



Views from Mount Grace

Mt. Grace Land Conservation Trust

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Bitzer Project Ripens

By Allen Young

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.

Land conservation requires creativity and tenacity. No single conservation plan works for all landowners. Finding the conservation option suited to the combination of a landowner's situation and a particular piece of land can take from a few months to years. In 1996, Henry Waidlich of Montague, who was then President of Mount Grace, introduced Montague farmer John Bitzer to Mount Grace's Director of land protection. The documents that will permanently protect this farm were recorded at the registry of deeds in December of 2000, making a long time wish come true—a wish that will last forever.

Leigh Youngblood

"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



Rich Hubbard, John Bitzer,
Richard French, & Leigh Youngblood

(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.

⇒ Bitzer, pg. 2

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 MHC 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."

