

BUILDING WITH LITTLE COMPTON IN MIND



A Handbook of Ideas and Resources

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❖ INTRODUCTION

In 1990, the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission published Historic and Architectural Resources of Little Compton, Rhode Island as part of a larger project documenting important features in all 39 Rhode Island cities and towns. The book is filled with photographs of, and commentary about, Little Compton's impressive landscape and housing. It summarizes eloquently what makes our town so appealing. The following excerpts from the book describe its uniqueness and how we might enhance the architectural, historic, and scenic aspects of Little Compton.

The Townscape

"Today, Little Compton presents an idyllic picture, complete with rolling topography, a quiltwork pattern of stonewall-bounded farms and woodland, complimented by marshes, saltwater ponds, barrier beaches, a rocky promontory at Sakonnet Point, old farm complexes, comfortable summer houses, winding roads, and tree-lined villages of Adamsville and the Commons. All these elements combine to produce a townscape, the most sublime in Rhode Island, that projects the very image of a typical seaside New England town." ¹

"The town's isolation has been not only physical, but also psychological: in almost every activity that occurred here to shape the town as we know it today, Little Compton has behaved independently. As a result, Little Compton has an extraordinarily well defined sense of itself as well as a highly coherent built environment. The interrelationship between the land, the plants and trees, the landscape features, and the buildings is one of the most strongly developed in the state. Little Compton largely remains, as Sara Orne Jewett wrote in the late nineteenth century, 'like the places one goes to on the way to sleep.'" ²

¹ Wm McKenzie Woodward, *Historic and Architectural Resources of Little Compton, Rhode Island*, Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission (1990), pp. 2-3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

The Present and Future

“The forces shaping the built environment in Little Compton have changed in recent years. Little Compton imposed few restrictions on new construction, other than building and fire codes, until 1970, when the town adopted two-acre minimum lot size for residential construction as a way of preserving the town’s rural character, avoiding suburbanization, and maintaining the town’s relatively small population. The visual cogency of Little Compton’s historic development and the town’s magnificent physical setting have made the town ever increasingly desirable as a country retreat for residents of all of Rhode Island as well as nearby Massachusetts, New York, and Washington D.C. As a result, the demand for new construction mounts yearly, and the price of real estate similarly escalates.” ³

From Historic and Architectural Resources of Little Compton, Rhode Island - Recommendations

“Little Compton’s architectural, historical, and natural legacy are closely intertwined in making it what it is today. Its natural and man-made environments exist in a balance that is as fragile as it is remarkable. The town’s isolation and strong sense of the past have largely encouraged the maintenance of this delicate equilibrium, but the very qualities that have made the place so appealing to generations of residents and visitors could be easily and irretrievably lost in the course of only a few years, if the town were to accommodate the unbridled development pressure that increasingly occurs in many coastal New England towns.”

“In planning for Little Compton’s future, two key elements should dominate: the historical continuity in the design of the town’s buildings and structures and the visual dominance of the natural and man-made landscape. *Few communities in the state can match the coherence of architectural design of Little Compton. The important relationships between the built environment and the natural environment that exist throughout the town play an important role in defining the character of Little Compton.*” ⁴ (Emphasis added.)

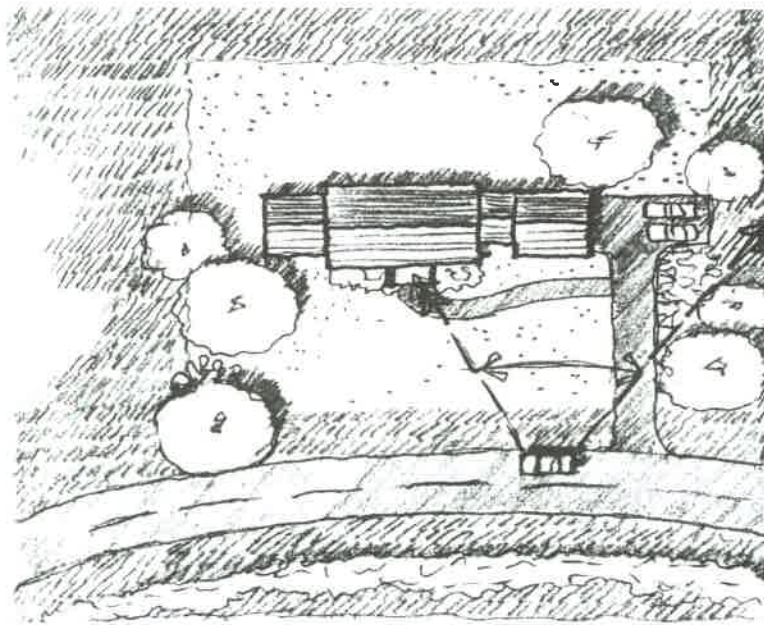
³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

