



Friends of the Woods

JOINING THE HITCHCOCK WOODS FAMILY

By Pam Gleason

For many people, the Hitchcock Woods embody the essence of Aiken. Today's Woods are part of a large parcel once owned by Aiken winter colonists Thomas Hitchcock and William C. Whitney. In 1939, Thomas Hitchcock and his daughter Helen Clark set up the Hitchcock Woods Foundation, to which they donated 1,200 acres of land. Since the 1980s, the Foundation has acquired additional tracts, bringing the total area up to 2,100 acres, and making the Hitchcock Woods one of the largest urban forests in America.

Although the Woods have always been open for public use and enjoyment, it is only within the last year that members of the Aiken community have had the opportunity to demonstrate their appreciation of the forest by joining a new program called "Friends of the Woods." The donation is a modest \$50 per year. Members are added to the Foundation's mailing list and receive a benefit package, including a Friends of the Woods vehicle sticker, Friends of the Woods ribbons for horses or dogs, and a subscription to the Foundation's new e-newsletter.

"Historically there has never been a means for people to be members of anything associated with the Hitchcock Woods," says Hitchcock Woods Foundation Executive Director Doug Rabold. "There has always been private support, but it has never taken the form of a membership program. Membership demonstrates endorsement of the mission of the Foundation and of the value of this resource for the community."

The Hitchcock Woods Foundation unveiled the Friends of the Woods program in September 2006. At the same time, the Foundation established its Business Partnership program, allowing local businesses to become Woods Partners at various levels of financial support. The public received both programs enthusiastically.

"We set a goal for membership in the Friends of the Woods program," explains Doug. "The total number of private donors to the Woods in 2005 was just over 400. We thought that, conservatively, three quarters of these people would want to become Friends of the Woods. But within five months, we broke the 500 threshold, exceeding the total number of donors in 2005 altogether. This showed that the community was waiting for something like this and supported it in a very strong way."

The Business Partnership program was similarly successful. "It was hard to project how we would do as far as how many partners we would have," continues Doug. "We projected 47 members across four tiers of support. However, within the first six months of the program, we already have over 60 business partners."

The Hitchcock Woods Foundation is going through a period of transition. For most of the history of the Foundation, the Woods were supported and maintained by the Trustees. Arrangements were informal and costs were minimal.

"The trustees would meet at an annual Christmas party at the Green Boundary Club," says Doug. "They



would agree on things that needed to be done, and then everybody would write a check.”

For decades, the Foundation had just one employee. In 1939, when the Foundation was established, this was Cleveland Heath, who was the Hitchcock’s woodsman. After Cleveland’s accidental death in 1959, Namon Corley took over the job. Namon remained the only person working to care for the Woods until the mid-nineties, when the Foundation hired its first manager. Today, things are a bit more complicated and costs are considerably higher. Among other things, the Foundation has gone from simply maintaining the trails to implementing an ecological management plan that involves the whole Woods.

“We have become much more proactive,” says Doug, commenting that additional demands on the Woods make a forward-thinking stance necessary. “We are moving from a time when the Woods were appreciated and used by a small group of people to becoming more of a community resource. We also have an influx of new residents to the community. There are many things that we need to do in order to accommodate these new people and to make them feel a part of the Woods. The Friends of the Woods program is intended, first of all, just to get people on board so that we can start the education process about what a truly unique resource we have in the Woods.”

Riders or walkers in the Woods almost always recognize the natural beauty of the landscape. Fewer people appreciate the amount of work that goes into keeping the Woods the place that it is today.

“It requires a very involved set of management practices year round, both from an environmental side and from a recreational side,” says Doug. These management practices include controlled burns, bush-hogging trails, maintaining jumps and managing water run-off to prevent erosion of trails. All of these activities require funding. Another pressing need for funding involves the purchase of more land surrounding the Woods to further protect the forest from development.

“I believe that if you just tell people about the value of the Woods and get them to understand the scope of the responsibility and the nature of the expenses, they will want to be a part of the effort,” says Doug. “This tract of woods has truly shaped the way the community has developed over the past century. It has been central to Aiken, both literally and figuratively.”

Becoming a Friend of the Woods is an excellent way to demonstrate support for the Woods as a community resource. It is also a first step toward joining the Hitchcock Woods family and participating more actively in the stewardship of the forest. “We are looking for the ‘best and the brightest’ to be future board members, future staff members and volunteers,” says Doug. The Friends of the Woods program is intended to start a dialogue between those who enjoy the Woods and those who care for them. Once people realize how much they need the Woods and how much the Woods need them, Doug feels certain that they will want to take an active role in preserving the forest.

“We need to impart an appreciation of how the Woods have helped shape Aiken,” says Doug. “We need to show how the Woods must continue to play that role if we are going remain the beautiful community, the quiet community, the recreational community that we are. If people understand that the Woods are one of the major forces in Aiken, they will realize that we can’t have a hands-off sensibility. We have to be very hands-on and very supporting.”

