

Forever Wild

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As our towns develop more and more intensely, we cherish the few places which remain natural. In our community we are fortunate to have Sweetbriar Nature Center as a guardian for the beautiful land it protects, land which is accessible to all of us. We also know how easily a threat to such a legacy can occur by persons or groups who have little understanding of the contribution an environmental organization makes to the quality of our lives.

Largely unknown except to some members of the university community, the *Ashley Schiff Park Preserve* on the campus of Stony Brook University is a treasure for all nature enthusiasts. In addition to the deciduous forest ecosystem that thrives here, the park is a repository for numerous glacial remains, including a kettle hole and glacial till. Schist with crystals of garnet and mica, and pegmatite containing quartz and feldspar are easy to find.

In 1970 this 28.2 acre tract of land was dedicated at a public ceremony by former Secretary of the Interior *Stuart Udall*, who had been active in acquiring millions of acres of land for the national park system during his service under *Presidents Kennedy* and *Johnson*. At this event University *President John Toll* proclaimed, "...today we dedicate a wilderness preserve to the memory of *Ashley Schiff*, where future generations at Stony Brook can learn to share his, appreciation of nature.. ...Of all the tributes we might pay him, I believe this is the one that would have touched him most and best carries forward his special contributions to Stony Brook."

Ashley Schiff was a popular professor of political science from 1964 until his sudden and unexpected death in 1969 at the age of 37. Growing up in Brooklyn, he first learned to be a conservationist in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's Children's Program. His book "Fire and Water - Scientific Heresy in the Forest Service," Harvard University Press, is a study of forest management in controlled burning and became a classic in its field. As a master of Cardozo College, a student residence, he had been greatly respected for his work to improve student life. In protest against the destruction of the landscape during the early building of the university, he had personally purchased, planted and maintained an azalea garden in the courtyard of one of the new buildings. He is remembered for threatening to chain himself to a bulldozer to save a rare tall hemlock. Not least of his contributions was his role as a leader of children's nature walks for the Nature Center, a group that was the forerunner of Sweetbriar Nature Center.

The land chosen for the memorial was a site which Schiff loved and had used each September to walk with his students. It was representative of the former beauty of the land on which the campus was built. After the dedication in 1970 the park was plotted and surveyed, and signs were placed advising "Take Only Photos, Leave only Footprints."

Years passed and the signs disappeared. In June of 1998 an updated survey revealed that the preserve now contained only 26.6 acres. Campus maps did not name the preserve. The generation of students who knew Schiff was now middle aged and the colleagues who worked with him were retiring. The Schiff Preserve slipped from public awareness while the university planned a large expansion.

Happily, that is not the end of the story. A few years ago two professors who appreciated the value of the park led a campaign to protect and perpetuate it. Professors *Malcolm Bowman* in Marine Sciences and *Gil Hanson* in Geosciences organized The Stony Brook Environmental Conservancy, a community-based not-for-profit corporation registered in New York State, whose mission is to help preserve and enhance the unique environmental heritage of the area. The Schiff Park Preserve is one of

the assets included in the group's concerns, which it hopes will be part of a greenbelt of existing preserved lands. In February 2005 The Stony Brook Environmental Conservancy was honored by a "People of the Year Award in Environment" by the Times Herald Newspaper.

To facilitate the use and enjoyment of this park, Gil Hanson's students have developed a website called Ashley Schiff Forest Preserve. They have included guided walks explaining fauna, flora, and geologic features. A booklet that can be downloaded with information for any age level is often used by classes and the community. Documents depicting the location and history are available. Numerous classes and programs using the site are listed. One study which uses the park is described elsewhere on the internet. *Christopher Tingué* of Kings Park High School, a semifinalist in the Intel Science competition in June 2004, found the Schiff Preserve, " ...a relatively undisturbed place to study the interplay of various glacial processes."

Aware that the Ashley Schiff Park Preserve possessed no formal legal protection, concerned faculty and alumni sought further guarantees. In the spring of 2001 these issues were brought before the University Senate and administration officials. The Senate passed a motion without dissent that the forested lands on campus be designated as "University Living Treasures." In meeting with university officials, the Senate Environment Committee, alumni, community leaders and state legislator *Steve Englebright* advocated permanent protection. As a result, the Schiff Preserve is now identified on the campus map. It is mentioned in official university planning documents. New signs have been erected and designated parking spaces are planned. Most important, *President Kenny* has assured the University Senate that the Schiff Park Preserve will not be touched during her leadership.

Presently a new group is forming calling itself "The Friends of Ashley Schiff Park Preserve." As a not-for-profit group, it seeks permanent protection of the forest preserve so that it will remain "forever wild." The Friends hope to raise funds for student scholarships, park maintenance and educational programs for both local residents and the university. Those of us committed to sustaining this small gem of natural beauty in our community are hoping that when more people are aware of it they will be eager to join the effort to protect the Schiff Park Preserve.