# Table Of Contents

- **Forward** ................................................................. 2
- **Historical Perspective** ............................................... 2
- **Map of Essex – November 1830** ................................. 2
- **Map of Manchester – December 1830** ............................ 2
- **Cathedral Pines – A 19th-Century Beginning** ............... 3
- **Map of Manchester – December 1872** .......................... 3
- **The Brass Plaque Commemorating 1879** ...................... 4
- **The Big Change – Route 128** ...................................... 4
- **Wilderness Conservation Area** .................................... 5
- **Cathedral Pines Conservation Area and 1879 Brass Plaque** ........................................................................... 6
- **Cedar Swamp Conservation Area** .................................. 6
- **Heron Pond within Cedar Swamp** .................................. 6
- **Boardwalk within Cedar Swamp** ................................... 6
- **Millstone Hill Summit – Millstone Hill Conservation Area** ................................................................. 8
- **Cheever Commons Conservation Area** .......................... 8
- **Anne’s Woods – Dug Hill-Spruce Swamp** ..................... 10
- **Woodland Nature Pictures** ......................................... 10
- **Woodland Nature Pictures** ......................................... 11
- **Woodland Nature Pictures** ......................................... 12
- **Old Mill Dam** ............................................................. 13
- **Old Manchester-Essex Road** ........................................ 14
- **Granite Stone Town Marker** ......................................... 14
- **Monster Rock** ............................................................ 15
- **Ship Rock** ................................................................... 16
- **Baby Rock** .................................................................. 16
- **The Rock Garden** ......................................................... 17
- **Lichen Ledge** .............................................................. 17
- **Paul D. Knowlton Woodland** ........................................ 18
- **Julius F. Rabardy Memorial Park & Nature Preserve** ................................................................. 19
- **Bear’s Den** ................................................................. 20
- **Homestead Trail – Troop 3, Boy Scout Bridge** .............. 20
- **Bishop’s Grave** ............................................................ 21
- **Pulpit Rock** ................................................................. 22
- **Louisa V. Conrad Woodland** ........................................ 22
- **Warren-Weld Woodland (ECGA)** ................................ 22
- **Agassiz Rock Reservation (TTOR)** ............................... 23
- **Little Agassiz Rock (TTOR)** .......................................... 23
- **Big Agassiz Rock (TTOR)** ............................................ 23
- **Powder House Hill Reservation** .................................... 24
- **The Powder House** ....................................................... 24
- **Hoar Memorial Trail** .................................................... 18
- **Dorothy M. Cobb Bench** ............................................. 18
Forward

The reason for this guide is simple: There are many miles of trails within the woodlands of Manchester and Essex, which contain wonderful locations of keen interest. However, there has been no common source document that has attempted to describe the trails and points of interest. This guide is an attempt to accomplish that, showing the locations, telling the stories and describing the significance behind them.

Many individuals contributed stories, prose, facts and figures about these woodlands. The goal is to be as accurate as possible, backed by historical record. However, stories change as they are passed down through the ages, and become folklore. In almost every case the events are true, but in some instances there is no historical record available to confirm or deny the stories. Regardless, we hope that you find the information about the Wilderness Conservation Area (WCA) and other properties under conservation in Essex and Manchester fascinating, educational, and entertaining.

Use this guide, along with the Manchester-Essex Hiking Trails map, to gain a feel for these woodlands as they once were, and to experience them as they are today. And please remember these simple rules:

- Stay on the trails for safety
- Respect the natural surroundings and protect their biodiversity
- Carry out what you carry in
- Most important – Enjoy yourself!

Historical Perspective

The old maps pictured here represent why it is so vital for us to protect and conserve our woods in both Manchester and Essex. They are from the original 1830 maps held in the Mass State Archives in South Boston.

In the 1820’s, towns under the direction of their Selectmen were required by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to create official town maps in order to produce a consistent set of geographical records showing borders, rivers, streams, ponds, woodlands, pastures, streets and key buildings of each town within Massachusetts. These maps show how the woods of today in Manchester and Essex, which comprise much of the WCA, are similar to what they were in 1830.

The large woodland is indicated by hand-printed trees, which look like dots in these photos. These woodlands provide vital protection to our watershed. The protected area contributes significantly to the aquifer and the reservoirs of both Manchester and Essex.

Map of Essex (Woodland section) – November 1830

In 1830, there was one mapped road to Essex from Manchester, shown in blue. The road ran from Old School Street and today’s Southern Avenue. Not shown was a more common path indigenous people used which is indicated on the Manchester – 1872 map.

Map of Manchester – December 1830
The following historical perspective comes from the writings of Helen D. Bethell, especially her entry on conservation in Manchester-by-the-Sea 1645-1995, 350 Years of History p. 120-123, published in 1995 by the town of Manchester-By-The-Sea. It also comes from data from the towns of Manchester and Essex, and key sources including The Wilderness Conservation Area Management Plan, The Trustees of Reservations, Essex County Greenbelt, the Commonwealth of Mass Archives and citizens from both towns.

Cathedral Pines – A 19th-Century Beginning

“The first recorded effort to protect natural areas for community enjoyment began more than a century ago. In those days of Victorian sensibilities and horse-and-buggy travel, afternoon drives into the countryside were very popular among summer residents. A favorite route was the narrow, curving, heavily wooded road that linked the village with South Essex.

