Camping — Overnight pull off, tent camping for cyclists only, permit required.