

History

Historic records document that in 1835, William Alexander McConnell arrived at an intriguing clearing on the banks of the North Branch of Nippersink Creek and spent his first night at the base of an oak tree. McConnell must have liked what he saw because he made claim to 480 acres in the southeastern quarter, and became the first documented settler of Richmond Township. (The oak tree, one of the largest in McHenry County, still survives today.)



Historic Illustration - 1872 plat
Residence of W.A. McConnell,
historical illustration

In the spring of 1835, McConnell and his wife Elizabeth built the first building in the Township, a 16' x 18' log cabin. For fifteen years the McConnell's and their three sons lived in the log cabin "built in the shade of a white oak".

In 1852, McConnell built a Greek Revival house across the street and lived there as he amassed 1,400 acres, upon which he built a pickle factory, creamery, cheese factory, and several impressive barns. McConnell became one of McHenry County's most prominent citizens as the first postmaster, school director of Richmond Township, Associate County Judge and state legislator.

In 1999, the Conservation District began protection of the biologically and historically rich area. Despite decades of agricultural use, several important, high-quality natural communities still exist on the land.

Over time, three additional parcels were acquired, contiguous to the first. North Branch Conservation Area opened to the public in July of 2008 and today encompasses 521 acres.



North Branch



North Branch Conservation Area

11500 North Keystone Road
Richmond, Illinois

Main Entrance GPS Coordinates:
N42°29.500, W88°20.113, WGS84



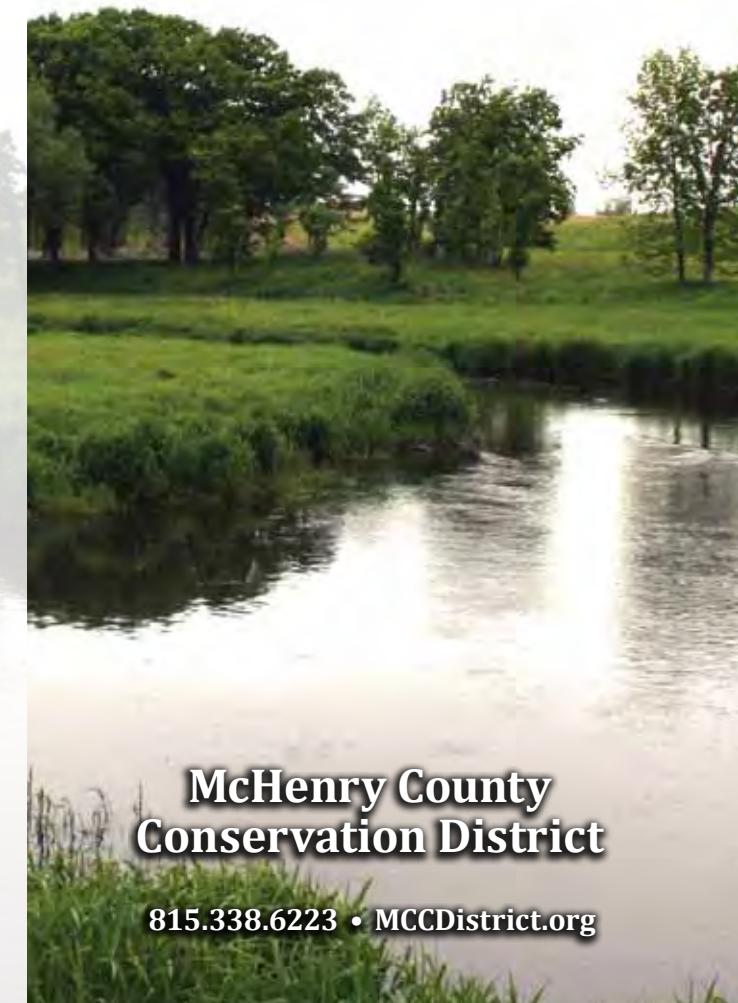
McHenry County
CONSERVATION DISTRICT

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North Branch Conservation Area



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Preservation

Tucked away in the extreme northeastern part of McHenry County lies 521 acres of preserved open space known as North Branch Conservation Area. Due to its biologically rich ecosystems, like the 125-acre wetland complex, 282-acre Genoa City Wetlands and Barrens, a Bur oak dominated savanna, and a 1.5 mile section of the North Branch of Nippersink Creek, the site is teeming with wildlife.