“Upper School Street was laid out quite differently from what we know today. Across from Baker’s farm (just before Mill Street) it made a sharp left turn to pass around Shingle Place Hill, then continue northerly along the edge of Cedar Swamp. Cathedral Pines lay on the west side of Shingle Place Hill, along the bend in the old road as it turned north again.”

Manchester Map – 1872

The map, from an 1872 atlas, shows the lay of the old roads from Manchester into Essex, Gloucester and Beverly. As noted, the first official road to Essex shown on maps was School Street, which can be seen on the 1830 maps. The second road was the Old Manchester-Essex Road, which was an ancient and more commonly known trail originally used by indigenous people. It is represented on the map passing to the easterly side of Moses Hill and the westerly side Milestone Hill. For unknown reasons it was not officially documented on maps until sometime between 1866 and 1872.

“In the 19th century little, if any, thought was given to building in the woods, but residents did use the woodlots for fuel supply. Perhaps some of the large trees along the road were being cut; perhaps there was just the fear that they might be.

Enter Alice North Towne, a 24-year-old summer resident of remarkable foresight, determination, and environmental concern. In 1878 she became convinced that action was needed to protect the lovely wooded drive. At the prompting of Alice, T. Jefferson Coolidge, of Boston and Manchester, and Henry Lee, of Boston and Beverly Farms, agreed to be trustees in purchasing narrow parcels of land along the road to preserve the trees for shade and ornament.”

Thus Manchester’s Woodland Park and Essex’s Coolidge Trusts were born. The first parcels, which included the area popularly known as Cathedral Pines, were bought in 1879 and 1880 and quickly accepted by Town Meeting as deed-restricted gifts. One parcel was, in fact, bought for $1 from the Town itself! At a time when permanent preservation of land in its natural state was unusual, the cooperative approach was quite innovative. The citizens of Manchester apparently were blessed with ingenuity, as well as, a strong appreciation of natural beauty

“For another quarter of a century Messrs. Coolidge and Lee continued to acquire parcels that were accepted by Town Meeting as deed-restricted gifts. One parcel was, in fact, bought for $1 from the Town itself! At a time when permanent preservation of land in its natural state was unusual, the cooperative approach was quite innovative. The citizens of Manchester apparently were blessed with ingenuity, as well as, a strong appreciation of natural beauty”

“In the 1920’s a brass plaque inscribed:
‘To the Glory of God and For The Benefit Of Man
These Woods are Preserved Forever – 1879’;

This plaque was installed in commemoration of the first parcels of land that were bought in 1879 and given to the town of Manchester as “deed restricted” gifts, ensuring their permanent conservation. It is in an area then known as “Cathedral Pines,” along the edges of the Old Manchester Road, which was popular for scenic “countryside” carriage drives between Manchester and Essex.

The plaque was stolen in the 1980’s, found again a few years later, and re-affixed where it remains today.

Source: Bethell, Helen, 1995. Conservation. Manchester-By-The-Sea 1645 to 1955, p. 120. Manchester, MA: Town of Manchester

The Big Change—Route 128

“Until after World War II Manchester’s daily contacts with the wider region were fairly limited. Most comings and goings by private or public transportation followed that coastline, ignoring the great woods the separated Manchester from Essex to the north. In the 1950’s all this changed. Construction of Route 128 brought upheaval. The highway cut through the northerly part of town, drawing traffic to the once quiet woods and swamps, and raised the possibility of large-scale commercial development.

“In 1960 Town Meeting created a Conservation Committee to work on open space preservation. (The present Conservation Commission was not authorized until 1972.) In 1965 Town Meeting voted tax-title to parcels on Millstone Hill and Cheever Commons to conservation, and in 1968 added Cedar Swamp.

“What to do about the many small woodlots owned by descendants of old Manchester families was still in question. Many people wanted their parcels preserved. Though they often were uncertain as to exactly where the boundaries lay, they knew the land was extremely rocky, steep, and/or wet, with beautiful wildflowers and song-birds—land totally unsuitable for development.

“In 1963 Frances L. Burnett, Albert M. Creighton and George G. Loring rose to the challenge by creating the Manchester Conservation Trust, a non-profit land trust that would be able to acquire by gift or purchase land suitable for permanent preservation. The Trust would draw support for its work from conservation-minded members. Gifts of woodlots came quickly.

“Thanks to this cooperative effort between the Trust and the towns of Manchester and Essex, a comprehensive Wilderness Conservation Area has been created within the Manchester-Essex woods. A network of foot trails was laid out in the 1960’s. The Nature Conservancy, which protects important natural lands throughout the United States, ranks this remarkable woodland among the top twenty natural areas in Massachusetts.”


In contrast to the 1872 map that shows no highway interference with the geography and wildlife habitat, current Google maps show how the Route 128 highway has cut off the Old Essex Manchester Road and Old School Street. This created the School Street access to Southern Avenue that exists today at the Exit 16 interchange and the Pine Street interchange at Exit 15.

