

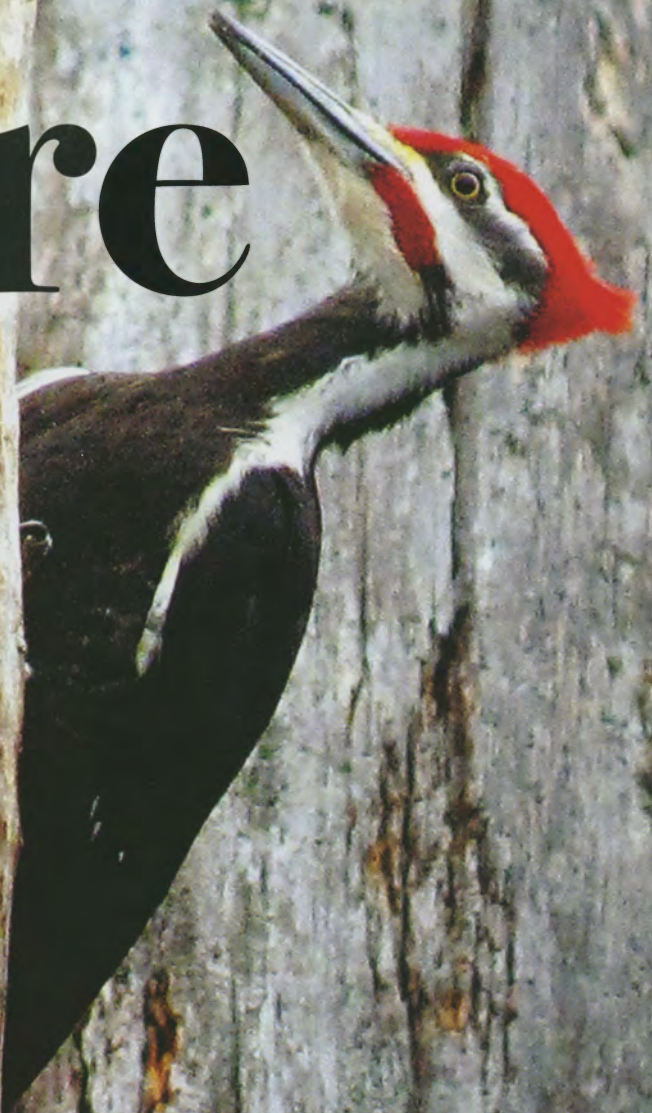
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Eye on nature

Andover Village Improvement Society has been preserving the landscape for 120 years



