

# Remembering a Meadow



*Solidago canadensis and Sorghastrum nutans*

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The Story of a Place  
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## *remembering a meadow*



I live in the Old North End of Burlington, one of the most populated residential parts of the city. I'm about a mile walk from a sweet little beach on the Champlain Waterfront called Texaco Beach, which I started to visit pretty often when I got a dog in the summer of 2019. The quickest way to get there is down a series of residential streets, across North Avenue, and through about a half mile

of forested trail that's heavily trafficked but not obviously named or labeled. It skirts around a community garden, through some forest with larger trees and canopy cover, and halfway between the trailhead and the beach it spills out into a meadow. When I started, this meadow was probably close to 5 or 6 acres, and throughout the course of a year it dwindled to probably two due to an encroaching line of construction. Today, I walked through the site with observational eyes for the last time and considered how differently I see this landscape now that I've spent the last year making careful observations of it.



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Today hit a high of 95 degrees, and as I walked down the path and into the bowl of the meadow I was reminded of the curious quality that originally caught my attention-- cool air settles into the meadow, lowering the temperature in a way so refreshing that you want to linger. The series of interconnecting paths off the main path have reappeared as trodden lines of grass amongst the waist high blooming grasses, and many (but not all) of the Conservation Department's young reforestation plantings have flushed back out. Upon first observation I was curious about who had planted the trees and who was taking care of them. I remember using a landscape fabric barrier to delineate the eastern edge of my observation site, as it was an intuitive way to narrow my focus to an area that didn't feel overwhelmingly large. Beyond that barrier was more meadow; beyond that, a distant construction site. Today, the earth has been upturned, excavated, and regraded right up to that fabric border on the east edge. My "site" is what remains of the greater meadow.

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This shot was captured by drone in October of 2020.



This shot was captured by drone on June 6, 2021. Builders have excavated and regraded the sandy soil all the way up to the eastern boundary of my observation site, laying the groundwork for several new apartment buildings and a hotel.

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The landscape fabric barrier in this image used to run through the middle of an expanse of field, and I was unclear of its purpose when I first started my observation. Now, it edges a large excavation site where an underground stormwater system is being installed.



Most of the meadow's sandy soils have been upturned, leaving about an acre of grassy shrubland. This area, too, will probably be regraded in the near future.

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We began our long term observations in September of 2020, and my mind was flooded with curiosities and questions about this unique little parcel of land. It reminded me of the field that I grew up playing in; tucked up against a housing development, wild and unmanaged save for a yearly mowing. As I began to investigate the questions that arose, like who could really claim ownership and what management decisions were being made, I expected that I'd eventually track down answers if I just Googled hard enough. This didn't appear to be the case. Many months passed, and the best answers I had for many of my inquiries were educated guesses based on direct observation and a few articles written by UVM students. However, in a cosmic display of serendipitous timing, signs began to pop up along the footpath just last week inviting community members to read and give feedback on the management plan for this little tract of land currently referred to as 311 North Ave. I scanned the QR code that brought me to a many-paged interactive document that outlined in detail the natural and cultural history of the site, as well as the vision for what it will look like moving forward. Some of my educated guesses were confirmed, and some pieces of information made me realize that my assumptions were a little off base. Some of my observations were lifted up with historical facts that pointed towards experiences I had on the site that I hadn't even considered the origins of. It was a satisfying experience to read the management plan, and because Burlington is so closely connected, the land steward who prepared the document happens to be a friend of a friend whom I've met a few times through our mutual activity in the music scene. I called him up, and he was gracious enough to take me on a walk just a few hours before I sat down to finish writing this reflection.

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The management plan informed me that the area around my meadow shows remnants of a historical Pine-Oak-Heath sandplain forest--one of the rarest and most protected plant communities that remain in Vermont. According to an assessment completed by ecologist Brett Engstrom, there remain a handful of old growth pitch pines (*Pinus rigida*) perched on a sandy bluff towards the southern end of the town-owned parcel. After reading the plan, I wanted to see these trees for myself--I wandered around the site for about half an hour and came up short. I needed a guide.

“Dan--do you think you might be able to find a few minutes today to meet me at 311 and show me where the pitch pines are?”

“Sure, we can start there!”



The little stand of pitch pines is perched on a bluff towards the south border of the parcel, accessible now only by a winding path fringed with poison ivy.



Around the base of the mature trees are a handful of young plantings; efforts by the Conservation Department to begin restoring some of the historic forest.

