Four years after Nancy Strong’s father Norman passed away, her extended family agreed that with nobody to farm the land, they couldn’t afford to hold onto the Strong Farm. “Deciding to sell the farm was very hard but we didn’t see another option,” says Nancy, whose family had owned the 51-acre Vernon farm for more than a century.

When word spread that the family wanted to sell the farm for $1 million, she says, developers started calling. Located in the center of Vernon, the land is less than a half mile from I-84, has views of Hartford and is zoned for residential use.

Residents had expressed their desire to save the farm in the town’s Plans of Conservation and Development since 1990, so Ann Letendre, chair of Vernon’s Open Space Task Force, knew the community supported keeping the land as a farm rather than a housing development.

“We knew we had to get it off the market,” Ann says. A handful of residents interested in preserving the land met with two local land trusts, but “neither was in a position to take on a large project like this,” she says.

She was wracking her brain trying to figure out how to come up with the money before developers could buy it, she says. “In the middle of the night, I thought, ‘Why don’t we all just buy it temporarily?’”

Ann called Nancy to let her know there was strong community support to save the farm, one of only three heritage farms left in Vernon.

Both Nancy and Ann worried that a developer would come up with the money before residents could cobble together enough to buy it.

Ann called her friend, Amy Paterson, executive director of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council, who suggested the group form an LLC to purchase the property and ask Connecticut Farmland Trust (CFT) for help with applying for grants and managing the complex logistics involved with conserving farmland. Strong Farm consists of an 18-acre field and a 33-acre field of locally historic importance called Meetinghouse Hill, and the group of residents called themselves Meetinghouse Hill LLC.

Seven individuals loaned funds from their retirement savings and investments in varying amounts to buy the land until they could raise the $1 million needed through grants and donations to protect the farm. Meetinghouse Hill LLC bought the land in April 2015.

CFT agreed to apply for grants and hold the grant funds until it could purchase the land from Meetinghouse Hill LLC.

"We simply could not have done this project without CFT.”
— Ann Letendre, Vernon’s Open Space Task Force

The iconic yellow barns of Strong Family Farm.
Protection, a Decade Later: What it means to the owners and tenants of Mitchell and Marvel farms

In 2009, the owners of **Mitchell and Marvel farms** agreed to work with CFT and The Nature Conservancy to protect the Salem farms, which were home to both prime fields and diverse wildlife. With 30 family members sharing ownership of 206 acres, it’s no surprise it took several years to reach consensus on the future of the land that had been in the family for more than 150 years.

We caught up with **David Bingham**, who serves as the spokesman for his 10 brothers and sisters and 19 cousins who had a stake in the family farms, to learn about his family’s legacy and its decision to protect the land. We also talked with Nancy Franklin of Marvel Farm and Dee Doolittle of Mitchell Farm, who each has been leasing the farms for more than a decade.

Growing up across the road from Mitchell and Marvel farms, David Bingham played and explored on the land once owned by his grandmother and developed an appreciation of nature and land as a child. An amateur ornithologist and naturalist, he founded the Salem Land Trust and serves on several environmental-conservation boards.

CFT submitted a state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition grant and applied for a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

“We simply could not have done this project without CFT. This was the most complicated land preservation transaction I’ve ever worked on,” Ann says. “CFT’s expertise in the world of land conservation, including the associated legal requirements and transfer documents, brought the project home for us.”

CFT received $650,000 from DEEP and $295,000 from NRCS. CFT and Northern CT Land Trust each contributed $10,000; and the Bafflin Foundation awarded a $30,000 matching grant. The Town of Vernon, with money from its open space fund, gave $25,000 toward the purchase price and paid for a survey. Meetinghouse Hill LLC raised additional funds for legal fees and other final transaction costs.

The Vernon community played a significant role in preserving the farm. Ann mailed 6,000 letters out to residents and raised an additional $49,721 by late September. More than 470 people sent checks as small as $5 and as much as $4,000.

Saving the farmland preserves an irreplaceable part of the town’s history, local historian Jon Roe says. The 33-acre pasture known as Meetinghouse Hill is “the birthplace of Vernon, the location of our first meeting house and first schoolhouse,” he says.

The property is also vital as farmland. Eighty-eight percent of the property is covered by prime and important farmland soils, says Kathleen Doherty, conservation coordinator at Connecticut Farmland Trust. “It’s an excellent natural resource in a densely developed area. We don’t often have the opportunity to protect a farm with such a high percentage of the best farm soils.”

CFT officially purchased the farm from Meetinghouse Hill LLC on Sept. 27 and will transfer the property later this year to nonprofit Strong Family Farm, Inc. an agricultural education center that owns the original Strong Farm’s farmhouse and iconic yellow barns. The nonprofit center is not affiliated with the Strong family.

“My family and I couldn’t be happier that the farm has ultimately been protected,” Nancy says. “I dreamed that this would happen but I didn’t see how. I’m so thankful for CFT’s help in making my dream come true.”

