

# Views *from* Mount Grace

Volume 16, No. 2 • Late Spring 2005

C O N S E R V I N G T H E L O C A L L A N D S C A P E™



PHOTOS BY PAM KIMBALL-SMITH

*Left Photo:* George Northrop and Kate Collins with two of their Border Collies. *Right Photo:* Feeding time at Aurora Ranch—a mother sheep nurses her lamb.



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## Aurora Ranch in Royalston— Expands With 20 Acres of Protected Woodland

BY ALLEN YOUNG

**Aurora Ranch, a sheep and cattle farm on Taft Hill Road in Royalston,** has recently been expanded to include 20 acres of woodland already protected by a conservation restriction.

I know Aurora Ranch well, as Royalston is my home town, and its owners, George Northrop and Kate Collins, have been good personal friends since the early 1970s. In the past, when they had milking cows, I bought milk from them, and to this day, the organically grown meat I purchase from them is a perfect accompaniment to my own home-grown vegetables.

As a member of the Mount Grace Board of Directors, I was very pleased to learn that these friends and hard-working farmers had purchased the 20 acre parcel to add to the 113 acres they already own.

*(continued on page 3)*

## Inside This Issue

Massachusetts Article 97 • Montague's Gaier Farm Protected • Uppingil Farm Strawberries • Volunteers Needed for Mount Grace • Special Thanks • New Director of Land Protection • Wildlife Tracking at Skyfields • Upcoming 2005 Events

Senator Robert Wetmore





## Dear Friends,

Come June 1st, Mount Grace will begin an organizational experiment. The land protection program will be run by two full-time staff dedicated to land protection, and I will work half-time as Executive Director. I will continue to oversee our land protection work, but will rely on Dan Laroche, Director of Land Protection, for management of projects and supervision of our Land Protection Specialist.

From a budgetary perspective, this decision affords Mount Grace the opportunity to increase our land protection staff; from a management perspective, this organizational pattern allows staff to focus our attention more effectively; and from a personal perspective, it provides me the change of pace of a semi-sabbatical.

The integrity of Mount Grace's land project work is also held together by the essential efforts of our Development Director, who secures funds from foundations and individuals for our land projects, workshops, and initiatives; our half-time Stewardship Coordinator, who oversees our conservation areas and conservation restrictions; our quarter-time Membership Coordinator, who makes it possible for us to keep in touch with you; and our full-time Program Assistant, who manages considerable day-to-day administrative tasks and ably assists each of us as needed.

Much of the success of Mount Grace stems from the consistency with which we implement our dual mission to protect land and encourage land stewardship. This environment, well-developed on the part of the Board of Directors, has made it easy for me to continue that tradition and is reinforced by you, our members. Together let's keep up the good work.

Very truly,

Leigh Youngblood  
Executive Director

# Views *from* Mount Grace

**Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust** protects significant natural, agricultural and scenic areas and encourages land stewardship in North Central and Western Massachusetts for the benefit of the environment, the economy and future generations.

We welcome your articles, photographs, comments and suggestions. For information about becoming a member or to request a change of address, please contact our office at:

### **Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust**

1461 Old Keene Road  
Athol, MA 01331  
978.248.2043 (tel)  
978.248.2053 (fax)  
landtrust@mountgrace.org (email)

**Visit our web site at [www.mountgrace.org](http://www.mountgrace.org).**

### **Mount Grace Staff**

Leigh Youngblood  
*Executive Director (P/T)*

Dan Laroche  
*Director of Land Protection*

Pam Kimball-Smith  
*Development Director*

Amanda Nims  
*Program Assistant*

Alain Peteroy  
*Stewardship Coordinator (P/T)*

Elliott Hunnewell  
*Membership Coordinator (P/T)*

### **Mount Grace Board of Directors**

Richard French, <i>President</i>	Gill
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### *Views from Mount Grace* **Editor**

Susan LaScala

### *Views from Mount Grace* **Design and Layout**

Michael Ruocco

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"Philosophically, Kate and I support strongly what Mount Grace is doing," commented George Northrop. "We are very interested in seeing open land remain so, even if it is not agricultural land." He explained that the parcel in question -- located just west of Aurora Ranch's large field with a magnificent view of Mount Monadnock -- is part of a significant wildlife corridor associated with Priest Brook and the state's Birch Hill Wildlife Management Area.

