



the land  
Steward

MAINSRING 2024

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# From the Director

As this edition of the Land Steward was in production, western North Carolina was reeling from the catastrophic impact of Hurricane Helene. While all Mainspring staff and their families were spared from injury and major damage, our friends east of the Balsams will be healing for years to come — and our team is joining many of you in cleanup efforts. The road to recovery is long, but here in the mountains, we take care of our neighbors.

In the immediate aftermath of the floods, we were inspired and amazed by neighbors rallying together for their community. In the long-term, one of the most impactful ways we can support our communities is by conserving land. The storm that came with Helene might have been a “2,000-year flood,” as some models have suggested, but extreme weather events like this are becoming more frequent due to climate change. We must prioritize nurturing resilient landscapes, not only for ourselves, but for all.

When we conserve forests that store carbon, our loved ones all across the country experience milder summer temperatures. When we restore wetlands that hold stormwaters, our friends’ and families’ homes are safer from floods. When we create corridors of conserved land, our native wildlife can more easily flee the impacts of climate change. Conservation and healthy communities are deeply connected. When we protect the land, we protect our neighbors, near and far.

By supporting Mainspring, you’re helping your community, both now and in the future. Thank you for your dedication to conservation in the Southern Blue Ridge.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jordan". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

Jordan Smith  
Executive Director

The annual publication  
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**MAINSRING**  
CONSERVATION TRUST

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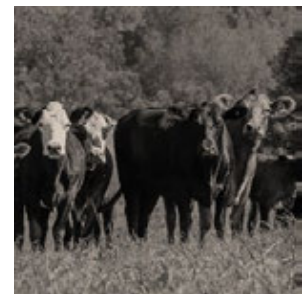
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# What We Sow

## SAVING NORTH CAROLINA'S FARMLAND

**F**ARMLAND IS THE BACKBONE OF OUR COUNTRY — providing the food we eat, supporting our economy and preserving our cultural heritage. This is especially true in the North Carolina mountains, where farmland is not just a piece of land: It's part of who we are.

The region's diverse climate, abundant natural water supply and fertile soils make it ideal for growing a variety of crops and raising livestock.

Despite its importance, farmland is disappearing at an alarming rate. Between 2001 and 2016, the U.S. lost

about 11 million acres of farmland — an area larger than the state of Maryland. North Carolina is particularly hard-hit, ranking second in the nation in farmland loss, just behind Texas. Our Southern Blue Ridge region is especially vulnerable, as any large expanse of relatively

level terrain is a prime target for development.

“Farmers don't farm on a whim. You've got to really love it, because it can be a pretty brutal business,” says Ed Wood, who tends to roughly 500 acres of corn and soybean crops between Andrews and Murphy. The farm, which is currently owned and operated by Ed and his brother Keith, has been in the Wood family's care for more than 100 years.

“But what's happening all over the country,” Ed continues, “is that — just because our generation took it over from the previous generation, who took it over from the previous generation — it doesn't mean that our kids want to farm. There are a lot of people who are my age or older out there saying, ‘I'm too old to be doing this stuff anymore.’ But their kids live in big cities with white collar jobs. They don't want it. So a lot of people start to wonder, you know, ‘What am I going to do?’”

And that's when offers from

developers begin to feel a bit more enticing.

The disappearing farmland crisis is a pressing issue, one that Mainspring has spent 27 years working to avert. Not only do we conserve farmland across our service area, particularly in far western North Carolina, but we also connect farmers with resources that help them stay up-to-date on healthy practices and restoration of sensitive lands so generational farming can continue on more sustainable ground.

Thankfully, there are programs to support the conservation of local family farms. Both the N.C. Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service offer grants to Mainspring that benefit the region's farmers, paying them for most of the development rights by purchasing a conservation easement. This enables farmers to continue living and working on their land, which



## What We Sow

might otherwise be sold for development. Mainspring serves as a key player in these projects, helping farmers access financial incentives while protecting their land.