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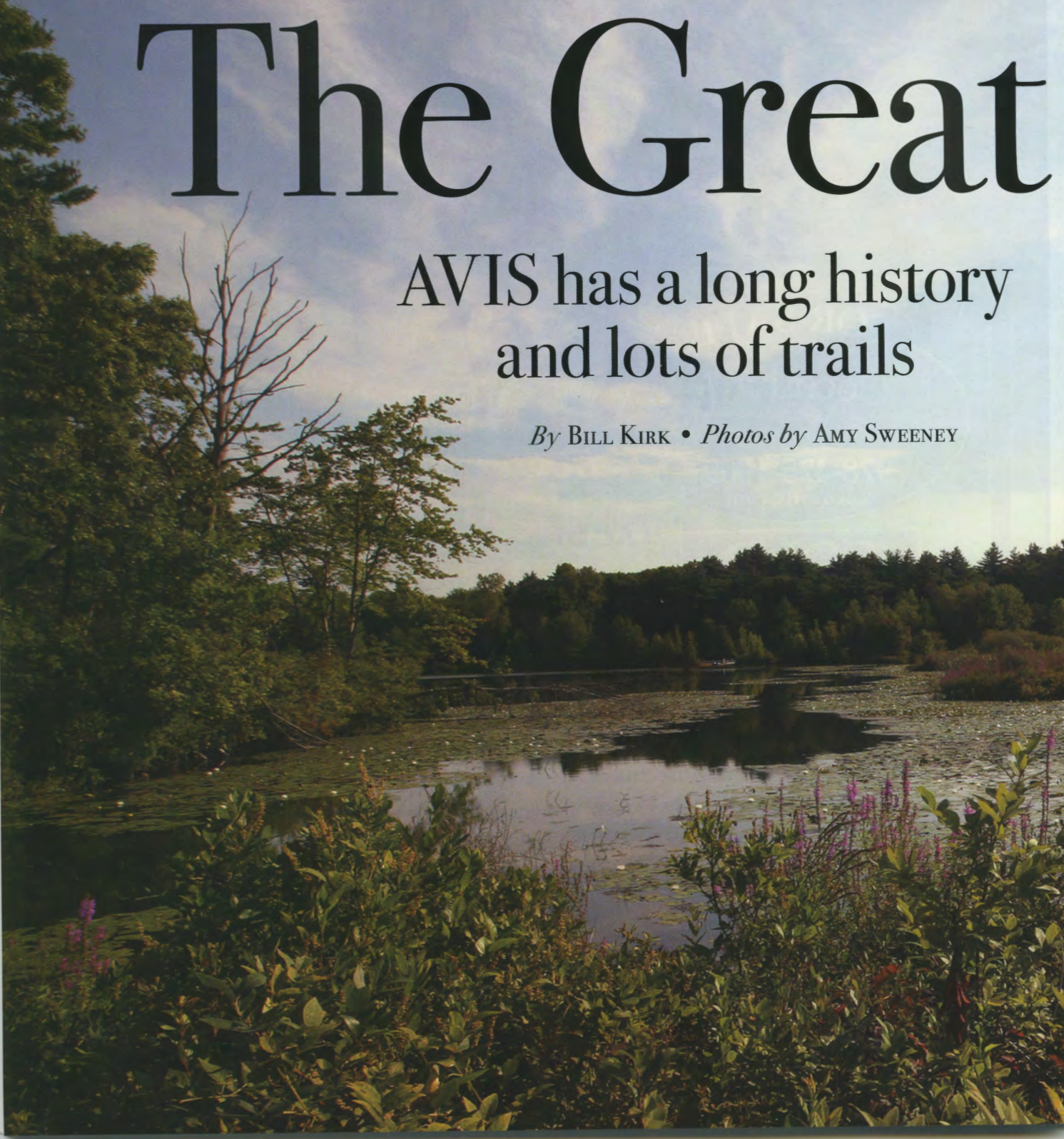
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The Great

AVIS has a long history
and lots of trails

By BILL KIRK • *Photos by* AMY SWEENEY





Paul Bilodeau

Outdoors

Almost exactly 120 years ago, on April 30, 1894, a group of prominent, local citizens held a meeting to launch what is now one of the oldest land preservation societies in the country.

The Andover Village Improvement Society, or AVIS as it is known, was founded by a diverse group that came together after an ad was placed in the Andover

Townsmen seeking people interested in “the planting of shade trees, the protection of those already planted, (and) the reclaiming and care of unsightly spots.”

Apparently, Andover, and many other communities across the country at the time, had gone to decay.