George added, "The \$10,000 was affordable to us, and in effect this is a donation to Mount Grace, giving it back some capital with which to hopefully do land protection." Kate stated, "I would not like to see Royalston lose its rural character."

Mount Grace acquired this land during the Tully Initiative when the Wachtel family wanted to sell a conservation restriction (CR) to the state but required additional money to obtain the full appraised value of the land. Mount Grace used its funds

**The sale to George and Kate is significant because it affirms the concept of having protected land in private ownership.**

and bought the land with the intention of selling it to a conservation buyer once the state purchased the CR. Leigh Youngblood, Mount Grace's Executive Director, said the sale to George and Kate is significant because it affirms the concept of having protected land in private ownership.

Aurora Ranch was started in 1979 when George and Kate departed the former Jolly Road commune and bought twelve and one-half acres of land for farming. Later, they added the 100-acre parcel and cleared for grazing. At Aurora Ranch, the public can buy organically grown chickens, lamb and beef, sheepskins and fleece (phone 978-249-4407).

Kate, a New Jersey native, studied animal husbandry at Pennsylvania State University, while George, a native New Englander, has no previous link to agriculture. Both are involved in the breeding and training of border collies, with 11 of them currently at the ranch.

The farm memorializes a beloved horse, Aurora, named because she was born at the time of a magnificent Aurora Borealis display. The word "ranch" was chosen because of the couple's links to the west, where George once lived and where their romance began.

Kate serves on Royalston's capital planning committee and formerly was a selectman -- the first woman ever elected to that position in Royalston. George is a member of the Zoning Boards of Appeals and Conservation Commission. ■

## ARTICLE 97: MASSACHUSETTS' ENVIRONMENTAL BILL of RIGHTS by Allen Young

**D**id you know the Massachusetts constitution has an "environmental bill of rights?" Did you know that this bill of rights, Article 97 of the Constitution, was written and shepherded into law by former State Senator Robert Wetmore, who is currently a member of the Mount Grace Board of Directors? And did you know that Article 97 is in trouble?

*If you did not already know the above, here is a brief primer:* Wetmore began his political career in the 1960s, primarily motivated by his concern for the environment. Returning from the Korean War, he saw a favorite fishing venue, the Millers River, "being used as a sewer." He also observed Martha's Vineyard State Forest being "chipped away" by legislative voice votes for airport expansion and other purposes.

Wetmore concluded that only a constitutional amendment would halt such losses. The amendment, adopted in 1972, addresses the public's "right to clean air and water" and ascribes a "public purpose" to natural resource protection. It also requires a roll-call vote by a two-thirds legislative majority to transfer land away from conservation purposes.

Despite Article 97, however, lawmakers (under the "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" system) have often voted to transfer

protected conservation land, especially municipal property. Examples are parklands taken over for schools or roads, or forested wildlife and hiking areas turned into ball fields.

A new bill, recently drafted by Massachusetts Audubon and other conservation groups, is designed to strengthen Article 97 by codifying "clear standards with the force of law." The Senate version, S-539, is sponsored by Sen. Pam Resor and already has the support of Sen. Steve Brewer. The house version is H-1277, filed by Rep. Ann Gobi. These legislators are well-known to Mount Grace as supporters of land protection. Our own Bob Wetmore, however, urges environmental groups to give a "high priority to their own watchdog role to keep an eye on our legislature." ■

### *Article 97 (excerpt)*

*"The people shall have the right to clean air and water, freedom from excessive and unnecessary noise, and the natural, scenic, historic, and esthetic qualities of their environment; and the protection of the people in their right to the conservation, development and utilization of the agricultural, mineral, forest, water, air, and other natural resources is hereby declared to be a public purpose."*

