A Preliminary Land Use History of the Otter Creek Swamps
Kathryn Morse, Middlebury College, based on oral histories and research by the members of Env. Studies 401A, Spring 1999:

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Contents:

I. Introduction
II. Summary of Conclusions
III. Historical and Current Uses of the Otter Creek Swamps
IV. Wood
V. Swamp Road
VI. Agriculture
VII. Hunting and Wildlife
VIII Final Thoughts and Future Areas of Research

I. Introduction

As Mary Peet Green remembers the story, her great-great-great grandmother, Diademia Stebbins, who settled in Cornwall, Vermont in the late 18th-century, one day headed out to the northwest corner of the Cornwall cedar swamp to drive her cows back home. She ran into a bear. Seeking refuge in a nearby tree, she blew a horn and awaited her husband, who killed the bear.¹

This old story, passed down across two centuries of local history, is admittedly less than remarkable. But it reveals to us that the swamp, part of a larger wetland complex now known as the Otter Creek Swamps, was, in the 18th century, a little-known and scary place, bordering agricultural land, that harbored bears.

About a year ago, the Williams family, who live at the corner of Rte. 30 and Swamp Road in Cornwall, found a bear frequenting the bee-yard that a friend keeps on their land. The bear went after everything, the bees, hives, and combs, and there was no question he would finish quickly and look for more. Afraid to go berrying on their own land, they called Barry Forbes, the local animal control officer. Forbes waited at the bee-keeping boxes that very night. He knew exactly where to station himself at precisely the right time, and when the bear appeared, Forbes shot him. It would seem that little has changed: the Otter Creek Swamps remain, at the turn of the 21st century, a little-known place bordering agricultural land, that harbors bears.

But have things changed in the Otter Creek Swamps? They must have changed, for despite initial indications, we know that nearly every natural place in North America has

¹ Mary Peet Green, Cornwall People and their Times (New Haven, VT: Antioch Press, 1993), 1.
been transformed by Euro-American settlement in the last two or three centuries years. We know that there was a hurricane in 1950 that caused dramatic change. The wind blew so strong that year it took the steeple of the Cornwall church right off.\textsuperscript{2}

And we know that American attitudes toward swamps, or wetlands, have changed dramatically as well. What might an understanding of those changes in the Otter Creek Swamps, if we can trace them, mean for the swamps, and for the communities that surround them? What might an understanding of that history bring to the protection, preservation, and use of an interesting and valuable natural area hidden directly at the heart of Addison County?

This last spring, a group of senior environmental studies majors at Middlebury College began a project on the land use history of the Otter Creek Swamps. Though just a beginning, their research, oral histories, and field trips led to some initial conclusions about these swamps and their place in Addison County history, both in the past, and in the present day. This is very much a preliminary report of those findings. Though the swamps run through several towns, including Cornwall, Whiting, Salisbury, Brandon, and Leicester, most of our research focused on Cornwall. It is the most well-known and researched part of the swamp, and we had more contacts in Cornwall than elsewhere. In addition, our work focused on recent history as revealed by oral interviews of current residents. We were unable to do much extensive archival research. But we did turn up interesting early documents that provide a starting point for an understanding of earlier eras.

We conducted several oral interviews with local residents, most of which we tape-recorded. Because this was a history project, and not a Nature Conservancy operation per se, we did not mention the Nature Conservancy to our interviewees. We presented ourselves as interested in the history of the swamps. As such, we have chosen to keep the tapes at Middlebury, and to refer to our sources for the most part anonymously.

II. Summary of Conclusions

The most important conclusions we can draw at this point are as follows:

1) Common lands: Although many parts of the swamp are owned and managed by individuals, the State of Vermont, and the Nature Conservancy, local farmers and swamp hunters, to some extent, view it as common ground, as a place where anyone can walk, hunt, spend time. Though there are some boundary markers denoting swamp lots, it is not marked or bounded the way that most privately owned farmland or woodland might be. This follows a long tradition of common access to natural areas, especially for hunting and fishing. The impulse to protect the swamps has emerged from the need to protect this common resource (we think), rather than to protect individual property from threats (there don’t appear to be a lot of threats). One hunter and trapper told us that the

\textsuperscript{2} Mary Peet Green, \textit{Cornwall}, 82.
Nature Conservancy has bought certain land, "to make sure it stays as usable land for people like me...open for the public to use."