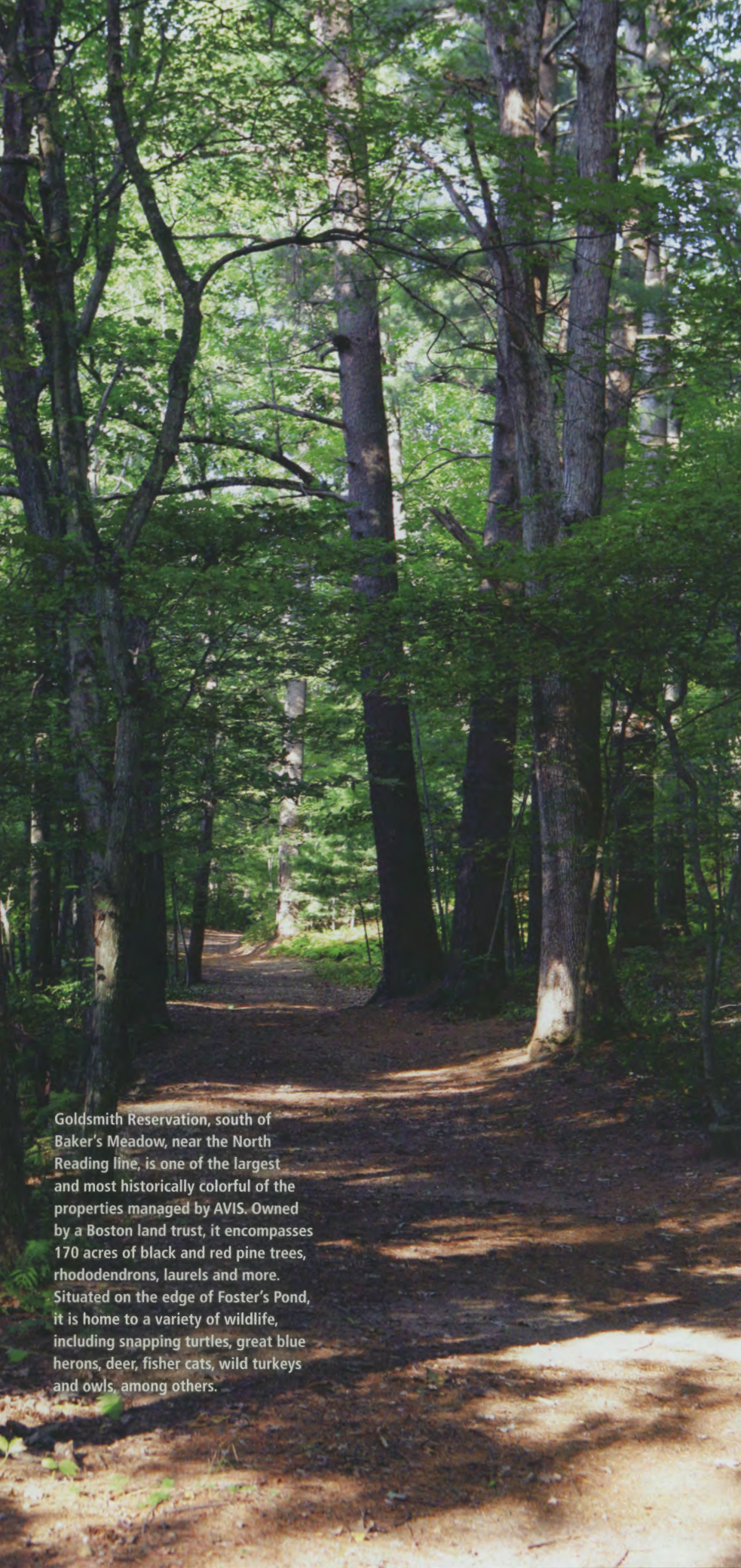
As chronicled in Juliet Haines Moford’s book, “AVIS, A History in Conservation,” a letter to the Townsmen editor

around that time lamented how Andover, once popular with tourists from Boston, was no longer attractive and was repelling visitors.

“You have spoiled all those charming drives that we loved so well,” Sarah Nelson Carter wrote in her letter. “Our roads are stony and dusty in the hot season.



MAIN PHOTO: Foster’s Pond as seen from Bessie’s Point in Goldsmith Woodlands in Andover.
TOP: Scenes from AVIS properties.



Goldsmith Reservation, south of Baker's Meadow, near the North Reading line, is one of the largest and most historically colorful of the properties managed by AVIS. Owned by a Boston land trust, it encompasses 170 acres of black and red pine trees, rhododendrons, laurels and more. Situated on the edge of Foster's Pond, it is home to a variety of wildlife, including snapping turtles, great blue herons, deer, fisher cats, wild turkeys and owls, among others.

Our roadsides have been so mutilated that they are noticeable for unsightliness rather than beauty.”

Clearly the need for action was urgent.

From that meeting in late April 1894, AVIS – an organization based on the Laurel Hill Association of Stockbridge, Mass., the oldest village beautification society in the country – was born. Closer to home, North Andover had created its own improvement society in 1885, which no longer owns property and which has become more of a trails organization. (*See related story.*)

AVIS, however, continues to function as a land-preservation organization, working annually with town leaders to acquire more property while constantly improving the 1,100 acres under its aegis.

Although its early ambitions were for improvement of downtown sidewalks and streets, its goals, as adopted in its constitution on May 7, 1894, went well beyond the confines of the village.

Its statement of intent, as published in Mofford's history of AVIS, included weed eradication, street grading and other duties: “We mean to work ‘til ... every nook and corner (is) beautiful; In short, ‘til art combined with nature shall have rendered our town the most beautiful and attractive spot in our ancient Commonwealth.”