The lowland graminoid fen, sedge meadow and marsh communities provide a haven for over 80 different species of grassland songbirds, ducks, hawks and shorebirds, including the state endangered yellow headed blackbird and black tern. Twenty-one species of butterflies also flutter in the woodlands, meadows and savanna amongst an abundance of wildflowers.

Due to its clear, spring fed water and continuous sand and gravel bottom, Nippersink Creek supports more mussel species than any other Northeastern Illinois creek, including 11 state endangered or threatened species. In addition, 30 different native fish species swim in its clear waters including eight pollution intolerant species like the state endangered pugnose shiner and blacknose shiner.



Chorus Frogs

Collectively, North Branch Conservation Area offers visitors an excellent example of how a high-quality natural area can be protected while also allowing an opportunity for outdoor recreation.



Recreation

Multi-Purpose Trail

The primary recreational element at North Branch Conservation Area is the 1.5 mile multi-purpose trail that winds through prairie and savanna, and over Nippersink Creek. The trail links the 26 mile Prairie Trail on the east to the 7 mile Hebron Trail on the west. The trail is part of the greater 530 mile regional trail system known as the Grand Illinois Trail. The trail provides visitors and neighbors an opportunity to hike, bike, horseback ride and snowmobile.



Overnight Bicycle Pull-Off Area

Because the trail within North Branch Conservation Area is part of the larger Grand Illinois Trail system, the site provides long distance cyclists an overnight pull-off area. The area can accommodate up to seven tents for a maximum one night stay. The area is located off Keystone Road and is designed for cyclists only. Permits required.



Rose-breasted Grosbeak

These existing wetland and marsh areas also provide habitat for chorus frogs, leopard frogs, salamanders, Blanding's turtles and northern water snakes.

Picnicking

North Branch is an ideal place for picnicking after a hike or bike ride. A parking lot, restrooms and picnic tables are located at the main entrance off Keystone Road.

Note: Fishing is not allowed along the banks of Nippersink Creek.

Historic Site

McConnell Farmstead

Situated between Route 173 and Broadway Road is the William Alexander McConnell Farmstead, a four acre home site of the first settler in Richmond Township.

Early plat maps show McConnell owning portions of what is now protected within the North Branch Conservation Area. Through multiple purchases, both the unique natural communities and the historical aspects of the site are being preserved.