Route 128 brought ease of commerce, economic growth and transit into the Cape Ann area. With that also came the disruption of ancient eco-systems and the potential for further development. As a result, preserving this ecologically important land and wildlife habitat in Manchester and Essex has been the most important mission of MECT. Carrying this mission forward while promoting the land’s use for education, research and quiet recreation will remain central to the conservation trust for the towns of Manchester and Essex.
Wilderness Conservation Area (WCA) –
The Manchester-Essex Woods – North of Route 128

More than 3,400 acres of extensive woodlands join Essex and Manchester. The woodlands stretch from Hamilton in the west to Gloucester in the east: from Rocky Hill Road, Essex to Route 128 in Manchester. In this area MECT owns approximately 1,100 acres of woodland. Essex County Greenbelt Association, The Trustees of Reservation (TTOR) and the two towns also protect land in the area. MECT oversees a network of old roads, cart ways and foot trails that provide access from both towns and safeguards the area’s exceptional wildlife, geology, and watershed values.

The Woods are a truly beautiful, wild, and quiet place for walking, cross-country skiing, snow shoeing, science study, educational research, nature appreciation and more. The terrain varies from cliffs and rocky outcrops to red maple swamps and white pine, hemlock, and oak forests, interspersed with beech, maples, shrubs and many wildflower species. The overall area under MECT management is outlined in the map pictured below and the WCA area is shown in the outline box. The map is available from MECT and provides excellent detail on the trail system.

These Woods contain several historic sites that are described further in this guide. They also provide critical public health benefits by filtering rainwater that becomes public drinking water and by storing storm water during heavy rainfall events. Comprising large, unfragmented open space and undisturbed soils, these Woods also contain unusual plant and animal species. Scientific studies have documented the presence of rare animals and plants. The Natural Heritage Program of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, The Nature Conservancy, and TTOR have long supported efforts to save the Woods. Details of the biodiversity and land management of the WCA are available by download from the www.MECT.org website titled the Wilderness Conservation Area Management Plan. Prepared for: Manchester-Essex Conservation Trust, May 2013 by Entrust.

There are over 35 miles of interconnected trails and locations to explore in the WCA woodland alone.

Parking to access the WCA and Manchester/Essex Woods are available at six main locations (see corresponding numbered locations on map):

1. Pine Street/Upper Pipeline Rd., next to the off ramp of Exit 16 South, with space for 6-8 cars parked along the road.
2. WCA gateway at Cedar Swamp, north of Exit 15 on Southern Avenue, with space for 18 cars.
3. Old Manchester Essex Road in Essex, with limited space for two cars.
4. Andrews Street in Essex just past Homestead Trailhead, with parking for 4 cars.
5. Pond Street in Essex with limited parking for 2 cars.
6. Apple Street in Essex with limited parking for 2-4 cars.
Cathedral Pines Conservation Area and 1879
Brass Plaque – Town of Manchester Conservation Commission (11.16 acres)

To view the brass plaque one needs to enter Old School Street from the main WCA gateway at the Cedar Swamp entrance into the Manchester-Essex Woods just north of Route 128. From the trailhead, walk about 0.25 miles. Stay left at the fork where the dirt connector road to Old Manchester-Essex Road turns to the right.

Then walk approximately another 100 yards on Old School Street. The plaque is visible on a large boulder facing Old School Street and the highway directly beyond it. You can imagine that before 1953 Old School Street extended diagonally across the highway to today’s School Street at the junction of Mill Street (see the 1872 Atlas Map).

Cedar Swamp Conservation Area – Town of Manchester Conservation Commission (32.94 acres)

Heron Pond in the Cedar Swamp Conservation Area – This lovely wildlife pond was once a wooded wetland much like the rest of Cedar Swamp. It was created inadvertently through commercial gravel removal in the 1960’s, when Cedar Swamp was explored as a supplementary drinking water resource for Manchester and Gloucester. Water from the aquifer beneath marine clays rose to fill the gravel pit, which is now known as Heron Pond. The gravel removal and alternative water source project was abandoned. Beaver activity here enriches wildlife habitat, and the original Atlantic white cedar trees are beginning to make a comeback in the nearby swamp.

The Boardwalk within Cedar Swamp – The Cedar Swamp Boardwalk is 200m long, and crosses over Cedar Swamp past Heron Pond, an area of rich wildlife diversity, particularly known for the large number of bird species found there at certain times of the year. Visitors are rewarded with excellent bird watching and views of Heron Pond and the surrounding wetland. It is also the main access point to the WCA trail system.

The Boardwalk is located near the main parking entrance for the Wilderness Conservation Area along Southern Avenue. The Boardwalk is a highlight of the WCA and is an easy 0.2 mile walk along Old School Street from
the main parking entrance. Boardwalk construction was funded through a major donation by an MECT trustee and installed by a hired contractor in 1997.

The Boardwalk (winter)

Baltimore oriole

Millett’s Brook feeds into the Sawmill Brook, which runs through Cedar Swamp and Cathedral Pines.

Sawmill Brook then passes through Beaverdam Swamp and under Route 128 near the Manchester Athletic Club. It travels south through the Essex County Club, where it merges with Causeway Brook. It continues between the Manchester-Essex Regional Middle/High School and the Manchester Memorial Elementary School, then through the center of Manchester until it spills into Manchester’s inner harbor at Central and Elm Street.