Among the 40 people who gathered in April 1894 to kick off AVIS' creation were educators, scholars, theologians, architects, clergymen, industrialists, businessmen and newsmen. In fact, the editor of the Andover Townsman at the time, John Cole, called the group to order that evening.

LEARN MORE

The Andover Trail Guide, 4th edition, describes the major reservations in Andover, including AVIS properties, town- and state-owned land and Trustees of Reservations property. In addition to trail maps, the guide contains brief descriptions of each reservation and indicates where to park. For more information on acquiring the guide and to learn more about AVIS properties, visit www.avisandover.org.

“AVIS, A History in Conservation,” by Juliet Haines Mofford, available at Memorial Hall Library in Andover, is a treasure trove of information about the organization, its history and the people behind it. The only downfall is that it only goes up to the 1970s, while AVIS has continued to acquire more property.



Courtesy: Andover Historical Society

ABOVE: The plaque and the boulder at Indian Ridge Woods commemorate the hard work done by Alice Buck, who led a group of local women in preserving the prized hiking spot in 1893. **LEFT:** The saving of Indian Ridge Woods, seen here at the turn of the last century, became a cause célèbre among Andover residents.

The list of luminaries read like a who's who of Andover society, according to Mofford's book, as Cole was joined by Cecil F.P. Bancroft, then headmaster of Phillips Academy, along with architect Perley Gilbert, clergyman Frank Shipman of South Church, Warren Fales Draper of the Andover Press, and businessman J.W. Barnard, a shoe manufacturer.

The group's first president was William

Goldsmith, an Andover native who went to Phillips Academy and then Harvard University. He returned to town to become principal of Punchard Free School and later a science instructor at Phillips before returning to Punchard School and eventually becoming the town's postmaster.

AVIS went through a rocky period in the late 1800s and early 1900s, beset by lack of funds and seemingly struggling

from an identity crisis.

And then came Indian Ridge.

An impressive leap

For years, the geologic anomaly known as Indian Ridge had been a prized destination for scientists and outdoor enthusiasts from all over the world. According to another Mofford book, "Andover Massachusetts: Historical Selections from Four Centuries," Indian Ridge – made up

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of 23 acres off Reservation Road – had been studied by scientists who were hotly debating the new theory of glaciation.

A theory now taken for granted, glaciation had left an indelible mark on this section of Andover. According to Mofford's book: "The winding, forested ridge in the center of South Parish ... had been created by glacial deposits formed by the ice sheet that once covered the northern part of the continent."

She went on to write: "Many (scientists) traveled to Andover to study glacial evidence in kettle holes and this 500-foot high moraine created by the glacier's retreat at Indian Ridge."

The towering ridge also attracted health-conscious residents, who used the trails up to and along the glacial outcropping as a sort of early gym. Local physicians, in fact, prescribed daily walks up Indian Ridge for their patients.

Samuel Farrar, a trustee and treasurer of Phillips Academy and Andover Seminary, called Indian Ridge "a panacea for every ill that flesh is heir to." When asked the secret of his longevity, Farrar, who remained vigorous into his 90s, Mofford wrote that he replied, "I saw all my own wood, I work in my garden an hour every day, and I have walked twice a day around Indian Ridge for 50 years."

But in 1896, it came to the attention of town residents that Andover's "beloved hiking spot," as Mofford put it, was going to be sold, its trees cut and the sand and gravel left behind by the last Ice Age excavated, to be used for roads and other industrial needs.

Four local women, Alice Buck, Susan Black, Salome Marland and Emma Lincoln, appealed to the town's residents to save Indian Ridge. They were apparently quite media-savvy, having articles printed in *Harper's Weekly*, the *New York Evening Post* and several Boston newspapers.

They enlisted the help of the Andover Townsman, whose editor in the fall of 1896 wrote an editorial calling on AVIS to come to Indian Ridge's rescue: "Cannot AVIS accomplish something in preserving a string along by the road if the rest must really go? Woodman – spare that tree!"

It wasn't all left to AVIS, however. The rallying cry for Indian Ridge was heard across town and across the world. Emily Means, the headmistress of Abbot Academy, now part of Phillips, was instrumental in raising awareness – and money – to save the geologic treasure. She was able to amass \$1,861.50, which was put toward the ultimate purchase price of \$3,500 for the land.



Alan French, former chairman of the Bay Circuit Alliance, walks along a portion of the 200-mile arc trail that travels through Harold Parker State Forest.