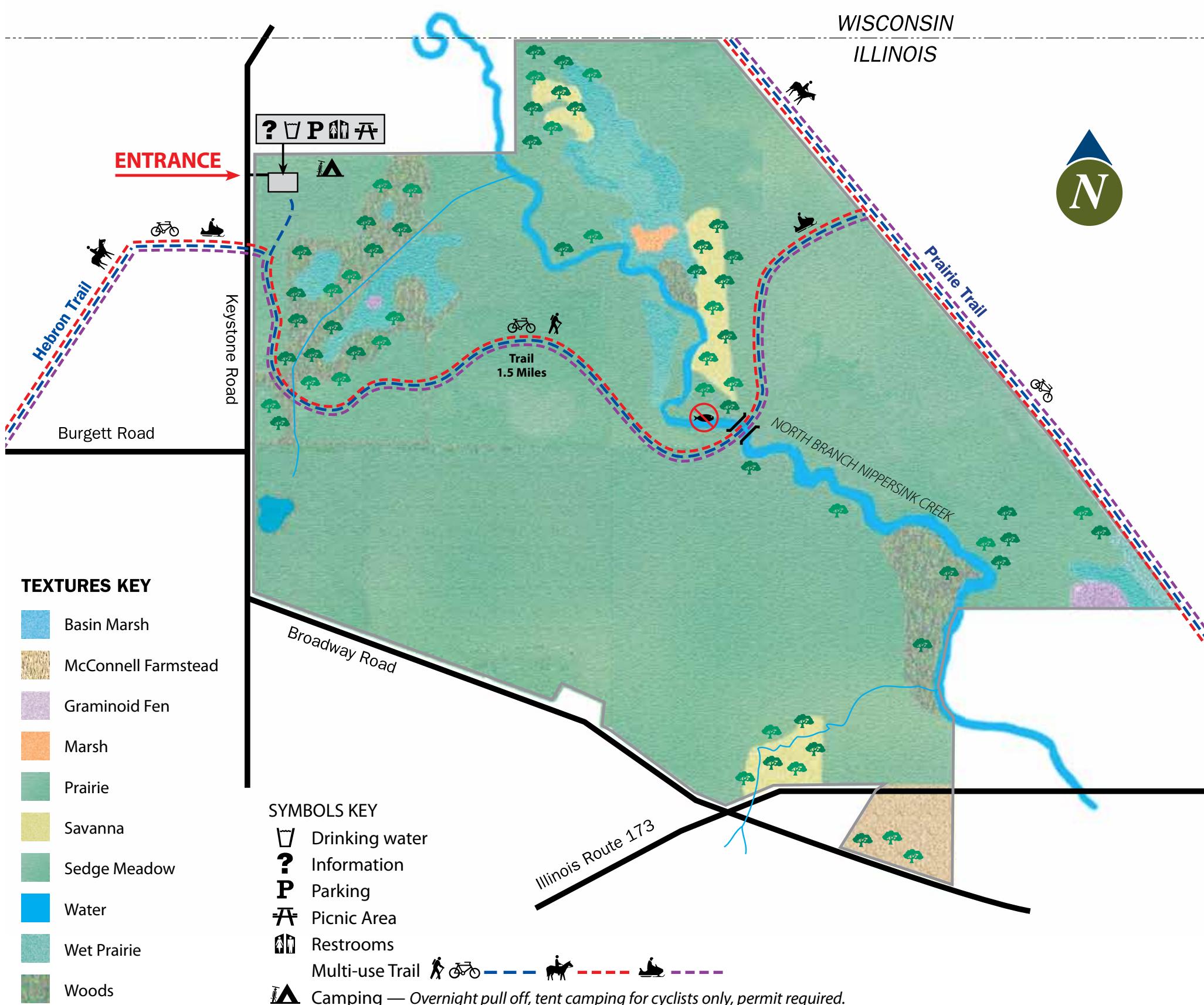
Residence of W.A. McConnell

Currently, a non-profit group, the McConnel Friends Foundation, is raising funds to restore the buildings on the site, which include the two-story 1870's Greek revival house, small barn, large dairy barn, hand-hewn threshing barn, milk house, chicken coop, granary, corn crib and hog house.

The potential exists for future development of the McConnell farmstead, which may include school field trips and educational opportunities that would reconnect visitors with local agricultural heritage specific to farm life and technology of the late 1800's.

Note: This area of the site is not yet open to the public.

North Branch Conservation Area



Natural Communities



Savanna

Ecologically Diverse Habitat

The North Branch Conservation Area contains a number of interconnected natural communities including sedge meadow, basin marsh, stream, savanna and prairie. Many of these communities are recognized and classified for their ecological importance in the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory (INAI), McHenry County Natural Areas Inventory (MCNAI) and the Advanced Identification Wetland (ADID) study.

A 1.5-mile section of the North Branch of Nippersink Creek is recognized by all three of these classifications due to the high number of fish and state endangered and threatened mussel species found in the creek. Also within the boundaries of North Branch Conservation Area are nine significant wetlands that are registered in the National Wetlands Inventory.



Prairie



Wetlands

The **Nippersink Creek watershed** is the largest tributary to the Fox River, which begins in Wisconsin's Walworth and Kenosha counties and drains 50 square miles before crossing into Illinois. Genoa City Wetlands and Barrens, a 282-acre complex of wetlands, make up the northern half of the site, while the 132-acre Prairie Trail North Wetlands abuts the southern portion of the site.



Mink

Geology

The gently rolling topography, with the highest elevation at 850 feet above sea level, is a product of the Wisconsin glacier. As this last ice sheet melted around 14,000 years ago, it left behind ridges and mounds of the rocks, gravel, sand and soil that it had picked up and pushed along as it advanced. The North Branch Conservation Area sits on one of these landforms, known as the Valparaiso moraine. Its natural communities are all a result of the flow of the glacial meltwaters and the deposit of the soils they carried. There are 27 different soil types found within this site and underlying the soil is the bedrock formation of Silurian Dolomite, an extremely hard rock, resistant to erosion.



White Indigo



White-Heelsplitter Mussel



Pimpleback Mussel



Plain Pocketbook Mussel



Sandhill Crane