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106 Acres in Pulaski County Donated to VOF

Landowner hopes land can one day become a community park.



Margaret Virginia Smith was just 19 years old when her father passed away in 1944, leaving her with the family farm and instructions to “provide for your mother for her natural life.”

By that time, the Pulaski County farm had already been reduced from 300-plus acres to little more than 100. Smith’s father, J. Logan Smith, had been forced to sell much of his property to survive the Great Depression. Then, the war effort took even more of the Smith family’s land. A large chunk was sold to the Fairlawn Realty Company in 1941 to provide housing for the crush of people descending on the county for work at the Radford Ordnance Works—later known as the Radford Army Ammunition Plant—which produced gunpowder for World War II. A suburb was born, but a family farm was dying.

However, Smith’s father saved the best for his daughter.

The remaining property was perched high above the New River, and the 1920s farmhouse afforded views of the City of Radford across the way. Apple trees and hay fields cradled the house like a mother’s arms. Cattle grazed in green pastures as the burgeoning suburb of Fairlawn prospered and expanded, threatening to overtake the remaining farmland from which it was born.

After selling more land to the county for a new elementary school, Smith decided that her family had done enough to help the development of the young community. That was 60 years ago. Since then Smith has held on to the remaining 106-acre farm—an emerald isle in a sprawling sea of houses, fast-food joints, and shopping centers.

Smith, who never married, says, “For years I’ve known that I didn’t want the land to be developed, and then I started reading about the Virginia Outdoors Foundation in the newspaper.” Recently, she declared in her will that the farm will be given to



Margaret Virginia Smith, left, receives a VOF sign from VOF’s deputy director of policy and acquisitions, Leslie Grayson. Ms. Smith will live on the farm the rest of her life, and then VOF will become the owner and preserve it according to her wishes.

VOF, which will forever preserve the property as open space. Smith hopes that eventually her land can become a public park with ball fields, walking trails, and picnic shelters. No matter what happens, she knows that it will be protected and remain as the open rolling fields that she has known her whole life.

VOF Executive Director Bob Lee says the gift is an extraordinary act of generosity. “The Smith farm is truly a gem. This gift will provide so many benefits to the community surrounding it, as well as the greater Commonwealth. It is rare that we have an individual so committed to not only the conservation of their land, but also to sharing it with the community.”

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THE PRESERVATION TRUST FUND

Letter from the Executive Director

The Open-Space Lands Preservation Trust Fund (or PTF, as we call it at VOF) was created in 1997 by the Virginia General Assembly to help land-rich, cash-poor family farms engage in voluntary land conservation for the benefit of current and future generations. Most farming families have a strong commitment to protect the natural and cultural values of their land, but the transactional costs of voluntary land conservation can often be a major deterrent. Knowing that the legal and appraisal costs are eligible for partial or full reimbursement through the state PTF program can provide an important inducement to move forward with an open-space easement.

PTF allocations represent 25 percent of the annual Virginia General Fund appropriation to the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation that is administered by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. The PTF program has been extremely beneficial in protecting a critical mass of agricultural and forestal working lands that represent almost \$80 billion annually to the Virginia economy. Protecting these renewable resource lands is a vital part of the legacy that we offer for continuing economic progress with appropriate reverence for Virginia's farming heritage.

Since 1997, VOF has used more than \$10 million in PTF funds to reimburse 274 easement donors for a portion or all of the professional services costs associated with their open-space easements. This investment has protected more than 66,000 acres of farmland and forestland. In 2011, PTF grants were made to 32 landowners who were thereby able to preserve a total of 6,687 acres.

Now, with many competing demands for scarce state dollars, VOF is hoping that Virginians who care deeply about preserving our treasured working landscapes will make donations in support of the restricted PTF program. Lacking voluntary cash contributions for the PTF program, the pace of VOF land conservation will slow. Our easement staff reports that some landowners, particularly in the historic Shenandoah Valley and in Southwest Virginia, have put their prospective easement projects on hold pending replenishment of funding for the PTF program.

