

St. Michael's tract: a peaceful escape from the rest of the world

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REPORTER'S

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Standing on a low ridge and looking north, Bill Rawlyk was able to see the steeple tops and tallest rooftops of Hopewell Borough, about half a mile away.

All that separated him from the town were low rolling hills, some

cleared for farming, some still forested. Tall trees encircled each of the buildings in the borough that could be seen from here.

"Isn't that pretty?" Mr. Rawlyk said of the view.

It was that, and more. It was a beautiful view, a spectacular one, enjoyed in an aura of silence broken only by bird songs, creeks running through the woods, and, rarely, the distant, barely audible sound of an automobile or truck tire humming on pavement. Once the leaves have changed colors, well ... this view is something that needs to be seen, period, if you're able to get to it.

Mr. Rawlyk was standing on the central portion of the St. Michael's tract, which



A trek through the scenic, peaceful St. Michael's tract brings one to a simple footbridge over this tributary of Bedens Brook. Three other tributaries of that brook cross the tract.

owned by the Diocese of Trenton and is the former home of the St. Michael's orphanage and school, which was razed many years ago.

The Delaware & Raritan Greenway, a nonprofit organization that works to preserve land as open space or farmland, is the lead agency in an effort to preserve St. Michael's. Mr. Rawlyk, a naturalist who grew up on a farm that has been in his family for three generations, is in charge of land and easement acquisitions for the Greenway, which has raised \$8 million toward the purchase of St. Michael's. Three million dollars more are needed. He said the Greenway hopes to close the deal by spring.

Trekking around the St. Michael's tract, which this writer did with Mr. Rawlyk after the Hopewell Harvest Fair on Saturday afternoon, makes for as pleasant a walk as you are likely to find anywhere in these parts. Once you get a few hundred feet into this land, low ridges and trees begin to screen out the sights and sounds of the rest of the world. It is very quiet and everywhere the view is green trees and foliage latticed with neatly cultivated farmland. Four streams, all tributaries of Bedens Brook, cross the St. Michael's tract.

Mr. Rawlyk says the Greenway's goal is to continue farming on the St. Michael's tract and allow public access, via trails, at the same time. "There's easily room for 5five miles of trails in here," he said. "The trails would run along the stream corridors and the edges of the fields that are farmed. It would make for very nice walking."

On the agricultural side of the St. Michael's project as the Greenway envisions it, grassland that could be harvested as hay could provide habitat for a number of

species of birds that are endangered in New Jersey – bobolinks, meadow larks and upland sandpipers among them. "If you wait until after July 15 to mow the hay, you wouldn't interrupt their breeding," Mr. Rawlyk said.

He added that St. Michael's is an ideal place to try to establish a habitat for these birds, because of the tract's size. "The bigger the habitats we create, the better, as far as helping these birds survive goes," he said.

Some of the funding committed to the project by the state comes with the condition that the farming continue at St. Michael's. Harvesting hay would satisfy that condition. The Greenway is looking into other kinds of farming as well. "We're talking to the local agricultural community now about types of work that could be done here," Mr. Rawlyk said. "Organic farming and raising grass-fed beef are two possibilities."

Why both farming and open space preservation? "Our greenbelts are limited in size," Mr. Rawlyk said. "So it's best that they serve more than one function when possible. This land was farmed when St. Michael's was open, and it's still being farmed (by tenant farmers). Another thing we'd like to do is clear out invasive species that were brought in many years ago to serve as natural fences. Those species have spread to consume quite a bit of the land here now. Restoring species natural to the area they're taking up would make this land a better habitat for wildlife."

In the central portion of the tract, a simple, very old-looking footbridge of wooden planks crosses a tributary of Bedens Brook. As ever, the sound of a creek running through the woods is so pleasant that it seems restorative, somehow literally a healthy thing to be around.

"Preserving this land from development would keep this water cleaner," said Mr. Rawlyk as he stood on the bridge. All the water here flows into Bedens Brook, which flows into the D&R Canal. That's a source of public drinking water."

For the people of this area, and especially in Hopewell Borough, the preservation of St. Michael's would be quite an amenity. If you lived in the borough, you could literally walk to the edge of the tract in a few minutes. Walk into it a few minutes and you feel as though you have gone to a whole other place — and another time as well.

"It's amazing how much good even a short walk on a place like this can do," Mr. Rawlyk said. "The way things are now, you need to be able to do that."

Amen.