Former residents now living as far away as Germany wrote letters and sent donations, according to Mofford. In December 1897, the deed was passed and the heirs of Hartwell Abbott sold the property. Originally owned by the Indian Ridge Association, the property is now owned and maintained by AVIS after a merger between the two organizations.

Today, a plaque memorializing Alice Buck, one of Andover's first conservationists, is mounted on a boulder in the reservation.

Baker's Meadow

The successful fight to save Indian Ridge galvanized conservation-minded residents. By the 1950s, during a post-World War II building boom, they were ready to expand their reach.

In 1956, AVIS successfully petitioned the state Legislature to amend its charter so it could buy land "for park and recreational use" and to "acquire wetlands and

marshes for the conservation of wildlife and plant life in their natural state."

Not wasting any time, in September 1958, AVIS acquired Baker's Meadow, a 59-acre woodland anchored by a pond that now attracts all sorts of wildlife and is habitat for dozens of bird species.

The property, recently augmented by the 9-acre Sakowich Reservation, is adjacent to Indian Ridge and their trail systems link up at two points crossing Reservation Road. In addition, Indian Ridge is linked to the Bay Circuit Trail, which winds its way through town as it heads north to Newburyport and south to Duxbury.

A hike around the pond with AVIS members Mike Timko and John Hess provides an up-close look at the property.

The Sakowich Reservation is technically located at 26 Oriole Drive, but what one finds there now is nothing more than a gravel road and a cleared lot. According to the AVIS website, "this land was developed as a subdivision in 1957. Gladys and

Tony Sakowich purchased eight house lots and built a home in the middle of them in 1961. In 2011, they generously donated their 9-acre house lot at the northwest corner of the pond to AVIS. As part of the agreement, AVIS demolished the house and restored the site to the original contours. The blacktop driveway was removed to aid rainwater absorption.”

The only sign that remains of the couple’s presence at the site is a plaque commemorating their generous gift. It is also a fitting place to start a hike into Baker’s Meadow, as it is on a hillside sloping down toward the pond.

The trail winds down to the pond, encircling it. Along the way – about an hour is needed to get all the way around the pond – alert visitors might see geese, swans, signs of beavers, numerous songbirds and assorted flora and fauna.

About midway through the walk, hikers will cross an earthen dam with a concrete spillway, a remnant of a 1920s-era muskrat farm.

Baker’s Meadow was named for Dr. Symonds Baker, who owned the area during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, according to the indispensable Andover Trails Guide (\$15).

In the 1920s, the property was owned

OTHER NOTABLE AVIS PROPERTIES

Skug River/Hammond Reservation: Combined with two, town-owned properties — the Mary French and Jenkins Quarry reservations, this 75-acre property is adjacent to Harold Parker State Forest. It has some historic features, including massive stone walls from an old mill, and a soapstone quarry, as well as some interesting history, as it was a station for the Underground Railroad.

Purdon and Lupine reservations: These 11.4 acres are contiguous to a much larger, 450-acre property owned by Phillips Academy, with pine woodlands, wetlands, pheasants, foxes and a large stand of lady slippers, according to the Andover Trails Guide. Lupine Reservation has fishing spots along the Shawsheen River.

Harold Rafton Reservation: This 226-acre property combined with the adjacent Fish Brook Wetlands and Virginia Hammond Reservation, owned by the Andover Conservation Commission, together create an enormous expanse. In fact, Rafton is the largest of the 25 AVIS properties. It was once farmland and woodlot, with old stone walls remaining as evidence of the area’s agricultural past, according to the Trails Guide. It is filled with maple, birch, oak, hickory and sassafras trees, along with white pines and hemlock groves. Some of the wildlife making their home there include deer, beaver, fox and numerous bird species.

Deer Jump and Spalding reservations: These two properties, along with the 76-acre Merrimack River Reservation, create a nearly 250-acre property following the southern bank of the Merrimack River, from Tewksbury to Lawrence.

by Alexander Henderson, who dammed a stream running through the meadow to create what is now the pond. The pond was used to raise muskrats, which were valued for their furs. During the Depression, however, the market for furs plummeted and Henderson gave up on muskrats.

Henderson maintained the pond for

years as a habitat for songbirds and other wildlife, before donating the property to AVIS in 1958.