The WCA provides the foundation of the Sawmill Brook watershed and the underground aquifer. This watershed supplies the Lincoln Street well that, according to Manchester DPW, provides up to 40% of the water used by Manchester residents and businesses.

Downy Woodpecker
Ovenbird (well camouflaged)

Millstone Hill Summit – Millstone Hill Conservation Area – Town of Manchester Conservation Commission (16.64 acres)

Within the Millstone Hill Conservation Area is the summit of Millstone Hill. It is about a 1.4 mile round trip hike from the Wilderness Conservation Area Gateway parking area, and is the highest peak in the WCA and Manchester rising to 220 feet. The hike to the top is relatively steep when ascending from the eastern section on the Millstone Hill Trail. A more gradual alternative to the top of Millstone Hill is via Prospect Ledge Trail; this trailhead is located on the Old Manchester-Essex Road.

The Millstone Hill summit is a large open area of granite where you can look east across part of Cedar Swamp, eastern Manchester and into the western Gloucester woods. On the summit you will find scrub oaks, white and pitch pines and plenty of mosses, lichens and ground plants.

On sunny days, Millstone Hill’s summit is a nice place to rest and relax in the late morning and afternoon.

Cheever Commons Conservation Area – Town of Manchester Conservation Commission (37.33 acres)

In 1965 Town Meeting voted tax-title parcels on Millstone Hill and Cheever Commons to conservation. The most direct access into Cheever Commons Conservation Area is from the Pine Street parking location. You can take the Ancient Line Trail with unique twists, turns, ups and downs through pine and hardwood forest and wetlands to Cheever Commons.

Ancient Line Trail turn near Pine Street
Ancient Line Trail (hill scramble)

Alternatively, you can diverge off the Ancient Line Trail and onto the Spruce Swamp Trail to get there. The main attraction of the Cheever Commons Conservation Area is the varied terrain. This challenging ridgeline scramble descends into an emerald green moss covered ravine, similar to those found in larger mountain ravines at higher elevations. It is a diverse, beautiful and vigorous trail to hike. In the winter months the Cheever Commons Trail, accessed from Ancient Line Trail, and surrounding area provide a magnificent opportunity for snowshoeing.
Anne’s Woods – Dug Hill-Spruce Swamp – WCA Manchester

Anne’s Woods is in the WCA off upper Pine Street and Upper Pipeline Road. It is located north of exit 16 off route 128 with parking along the road. The nondescript trail entrance runs into this area between Spruce Swamp and the exit 16 Southbound off ramp guard rail. The best access into Anne’s Woods is from the Dug Hill Trail near the Pine Street kiosk.

Anne’s Woods was named by Frances Burnett, one of MECT’s founding trustees, to honor her sister, Anne Gallagher. Anne, who died when a young mother, loved this vibrant wildflower site.

A new beaver dam at Dug Hill-Spruce Swamp elevated the water level in the swamp area next to Pine Street.

Beavers like this one shown, down trees for food and shelter.

In spring this is a wonderful location to view a variety of wildflowers. Wildflowers observed here and throughout the woods, include Dwarf Ginseng, Bearberry,

Partridgeberry, Canada Mayflower, Pink Lady-slipper, Bunchberry, Wood Anemone, Rattlesnake Plantain,
Wintergreen, Solomon’s-seal, Indian Cucumber-root, Marsh Marigold, Skunk Cabbage, Goldthread, and Lowbush Blueberry. Also seen are a wide variety of mosses, ferns, and other ground plants.

Spring is a particularly enjoyable time as life renews and the calls of migrating birds fill the air.

Magnolia Warbler
Eastern Towhee

Growing fern (fiddleheads)

Fungi

Pink Lady’s Slipper

Yellowthroat
Old Mill Dam – WCA MECT, Manchester

The most scenic way to the Old Mill Dam is to enter the Wilderness Conservation Area from the Pine Street parking location and follow the Dug Hill Trail through Anne’s Woods until you reach the old saw mill cart road, which is now a fire road. Take a right at this junction and continue for roughly 0.2 miles to reach the Old Mill Dam on the right. A more direct route is to follow the Ancient Line Trail from Pine Street and continue straight on the fire road at the point where the Ancient Line Trail turns right into the center of the WCA. Follow the fire road another 150 yards and the Old Saw Mill area will be on the left.

This site contains remnants of an old sawmill and dam built in 1720’s by Robert Morgan and Nathaniel and John Stone. According to an early deed for this property, the parties had “mutually agreed … to erect and build a saw mill and make a convenient dam to raise a head of water to drive said mill… upon [this]… tract of land.” The plans for the dam are described in the deed.

There are remnants of a stone retaining wall just above this flow of water pictured that was likely the dam, the plans for which were described in the deed.

The property was owned by “the Township of Ipswich, in the County of Essex in the Province of Massachusetts Bay in New England near Manchester towns line contriving about nineteen acres be it more or less.” It was sold to the three men noted on January 4th, 1723. At the time this area was a colonial province of England. Today the property abuts the town of Wenham.

