

Gilsland Farm History

Gilsland Farm and the surrounding shorelands have a long history of human use. For thousands of years they were home to the Wabanakis and their ancestors. It was an ideal spot: the estuary's vast tidal flats provided a rich source of shellfish and attracted huge concentrations of shorebirds; the sheltered waters of Casco Bay offered superb fishing and hunting for waterfowl and marine mammals; and the river provided an important travel route to the interior.

The arrival of English settlers in the 1630s signaled the end of this era and the beginning of a new one. Claiming and dividing the land into individual properties, the settlers soon cut the timber from the shorelands and established farms. Along the Presumpscot -- which means "many rough places" -- they erected gristmills and sawmills. In the mid-1800s, Silas Noyes bought the site of what would become Gilsland Farm and built the red wood-frame house still standing near the entrance to the sanctuary.

Gilsland Farm was acquired through the generosity of the Freeman family in a series of gifts between 1974 and 1994. Ruth Moulton Freeman's father, David Moulton -- a Portland lawyer and dedicated conservationist -- bought the farm in 1911 as a summer retreat. He named the property Gilsland Farm in honor of Sir Thomas de Moulton "of the Gils," a distant relative, and spent the next 40 years turning it into a showplace with an exceptional herd of Jersey cattle and nurseries of shrubs and flowers. One of the outstanding features of the farm was the more than 400 species of

peonies stretching over seven acres. Descendants of Moulton's peonies can be seen today in several locations on the property.

In 1976, the headquarters building was erected as a prototype demonstration of energy-efficient office space heated by solar and wood heat. Besides its heating systems, the building includes many other unique features, including a composting toilet on the second floor. By the end of the 1970s it was clear Maine Audubon had outgrown the headquarters building, and in 1981 the farmhouse at the end of the driveway was purchased. In 1987, the small building behind the headquarters was constructed as an energy demonstration center and part of an overall energy upgrade for the building.

By 1995, Maine Audubon had again outgrown its space and the environmental education center was constructed using then-state-of-the-art "green" design and construction techniques. The education center provides facilities for the majority of public programming at Gilsland Farm. It is also home to the Teacher's Resource Center and Maine Audubon Nature Store. In 2005, Maine Audubon began purchasing renewable, cleaner-burning BioHeat™ heating oil to heat the buildings and biodiesel fuel to run the tractor at Gilsland Farm. The subsequent installation of seven solar arrays and an electric vehicle charging station has continued Maine Audubon's commitment to renewable and sustainable energy.