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Beloved Watertown Farm is Protected Forever

[HARTFORD, CT] June 8, 2020 - Connecticut Farmland Trust (CFT) is pleased to announce the preservation of Gustafson Farm in Watertown. The farm has been a popular destination for area families since 1907. The preservation of Gustafson Farm was a complex feat of partnership and teamwork. The Connecticut Department of Agriculture, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Housatonic Valley Association, and CFT were each involved in the farm's preservation.

For many families, the idea of conserving their land is like a seed – it takes many years to mature. For the Gustafson family, the seed was planted over a decade ago by the past generation of Gustafsons, who knew their 301-acre orchard and beef farm was something special that they wanted to preserve. That seed has finally come to fruition with the work of their descendants: cousins Katie Barnosky, Frank Gustafson, III, and Kristie Weidemier.

"We didn't want to see it developed because my family worked so hard to keep the farm," said co-owner Katie Barnosky on the family's move to protect the land. "We think that the neighbors and the town [of Watertown] will be happy to see the farm stay. We hope to provide for the town and make our family proud of us."

The farm, centered between Judds Pond and Black Rock State Park, is well known to locals for its iconic rolling hills on either side of Linkfield Road and its popular farm store. The land boasts not only an orchard but well-maintained hayfields and acres for beef cattle grazing. The Gustafson family hopes to restore the orchard and produce fruits and vegetables to feed the Watertown community well into the future.

Katie's father, Alan Gustafson, started meeting with the Housatonic Valley Association (HVA) to discuss conservation options in the early 2000s. After he passed away in 2008, there was a long pause as the family decided what they wanted to do. With HVA's guidance, the cousins eventually applied to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture's Farmland Preservation Program. CFT and the State jointly applied for funding from USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in 2017. After three years of active work by CFT to purchase the development rights on the entire property, the land will now remain a farm – forever.

“HVA is so proud of the Gustafson family and of our conservation partners at the Department of Agriculture and Connecticut Farmland Trust who, with patience and persistence, were able to conserve this special property,” said Tim Abbott, Regional Land Conservation Director for the Housatonic Valley Association. “Places like this have many reasons for protection – farmland soils and public drinking water and connected forest habitat among them -- but saving family land and sustaining families is one of the hardest things to achieve in land conservation and this a wonderful and gratifying outcome.”

The farm, which is large for a farm in suburban Connecticut, was preserved in three pieces to provide the family with more flexibility when it eventually becomes time to transfer or sell the property to the next generation of farmers. In total, 301 acres are now protected.

“The permanent protection of Gustafson Farm in Watertown demonstrates the importance of a collaborative effort among state and federal agencies, as well as non-profit partners,” said Connecticut Agriculture Commissioner Bryan P. Hurlburt. “This particular project encompasses 300 acres of rolling orchards, hayfields, and pasture critical to the future of agriculture in Connecticut.”

“It is critical to protect our state’s valuable working lands,” said Thomas L. Morgart, Connecticut State Conservationist for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. “Through our Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, we are able to help landowners protect their land and keep it in agricultural use forever. More than 50 percent of the soils on this farm are designated prime farmland. Permanently protecting this farm and its high-yielding soils are of major importance in meeting Connecticut’s and the nation’s short- and long-range needs for food and fiber,” he said.

“This is a tale of a family’s dedication to the land that has been in their care for generations. Twenty-one years ago, when I first came to Connecticut to do land conservation work, I saw this stunning land and knew that it would be essential to keep it as a working farm. The extended Gustafson family realized that, too, and began actively working to protect the land three years ago,” said Elisabeth Moore, Executive Director of Connecticut Farmland Trust. “I’m thrilled that CFT was a partner in the farm’s protection because the land is truly special.”

CFT has preserved two additional farms in Watertown. Osuch Farm is a 40-acre farm that grows corn for a local dairy with public walking trails, owned by the Watertown Land Trust. Calabrese Farm, leased by Logue Farms, is similar to Osuch farm in acreage.

Agricultural conservation easements prohibit residential and industrial development but allow construction of agricultural structures on designated areas of the land. Since its founding in 2002, CFT has protected 56 family farms, covering over 4,400 acres. CFT is Connecticut’s only statewide land trust, and the only land trust in the state dedicated solely to the protection of agricultural land. CFT is a private 501(c)(3) nonprofit that relies on Connecticut residents to support its work. Learn more at CTFarmland.org.

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Photo credit: Housatonic Valley Association, Wendy Carlson, 2007.