“We’ve seen a steady increase in farmland conservation interest over the past five or so years,” says Land Conservation Manager Emmie Cornell. “Interested farmers and landowners tell us that they primarily hear about these grant opportunities from others who have successfully conserved — or are in the process of conserving — farmland with Mainspring.”

Despite receiving many offers, Ed and his brother were never tempted to sell their farm to developers. “When we first inherited this farm, we probably could have sold it off and lived easy for the rest of our lives, but we didn’t think it was the right thing to do,” he says. “It’s not just a farm. We grew up here. The land means a lot to us. It’s an emotional tie. We weren’t comfortable with the

thought of it being chopped up into houses and mini-malls. So, Keith and I made the decision to put conservation easements on it.”

In 2021, with funding from the North Carolina Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust and guidance from Mainspring, the Wood brothers successfully conserved more than 250 acres of their family farm. They’re currently working on conserving two more parcels — both around 50 acres apiece.

And the Wood brothers are far from alone. With two projects completed in Cherokee County and one in Jackson County, Mainspring has conserved nearly 200 acres of farmland this year. These are just the tip of the iceberg. The Land Conservation Team is currently working on 16 active farmland projects over four counties totaling more than 1,600 acres.

But the rise in awareness presents some challenges. “Accessing the



**“Landowners tell us that they primarily hear about these grant opportunities from others who have successfully conserved farmland with Mainspring.”**

**– Emmie Cornell**

funding usually isn't an issue for us, since the rich bottomland mountain soils and family farms typically score very well with the grant programs that Mainspring applies to on their behalf," says Cornell. "But it takes an immense amount of staff time to apply for and administer these grants. It can take between two and five years, from start to finish, to purchase those development rights. Landowner patience and adequate staffing are important, particularly when the interest in conserving farmland only continues to grow."

The grant programs work well for farmers, who are often enticed by those interested in developing their land — land that may have been in their family for more than 100 years. Cornell explains that many farmers use the payments received from the grants to pay off property and equipment loans and/or set their children up for success in managing the farms in the future. "They're interested in preserving the farming

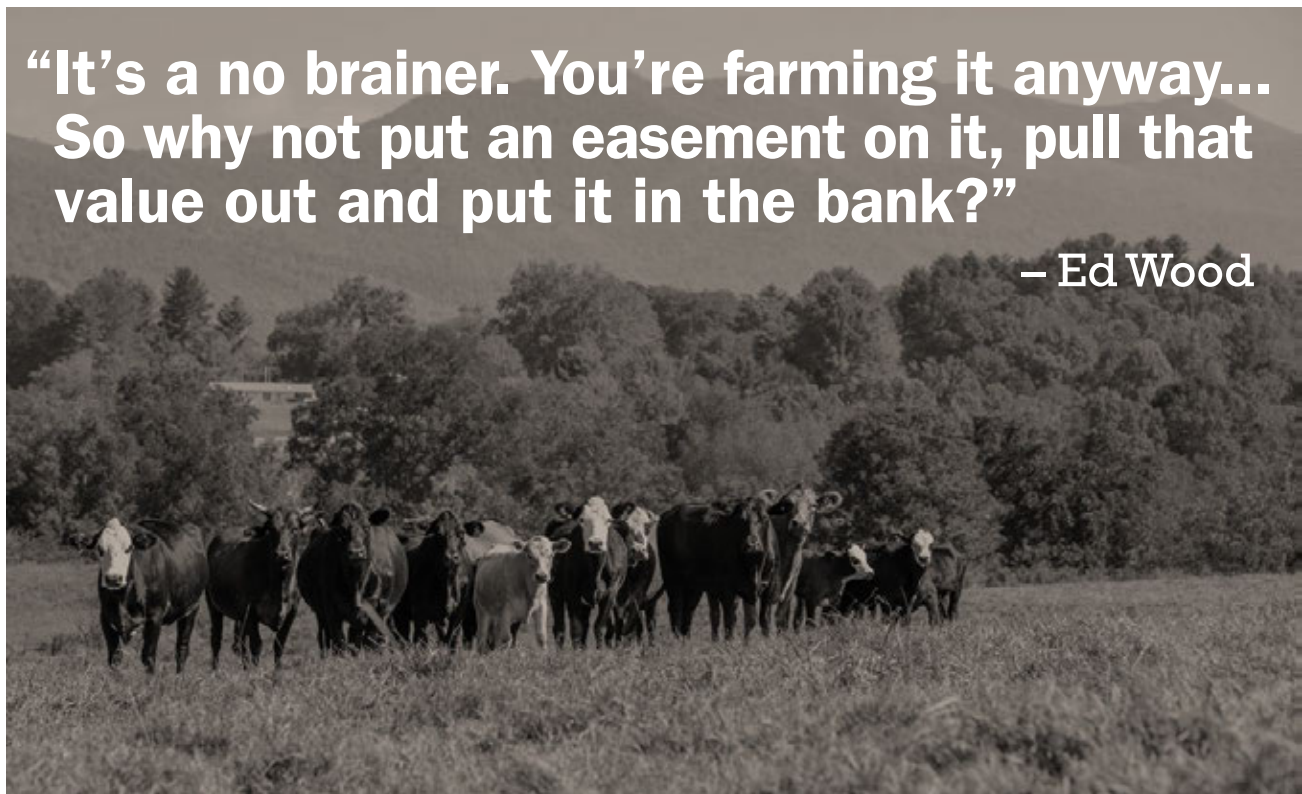
heritage and rural character of the region they live and work in and are proud to protect western North Carolina's ability to grow its own food and fiber products here at home."