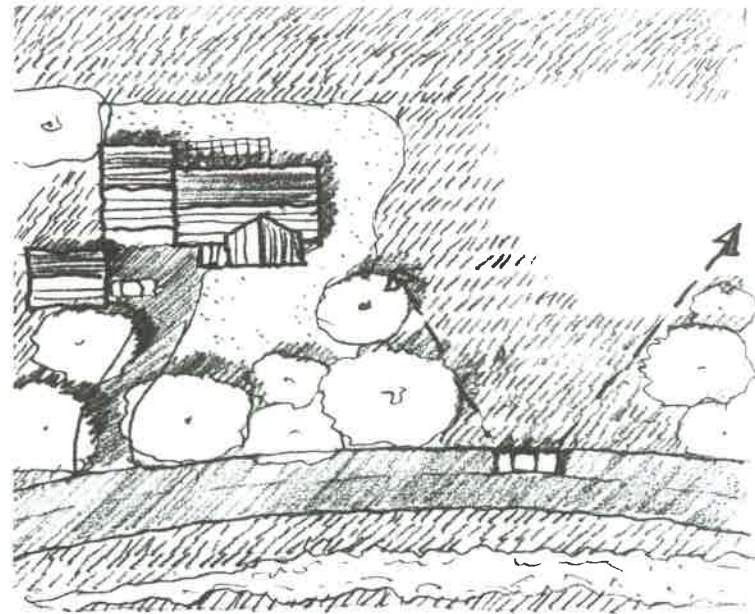
❖ BUILDING INTO OUR LANDSCAPE

When building or renovating, consider the following recommendations which can enrich properties in a number of ways. When houses 'fit' with the local aesthetic they have greater resale value and act as an enhancement in the larger community and become part of the town's legacy.

1. **Site a house** so that it takes into consideration existing public views from roadways and intersections, as well as the view your neighbors have from their property. (*Figure 1*)



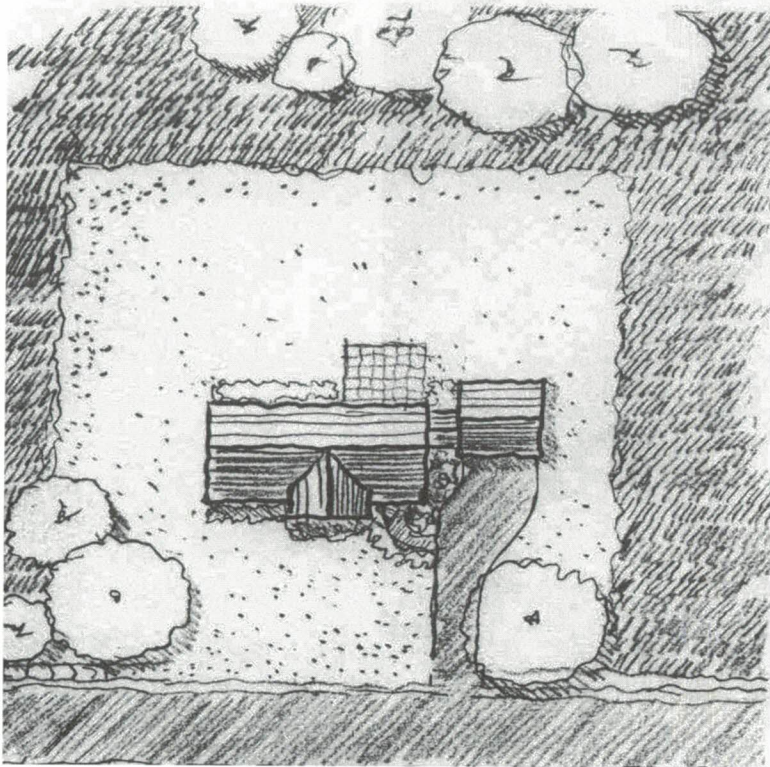
A. Views blocked by new construction and landscape.



