



Agricultural
Stewardship
Association

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS

Forever Farmland

Spring/Summer 2020

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CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF CONSERVATION



If ever there was a textbook definition of a grassroots organization, ASA is it.

Started in 1990 by a handful of farmers and conservationists with a shared goal of protecting the farming lands in the region from mounting development pressures, ASA operated for the first 13 years solely on the donated time and energy of these visionaries and other volunteers. Through tireless effort and outreach, they conserved 3,300 acres on 30 properties in Washington County.

Buoyed by their success, and painfully aware their efforts required full-time, professional focus, the founders hired the organization's first Executive Director, Teri Ptacek. A resident of Washington County, Teri came from American Farmland Trust which focuses on conserving farmland throughout the state. She was thrilled to discover the strong community support for conserving agricultural land locally.

Evolving and expanding to protect the landscape

There are three essential ingredients to conserve land in perpetuity for

agricultural and forestry purposes: first, landowners willing to voluntarily conserve their land by either donating or selling their development rights; second, federal or state funding to purchase the landowners' development rights; and third, support of donors to help fund ASA's operating costs. Under Teri's leadership, ASA was able to secure all three ingredients.

Thirty years later, ASA's portfolio now covers 24,000 acres of farms and forests on 143 properties throughout Rensselaer and Washington counties.

ASA is now staffed with seven professionals and supported by hundreds of volunteers, all focused on conserving productive land for future generations and connecting local communities to the land through educational programs and outreach efforts.

Pushing harder than ever to protect the land and provide for the future

While we're proud of the amount of land conserved to date, much work remains to be done. We estimate another 30,000-40,000 acres must be protected to ensure a vibrant future for

farming economy in our region. As daunting as those numbers may seem, the truth is that 30 years ago we could have never imagined reaching 24,000 acres today.

Without question, COVID-19 has made all of us painfully aware of the impermanent nature of so much around us, including our health, our economy and our food supply. For us at ASA, never has the permanence of ASA's mission to conserve productive land forever seemed more relevant or important. And we're committed to stepping up the pace of our work to ensure that our region's most vital resource—land—is available for growing local food for generations to come.

We are extremely grateful for the vision that gave shape to ASA and for your generosity and trust in the work we do. We hope you will continue to lend support in any form so that, like the land we conserve, ASA's mission remains vibrant and valued forever. It means the world to us now and will mean the same to our children's children in the future.



Thoughts from a Founder

“I've always appreciated the hard work our forefathers did to improve the land of this region. So in 1990 when there was talk of forming a group to help protect this area from housing development, I immediately got involved.

We started with a shoestring budget and many devoted volunteers. But even with good hearts and intentions, we soon found ourselves struggling financially and not protecting enough land from development. We were fortunate to have Dave Horn join ASA at this critical time. He forged a new path for the organization that's led us to a level of success that I don't think we could have imagined when we started.

In addition to Dave, many people have stepped up to support ASA and protect farmland from development. But more support is needed.

The future of ASA as well as the integrity of the landscape that surrounds us, truly lies in the hands of the communities and people of the region. I hope when called upon, they will do what's needed to ensure ASA can continue its important work and preserve our lands forever.”

—Jim Perry

30 Years & Counting

24,124

Acres of Rensselaer and Washington County farmlands conserved

1

ASA-owned Cambridge Community Forest (139 acres)

7,000+

Acres in the process of being conserved

143

Easements

27

Active dairy farms

50

Easements with 10+ forested acres, including fifteen easements approaching 100% forestation

16

Conserved farms that provide direct-to-consumer sales

252,653,085

Meals provided by protected farmland since 1990*

*Derived from American Farmland Trust's Cultivate New York Study, 2018



Supporting farms through improved soil health

When it comes to climate change, farmers are on the frontline. With the global food supply depending on their success, many farmers are trying new and innovative approaches to raising crops and livestock in an environmentally sustainable way.

We are happy to support those efforts and, thanks to a Northeast SARE Partnership Grant awarded in 2019, ASA is working with three local farms to explore ways to increase the resilience of their soil.

Combating climate change from the ground up

The grant provides funds to engage Dr. Allen Williams to work directly with **Tiashoke Farm, Otter Creek Farm, and Hickory Hill Dairy** to test new methods to improve soil

quality and health, reduce erosion and nutrient loss, increase water-holding capacity and elevate the level of organic matter in the soil.

