



Mill owner's house on Oaks Creek

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a living," he confides, leading him to search for ways to promote rural economies while simultaneously protecting the environment at his job with Merrill Lynch. He furthered his support for the conservation movement by joining the Land Trust's board last year. But perhaps the greatest reward for the Hodgins' is that their children understand the value of protecting the land. Describing the concept of a conserva-

tion easement to his 10-year old son Finn, Hodgins explained they chose to keep the land available for agricultural and forestry uses by keeping most of it open space, and that when Finn inherits the property, he "won't be able to build a bunch of houses on it." Finn's response was simply, "Well why would I ever want to do that?"

These sites offer a glimpse back to a time when agriculture dominated

the local landscape, reminding us of our past as well as our progress. They embody a succession of memories, chronicling the lives of those who devoted their time here. Although increasingly rare throughout the country, Otsego County retains a concentration of such farmsteads, imbuing it with an unequivocal pastoral quality. Thus, under ever-increasing threats of subdivision and development, their protection ensures the preservation of Otsego County's distinctive rural character and honors the memory of the families who recognized and revered the area's innate beauty and value.

Take nothing but pictures.
Leave nothing but footprints.
Kill nothing but time.

Three Families, Six Easements

By Emily Underwood

A glimpse back to a time when agriculture dominated the local landscape, reminding us of our past as well as our progress

Oneonta

The day they closed on their property on Gifford Hill Road in 1978, Mrs. Slanski-Lee and her husband hiked up the hill behind their new home, each coming to a sudden halt half way up the incline. They stood drinking in the scenery in amazement. "Simultaneously, we realized we could not actually own it," she recalls, "but gladly accepted stewardship of this 'piece of the good earth'. It puts me at ease knowing it will be protected forever." Slanski-Lee owns three of the Otsego Land Trust's most recent conservation easements, all on adjacent properties, which together protect a total of 105 acres. The Land Trust's six newest easements are landmarks for the organization, its first deliberate efforts to protect lands of historic and



View from Tanner drive shed

cultural significance. According to Slanski-Lee's extensive research, her properties are overflowing with these values.

On the couple's original property, a farmhouse with a fieldstone foundation and hand-hewn post and beam construction was the first home to be built on Gifford Hill, and may date back to the 1790s. Its reputation as a former veterinary office has been verified over the years by the many old medicine bottles the couple unearthed. A stone quarry at the top of the hill, dating to at least 1860, was likely the source of building materials for many homes in the area. It was also the site of the couple's wedding vows. "Getting everyone up there was a little difficult," laughed Slanski-Lee.

The second property was acquired by Slanski-Lee from a neighbor, who entrusted her with preserving the land. Historically a hops farm, it features a lengthy network of well-maintained stone walls, whose remarkable condition can be at-

tributed to the previous owner's husband. He used them throughout the years as a disciplinary tool, requiring his children to repair the walls if they misbehaved. "Henry could be an ornery man," said Slanski-Lee.

Her most recent property was purchased solely for the purpose of expanding her protection of the land. It was part of a Girl Scout camp, and Slanski-Lee is currently searching for more information on it—local lore has it that a cement block cottage on the easement was the camp caretaker's living quarters.

Butternuts

Like Slanski-Lee, Lynne Tanner demonstrated a considerable commitment to conservation by acquiring two large mowed fields across the road from her original property to enhance its preservation values. Tanner's 64-acre property in Butternuts includes several historic structures, among them a late-Victorian vernacular farmhouse (circa 1890), a drive shed (circa

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Otsego Land Trust protects the distinctive rural character of the Otsego County area by securing lands and waters of significant scenic, historic, and ecological value, including forests and farmlands.

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Field Notes

by Peter Hujik and Harry Levine

As this newsletter goes to press, we joyfully celebrate the birth of a baby boy and baby girl—the seeds of a new generation—Luke Roger Hujik and Lily Grace (Levine) Lanzetta. Holding an infant naturally prompts reflections on the past and aspirations for the future. Our common heritage and future is bound to the places where we live. You have charged Otsego Land Trust with protecting those special places, for us and for generations to come.