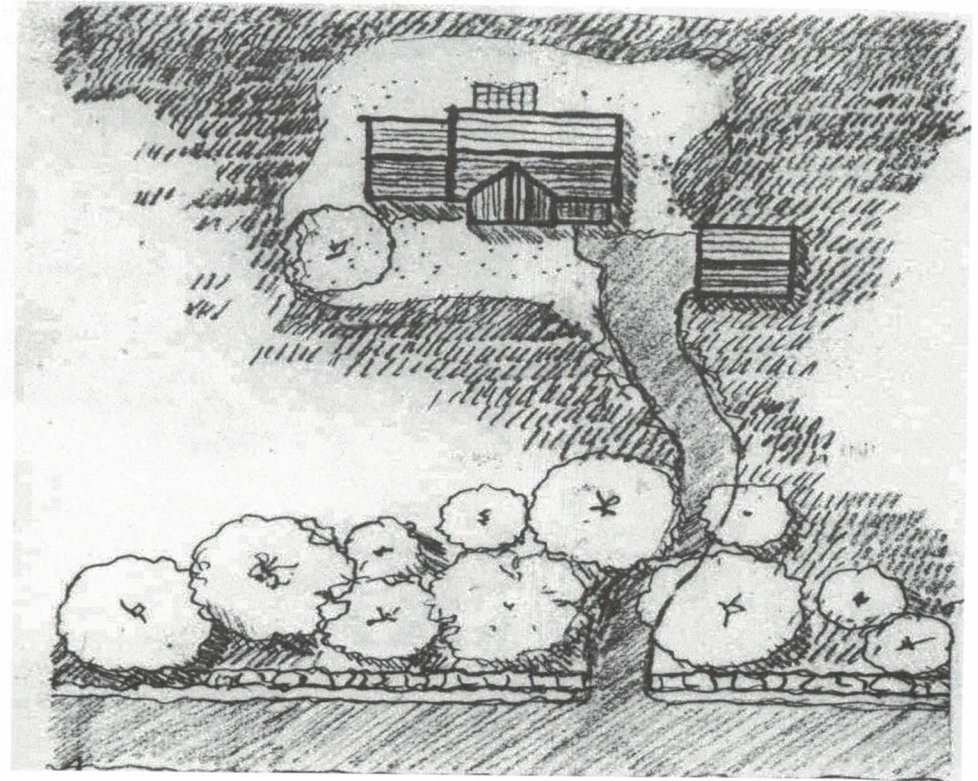
B. Natural views left open with landscaping that minimizes visual impact.

Figure 1

2. Scale the house to the surrounding landscape. Nestle the house among existing trees or back it up to them. Naturally shaped clearings, rather than geometric shapes, mimic our wild landscape. Minimal lawn size reduces maintenance, including chemical and water use, that may have long term negative effects on our surface wells. (Figure 2)



A. More suburban, more maintenance, less private, closer to road and light sources.



B. Preserves the natural look along roadways.

Figure 2

3. **Build curved** driveways to houses. Build winding roads in developments allowing landscaping opportunities that reduce the visual impact of housing and roadways on the landscape. (*Figure 3*)
4. **Use natural materials for driveways** to maintain a rural look and allow for absorption and filtration of rain water, reducing erosion and contaminated runoff from entering our ground water. Shared driveways, when permissible, reduce interruptions in the natural landscape along our roadways.



Figure 3

5. **Maintain vegetation** of varying heights and thickness between a house and the road to provide naturalistic additions to our rural landscape, to increase privacy, and to reduce traffic noise. Solid fencing and trimmed plantings close to roadways create a suburban rather than rural appearance.
6. **Build into a hill** rather than on top. This scales down the apparent size of a house and ensures that it won't dominate long distance views. (*Figure 4*)



Building into the landscape maintains the natural landform and rural character.