Dr. Williams is a widely recognized expert on soil health and regenerative agriculture. Raised on a family farm in South Carolina, he is a founding member of Understanding Ag LLC. Dr. Williams and his colleagues specialize in a whole farm planning approach that creates additional revenue opportunities.

Working with these three local farms, Dr. Williams will explore the benefits of interseeding cover crops in silage corn early in the season. After the corn is harvested, a portion of the cover crops will be used to graze animals. Soil tests will be taken over the three-year life of the grant to measure the results of combining cover

crops and grazing on land used for corn production.

These steps should reduce costs, as well as boost yields and crop resilience in the face of excessively dry or wet weather. The broader community should also benefit since these farming methods mitigate the effects of excessive rain events and help improve water quality.

Dr. Williams will lead a Field Day Discussion for the farming community (look for more information on ASA's website later this summer) at the end of each growing season to share lessons learned, including the benefits or challenges farmers identify.

It is also ASA's hope that this collaboration will encourage other farmers to try interseeding covercrops in silage corn as well as adaptive grazing as methods of improving soil health.



"I've been thinking of you."



As I write this from my home in mid-April, it's clear that the world as we knew it has changed. ASA staff members are also working from home, finding new ways to connect with community members, local farmers and landowners using remote technology so that we can slow the spread of COVID-19.

While it is an uncertain and anxious time for us all, I am seeing something that makes me hopeful. And that is this: despite the necessary distance between us, we are coming together as a community.

Acts of kindness are all around us. People are self-organizing to help those in need. Some are picking up medications for others, some are dropping off groceries and others are fostering pets. Stores are designating hours for at-risk shoppers to ensure everyone has the safest access possible to what they need. We are coming together to care for each other and it gives me hope.

I'm also inspired by families who are safely venturing through fields, on trails, into the woods, and simply slowing down to appreciate each other and the amazingly beautiful place we call home.

I'm excited that when the Cambridge Community Forest is completed and ready for families (fingers crossed for this fall, funding permitting), it too will serve as a peaceful place to connect with the land and those around us. Thank you for your help in making that happen.

Another positive outcome of this unprecedented moment in our collective history is the new appreciation for the value of local food.

Empty store shelves are a vivid reminder that locally sourced food was never just about health. It's about creating a more resilient community. In many ways, this crisis dramatically underscores why our efforts to conserve local farmland and forest are so important.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for all you have done, and continue to do, to support ASA as well as farmers and community organizations. Together, we have the ability to ensure the strength and beauty of our region no matter what challenge befalls us.

Sending my best,

Teri



For thirty years, ASA has worked with local landowners to protect the agricultural landscape of our region. We celebrate and support the foresight of these landowners and donors who recognize that once lands are lost to us, we never get them back. It is with great gratitude and pleasure that we share a few of their stories in the pages that follow.

A first-time farmer makes his mark through innovation and conservation



While lifelong farmers and first-time dairy farmers often have different visions of, and approaches to, their trade, one thing they share is a love and respect for the land.

And in the case of lifetime farmer Walter Buck and first-time farmer Eric Mayer, the land they love just happens to be the same 242 acres in Schaghticoke.

For Buck, the land and rolling hills served as home to his successful dairy operation, Buckland Farm, for 45 years. Throughout those years, he turned down countless developers who wanted to buy the property. As he neared retirement, Buck knew he wouldn't be able to farm the land forever but he wanted to be sure the land was protected so that someone else could. Thanks to state funding and ASA's assistance, Buck's vision was achieved and his retirement secured in 2013.

About the same time as Buck was preparing for retirement from dairy farming, Eric Mayer's future in dairy was just beginning.

Mayer grew up in an agriculture-related family business and had a deep understanding of what it meant to build something that will last for generations. So when he and his wife Maureen were looking for a place to establish a dairy operation, the history—and protected future—of the Buckland Farm had appeal.

“We were looking for something large enough in scale to support our family now and in the future. It was important to us to create a family

legacy farm where we could raise our children and then pass it on to them in the future; a family farm legacy, if you will,” recalls Eric. “The Buckland Farm property was an important first piece of the puzzle for us.”

