



THE SALT LINE

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION BY
SOUTH ALABAMA LAND TRUST

Friends of Weeks Bay Reserve - Fall 2020 (Vol. 1, No. 1)



30

YEARS OF PROTECTING COASTAL HABITATS

OUR HISTORY

1986

2,693 acres of initial protected habitat of the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve

1990

Weeks Bay Foundation incorporated

1992

Weeks Bay Foundation's first land acquisition

1993

First land in Baldwin County donated to Weeks Bay Foundation

1997

Acquired Safe Harbor RV Park and Fish River Marina at auction

1998

First land in Mobile County donated to Weeks Bay Foundation

2009

Accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission

2009

First conservation easement in Baldwin County

2011

First conservation easement in Mobile County

2015

Transferred 143 acres to State of Alabama Forever Wild program

TODAY

700

Members

9,500

Acres of protected habitat including along the Alabama coastline

\$11,780,946

Total value of protected land



SOUTH ALABAMA
LAND TRUST

Board of Directors

- Chesley Allegri
- Ellis Allen, MD
- Shawn T. Alves
- Coley Boone
- John L. Borom, PhD
- Andrew Chason
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- Louis G. (Buddy) Russell
- Skipper Tonsmeire
- Gina Walcott
- Leslie G. Weeks
- Julie Wiggins

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Connie Whitaker

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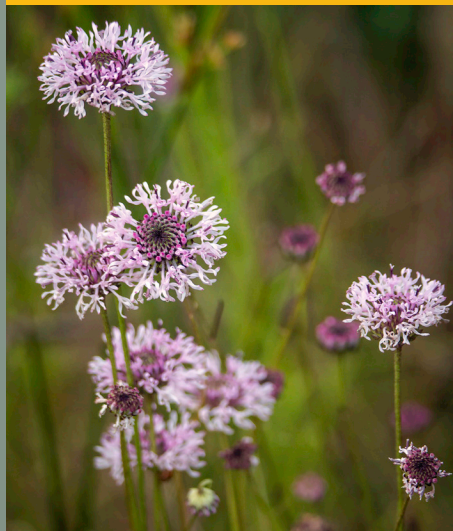
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Colette Boehm

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| Bald Eagle Bash | # |

The mission of the South Alabama Land Trust is to protect land and promote environmental education so current and future residents can enjoy clean water and the marine life, wildlife, and outdoor recreation that define our area.

There is so much exciting news to share with you in our inaugural issue of The SALT Line! Not only are you seeing our new name, brand, and newsletter, but we are also celebrating our 30th anniversary. We will take you on a walk down memory lane as you read about milestone accomplishments and hear from some of the passionate and dedicated people who helped make them happen!

I found it fitting that the traditional symbol for the 30th wedding anniversary is the pearl. A pearl is considered a symbol of beauty, cultivated over time as it grows within its oyster. Pearls are formed inside the shell of certain mollusks as a defense mechanism against a potentially threatening irritant such as a parasite inside the shell, or an attack from outside that injures the mantle tissue. Isn't it amazing that something of such beauty is created by protecting the oyster?

I think the story of the pearl and oyster symbolizes the work that South Alabama Land Trust has been doing for 30 years, forever protecting more than 9,500 acres of environmentally sensitive land and habitat in Baldwin and Mobile counties.

Our new mission statement—to protect land and promote environmental education in coastal Alabama so current and future residents can enjoy clean water and the marine life, wildlife, and outdoor recreation that define our area—determines our vision for the next 30 years. As we grow our footprint of protected lands in south Alabama, we will also share with you ways you can get more involved through lots of new outreach and stewardship programs.

I will close by offering a hearty thanks to all of you who continue to support our mission, and to share a quote from Theodore Roosevelt.
"Here is your country. Cherish these natural wonders, cherish the natural resources, cherish the history and romance as a sacred heritage, for your children and your children's children. Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches or its romance."

Connie Whitaker

Connie Whitaker



FROM THE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



WHAT IS SALT?

Building on 30 years of land protection that began around Weeks Bay and now includes coastal Alabama, the Weeks Bay Foundation is now South Alabama Land Trust!

Saving land and promoting environmental education remain our central focus; only the area and the needs have grown to address rapidly-decreasing greenspace, wetlands, and plant and wildlife habitats.

With the help of our members, donors, and partners, South Alabama Land Trust (SALT) has protected more than 9,500 acres of environmentally-sensitive land and habitat in Baldwin and Mobile counties. These lands will be preserved forever, sheltering wildlife and marine life, keeping waterways clean, and offering the outdoor recreation that define coastal Alabama.

