

# Weetamoo Woods - Pardon Gray Preserve

**Weetamoo Woods** was purchased from many private owners by the Town of Tiverton with funding from state open space bonds, and dedicated May 20, 1990. It now consists of over 600 acres of Atlantic white cedar swamp, coastal oak-holly forest, and many remnants of Tiverton's earliest days. The Tiverton Open Space Commission manages it.

**Cultural History:** Prior to European settlement the Pocasset people fished and farmed around Mt. Hope Bay and along the eastern shore of the Sakonnet River. Forests and swamps provided fresh water, game, wood products, berries, and winter shelter. The remains of a Native American quartz quarry for making stone tools has been found in Weetamoo Woods. Weetamoo was the last sachem of the Pocasset. She supported the Great Sachem, Metacom (King Philip), in the King Philip's War and died in that conflict.

The first Europeans in the area were traders, trappers, and hunters in the early 17th century. Later, Aquidneck Island settlers ferried cattle across the Sakonnet River for pasturage on the coastal grasslands of Pocasset. In 1679, impoverished by the King Philip's War, the Plymouth Colony sold a tract of this land to a group organized as the Proprietors of Pocasset. The "First Division" in the Pocasset Purchase was thirty "great lots." Weetamoo Woods and Pardon Gray Preserve are at the south end of that original plat.

The eastern boundary of the First Division was Eight Rod Way, a common colonial road designation to indicate its width (132 feet, a rod being 16.5 ft.). The original right-of-way passed through the western edge of Cedar Swamp, a section that is no longer identifiable. The southern section from East Road to the sawmill, however, retains the character of a colonial cart path, with cobble paving and a slab bridge across Borden Brook. This section was probably improved in conjunction with the mill. Several cellar holes and wells have been found along Eight Rod Way.

**Pardon Gray Preserve** is owned and managed by the Tiverton Land Trust. It has 230 acres of land, including a forested stand adjacent to Weetamoo Woods and 75 acres of scenic open land with valuable habitat for threatened grassland nesting bird species. In many ways this site is a Tiverton original that speaks to the town's agricultural past. It was one of the First Division great lots in the Pocasset Purchase of 1681. Its proprietor was Edward Gray of Plymouth whose land eventually passed to a descendent, Pardon Gray, who farmed it in the late 18th century. During the Revolutionary War Pardon Gray was commissioned to supply Continental Army garrisons at Fort Barton where they were defending the East Bay from attack by British forces on Aquidneck Island.

**Land Use History:** As evidenced by its suitable soils and the abundant archeological evidence that has been found nearby, the Pocasset People undoubtedly farmed some of the land now preserved at Pardon Gray Preserve. Following settlement, European settlers typically farmed virgin land for a few years, then converted it to pasturage when the soil became depleted. Less arable land was used for wood lots. As with much of New England, remnant stone fences survive from this early farming era in Weetamoo Woods and Pardon Gray Preserve. Many of these were built in the late 18th century after decades of intensive land use and loss of the original deep, loamy topsoil. By then stone walls had become a practical necessity because of scarce wood and the emergence of stones "growing" on eroded land. In the mid 19th century farming in New England declined and forests began returning to the region. The cleared land of Pardon Gray, however, remained in active agricultural use through much of the 20th century.

**Natural Communities:** The present forested area of Weetamoo Woods and Pardon Gray has matured at least since the 1938 hurricane, a severe natural disturbance that leveled forests throughout this area. A large forested swamp including stands of Atlantic white cedar swamp is located in Weetamoo Woods. Cedar swamps were once common along the Eastern Seaboard but was mostly logged out for the valuable cedar wood. Surrounding the swamp is predominantly coastal oak-holly forest, an upland community unique to southern New England. There are black oaks, scarlet oaks, white oaks, northern red oaks, and American holly. The holly is the lone New England native broadleaf evergreen tree, found in Rhode Island near the coastline. Other trees in Weetamoo Woods include American beech, yellow birch, black birch, Canada hemlock, eastern white pine, sassafras, tupelo, black cherry, red maple, and white ash. Prominent understory shrubs are spicebush, blueberry, huckleberry, mountain laurel, arrowwood, nannyberry, sweet pepperbush, elderberry, and winterberry. A variety of woodland wildflowers and ferns are also present.

The extensive unfragmented forest is valuable as habitat for species that require "deep woods." These include scarlet tanager, veery, Acadian flycatcher, worm-eating warbler, blue winged warbler, wood thrush and Baltimore oriole. Raptors that may be seen include barred and horned owls, and the American kestrel on the Pardon Gray grassland. White tail deer, opossum, raccoon, fox, and coyote also live in the forest. Vernal pools, which are home to a unique community of amphibians and invertebrates are scattered throughout Weetamoo Woods and Pardon Gray Preserve.

**Contacts:** The Tiverton Open Space Commission may be contacted via the Tiverton Town Hall, 343 Highland Rd. Tiverton RI, 02878, 401-625-6700. The Tiverton Land Trust may be contacted at P.O. Box 167, Tiverton RI, 02878, 401-625-1300, [www.tivertonlandtrust.org](http://www.tivertonlandtrust.org).