“ We were looking for something large enough in scale to support our family now and in the future. It was important to us to create a family legacy farm where we could raise our children and then pass it on to them in the future; a family farm legacy, if you will”

—Eric Mayer

A new owner, a new vision

The Mayers purchased Buckland Farm and the neighboring Copses Farm in 2013. To realize his vision for the operation, Eric next purchased additional acreage on nearby properties for grazing and crops, including the Herrington and Akin farms for a total of 520 acres. “I was interested in building a progressive dairy that maximized the opportunity and potential of technology,” he explains. “We used the time to consider all the factors that would go into creating an



Eric Mayer, Copses Farm

operation that would not only sustain us, but we could feel good about in terms of its impact.”

With a vision and plan in hand, the family moved to the property in 2016 and quickly began construction of a 120,000 square foot dairy facility on the Copses Farm. They also decided to adopt the Copses Farm name for their entire venture. The striking new black barns are home to some of the latest in robotic dairy farming technology, including a robotic milking system, an electronic feed management system, robots to convey food to the cows, and heat and rumination tags to monitor their herd's health.

Learn from the past, look toward the future

While Mayer acknowledges the important role that technology plays in the productivity of his herd and the quality of product, he's also quick to

acknowledge the lessons learned from skilled farmers who've been at it for far longer than he.

“While I brought some vision and willingness to invest in technology to the operation,” he explains, “A lot of the knowledge and information that we've used to create what we have comes from the support of others in the industry. A lot of good people have had a hand in shaping what we have now and what we'll have in the future. I'm incredibly grateful for their willingness to offer direction and share insights that allow me to learn something new and improve things every day.”

Amid change, land is constant

The other thing Mayer is deeply grateful for is the land beneath his feet.

“Farming is an incredibly capital-intensive venture and real estate is the most important asset,” he says. “You need land to support the operation but

it's easy to get so much money tied up in land that you're essentially crippled from investing in any other part of the business.”

With a clear understanding of the land-cash challenge and a familiarity with the work of ASA, Mayer and his wife decided to pursue conservation easements on the three farms.

“The goal,” he explains, “was to protect the land so it can always be used for farming and to free up some of the capital we have tied up in it to create financial security.” He adds, “What's interesting—and important—about the work that ASA does is that it has served to support two different farmers running dairy operations on some of the same land but at the opposite ends of their careers. How the business runs today is a lot different from what Walter ran but the one thing that's the same is the importance of the land and its conservation.”



Customers and friends help fund a forever farm



Standing on the grassy slopes of the Lewis Waite Farm, surrounded by strutting peacocks, chattering guinea hens, and the expectant faces of floppy-eared pigs, it's hard to imagine a place less connected to the congestion and teeming humanity that is New York City.

But connected it is.

For the past 17 years, Alan and Nancy Brown have operated Lewis Waite Farm Network, which gathers locally produced and sourced food and delivers it to over 50 CSAs in the Hudson Valley, Long Island and, you guessed it, New York City. CSA refers to a system where customers agree in advance to buy a certain amount of product from a farm, thereby guaranteeing the farmer a predictable revenue flow.

From "not much of a plan" to a bustling business

While the Lewis Waite Farm now covers 447 acres of high and rolling hills, it started off considerably humbler.

Alan recalls, "When I bought the property in 1966, I was teaching in New York City. I had this idea I wanted to be a farmer but without much of a plan. Then I found this great old house from the 1820s with 141 acres tucked up away from everything and everyone, and I took my chance."

Over the next few decades, Alan spent hours fixing up the house and coming to terms with the property. "At first

I thought I'd grow crops," he says, "but the terrain and soil wasn't suited to it so I started grazing beef and pork." Slowly, he began adding land as adjacent properties became available and expanding his herd, which he and Nancy initially sold at live auctions. When the 'farm to table' movement took root in the early 2000s, they began doing retail cuts of beef and pork.

"Around that time, Thomas Christenfeld and Liz Gordon of The Alleged Farm in Easton asked if we'd like to include our cuts in the CSA programs they were supplying in Brooklyn," says Alan. "They really encouraged me to consider CSAs. Before you knew it we had a walk-in freezer and were aggregating products from small regional farmers and producers for delivery to dozens, and now over 50, CSAs."

Thanks to a background in computers, Nancy oversaw the creation of a website that handles weekly orders ranging from cheeses, cider, and bread, to grains, meat, and mushrooms. Products are collected and sorted at the farm and three or more times a week Alan rises before the sun to deliver it all to waiting customers downstate.*

Creating the ultimate "community-supported agriculture"

Driving nine plus hours a week to the city affords Alan plenty of time to think. One thing he's always thinking about is the future of the farm.

