

# Conservation Partners Spotlight: Essex County Trail Association



*By Jennifer M. Keeler for ELCR*

Preserving equestrian lands against urban sprawl is an ongoing war, and it may seem as if an army is needed to turn the tide of development and preserve precious acres for riding. In the case of the Essex County Trail Association in Massachusetts, preserving land for the community did indeed take the effort of an army - a one-woman army.

Susanna Colloredo-Mansfeld spent her post-World War II childhood living in Hamilton, MA, less than an hour north of Boston. She was an enthusiastic equestrian, and often accompanied her father, an avid foxhunter, on hunts across the scenic New England landscape. Although her studies and career took her away from historic Essex County, she always longed to go back to the land of her youth. Finally returning to Hamilton with her husband and family in 1970, she looked forward to raising her three children in the same type of charming life in the countryside that she had cherished growing up. But as time went on, she was in for a shock: many more houses were dotting the landscape, and some of the farms and trails where she had galloped her horse as a child were now closed to equestrians. "Places that I'd loved to ride when growing up were no longer accessible - trail after trail had a chain across it," Colloredo-Mansfeld remembered. "I thought, what am I going to do about this? I wasn't sure, but I knew we had to do something."



*Susanna Colloredo-Mansfeld*

"Something" came in the idea of forming a trail association. Several surrounding towns had existing horse clubs for riders and drivers, so Colloredo-Mansfeld invited members of these groups to get together, discuss local equestrian trail use issues, and gather ideas as to how to proceed. She also looked to area conservation groups and land trust organizations for guidance, and recruited the help of her neighbor, Ann Getchell of Groton House Farm, to help with the local effort. "My original idea was just to have a club for Hamilton, but it grew from there to include other towns too," she explained. "These neighboring clubs were very helpful, and it ended up that we all wanted to work together."

Foxhunting is a strong tradition in Essex County, so area farms and communities were accustomed to equestrians riding across the countryside. But the privilege and responsibility of riding across private property had been taken for granted, and even abused, by some riders, leading to bad feelings and many farms closing their borders and trail access. Colloredo-Mansfeld's small hometown

had grown so that riders and owners no longer knew each other. A lack of understanding and appreciation had developed on the part of the riders so they were no longer in touch with the concerns of the landowners.

"We knew we had to get trails open again, and to do that we had to regain the confidence of landowners," Colloredo-Mansfeld explained. "In those days, there were fewer landowners in the area but they controlled larger parcels of land, hundreds and even thousands of acres at a time. They all appreciated the country they had and most were horsemen themselves, but just wanted



*Foxhunting is a strong tradition in Essex County.*

some regulation and for someone to get a grip on things. They were tired of people being thoughtless and riding through their vegetable gardens and crops, tearing up trails when wet, leaving gates open, disturbing livestock, and looking in their windows. Some people didn't understand the need for a structured association at first, but the large landowners really appreciated the fact that we were there to help police the trails. Our group offered to act as communicators and liaisons between the riders and landowners; that way, the landowners

knew they had someone they could call if a situation needed to be addressed, and also we would work with riders to be respectful, understand property restrictions, and encourage stewardship of the land."

Since the time of her original idea to "do something" in 1982, the tireless efforts of Colloredo-Mansfeld and other founding members of the Essex County Trail Association (ECTA) have paid off. Today, the ECTA works to protect access to open land and a vast network of over 450 miles of trails throughout six towns in eastern Massachusetts (Essex, Hamilton, Ipswich, Wenham, Topsfield, and West Newbury), partnering with both public and private landowners to ensure that the experience of open trails is positive for them as well as the trail users. And while the Essex County Trail Association is a favorite with local equestrians, this active group is about much more than just horses. ECTA holds many athletic, educational, and social events throughout the year designed to promote the outdoors and to bring in funds for the organization, with a wide variety of community activities ranging from competitive long-distance runs, nature walks, and sled dog races.

The ECTA Board of Directors embrace variety and work directly with members of community to shape the diversity of trail usage and optimize use of the trails for multiple disciplines, such as walking, running, riding, biking, and skiing, bringing different trail users together in a mutually respectful way. Colloredo-Mansfeld emphatically believes that as horse populations dwindle, in order to preserve treasured spaces horsemen must be open-minded towards sharing trails with others to enjoy.



*ECTA works to bring a variety of trail users together in harmony, including hikers, bikers, and even sled dogs. Photo courtesy ECTA.*

"Some people, just because they're on a horse, behave in an arrogant way even when on land belonging to others," she explained. "We need to be appreciative all the time, and it's so important for all users to work together. If there's a problem, everyone needs to sit down together and figure out how to work things out before there's a crisis. Remember that the way a biker or hiker looks at the countryside is very different from the way equestrians do. So get off your high horse - if we don't work together, we won't have anything."

The management of trail routes through both public lands, which are open to all types of trail users, and private parcels (limited to equestrians only) is a feature which distinguishes ECTA from many other associations. "Certain private properties in our system may be restricted to just horses only, and we respect that," noted Colloredo-Mansfeld. "Some people aren't comfortable with just anyone and everyone walking through their land, but we are trying to encourage responsible use of these trails by others. We don't force anything, but in the public areas we've demonstrated how equestrians can very successfully get along with bicyclists, dog walkers, and runners, and I hope this grows the confidence of private landowners on connecting lands so as to allow access there also."