## Gaier Farm Protected

### Agricultural Preservation Restriction Helps Save Montague Farm

B Y R O B I N S H E R M A N



PHOTO BY DAVID DETMOLD

Gaier Farm in Montague. Protected by Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR)

**I**n 2002, Melanie Gaier and

**Anthony Reiber** fell in love with the scenic beauty of the 10-acre farm on Meadow Road in Montague. They both had some farming experience, and were excited about the agricultural potential of the land. But the 19th century farmhouse needed major renovations, and the price tag on the property reflected the fact that it had two building lots. Mount Grace helped the couple investigate options for buying and protecting the land. Two years later, with assistance from the Montague Conservation Commission and Valley Land Fund, Gaier and Reiber sold an Agricultural Preservation Restriction on the land to the state. The couple invested the proceeds from selling the APR in the house, and decided to lease the land until they could build up enough capital to start their own farm.

Gideon Porth had worked on several farms, and wanted to start a farm of his own, but he couldn't afford to buy land. A friend referred him to Gaier and Reiber. The land on Meadow Road was ideal. It had great soil and hadn't been farmed for several years, which made it possible to get organic certification immediately. Now in its second year, Porth's Atlas Farm has four employees who sell organic vegetables at farmer's markets in Boston and Pittsfield.

Gaier is happy to have Porth as a tenant. "He's a great farmer, and he's taking good care of the land," she explains. The lease arrangement is allowing Gaier and Reiber to start their agricultural business slowly, with

chickens, bees and berries. It is also helping

Porth and his fiancée save money to buy their own farm in the future.

After decades of decline, the number of farms in Massachusetts increased significantly in the 1990s, growing 15.5 percent between 1992 and 2002. Most of this growth was in small farms with 50 acres or fewer, which grew by more than 30 percent during the decade. Many of these new farms belong to young people who didn't grow up farming, and didn't inherit land from their families. Porth, Gaier and Reiber are good examples of this trend. Without help from land trusts and the APR program, these young farmers wouldn't be able to compete with developers for land. Thanks in part to the efforts of Mount Grace, a small farm in Montague is growing vegetables instead of houses, and two families are making their living from the land. ■

### Pick Strawberries – Save Land

**C**ome pick strawberries anytime during the 2005 strawberry season at Uppingil Farm and when you check out, tell them you are "picking for Mount Grace," and a portion of your purchase will be donated to Mount Grace to help protect more land! Thank you to Cliff Hatch, proprietor of Uppingil Farm, for this offer. Uppingil Farm is located at 151 Center Road Gill, MA. The season typically runs from June 19th to July 4th, but call (413) 863-2297 for the latest picking information and updates.

# Help Protect and Steward *the* Local Landscape

BY AMANDA NIMS

Volunteers are the foundation of an organization like Mount Grace, and we are in the process of re-examining the successes of our Volunteer Program. We always have a list of meaningful tasks for every skill level and ability. What are your areas of interest, and what are your skills?

Perhaps you would like to work in the office. Do you enjoy writing articles, promoting events, working on grants, or possibly helping label and stamp bulk mailings? Perhaps you would like to help organize our Annual Meeting, assist with our Local Landscape Appeal, or hold a membership building event at your house. Perhaps you like to work outside. We are looking for gardeners at Skyfields Arboretum, assistance with woodwork repair of the Headquarters building, and strong backs for future trail days, when we create or maintain existing Mount Grace



PHOTO BY PAM KIMBALL-SMITH

Skyfields Arboretum Volunteers Allen Ross and Yona Kimball-Smith

hiking trails. Would you like to be a land steward, and walk the trails of a Mount Grace property once or twice a year? There are a wide variety of opportunities available for volunteers at Mount Grace.

