

GREENBURGH NATURE CENTER HISTORY

HISTORY OF THE PROPERTY AND BUILDINGS

The history of the Nunataks Estate property — home of the Greenburgh Nature Center — provides a fascinating look at how one small tract of land has changed dramatically over the short span of time that humans have inhabited it. Nunataks was developed in 1916 on a 39-acre tract of woodland that had been part of a 50 acre farm.



Natives Making Maple Syrup

Long before humans built any structures on the land, the Native Americans who lived in what is now lower Westchester used Nunataks' wooded ridge as part of their hunting grounds. Perhaps they even tapped some of the sugar maple trees growing on the ridge to obtain sap for making syrup, sugar and candy. The earliest known inhabitants of this area were Algonquin-speaking members of the Wappingers Confederation. The local "sub-tribe" was known as the Wecquaesgeeks, a name which meant the "country of the birch bark." Birch bark was a very important part of their daily

life, being used for pots, baskets and tools.

As the European settlers arrived in the 17th century, the Native Americans slowly but surely were forced out of the area. During colonial times the property that is now the Greenburgh Nature Center became part of the vast Philipsburg Manor, which extended from Manhattan to Pocantico Hills — over 90,000 acres. In 1731 the



Ed Barns (left), who established a fifty-acre farm on the Nunataks property (c. 1850), and a friend stand in front of the original nineteenth century barn which stood near the present site of the Greenburgh Nature Center, just off Central Avenue, where the Scarsdale Park Mall is now situated.

Nunataks Manor ridge was included in a nearly 600-acre farm leased by the Manor to the Tompkins family. The property was not developed at that time, however.



Barnes Barn

By the late 1840's the Edgemont section of Greenburgh became more populated, with the building of the railroads along the Hudson and Bronx Rivers. In the 1850's Ed and Mariah Barnes established a 50-acre farm that included Nunataks within its boundary. Their house and barn were located at the bottom of the hill near Central Avenue, on the south and north sides of Dromore

Road (which at that time was just the lane to their farm).

The Barnes' raised livestock and grew feed crops, fruit and produce. Stone from quarries on the eastern side of their farm was used in the construction of Central Avenue, in the 1870's. Mary Barnes Babcock was the last of the family to live on the farm. She and her unmarried sister, Emily, are buried in the old Greenville Church cemetery, which is behind the Scarsdale Mini-Mall near the corner of Central Avenue and Old Army Road.



Dr. Lewis Rutherford Morris

Dr. Lewis Rutherford Morris, the builder of Nunataks, was descended from the Lewis Morris who signed the Declaration of Independence for the New York delegation in 1776. Born in the Morris's upstate homestead at Morris, New York, Dr. Morris was an outdoorsman and hunter. A wildlife enthusiast, he helped found the New York Zoological Society, and he also served on the board of the New York Botanical Society. With his friends the Harrimans he helped organize a now-famous expedition to Canada and Alaska in 1899. Both John Muir and John Burrows were part of the entourage. Dr. Morris became inspired by the Alaska scenery, wildlife and Eskimo culture.

Dr. Morris lived in Manhattan with his wife and daughter, but he was a founding member of the Scarsdale Golf Club in Hartsdale, which was developed in 1898. Thus it wasn't surprising that, in 1916, when he was looking for a site to build a weekend retreat from New York City, he picked the 39-acre Nunataks property, as it is directly adjacent to the Golf Club.

"Nunataks" is an Eskimo word meaning "hill of stone." In geological terms, a nunatak is the rocky peak of a mountain that protrudes above a glacier. In Canada and Alaska the nunataks are like islands of life floating above the glacial rivers of ice that work their way west to the coast. The term is quite fitting for the Nunataks Estate, as the manor house, located astride a glacially shaped ridge, was made of stone quarried on the property.



Expedition To Alaska Crew Posing For A Photo

The manor house and caretaker's cottage/garage were designed by architect C. Grant LaFarge, who had designed the original buildings at the Bronx Zoo. He also designed the famous "north room" at President Theodore Roosevelt's Sagamore Hill estate on Long Island.