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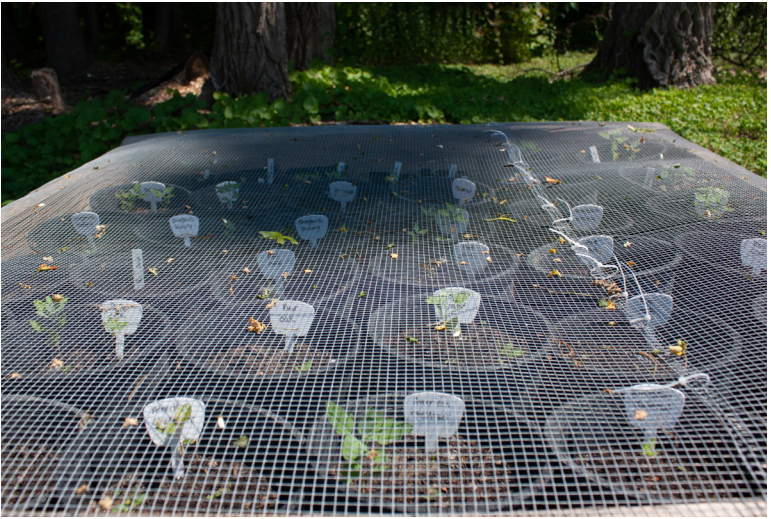


The dwindling of the Pine-Oak-Heath sandplain community is likely due to a number of human and environmental factors. When the Catholic Diocese owned the land, they made revenue by selling the sandy soil as construction fill, turning what is now the meadow into a sand pit. This is also the reason behind the bowl-shaped topography, which contributed to the temperature change that first sparked my curiosity about the site.



There is also pressure from introduced species like Black Locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*), which has a number of beneficial qualities such as providing a bountiful nectar source for pollinators, cover and habitat for other wildlife, high quality lumber, and soil building properties. However, its aggressive clonal habit cannot be kept in check by the more delicate species native to the historic plant community.





The Conservation Department is making an effort to propagate and restore native species like Pitch Pine, but fire is a necessary element in its life cycle, and it is unclear whether prescribed burning would ever be approved in such close proximity to a housing development and hotel.

As I sit at my desk reflecting now, I realize that I actually HAVE been to the pitch pine spot. My partner and I took our dog for a walk on Easter morning this year, while the understory still lay dormant and the red bark and scrubby green foliage of the pines stood out against the rest of the deciduous forest. We stood in exactly the same spot Dan and I stood today, reflecting over the view of the lake. I took a photo to remember the quiet moment, anticipating the chaos that I intuitively knew would come when the understory exploded into summer life again. I hunted through my phone for the photo and felt the joy and satisfaction of discovery when I matched it up to the photos I took today.



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As a designer--how do you facilitate that same joy of discovery for visitors? *Should* you aim to set up that experience for every visitor, or does the nature of discovery limit the experience to only be witnessed by the curious and brave? I think that every human has the potential to be curious and brave, but what often lacks is the inspiration to look in the right direction.

As I come to this place in my study, rounding the corner from nature lover to landscape designer, I'm becoming keenly aware of the differences between the emotional and practical motivations driving those roles. As a visitor in nature, and as someone who has grown to really love this meadow, I look at the encroaching development and can't



One of my favorite views of Lake Champlain as seen from the edge of the bluff.

help but feel a little heartbroken. I also understand that I spent many years living near to this site, zipping down the connector trail on my way from the Old North End to the beach, hardly giving what I encountered on the journey a second thought. Should I be framing this devastating loss of wildness as an opportunity for phenomenal change? If I were to redesign this space, could I honor the wildness and magic that was there before while reinventing something that is more legible and accessible, reaching the hearts of even more people who pass through it?

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To pose a further design challenge, how does one honor the sometimes dark and complicated cultural history of a site in a way that is respectful and educational? This site was once stolen from the indigenous people who inhabited and managed it. Then, it went on to harbor the children at St. Joseph's Orphanage who



The space provides good cover for individuals living and sleeping there, but encampments contribute to erosion of the delicate soils.

suffered horrific abuse at the hands of the Catholic Diocese. After that, it served as the green at Burlington College,



where students learned and connected over education. Today, a large population of Burlington's residents who are currently experiencing homelessness use the heavily wooded and steep bluffs to camp because it provides good cover, and the abundance of wild

berries offers some nourishment. It's clear that some people would want to see this land scrubbed of every memory it might hold, and others might want to see it preserved exactly as it has always been. How do you hold room in your heart for everybody's valid, emotional, and deep personal connections to place?

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Is it even possible to deny the force of human will and habit, and the patterns those habits create? By far, the most surprising answer to one of my many questions is who was responsible for laying out and building the existing trails. I spent several years as a trail crew leader and understand intimately the amount of labor it takes to carve a new path through the wild. The management plan described the trails as “informal,” and when I asked Dan to clarify, he said that means the trails literally just exist because people use them. No mowers or snow blowers traced the football shaped path around the meadow that I followed visit after visit, and the connector trail from the Old North End to Texaco beach shows up in aerial photos from the 1930’s. The survivors who resided at of St. Joseph’s Orphanage tell stories of using the exact same



path to retreat to the beach below. While there is an ADA approved accessible trail reroute proposed to connect the new development to the waterfront, would it be arrogant to think a switchbacked, looping reroute would ever be favored by the general public over a hundred year old shortcut to the beach? As a designer, how do you learn to find the balance between what you believe to be a good idea and what patterns are undeniably clear?



What gives this little park such unique potential is that it's jammed up against so many forces at play--economic, residential, cultural, historical, and natural. It is both on its last breath in its current state and on the cusp of rebirth into something new. I hope that it becomes a recognizable but evolved form of what it currently is--offering enough wildness to remain a sustainable ecosystem and reward brave and curious humans with the joy of discovery, while also offering a safe environment for those seeking a calm and reflective moment in their backyard.



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