If you are interested in helping Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, become a volunteer. Please fill out the volunteer form and send it to:

**Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust**  
 1461 Old Keene Road  
 Athol, MA 01331

Or, go to our website: and complete the form there: [www.mountgrace.org](http://www.mountgrace.org)  
 You may also call us for more information at: 978-248-2043

*Thank you for your participation in conserving our local landscape.*

## V O L U N T E E R C O N T A C T F O R M

**YES!** I would like to help Mount Grace succeed in its mission to protect land by volunteering my time and energy. I'd be interested in volunteering in one or more of the following activities (please circle interests):

- Administration: office support, event organization, newsletter articles, computer consulting, other.
- Fundraising: bulk mailings, recruiting new members, hosting Mount Grace parties or events, other.
- Stewardship: trail creation, trail maintenance, land steward, hike leader, invasive species control, gardener, carpenter, other.
- Committees: Development, Facilities, Finance, Personnel - a great way to help move the organization forward!
- Other skills/talents not listed (music, botanical expertise, legal assistance, photography, etc.)

Please describe below how you would like to help Mount Grace. If there are ways to help out that you don't see listed above, please describe your interests here: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ TEL. NUMBER \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_ CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP CODE \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_ Best way to contact you: \_\_\_\_\_

Days and times available to volunteer: \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like to volunteer on a regular basis? \_\_\_\_\_

Number of hours you would like to volunteer weekly/monthly: \_\_\_\_\_

Medical conditions that we should be aware of (ie allergies, asthma etc): \_\_\_\_\_

**PLEASE MAIL TO:**  
 Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust  
 1461 Old Keene Road  
 Athol, MA 01331

## Grants Received

**C**ommunity Foundation of Western MA—\$6,000 for the Land Protection Fund in support of Franklin County land and easement donation transaction costs.

**F**ields Pond Foundation—\$3,000 for the Skyfields Arboretum Public Accessibility Project.

## Welcome Dan Laroche Our New Director of Land Protection

### Dan Laroche, Director of Land Protection

Dan joined Mount Grace in February 2005 to oversee land protection efforts. For six years he worked as the Land Use/GIS Planner for the Town of Greenfield. His accomplishments for the town include completing the Open Space and Master Plans, and developing local regulations that have benefited the environment. Dan has prior environmental nonprofit experience including working for the Northeast Sustainable Energy Association (NESEA) and the EarthAction Network.

Dan holds a Master's Degree in Public Administration from UMASS, along with an array of graduate coursework in environmental studies from Bard College. Dan also has a Bachelor's Degree from Central Connecticut State University where he studied philosophy and founded the Whole Earth Club, an organization whose mission was to promote environmental awareness and activism among faculty and staff. Dan is an avid hiker and has hiked most of the Appalachian Trail. Currently he is training to complete an Ironman Triathlon this September.



## Goodbyes *and* Hellos

BY MARY KARIS

The arrival of spring reminds us of the inevitable process of growth and change. At Mount Grace recent changes include saying good-bye to Doug Stephens and Mary Karis, and welcoming Dan Laroche as the Director of Land Protection, and Elliott Hunnewell as the Membership Coordinator.

One highlight of Doug's work as the Land Protection Specialist was being the primary author of the Forest Legacy application, recently ranked third nationally for funding. Doug has returned to private practice under the name Conservation Land Surveys. He hopes to continue supporting land conservation by applying his professional land surveying expertise to meet the needs of the land protection community. He can be reached at [surveyor@dougstephens.net](mailto:surveyor@dougstephens.net).

Mary is grateful to Mount Grace for what she describes as "an incredible paid internship." She says, "I had the opportunity to learn from a vision-focused leader like Leigh about what it takes to run a successful small nonprofit." Mary is putting her new knowledge to good use by serving on the Board of Directors and leading programs for Animas Valley Institute, which offers nature-based programs that facilitate people's reconnecting to the passion and wisdom of their souls. ([www.animas.org](http://www.animas.org)) While at Mount Grace, Mary facilitated the creation of the Membership Coordinator position, and the updating of the membership database.

## Special Thanks *from Mount Grace to:*

**Celt Grant, Chris Black and Allen Young** for their recent hosting of our Quabbin to Cardigan Event at the home of Celt Grant.