Source: Salem Deeds 43:198, 43:199

Old Mill Dam – spillway under the bridge

The stream and surrounding swamp area are part of a vital watershed that also includes Gravelly Pond, Round Pond and Chebacco Lake. Gravelly Pond and Round Pond serve as key water reservoirs to the Town of Manchester.
Old Manchester-Essex Road – WCA MECT, Manchester/Essex

We call this unpaved way the “Old Manchester-Essex Road”. Prior to the 20th century, this roughly 1.5 mile narrow way was used primarily by woodlot owners as a cart path for hauling firewood and timber to village sites, and by occasional travelers on foot or on horseback. The Andrews Street entrance in Essex has a stone marker, installed in 2008, with the same inscription as the original 1879 plaque located in Cathedral Pines. It too serves as a reminder of why this land was preserved in the first place.

In 1905, a group of summer residents – accustomed to taking carriage rides on hot days along shady ways – grew annoyed at having to share public roads with the latest mechanical marvel: the noisy, smelly automobile. Under the leadership of William D. Sohier of Manchester, they sought permission from woodlot owners to widen and reroute the Old Road for recreational carriage use only.

Granite Stone Town Marker – About 1.0 mile from the WCA entrance in Manchester and a half mile from the Andrews Street entrance in Essex is an old stone border marker for Essex and Manchester. The stone marker was installed in 1906, the date chiseled into its face on both sides. The letters “E” and “M, also chiseled on opposite faces of the stone, represent the property boundary of each town. The selectmen from each town periodically walked the bounds to be certain that no infringement of town land had occurred.
In early 1989, vandals entered the Woods from the north and dislodged the stone, dragging it about 200 feet northward into Essex. MECT brought this problem to the attention of the Essex selectmen. They had the marker returned to its original position, and MECT was authorized to install a gate across the road near Andrews Street to prevent further intrusions into the woods by four-wheeled vehicles.

**Monster Rock** – MECT Manchester

Monster or Frog Rock encourages families traveling on the Old Manchester-Essex Road to look for a special boulder near the stone border marker. Kids (and adults) can decorate “Frog Rock” or “Monster Rock” to their own liking, using only natural materials. The rock is about a 1.0 mile walk from the WCA entrance on Southern Avenue and a ½ mile walk from the Andrews Street entrance in Essex.

Examples of the creative whims of children.
Ship Rock – WCA MECT, Manchester/Essex

Ship Rock is located just before the junction of Prospect Ledge Trail and Cedar Swamp Trail. It is a glacial erratic, a distinct rock carried distances and deposited by a receding glacier, that marks a distinctive spot on the Manchester-Essex town line. Markings on the rock indicated that town selectmen fulfilled their ancient duty to walk the town bounds.

Another interesting spot in this area is the small stream that runs through Cedar Swamp Trail prior to reaching Ship Rock. During the spring and after rain showers this stream expands enough to provide that serene sound of water rushing over rocks and small falls. You can sit and find tranquility while enjoying the simple sound of flowing water.

Baby Rock – WCA, Essex

Baby Rock, as it is popularly known, is a granite outcropping on a high ridge located on Baby Rock Trail. It is a landmark by virtue of the large cairn erected on it many years ago. Baby Rock can be best reached from the Andrews Street entrance by traveling on the Old Manchester-Essex Road from the north, taking the older road extension to the Baby Rock Trail. One can also reach it from the WCA entrance by taking the Baby Rock Trail from Prospect Ledge trail.

“Baby Rock” obtained its name from an incident in July of 1877, when a 2 ½ year old boy from Essex wandered from where he had been playing with another child in a neighbor’s yard. A large search party of town citizens set out to look for him immediately after his disappearance was discovered. The search for the boy continued all night, with the party carrying lanterns to illuminate the woods and trails. The following morning a cry was heard, and the boy was found uninjured (but covered with mosquito bites!), seated upon this rock, which was about a mile into the thick woods from the yard where he had been playing the previous day.

“Baby Rock” and cairn
Following the incident, a great number of townspeople visited the spot where the boy was found. They marked the spot by piling loose stones into a mound to create a cairn that dedicated the spot as “Baby’s Ledge.” The cairn of stones still stands on this rock ledge, with lichen growth that shows its age.

Source: photocopy of original article from early Manchester newspaper, “Beetle & Wedge,” August 1877.

**The Rock Garden** – WCA MECT, Essex

The “Rock Garden” is on Prospect Ledge Trail between the Cedar Swamp and Baby Rock Trails. It is a good example of a glacial moraine, which consists of debris deposited when thick glacial ice melted at the end of the Ice Age, about 12,000 years ago. The trail ascends an incline littered with small and large granite boulders. One can imagine the area as the aftermath of a mythological scene where giants had fun planting rocks all down the hill. Hence the name; “The Rock Garden.”

**Lichen Ledge** – WCA MECT, Essex

Lichens are noticeable on many glacial rocks and ledge formations within the WCA. Lichens are particularly common along the Prospect Ledge Trail, north of the Cedar Swamp Trail.
These cliffs and larger boulders are covered with various lichen, moss, and fern species. This is a unique feature on the Prospect Ledge Trail.