"When you're a farmer you get fixed to a place and you have a responsibility to it," he says, "We wanted the farm to remain a farm forever but didn't really see a way to do it financially." Then, after another conversation with their friends Tom and Liz, they realized that working with ASA could make it possible.

"We figured that if our customers really valued what we were doing, they'd want to make sure we could keep doing it. Apparently we were right."

— Nancy Brown

Many conversations and grant applications later, ASA secured a farmland protection grant from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to cover 50% of the funds required to purchase the developments rights from the Browns, as well as a NYS Conservation Partnership Program grant to help cover many of the transaction expenses. Despite the Browns donating a portion of their development rights,

and ASA contributing from its Forever Farmland Fund, there was still a funding gap. That's when they turned to the community they served for help.

"In talking with ASA, we realized we had this wonderful relationship with all these people we supplied food to for years," recalls Nancy. "We figured that if they really valued what we were doing, they'd want to make sure we could keep doing it. Apparently we were right."

Through appeals included in the weekly CSA newsletter, they raised the needed funds.

"The response was overwhelming," says Nancy. "It was very affirming that what we do matters and it lifted a weight off our shoulders." Alan agrees. "Lifechanging, that's what I call it."

The Browns also partnered with Equity Trust and ASA to add another level of protection by ensuring the land will remain affordable and accessible to future farmers. "These added provisions to the easement help keep the ownership in the hands of farmers and the farmland in active production," explains Jim Oldham, Executive Director of Equity Trust.

Alan reflects, "I named this farm after two farmers who worked this land before me as a way to honor them. I think keeping this land farmland forever is the greatest tribute of all."

Funding for this project was provided by USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services, Equity Trust, ASA's Forever Farmland Fund, New York State Conservation Partnership Program (funded by New York State's Environmental Protection Fund and administered by the Land Trust Alliance in coordination with the state Department of Environmental Conservation), and friends and customers of Nancy and Alan Brown.

*Due to COVID-19, the Lewis Waite Farm Network switched from weekly CSA deliveries to direct-to-customer shipments in March of this year.

Conservation through partnership



Except for a few mighty sycamores that have surrendered themselves to the river, the view of the Battenkill River from Kathy and Hugh Roome's property in Jackson, NY has changed very little since they first purchased the land over 20 years ago.

Home to an assortment of ducks, kingfishers and untold numbers of trout tucked into deep pools, "the land is located on a wonderful stretch of river that doesn't have a structure on either side," says Kathy. Which is one reason protecting it was so important to her and her husband.

The Roomes, who had previously donated an easement on 275 acres of farmland in Jackson to ASA in 2018, were already familiar with the process and merits of conservation. "Turning to ASA to protect the land was naturally my first thought," continues Kathy.

But while it may have felt obvious, the project wasn't without its challenges.

The first issue was a matter of timing as the Roomes were looking to donate an easement within a tight timeframe. The second was that, with its 3,400 feet of river frontage, but only a few acres of prime and important soils, the 50-acre property didn't quite check all the boxes for a typical ASA easement. But the one box it did check—and the one that mattered most—was that it was a property worth conserving.

Very quickly, ASA's land protection team realized the property was a better fit for the Battenkill Conservancy (BkC). So ASA reached out to Lorraine Merghart Ballard, Executive Director of the BkC with a proposition: if ASA was able to put an easement on the property, would the BkC be open to having it transferred to their portfolio for monitoring and stewardship?

"Of course we agreed, recalls Lorraine. "And the timing couldn't have been better as we had been actively honing our process for easement acquisition. And here was a chance to work alongside ASA and watch to learn from their efforts and protect a valuable stretch of land and water."

ASA was able to secure the easement and will transfer it to BkC this summer, effectively conserving the land through a partnership with BkC.

Funding for the transaction and stewardship costs was provided by the landowners.

Honoring an agricultural legacy by safeguarding it for the future



When Edward Meagher's Aunt Catherine died a few months short of her hundredth birthday, he quickly realized he had much more on his hands than just grief.

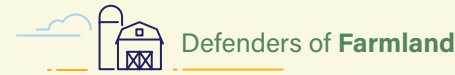
With Catherine Relihan's passing, Edward had the responsibility of deciding what to do with the 96-acre family farm. Stretching back from Route 22 into the low rolling hills of White Creek, the family's history on the property dates back to 1867 when it was purchased as a 10-acre lot. Over the years, parcels were added on, each supporting the family's successful dairy operation. As family members grew older and fewer, those left determined the best way to maintain the agricultural legacy was to lease the land to a neighboring dairy farm—an arrangement that remains in place over 30 years later.