Please consider supporting this exemplary public-private land conservation partnership. Send a contribution using the envelope inside this newsletter, or by visiting our website at virginiaoutdoorsfoundation.org, so that we can ensure no easement is lost because of a landowner's limited financial resources.

Bob Lee, Executive Director
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New Protection on the New River

Several years ago, Julie Montgomery called the National Committee for the New River (NCNR) to talk about her family property in Giles County, Virginia. She had 70 acres on East River Mountain with a view of the New and was hoping to preserve the wildlife habitat and protect water quality on this stretch of the river. She came to NCNR with her questions on how that might work. Eventually she donated the tract to NCNR.

A few years later, NCNR met Montgomery's neighbors, the Robertson family. The Robertsons owned and farmed an adjacent 352 acres. NCNR Executive Director George Santucci had a chance to talk to Ed Robertson at a luncheon in Hinton, West Virginia, downriver from the property. Santucci learned that the Montgomery acreage was originally part of the Robertson family farm—land they'd lived on for generations.

Working hand-in-hand with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation and Ed Robertson, NCNR packaged together a land deal that forever preserves 422 acres. The deal involved selling the 70 acres to the Robertson family, and then protecting the entire property with a permanent conservation easement held by VOF. The Robertsons retain ownership of the land, but it is forever protected from development. It may be passed on to heirs or sold, but the restrictions on its use stay with the land.

Ed Robertson says he doesn't see why more landowners don't do conservation easements to protect their land from development. "I love to see land used, but not abused, and conservation easements are great tools for just that," he explains.

VOF protects about 47,000 acres of open space in the New River watershed, including 3,300 acres protected in 2011. NCNR has protected 7,614 acres and restored more than 77 miles of river and stream bank.

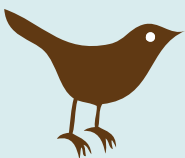


BY THE NUMBERS

According to the McDonnell Administration, how many acres of open space are being developed in Virginia each year?

- A. 30,000
- B. 60,000
- C. 120,000

Answer on page 6



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A Natural Connection

Volunteers play a key role in managing the Bull Run Mountains.

Straddling the boundary between Prince William and Fauquier counties, the 2,486-acre Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve is a favorite destination for hikers from around the Washington D.C. area. Most of the property was given to the Virginia Outdoors Foundation by a group of conservation-minded landowners in the late 1970s. VOF has added acreage to the preserve since that time.

The management of a heavily visited preserve in a densely populated region is a challenge. VOF has been fortunate to have the assistance of volunteers. Among them is the Bull Run Mountains Conservancy, which was created in 1995 to conduct research and provide programs to educate the public about the important ecological features of the mountains. Also, the Manassas Bull Runners Trail Crew of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club has helped to improve and maintain the nearly 10 miles of trails open to the public.

The longest-serving volunteers comprise a team called the Bull Run Mountains Stewardship Committee. This group of 20 local residents has provided extensive property management assistance on the mountain for 18 years. The committee is organized and managed by Mike Massey and Randy Dasher. Mike is a surveyor and civil engineer based out of Manassas, and Randy is the retired director of facility services for Prince William County Public Schools. Their professional expertise has benefitted numerous projects taken on by the committee.

For nearly two decades, the stewardship committee has built trails, marked boundaries, cleared trash and debris, and constructed bridges and boardwalks. This spring the volunteers restored their earlier bridge work and constructed

a new parking area near the main trail head. The parking area was sorely needed; the preserve gets several hundred visitors on weekends during the spring, summer, and fall. The new area has doubled the available parking. The committee was able to get the asphalt and use of equipment donated by local companies.

After performing bridge repairs and constructing the new parking area, the stewardship committee also helped VOF mark the property's boundary with small steel signs and silver blazing. Visitors and neighbors are asked to appreciate the sensitivity of the plants and animals within the preserve boundaries, many of which are rare and unusual species.

