

Views from Mount Grace



SPRING 2025
VOLUME 36, NO. 1

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Four Corners
- Protecting Fox Hill Farm
- Partnership Protects Nipmuc Land
- Supporting Early Successional Habitat
- Margaret Power Biggs Society Member Profile: Craig Twohey
- Upcoming Events

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Overlooking the Four Corners property in Montague with Mount Toby in the background.

Mount Grace & Franklin County Community Land Trust Protect Historic Four Corners Property in Montague

BY TYSON NEUKIRCH

In December 2024, Mount Grace, in collaboration with Franklin County Community Land Trust (FCCLT) successfully protected the historic 47-acre Watroba property at the intersection of Old Sunderland and East Taylor Hill Road in Montague, known colloquially as Four Corners. Located within the Connecticut River Farm Scenic Byway Corridor, the property boasts stunning views of Mount Toby to the south, along with vibrant wetlands, productive forestland, and fifteen acres designated as prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance.

“The landscape feels both partially wild and partially cultivated, with an open, pastoral charm,” says Walker Korby, a Montague resident who has been involved in efforts to protect the land. The three parcels in this 47-acre conservation project are divided by the intersection of Old Sunderland and East Taylor Hill Roads, with each parcel sitting on a different corner of the crossroads – hence the name Four Corners. “The central location of these parcels and the crossroads play an important part in the neighborhood’s sense of connectivity to a shared landscape both from a geographical standpoint and an emotional/spiritual one,” Walker explains. “One of the things that makes this project so exciting is that the Four Corners property,

> continued on page 3



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SPRING 2025 • VOLUME 36, No. 1



Dear Friends of Conservation and Mount Grace,

Spring is full of simple pleasures — like stepping outside, suddenly realizing you’ve left your mittens, scarf, and hat on the kitchen counter, and feeling a moment of panic — only to find that it’s okay. The crisp air is refreshing, not biting. The first hints of color emerge from the brown and grey leaf litter on the forest floor, blushes of yellow daffodil and blue purple snowbells. This has been our first “real winter” in many years. Snow plowing budgets have been stressed, snow shovel handles cracked, and our communal patience taxed. And yet, it also had keen joys. A friend sent me a video of her young son’s mile-wide smile and exclams of glee as he reeled in a record-breaking bass while ice fishing. Our own Jenn Albertine survived a momentous Dog Sled Race in Maine, navigating challenging terrain with her brave team. Neighbors played pond hockey again, a sport we thought extinct in our region.

So, amidst the struggle — the cold hands and the icy walks — we find moments to come together and celebrate the beauty and bounty of the nature we are privileged to live around. We stay strong knowing that warmth, longer days, and the delicate unfurling of maple leaves

will return. Currently, our conservation world is turned upside down. As questions swirl at the federal level about funding sources for land protection, sustainable forestry and agriculture practices and climate resilience, Mount Grace continues moving forward. We celebrate the completion of several momentous conservation projects, the growth of our team, and renewed efforts to care for our beautiful meadows at Skyfields. Our work is your work. It is the work of our community. We cannot make more land, so we strive to protect, cherish, and take care of what we have.

Warmly,

Emma

Mount Grace conserves and cares for our forests, farms, and waterways to promote healthy communities in climate-resilient, biodiverse landscapes.

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

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Fox Hill Farm Conservation Restriction Honors Five Generations

BY CAITIE DWYER - HUPPERT

Lottie Hains has lived at Fox Hill Farm on East Road in Orange her whole life. Her grandparents bought the farmstead in 1932. When her father, John Phillips, took over he shifted from dairy to beef cows.

Lottie's relationship with the land and animals runs deep. She remembers, "I used to sit in the field with my pony, with no fencing, and watch the cows...I said, 'there's no way I'm going to run up and down the field. I am going to use my pony to help me.' So, I taught him how to herd cattle."

Lottie and her husband Frank raised their three children, Ashley, Christian, and Nicholas, on the farm. Today they raise cows, sheep, horses, and chickens on twenty acres with Christian, his wife Sarah Wells, and their children. Sarah served as Mount Grace's Conservation Director for many years and now continues to lead conservation efforts throughout New England for the Open Space Institute.

Portable fencing helps the family save time on farm chores and facilitates rotational grazing. "I wonder how many hours in our lifetime we've spent moving fence," Lottie muses. "But it's good...for the land."



The barn at Fox Hill Farm as seen from East Road in Orange.

Lottie and Frank worked with Mount Grace to put a conservation restriction on their 72-acre farm in December. "I wanted to be able to protect it so no more development could happen, and for forestry, water, and wildlife," Lottie reflects.

