

Our Stories—Virginia Carter

Virginia Carter's Rhode Island roots run very deep, but she was born in France where her father was serving in the Foreign Service. Her family returned to RI to live in her grandfather's house in the Matunuck Hills of South Kingstown—she vividly remembers being afraid during the 1938 hurricane as the wind blew fiercely and trees fell left and right. After a divorce, her mother moved the family to North Carolina, returning to RI in time for Virginia to enter 4th grade. Virginia and her younger sister Jane loved Rhode Island, swimming in Long Pond and going for long walks in the woods. But after graduating with a degree in zoology from Swarthmore College, Virginia married and moved away again, not to return full time to Rhode Island until retirement.

Raising three children kept Virginia plenty busy in Montgomery, Maryland but once Elizabeth, the youngest, was in school full time Virginia took a job teaching young patients who were being treated at the National Institute for Health. Though she enjoyed this job she felt she needed to be more challenged so she decided to continue her education at American University, earning a Master's Degree in ecology. It was her studies here that led to her career as a scientist at the US Geological Survey. She wrote her thesis about the Great Dismal Swamp in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, marking the beginning of her lifelong interest in swampy habitats.

It was an exciting time to be working at USGS. In coordination with NASA, meteorological satellites that had begun to fly in the 1960s were being outfitted with remote sensing equipment that provided the information necessary to create the maps used by the US Fish and Wildlife Service among other agencies. Virginia's specialty was wetlands interpretation and mapmaking. She worked in the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia, in the Florida Everglades and on Ossabaw Island off the coast of Georgia. Her work took her to swamps and wetlands in every one of the fifty states and Puerto Rico, plus Argentina, China and elsewhere.

Always she returned to Rhode Island for part of the summer to visit her mother and her sister Jane, who had settled in RI with her family, and to enjoy time by the shores of the ponds in South Kingstown. Her children grew up thinking of RI as another home.

In 1987, by now divorced, she again returned to school, this time George Washington University where she earned her Ph.D. in invertebrate paleontology and geobiology. The field work was always her favorite part of the job—traveling out into an area on a small motorboat, outfitted in chest waders and hauling up samples and measuring water levels.

When it came time to retire Virginia knew that she would return to RI. She and Jane looked forward to buying a motor home and traveling about the country together. Virginia had fond memories of camping with her three kids in a VW bus decades earlier. Virginia built a home next to Jane's house on Round Pond. Very sadly her much anticipated travels with Jane were not to be. Jane contracted cancer in 2002 and passed away in 2004.

Virginia did not have a religious upbringing. She was introduced to Unitarian Universalism by her husband, though they wed at the Congregational Church in Peace Dale. In later years when Virginia returned to RI for her summer sojourn, she had found out about UUCSC when they were meeting at St. Augustine's Church in Kingston, but not holding summer services. It wasn't until Virginia moved back to RI full time that she started attending UUCSC, by then meeting at the American Legion Hall. Virginia

has been very involved with the church, serving on the Board and for two years running the Annual Auction, a major fundraiser for the church. She participated in potlucks and later in Dining for Dollars events. She has been devoted to her Small Group for many years.

Family is a high priority and Virginia's house has ample room for visiting children and grandchildren. Even in this summer of Covid her place was a safe haven. Her daughter Elizabeth lives just down the hill. Virginia is not at all happy about this forced isolation and the cancellation of church services and so much else. She is a bit cranky about Zoom but she is trying. She reads and does jigsaw puzzles. She is recovering from a couple of carpal tunnel surgeries and last year had a hip replacement. Now the other hip hurts - likely damage from all that bouncing around in boats, she says. The miles of walking trails she has created in the woods offer no end of nature sights and the pond provides beautiful views in the fall through the spring and a refreshing dip come summer. Though deep in the center, the pond is shallow enough on the edges that one could put on a pair of chest waders and muck about if one was so inclined.

Elizabeth Donovan, September 2020