For local people, the swamps have always been and remain a commons. Though parts are privately owned, local farmers and residents have entered the swamp to cut wood, hunt, and just wander without worry for property boundaries. They often enter the swamp by crossing private farmland, and need only their neighbors' permission to do so.

2) Relation to surrounding farm land: The Otter Creek valley was settled as agricultural land, and though agricultural uses have lessened in the twentieth century, it remains an agricultural landscape. The swamp is surrounded by farmland, and that buffer of open land, of cornfields, hay fields, and apple orchards is important to maintaining the wildlife populations in the swamp. The line between farmland and swamp, the “edge”, is crucial to wildlife, and creates the conditions that make the swamp an ideal hunting environment, and a diverse wildlife habitat. It may also have some negative effects on the swamp, such as the introduction of exotic plants from agricultural fields, and agricultural run-off into the swamp waters themselves.

At the same time, the human uses of the swamps are very much related to agriculture: haying and apple orchards, hunting as a supplement to dairy farming. Farmers are not always IN the swamp, but the swamp is connected to agricultural land use. The swamp does not feel like an agricultural place when you are in it, yet it is a place very much shaped by farms, by agriculture as a way of life.

3) Agriculture and commercial woodcutting: The swamp has been, in the past, the site of somewhat intense ditching and draining, as well as commercial cedar harvest. For economic and cultural reasons, this heavy use and harvest of the swamp made sense in the 19th and early 20th-centuries. Things have indeed changed. Though some ditches are still maintained, agriculture is far less common and intense in the swamp than it was a century ago. The same is true of cedar cutting. It is thus difficult to figure out what the swamp was like when it was more heavily used. Given changes in wetlands regulations, it seems unlikely that any further agriculture incursions could happen. Most likely, the currently ditched and drained fields will be abandoned and will grow back to some form of forested wetlands, though perhaps not the same as the pre-agricultural swamp.

III. The Otter Creek Swamps

The swamps lie, physically, at the center of the county, but few people know them or have spent time there. They are little visited. Swamp Road, which dates from the 1860s, cuts through the Cornwall Swamp and provides direct access. But most people use the road simply to cut across the valley from Cornwall to Salisbury, avoiding traffic congestion through Middlebury and on Rte. 7. Very few ever leave their cars to explore the swamp further.
It would thus be tempting to define the swamps themselves as peripheral to the mainstream of economic and recreational life in central Vermont, but that would be misleading. The swamps are indeed on the periphery of farms and towns, out of the way and little noticed. But they are more than peripheral. Over the last few centuries they have played a constant and important, though perhaps not central, role in providing key resources for local farmers and hunters, and crucial habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals. The swamps border corn fields and roads, towns and pastures. They thus lie at the border between the settled and the wild in Vermont. That border is a rich and complex place, and adds much to the lives of those in the local community whose lives are intertwined with that of the swamps.

The early history of the swamp remains sketchy. The first Euro-American residents of Cornwall and other such towns were farmers, moving north from Connecticut in search of rich land. They cleared and cultivated the land starting in the 1770s, but we know little of their specific uses of the swamps that lay below their fields and pastures. The most famous settlement story in Cornwall (the Story story), tells of Ann Story’s brave escape from local Indians. Fleeing violent attack, she left her farm and hid in the swamp, in a cave dug into the banks of Otter Creek. The swamp was, even then, a place apart, a dark and tangled hideout.

Records and stories from the 19th century, however, indicate that the swamps were more commonly a far less dramatic source of wood, wildlife, and, in limited ways, drained agricultural land for grazing, hay, and corn.

“One of the largest swamps in the State,” wrote Z.E. Jameson in 1874, “is in the valley of the Otter Creek. It is perhaps twenty miles long, and is from one to three miles wide....This swamp is owned by various farmers and valued principally as wood-lots.”

IV. Wood Resources

The most abundant resource in the swamp has always been wood, particularly cedar. Although we have yet to locate specific records of commercial cedar harvest in Cornwall swamp, as late as the 1960s loggers moved through the swamp taking cedar for commercial sale. According to one local source, no one logs cedar any more, and there are plenty of cedars left. However, early maps identified each of the town swamps as a “Cedar Swamp,” which indicates a predominance of cedar trees in the past. Many of those swamp woodlands are now mostly hardwoods. One Cornwall farmer remembers a timber operation from White River that took a lot of wood for pulp, but they didn’t clear cut it. According to that local source, that cutting took place 45 or 50 years ago. He doesn’t remember any commercial use since then. Local hunter and trapper Bruce Maheu found an old stove in the swamp once, cast iron, made at the old Middlebury stove works. He surmises it was a relic from the cedar logging camps, where a crew of men would.

