

Steward of the valley

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At the confluence of the St. Croix and Apple Rivers is a 16-acre plot of land with a 150-year family history. It is prime land for development. That will never happen while Stillwater resident Nancy Brown co-owns the property.

For her efforts in saving and using the land as an educational tool, Brown was honored with the 2008 St. Croix Watershed Stewardship Award last week.

The Stewardship Award is given annually to people that volunteer their time, energy and resources to preserve the St. Croix River Valley. Brown received the award for developing Martell's Landing Education Center on the property. Brown teamed with St. Croix Valley resident Charles Bailey to purchase the land from the Martell family in 2004. Since, they have been at work to preserve the riverfront property and turn it into a non-profit place of learning called Martell's Landing Education Center.

The St. Croix River Association is concerned with preserving the character the Valley's environments. The association began in 1911, said Jim Harrison, a past president of the group.

As the logging and milling era ended, the transition from the river's industrial use to a recreational use began. It was in the early 1900s that people of the Valley foresaw a great deal of change coming to the area and wanted to ensure there would be check-points to help keep the river a scenic area for many generations to enjoy.

"We know there is going to be development," Harrison said. "This does not stop all development, but it is to control development. It can be done without making this look like an urban river."

The land owned by Brown and Bailey is part of the original 500-acre homestead built by the Martell family in 1856. It came complete with the well-preserved, thick timbered home the Martells first lived in and many of the tools they farmed with.

"This is to preserve nature and human history," Brown said of purchasing and preserving the land. "It's to teach people to be good stewards of nature. If you wanted to tear this all down, you could probably get three nice lots here, three giant houses. But this is a historic house. It shouldn't be torn down."

The land is mid-way between Stillwater and Marine on St. Croix, on the Wisconsin side of the riverbanks. Much of the property surrounding Martell's Landing is owned by the Department of Natural Resources. It is isolated yet accessible to those who want to enjoy the education center, according to Charles Bailey, who grew up fishing the St. Croix and Apple rivers.

"It's one of the last pieces of land like this left," Bailey said. "As far as a private piece of property goes. It's right at the Rice Lake flats, which is like a huge nature preserve."

For several years after purchasing the land, it was known as Tree of Peace. The name is currently being changed to Martell's Landing Education Center.

“Tree of Peace was more of a philosophy but it never really had a land base,” said Brown. “Now we have a land base with a historic building. The historic building and the history here is important to this particular area.”

Brown, who is the director of Martell’s Landing, said that more than 300 children visited the education center last year for programming on history, social studies and sciences. The landing has acted as a place for field trips, retreats and even weddings.

“As long as [the activities] connect you to the land, the importance of the land and working with the land, it fits our mission,” Brown said. “I’d like to think of this as a living classroom.”