"VOF has tremendous gratitude to the volunteers who make the operation of a publically accessible preserve possible," says Executive Director Bob Lee. "The assistance provided by the members of the Bull Run Mountains Stewardship Committee this year and for the last 18 years has been crucial to the management of the Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve."

Anyone interested in volunteer opportunities on Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve should contact VOF's manager of owned lands, Amanda Scheps, at (540) 347-7727 or ascheps@vofonline.org. Volunteer days are held the first Saturday of each month from September through June. Typical projects include trail improvements and invasive species removal. More information about the volunteer opportunities and the preserve can be found on our website at virginiaoutdoorsfoundation.org/bullrunmts. ★



Left: This past spring, the Bull Run Mountains Stewardship Committee arranged for asphalt and equipment donations that doubled the visitor parking area.

Right: Volunteers have spent many hours marking the boundary of the preserve with signs that help keep visitors (walking stick insects not included) from wandering into adjacent private property. The signs also provide people with the VOF web address, where they can learn more about our work.

Volunteering With VOF

VOF is responsible for protecting 650,000 acres in perpetuity. You can help.

Across Virginia at our seven regional offices, volunteers work alongside VOF staff on everything from office assistance to easement monitoring to maintaining trails and removing invasive species on VOF's public lands. These volunteers save us money and enable our staff to accomplish their work more efficiently.

Volunteer opportunities are quite flexible. You decide when, where, and how often you contribute. Whether you want to work in the field, in one of our offices, or from your home, VOF likely has a project that suits your interests.

Your time is valuable to us. Independent Sector—a national nonprofit that supports charitable organizations—says that one volunteer hour in Virginia is worth \$24.29, so donating one hour each week is equivalent to donating more than \$1,200 a year. Because VOF is a qualifying nonprofit agency, your volunteer expenses are tax-deductible. For those who are eligible, VOF also reimburses mileage and offers VOF shirts, hats, and other apparel a way of saying thanks.

Join the VOF team today and help us to protect Virginia's farms, forests, and landscapes for future generations.



Registering is Easy

1. Visit virginiaoutdoorsfoundation.org/volunteer.
2. Fill out and submit a volunteer application.
3. Once registered, we will send you regular updates on volunteer opportunities at our regional offices.

If you wish to receive a volunteer application by mail or fax, please contact:

Jason McGarvey
Volunteer Program Coordinator
1108 East Main St., Suite 700
Richmond, VA 23219.
Phone: (804) 786-9603
E-mail: jmcgarvey@vofonline.org.

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PLANNING TO HARVEST TIMBER ON EASED LAND?

Before you begin, please be sure to contact your local VOF stewardship staff to ensure compliance with the terms of your easement. You can find contact information for our regional offices on page 2 of this newsletter and online at virginiaoutdoorsfoundation.org.



Mole Hill in Rockingham County



Landowner's Last Wish to Protect Land Fulfilled

A new conservation easement held by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation protects a highly visible portion of one of Rockingham County's most distinctive landforms, Mole Hill. Dominating the landscape of Dayton and the Dry River area, and also visible from much of Harrisonburg, Mole Hill is relatively unique in its geology and has served as a cultural touchstone in this farming community.

Mole Hill is an isolated hill just off Route 33 about four miles west of Harrisonburg. Well known to generations of James Madison University geology students, the core of the hill is a remnant volcanic plug made of harder, igneous basalt—evidence of younger, molten rock that rose up through the much older limestone bedrock of the valley floor.

Lowell Ulrich, who owned a farm that included the summit and north slope of Mole Hill, contacted the Valley Conservation Council (VCC) over three years ago for help in conserving his part of the hill. Ulrich shared his excitement about permanently conserving this land for use by people seeking a spiritual sanctuary and for the future benefit of the thousands who enjoy its subtly changing views every day. As Lowell proceeded through meetings with VCC and the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, everyone involved caught his infectious reverence for the place.