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come into the swamp for the day to cut trees, in winter, and haul in a stove by sled, for hot food and drinks. Together, these bits of information indicate a significant amount of cedar harvest from the settlement era through the 1960s, but we will need to do more research.

The general history of Vermont settlement reveals that most early settlers, faced with an abundance of wood and few other marketable commodities, burned wood for potash (a key ingredient of soap) to sell, and also operated lime kilns, which consumed huge amounts of wood. There are mentions of both potash and lime kilns in Cornwall, so more research is needed to see how swamp forests may have contributed to those industries.

Most wood-cutting in the swamp, however, was and is still small-scale. An 1874 report on swamp lands for the Vermont Board of Agriculture noted that “Year after year the farmer gets bean poles, hop poles, fence rails, building timber and fire wood from such a swamp.” Local farmers used cedar for fenceposts, and other soft and hard woods for firewood, either for homes or for maple-sugaring operations. When the first settlers surveyed the land, each farm received a swamp woodlot, to provide necessary firewood. From the start, then, most Vermonters viewed the swamp primarily as a source of wood.

“After winter settles down with severity,” Jameson wrote of the Otter Creek swamp specifically, “making all firm beneath, roads are made in various directions and fire wood, rails, and sawlogs are drawn out in large quantities.” “The tamarack is being cut into cord wood, (one man has piled eleven hundred cords,)” he continued, “and the cedar is made into rails and stakes.”

Woodcutting was an entirely seasonal activity. Only in winter, when the swamp froze, could anyone move around well enough to take wood. Mary Peet Green recorded her childhood memories of winter woodcutting in the swamp in the early decades of the 20th century. The key question for Cornwall men at the start of the winter, she remembers, was “Has the swamp frozen yet?” Green continues, “Every man hoped the swamp would freeze before a big snowstorm came. The snow-covered little pools of water, enclosed by the snow-covered muddy hummocks, meant the men would have to go to the swamp and pack the snow into the water. Tramping snow into icy water was wet, cold, miserable work, but had to be done to make a frozen base for chopping down the trees and cutting off the branches. The men hoped it would freeze hard enough for them to bring their team and double sleighs into the swamp. Otherwise they would have to leave the sleighs at the edge of the swamp and drag the poles (trees with the limbs cut off) to the sleighs. They needed wood to heat their homes and as fuel for their cookstoves.”

“As soon as the cold and snow came, our north driveway became a busy thoroughfare. (Our home was on what is now Route 30, just south of Morse Road.) About 9:30 in the morning teams with double sleighs would start going through the north driveway and head southeast. Their route was through the meadows and pastures to Peet Road; then

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most of them continued east and south to the end of Tilden Road and on south to the swamp. About an hour and a half before sunset, teams, loaded with poles that had been cut that day, would be returning through the north driveway and going north on Route 30 to wherever home was—in Cornwall or in Weybridge. As a child I used to count the returning teams and identify their owners…. The farmers felt free to use our driveway and go through the fields and pastures of various owners. They and their forefathers had been using that route to the swamp every winter for years, and thus had gained the right of passage.6

Green’s memories point out several important themes: seasonal access to the swamp; the importance of local resources to farmers even further from the swamp; and the key question of access. Although just a few farmers owned property directly bordering swamp, others felt free to cross their land in order to enter the swamp. Despite being surrounded by private property, and even divided into private woodlots, the swamp was treated as a common resource, accessible to all once the snow fell, allowing sleighs to glide over the snow and ice.

Though most farms, when first settled, included swamp wood lots, few records remain of the location of those lots. Each early family had many children, and when the children set up their own homes, the families split the woodlots into fragments, making them even tougher to locate. Farmers today still own them and pay taxes on some of those lots, but few actually know where their swamp woodlot is. Though they were surveyed long ago, the survey records seem not to exist, and many of the survey markers, trees and rocks, would be difficult to find or identify now. In the swamp, one Cornwall couple explained, it is very hard to tell where boundaries are, even if you know where they are supposed to be. One marker could have been recorded as a four-inch maple tree, and there is no way to find it now: the maple tree is either bigger or gone. “You can pretty much go where you want,” they explained, and cut wood where you want. Others noted, though, that there are sometimes boundary disputes, impossible to resolve. One family knows that some neighbors cut wood beyond their own swamp lots, taking wood from others’ land as well. That neighbor just went in and cut, snuck over. The big thing was cedar for fence posts. That one neighbor knew where the cedar was and wanted it. “Cedar was his business and he would cut everybody else’s.”

