

Beebe Woods

We owe the existence of this 400-acre green heart of Falmouth to generosity. In 1972, when Falmouth had lots of undeveloped land but very little protected open space, the late J.K. Lilly III and his late wife bought this land as it was about to be developed, and gave 388 acres as conservation land to the town. Since that time smaller parcels have been added: 10 acres given by the Clowes family; and the remaining 1.8 acres on the Punch Bowl acquired in 2010 through the generosity of donors to The 300 Committee Land Trust.

The many people who enjoy Beebe Woods each day may not know of this history of generosity, but the intense use of this beautiful landscape attests to the prescience of the donors, and the value of these gifts to the people of Falmouth. Special places like Beebe Woods don't stay special by accident, or by themselves; we all owe thanks to those generous folks, whether they gave many acres or only a few dollars. It all counts.

Beebe Woods lies across the top of the line of rocky moraine hills that runs from Woods Hole north to beyond the Cape Cod Canal. These hills formed at the end of the Ice Age, as the ice sheet that had covered eastern North America melted away and left its burden of rock, sand, and gravel marking its former edge. Although the ice is gone, evidence of its work is everywhere: big boulders, rocky but fairly rich soil, hummocky terrain and even Deep Pond, which the Beebes renamed the Punch Bowl.

Beebe Woods lives up to its name—it is woods. Because of the relatively rich soil of the moraine, and because the area was never completely cleared during the height of farming in Falmouth, there is a wide variety of trees. The trees that are common everywhere on the Cape (White and Pitch Pines, and Black, Scarlet, and White Oaks) are common, but less-common trees like Beech, Tupelo, Atlantic White Cedar, American Chestnut, Sassafras, and Hickory also grow here. All those trees make this a cool, shady and pleasant place on a hot day. And if that weren't enough, there are two nice swimming ponds.

Good trails wind all through the woodlands, making for many different walks. Some are old carriage roads, built for the Beebes, whose summer home, Highfield Hall, is now a restored showplace, owned by the town and operated by a non-profit organization, Historic Highfield, Inc. Branching off from the old roads are numerous foot paths of later provenance. Some of them reach into the farthest corners of the woodlands, including to Peterson Farm—an adjoining town open space parcel, Ice House Pond, and into the interesting hilly woods to the north.

When the Beebes bought the hilltop now named for them, much of the land was cleared, having been used for pasture or woodlot since the 1700s. They encouraged the trees to return, and even did some planting. In the woods, incongruous stone walls built during those centuries—by hand—testify to the hard work of the early farmers, and to the rapid return of the trees to formerly cleared land. But many of the trees are much younger than the Beebe era, because a big fire swept through the woods in October, 1947. Highfield Hall was protected by fire hoses, and a few other areas, mostly near wetlands, escaped the flames. Elsewhere, many of the most hardwood trees were damaged or killed by the fire, while the fire-adapted Pitch Pines were rejuvenated. It is still possible to determine something of the fire history by noting the type and size of the trees in any given area.

Access to Beebe Woods is at the end of Highfield Drive, with parking between the Cape Cod Conservatory and Highfield Theater, also from a small parking area on the south side of Ter Heun Drive, west of the hospital, and by a connecting trail from Peterson Farm. A map of Beebe Woods and Peterson Farm, including all the trails, can be downloaded and printed from the website of The 300 Committee Land Trust: www.300committee.org.