Under our former name, South Alabama Land Trust was incorporated in 1990 as a non-profit organization to support the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve. We became a nationally-accredited land trust in 2009, and began to protect land outside the 4,000 acres that were part of the Weeks Bay Reserve.

"The name 'South Alabama Land Trust' better represents our work today and our plans for the future," Executive Director Connie Whitaker said. "Our hearts will continue to be with our partners at the

Weeks Bay Reserve, and we will continue to support their research, education, and stewardship programs." "We are surrounded by waterways and wetlands in both coastal counties," said Ellis Allen, chairman of the board of directors. "It's natural that people want to live and play by the water. The land and habitats along the edges of our waterways protect our water quality, our seafood supply, and areas vital to wildlife. When we protect them, we protect our quality of life."

We recently closed on a conservation easement agreement with the City of Mobile to protect 96 acres of greenspace on Perch Creek, the last tributary of Dog River that has not been developed. We also partnered with the City of Gulf Shores to protect 836 acres on and around Oyster Bay.

Besides protecting more land outside the Weeks Bay Watershed, SALT is also broadening its stewardship and outreach programs. Through activities such as restoration, tree plantings, kayak tours, and nature walks, people of all ages will learn about the coastal environment, and get excited about taking care of it.

"By becoming South Alabama Land Trust," Connie said, "we are confident more people will get involved and will grow their love and care for the natural resources throughout south Alabama." -- DB

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF CONSERVATION

As the South Alabama Land Trust celebrates 30 years of conservation in coastal Alabama, it starts a new chapter in its story. What began as a “friends group” for the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR), from which its first efforts were born, has become an organization with much to be proud of. With an eye toward doing more, involving

more people, and preserving more land, the trust has some dedicated leaders and many generous supporters who are all a part of the legacy it will leave to the residents of Baldwin and Mobile Counties and to all who enjoy the more than 9,500 acres it has worked to protect.

“In the late 1970s, a group of us got together when we heard there was a large tract of land available on Fort Morgan peninsula,” said Dr. John Borom, Ph.D. “Skipper Tonsmeire was involved. He was in real estate development. I was the biologist. It was my job to go around and talk to politicians and explain why we needed to preserve this piece of land.”

Tonsmeire’s familiarity with that initial piece of property began long before this

conservation effort kicked off.

“The reason I was familiar with that property is because I knew one of the former owners and we used to go down there when I was in high school,” Tonsmeire said. “And let me tell you, that was a long time ago,” he added with a smile. “In about 1972 the property was owned by some developers. I was a contractor over in Mobile.” When someone came to him with plans for developing the land, Tonsmeire decided it was time to take action.

“This property was 1,400 acres. It had 8,000 feet of frontage on the Gulf of Mexico and 22,000 feet of frontage on Little Lagoon. This was an incredible piece of property. I started looking for a way to find a conservation group to buy it. I went to the Audubon Society. John and I were members of the Audubon Society at that time. I went to the Wilderness Society. Everybody thought it was a good idea but nobody knew how to do it or had the money. I’ll be honest with you, I’d never heard of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) at that time, in 1972, but I called up there to their office in Washington.”

That call was the beginning of what became a successful plan to purchase the property, the catalyst for the formation of the Weeks Bay Foundation, and a long-standing relationship between the organizations.



Skipper Tonsmeire

"It was an alignment of a bunch of planets," Tonsmeire recalled, noting that TNC and NOAA funding, along with other resources and the support of then U.S. Senator Jack Edwards were all integral to the outcome. "None of these things would have happened without Jack Edwards."
"Jack Edwards is the guy who helped us get it all," Borom agreed. "With Jack's influence, we got The Nature Conservancy involved. Skipper and I were the first TNC members in Alabama. We had to get a letter of intent from the Department of Interior and TNC actually purchased the land."

Following that purchase, the land became the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1980. An additional piece of land, not adjacent to the Fort Morgan Road property, was also part of the initial land purchase. It became what is now the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Reserve.

"TNC told us about what was then the National Estuarine Sanctuary program," Borom explained. "In 1986, Weeks Bay was designated the 16th National Estuarine Sanctuary."

"Over the years we've been a support group for the reserve, but we became a land trust. Through those years, we met people and had certain events happen. Like this tract," he said of the land the SALT office sits upon. "We found out there was going to be an absolute auction of this property."

Skipper talked to some people he knew, I talked to some people I knew, and we got some people to agree to help. We won the auction. It was because people worked together to accomplish something good. Nobody was out for themselves.



John Borom

"Skipper and I were first, but other people who have come along have played a big role," Borom said. "It's been a joint effort over the years. Some of the things we've tried have worked. Some of the things we've tried have not. We're just trying to make the quality of life here better. If you kick the ball and keep it going, somebody else will come along and keep it going."