So few local families actively use their swamp lots, though, that few think of the boundaries as important. One Cornwall family has only cut wood in the swamp four or five years out of their whole time in Cornwall, and then only for firewood. But they might have been important at one time, when there was more valuable and desireable wood in the swamp, and when families cut more of that wood. One interviewee noted that the elm trees are all gone, leaving little else in terms of desirable wood. There is black ash and swamp maple, which is soft. They see that wood as all right for burning, but not for much else.

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6 Mary Peet Green, Cornwall, 127-128.
Though wood was the primary resource taken from the swamp, it is difficult to tell much of the species composition of the wetland forest. Jameson described the Otter Creek swamp in 1874 as comprised of tamarack and cedar, but that may reflect only the trees he saw as useful. "West of the Salisbury depot," he wrote, "the swamp is about a mile across, and the timber is a very uniform growth of tamarack about forty feet high and six inches in diameter. Mingled with this is a growth of cedar, of about half the height." Jameson continued with a description of the Whiting part of the swamp, which produced, he wrote, "brown ash, birch, soft maple and elm."\(^7\)

Cutting wood in the swamp has, for some, meant more than just access to a common and abundant winter fuel supply. Ethel Palmer, who retired with her husband to Bond's Island, an upland section in the midst of the Cornwall swamp, always loved winter days cutting wood. The Palmers cut pine to help build their home, and also birch to fuel their sugar house. She and her husband would take their tractor into the swamp, on frozen ice and snow, with the temperature at or below zero. She felt like it was a different world in the swamp in the winter, very beautiful.

V. Swamp Road

Though winter ice and snow made transport easy, both nineteenth- and twentieth-century Addison county farmers clearly needed better transportation through the swamp.

In the 1860s, Addison County farmers managed to build a road across the Cornwall Cedar Swamp—it's not clear whether today's Swamp Road is in exactly the same place, or simply nearby the original road. The story around Cornwall is that the men were out working on it when Abraham Lincoln was shot: in the spring of 1865. Another informant said it was either when Lincoln was elected, assassinated, or inaugurated, one or the other. Any of the three means the road appeared between 1860 and 1865. The older road bed, just north of Swamp Road, may be the original site. It is somewhat visible both from the air, and when walking in the woods. The original road was difficult to build and maintain. The road builders of Cornwall put down cedar logs perpendicular to the road bed to make a corduroy road. All swamp roads had cedar logs, since they wouldn't rot in the floods. Some of the logs under the current Swamp Road are still there, and will now and again come poking through.

Even in 1999, Swamp Road floods easily. It has been improved with asphalt, gravel, and dirt, but it has to be re-built now and then, and is often closed in winter due to ice. People are always going down there and getting stuck—Cornwall has a cottage industry pulling them out. Sometimes cars have to sit there for a couple of months before they can be pulled out. The town closes the road a lot, mostly so they won't be responsible for what happens, and so they don't have to grade the road as often, to even out the potholes.

Why build a road across the swamp? According to long-time swampler Steve Pratt, a Cornwall dairy farmer, the swamp was "big business" in the second half of the 19th century.

\(^7\) Jameson, "Swamp Lands," 549.
Local farmers needed wood, and they needed access to the railroad line in Salisbury, to ship milk to market. Before the big trucks started shipping milk, all dairy farmers depended on the milk trains to sell milk in distant cities. Going straight through the swamp made more sense than going all the way around it. The Quesnel family in Salisbury also noted the importance of the Salisbury train siding, where the train picked up milk from local dairies.

VI. Agriculture

Historian Ann Vileisis argues that the 19th-century American agrarian ethos demanded that wetlands be altered to be made productive agricultural land. As Vileisis explains, the last half-century or so has brought Americans through a profound shift in their knowledge of, appreciation for, and attitude towards wetlands. Wetlands have gone from wastes to be drained and made productive to valuable ecosystems that provide habitat for rare plants and animals, maintain hydrological cycles, and preserve biological diversity.