**Paul D. Knowlton Woodland – Essex MECT, WCA**

This land is located northwest of the Baby Rock Trail and east of the Old Manchester-Essex Road. Also known as the “Steep Pitch” lot, this 21-acre woodland in the center of the Essex Woods was set aside in 1969 in memory of Paul D. Knowlton, a young man from Essex who lost his life in Vietnam. Paul was the son of Richard D. Knowlton, one of the donors.

The lot includes a section of the Old Manchester-Essex Road that was rerouted in the beginning of the 20th century to ease the strain on carriage horses during regular summer outings. (On MECT’s map, this is the section of the Old Manchester/Essex Road that splits and is where Baby Rock and Cedar Swamp trails terminate.)

**Hoar Memorial Trail – Essex MECT, WCA**

Samuel (Sam) Hoar was an avid environmentalist who served on the board of the MECT for many years. He was also a lawyer and dedicated public servant in Essex, Hoar passed away in 2004 at the age of 76.

This trail was created by family and friends of Sam Hoar and members of Manchester-Essex Conservation Trust in his memory. The trail lies on a 10-acre parcel of land that was purchased by the Trust in 2007, and the trail was completed and a dedication ceremony conducted in 2009.

The Hoar Memorial Trail includes 12 stations that allow reflection. It is a section of the WCA that is meant to bring peace and solace for those seeking it.

This trail is best accessed from the Andrews Street entrance to the WCA in Essex. The trail starts just south beyond the WCA kiosk at that location. It begins as an easy walk for the first section and gains a moderate level of difficulty when it turns back on the opposite side of the wetland and goes up the hill into the pine forest. It then levels out and meanders through a tall pine grove until it descends rather steeply back to the Old Manchester-Essex Road, where one can turn right to return to the Andrews Street parking area. The round trip is about 0.5 to 0.75 miles. Total hike time will depend on how long you reflect at each station.

**Dorothy M. Cobb Bench – WCA MECT, Essex**

The bench sits on a parcel totaling 30 acres donated to MECT by Richard H. Cobb, of Gardiner, Maine in memory of his wife Dorothy. Funds from the MECT Save Our Woods campaign also helped protect this area. The granite bench was installed shortly after the land donation in 2010.
Dave Rimmer, Director of Land Stewardship, Essex County Greenbelt Association, was a great help during the installation of the granite bench honoring Mrs. Cobb.

This section of the woods is a peaceful and pleasant place to relax and take in the surrounding nature. Deer are commonly seen in the early morning or late afternoon.

Deer are often seen in the WCA

Julius F. Rabardy Memorial Park & Nature Preserve – MECT, Essex

The Rabardy parcel in Essex has an unusual history. In 1908, Julius Rabardy deeded a lot of 3.81 acres to the Salem French Baptist Mission with the proviso that if the church went out of business or failed to incorporate, the land would be offered to the Town of Manchester for use as a park and if the Town declined the land, it would revert to his heirs.

The records indicate that the Salem French Baptist Mission was defunct by the late 1920’s and in keeping with Julius Rabardy’s probated will, the Town of Manchester formally accepted the deed to the 3.81 acres for use as a park.

In 2011, Manchester’s Town Meeting authorized the Selectman to convey the town’s interest in the Rabardy parcel to the MECT. We were eager to keep the land in its natural state in accordance with Mr. Rabardy’s wishes, and for wildlife and watershed benefits.

To gain access into this area park along Southern Avenue at either the WCA or Agassiz Rock entrance. Rabardy Memorial Park is located on the east side of Southern Avenue. Currently, MECT has no designated trails in the woods on this side of Avenue. As a result, MECT discourages people from exploring the area unless they are already familiar with the terrain and woodland.

Red-bellied Woodpecker
Bear’s Den – WCA MECT, Essex

Bears have not lived in our local woods since colonial times. When the colonists arrived, they exterminated bears and other large predators in order to safeguard their farm animals.

According to “legend,” around the year 1700 one very canny bear was raiding Essex farms, killing valuable young animals. In early winter after a fresh snow, a young lad came upon bear tracks. He followed the tracks to the mouth of a cave, at the place we now call the Bear’s Den. He ran home to alert his family. A few weeks later, when the boy’s father was sure the bear was asleep for the winter, he gathered a few neighbors, and the party came out to the bear’s den and hunted it down. They took rifles and a torch made of a strong stick with a lump of pine-pitch at the end. When they got to the cave, they sent the boy around to the small gap in the back side. His job was to arouse the sleeping bear by poking the burning torch toward it. The men waited by the other opening to deliver the coup de grace.

This was said to be the “last bear in Essex.” The capture reportedly occasioned a great feast, as fresh bear meat was a treat. No part was wasted. The colonists used bear fat for soap and waterproofing, and the thick, soft bearskin for blankets.

Source: Verbally passed down from the late Frances Burnett to Helen Bethell; also written in the “Great Walk Through” brochure, Manchester-Essex Conservation Trust, April 2002.

Bear’s Den is an example of the amazing glacial formations that lie in our woods. They were habitats for various animal species including bear. The huge rocks that form Bear’s Den are approximately 20 feet tall and beautifully laden with moss and lichen.

