

History of the Pickering Creek Audubon Center

Chesapeake Audubon was a new organization in 1981, less than ten years old, but our young membership was very enthusiastic and energetic. We were very interested in both land preservation and in environmental education. We had already purchased about 750 acres in Dorchester County for a sanctuary (Farm Creek Sanctuary). Under the experienced leadership of Dr. Charles Stine, we had held a number of very successful weekend education trips for adults throughout Maryland. But we all knew that to make an impact, we needed to work with children, and it was our dream to have a site we could develop into an environmental education center. Our Farm Creek Sanctuary was just not going to work; the mosquitoes were intolerable, and there was virtually no dry land.

In 1981, the National Audubon Society was contacted by George Olds of Easton, Maryland. He was interested in preserving Heigh Ho Farm, owned by he and his sister, Margaret Olds Strahl. They had received offers from developers to purchase the land, but being avid conservationists, had refused. Frank Dunstan, Regional Rep for NAS, contacted our chapter with a note that the property probably would not be of interest to us (!) but we were welcome to speak with the owners. George had become aware of our efforts to buy Farm Creek Sanctuary, had made a donation toward that campaign, and so was willing to talk with us. Accordingly, a group of us visited Heigh Ho that year. We found a stunningly beautiful property, with a 40 acre old growth forest and more than a mile of waterfront. It was ideal for doing environmental education!

We met with George, and expressed our interest in using the property for education. George had not previously considered this use, but it took him about two microseconds to buy into our dream. By spring, we showed him the kinds of programs we had in mind: Charlie Stine explored the estuary with a group by canoe, seining and water sampling; Bryan MacKay ran an education program for a group of students from the Neighborhood Service Center in inner city Easton. We were off and running!

In 1983, George and Margaret donated the first parcel, 35 acres of old growth forest, to Chesapeake Audubon. In doing so, they stated, "We do so in appreciation of and behalf of those among us who place value in preserving natural riches wherever they exist. We want those in our immediate greater community who love the myriad forms of life in nature to inherit with us now what little we can make available to them, namely the Pickering Creek sample of un-trampled land.... Ultimately, we hope that this property will be made available for education programs involving our community's schoolchildren. If this world is ever to bring mankind's material needs into harmony with the needs of our natural environment, we must start with the education of the young people." The donation specified that the property must be forever preserved in its natural state as a wildlife sanctuary and working farm, and used strictly for environmental experiences and education. To quote an article in the Chesapeake Audubon newsletter from that time, "Pickering Creek ... was established for two purposes. First, it is a sanctuary for the plants and animals that reside there, held inviolate against the ravages of man that affect so much of our valuable waterfront property. Second, it is an education center where people can experience, enjoy and understand their natural environment."

This extraordinarily generous gift from the Olds/Strahl family to Chesapeake Audubon for the use and benefit of the people of Talbot County was incredibly foresighted and destined to be as successful as anyone could ever have hoped or expected.

During the 1980's, Chesapeake Audubon members and Talbot County educators used what was now called Pickering Creek Audubon Education Sanctuary, running programs and field trips. Chesapeake Audubon and the Olds family raised money, eventually creating an Endowment of almost \$100,000. Small grants were obtained, farm profits were reinvested in the property, and CAS members Mildred and Virginia Struve left a large gift in their wills that allowed programs to go forward in these early years. George Olds joined the CAS Board of Directors and spent immense amounts of time getting the Sanctuary off the ground. Very significantly, he recruited a local Board of Trustees once it became clear that the increasing activity required local management and fundraising expertise.

In recognition of advances at Pickering Creek, and with growing confidence in its future, the Olds/Strahl family donated the remaining acreage, more than 350 acres, to Chesapeake Audubon in 1988.

That same year, through contacts with the Natural Resources Defense Council, a major three year grant was obtained. Upon George Olds' all too premature death, his nephew, Dr. Stuart Strahl, took over as Executive Director. Under Stuart's leadership, an era of unprecedented growth in budget, programs and reputation ensued. The facility now came to be called Pickering Creek Environmental Center. One example of how PCEC achieved its success was by recognizing a strategic opportunity. In 1994, the Maryland legislature passed a fairly obscure bill requiring environmental education for every student. Pickering Creek approached Talbot County Public Schools and offered to implement this requirement, free of charge, for elementary school children. This mutually beneficial relationship continues to this day. By the time Dr. Strahl left to lead National Audubon's Everglades campaign, Pickering Creek was one of the best environmental education centers in the nation, and served as a model for National Audubon's new campaign to greatly expand the number of its Audubon Centers.

The Pickering Creek legacy continues. In 2000, PCEC became an official center of the National Audubon Society and is now called Pickering Creek Audubon Center. Its Mission is Pickering Creek Audubon Center is dedicated to community-based conservation of natural resources through environmental education and outreach on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Pickering Creek serves more than 16,000 visitors each year. The property features a working tidewater farm, a demonstration garden, farm and wildlife programs, a pond, nature trails, classrooms, a low ropes course, a canoe launch, a dock and 75 acres of freshwater wetlands. It is an official Chesapeake Bay Gateway, open 365 days a year providing public access to the Bay. Chesapeake Audubon is justifiably proud of our environmental education center and its role helping to save the bay. We hope you will visit Pickering Creek!