Two heritage farms—farms in the same family for many generations—were protected with land preservation agreements in late summer 2017: Farnham Farm in Morris and Ballek Farm in East Haddam.

The 138-acre pre-Revolutionary-era Farnham Farm has been passed down to a single family member for eight generations from 1735 until the present. In the 20th century, Ruth Richardson Farnham owned the dairy farm and, with her sisters, spent every summer there, welcoming the extended family. When Ruth died in 1988, the farm was held in trust by two nephews, who changed it from dairy to hay. In 2012, the last trustee died and Anne Howson Fellows was chosen to inherit the property.

The farm is the family’s gathering place. Every summer of Anne’s younger life was spent on the farm, happily being outdoors in nature. Anne and her husband, Mark, had their wedding reception in the apple orchard—one of many family weddings held there throughout the centuries.

When Anne was in her 30s, she had a nightmare: purple condos replaced the farm. Once she became the owner, Anne wanted to preserve the farm so that her nightmare could never become a reality. Then, her sister saw a Connecticut Farmland Trust ad in Nutmeg magazine: “Learn how to save your family farm.”

Connecticut Farmland Trust was pleased to work with Anne to determine the most appropriate conservation strategy for her family’s farm. The property was a high priority for conservation due its high quality and quantity of farmland soils and Anne’s commitment to finding a new farmer to revive the land. Since the farm was protected this summer, Anne has selected a young dairy farmer to assume stewardship of the farm in November.

Anne has always had three goals for the farm: to get the land into good tilth; to get it financially out of the red and into the black, and to do right by the community. During the days of the family trust, there was little farm maintenance. Recreating a well-maintained farm requires considerable resources, so Anne and the family are very grateful for funds from the sale of the development rights helping to bring the farm back to life.

Preservation of Farnham Farm was made possible with funding from the US Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service and the CT Department of Energy and

“I am very excited about the future for the farm.”
— Anne Fellows
Environmental Protection. The farm was preserved in collaboration with Morris Land Trust.

Ballek Farm is an even older continuously farmed property. Its farm origin dates from a King Charles II land grant in the 1660s given to dissenter Nicholas Ackley, who at age 19, was to begin a new colony. In preparation, Ackley was trained to survey, dig wells, farm, and preach the Gospel.

Nicholas’s first wife Hannah Ford Mitchell convinced him to move his farm south from a Hartford floodplain. The couple canoed down the Connecticut River to find higher land. Hanna gave birth on or near the river while Ackley was surveying the 55-acre site of the current farm. She died in another childbirth before the move. Ackley and second wife Mariam Moore are the Ballek ancestors. That same acreage that Ackley claimed as his, is now a modern, preserved family farm operation 360 years later.

The acreage is under conservation except for the popular garden center site. The current barn is an expansion of the original: old beams are still visible. The 1660s well is still in use and has only gone dry once. Challenges are not new to the farm, including a Revolutionary-era accidental explosion of hidden gunpowder hidden in the farmhouse basement.

Owner Ms. Anita Ballek sees stewardship of her family’s land as a serious responsibility so she and her children have ensured that the land is respected forever. Today, Anita is the family matriarch with great grandchildren. One of Anita’s favorite childhood memories was playing on the beams in the barn, watching dust motes, and dreaming of the future.

“As long as we have land, we have so many opportunities available for farming.”
— Anita Ballek

Comings and Goings

New Staff!
Kathleen Doherty has joined CFT as our Conservation Coordinator. She has two and a half years of land trust and conservation experience and interned with the CT Department of Agriculture.

Brianna Dunlap, former Director of the CT Valley Agricultural Museum, has joined CFT as our new Development and Communications Coordinator.

Naomi Marinelli, CPA, joined CFT as our Controller. She has been a staff accountant with several area accounting firms.

John Weedon, We wish happy trails to our former Conservation Manager. He has taken a position in Ohio to be closer to his family’s farm. Good luck, John!

New Board Members!
Lisa Bassani, Assistant Director of Development at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

Chris Casiello, Arethusa Farm Dairy Plant Manager and a nationally recognized cheese maker.

Keith Stechsultz, Enfield Branch Office Manager of Farm Credit East.
Cato Corner Interview
A Decade After Farmland Protection

Nearly a decade ago, Elizabeth (Liz) MacAlister protected her land, Cato Corner Farm in Colchester, with CFT. We caught up with her to learn about what has been going on since 2008 and where the farm is heading next.

Liz and her son Mark Gillman have been making cheese at Cato Corner Farm since 1997. “We come from a cheesy family,” says Liz. “We grew up eating many interesting cheeses.” Today they produce more than 18 cheeses. The American Cheese Society honored their Womanchego cheese as a Best American Raw Cow’s Milk Cheese 2017.

How did you come to own Cato Corner Farm?
“We were living on a leased farm and wanted a ‘real farm,’” says Liz. Finally, in 1979 she found a listing in the Market Bulletin for the farm on Cato Corner Road in Colchester. The farm now employs 15 staff and is home to over 70 animals, including 32 milk cows.

What made you want to preserve the farmland?
In 2008, the family worked with CFT to protect the farm. “It was always our goal to protect it,” says Liz. “We always wanted to own a farm and when we finally got this place, it just didn’t seem like we’d ever want it to go into development.”

She noted, “It’s hilly, not river bottom land, so it wasn’t of interest to the state of Connecticut,” which was focused on prime farmland soils. Liz donated the development rights on her land, to preserve the farm for future generations.

Since then, several of Liz’s neighbors have decided to conserve their land. She says, “It snowballs. When you have one person in an area like this do preservation and people see that it’s beneficial, they start to think of things they wouldn’t have thought of — like protecting their own land.”

What is the next step for the farm?
Cato Corner Farm recently received two grants, a Farm Viability grant from the state to expand their infrastructure and, a USDA value-added grant to improve value added products and to help them expand their farm operations. Liz and Mark plan to build an extension to the cheese barn and increase cheese production. They will partner with River Plain Farm in Lebanon, for pasteurized milk, to make new products: fresh cheese—such as ricotta, goat cheese, soft mozzarella, and crumbly feta.

Where can Cato Corner Farm cheese be found?
Cato Corner Farm sells its cheese nationwide. In 1999 they were the first cheesemaker at New York City’s Greenmarket, and they continue to sell at three markets in New York as well as hundreds of restaurants and grocery stores across New England and the country. You can buy Cato Corner cheese at the farm’s shop or order online at www.catocornerfarm.com.
Who Helped Protect Family Farms in 2016?
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