As important as the Otter Creek Swamps were for wood, they were nonetheless a barrier to productive farming. Most of the swamp never dried out in the spring, and thus was impossible to raise crops. As 19th-century agricultural people, Vermonters sought to make their land as productive as possible, and for those near the swamps, this meant drainage and reclamation. And that meant determination and hard work.

In the 1870s an agricultural reformer named Z.E. Jameson from Irasburg, Vermont spoke to the Vermont Agricultural Society about swamp reclamation. Each farm, he noted, embraced different sorts of land, including poorly drained, “wild, dark, tangled” wetlands. For Jameson, swamps were a moral and physical threat. Cows could sink into their depths, disappearing forever; the swamps fouled the air, bred mosquitoes, and harbored a maddening cacophony of extremely loud frogs. Swamps were not good places. They resisted the ordered, controlled geography of well-managed farmlands; they were not easily controlled. They were, according to Jameson wastes full of “loathsome reptiles”; they “disfigure[d] the fair face of nature.”

Nineteenth-century American farmers generally saw swamps as potential farmland. Vileisis writes that “Drainage, it seemed, could magically create valuable lands from worthless lands, a prospect that matched expectations of unsurpassed opportunity in America.” Most Americans, farmers and others, agreed that wetlands had to go: to drain them would be “to rid the nation of pestilence and travel difficulties, and to make good use of rich resources. Most everyone could agree that wetlands best served the needs

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9 Judd, Common Lands, 73-74, citing Jameson, “Swamp Lands.”
of the country by vanishing and becoming well-ordered, nonthreatening, productive, cultivated lands."\(^{11}\)

With drainage however, such lands were transformed into productive, charming, beautiful landscapes. Jameson exhorted Vermont farmers to "go for that swamp, relieve it of stagnant water, smooth its surface, sow the best varieties of low land grasses." Swamps were considered unproductive land, that could be made productive through hard, hard labor. Such work, primarily drainage, would make such land "a bank upon which the occupant of the farm may constantly draw, and no wastefulness should be allowed....Do not wantonly destroy a good muck bed, as the care of a farm is a sacred trust from the Creator, for present time and future use. Its stores of fertility should be carefully husbanded, unless they can be judiciously used."\(^{12}\)

Jameson was most interested in drainage and clearing. He believed that the swamp land could be made productive, and he closely followed the work of one F.D. Douglas [farm site can be found on Atlas of Addison County, 1870s], a member of the Vermont State Board of Agriculture, who lived in Whiting and worked swamp land in the Whiting swamp. Douglas bought land there in 1866, including 100 acres already partially cleared. But he continued the work. "Ditches were dug from the river directly back across the meadow....Then the stumps, roots, and fallen trees were dug out, and the surface smoothed. The hard, grassy tussocks, tufts or bogs, were then cut off evenly and carted away to the upland, some being put in piles to rot away, and some spread upon the land to be plowed in. Over six hundred loads of these bogs were cut from the meadow, and now one hundred acres of what was swamp land can be mowed with a machine, and yield a ton and a half per acre of foul meadow, red top, and other low land grasses." (550)

"I found at the barns," Jameson reported, "about forty cows and heifers, and a dozen horses and colts living entirely upon this meadow hay, and looking as well as the average farmer's cattle."\(^{13}\)

Continuing his survey, he wrote, "Another swamp, in New Haven, flowed by a beaver dam, has been ditched, and the deep muck has so settled down as to be plowed where it has been cleared for years, and crops of English hay are now produced, yet I am tole that it takes about twenty-five years to clear it from forest and stumps, and get it in profitable shape."\(^{14}\)

But was it worth it? One of Douglas' meadows required six hundred rods of ditches. Jameson saw another swamp undergoing "renovation" as he called it. "First a ditch was dug through the middle. The bushes and grass cut, and the surface burned over. Then ditches were dug from the main one to the edge of the swamp about forty feet apart, and

\(^{11}\) Vileisis, 68-69.
\(^{12}\) Judd, 75-76, quoting Jameson; Jameson 553).
the muck drawn to the barn cellar. Then with axes, potato hooks, and bog hoes, the turf was all peeled off and wheeled in a wheel-barrow on planks to the dry land, to be burned to ashes; then sand was wheeled on and spread, then manure was spread, then grass seed was thoroughly raked in, and as it was finished in sections, some with green with the freshly springing grass, while some was just sown and raked as smooth as an onion bed. The help hired on this job cost $10 and board a month, for each man, and the land from being worthless was made, as I fully believe, worth $150 per acre, and as it was in the center of the farm would give additional value to adjoining acres.\textsuperscript{15}