**“We are lucky to be here and we’re so grateful that it’s protected.”**

— Dee Doolittle, Mitchell Farm

**Stock Gifts**

If you would like to donate stock, please call (860) 247-0202 x223 to acquire updated account information for your broker.

**“I'm so thankful for CFT's help in making my dream come true.”**

— Nancy Strong, Strong Farm

Continued on next page.
including the board of directors of the Salem Valley Corporation, which owns both farms.

When his generation of the family began thinking about protecting the land, they worked through some typical family dynamics and disagreements, he says. With so many owners, David and his siblings saw that, “If we divided the property up into lots then this huge parcel would be gone and we’d all be fighting over who would get what,” he says. “We made a family decision, and it took a long time, but we gradually convinced family members to sell the development rights of the farm.”

By selling the development rights, the family was able to create a trust to maintain the property and pay the taxes. “It took a lot of tears and a lot of years,” David says. “But once it happened, there was a remarkable family unity around doing something important and significant and leaving a legacy for future generations.”

The land is part of a 7,500-acre swath of protected public and private land in the 8-mile River watershed. “I’m old enough to see the farms around me become developed and see what happens to those farms,” David says. “Without the Connecticut Farmland Trust there, this land might all have been developed. It would have been a real loss.”

**Board Member News**

**Jiff Martin** works with the UConn extension service as a Sustainable Food System Associate Educator promoting agriculture and local food systems. She was American Farmland Trust’s state director in Connecticut, leading the Working Lands Alliance and playing a critical role in creating the Community Investment Act, the state’s primary source of dedicated funding to conserve open space and protect farmland.

**Nancy Franklin** has been boarding horses at Marvel Farm since the 1990s. Knowing the land is protected gives her peace of mind that the farm will continue, for her sake, and because she sees Marvel Farm as a community asset. “After I was here for a few years, I thought of myself as a steward of the land,” she says “It’s wonderful to know I won’t have to worry about this wonderful farm and all its nooks and crannies being turned into a housing development."

For 15 years, **Dee Doolittle** has cared for retired horses at the nonprofit she founded, Mitchell Farm Equine Retirement. She leases 50 acres of Mitchell Farm, where she and a large team of volunteers feed and care for aging horses and donkeys. Dee, the executive director, says the land’s preservation removes her concern for her horses’ futures while also protecting a natural resource that’s home to diverse wildlife. “We are lucky to be here and we’re so grateful that it’s protected. So many other nonprofits have a farm lease and think that they have a home forever and all of a sudden, the land goes up for sale for development and they’ve got to relocate a lot of horses,” she says. “This way we’re sure that the family is on the same page that we are, and it’s meant a whole lot of safety and security for us.”

**Joan Nichols** is Executive Director of the Connecticut Farm Bureau and a certified forester with her own forestry business. She is considered an expert in PA490 issues, the Public Act which enables towns to tax land at its current use as opposed to potential residential use.

Farewell, and a big thank you, to **Sara O’Connell** and **Richard Marone** for their time and contributions to Connecticut Farmland Trust over the years.

---

**Thank You!**

We give a heartfelt thank you to **Guida’s Dairy** of New Britain for donating the proceeds from its 7th annual charity golf tournament.

Thanks to **Farm Credit East** for its sponsorship of our Farm Flavor farm tours this summer, including the 50th Farm Celebration at Bristol’s Farm in Canton.

We are very grateful to the long-standing and significant support from **Harney & Sons Fine Teas** for its event sponsorship since 2006.

---

**Board of Directors**

Dawn C. Adielta, President, Woodstock  
Lisa Bassani, Vice-President, New Haven  
Charlotte Hansen, CPA, Treasurer, Stafford Springs  
John J. Kriz III, Secretary, New Canaan  
Chris Casiello, Litchfield  
Robin Chesmer, Lebanon  
Paul Geraghty, Hamden  
Gordon F. Gibson, Vernon  
Dr. Michael A. Fotos, III, West Hartford  
John C. Haller, CPA, Granby  
Jiff Martin, Mansfield  
Nicholas J. Moore, Sharon  
Dr. Michael P. O’Neill, Storrs  
Joan Nichols, Franklin  
Toni Robinson, Essex  
Dr. James Shepherd, Sharon  
Tim Slate, Lebanon  
Keith Stechschulte, Windsor

**Staff**

Elisabeth Moore, Executive Director  
Sandy Allen, Accountant  
Kathleen Doherty, Conservation Coordinator  
Brianna Dunlap, Development and Communications Coordinator  
Kip Kolesinskas, Consulting Conservation Scientist  
Lily Orr, Conservation Associate
Contents
Iconic Vernon Farm Protected ............... 1
Protection, a Decade Later ................. 2
Thank You! .................................. 3
Welcome to New Board Members .......... 3