

A Look Back ... Helen Fenske

A 1959 newspaper article reported on Port Authority of New York and New Jersey plans to build an airport in a New Jersey swamp. Angry neighbors immediately created the Great Swamp Committee with Helen Fenske as its head. She led a tireless campaign to save the swamp, helping to raise more than \$1 million to purchase and donate nearly 3,000 acres of land to the Department of the Interior – including spare change collected by Girl Scouts.

Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1960, but the Port Authority didn't give up. Eventually, Fenske concluded that only designation under the Wilderness Act of 1964 would truly protect this wild land. With her persistent and effective lobbying, the Great Swamp Wilderness Area became the Department of the Interior's first designated wilderness in 1968.

Fellow activist David Moore of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation said, "No one had taken on the Port Authority, and certainly no one had taken them on and won."

Fenske also promoted the establishment of Wallkill River and Cape May National Wildlife Refuges in New Jersey. "She was a warrior," said former New Jersey governor Thomas Kean, who appointed Fenske as assistant commissioner for the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. "It's hard to think of an environmental fight that Helen didn't take on." Fenske used to deliver tape recordings of her positions on environmental issues for Kean to listen to while he was being driven around the campaign trail.

Fenske received the Department of the Interior's Conservation Service Award. The visitor center at Great Swamp Refuge is named in her honor.

CAPTION:

Helen Fenske reflects on the swamp that could have become tarmac but instead became a national wildlife refuge 25 miles west of New York City's Times Square. (Fenske family)