The last few generations of Addison county farmers have been caught in the midst of the cultural shift from drained swamps as productive farmland, to drainage as environmental damage to ecologically important wetlands. Drainage has gone from being the ultimate "good" to a serious and illegal harm. They inherited a land base that included ditched and drained hay fields, swamp forest lots. New ditching for reclamation continued until the 1970s for some at the margins of the Otter Creek swamp. Most of the local farmers still around explain that they did ditch fields for hay. The government helped to pay for it, and actively supported it through soil conservation programs. Farmers remember getting lots of federal funding for ditching; that funding is no longer available. The Dept. of Soil Conservation would pay for them to do it; it would allow them to get crops in earlier and harvest them earlier. They needed funding, as it took heavy equipment, bulldozers and clamshell diggers to dig the ditches. They would line up the muck they removed in windrows, and let it dry out, then spread it onto the fields. One farmer remembers scooping up the dried earth and filling in other pockets in damp places, evening out the land. "We loved every minute of it," he said of his work as a farmer.

Mary Peet Green remembers that her father was offered the land of the George Tulley farm, next door to them, an area of 251 acres. She writes that, "Most of the land had not been farmed for many years. Much of the hundred acre meadow west of the house was covered spring and fall with water which often remained during the summer. The part nearest the Peet ancestral farm was covered with large hummocks ranging in height from a foot to twenty inches with a little space between them. To be useable this land first had to be drained."

From context, it appears she is remembering from about 1949. "From his boyhood Dad had been digging ditches by hand, but in the late 1940s there were drag lines and backhoes to do the back-breaking work. To drain the 100 acre meadow he first asked the Soil Conservation Service (S.C.S.) to set stakes marking location and depths for the ditches. (This was a service the S.C.S. was offering farmers.) The S.C.S. men took a look at the situation and brought back the report that there was so little drop they doubted ditching would be useful. Dad told them when he was a boy, the Tulleys had ditched the land by hand, and he had seen good crops raised on it... The next year that 100 acre meadow was a glorious mass of red, white, purple and yellow flowers. People going for evening rides came to see the display. The Soil Conservation Service scheduled a state

\textsuperscript{15} Jameson, "Swamp Lands," 551-552.
meeting in Middlebury, so farmers could see first-hand how ditching had transformed worthless land."

Ditches were crucial for farming in the 20th century, because only drained land was dry enough to support heavy equipment. Farmers invested a lot of work in ditching. Once dug, they had to be vigilantly maintained, as they would easily fill up, flooding the land again. One Salisbury farmer inherited the farm from his father. When he was younger, he recounts, he was more aggressive than his father, and a full time farmer. So he and his family dug new ditches in the 1960s, cleared acres of brush, to create hay land. It was a bit easier than when his father hayed the land. Back then, they had to take horse-drawn wagons in, and put burlap bags on the horses feet. Now we’ve got balloon tires, he explained, and it’s much better. The narrow wheels on the old tractors and wagons made it tough in the soft swamp land.

Land that now has been abandoned will end up spongy and wet, will eventually go back to the swamp. Those that still use swamp land for agriculture mostly cut hay on drained meadows, and also graze cattle in summer. There is nothing else to do with the land, most farmers admit. If it was truly dry land all year, they could sell it for development, for house lots, but that can’t work with the spring flooding. When it is no longer needed for agriculture, they will probably sell it to the state, as many already have. The state can use it for wildlife habitat. “We could sell it to the college,” one farmer joked. “They could make it into a golf course.”

And 20th century farmers shared aspects of the earlier 19th century belief that the swamp could be made rich and productive agricultural land. One Cornwall farmer remembers taking agriculture courses at the Middlebury High School night school. His teacher there told the farmers that if they could ever drain that swamp, they would have the richest farmland anywhere in the country. As the lowest point in the valley, it gets all of the run off with the organic buildup from upland forests and farmland, gathers all the fertility and nutrients and stores them, layer upon layer. If they could only “tame that rich swamp” they would be rich. But, this farmer noted, there is no way to do it. Where would you drain it to? There is nowhere for the water to go.