Figure 4

7. **Use sectioned glass**, as has been done on older buildings in Town, particularly in windows visible from roadways. This helps visually connect new construction with Little Compton's historic architecture and brings newer buildings into connection with pre-existing structures. Large plate glass, unlike sectioned glass, dominates the face of a building and stands out on the landscape.
8. **Preserve stone walls** to acknowledge their significance as relics of this community's farming heritage and to add value to a property. Build new walls to connect construction to that heritage.
9. **Plant indigenous shrubs and trees** to not only ensure their survival but to link a property's landscape to the larger one. Native plantings require the least fertilizer, water, and pest control. The Little Compton Garden Club, the Sogkonate Garden Club, the Little Compton Tree Committee, and local landscapers have lists of these species available to the public. (*See Appendix*)
10. **Create backyard wildlife habitats** with gardens and landscaping. The Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program has suggestions for landscapes and gardens that take the needs of birds, animals and insects into account. Information about this program is available at www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat or at 1-800-822-9919.

*"How cool and refreshing to a dweller in the sultry city were the vaporous winds that blew over
the new-mown meadows and across the wild rose hedges that bordered the roadside.
How delicious the breath of the sweet briar that floated in at night through the open window!"*

Poet Sarah Helen Whitman recalling her visit to Little Compton in 1869⁵

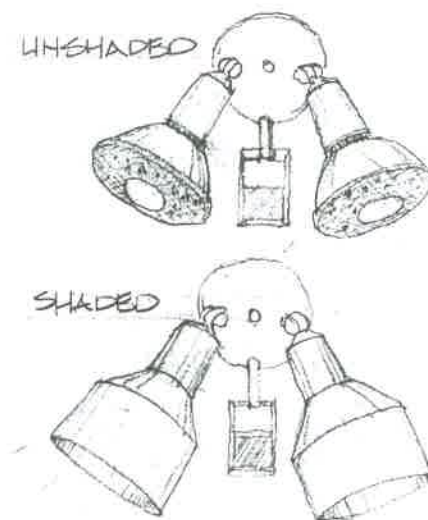
⁵ Benjamin Franklin Wilbour, *Notes on Little Compton* (Little Compton, 1970), p. 252.



11. Use downlighting, or canister-shaded light fixtures, to give the light needed for nighttime assistance without lighting a neighbor's property. Amber colored lights (rather than bright white) create less glare in our humid environment. Lighting directed downward under entry roofing provides flooding of light for coming and going. Motion sensors or timers on lights reduce the cost of lighting and save the night sky for all to enjoy. Low landscape lighting can mark pathways with little impact. The absence of street lights in our town contributes to its rural feel, saves taxpayer money, and protects our views of the night sky. For further information and lighting suggestions go to www.darksky.org or 520-293-3198. Another source of information is the Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star Hotline 888-782-0937. (Figure 5)



A. Point under-eave lighting down to wash sides and entry of house.



B. Unshaded security light disturbs neighbors and causes light pollution. Shaded light reduces glare and focuses light. Motion detectors save electricity.

Figure 5

12. Use cedar shingle siding, which costs more initially, but saves money in the long run and weathers into the landscape as it darkens from the mildew caused by our humid environment. Shingles last many years. If clapboards, or some other siding alternative is chosen, darker colors help structures blend into the landscape and will show mildew less.

13. Minimize height by connecting buildings and lowering rooflines. Additions break up large vertical walls. Clustering buildings, garages, and sheds brings the scale of structures down to the landscape. Continuity of materials, style, and color among buildings on a property minimizes their impact on the landscape. (Figure 6)

