

Preservation

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For anyone who calls Kent home, entering the valley is marked by the realignment of the horizon into its most familiar shape: the sloping summits of Kent Mountain, Segar Mountain, and Bull Mountain to the East, the sharper ridges of Caleb's Peak, Fuller Mountain, and Mount Algo to the West, and the gentle nameless hills undulating over the surrounding landscape, dotted with farms and neighborhoods, all slanting inevitably down towards the Housatonic River.

The smaller, man-made landmarks often feel deceptively like just as permanent a component of the landscape: the faded covered bridges at Kent Falls and Bull's Bridge Dam; the gray obelisk watching over our central intersection; the crumbling stone walls marking the borders of forgotten pastures in the forest; the old wooden barn standing watch between Route 7 and the Kent Greenhouse on one side, Kent Center School and the river on the other.

This old wooden barn – dubbed the 'Sentinel' Barn, I recently learned – has stood in the background of every post-cafeteria-lunch recess, every elementary school soccer game, and every science class rocket launch of my years at KCS. It has kept a silent watch over the Kent Community Garden and witnessed the airborne acrobatics of the local Purple Martin colony, whose birdhouses share its field. Its familiar silhouette even stands watch over the main dining room of the Fife'n Drum, weathering a blustery snowstorm in a 1996 David Armstrong painting (aptly titled 'Preservation').

As unchanging as this monument to the town's agricultural history may feel, the continued upright nature of the barn really is a testament to many careful renovations that have bolstered its structure up over years and years of stewardship. It has stood tall for so long not because its preservation is inevitable, but because its preservation has been carefully undertaken.

When I look at that painting or old photos of that classic Kent landscape, I'm struck just as much by the familiarity of the barn in the foreground as by that of the landscape behind: Mount Algo looms up in just the same shape it always has, appearing as unchanged as could be in each historic image of our local horizon.



Sentinel Barn as depicted in "Preservation" ©1996 David Armstrong

This, too, is misleading. We tend to think of forests as homogenous, unchanging things: blocks of uniform green wildness, wrapped over the geography of the valley like a monochromatic bolt of cloth. Around the same time that 'Preservation' was painted, botanists introduced a term for this overly simplified understanding of wild spaces: 'plant blindness,' meaning a cognitive bias,



Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*)

inability, or general unawareness of the presence, importance, and diversity of the plant life that makes up most of our ecosystems.

‘Plant blindness’ is all too common in today’s increasingly digital world. Unlike the early years of Sentinel Barn, where daily interactions with agricultural fields instilled at least some innate understanding of human reliance on the environment for survival, many of us today do not often interact with our inherent dependence on nature for resources, energy, and food.

I could write a whole book about the problems caused by this lack of natural awareness, but I’ll focus here on what’s closer to home: the diversity, changeability, and preservation of the forests of Kent. While these familiar landscapes tend to look the same to us year-to-year, the makeup of our forests is actually the outcome of hundreds of years of succession, disturbance, and complex interactions between humans and plants.

The characteristic groves of Red Maples and Black Birches, thick undergrowth of forest edges, and intermittent tumbles of abandoned stone walls feel like permanent features of our valley. Yet the legacy of the agricultural past runs far deeper than those ragged walls: we have forests full of Red Maples and Black Birches because of the extensive logging that took place relatively recently in our town, converting old growth forests into pastures and tobacco fields. Our current forests are made up of these specific species because they are relatively ‘early successional’ trees, or trees that grow well in sunny conditions and can thus help recolonize a forest after such disturbance. Slower growing, more shade tolerant trees – Sugar Maples, White Oaks, and Shagbark Hickories, for instance – are often quite young in Kent, except for those growing on steep slopes (too hilly to log or farm) or along old stone walls (left standing to mark property edges).

This interplay of succession and human interaction is ongoing. The forest continues to age around us, but it does so in jumps and starts as we intermittently preserve parcels, clear trails, clear pastures, manage invasive plants, introduce invasive pathogens, and so on and so forth. The forest is a living thing, and it holds on to the legacy of how its soil has been used for a very long time.

Rarely is this deep historic interplay between humans and wildlife as visible as in April. For the botanically inclined, April in New England forests is notable for two divergent sources of greening: the early leaf out of invasive species, and the annual emergence of the spring ephemerals. The former dominates areas that have been more recently disturbed – old fields overgrown with Japanese Barberry and Multiflora Rose, road edges where Oriental Bittersweet keels over the neighboring trees, garden edges where privet,



Yellow Trout Lily (*Erythronium americanum*)

pachysandra, and forsythia spill out of yards and into forests – but the latter still have a foothold in less disturbed places.



Red Trillium (*Trillium erectum*)

Spring ephemerals are early blooming flowers that specialize on emerging before the canopy’s leaves to capitalize on the extra sunshine. Their flowers briefly burst with color this time of year: deep red trilliums, golden trout lilies, purple hepaticas, white clusters of Dutchman’s Breeches, Rue Anemone, and Bloodroot.

Their odd distribution, however, means you likely haven’t seen them if you haven’t looked. Their sporadic distribution across the landscape feels inexplicable: some patches of forest have half a dozen species, others none at all. This is partly a function of the specific preferences of each flower – how wet or dry, rocky or silty, sunny or shaded they like – but it’s also a feature of dispersal. Most spring ephemerals are ‘ant dispersed,’

meaning that a plant can only get to a new location if an individual ant carries its individual seed there. Seeing as most ants are only a couple of centimeters long, that makes the spread of spring ephemerals exceedingly slow. In an area dominated by tobacco farms 100 years ago – much of Kent! – most of the delicate spring ephemerals are unlikely to have found their way back just yet. The long-term maintenance of healthy forests nearby is the only reason they’ll ever have a chance to return.

These early spring flowers serve as a perfect reminder of what it is we seek to do through preservation, even when we’re preserving something that is constantly changing, constantly in motion, constantly in flux. By protecting natural spaces, we allow these changes to continue: allow the trees to grow and to change composition from early to late successional, allow the spring ephemerals to flower and the ants to slowly, slowly, carry them back to where they used to live.

The Sentinel Barn’s turn in this succession is likely arriving soon. The old structure, witness to years of succession and development, preservation and change, is crumbling. As that vista, too, grows and changes into something new, it’s well worth remembering what it is we put our efforts into preserving: the historical landscape of the town, yes, but also its continued growth, change, and succession into landscapes that continue to support our community, support our ecosystem, and stand the test of time.



Photo by Darrell Cherniske.