But farming with these continuities, farming near the swamp has seen real change, and some puzzling reversals. After once receiving federal aid now they get paid NOT to dig or maintain ditches, or even to fill them back in. Now, according to one retired farmer, ditching is a “no-no.” The “back to nature conservancy people” have determined, he explained, that “you should not change your environment,” so ditching is no longer allowed. Some still maintain ditches that were created earlier, which is allowed, but no longer drain new land, as that would be in violation of wetlands protection statues. If you don’t take a crop off of drained land for five years, one farmer explained, then it reverts to wetland status, and you can’t cultivate it further. It takes on wetland status.

15 Mary Peet Green, Cornwall, 193-196.
Today, most agriculture in and around the swamp is simply hay and corn fields, as it may have always been. Many folks mentioned either existing hay fields or land that was once hay fields and is either grown back to brush or part of their yards, etc.

Some families that live around the swamp have done some maple sugaring, either after leaving dairy farms or other larger types of operations, or in addition to them. Some stocked their sugar houses with wood cut in the swamp, sometimes just down wood and other small wood, thinned out from the forest. One family mentioned gray birch as a species cut for sugaring wood.

VII. Hunting and Wildlife

The Otter Creek Swamp forests do more than supply wood and defy clearing. They are habitat and shelter to a diverse wildlife population. According to all local hunters, the cedar forest is both shelter and food supply to an ample deer population, which winters deep in the cedar swamp in nearly impassable cedar thickets. The deer don’t rely only on the cedar swamp. As an edge species, they move across its margins, crossing into and out of the swamp by season. With corn fields and apple orchards all around, the swamp provides both cover within the cedar thickets, and food sources just beyond them as well. One local hunter and trapper explained how deer will come out of the swamp in particular places, to cross the roads into apple orchards. These are the most dangerous places for the deer, as cars hit them at night.

The deer hunting is best around active agricultural land, because those fields are the richest sources of feed for the deer, especially corn and alfalfa. Ed Peet plants a lot of corn, he is one of the biggest land owners in the swamp, so the hunting is good around his place, according to one local hunter. Some hunters walk the agricultural fields, just at the border of the swamp, where the deer come out to feed. This is easier walking than in the swamp, since it is slow going, moving amongst the root piles and the “bogs” at the base of the trees. But the deer are in different places at different times. In the winter they bed down in the thick cedar forest, in trees so thick that you can’t walk in there. Later in the winter and in the spring, they come out of the deep swamp to edges to eat, and then, driving around Cornwall, you see them. They’ll move into uplands for the summer and fall, and then, after Christmas, come down and move back into the swamp for the worst of the winter. One hunter noted that if your drive on Morse road, north of the swamp, up toward the college, in the winter, it will all of a sudden be empty. The deer are gone, from the minute it first snows, into the deep swamp. They cross Morse Road and disappear into the cedar swamp. They love the young tender cedar shoots, the tops of blackberry bushes, and the young maples just coming up.

The swamp shelters other animals as well: raccoons, coyotes, fisher cats, foxes; moose, snowshoe rabbits, bear, and even bobcats. People hunt squirrel and turkeys as well, and grouse, duck, and woodcock. The irrigation ditches that run into Otter Creek are good for grouse and duck. Although the deer population draws the greatest number of hunters, local hunters have hunted all of the species in the past. Most argue that hunting
is the most popular (or only) local use of the swamp, and the reason why most people
know it as well as they do. Many cannot imagine any other reason to go into the swamp.

Deer hunting in particular is an important and much-cherished tradition in the
swamp. Unlike other hunters, swamp hunters usually hunt from a tree stand, an elevated
platform usually built into a tall tree, which provides hunters an aerial vantage on the deer
as they move along paths and through clearings. There are several areas in the swamp
that, while not privately owned in any formal way, have tree stands that are considered to
“belong” to various families and extended families of swamp hunters. There are new and
more regulations now, on hunting from stands on state, and even on some public land.

As one local hunter explained, hunting from stands, and hunting in the swamp in
general, is not better or worse than other kinds of hunting. It’s just different. It’s harder
to move around in the swamp before it freeze, hence the need to hunt from stands. Rather
than traipse through the swamp, following deer, they told us, you sit and wait for them.
As always, though, he added, a hunter has to know how to read the wind, and hunt
downwind. They need to know what the deer are eating, and hence where they will be,
whether under oak trees eating acorns, in hemlock, or in cedars.