**Paul Doscher** of The Society for the Protection of NH Forests for his Quabbin to Cardigan Presentation.

**Walt Davidson** for installing our new mailbox.

**Bob Schwein** for his assistance with our computer systems and network.

**Mike Ruocco** for doing such a great job on our newsletter.

Harvard Forest Director **David Foster**, former Board member **John O'Keefe**, and **Keith Ross** of LandVest, Inc., for their assistance in the creation of the Forest Legacy 2006 application.

## Green Donations Wanted!

Mount Grace is looking for shade-loving, native perennial and shrub donations for our shady rock garden. Please email Christine Long at [Christyblue@juno.com](mailto:Christyblue@juno.com) to arrange a donation.

# Tracking Winter Wildlife *at Skyfields*

BY ALAIN PETEROY

There was no better day to track wildlife than Saturday, February 26th, 2005. The sun was shining, the air was still, fresh snow had fallen just the day before, and an experienced guide was leading the way. Tracking perfection.

Local tracker and naturalist Paul Wanta graciously volunteered to lead Mount Grace's third annual winter tracking workshop. Being careful to not step on any animal prints, Paul led a group of nearly thirty individuals along a narrow, snowy trail, through a field and into the woods. Those hardy souls willing to kneel and sniff were soon initiated into the wonderful world of tracking with the nose. Paul told us a red fox had recently left its mark on an unremarkable looking stump. Who knew that fox urine smells like skunk? The strong odor confirmed the source of the small, dog-like tracks winding their way through the forest.



PHOTO BY PAM KIMBALL-SMITH

Paul Wanta employs all senses to Explore fox tracks.

As we moved deeper into the woods, we discovered more red fox tracks as well as white-tailed deer, coyote, and human-on-snowshoes-with-domestic-dog. There was more tracking excitement as we discovered evidence of a female red fox in heat. The fox tracks just yards from the snowshoer and dog suggested that the fox had been startled by the visitors and quickly turned and went on its way. So went three hours of observation and speculation.

Energized from the morning, I went home that afternoon and took my almost three-year-old daughter in the back-pack for a short tracking walk in the overgrown apple orchard. Though only vaguely interested in deer tracks, she was very excited about deer "poop." In just a few minutes, a new tracker had been born. ■

## Upcoming Summer 2005 Events

### Strawberry Picking, Gill Fundraiser, Farm Tour and Picnic

Uppingil Farm  
 Tuesday, June 28  
 (raindate Thursday, June 30)  
 9:30 am - 1:00 pm

Come pick strawberries and a portion of the proceeds will be donated to Mount Grace. Tour Board member Cliff Hatch's organic diversified farm and bring a picnic to enjoy afterwards.

### Skyfields Arboretum, Athol Volunteer Afternoon

Skyfields Arboretum, Athol  
 Thursday, July 7  
 4:00 pm - 6:00 pm

Please join staff and volunteers to care for the Arboretum. We need energetic people to help with weeding, pruning and mulching. Bring gloves. Refreshments provided.

### Hike Devil's Washbowl, Warwick with Allen Young (Co-Sponsored by Warwick Open Space Committee)

Arthur Iversen Conservation Area (AICA)  
 Saturday, August 20  
 10:30 am - 1:30 pm

Come enjoy the special area at AICA known as Devil's Washbowl, where we will explore the beautiful wetlands, forest and an interesting waterfall. Led by Board member Allen Young. Bring a picnic lunch, water and sturdy shoes. Please contact Mount Grace to register and for directions.



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\_\_\_\_\_ I would like to pledge \$\_\_\_\_\_ per month to Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust.

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\_\_\_\_\_ I am interested in learning more about volunteer opportunities at Mount Grace.

\_\_\_\_\_ Please do not use my name in your lists of contributors.

\_\_\_\_\_ Please do not share my name with other organizations.

**Please forward to Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, 1461 Old Keene Road, Athol, MA 01331-9689. Thank you!**