The trail meanders along the edge of the pond, and turns south back toward the Sakowich Reservation, also following the bank of the pond. Hikers may pass by the home of Evelyn and the recently

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deceased Al Retelle, who had been wardens of the reservation for years.

AVIS wardens live near the group's reservations and can keep an eye on things, maintaining the trails, organizing cleanup parties and cutting and marking new pathways. The warden system was started in the 1970s, and continues to this day, with nearly 50 people entrusted to keep AVIS properties clean and accessible. (For more, including a list of wardens, see avisandover.org.)

Goldsmith Reservation

South of Baker's Meadow, near the North Reading line, lies one of the largest and most historically colorful AVIS-managed properties in town.

Goldsmith Reservation, which is actually owned by a Boston land trust, but managed by AVIS, encompasses 170 acres of black and red pine trees, rhododendrons, laurels and more. Situated at the edge of Foster's Pond, it is home to a variety of wildlife, including snapping turtles, great blue herons, deer, fisher cat, wild turkeys and owls, among others.

It is easily accessible, with a well-marked trailhead off Route 28 near Old County Road, just north of the Route 125 junction. As soon as hikers enter the property, just a hundred yards in or so, it

is difficult if not impossible to hear any sounds from the nearby roads.

The trail is wide and well-marked, and mostly easy to hike, as much of it is covered with a carpeting of pine needles. The so-called Pine Trail curves around toward Bessy's Point, or Bessie's Point, depending on which sign you're viewing. The red pines that mark this area were planted by Bessie Goldsmith years ago and are good-sized now. In fact, many of the trees in the reservation were planted by Goldsmith, who painstakingly managed her property.

The trail rises slightly to a small bluff overlooking Foster's Pond. It was here that Goldsmith had her cabin, one of many that were once located on the property and rented for years to city dwellers who would come to the reservation in the summer, taking the train from Boston and then a buggy to their oases in the woods.

The hike to Journey's End, meanwhile, takes about a half-hour, depending on how fast you go and how many stops you make. Dropping down to the end of the trail, a bench and an expansive view of the lake beckons hikers to stop and take it all in. Anyone who makes it that far should be sure to take the boardwalk. This trail was constructed by Boy Scouts and crosses over Foster's Pond itself, linking a

NORTH ANDOVER TRAILS COMMITTEE

Andover is not the only community to put a premium on open-space preservation. In fact, the North Andover Improvement Society was created in 1885 with an eye toward preserving the "natural beauties and history of North Andover."

It is still a nonprofit, but it doesn't own any property. The working arm of the group is now known as Friends of North Andover Trails. President Glen Aspeslagh says originally the organization did own some property, but its primary mission was in setting up the Old Town Common and maintaining Patriots Park near the library.

The trails group formed about 15 years ago, but recently has been reinvigorated.

In recent years, the trails organization has worked hard to identify and maintain trails throughout the town, including those that link with surrounding communities.

The group's website, fonat.org, is filled with information about the rich history of the town's open spaces as well as more than a dozen maps.

The website carries a copy of a brochure created by Aspeslagh, with photos, of the Cold War-era Perimeter Acquisition Radar site partially constructed by the federal government in the late-1960s at the end of Sharpner's Pond Road. It was to be a radar system that tracked incoming Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, or ICBMs. The project was never completed. All that remains is one huge hole in the ground filled with water and a more or less denuded site that looks like an old gravel excavation.

The trails group has become very active in the last couple years, with numerous hikes and other activities for anyone interested in getting outside and learning about North Andover's natural history.

Aspeslagh has been working hard to raise awareness about some of the gems in North Andover since taking over as president 2 1/2 years ago. He and the other 32 dues-paying members sponsor guided hikes on the second Sunday of every month, which draw as many as 50 people.

"Typically we work on maintaining trails on town land, making them passable, building boardwalks and bridges over wet areas, and occasionally adding new trails," he says.

The next big project is a North Andover trails guide.

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series of islands and marshy areas back to the main trail. Again, the views are great and it's a good place to look for birds, including egrets, herons and ducks.