The Bear’s Den is an impressive formation of granite that can be accessed from the north via the Homestead Trail and from the east on the Bear’s Den Trail, which is on the western side of the Old Manchester-Essex Road.

Homestead Trail – Troop 3, Boy Scout Bridge
Bishop’s Grave – WCA MECT, Essex

On an old cart way off Old Manchester Road, this gravestone deep in the woods inscribed with the date “1770” is somewhat mysterious.

We know from the book A Walk About Town the following; “In the fourth range of Chebacco wood-lots, number two hundred and eighty-five, as found upon the commoners book, is a spot made memorable by the fact of it containing the “Bishop’s grave.”

The ornamental back of Bishop’s Gravestone

The lot of land belonged to the heirs of the late Jonathan Story, Esq., and lies almost half-way between Chebacco Lake and the Old Manchester-Essex Road.

The history of the man buried there is obscure. As stated verbally by the late Col. David Story, while at the grave many years ago, this Mr. Bishop, then residing in the south part of town, presumably Essex, was away from home one evening making a call on a distant neighbor.

On leaving the neighbor’s house, he lost his way in the intense darkness. We hardly need to be told that a search was made, but to no avail. The body was found the next spring on the spot where the head and footstone lie, and was buried by order of the Selectmen of the town. Col. Story fixed the time at about the year 1770, although he did not claim to be accurate.

The MECT purchased this land from the Everett Burnham family of Essex, who owned it for more than a century. The year “1770” and the inscription “Bishop” can still be made out on the deteriorating headstone in the middle of the woods.

The gravestone is in the center of the WCA located on the Bishop’s Grave Cartway. Use the MECT Trail Map for navigation as the cart way can be accessed from several trails.

**Pulpit Rock – WCA MECT, Essex**

Pulpit Rock is on the Pulpit Rock Trail, and is a formation of stone that stands vertically to form a structure that resembles a pulpit. Here you can imagine yourself as a person of God “preaching” to your flock.

There is no known historical significance of this location, beyond the fact that it is a great spot to take pictures of your friends with hands raised to the heavens preaching to God, nature, or just your friends, waiting for you to come back to reality.

**Louisa V. Conrad Woodland – WCA MECT, Essex**

This woodland consists of several parcels south of Rocky Hill Road, north of Candlewood Hill and west of the Old Manchester-Essex Road and the Homestead Trail in the Essex section of the WCA. The Louisa V. Conrad Nature Preserve was acquired with funding from a bequest by Mrs. Conrad through the North Shore Garden Club. They requested the area be named to honor Mrs. Conrad.

Access to this area is at the Rocky Hill Road, Andrews Street or Apple Street parking locations. The only known trails through this preserve skirt it by way of Caesar’s Lane and Bishop’s Grave Cart way in the northern section of the WCA in Essex. The Rocky Hill Road cart path also intersects the preserve.

**Warren-Weld Woodland – Greenbelt, Essex**

A scenic wildlife corridor, this property is part of the Manchester-Essex Woodlands and is owned and under management by Essex County Greenbelt. The property consists of 106 acres of woodland that borders the northern portion of the WCA in Essex. More details and a map can be obtained at the Greenbelt website: http://www.ecga.org/explore_our_properties/view_property/1058-warren-weld_woodland

The property protects the headwaters of the Essex River, which is a mere trickle at this location, and is part of a wildlife corridor that runs south from the salt marshes of Essex into the Manchester-Essex Woods. There are several natural communities on this property, but it is predominantly oak forest. Depending on the amount of moisture in the soil, white, red, scarlet and black oaks are interspersed with black birch, red maple, beech, hemlock, white pine, and shagbark and pignut hickories. The slope of the land is generally facing north, creating a slightly cooler climate preferred by beech and hemlock.

The Warren-Weld Woodlot is an excellent spot to observe wildlife. Catbrier and low-bush blueberries provide food for many species. Deadwood hemlocks provide shelter for cavity-nesting animals, such as flying squirrels and saw-whet owls. Opossum, red fox, skunk, otter, deer and other mammals make their home in these woods.

Several natural ecosystems thrive here, contributing to a varied bird population. A shrub swamp contains several vernal pools that are breeding habitat for amphibians. Bird diversity is high due to the variety of habitats.

**Red-backed Salamander**

The best access into the Warren-Weld Woodland is from the Apple Street parking area or the parking area off Andrews Street by the Homestead Trail. Both locations are in Essex.
**Agassiz Rock Reservation (Property of The Trustees of Reservations)**

This site is not part of the Manchester-Essex Conservation Trust, but is well worth a visit. It is almost directly across from the WCA gateway entrance along Southern Avenue. Both “Little Agassiz,” perched at the summit of Beaverdam Hill, and “Big Agassiz,” hidden much lower down the hill, are astounding in their size. Big Agassiz is believed to be the largest glacial erratic boulder in Essex County.

“Ascend a small hill to where a massive granite monolith left by the last glacier juts into the sky, then pass a swamp where another huge boulder has sat as silent witness for millennia. Big and Little Agassiz Rocks are dramatic examples of giant boulders plucked from bedrock and carried far away by the last glacier. A short loop trail leads up Beaverdam Hill where you will find both Little and Big Agassiz Rock.

