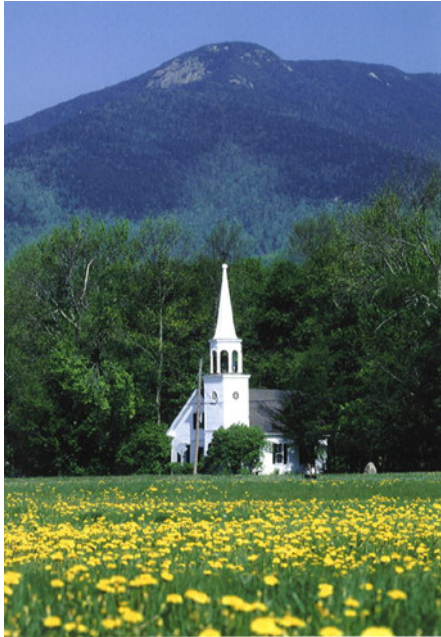


Wonalancet farm land to be conserved



Wonalancet, the quiet intervale at the north edge of Tamworth is the current focus of a significant land conservation effort. The Green Mountain Conservation Group (GMCG) has been awarded a matching grant of \$228,500 from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, for the purchase of a conservation easement on 88 acres of the Birches Intervale Farm (also known as the Steele Farm.) The property includes the sprawling farm fields that border Route 113A in Wonalancet Intervale, across the street from the picturesque Wonalancet Chapel. GMCG and local individuals have begun fundraising efforts to complete the requirements of the grant and finalize the easement purchase. There will be an informational meeting on Monday May 28th at 10 a.m. at the Wonalancet Chapel to learn more about this exciting project.

The Birches Intervale Farm , with its open fields, the Wonalancet Chapel, and the nearby Sandwich Range have long been an icon of scenic beauty in the White Mountains. The Green Mountain Conservation Group considers this land conservation project significant for many reasons. Not only is it pivotal in linking existing conservation land to the White Mountain National Forest, but this land hosts valuable agricultural soils and is important from a broader perspective of conserving crucial farm land in the Ossipee Watershed. GMCG needs to raise \$496,450 to realize the goal in protecting the Steele Farm. “We are very excited that the USDA has awarded this project \$228,500,” reported Duane Dale, GMCG Board President, “Now, we are hopeful that the community will step forward to back this project by helping to raise an additional \$268,000 to realize the goal of protecting the Birches Intervale Farm.”

In the late 19th century, inn-keeper Kate Sleeper established Birches Intervale Farm and Wonalancet as prime vacation destinations. In the 1930s, the farm was sold to Mr. Collins who ran it as a dairy farm. He sold the farm to his step-son Justin Brand who sold it to Whip Farnum. Whip owned it after WW II and ran it as a dairy and horse farm. He built the unusual silos but was unable to maintain the property. Small farms had already become almost an impossible dream. Helen Steele’s father, Richard Read, bought it in the 50's to keep it from being sold for development. Helen bought it in the 1980s and has run it as a sheep and hay farm since.

Helen Steele worked as a teacher for 41 years to support family and farm. It became increasingly challenging to bring in 4000 bales of hay a year and to feed and care for 150 sheep. In 2000, she sold many of the sheep and began to seek outside advice about this property. Helen has continued to look for ways to be a faithful steward for this beautiful piece of Wonalancet. While she has managed to continue the hay operation, tend a small sheep herd and grow two acres of vegetables, she also has been aware that she had to find another solution to financially maintain the farm.

When Helen approached GMCG about the farm and her interest in seeing the land conserved, she was relieved to learn that GMCG was interested in purchasing a conservation easement on the property. In less than two weeks, GMCG was able to draft and submit a grant application to United States Department of Agriculture under the New Hampshire Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program of the Natural Resources Conservation Services. Because Helen has been concerned about conserving this farm land for years, she already had the soil data and maps needed for this grant application. “It was clear from the first meeting with Helen, that GMCG was very interested in helping to conserve this farm land,” said GMCG Executive Director Blair Folts. “Not only does the land support important agricultural soils, but the property abuts a conservation easement that GMCG already holds on 405 acres on Mount Katherine. The property is also located over an isolated but highly productive part of the Ossipee Aquifer,” continued Folts.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is very pleased to be part of this conservation effort. “The protection of New Hampshire farmland is critically important to maintaining the agricultural infrastructure in the State” said George Cleek, State Conservationist. “The Helen Steele Farm, with its highly valued agricultural soils, is an excellent example of the quality of farmland the NRCS wants to help place under a permanent conservation easement.”

There will be a public meeting at the Wonalancet Chapel on Monday, May 28 between 10:00am and 11:00 am to further describe the project and to learn more about conservation easements. Blair Folts, Executive Director of GMCG will introduce and describe the significance of the pending acquisition and explain why GMCG is interested in helping to preserve open space in the Wonalancet region. Peter Pohl, retired UNH Cooperative Extension County Forester will give a broad explanation about conservation easements and discuss how others might consider conserving their lands. GMCG Board Member, Nat Scrimshaw will also give a Power Point presentation about land conservation in New Hampshire and what can happen to land that is not conserved—including what could have happened to the Intervale if Helen had not been interested in selling a conservation easement to GMCG.

Following the program, there will be an easy hike to Mt. Katherine, a lovely little mountain that offers a rocky summit with full views of the Steele Farm. Please bring a picnic lunch and water for the hike as well as appropriate clothing. For more information, feel free to contact GMCG at 539-1859.