This year Otsego Land Trust celebrates its 20th anniversary and we hope you will join us in the events we have planned to mark this occasion. On June 14, Family Day at Leatherstocking Falls will feature our first conservation easement from 1990, which protects a stunning and storied natural landmark as well as the surrounding property. The event will feature a local historian and artist and allow visitors an opportunity to add their impressions to the chronicle of the Falls.

On August 23rd, bring out your party hats and noisemakers! At our 20th Birthday Party on the grounds of another protected landmark, Thayer Farm, we will not only celebrate our first 20 years, but share our successes with you and ask you to continue your support in fulfilling the promise of the next 20. With a battery of new tools including our updated conservation easement template, our farmland protection partnership with Otsego County, and our recent commitment to protection of historic structures

and landscapes—coupled with your continuing support—we can and will help families protect “a legacy of landscape” for future generations—lands where they can see the stars and hear the sounds of nature.

Spring is a time for nurturing: planting seeds and helping them grow. We hope that an exciting new initiative will do just that for the best and brightest students in the fields of conservation biology, finance, and law. In June, we welcome our first intern under the Earle Peterson Conservation Fellowship. This competitive internship honors our immediate past president and his extraordinary conservation legacy by helping develop the conservationists of the future, those who will care for our legacy of protected lands.

Remember, save these dates—June 14 and August 23. Without you, there would be no Otsego Land Trust. Your support is critical. With you, we can save more of the lands we love for our children and grandchildren. As spring bursts into bud and bloom around us, and new babies delight their families, the future is ours to create! ■

Save these Dates!

FAMILY DAY AT
LEATHERSTOCKING FALLS
June 14

OUR 20TH BIRTHDAY PARTY
August 23

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1850), a red sandstone wall, and the stone foundation of a barn that burned in the 1920s. Anticipating her eventual need to sell the property in the years to come, Tanner wanted to ensure that its “country quality” stayed intact. “It’s so beautiful and open, and you can see the stars at night—you can’t do that in many places anymore,” she reflects.

Tanner’s property is emblematic of Otsego County’s history, retaining the look and feel of a working farm—the use that once sustained the land. The historic structures listed above were once common on 19th-century farms, but have now become endangered species. The drive shed is a particularly rare survivor—although once common in the area, as they were used to store agricultural machinery, drive sheds like Tanner’s were too small for most tractors, and so have largely disappeared from the landscape. The stone wall marking the property boundary, its unique red color reflecting the area’s geology, is also a relic, and a testament to agricultural progression, as most were destroyed to allow the expansion of fields, the use of horse drawn equipment, and later, the use of tractors.

Morris and Otsego

The priceless value of these historic easements is well captured by Philip Hodgins—“People will spend a lot of money to hang a painting on a wall, but [land] is a piece of art you can really enjoy, all while preserving history and the environment.” He and his wife, Annbritt, and their three children: Finn, Maya, and



Rock outcropping on Slanski hill

Anya, are the recent donors of two conservation easements in Otsego County. The family began searching for an upstate farm in 2003, driven by their desire to fulfill Philip’s late father’s dream—to have title to his own land. “It was love at first sight,” says Hodgins of their 294-acre farm in Morris, now protected by a donated conservation easement, “We decided on the spot that this was where we wanted to be.” The Hodgins’ intuition was right, as the farm quickly proved to be an excellent weekend retreat where the family could enjoy every season, fishing, hiking, picnicking, watching the deer, playing in the mud, sleigh riding, and hunting for fossils.

But the family longed for community, and so bought the 73-acre Toad Hall estate in Fly Creek to be closer to village life. Of exceptional historical value, it is said to have been a mill owner’s estate, with a late Federal-style stone house (circa 1828) and wooden stable and barn (circa 1830) eligible for listing on the National Register of Historical Places. Although Hodgins has traveled the world extensively, he maintains that “there is no other place as special or as beautiful” as this area of New York. Moreover, their love of land and collaboration with Otsego Land have influenced the Hodgins family at a deeper level. “It has redefined what I do for