

A Vision for Dogtown

Introduction

Dogtown is a rare treasure – an expanse of undeveloped wildlands surrounded by picturesque seaside villages and a historic seaport. Once inhabited, then abandoned, it is a boulder-strewn glacial landscape of wetland, woodland, and moors, overlain with stonewalls, cellar holes, and old roads dating back to pre-colonial times. Dogtown is a place to get away from it all – a place of inspiration, contemplation, and recreation. Young and old, people from all walks of life, with different perspectives on life, all value this unique place.

Dogtown is a remarkably rich repository of Cape Ann’s heritage, with complex layers of human history, biological diversity, and artistic inspiration. But many of its wonders are now obscured or threatened and its future is uncertain. This document offers an inspired long-term plan for this important property. After a brief historical overview, we summarize current problems facing Dogtown, and then outline a long term plan: a vision for Dogtown.



John Sloan, Dogtown Valley in the Sun (1916)

The Past

Once cloaked in primeval forest, the hunting grounds of Native Americans, the middle of Cape Ann was cleared for its timber during colonial times. Half a century after the town of Gloucester was settled, people began to live in what was originally called the Commons Settlement, named for the thousand or so acres of common or community woodland out of which it grew. At its peak, more than forty families lived in the Commons. Around the time of the Revolutionary War the village began to decline as commercial interests shifted from logging and agriculture to fishing and trading, and people moved downtown to be closer to the harbor. Houses were rented and fell into disrepair. By the early 1800s, the area, which had become known as Dogtown, was a ghost town.

When Dogtown was abandoned its mystery and the uniqueness of its natural communities were enhanced rather than diminished. Abandoned farmland on thin acidic soils reverted not to forest but to moorland offering bushels of blueberries in summer and a riot of scarlet huckleberry foliage in fall. The remnants of the historic settlement – its stone walls, cellar holes, and old roads – far from detracting from Dogtown’s mystique, combined with its monumental geology and diverse vegetation to attract the attention of poets, painters, historians, and naturalists a century later. Dogtown appears as a prominent element in the poetry of Charles Olson and in the haunting paintings of Marsden Hartley, John Sloan and other artists. Charles Mann, Percy MacKaye and others told the stories of the last generation to inhabit the site; and renowned natural historian John Kieran wrote of its birds and orchids.

In the early 20th century, Cape Ann philanthropist, Roger Babson mapped what remained of the old settlement, and later himself become a part of the history of Dogtown. In response to a city-wide water shortage, the Babson Reservoir was built on land given to the City by Babson and his family in 1930. Dotting this rocky landscape is his enduring legacy – inspirational words and phrases chiseled into boulders by unemployed quarrymen during the Great Depression – the Babson Boulders.

The Present

Unmanaged, the mystery and romance of Dogtown had become a problematic reality by the mid 1980’s. Illegal dumping, civil disturbances, and a general state of lawlessness prevailed. In 1984 representatives of the Essex County Greenbelt Association, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and the City of Gloucester organized the Dogtown Steering Committee to deal with two key problems facing Dogtown: the threat of development, and land management. In the following year the City acquired critically situated land for conservation. A number of public safety actions were taken by the Police Department and the Department of Public Works. The Dogtown Advisory Committee was established in 1985 as an *ad hoc* committee reporting to the Mayor of Gloucester, staffed by volunteers appointed by the Mayor

and tasked with implementing other recommendations of the Steering Committee including clean-up activities, trail maintenance, installation of trail markers, and the creation of a map.

Thirty years have passed and Dogtown has once again fallen into neglect. Between the Babson and Goose Cove reservoirs lies a compost facility at the entrance to historical Dogtown. What had been a temporary solution for waste recycling is open only thirty days out of the year and is used as a dump as much as a facility for converting yard and food waste into usable compost. Moreover the compost area has become an eyesore with runoff polluting a nearby fresh water spring, stream, and acidic fen that contains three species of orchids, one of them on the state endangered species list.



The compost facility is located at the entrance to Dogtown

Oriental honeysuckle, Multiflora Rose, Oriental Bittersweet, and other invasive plants have created dense thickets and tangles that destroy healthy trees and prevents the succession of native species. Behind this thicket are the cellar holes, stonewalls, and iconic landscape painted by Hartley and Sloan. The build up of dead trees and other combustible materials contribute to fire risk during dry spells.