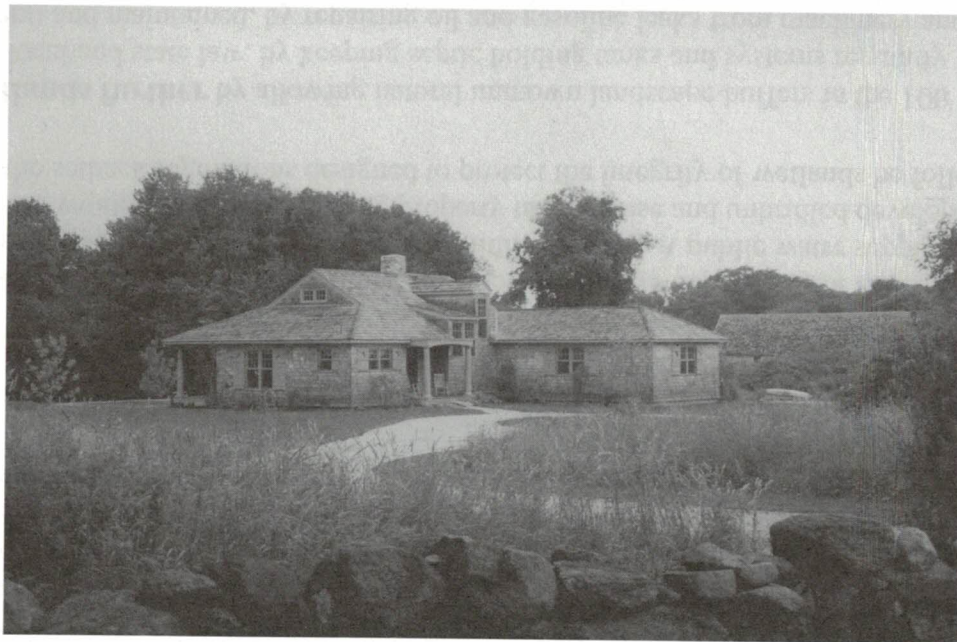


Figure 6

14. **Reduce the visual impact of an above-ground septic system** with grading and landscaping to diminish its visual impact. Care must be taken planting shrubs or trees within ten feet of a mound or bottomless sand filter system as roots may impair its function.
15. **Mow fields only in late July and November** to allow ground-nesting birds and their young to thrive. The protection of contiguous fields and forestlands from development helps preserve nesting and habitat areas for the many species of wildlife that make Little Compton their home. Mowing twice a season helps keep bull briars and poison ivy in check.
16. **Love your dandelions!** Chemicals used on lawns and gardens make their way into the ground water that supplies your well and your neighbors' wells.
17. **Protect wetlands!** Wetlands are a critical filtration system we depend on for the surface water that supplies our wells. Wetlands are essential wildlife habitat. A public water supply system in Little Compton would cause a devastating property tax increase and unbridled development. It is critical that the setback regulations designed to protect the integrity of wetlands be followed.
18. **Protect wetlands further** by allowing natural unmown landscape buffers in the 100 foot setback required by local and state law, by keeping septic holding tanks and systems regularly pumped (every 2 years) and maintained, by repairing oil and gasoline leaks from machinery and vehicles, by using organic and biodegradable pest prevention on lawns and gardens.
19. **Protect an historic property** with an historic preservation easement thereby preserving a part of the Town's historic legacy. Information may be obtained from the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission at 222-2671.



❖ **BEFORE CONSTRUCTION, OR MAJOR RENOVATION BEGINS:**

- Obtain a copy of the current zoning ordinances from the Town Hall. (\$5.50)
- Meet with the Building Official (635-8384) to discuss preliminary plans. If possible, include your architect and/or builder in this meeting.
- A building permit is good for six months. If needed, it may be renewed.
- Plans must conform with the International #2000 Residential Building Code adopted by Rhode Island, available at the Town Hall, or online at www.state.ri.us/library/buildingcodes.htm.
- Residential contractors are required to carry liability insurance and register with the State. For further information, check the Contractors' Registration Board on line at www.crb.state.ri.us or by calling 401-222-1268. Mechanical, electrical, and plumbing contractors must be licensed by the RI Department of Labor. A building permit will not be issued to a contractor without evidence of registration or licensure.
- Water and septic systems are governed by the RI Department of Environmental Management (DEM).
 - A wetland determination must be done by DEM before construction starts.
 - Water table tests are done by a qualified engineer. These tests take anywhere from 6 weeks to two-plus years depending on site conditions and competence of the engineer retained, the time of year and weather conditions.
 - Well water must be tested before a certificate of occupancy is issued.
 - Septic systems and placement must conform to local ordinances and state law and are under the jurisdiction of the department's Individual Septic and Disposal Systems (ISDS) Office.
- Restrictive covenants in developments as well as deed restrictions on individual properties should be reviewed before plans are made.
- When plans are complete, arrange another meeting with the Building Official for a general review **before construction begins.**

NOTES:

❖ RELEVANT TOWN BOARDS AND OFFICES

The time, location, and agenda for the meetings of all Town Boards and Commissions are posted at the Town Hall, Wilbur's Store, and The Brownell Library.

