



Land Trust Hero: Mary Edwards
by Put Brown

When Mary Wells Edwards died on January 15, 2004, the Town of Granby lost a loyal friend. What magnificent gifts she left for us! Donations of land, an endowment at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving and a thriving Granby Land Trust are just a few of her legacies.

Everyone who drives down Silkey Road towards Mountain Road in North Granby is struck by the magnificent view. Straight ahead is a short-cropped meadow with a shallow pond nestled into a curve of the land. Past that, the land falls off steeply and reveals about forty miles of the Connecticut River Valley. Springfield, a little bit to the east, is about halfway into the distance and Mount Tom and other mountains can be seen beyond it.

For much of the 20th century, the 200 acres over which this view opens were owned by the Edwards family, whose ancestors, the Hayeses and Dibbles, had lived in Granby from the eighteenth century. One branch of the family lived in the ancient house on Barndoor Hills Road, just north of Reed Hill Road; another inhabited much of what Mary fondly called "Dibble Hollow," although we don't know for sure just where this is; and another lived in the big house located at 239 Salmon Brook Street. By the late 19th century, most of the family had moved to Hartford, although the house on Salmon Brook Street was kept and used as a summer house.

Mary grew up in Hartford but spent so much time in Granby that she came to think of both places as home. In 1918, her mother bought the land in North Granby. In the 19th century, it had been farmed by Willie Phelps, but now only a few old stone walls and the cellar hole of his center chimney house are left. During the next 60 years, the Edwards family used it for their own berry and apple picking jaunts, picnics and hikes and encouraged friends and neighbors to use it as well. For everyone, a favorite look-out, secluded from Mountain Road, was "Mary's Rock," which is located near the site of the old Phelps house to the west of the pasture. In later years, a little clearing near that rock was used by the Granby Boy Scouts, who camped and held their most important ceremonies there. In 1972, they erected a flagpole in memory of their late Scoutmaster, Walter Berriman. Brownies, too, have used the site for their "fly ups" to Girl Scouts.

Mary acquired the land in 1955 and soon became concerned that the view was being obstructed as trees and shrubs grew up into the pasture. She intervened and began to prune and chop down trees here and there and dig out Queen Anne's Lace, junipers and other plants, which she believed would destroy the appearance of the setting. With the keen eye of a professional landscape architect, a profession that she practiced for her entire life following her graduation from Vassar College and the Rhode Island School of Design, she preserved both the view and the seemingly "natural" appearance of the land.

In the early 1970s, Mary began to fret about what would happen to the property after she died. She hired foresters, a geologist, a hydrologist, and others to help her consider its potential and thought about subdividing it or somehow developing its extensive water and gravel deposits. Each of these activities would destroy the view, however, and so she refrained from them all. Finally, after initially creating a private foundation to own the land, she decided in 2000 to give the land, which she called "The Mountain," to the Granby Land Trust, a representative of which had been involved in its care since the mid-1970s. She also set aside funds at the Hartford Foundation for Public giving for the support of that land and to underwrite some of the ongoing operating expenses of the Land Trust itself.

Mary was no stranger to the Land Trust. In the spring of 1973, within months of its founding, she approached the Land Trust and offered to buy and then contribute "Diamond Ledge," a ten acre parcel at 27 Broad Hill Road in West Granby, known (and named) for the brilliant shimmer of the rock face of the cliff located on that property. This was the first gift of land to the Land Trust and was an important endorsement of the organization. At that time, the Land Trust was a fledgling charity, with no operating history, few members, and an inexperienced board. Mary looked past those weaknesses, understood the organization's potential, and breathed life into it.

In the following years, she contributed six acres at 22R Oakridge Drive (1975), 29 acres at 84 Hartford Avenue (1987), two acres at 239R Salmon Brook Street (1987) and the 200 acres of The Mountain (completed in 2000). She also contributed to the purchase of the Dewey Granby Oak,

one of the State's great trees, and made regular gifts to underwrite the costs of maintaining "The Mountain."

With the support that she so freely offered and the dedication of the many citizens of the community who have served on its board and made financial contributions over the years, the Granby Land Trust has become widely known as one of the most successful land preservation entities in the state. Having forged alliances with "sister" organizations such as the Town, the Holcomb Farm, the McLean Game Refuge, The Nature Conservancy, the Connecticut DEP, the Salmon Brook Historical Society, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving and other organizations, it is considered to be the logical clearinghouse for land preservation activities in town.

Mary was not a passive philanthropist. She came to Land Trust meetings, participated in its hikes and other activities, kept in touch with its members, offered her advice from time to time and urged others to contribute land and money to it, as she had. At the age of almost 90, and despite her diabetic condition, she joined other Land Trust members on a rigorous hour-long hike from Higley Road to Old Messenger Road and back. Almost collapsing from the effort, she smiled broadly and said time and again "Isn't the Land Trust great? This is so exciting!" It was exciting, in large part because of the exhilaration that Mary felt.

"The Mountain" was Mary's most cherished possession. When she honored the Land Trust with her donation, she cited as her principal concern the preservation of the view of "Springfield, Massachusetts, Sodom Mountain, and the Connecticut Valley," but noted that "hiking, nature study, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, fishing" and other similar uses would also be appropriate. She had specific ideas about how the view should be maintained and urged that the "fields should be kept cropped," that various kinds of vegetation "not eaten by livestock must be removed from the fields by hand pulling, use of a mattock, chemical eradication in an ecologically safe manner or other method of removal," and that rocks "heaved up by the frost each year" must be removed. She knew that, with the future development of Granby, increased pressure would be put on "The Mountain," and so authorized the trustees to adopt reasonable regulations to preserve the character of that property. She also understood that the aggressive development of other open space in Granby would overcrowd the school system, increase taxes, close off wildlife corridors, suburbanize a rural community and change its character forever. With passionate commitment, she worked with the Land Trust to set aside some of the town's open space treasures and provide for their ongoing maintenance.

In choosing to make her gifts to the Land Trust, Mary assured the Town that valuable parcels of open space land and the magnificent view across The Mountain would be preserved forever. The Land Trust, she knew, with its local roots and interest, was the organization best suited to own and maintain these properties. Furthermore, by providing for a professionally managed endowment at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, she made certain that funds would be available to accomplish her goals.

"The Mountain" and the Land Trust were not her only charitable passions. She supported many other organizations, both in Granby and in the Greater Hartford region. When she moved out of her Granby house, and from time to time afterwards, she made significant gifts to the Salmon Brook Historical Society and to the Connecticut Historical Society. She also supported the Salmon Brook Watershed Association. Elsewhere, she was active on the board of the Mark Twain House, working on the landscaping of that property. She also designed the plantings for the Antiquarian and Landmarks Society's Phelps Hathaway House in Suffield and was a "benefactor" of the Connecticut Forest and Parks Association. As an editorial in the Hartford Courant noted shortly after her death, "the subtle, beautiful flow of trees, lawns and gardens at some of Hartford's treasured houses owes part of its distinction to the dedication, hard work and keen eye of Ms. Edwards."

As future generations come over the crest of the hill on Silkey Road and look north over "The Mountain" past Springfield, climb the rock face of "Diamond Ledge" or walk into other lands Mary Edwards set aside, they can thank this marvelous woman for having made such gifts. Others who share her vision can follow her example by donating land, conservation easements or money – or perhaps all three – to the Land Trust. Its motto, "Preserving Granby's Natural Heritage," is one Mary fully endorsed.