*Through the ongoing efforts of ECTA, future generations of equestrians will be able to enjoy hundreds of miles of trails and the beautiful New England countryside. Photo courtesy ECTA.*

On the conservation front, ECTA actively negotiates with private landowners to give permanent trail easements to the association's members. "Within our six towns, we are blessed not only with extraordinary lands and 450 miles of trails, but also with extraordinary landowners who have the foresight to protect their lands and the access to them for us to enjoy," noted Alex Van Alen, Executive Director of ECTA. "Over the last 28 years, ECTA has become the leader in protecting that access, and we are dedicated to continuing and increasing our work with landowners to further protect, in perpetuity, our otherwise vulnerable trail system."

One of ECTA's missions is also to rigorously maintain, repair, and construct trails, ensuring safety and protection of the land. Maintaining a vast network of trails takes manpower, and in this regard ECTA has excelled not only by engaging the community through Volunteer Trail Days, but also through an innovative system of "Trail Stewards". Nineteen volunteers located throughout the six townships have been designated as stewards, who are responsible for particular sections of trails. Originally called "area representatives," these people knew the trails and the landowners and were willing to keep an eye on things and keep open channels of communication with the landowners. "They're the ones who know the trails in their community, monitor the condition of the trails, keep an eye on things, and report their findings to a board member or our Executive Director so action

can be taken if needed," said Colloredo-Mansfeld. "As a result of this open communication and education, we don't have many problems with issues or courtesy on the trails anymore."

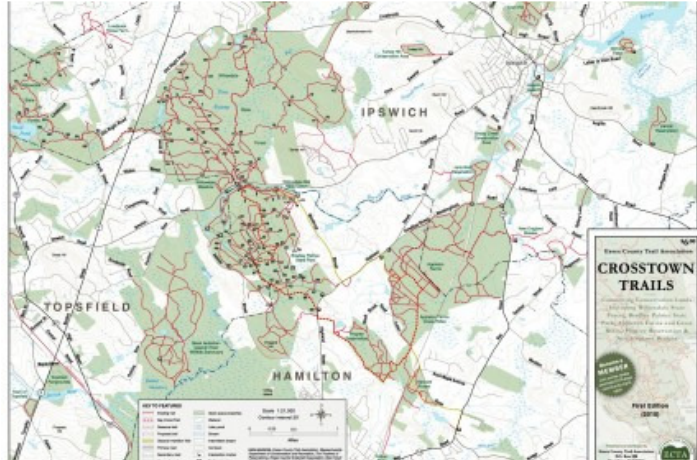
Effective communication between members, the association, and landowners will become increasingly critical as Essex County continues to grow in popularity due to its proximity to major metropolitan areas. Colloredo-Mansfeld has seen many large farms sold and divided, which creates many more landowners along trail routes.

In turn, this places increasing demands on the association to maintain relationships with more and more people to preserve existing trail connections. "Every parcel is critical, and every landowner is essential," she noted. "If you lose just one section, it can be an entire trail connection. Then the public lands will eventually become islands with no access between them."

Through their ongoing efforts to maintain and promote the responsible use of land and trails, promote good will and serve as liaison between the trail users and landowners, and provide organized support for the preservation of open land, ECTA has become a model organization in making a real difference for conserving land for future generations of equestrians. But it all began with just one individual. "This grew into more than I could have imagined," said Colloredo-Mansfeld. "I just wanted to do what I love and ride through the trails of my childhood. But I didn't want things to continue to change the way they were going.

"After all these years, sometimes you just trudge along and wonder if you're really making a difference," she continued. "But the other day I met a woman who thanked me. She lives in a neighboring town which has been overrun by development, and the trails leading from her property had been closed. So now she trailers her horse a short distance to a trailhead that gave her the access into ECTA's countryside, and was so grateful to still have our trails to ride on. She said she wouldn't have anything if it wasn't for what we've done. So that keeps me going."

Could you be the next person to make this kind of difference for your community?



ECTA's current network includes over 450 miles of trails across six townships. Map courtesy ECTA.

## That's A Lot More Houses

Over the last 30 years, the number of people per square mile has increased significantly in Essex County, MA, although not as dramatically as population density figures for the overall United States:

### Essex County, MA:

Population per square mile 1980: 1280.3  
Population per square mile 2010: 1508.8  
Percent increase: 17.8%

### Overall U.S.:

Population per square mile 1980: 64.0  
Population per square mile 2010: 87.4  
Percent increase: 36.6%

*Figures per U.S. Census*

***About the Equine Land Conservation Resource (ELCR):*** *The Equine Land Conservation Resource is the only national not-for-profit organization advancing the conservation of land for horse-related activity. ELCR serves as an information resource and clearinghouse for land and horse owners on issues related to equine land conservation, land use planning, land stewardship/best management practices, trails, liability and equine economic development. For more information about the ELCR visit our website at [www.elcr.org](http://www.elcr.org) or call (859) 455-8383.*

