

Webster Woods

This little-used town land lies along Woods Hole Road, behind and east of the Woods Hole Fire Station. Some years back a member of the Webster family gave these 16 wooded acres to the town as a possible site for a new school. Ultimately only the fire station was built in the southwest corner; the rest has remained, as the name suggests, woodland. Most of this site must always remain undeveloped because of endangered species that make their homes here.

One of the reasons this site was not deemed suitable for a school may have been that its surface is not flat, or even sloping, but instead is quite irregular, interrupted by three large, deep, steep-sided kettle holes. These kettle holes are the result of the waning stages of the ice sheet that built Cape Cod. Three large blocks of glacial ice that separated from the main ice sheet by melting along crevasses, were gradually buried in the sand, rock, and gravel that was being released by the melting ice. The ice sheet bulldozed the piles of rocky debris up into the line of hills that runs from Woods Hole to Bourne, creating the “backbone” of this part of Cape Cod, burying the separate blocks of ice yet deeper in the rocky ground. After the main ice sheet melted away the kettle holes formed when those buried blocks of ice finally melted, allowing the sand and gravel that had capped them to collapse into the space below. This was not an unusual process on Cape Cod—there are hundreds of ponds occupying such depressions all across the Cape, and many hundreds more dry kettle holes, like these three, perched above the water table, forming deep, rounded, bowls that make the tall trees around them seem even taller.

Growing around and down into the kettle holes is a woodland of unusually large, mature trees. Chief among these giants are towering American Beeches and Black, White, and Scarlet Oaks. There are few places on Cape Cod with trees as large as these. Perhaps the trees have grown large because the area has been undisturbed for so long; probably no trees have been cut on this land for at least 150 years, a much longer period of growth than in most Cape locales. And because it is on the moraine, this parcel, as well as the adjacent private woodlands, probably also has richer, moister soil than most of the Cape. The result has been impressive trees, 100 feet or more tall, many of them much too large for one person to reach around. In addition to the beeches and oaks, there are Hickory, Yellow Birch, White Pine, and Hop Hornbeam trees here, and many of them are also quite large. The combination of uncommon trees and unusual size makes this woodland doubly unusual; in fact, it resembles the original forests on the Cape. So much of the Cape has been deeply altered by human activities that it is exciting to find some sense of the deep woods that so impressed the Pilgrims and early explorers.

This deep shady woods hosts many birds that cannot be found in hotter, drier, or more disturbed woods, including Wood Thrush, Scarlet Tanager, Red-eyed Vireo, Eastern Wood Pewee, and Solitary Vireo. They make use of the nesting sites in the tall trees and among the rich native understory shrubs. Surprisingly for a site that was farmed and is close to landscaped village sites, very few invasive plants have taken hold, yet another reason that this woodland feels more like the untouched woods that the earliest European colonists found here. A short walk here (not much chance for a long walk, on less than 16 acres) can call up visions of the old Cape that we have never seen.

Access is from the northeast (back right) corner of the Woods Hole Fire Station on Woods Hole Road. Follow the dirt road in and turn right onto the path just at the edge of the Woods Hole Golf Course maintenance and storage area, near some piles of dirt. Two branches of the trail lead, one right, and one left, toward the edges of the property, which are marked by stone walls. There is no trail map, but trail maps for 25 other open space parcels in Falmouth may be found at The 300 Committee’s website: www.300committee.org.