Planning Board—Advises the Town Council on issues related to the growth and development of the Town, including recommendations for zoning ordinances, land subdivision and development, and policies related to land use in the areas of recreation, conservation and open space. The Planning Board meets the 1st Tuesday of each month at 7pm in the Town Hall, 2nd floor, in the Council Chambers. If Planning Board approval is required, one week's written notice must be given to the Town Clerk in order to be placed on the agenda.

Zoning Board—Hears all requests for variances to the zoning ordinances. The Zoning Board meets on the 3rd Wednesday of the month at 7 pm in the Town Hall, 2nd floor, in the Council Chambers.

Tax Assessors— Responsible for the valuation of property for tax purposes and for managing the revaluation of properties as required by State Law.

P.O. Box 226

Little Compton RI 02837-0226

635-4509

8 am—4 pm daily

Town Clerk—Maintains official permanent records of all town boards and commissions, land evidence records (plat maps, deeds, etc.) probate records, vital records, and historic records. The Town Clerk is responsible for the printing, posting, and filing of agendas and minutes for town boards and commissions as well as for the Town Council.

P.O. Box 226

Little Compton RI 02837-0226

635-4400

8 am—4 pm daily

Town Council – Responsible for all aspects of town management. The Council meets on the first Thursday after the first Monday of each month. The second meeting of each month occurs exactly two weeks after the first meeting of the month. The meetings are held at 7 pm in the Town Hall, 2nd floor, in the Council Chambers.

PO Box 226

Little Compton RI 02837-0226

401-635-4529

Town Treasurer and Tax Collector

P.O. Box 226

Little Compton RI 02837-0226

635-4219

8 am—4 pm daily

Little Compton Public Safety Complex - Police and Fire Departments

60 Simmons Road

Little Compton RI 02837

635-2311



❖ LAND PRESERVATION - A COOPERATIVE EFFORT

Rolling fields, pastures, stone walls, woodlands, wetlands and open spaces with long vistas are prominent features of the Little Compton landscape. The organizations listed below are working together to protect all of these features.

The Town of Little Compton

P.O. Box 226

Little Compton RI 02837-0226

401.635.4400

The Town of Little Compton itself owns certain public parcels, including Wilbour Woods, South Shore Beach, Town Landing, and Veteran's Field.

The Little Compton Agricultural Conservancy Trust

P.O. Box 226

Little Compton RI 02837-0226

The Little Compton Agricultural Conservancy Trust (LCACT) was established by vote of the Little Compton Financial Town Meeting in 1986, in accordance with the provisions of a 1985 Special Act of the Rhode Island General Assembly. The purposes of LCACT are to acquire agricultural property or their development rights, to preserve open spaces, fresh and saltwater marshes, estuaries and adjoining uplands, groundwater recharging areas, land providing access to the ocean, land for bicycle paths and land for future public recreational facilities and use. There are seven Trustees: five are appointed directly by the Town Council for staggered five-year terms; the other two are the chairpersons, or their designees, of the Planning Board and the Conservation Commission. Currently, the LCACT receives most of its funding from a graduated tax on real-estate transfers (after a \$150,000 exemption). Since 1986, the LCACT has acquired property interests for over 1,000 acres including the Brownell, Goulart, and two Almy farms. Other properties protected include the Harrison and Middendorf fields along West Main Road. Applications for the sale or donation of land or development rights may be obtained by writing to the address above.

The Sakonnet Preservation Association

P.O. Box 945
Little Compton RI 02837-0945
401.635.8800

The Sakonnet Preservation Association (SPA) was founded in 1972 as the first private, nonprofit, tax-exempt land trust in the state. Since then, the SPA has protected over 300 acres, either by outright ownership or by the acquisition of conservation restrictions. Some of the SPA's more than 40 properties include East and West Islands off Sakonnet Point, the Ponderosa on Meeting House Lane, and the "Meehan Triangle" at West Main Road and Taylor's Lane. Many of the SPA's properties have been acquired by donations; a few have been purchased. The SPA is a membership organization administered by a volunteer board of directors. Membership dues, donations, grants, and loans provide the SPA's financial resources. Direct any inquiries about the donation or sale of land or easements to the address or telephone number listed above.

