

# **It's All About Connections**

## **A New Park and Nature Preserve for Sandy Springs**

Standing under a vast white oak on a brilliant but chilly afternoon, Helen Tapp got it exactly right. Addressing a small group of stakeholders last Tuesday, the Director of The Trust for Public Land, Georgia (TPL) remarked that “the preservation of Lost Corner is all about connections”.

The group gathered at the City's new park for a press event to acknowledge the generosity of the park's land donor, Ms. Margaret “Peggy” L. Miles. The land is an extraordinary 22 acre tract of lush hardwoods, streams and natural springs. Representatives from the City of Sandy Springs, the Sandy Springs Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, and the Governor's Land Conservation Program were there to celebrate the connection of Ms. Miles to her land and family homestead, and to the people and organizations who helped fulfill her vision.

Ms. Miles passed away on September 6<sup>th</sup>, shortly after her 87<sup>th</sup> birthday. She was born and lived all of her life at Lost Corner. Her father purchased the land in 1915, moving the family from East Point to ‘the country’. He called it Lost Corner because the site was so remote that few could find it on the first try. Peggy was the fourth of five children and the first to be born at Lost Corner. He built a craftsman style bungalow for the family, but chose to leave the land essentially undisturbed. Peggy, who never married, survived all of her siblings and eventually inherited the property.

Although Peggy pursued a distinguished career as a medical researcher, she was passionate about the natural world, becoming an expert on the land's trees, plants and animals. Her connection to the land was infectious. The bungalow became a gathering place for family, neighbors and friends to share the pleasures of the gardens, the woods, and Peggy's love of the land. One friend remembers, as a child, visiting Peggy to sit with her on the porch or explore the woods. “There was something magical about that place that always felt like you were in a storybook. Mom loved being there too, in fact everyone we know did. Peggy made things magical. Nature was exciting and vibrant and it was everywhere.”

Over the years, the rural character of the land around her changed. Sandy Springs became the bedroom community for Atlanta, cul de sac subdivisions replaced forested tracts, old Indian trails and wagon routes became thoroughfares, and a thriving suburban community grew up around Lost Corner. Peggy's attachment to the land, however, never changed. She understood the

unique character of Lost Corner, a fragile landscape that could disappear if it were not properly protected.

Trisha Thompson Fox, a neighbor and long-time friend, remembers the 'front porch chats' she had with Peggy about her vision for Lost Corner. With no direct heirs, Peggy was increasingly concerned in her later years about preserving her land. She wanted future generations, especially children, to enjoy what had sustained her all her life – a love and appreciation for nature, and a strong connection to the land.

Trisha introduced Peggy to her trusted friends, Ralph Daniels and Joey Mayson, with the thought that they could help her think through possible options for the property. Both had been actively engaged in land conservation efforts, particularly Mayson who was instrumental in preserving the 30 acre Big Trees Forest Preserve in the early 1990's, and founded the Sandy Springs Conservancy (SSC) in 2001, a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing park and green space development and identifying opportunities for land conservation in Sandy Springs. He recognized the unique opportunity to work with a knowledgeable landowner and her supportive family to create a nature preserve similar to Big Trees.

Knowing that Ms. Miles wanted to permanently protect her land, Mayson turned to experts at The Trust for Public Land, Georgia (TPL). TPL, a national non-profit dedicated to "conserving land for people", has been locally engaged for the past two decades in protecting land in the Chattahoochee River Corridor (more than 15,000 acres to date). Lost Corner was of particular interest because its size and its location within the river corridor.

For more than two years, TPL worked to craft an agreement to provide Ms. Miles a life estate in exchange for the land. At a bargain price of less than \$900,000 (for land valued in excess of \$9 million), Ms. Miles would be able to live out her life on the land and be assured that, afterward, the land would be preserved according to her wishes. It was mutually agreed that upon Ms. Miles death, the land would become a passive park and nature preserve for the City of Sandy Springs.

Funding the life estate resulted in a strong public/private partnership among four key entities. TPL and SSC initiated a major fund-raising effort among private foundations and individuals. City Mayor, Eva Galambos, kept abreast of Ms. Miles wishes and the quiet fundraising that had begun even before city incorporation, ensured that the City would to commit to one half of the purchase price.

As part of the funding effort, the City submitted a grant to the Georgia Land Conservation Program (GLCP). The program was established by the 2005 Georgia Land Conservation Act to preserve forest and farmland throughout the state. Generally, GLPC provides low cost loans for land conservation, but Director Curt Soper recognized the unusual nature of this project, which exactly met the agency's goals and objectives. GLCP awarded the City a grant of \$250,000. Soper said that this isn't the largest land project funded by GLCP in 2008, but it's the most celebrated.

On October 10<sup>th</sup>, Lost Corner officially became Lost Corner Preserve, the newest park in the City of Sandy Springs. As the owner of the property, the City is fully supportive of the deed and GLCP grant restrictions on the land. In keeping with Ms. Miles' wishes, the land can only be used for passive recreation such as walking, hiking, and biking on designated trails, and for picnicking, nature appreciation and education. The park isn't open to the public yet – it will take time to assess the property, implement a master plan with trails and other amenities.

Peggy Miles' vision will be realized at Lost Corner Preserve. There we can share her connection to the land and enjoy the trees, plants and wildlife just as she did. There we'll be connected to Peggy for generations to come.