A Montague Center farm with unique historic value and scenic beauty has been protected from development in a cooperative effort involving Mount Grace and the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture. The fertile land of the 35-acre Bitzer-Rowe Farm at the junction of Greenfield, Cross and Hatchery Roads, which has been farmed using the organic method since the beginning of the 1800s, is now preserved for agricultural use in perpetuity.

The proprietor, John Bitzer, "is committed to farm life, and wanted very much to protect his beloved family homestead", according to Leigh Youngblood, Director of Land Protection at Mount Grace.

In her explanation of the state-funded Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program, Youngblood said that, without Mr. Bitzer's house, the property was appraised at $270,000. The APR value was appraised at $234,000, with the state paying Mr. Bitzer $150,000 for giving up his right to develop the land for houses. Because Mr. Bitzer accepted $84,000 less than the appraised value, this is viewed as "donated value," granting him the right to a tax deduction and thus sharply reducing capital gains tax.

The 76-year-old lifelong farmer had enough frontage to develop his land for residences, but his goal was precisely the opposite.

"They told me that 18 houses could be built on my land. This way, it'll be protected -- now and forever."

The Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) describes the acreage as "flat, fertile land." The MHC has recommended the farm for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and cited the farm's agricultural history as well as the unique early 19th century farmhouse, English style barn and cow house. The Commission called the place "a rare ensemble worthy of recognition and preservation."

Under the agreement, there are actually two separate conservation restrictions. Mount Grace holds a conservation restriction (CR) on 19 acres of the farm, including the historic home and barns. The Department of Food and Agriculture holds the APR on the remaining 15 acres of active cropland. Because of the large amount of road frontage, the development potential was high for the farm, adding to its value.

Rich Hubbard, John Bitzer, Richard French, & Leigh Youngblood
Rescuing Fiske Pond

In Wendell, a small body of water has been creating a big stir. Fiske Pond has been a favorite swimming spot for local residents for as long as anyone can remember. Last fall the 10-acre pond and approximately 115 acres of land surrounding it were offered for sale.

Fiske pond is a rare sand plain pond that is home to numerous species of plants not typically found in western Massachusetts. The land surrounding it contains rare open fields habitat, hard-wood forest, a distinctive hemlock swamp, and numerous streams and shrub wetlands. Because of its isolated location and lack of motorized boat use, invasive species have not been introduced into the water. "The water is extremely clear and there is at least a 50% match with species found in coastal sand plain ponds, which makes it a unique and important habitat in this area," says Paul Godfrey, Assoc. Professor of Biological Sciences at UMASS. He and his students have been studying Fiske Pond for over ten years, and have inventoried many of its plant species.

Because the parcel has approximately 1200 feet of road frontage, the threat from development was intense enough to create a bidding war. Mount Grace was asked to work with the Wendell community to help protect the land from development and to ensure continued public access to the pond for swimming, and for hiking on the trails that surround the pond. A group of concerned members of the town formed a group called the Friends of Fiske Pond. Their goal was clear: protect the pond. After weeks of anxious negotiations, a group called Chickadees Retreat, Inc. (CRI) bought the pond and its surrounding acreage for $405,000. CRI's long-term goal is to build several residential dwellings and a meditation/healing center on a portion of the land, and to place the remaining land under a conservation restriction.

Dar Williams, a contemporary folk singer who has lived in Northampton and has a love of this area, offered her talents for an evening concert. The proceeds of the concert would go towards purchasing a conservation restriction on the property.

Ms. Williams gave all she had for Fiske Pond on that December evening, and received a heartfelt standing ovation from the crowd, who included Mount Grace's staff and board president. Wendell is a small town of just over 900 residents. The amount of money needed for the project seemed immense, and many were skeptical about the possibility of saving the pond, as well meaning as the project might be. The Mount Grace staff could not help but marvel as they walked out of the hall into the moonlit winter night... who would have guessed what amazing things could happen in Wendell?

Dar Williams donated all of the proceeds from the concert as well as one-third of the proceeds from the sale of her CD's on that evening to the project. In addition, Ms. Williams has established a foundation that donates money to land protection projects, and Mount Grace received a generous contribution from her foundation as well. Not only is she a versatile and talented singer and songwriter, but she actively supports land protection. Thank you, Dar!

Mount Grace continues to be interested in working closely with both the community members of Wendell and with CRI to facilitate protection of the land. The next step is for CRI to present a building site plan and any proposed limitations on public access to the community group and to Mount Grace, who will be drafting the conservation restriction. As a whole, the process represents a strong collaboration between these grassroots organizations. Each has a different focus, but they share the common goal of wanting to protect important natural resources.

Bitzer from page 1

John Bitzer currently grows hay, potatoes and other vegetables, and he notes the farm has "always been organic," adding: "It's the right way to go. There's so much cancer, which comes from all the toxic chemicals. I'm so happy I can grow my own food."

For the past seven years, Montague resident Melissa Sarlat has been renting a portion of the land as a market gardener who grows hay, vegetables and flowers. Her produce is sold at local farmers' markets and the Green Fields Market. Sarlat said she plans to continue cultivating the land next season.

The farm is called the Bitzer-Rowe farm after the two families who have owned this land for most of its history, starting with Daniel Rowe in 1798. The Rowe family, according to an 1858 atlas, owned most of the land in and around Montague Center. By the 1880s, the farm passed into ownership of John Bitzer (an ancestor of the present John Bitzer), who had recently immigrated to the United States. For 21 years, the property passed out of Bitzer ownership, returning to the family in 1927. The MICH notes, "The village of Montague Center has increasingly lost farm land as its residents work off the farms, which makes efforts to preserve this farm more important."

Montague Grange Presentation

The Montague Grange invited the staff of Mount Grace to speak at the Grange's monthly meeting. The event was promoted as a presentation on land protection techniques and it was opened to members of the Grange and the general public. Leigh Youngblood and Elizabeth Wroblewski presented information on conservation restrictions and tax incentives for land protection, and gave examples of land protection projects that had been accomplished in Montague and the surrounding area.

Wanted: Buyer for a Blue House

Valley Land Fund is seeking a buyer for the "blue house" on Chestnut Hill Road in Orange. The 4-acre property includes a beautiful field and a vacant c. 1880 farm house in need of extensive renovations. The property abuts conservation land. Price: $50,000. For more information call 978-544-2735