**Little Agassiz Rock – TTOR, Manchester**

Little Agassiz Rock appears as a giant granite monolith silhouetted against the sky. It rests - seemingly precariously - on a small jagged stone, leaving an opening below.

A short distance away, other boulders lie perched on the edge of this glaciated upland. Below, in a small shrub swamp, rests the thirty foot tall Big Agassiz Rock.

**Big Agassiz Rock – TTOR, Manchester**

No one knows how far below the ground Big Agassiz Rock is buried. As the glaciers scoured this landscape, the mass of bedrock forming the hill proved more resistant than the surrounding soil, forcing the bottom of the glacier up and over the hill. The north side was smoothed and the south side was left steep and rugged because the glacier broke off chunks of rock as it passed.

In October 1874, a group of students from the Essex Institute formally named the site to honor Louis Agassiz (1807-1873), the professor of natural history at Harvard University who first theorized that the rocks that dot New England's landscape were shaped and deposited by glaciers. Agassiz supposedly visited the site at the suggestion of its then-owner, Frederick Burnham. Agassiz found its erratics great examples to advance his theory and to bring it to the attention of science. Prior to Agassiz’s theory, it was widely believed that the scattering of rocks throughout New England was the result of Noah's great flood.”


“The famous glacial erratics in the woods east of Old School Street (on today’s Southern Avenue), noted years before by Louis Agassiz, were the first landmarks to be protected. Between 1957 and 1963 contributions of cash and woodlots in the area enabled The Trustees of Reservations to create the 109-acre Agassiz Rock Reservation in Manchester, just north of Route 128”.

MECT – Powder House Hill, central Manchester within the old Village

Powder House Hill Reservation – Town of Manchester

“For generations almost beyond count this 53-acre wooded knoll in the heart of town has been a special place. Above the village but steep enough to be off the beaten path—large enough for a sense of privacy, but not so vast as other town woodlands, Powder House Hill Reservation is an integral part of the town space.

The first two purchases were for municipal purposes. The town acquired 225 square feet for the Powder House for $10 in 1810.

The Powder House – Town of Manchester

With the War of 1812 in the offing, a state law had required every town to construct a powder house in a location that would minimize damage if an explosion occurred. Another 11,050 square feet was purchased for the town’s first standpipe in the early 1890s.

The first conservation parcel was acquired in the twentieth century. E.S. Knight, then chairman of the Board of Selectman, told Town Meeting in 1913 that timber was to be cut from a section of the hill off Friend Street; he felt that the town should not allow this. The town voted to buy 12.3 acres and the still-standing timber for $8,200—according to Mr. Knight, a “good investment.”

In 1936 another 23 acres of woodland and swamp bordering Pine Street were added. Again, this was voted by Town Meeting to prevent large-scale timbering and “preserve its natural beauties.” The cost was $3,500. Three acres of the Reservation were ceded to the Housing Authority in 1963 for construction of Newport Park, but at the same time the Reservation was enlarged with 15 acres of tax-title land. The new, privately funded Manchester Conservation Trust acquired the 9-acre, wedge-shaped Hooker Morgan Pasture in the north-west corner of the area.”


In 2014, a communications company wanted to install a 200 foot tower at the site of the existing Manchester Police and Fire department communication tower. At Town Meeting the motion for petition was denied, and the communication additions were disallowed. However, an alternative and more practical location was allowed on the standpipe at Moses Hill, not to exceed its existing height, and to be painted in order to blend in as part of the standpipe structure.

The image that follows is from a painting of the Town of Manchester from the top of Powder House Hill by Joshua Sheldon. It hangs in the Manchester Public Library.

Above is a picture of the restored Powder House, originally built in 1810, and John Huss.
Today Powder House Hill contains trails that extend north and south from Pleasant Street to Elm Street, and from west to east from Pine Street to the back of the Troop 3 Scout House on School Street and at Friend Street.

Access is possible from several points on surrounding public ways. Gentle trails lead up from Pine Street, Pleasant Street, and from behind the Scout House on School Street. Steeper trails rise from Friend Street and Elm Street. Four cars can park at the Pleasant Street entry point across from Old Essex Road.

Depending on one’s pace, a loop walk or hiking trip starting at the Pleasant Street entrance, to the Powder House and back, can take 30 to 90 minutes. Lady’s slippers, tupelo trees, tall white pines, and leafy shrubs abound in this area.

The Minnie B. Ball Nature Study area is behind Newport Park, the elderly housing complex off Pine Street. MECT also owns a 9-acre parcel in the northwest corner of the Reservation that includes a vernal pool known to support amphibian life.

**The War of 1812 and the Manchester incident.**

“Manchester Historical Society Curator, John Huss, told people about the day that the British came into the harbor and everyone trekked out to meet them with their one new shiny cannon. It was so exciting that the townspeople came to see from all around. The British saw a swarm of people and feeling out-numbered rowed back to the boat. The townspeople rejoiced and trooped back into town in victory using the only ammunition they had that day in celebration. On the route back, they found their one shiny cannon ball left behind at the side of the road. True or not, it’s a great story and even better with John’s embellishments and excellent story-telling abilities.”

Thank you for your continued support!

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