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HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP: St. Michael's: Site of many new projects

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Double Brook Farm cattle are shown with some of their neighbors.

St. Michael's Farm Preserve was just awakening from a long winter's nap when D&R Greenway Land Trust leaders addressed a group of 25 community members, whose spirits couldn't be dampened by the then cold rainy weather.

In early March, they gathered in Hopewell Borough Hall to learn more about new projects at the 395-acre farm preserve

"St. Michael's was preserved in 2010 through a grassroots effort by the Hopewell community, with the support of over 900 individuals and local businesses," D&R Greenway President and CEO Linda Mead reminded the gathering.

"Because a large portion of the land was preserved with State Agriculture Development Committee funding, St. Michael's is a valuable model," she continued. "D&R Greenway is pursuing conservation simultaneously with agriculture and public access."

"Community involvement is so important in the management of the property," Ms. Mead stressed. "We want the community to remain informed and engaged. We are incorporating community comments into our stewardship program for the land, as evidenced by farming changes that attract and protect grassland birds."

In his presentation, D&R Greenway Vice President Jay Watson showed an aerial view of St. Michael's, indicating the 213 acres of preserved farmland in the center.

"As visitors walk on preserved farmland, we're demonstrating how active agriculture and passive recreational use can co-exist," said Mr. Watson. Visitors to St. Michael's will experience both pastures and hayfields because they are visiting a working farm.

Among the many accomplishments made by D&R Greenway since 2010 has been the creation of the Charles Evans Overlook to take advantage of the vista, as well as improved access and parking lots to make it easier to visit.

Trails have been developed from existing farm roads and are maintained. A new trail, east of Aunt Molly Road, through an open savannah —, habitat with oak trees and open grassfields — was built last summer with the assistance of community volunteers.

Two "citizen scientists" from Washington Crossing Audubon Society — Sharyn Magee and Hannah Suthers — regularly walk the site, collecting natural resource data for the Cornell Ornithology website. "This helps us make good habitat decisions, based on species information," said Mr. Watson.

For example, certain hayfields have become a sanctuary for grassland birds during breeding season. Therefore, they will be off-limits to grazing from May through July.

A wildflower meadow is being created on the Aunt Molly Road side of the property, to diversify habitat for grassland birds and pollinator insects. Also new this year will be beehives, across Aunt Molly Road from regular public access. They are next to the wildflower meadow, where bees assist pollination. In the future, D&R Greenway hopes to make available St. Michael's Farm Preserve honey.

D&R Greenway is in the process of planting a fruiting hedgerow with more than 200 plants for wildlife and hikers. These include raspberry, blackberry, high bush blueberry, persimmon and viburnum, some of which were raised in the Native Plant Nursery at D&R Greenway's Johnson Education Center in Princeton.

Six acres of the property are dedicated to raising 13 native species of grasses and wildflowers for the New York City Parks Department, to restore the Fresh Kills landfill.

This season may include the third annual Hopewell Valley Trail Run. The second Hopewell Community Campout will be held June 22. New this year for St. Michael's will be the Perseid Meteor Shower Party on Aug. 12. Members of the Princeton Amateur Astronomy Association will help run this event.

After an extensive study by the New Jersey Barn Company, evaluating the merits of restoring the old barn on the St. Michael's land, the decision was made to replace the barn. D&R Greenway Trustee Dave Reynolds has donated an 1840s barn, rescued 8 miles away. Flemington architect Chris Pickell has designed the installation. The New Jersey Barn Company will erect the timber frame, which will be finished by local contractor, Pro Line Construction. Double Brook Farm's Robin and Jon McConaughy have generously donated to this project.

"The new barn will be oriented to take in St. Michael's sweeping views," said Mr. Watson. "It will be used as a stewardship center: for seed harvest and cleaning support, storage, and general operations. The barn will feature an open porch with picnic tables, where hikers can seek respite from the sun while enjoying the property."

A children's garden has been suggested to memorialize the orphans at St. Michael's, and D&R Greenway has enlisted the help of an intern to design the process for setting up a community garden, if the Hopewell community demonstrates interest in this project. To welcome walkers from Hopewell Borough, a pedestrian link may be built that will incorporate marbles, symbolizing the children who played here when the land held an orphanage. These visions are still dreams for the future.

The herd grazing at St. Michael's belongs to the McConaughys, of Double Brook Farm. "We want to embrace the community, so we offer walking paths to see how the animals are raised and the vegetables are grown," Mr. McConaughy said. The products raised will be sold only at Brick Market (the former Malek Chevrolet) on East Broad Street in Hopewell Borough. The McConaughys hope to open the market in May. Brick Farm Tavern (the former Chorley house, located east of town off Route 518) is a restaurant in the making.

Mr. McConaughy believes it is more important for people to see how their food is raised ethically and without pesticides than to rely on the government stamp of organic. "If you don't know where your food comes from, then you have to rely on the USDA to stamp it organic. We are working toward certification, a lengthy process, but we want people to walk the land and see the process."

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The vision for Double Brook Farm is a closed system, where market and restaurant compost will return to the farm. The McConaughy vision is that no feed, fuel or fertilizer come from outside the community. "We want to get away from diesel fuel and produce healthier animals, feed and ecosystem.

"We are creating a symbiotic relationship with animals and native grasses," Mr. McConaughy continued. "Bird life will be enhanced by rotational grazing. Traditional farming, where hay is cut for feed, deprives birds of their nesting habitat. With rotation-grazing, there's no mowing. We move the animals so that grasses get their requisite days of rest. To do that, we are erecting temporary fences to herd them inside restricted areas."

"These fences will be no higher than four feet, to retain an open feeling along trails through agricultural areas of the property," stressed Ms. Mead.

"And we are open to the public so that they may embrace farming here," added Mr. McConaughy. "What we're doing is healthier for birds. These types of activities attract birders."

Apair of kestrels has been discovered nesting on the property. Eastern meadowlarks and bobolinks have been seen in the fields.

The St. Michael's Farm Preserve has quickly become a source of food, pleasure and habitat for creatures of Hopewell and the surrounding area. Look for more information this fall concerning a community celebration.

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