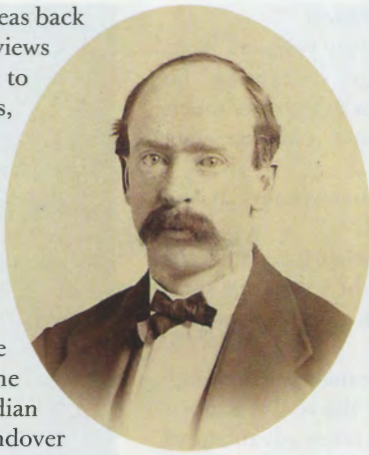
The history of the Goldsmith property is intertwined with the history of AVIS, since it is on land once owned by Bessie Goldsmith, herself the daughter of William Goldsmith, the first president of the land preservation group. She was a member of both the Indian Ridge Association and the Andover Village Improvement Society, serving in leadership roles in both groups.

She was ultimately a fierce protector and steward of the Goldsmith Reservation, threatening to arrest people who trespassed on the property while also cutting fallen trees, planting new ones and generally maintaining the property meticulously.

In 1977, AVIS became caretakers of the property, with funds for its maintenance coming from the Boston trust.

AVIS today

The organization continues to grow and prosper. In fact, this may be one of the most productive eras ever for the



Courtesy: Andover Historical Society

William G. Goldsmith and his daughter, Bessie, were among the earliest conservationists in Andover.

historic land trust.

During the annual dinner held earlier this spring at the Log Cabin function hall located on a wooded section of the Phillips Academy campus off Highland Road, about 100 people enjoyed cocktails and a meal before hearing a talk about beavers from noted expert Dr. Jonathan Lyon of the Merrimack College Biology Department.

As AVIS members milled around the rustic setting, with logs burning in the

stone fireplace, many swapped stories about their favorite places to hike or cross-country ski.

"I love Baker's Meadow and Indian Ridge," says Kay Berthold Fishman, a board member who serves as clerk for the AVIS trustees. "My father was on the board, and I grew up there. I used to walk there a lot, but every reservation has unique qualities. It depends on the time of year and what you're looking for."

Ron Hilbink, a 20-year resident of Andover, agrees, saying Baker's Meadow has "so much wildlife ... every time you go there you see something different."

Peggy Keck, a trustee emeritus who has a 45-acre reservation named after her at the junction of Route 125 and Gould Road, shares her efforts to protect the property, starting with just a few acres and eventually expanding it to its current size.

Fishman says one of the goals of AVIS over the years has been to acquire properties that are adjacent to or near existing AVIS or town-owned conservation land so that the local trail network can continue to grow.

"Five acres by itself is not valuable to

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us," she says. "If it's connected to another piece, it gives us more trails."

She added that properties get added every year, and nobody is ever quite sure when it's going to happen.

"You can work on something for years, and all of the sudden, it's there," she says, noting that the Sakowich property was one of those lots that kind of appeared magically from the couple who donated the land adjacent to Baker's Meadow.

The roughly 800 members of the organization are justifiably proud of the fact that AVIS holds a significant portion of the open space in town. Hilbink and Fishman say that 20 percent of the town is open space or conservation land, with about half of that owned by AVIS.

David Dargie, land manager for AVIS, helps oversee the 46 wardens, two rangers and a few other land management folks needed to handle the 1,100 acres of property.

While he says he loves all the reservations, his home is the Goldsmith Reservation, where he lives in a house at the entrance to the property. The house is actually owned by AVIS. One of the perks of his volunteer job is that he gets to live there.

Another multi-generation AVIS member, his father Phil was the warden of

Harold Rafton Reservation.

"We get more land every year, and build more trails and bridges every year," he says. "We purchase or acquire as much land as we can and make it all accessible to the public."


There were some newcomers at the annual dinner as well.

Trustee Denise Boucher has only lived in Andover about eight years, but soon after arriving in town, she began hiking the trails.

"There were all these maintained trails," she says, adding that she is also a cross-country skier who has taken advantage of Goldsmith as well as the new Vale Trail, which hugs the Shawsheen River. "I really like it," she says. "There is such different scenery — there's a clearing, fields, the river, a boardwalk and a bridge."

Land acquisition manager Susan Stott says the organization is constantly adding new properties.

Most recently, the group picked up some property near Ironstone Farm and the John Gardner Reservation and is in negotiations with the Melmark School off River Road for some more land that could link up with Deer Jump Reservation along the Merrimack River.

"We'd like to protect more," she says. 



Goldsmith Woodlands, which encompasses Bessie's Point, seen here overlooking Foster's Pond, is known for its views.



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