Sadly, before Lowell could see the property conserved, he died in a tractor accident. Knowing his wishes, VCC worked over several years to keep his dream alive while his estate was settled.

Eventually, a very conscientious and equally conservation-minded neighbor stepped forward to purchase the property and conserve it with a VOF easement for his own family and for the public benefits it provides.

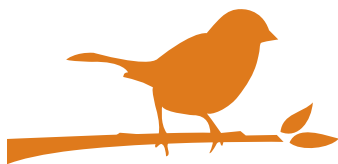
That neighbor is Gerald Knicely, who grew up in the shadow of Mole Hill on another nearby farm. Gerald is pleased that Lowell's legacy can also be passed on to his own children and those of future generations. "My family has identified with Mole Hill for three generations. It is such a local landmark and is so much a part of the community that we're very glad to be working with VCC and VOF to conserve it."

Knicely's easement covers 48 acres of forested land. Now that the summit is permanently protected, VCC is seeking further conservation of properties on and around Mole Hill.

Photo and article courtesy of the Valley Conservation Council.

BY THE NUMBERS ANSWER

The answer to the question on p. 3 is B—60,000 acres. During the five-year period from 2006 through 2011, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation preserved nearly 50,000 acres of open space per year, helping to provide a crucial balance between development and conservation.



EASEMENT SPOTLIGHT



Weeks Farm, Middlesex County

One of the largest waterfront farms along the lower tidal Rappahannock River has been permanently protected from development by a conservation easement produced through a partnership of the landowner, Minnie K. Burch, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

"The 640-acre tract will protect more than seven miles of shoreline on the Rappahannock River from future development," said Governor Bob McDonnell in announcing the easement's recordation. "This easement is part of our efforts to protect more open space, as well as working farms and forests."

The property contains some of the most highly productive farmland in the region, and the easement will ensure that the farm will be permanently available for production. The easement protects the property's prime soils and shoreline by restricting future development. The land can never be divided, and there are limits on the size and number of buildings and structures. In addition, the landowner will follow a conservation plan that conserves soil and water quality.

Mrs. Burch, who grew up working on the farm along with her four siblings, said, "A dear friend told me about conservation easements. She knew what the farm meant to me and how I never wanted to see it sold or developed. I decided that a conservation easement was just the tool I needed to save the farm."

"Large waterfront farms are in high demand for residential development throughout the tidal Chesapeake Bay region," noted

VOF Executive Director Bob Lee. "The vast scenic shoreline and easy access location of Weeks Farm made it ripe for development."

VOF worked with NRCS to enroll the land in the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), which provides matching funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farm and ranchland in agricultural use. To purchase the development rights and place the easement on the farm, NRCS provided 47 percent of the funding through FRPP, VOF provided 16 percent through its Open Space Lands Preservation Trust Fund, and the remaining 37 percent was donated by Mrs. Burch to the Commonwealth. VOF's contribution was made possible thanks to funding approved by Governor McDonnell for the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation.

The seven miles of tidal shoreline will be protected with 100-foot riparian buffers that will not only help the water quality of the river, but also provide valuable continuous habitat for eagles and other wildlife. Combined with a nearby 178-acre easement donated to VOF by another landowner in 2011, the protection of Weeks Farm preserves 818 total acres along the shorelines of Harry George Creek and the Rappahannock River.

"This part of Middlesex County experiences a lot of development pressure even in this economy, and the property could have been a forced sale out of the family for a large-lot waterfront community," says VOF's Estie Thomas, who managed the project for approximately five years from conception to completion. "Instead of losing yet another family farm, we have saved the farm for Mrs. Burch and future farmers in the region."





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SUMMER ★ 2012

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VOF's 650,000 acres of conserved lands represents an area three-and-a-half times larger than Shenandoah National Park.

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