The 21-room manor house was planned to hold the Morris family in the central portion and a large number of guests in the south wing. Three servants' rooms were provided in the north wing.

The Morris family made many excursions to Nunataks from 1918, when the building was completed, to 1924, when their daughter Katherine was married to Edgemont resident John Hall. In 1925 the Halls made Nunataks their permanent residence, and as the years went by the property became known locally as “The Hall Estate.”

During the 1920’s the Halls developed the lawn area, orchard, vegetable gardens, and the rock garden. In the 1930’s they added a four room guest/servant lodge next to the caretaker’s cottage. It was built in the same style as the other buildings, also using stone quarried from the property.

Barns, sheds and a root cellar were constructed to serve the needs of the gardens and the orchard. The Halls regularly employed a caretaker/chauffeur and his wife, a cook, a chambermaid, and a “mother’s maid” (nanny). A head gardener and his assistant were also employed.

Mr. Hall died in 1952, and Mrs. Hall died in 1968. Since none of their three children was interested in living at Nunataks, the property was put up for sale. When plans of a builder subdividing the property for development of single family homes became public, the Scarsdale Audubon Society led a campaign to purchase it as a nature preserve. Meanwhile, one acre — the Halls’ vegetable garden — near Central Avenue was sold to a developer (it later became part of the Scarsdale Park Mall parking lot). Five acres of the estate’s woodlands adjacent to the Edgemont Junior-Senior High School property were sold to the Edgemont School District. This left about 33 acres remaining.

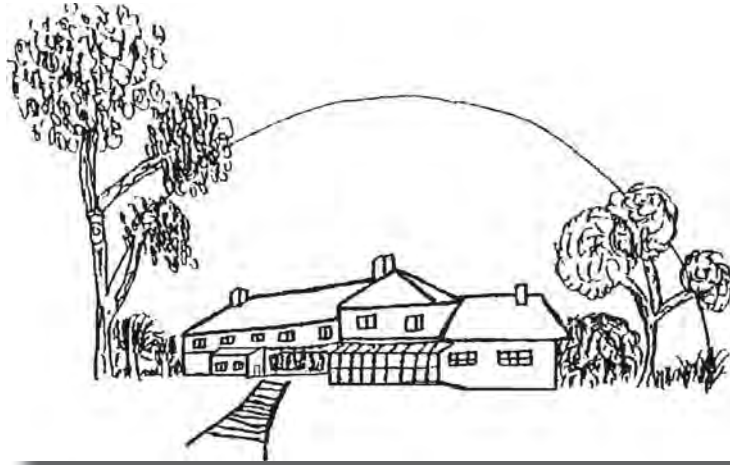
When the Audubon Society was unable to raise enough funds for the purchase, local residents turned to the Town of Greenburgh. A referendum was put on the ballot in April, 1973 to authorize a bond issue to purchase the property. This was passed by the voters. Later, a matching grant was obtained from the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. The total purchase price for the nearly 33 acres and all the buildings was \$725,000. According to the terms of the government grant, the Town was required to restrict the use of the property to nature education, and to preserve it in its “wilderness state.”

The Town decided to contract the running of the nature preserve to Nunataks, Ltd., a not-for-profit corporation that evolved from the citizens group that led the fight to save the property from development.



Walkway View To The Manor House

The Greenburgh Nature Center has grown from a staff of three in 1975 to a staff of ten full-time and two part-time paid employees (2005). Over the years the staff has worked to make the grounds and buildings more effective in promoting nature education. Our focus is on “hands on” learning activities that will appeal to people of all ages and backgrounds.



Ours is a partnership of the public and private sectors, with Town, County, and State funding supplementing the “grass roots” support of our members, visitors, school and group programs, and participants in special events activities. Through the active support and involvement of our community, we will continue to carry out our mission.