We are grateful to Sarah and the Hains family, and to Aaron Nelson, former Mount Grace Community Conservation Project Manager. Protecting the farm's fields and forest honors the family's stewardship legacy and their care of the land for the next generations.

Mount Grace & Franklin County Community *> continued from page 1*

in many ways, is a microcosm of the ecosystems, landscapes, and legacies of land use within Montague and the broader region," says Mount Grace's Farm Conservation Program Manager, Tyson Neukirch. "Which makes it an amazing opportunity to think creatively and collaboratively about how stewardship of the Four Corners property can contribute to a future in our region with more connected and accessible open spaces and thriving and just food systems."

So, what does that look like? Currently, the Four Corner's Working Group, composed of a dedicated group of Montague residents, Mount Grace staff, and other local stakeholders, is working on defining a community engagement process to explore the potential community uses of the property.

While the long-term vision for the land is being developed, Mount Grace is developing a Stewardship Plan for the property with the guidance of Director of Land Stewardship Matt DiBona and Conservation Director Dave Small, with input from local stakeholders. Stewardship activities will begin this spring and include cover cropping, invasive species management, mowing trails for public access, and signage.

For more information about the project contact Tyson Neukirch at neukirch@mountgrace.org.



Partnership Protects Nipmuc Land

BY DAVID KOTKER

Mount Grace's newest completed project is small, but represents a big step forward for conservation in the region.

This December, the 7-acre Tall Turtle parcel in New Salem was protected with a Mount Grace conservation restriction. The land is held by the Native Land Conservancy, an Indigenous land trust focused on land return. "The conservation of this unique landscape, made possible by a caring donor, represents the heart of our work to preserve land and culture," said Native Land Conservancy Executive Director, Diana Ruiz.

Situated within the Quabbin watershed, Tall Turtle nestles alongside Mass Audubon's 2,500-acre Whetstone Wood Wildlife Sanctuary. Tall Turtle takes its name from a set of large stones that look like a turtle's open mouth, which line up to appear to swallow the sun during summer solstice sunsets.

After accepting a donation of the land, the Native Land Conservancy worked with the Nipmuc community to develop both a conservation restriction and a separate cultural respect easement to ensure that the Nipmuc people will always be able to engage with this sacred place. To further this goal, the site is currently closed to the public. Native Land Conservancy then invited Mount Grace to hold the conservation restriction.

Mount Grace has previously worked with Nipmuc partners to draft agreements guaranteeing Indigenous rights and incorporating Nipmuc land management practices on our conservation areas. Tall Turtle is the first project Mount Grace has helped complete which actually returns land title to Indigenous people. "This is an exciting new opportunity," says Mount Grace Executive Director Emma Ellsworth. "For us it's a logical next step to support the Indigenous community in securing land access. Projects like this help build new partnerships that can protect land and restore it to Indigenous stewardship."



Tall Turtle is named after a striking configuration of boulders which appear to swallow the sun during the summer solstice each year.



Supporting the Health of Early Successional Habitat at Skyfields Arboretum

BY KOLYA PARTAN



Recently cleared fields at Skyfields Arboretum behind our office in Athol.

If you've visited Skyfields Arboretum recently, you may have noticed how open the fields behind our office have become. Earlier this winter, Mount Grace, with the help of farmer and board member Phil Stevens, undertook a thorough clearing of brush that had overtaken the old agricultural fields. While this intervention—preventing trees and shrubs from reclaiming land cleared by human activity—might seem at odds with protecting natural landscapes, it serves an important purpose.

Across the vast stretch of greenery from Route 32 in Athol northward through Lawton State Forest to Tully Lake, open meadows are almost nonexistent. While unfragmented forests are important, the landscape lacks early successional habitat. Managing the fields at Skyfields Arboretum as permanent openings adds diversity to the larger forested landscape.

“Periodic mowing of this land is needed to reset forest succession,” says Matt DiBona, Mount Grace’s Director of Land Stewardship. “A healthy forest thrives when it possesses age and structural diversity.” Keeping the fields open allows native grasses and wildflowers to thrive, providing essential support for the birds and animals that rely on them.

Meadows provide food and shelter for birds, insects, and wildlife. In 2021, we planted 20 native pollinator species, chosen to bloom throughout the season. Without annual mowing, shrubs and young trees will shade out herbaceous plants, reverting the field to forest. To resist that process, Mount Grace plans to clear the field annually.

This effort to actively manage our land to promote healthy, resilient and diverse forest landscapes is part of the Dynamic Forest Restoration Initiative, funded by a U.S. Forest Service grant. It brings together a diverse network of conservation partners with a demonstrated commitment to improving forest health on both public and private land.