Swamp hunters have de facto “territories” where certain families or individuals
have hunted for years. They respect those boundaries, though they are in no way formal.
“I know my territory,” one explained, “everyone knows that is where I go….no one
bothers me.”

Most hunters have an opinion on the size of the deer population, whether it has
increased or decreased in recent years. One experienced hunter figures there are as many
or more now than he remembers at any other time. The swamp, he points out, can
support a lot of deer. It provides cover in the swamp, plus abundant food sources all
around in the edges and agricultural fields. It’s a great place for deer. The population is
high enough that each individual hunter can take three deer now, if you combine bow and
rifle hunting. He also suspects that population will drop if we get a bad winter.

Another hunter, however, felt that the deer population is much lower than in
earlier years, due to residential and village expansion. Yards, lawns, and other residential
space eat up land that the deer used to use. And the houses, with all that grass and
shrubbery that the deer like, draw them out of the swamp into upland areas, thus reducing
the number in the swamp. One Cornwall family agreed, stating that there were more deer
in the 1960s than there are now, but that the swamp remains a real deer wildlife habitat.
And another hunter argues that the deer population has receded over the last twenty years,
due to too much hunting (doe seasons) and hard winters. But it is coming back, he thinks.

Other species are far different. There are plenty of raccoons and rabbits, but only 3-5
bobcats in the swamp in any given year, according to a local hunter and trapper. The
bobcats have their own territories, spread out away from each other. The bobcats, like
human hunters, move into the cedar to hunt deer. Hunters can track and hunt bobcats
and rabbits best in winter, when they can track them in the snow. You can get $50 or
$75 for a bobcat fur, but most people who hunt them do so for the sport of it, not to sell
them. There used to be a bounty for bobcats, but now there are controlled seasons.
Some do hunt coyotes, though not as the main goal. Coyotes will go after a wounded deer, and they will go after a dog. One hunter explained that if you lose a dog in the swamp, you should put down a piece of human clothing. The dog will find it and lie down on it, and the human scent will protect it from the coyotes.

VIII. Final Thoughts and Future Areas of Research:

The swamp is a place that local people simply enjoy, and in fact love. “I love the swamp,” one Cornwall farmer told us. Older farmers remember wandering in the swamp as kids. They were not scared of getting lost, because the swamp is not that wide. Most of the barns of nearby farms have big lights, one explained, and you can see them at night and just walk toward them. Or if a train goes by on the tracks, that lets you know where you are. Others disagree: don’t go in without a compass, they say. “If I did go in, I would never be heard from again,” one longtime resident exclaimed.

Many local residents, mostly from the farms that border the swamp, skated on the frozen surface of the swamp, hunted fiddleheads and threw parties to cook them up, took their children fishing, trapping, hunting, and walking. The best time in the swamp, they all agree, was winter, when it was a different world, quiet, wooded, mysterious.

“We raised our five children here,” one farm couple explained. They took their kids fishing in Otter Creek, in the swamp. The kids trapped and hunted. They used to ride ponies through the flooded fields and forests. In the hay fields they would find baby ducks and birds and bring them home. The kids liked it, liked that life.

Does the swamp change? Most of the local community members we spoke to feel that it does not change all that much. “Not a heck of a lot” changes, one farm family explained. More of the roads along the swamp are paved, but beyond that, not much. For their lifetimes, and for many that was a good piece of the 20th century, the swamp has remained a constant, unlike the town and farmland throughout the valley. “They’ve been the same way for years,” one noted. “Nothing seems to change in them.” “A swamp is a swamp because no one can get into them and do anything,” he continued. “It should be left alone,” another long-time Cornwall resident told us. “It should go where it wants to go.”

Research in the future: 1950 hurricane; town land ownership records; any evidence of logging operations, particularly cedar; any other sources on the swamps

Hints: From Beulah M. Sanford, Two Centuries of Cornwall Life (Rutland, VT: Sharp Printing, 1962):

25—“Samuel Benton arrived in Cornwall in 1774 and settled on Otter Creek which soon became a part of Middlebury but in 1787 he moved into Cornwall. His surveys of pitches in all parts of the town, based upon original rights, which he claimed to have purchased,
wholly or in part, cover pages of the Proprietor's records, and his deeds given and
received would fill a considerable volume."