The Nature Conservancy

159 Waterman Street
Providence RI 02906
401.331.7110 and www.tnc.org

The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a national land conservation organization with an active Rhode Island office, has acquired some Little Compton property interests itself; and TNC has also provided funding to other agencies (such as the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management for the Simmons Mill Pond acquisition). TNC emphasizes the protection of natural habitat. A decade ago, TNC acquired Goosewing Beach and some adjacent upland areas to protect threatened species while maintaining opportunities for public recreation. TNC continues to focus its land-protection efforts in the watersheds of Quicksand Pond and Briggs Marsh. Direct any inquiries about the donation or sale of land or easements to the address or telephone number listed above.

The Audubon Society of Rhode Island

12 Sanderson Road
Smithfield RI
401.949.5454 and www.asri.org

The Audubon Society of Rhode Island is another private land conservation organization with some Little Compton holdings. These include a 20 acre conservation easement on the eastern shore of Quicksand Pond, land on the western shore of Long Pond, and a 17 acre acquisition on Old Harbor Road.

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

235 Promenade Street
Providence RI 02908
401.222.6800 and www.dem.state.ri.us

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) assumed a substantial role in Little Compton land conservation when it began acquiring the properties comprising the Simmons Mill Pond Management Area. This area of approximately 500 acres is open to the public. DEM also administers several grant programs that have helped purchase development rights to some agricultural lands and open space in Little Compton in conjunction with local land preservation organizations.

The Rhode Island Natural History Survey

Room 101, Coastal Institute
1 Greenhouse Road, URI
Kingston RI 02881
401.874.5800 and www.rinhs.org

This is a consortium of organizations and individuals seeking to advance knowledge and understanding of RI's biology, geology, and ecosystems. It is a not-for-profit membership organization. Materials are available to the public about invasive species, indigenous plants, and endangered plants and wildlife, for example.

Little Compton Comprehensive Community Plan

A state-mandated document intended to be the central planning guide for the town. Its intent is to set out the major goals, plans, and policies for land use, natural resources, housing, municipal facilities and services, etc. The plan is available at the Town Hall and the Brownell Library.

Little Compton Tree Committee

P.O. Box 562
Little Compton RI 02837

Created by Town Council ordinance, this committee works to model and educate the public about the protection, care, and replacement of public and privately owned trees. It raises funds from the public, through donations, to plant and care for trees on public roadways. It assists with the planting of memorial trees on public and private property.

Farm, Forest and Open Space Act

Rhode Island's Farm, Forest and Open Space Act (FFOS): Chapter 44-27 of the RI General Laws provides for land enrolled in the FFOS Program to be assessed at its current use, not its potential value as buildable land. The purpose of the law is to conserve RI's productive agricultural and forest lands, and to protect open space benefits. The law does not guarantee that property taxes will be reduced, only that the assessment will be based upon its value as farm, forest, and open space. There is a minimum of 10 acres of undeveloped land required. A brochure on this program is available by calling 401.822.8832. To apply for this program contact the Little Compton Tax Assessors at 401.635.4509 or write to P.O. Box 226, Little Compton RI 02837-0226. Applications must be submitted by January 30th.



❖ RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the recommendations to private land owners addressed by this privately produced handbook, citizens should press public officials to implement some of the following steps, most of which are recommended in the current state-approved Comprehensive Community Plan. These will help protect some of the remaining rural characteristics of this beautiful town.

1. Designate certain districts of town worthy of historic preservation. Examples for this designation would be Adamsville, the Commons, and Warrens's Point.

2. Establish a model for flexible development where housing may be clustered with designated conserved open space to retain the two acre zoning minimum.

3. Create a priority list of places worthy of protection for their historic, scenic, ground water and habitat protection, or recreational value, and make this information available to the public, the building official, and land conservation organizations. This could be accomplished through joint planning and information sharing by the various public and non-profit organizations concerned with land preservation and environmental protection (i.e. Little Compton Agricultural Trust, Sakonnet Preservation Association, The Nature Conservancy, Little Compton Recreation, Conservation and Open Space Committee, Little Compton Conservation Commission).

4. Zone for increased setbacks from roadways for buildings, where possible, to keep scenic vistas open and woodland edges uninterrupted. This helps to protect the visual integrity of our landscape.