"It was important to me to honor the legacy my aunt, and all those who came before her, established on the property,"



says Edward. "Working with ASA to conserve the land was the perfect and, frankly, only option. I'm incredibly grateful the organization values the land as much as I do and is providing the means to keep it operating as a working farm the way it has been for generations."

Funding for this project was provided by the New York State Environmental Protection Fund administered by the Department of Agriculture and Markets.



Thoughtful donor makes a difference today and tomorrow

NOTE: In our fall newsletter we were pleased to announce a Bequest Challenge made possible through the generosity of an anonymous donor. Fourteen of you stepped up to make a pledge and have raised \$7,000 for ASA. The donor was so impressed with your commitment that he wants to share his motivation for helping our organization. His story follows.

While Bob Ross has called New York City home for nearly 50 years, his earliest memories are on the family farm in Wisconsin. Now a retired lawyer and full-time philanthropist, his connection and concern for protecting natural spaces is evident in the list of organizations he supports: Mississippi Valley Conservancy, New Jersey Conservation Foundation and Orange County Land Trust, all of which like ASA protect lands for farms. His late wife loved the land, and was responsible for planting over 100 walnut trees on their family farm.

"Any organization I consider supporting has to clear a few hurdles," explains Bob. First and foremost, it has to be something Bob's late wife would have believed in.

Bob explains, "She was always the one in our marriage who led the philanthropic charge. Even when we were poor, she'd find a way to give a few dollars to organizations she believed in. Before she passed, she made me promise to continue giving to organizations that made the world

a better place and did it responsibly." Toward that end, Bob now looks for the following in any group he considers supporting: a good track record of doing what they promise to do, a supportive board, committed leadership, and the internal structure to execute the work. "From our earliest conversations, it was clear that ASA met those criteria," says Bob, "which made choosing to work with them easy."

As for why a Bequest Challenge, Bob explains, "A bequest challenge has the advantage of helping an organization and, on some level, the people who choose to participate.

"In my years as a lawyer, I saw far too many widows left in very dire financial circumstances simply because there was no will. Encouraging people to create a bequest sort of forces them to consider their financial planning and get their affairs—including a will—in order. That's important to me as is the fact that the Bequest Challenge provides matching funds that go to ASA immediately and at the same time provides funds for the future."

Be a part of the ASA Bequest Challenge

Here's how it works. When you commit to including ASA in your will, trust, or estate plans for any amount or any percentage of your estate, ASA immediately receives \$500—up to a total of \$15,000—from Bob Ross that can be used to support our farmland protection efforts. The bequests will help fund our work for years to come in the future.

To date, 14 people have stepped up to make a pledge which triggered a \$7,000 matching pledge. As of the time of this writing, just 16 more commitments are needed to reach the \$15,000 matching maximum goal.

To be a part of this important effort, please complete a Bequest Challenge Commitment Form found on ASA's website agstewardship.org or contact Donna at donna@agstewardship.org.



You can make a gift to ASA by payroll contribution through EarthShare New York's Workplace Giving Program. State Employees please use # 999-00648 on your SEFA pledge form.

24,124

acres of
farm & forest land
conserved!



Agricultural
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The Agricultural Stewardship Association (ASA) protects our community's working farms and forests, connects people to the land, and promotes a vibrant future for agriculture and forestry in the region. To date, we have assisted landowners with the conservation of 24,124 acres of productive land in Washington and Rensselaer counties.

ASA receives funding from its members and supporters, which include the New York State Environmental Protection Fund and The PCLB Foundation, among others.



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We Conserve Good Farmland.
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Thank you to our donors

We are grateful to our many sponsors who continue to make the important work we do possible. A complete list of donors (April 1, 2019 through October 30, 2020) will be featured in our Fall/Winter issue.



The time to
shop local
is now

Due to the COVID-19, the economic health and viability of local farms is at great risk.

Reach out to local farmers and producers to learn how you can obtain their product and ensure they continue to be vital and contributing players in our local agricultural community throughout this time of crisis and beyond.



Your support is
more important
than ever

The power to ensure a future for local farming is in your hands.

Donations to ASA, no matter what size, make an impact that literally lasts forever. If you can, please make a gift today.

Visit agstewardship.org to learn more about ways to give to ASA and help protect farmland forever.