

BROOKS PARKHURST TOWN FOREST

By Ellen Knight¹

When the Brooks family settled in Medford in the late seventeenth century, their estate consisted of some 400 acres of woods and farm. By the early 20th century, the estate was one of the oldest remaining great estates of its kind in Metropolitan Boston, its grounds including woods, field, and flowers. About 100 acres lay in Winchester with ownership divided between the Peter Brooks and Shepherd Brooks branches of the family. Almost 29 acres of the former Brooks Estate now form the Town Forest.



According to Richard Parkhurst, who spearheaded the movement to acquire the Town Forest land, after some pieces of the estate had been sold for development, the family agreed that no remaining part of the land was to be sold until the death of Clara Gardner (Mrs. Shepherd) Brooks. She died in 1939 at the age of 92.

“Mrs. Brooks loved trees and flowers and up to the last she spent all possible time about her grounds,” Parkhurst reported in 1950. “She liked to have others enjoy them.” Parkhurst further stated that, “She willed part of the estate to the Audubon Society because she hoped by that means to perpetuate one of her greatest desires – that her property would always remain an open space.” The Society turned it down, reportedly for financial reasons. An attempt to interest the MDC was also not successful. “The Brooks heirs then felt that they must begin to dispose of the property commercially.”

In 1940, Brooks Park Inc. was offering for sale 49 house lots on 16 acres on the west side of Grove Street, former Peter Brooks land. And the word was that more of his land was about to be sold.

Citizens concerned that not all the open space be lost to development approached the trustees of the Clara Brooks estate. The trustees first agreed to give the Town first opportunity on the remaining land and then let it be known that they were prepared to accept an offer from the town for 10 acres of the land and that they would give the rest of the 23 acres to the Town. This offer was contingent upon a deed restriction that the area be kept by the Town as an open space.

In 1941, the option to approve the acquisition was presented to Town Meeting. Parkhurst enumerated the benefits, including “an open space of unusual beauty and permanency,” a natural spot for tree culture, birds, and quiet recreation, ideal for children far from streets and dangerous crossings. He also saw it as providing the sort of natural buffer that lay to the east with the Fells and to the west with the country club.

Town Meeting voted to authorize the selectmen to purchase 10 acres and accept the remainder of the 23-acre parcel as a gift “for a public domain to be devoted to the culture of forest trees”

as provided by M.G.L. Ch. 45 Section 19.

For \$10,000 and other considerations, “particularly the vote of said town at its Annual Meeting,” the heirs conveyed the land by deed to the Town that May.

When considering the forest as a buffer area between Winchester and Medford, Parkhurst did not know that Medford would also be successful in securing its portion of the remaining part of the Shepherd Brooks estate for public purposes. Counting what lies in both towns, about 88 acres of original Brooks land remains in its natural state. The Winchester forest may be relatively small, but with the adjoining Medford woods it makes up a substantial habitat of plants and wildlife.

According to Peter Wild, a member of the Town Forest Committee for 25 years, “It is one of the few primeval forests that still exist in the state.” It contains a variety of evergreen and deciduous trees, including a 300-year-old stand of hemlocks.

Winchester’s part of the forest grew from the original 23 acres of 1941 with the addition of 2.6 acres in 1955, 1.9 acres in 1960, and a little over a half acre in 1972. The added parcels were acquired with the same public domain restriction.

In 1950, Town Meeting followed the recommendation of the Town Forest Committee to adopt the name, “Clara G. Brooks Woods, Winchester Town Forest.” For all that Parkhurst did for the Town in connection with the acquisition of the land, including the donation of some additional parcels himself and his long service on the Town Forest Committee, the site is now known as the Brooks Parkhurst Town Forest.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb. 6, 2013. This revision supersedes all previous articles.