One of those people who came along was Dr. Rick Wallace, Ph.D. Wallace joined the foundation board in 2006 and served as its president for six years. Since leaving the board in 2019, he has remained on the Land Acquisition Committee.

"Protecting land in the Weeks Bay watershed and coastal Alabama is a priority

continued next page

LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD

30 Years of Conservation, continued

mission for the foundation," Wallace said. "Members of the committee suggest properties for acquisition and evaluate properties for purchase, donation, or conservation easements.

"The foundation generally does not seek to own a lot of land itself. Our business model has been to acquire land and sell or donate it. The important number is how much land has the foundation preserved." That preservation, he said, leads to more good things down stream.

"The land we acquire is generally adjacent to a water body," he explained. "The land itself serves as a buffer to non-point source pollution reaching the waterbody, and the land is habitat for birds, mammal, reptiles, and amphibians. At the water's edge, the protected land and its vegetation serve as habitat for fish and shellfish. Folks in our area often talk about the 'quality of life'. For many people quality of life includes boating, fishing, and swimming in clean waters. The efforts of the foundation to protect lands that help preserve water quality and provide habitat for fish and wildlife are central to preserving the quality of life we value so much."

"It makes a difference in the quality of life," Borom agreed. "The best places to live and the most successful tourist destinations are next to beautiful natural areas."

The decision to become the South Alabama Land Trust, according to Tonsmeire, is one that furthers this effort to make a positive impact on a larger part of coastal Alabama. While he admits 30 years of operation have proven the foundation has "a good setup," he acknowledges more can be done.

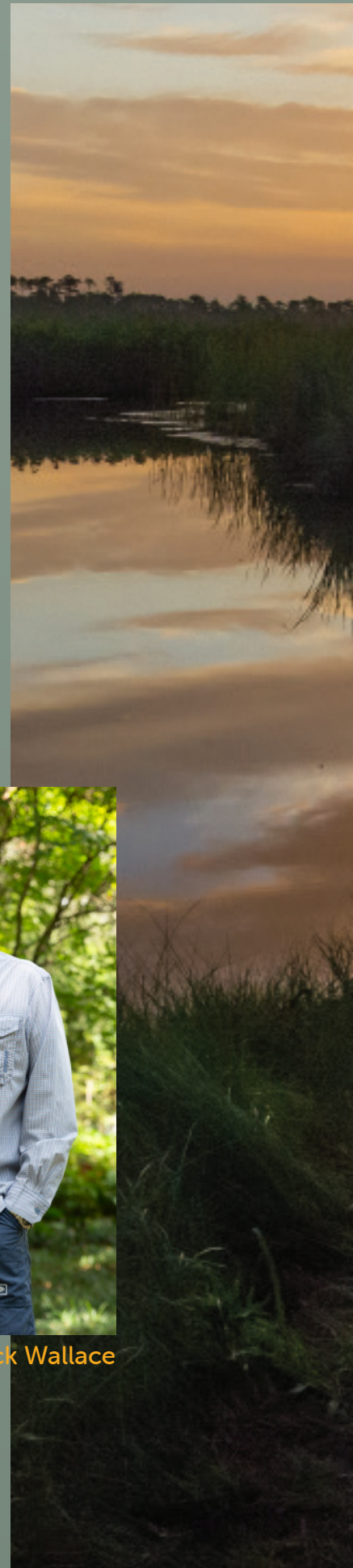
"We've done the best we can. This will broaden opportunities for us to preserve land," he explained, adding, "It will also broaden our footprint for fundraising. There are a lot of good tracts for us to look at. We have a strategic list."

That strategy-based approach, Borom said, is a pillar of the foundation's, now the trust's, success.

"Over the years we have morphed, but we've tried to keep our focus on what was best for our children and grandchildren. I've felt very fortunate to be involved with other people who had very similar goals and wanted to make things better. It's turned out okay." -- CB



Rick Wallace





EVENT FOUR

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A REAL GEM

HOLMES PROPERTY BECOMES A LEGACY OF PRESERVATION

"We are very pleased that after all these years we can preserve it for generations to come," Broox Holmes said of the decision he and his brothers, W.C. Holmes, Jr. and James Holmes, made to protect their Magnolia Springs riverfront property from development. "It's good for the community.