The Future

During the past thirty years, civic commitment to Dogtown has all but disappeared. In response to concern about the future of Dogtown, the Friends of Dogtown was formed in 2015 as a citizen’s action group with a mission of “conserving, interpreting and celebrating Dogtown’s unique historical and ecological heritage for the benefit of citizens of Cape Ann and the general public.” Friends of Dogtown is

committed to working with other stakeholders, including the recently revitalized Dogtown Advisory Committee appointed by Gloucester’s Mayor, toward the well being of this natural treasure. The initiatives below give some sense of how Friends of Dogtown can move to fulfill a vision for Dogtown and secure the future of this vulnerable resource.



Landscape painted by Hartley in the 1930’s and view along Dogtown Road as it looks today.

Landscape Restoration

The landscape of today’s Dogtown would not be recognizable to a person from the 19th century. One proposed initiative would involve the restoration of a part of Dogtown to the early successional habitat (heathland/moorland, native grassland) that prevailed during most of the historical period, through active ecological management techniques such as mowing, grazing and prescribed burning. This is

the landscape captured in paintings by Hartley and Sloan. Through restoration of the habitat, animal and plant species that have disappeared may return, including blueberries in selected parts of Dogtown.



Glacial heathland at Pole Hill is similar to the Dogtown landscape in the 1930's, which could be restored through land management

Environmental Remediation

One solution to potential pollution issues at the composting facility at Gronblad's Pit would be to relocate the facility to a larger more suitable location in Gloucester – one that would operate on a regular basis and provide clean and usable compost. This project would also include the restoration of the fresh water spring on Dogtown Road between the compost area and the parking lot and the nearby fen containing state endangered plant species. Friends of Dogtown also supports other activities targeting littering and pollution in Dogtown including Gloucester's Mutt Mitts initiative.

Dogtown Discovery Center

Dogtown already serves as "nature's classroom" for Gloucester schools. In order to further enhance our experience and understanding of the geology, ecology, sociology, and archaeology of Dogtown we propose the construction of a minimal footprint "off the grid" visitor/education center near the area that now serves as the composting facility. The center would serve as a focal point for outdoor recreational and educational activities in the arts and sciences for people of all ages.



Proposed visitor center (replace with a sketch of a structure more suited to Dogtown in the middle of where the compost facility is now with an open area around it)



Catherine Follensbee’s drawing of a typical Dogtown house from Charles Mann’s *The Story of Dogtown* (replace with a sketch of this kind of house along the left side of Dogtown Road, perhaps with a sheep or goat farm in the background)

As part of this project one of the cellar holes at this end of Dogtown Road might be restored and the house once above it reconstructed in a historically accurate manner. This part of Dogtown was once a sheep farm. Perhaps the land could be repurposed as a home for goats or other grazing animals that could be employed as part of an ongoing landscape management plan. As it is the goal of Friends of Dogtown to preserve Dogtown as a wilderness area, land management and historical reconstruction would take place over limited areas.

Historical Preservation

Dogtown should be no less important a destination than Halibut Point State Park, Thacher Island, Stage Fort Park, or other places of popular and historical interest on Cape Ann. We believe that it is time to take the steps necessary to have Dogtown included in the National Register of Historic Places – the official list of national historic places worthy of preservation. This project requires the compilation of a survey of the old settlement that includes detailed maps, archaeological findings, and other historical documents. The application would also require approval by the City Council and Mayor. Were Dogtown to receive this designation, it would be eligible for state and federal grants to support land management, historical restoration, and educational activities.

Long-Term Advocacy

Although Dogtown has many stakeholders there has been no organization up to now that has been willing to step up to the challenge of maintaining the sustained level of civic interest and involvement needed to realize the recommendations of the original 1985 Dogtown Steering Committee. We believe that together with the City of Gloucester, and its committees and commissions including the Dogtown Advisory Committee, Open Space and Recreational Committee, Conservation Commission, Gloucester Historical Commission, as well as privately financed organizations like the Essex County Greenbelt, Cape Ann Trail Stewards, and others, the Friends of Dogtown can help facilitate the communication, cooperation, and coordination between these groups required to accomplish the above goals.

– *The Friends of Dogtown, Steering Committee*

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