

## CURTIS HOMESTEAD CONSERVATION AREA

LAND DONORS: KEN CURTIS AND REBECCA CURTIS MEREDITH  
OWNED BY: KLT, LEEDS



Curtis Oak Island (Jane Davis)

Like much of the landscape surrounding it, KLT's Curtis Homestead Conservation Area has been in constant transition. Today, even-aged pine, mixed-aged hardwood, and mature hemlock stands dominate where there were once hayfields, pastures, orchards, and a woodlot. Three miles of trails meander through the property, crossing stone walls that are vivid reminders of Maine's 19th century era of subsistence and diversified farming.

Part of a wave of English emigration, William and Deborah Curtis moved to Maine from Tenterden, England, in the early 1800's. In 1817, they purchased land along a stream in the small town of Leeds and began clearing the land for a farm. Their farmhouse and barn, built in the 1840's, became the center of Curtis life and activity for the next 150 years, and remained standing until the 1990's.

Thin topsoil and a short growing season made farming in rural Maine a hardscrabble life, and it was no different for the Curtis family. Kenneth Curtis, who grew up on the property during its last years as a working farm, describes his childhood neighbors as hard-working and independent. Ken's father Archie "wouldn't have done anything else if he could have." To make ends meet, they raised a few dairy and beef cows and some chickens, and grew corn and beans to sell to local canneries. Ken recalls, "Virtually nothing was wasted."

During the long winters, Ken helped his father selectively log the north end of their land. This provided their yearly firewood as well as supplementary income. The wood was pulled out by horses, along a narrow logging road that forms one of the walking trails on the property today.

To escape from chores, Ken and his sister, Rebecca, spent summer afternoons exploring, picking highbush blueberries, and fishing in the small stream that runs through the property. Kenneth remembers that some of the best brook trout could be found near an old beaver dam. "The beavers made a hole and the fish liked to get into the deeper water. You could drop a line right by the beaver house and catch good size trout."

Today, walking trails follow the edge of the brook and bog where Ken and Rebecca trekked. From Curtis Rock, a large glacial erratic where Ken remembers he'd stop to catch his

breath, visitors can take in a view of the bog\* that surrounds an upland island with impressive red oaks.

Ken's parents, Archie and Harriet Curtis, continued farming until the 1960's. Looking toward the future, Ken and Rebecca wanted to honor their family's history on the property. "When we thought about how hard people had worked on the farm, the best thing we could do was leave the land in their memory." In 2000, Ken and Rebecca donated all 360 acres to the Kennebec Land Trust for permanent conservation and public use.

The landscape of the Curtis Homestead continues to evolve. Each year as forest growth reclaims more of the former farmland, its agrarian imprint fades. Visitors to the property now find a glimpse of Maine settlement history, and diverse habitats that benefit both wildlife and local residents. One local high school, Monmouth Academy, holds outdoor ecology classes here.

Elementary school students are learning about forest succession patterns on abandoned farmland, and the value of locally based sustainable forest management, logging, and lumber production. Ken Curtis and Rebecca Curtis Meredith have left a Maine legacy for generations to come.

*\*Ecologists in Maine would classify the Curtis "bog" as it is locally known, as a fen. Fens develop due to the influence of mineralized ground and surface waters such as the stream that flows into the area. The area is thus high in nutrients where as true bogs are nutrient poor and more acidic than fens.*



Curtis farmhouse (Ken Curtis: 1942)



Ken Curtis  
(Iym St. Pierre)



Brook trout  
(Duane Raver, USFWS)

*Maine is the last bastion of wild brook trout in the United States. Their presence is a true indicator of high water quality.*

— Steve Brooke,  
Maine State Council,  
Trout Unlimited