

Sheep Farm Self-Guided Tour

The property boundary of the Sheep Farm follows a stone wall dating from colonial times. There are two major trails: the **Blue Trail** follows an historic road that traverses the property, crosses Fort Hill Brook, and exits at the eastern edge of the Sheep Farm; the **Red Trail** circles the northern edge of the Sheep Farm, turns south to follow Fort Hill Brook past the upper falls, crosses the old road, passes the grist mill dam, large waterfall, and returns up the ledge through the red cedar forest back to the parking lot.

Meadows surviving from colonial times provide rare early successional habitat for birds and threatened animal species. Groton Open Space has a 5 year U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program contract to further improve the habitat: the plan is to remove invasive plant species and open the area to sunlight to encourage the growth of shrubs and grasses.

A, B – Parking and Entrance on 245/255 Hazelnut Hill Road. Note the hazelnut trees at the entrance.

C – Blue Trail The trail begins at the parking lot following a very early route, likely originally used by Native Americans who had a fortified village on the adjacent Fort Hill. It turns left just past the old house foundation near a large animal enclosure on the left. The road heads east between meadows and ridges, descends to a historic crossing of Fort Hill Brook, and exits the property at the stone wall boundary.

D – Red Trail The trail travels clockwise in a large angular circle from the parking area to the highest point of the site on extensive rock ledges and overlooks. It descends to Fort Hill Brook and follows old gravel mounds where the brook was channeled to the falls and historic industrial sites.

E – Old Well This dug well is covered by a large square capstone for safety reasons. Underneath there is beautiful circular stone well lining. Apparently, the old colonial road went by it and many people would stop to get water.

F - Old Samuel Edgecomb House Foundation and Sycamore Tree The Sheep Farm was used for agricultural operations for over 300 years, from colonial times up to the year 2000 when sheep farming ceased. Industrial operations were commonplace in colonial and later times, including a grist mill powered by the waters of Fort Hill Brook.

Samuel Edgecomb bought the Sheep Farm from the Smith family in the mid 1700's. Samuel had many occupations and was committed to the community and the close interpersonal relationships which were necessary to be successful in the early 18th century. Samuel built and owned ships used for trading salt and other key necessities, and would rent out portions of the vessels both to produce income and, more importantly, to reduce the high risk.

Samuel also cultivated hay and apples, raised chickens and shared Poquonnock Plains with other colonists as a commons for grazing cattle. He was an in-law of **Joshua Hempstead**, who was famous for his diary documenting colonial life. Samuel helped Joshua survey property boundaries, just as Joshua worked with Samuel on tasks such as mending fences, digging stones out of fields, and dividing stores of rum.

G, H – Rock Outcrop, Large Glacial Erratic Boulder The last ice age pushed huge boulders in front of the ice sheets. When the climate warmed and the ice melted, it left behind large rocks. Note other smaller ones on the upper red trail. Also look for signs of glacial scouring on the face of boulders and ledges.

I, K – Large Waterfall, Grist Mill and Miller's House Foundation The typical U-shaped grist mill foundation can be seen at the base of the waterfall on the eastern side of the brook. Most likely a flume (open chute) went from the top of the waterfall to the top of the wheel, powering the grist mill stone for grinding grain. The Miller's house foundation may be just to the east where a number of stones remain.

J – Grist Mill Dam In the early days of Groton, nearly every brook of any size was harnessed for power and the town

was dotted with small mills in which corn was ground or logs sawn into lumber. Note the square cut stones facing upstream along the 100 plus foot dam; large round rocks downstream to contain the large lake to power the mill.

L – Upper Mill, Waterfall and Wetlands Look for clues that there may have been a fulling mill used to pound, clean and thicken woolen cloth. The small gorge upstream from the falls has a natural flume channel which could carry water. Fort Hill Brook spreads out downstream from this site and feeds a large wetlands system with many top quality cryptic (water inlet and outlet) vernal pools, a breeding ground for amphibians and other species. Seeps flow from offsite wetlands to the north, from the boulder strewn lands to the east on Fort Hill, and up from the ground on the Sheep Farm and eventually into Fort Hill Brook, proving rich bird and other habitat and a wide variety of mushrooms.