5. Apply for designation of some of Little Compton's roadways as scenic byways through the Scenic Roadways Program within the RI Department of Transportation, to preserve their scenic quality.

6. Create meaningful tax incentives for folding substandard lots into larger parcels, for preserving historic buildings including those traditionally used for agriculture and fishing, and for preserving stonewalls.

7. Implement the affordable housing plan that meets state guidelines and keeps the town, rather than developers, in control.

8. Ask for the use of cannisters and timers on public lighting to keep light directed, reduce ambient light, and keep electric costs down.

9. Support the private and public land preservation organizations working in Little Compton. These organizations protect the open spaces, farmlands, and wetland habitats that give the town its increasingly unique scenic beauty and help keep Little Compton's tax rate one of the lowest in Rhode Island.



Wake up, Little Compton,

or 'the places you go to on your way to

sleep' will be a nightmare.

David Brussat, The Providence Journal

August 28, 2003

❖ APPENDIX

Native Trees and Shrubs

(Abridged from RI Natural History Survey)

Shadbush - *Amelanchier canadensis*
Red Chokeberry – *Aronia arbutifolia*
Gray Birch – *Betula populifolia*
Wild Clematis – *Clematis virginiana*
Sweet Pepperbush – *Clethra alnifolia*
Flowering Dogwood – *Cornus florida*
Witch Hazel – *Hamamelis virginiana*
Inkberry – *Ilex glabra*
Winterberry – *Ilex verticillata*
American Holly – *Ilex opaca*
Red Cedar – *Juniperus virginiana*
Mountain Laurel – *Kalmia latifolia*
Trumpet Honeysuckle – *Lonicera sempervirens*
Bayberry – *Myrica pensylvanica*
Virginia Creeper – *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*
Beach Plum – *Prunus maritima*
Great Rhododendron – *Rhododendron maximum*
Rose Azalea – *Rhododendron periclymenoides*
Swamp Azalea – *Rhododendron viscosum*
Pussy Willow – *Salix discolor*
Highbush Blueberry – *Vaccinium corymbosum*
Arrowwood – *Viburnum dentatum*

Perennial Bed Plants for Shade

Jack-in the-pulpit – *Arisaema triphyllum*
Wild Columbine – *Aquilegia canadensis*
True Solomon's Seal – *Polygonatum pubescens*
Bloodroot – *Sanguinaria canadensis*
Trillium- *Trillium*

Perennial Bed Plants for Sun

Pearly Everlasting – *Anaphalis margaritacea*
Butterflyweed – *Asclepias tuberosa*
Asters – such as *Aster novae-angliae*
Northern Blazing Star – *Liatris scariosa*
Turk's Cap Lily - *Lilium superbum*
Cardinal Flower – *Lobelia cardinalis*
Wild Lupine - *Lupinus perennis*
Mountain Mints - *Pycnanthemum*
Goldenrods - *Solidago*
Joe-Pye-Weed - *Eupatorium*

Invasive Species ☹

(Abridged from the RI Invasive Species Council: 401.874.5800)

Bittersweet – *Celastrus orbiculata*
Purple Loosestrife – *Lythrum salicaria*
Norway Maple – *Acer platanoides*
Privet – *Ligustrum* species
Russian Olive – *Elaeagnus angustifolia*
Autumn Olive – *Elaeagnus umbellata*
Burning Bush – *Euonymus alatus*
Glossy Buckthorn – *Frangula alnus*
Japanese Barberry – *Berberis thunbergii*
Porcelain-berry – *Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*
Tree of Heaven – *Ailanthus altissima*
Garlic Mustard – *Alliaria petiolata*
Multiflora Rose – *Rosa multiflora*
Japanese Knotweed – *Polygonum cuspidatum*
Japanese Honeysuckle – *Lonicera japonica*
Common Reed – *Phragmites australis*
Yellow Iris – *Iris pseudacorus*

❖ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Goosewing Farm	Shethar Real Estate
Harry Robinson	Spinnaker Real Estators
Heather and Michael Steers	T. L. Holland Agency
Judith Danforth	William McKenzie Woodward
Karen Richmond	

*❧ Questions or comments may be addressed to: The Development Handbook
Collaborative at 54 Taylor's Lane, Little Compton, Rhode Island, 02837 ❧*