“The Dynamic Forest Restoration Initiative has truly been a partner effort that stretches across the public/private lands boundary and engages a broad suite of stakeholders,” said DiBona. Through this partnership, Mount Grace has worked with groups like the Ruffed Grouse Society to complete important forest management work. Our recent demonstration project at Guiney Memorial Forest improved forest habitat for birds and serves as an example for how other private deedholders can use silviculture to improve forest health on their land.

Margaret Power Biggs Society

Member Profile: Craig Twohey

BY CAITIE DWYER - HUPPERT

Spend time with Craig Twohey and it is obvious — he cares about conservation because he loves the land and community.

“I grew up in Phillipston and never left,” says Craig, a chef, who worked together with his wife Jean, to run the King Phillip Restaurant for 36 years. “People say, ‘what do you miss about the restaurant?’ I say the relationships...with the people that worked for you, the people that came in.”

Phillipston’s population has grown to more than 1700, compared to 670 when Craig was a kid. On his road where there were eight houses, there are now forty. He reflects, “I’ve seen this place become like a bedroom community but it’s still very rural and it’s great. I love being able to walk in the woods.”

Craig is an avid hiker and plans to walk 132 miles in Maine this June to complete his 2,190 mile thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail.

Craig and Jean live at the top of the watershed where water flows to the Quabbin Reservoir from the headwaters of Popple Brook at the bottom of the property. The Twoheys protected forty-nine acres with Mount Grace and the MA Department of Conservation & Recreation Division of Water Supply Protection in 2017 as part of the Forest Legacy Program. Craig enjoys working on the land and is glad he turned one of the skidder roads into a three-season road because it helps hunters and walkers access the forest and trails.



Craig on the Appalachian Trail in Carrabassett Valley Maine.

Craig joined the Mount Grace Board and the Margaret Power Biggs Society in 2021. With a twinkle in his eye, Craig says, “there’s an old saying, ‘Buy land. They’re not making more of it.’ We need to keep working to conserve and manage as much land as we can.”

If you would like information about joining Margaret Power Biggs Society, please contact David Kotker at 978-541-1767 or kotker@mountgrace.org.

Spring 2025 Upcoming Events - Join Us!

Full Moon Hike to Richardson Overlook with Adventure East

Stratton Mountain, Northfield
\$40 to register, discount for members
Sunday, April 13th 6:30-10:30 pm

Bees and Brews: Planting for Pollinators Pub Science

Red Apple Farm Brew Barn, Phillipston
Wednesday, April 16th 5:30-7:30 pm

Give Back to the Land Day

Online Day of Giving
Tuesday, April 22

Vernal Pool Exploration

South Athol Conservation Area, Athol
Friday, April 25th 1:00-3:00

Dragonfly Field Trip

Eagle Reserve Conservation Area, Royalston
Sunday, June 1st 10:00-12:00 am

Free Estate and Financial Planning Workshop

Green Fields Market Community Room
170 Main Street, Greenfield
Tuesday, May 13th 6-8pm

Visit mountgrace.org/events to learn more about these and other events.

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Grants Received

Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs	\$680,000
Purpose: CR Acquisition	
Lillian Lincoln Foundation	\$25,000
Purpose: Operating	
Greater Worcester Community Foundation.....	\$20,000
Purpose: Capacity Building	
Bemis Foundation	\$10,000
Purpose: Operating	
Mass Audubon Climate Fund	\$10,000
Purpose: Climate & Land Justice Program	
The Adelard A. and Valeda Lea Roy Foundation	\$5,000
Purpose: Tall Turtle Project	

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Mimi Hellen Jones
Myra & Arthur Iversen
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Philip Calabria
Ruger, our beloved bulldog
Sarah E. Tedford
The Smith's ancestors
Thomas Peterson
Walter Jaworski & Nate Steinberg

Gifts were Received *In Honor of*

Allen Young
Carmen Queen
Emma and the Mount Grace Staff
John Natoli
Leigh Youngblood
Stefan & Erin Calabria



Welcome to the team, Dave Small!

We're delighted to announce that Dave Small has joined the Mount Grace team as our new Conservation Director! Dave comes to Mount Grace with decades of experience in environmental non-profit work and is currently President of the 250 member Athol Bird and Nature Club and Director of the Millers River Environmental Center. He also served as Assistant Regional Director at the DCR Quabbin Reservoir in Central Massachusetts for 35 years. He shares his passion for birds, butterflies, dragonflies and most recently moths, through workshops, lectures, and guided field trips across New England.



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