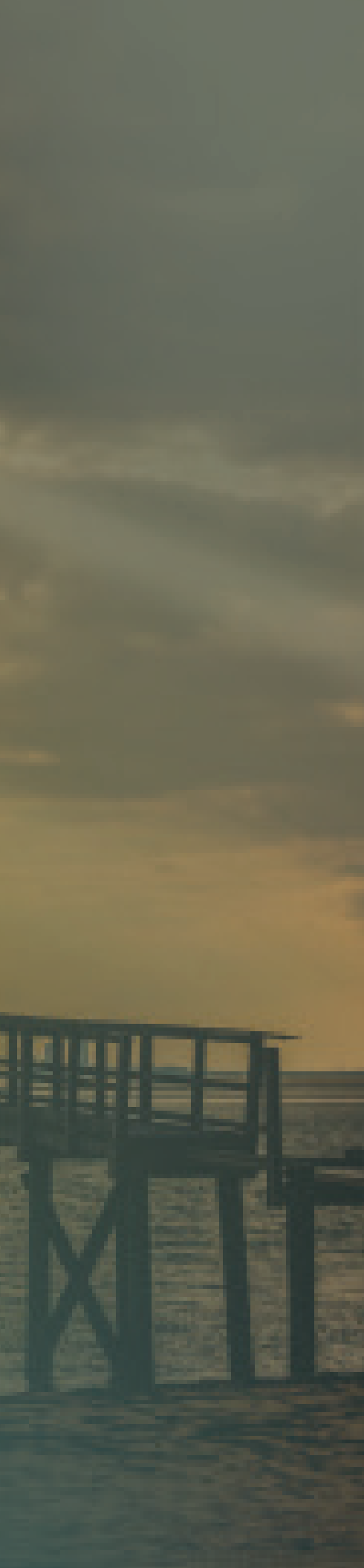
"We decided that would be a good thing," he continued. "It will help our children and grandchildren. And ultimately, it will be a good thing for the community. Everyone can enjoy it. We're pleased that everyone can enjoy it in its unique, pristine state. The good thing is, not much of it is wetlands. It can be walked on and enjoyed."

Will Underwood, State Lands Section administrator for the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and acting manager for the Weeks Bay Reserve, agrees. The 91-acre parcel, he explained, includes 7,000 feet of shoreline on the Magnolia River and a combination of tidal marsh and uplands.

"In general, DCNR and the Reserve are always looking for significant pieces of land," Underwood said. "But the Holmes property is one of those pieces that sticks out as a real gem. It's one of the largest pieces of undeveloped land in the area. It has a diversity of habitats, so it's got a lot of habitat value. Even though it has a lot of waterfront, is also has a pretty high elevation."

The property, surrounded by Weeks Creek to the south and Bemis Bay to the north, has been in the Holmes family for roughly 80 years.

"I grew up in Foley," Holmes explained. "My father moved to Foley when it was a new town. He moved from up north – Tensaw." He said the fair market value payment the family received is going into a trust for his and his brothers' children and grandchildren. Underwood praised the Holmes family for their foresight in ensuring the land will be protected and



said they will be recognized for their efforts.

“Yes, they are being compensated at fair market value, but had they subdivided it, there’s no telling how it would have ended up. So, this is a great thing they’re doing.” Now, according to Underwood, it will be managed and preserved, with the initial plan being to provide opportunities for passive recreation there, most likely hiking trails and a kayak access.

After surveying the property, a full plan for its management and usage will be developed. Underwood said the initial efforts would include a bio blitz to investigate the plant and animal species present, a mapping of any existing trails and roads on the property, and the introduction of fire management.

“That’s the beauty of this parcel,” he said. “Even with no management plan in place yet, just the introduction of fire can help it flourish.”

Underwood points out that the South Alabama Land Trust plays a key role in the ability to purchase parcels like this one. The decision as to whether a piece becomes part of the Weeks Bay NERR is based on its acquisition plan, part of the reserve’s overall management plan. Whether a piece of land fits better under the Reserve or in Alabama’s Forever Wild program is a decision made for each parcel.

“There is a delicate balance between land we’d love to preserve and our ability to be

good stewards of it,” Underwood explained. There is also the issue of timing. Having the land trust as a partner to take advantage of property acquisition opportunities while those and other decisions are made is a huge asset, he said.

“We have to bide our time, depending on the funding sources. There are a lot of i’s to dot and t’s to cross.” Having the trust “in the chain of ownership,” he said, is critical to attaining and protecting gems like the Holmes property.” -- **CB**

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Conservators \$1,000

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Steward \$500

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Advocate \$250

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JOIN THE SOUTH ALABAMA LAND TRUST

South Alabama Land Trust memberships, renewed annually or in monthly payments, start at \$50. As a member, you are joining a group of people with similar interests and concerns for the places we love. You are protecting land, water, wildlife habitats and outdoor recreation.

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- Legacy : \$5,000
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