



Hunterdon Land Trust

Protecting the places you love

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Hunterdon Land Trust Preserves Franklin Twp. Farm HLT Inches Closer to Goal of Protecting 10,000 Acres by Year's End

FRANKLIN TWP. -- Serendipity, hope and a lot of hard work led to Hunterdon Land Trust's latest preservation effort.

The charming 71-acre Hope Hill Farm in Franklin Township attracted HLT's attention for a number of reasons including its location within the South Branch Raritan Watershed, the two tributaries running across the property, and the high percentage of important statewide and prime soils on the property, noted HLT Land Acquisitions Director Jacqueline Middleton. (The farm is comprised of notable quantities of Penn silt loam, Bowmansville loam and Raritan silt loam, which are all great for crop production.)

This story begins back in 2012 when New York City gallery operators and newlyweds Sarah Christian and Jason Vartikar accepted an invitation from a friend, Gary Snyder, to visit his



historic East Amwell home. They were enchanted by Hunterdon County, traveling its back roads, exploring its scenic views, and even visiting HLT's Farmers' Market.

"We fell in love with Hunterdon County that weekend," the couple agree. "After a few more visits and lots of cruising around, we spotted a for-sale sign at the bottom of a long gravel driveway on one of the prettiest roads in the county."

They purchased the farm that fall. Originally a 10-acre island parceled off from surrounding farmland, the property was increased by more than 60 acres when adjacent land became available for purchase.

"We couldn't bear to see the land developed, and the natural setting destroyed," Christian and Vartikar said about their reason for adding to their farm. "In the process, we learned that the land had once been a fruit orchard and a cow pasture."

The preservation means the couple will own the land and continue to farm it, but the property must remain as farmland in perpetuity.

The couple sought to preserve the land for a number of reasons, chief among them that the nearby hillside sloping upward along the Raritan River, known as "Sunnyside," is a recreation destination for fishing, walking and biking.

"Along with adjacent county preserves, there are several farms which give 'Sunnyside' its splendor. But our farm was the missing piece with more than 1,500 feet of frontage on River Road in two separate stretches. The farm truly protects the natural and agricultural feel of the area, as well as the integrity of the watershed," the couple said.

To learn more about preservation, they reached out to neighbor Lora Jones, who at that time served as secretary of Franklin Township's Open Space Advisory Committee. Jones was well aware of the farm's environmental importance and natural beauty.

"River Road attracts hikers and cyclists year round; many of them have cited the calming effects of the landscape," Jones said. "Come see it and you will know the feeling."

The process took several years and involved a number of twists and turns. In 2016, Jones contacted Hunterdon Land Trust for help securing funds for the property's preservation.



“It just so happens that HLT and the New Jersey Water Supply Authority had jointly applied for a federal grant with the Natural Resources Conservation Services called the Regional Conservation Partnership Program,” Middleton said. “HLT had federal money to use in specific watersheds including the South Branch.” The State Agriculture Development Committee, Hunterdon County and Franklin Township also played key roles in this preservation effort.

Christian and Vartikar also noted that HLT, SADC, the county, Franklin Township and NJWSA worked together to secure federal and state funds to preserve the land. “It was another two and a half years until we got to sign on the dotted-line, but the wait was worth it,” the farm owners agreed.

To understand why, all one has to do is to travel along River Road.

“The meadows and adjacent woodlands are brimming with life. There are bald eagles, hawks, bears, turkeys, foxes, geese, unusual ground-nesting birds, amphibians, mushrooms, and old growth trees. The hillside also enjoys long views in every direction, from which to watch summer storms, hot air balloons, and the little planes that land at Sky Manor,” Christian and Vartikar said.

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Please credit Hope Hill Farm photos to Maria Valentina.