Working farmland easements provide a good balance of land use. Protecting them allows families and/or farmworkers to live on-site, build the necessary infrastructure for their farm operations and protect high-quality farmland. It also contributes to maintaining and conserving our rich cultural heritage while ensuring a future with enough food for everyone.

"To us, it's a no brainer," Ed says. "You're farming it anyway, and, if you're like us, your intention is to never sell it off for development. So why not go ahead and put an easement on it, pull that value out and put it in the bank? People tell us all the time that they enjoy driving down the highway and looking out at the fields — and now we can say that it's going to remain that way. I think there's a real value to that for the whole community." 🌀

**"It's a no brainer. You're farming it anyway...  
So why not put an easement on it, pull that  
value out and put it in the bank?"**

**— Ed Wood**





SPECIAL SECTION

# GROWING





MIDST WORSENING STORMS, more frequent wildfires and longer droughts, how can we ensure that our kids inherit a healthy planet? Other than living mindfully ourselves, one of the best insurances we can provide the earth is teaching the next generation how to live in reciprocity with nature.



UP GREEN

# Raising Environmentally Responsible Children

In an era dominated by screens and structured classroom environments, getting kids outside has never been more important. By partnering with teachers and schools in our service area, Mainspring has developed educational nature programs for students of all ages that shape young minds in ways traditional classrooms simply cannot.

## ...and Stay Out!

**Outdoor education is more than just a breath of fresh air; it's a powerful tool that can significantly enhance a child's academic experience.**

Students who have participated in these outdoor exploration classes offer firsthand insights into the benefits of learning outdoors: "My favorite part was getting to spend the day outside and make maps and write in my journal," shared one student, reflecting on the experience of using tools of exploration. Another student expressed excitement over the social aspect, saying, "I loved being able to play games with new friends while hiking."

The natural world also provides a unique platform for discovery and wonder. "I had no idea how many little animals were in the water," said

a student who spent time exploring the rivers and streams at Tessentee Bottomlands Preserve, where they learned to identify different organisms. After identifying edible plants like sourwood and white pine, another remarked: "I think it is cool that there are things in nature that we can eat." These hands-on experiences are not only memorable, but they also reinforce key scientific concepts in a real-world setting.

Jason Meador, Mainspring's aquatic programs manager, has witnessed the transformative power of outdoor education. "Observation skills are developed in nature," he

*Students work together to uproot a weed after learning about invasive plant control. Hands-on activities like these provide important lessons through memorable learning experiences.*



explains. “Kids who spend more time outside are more observant and aware of the natural world and phenomena — even if they don’t know the names of species or what’s actually taking place. It’s much easier to help them take the next step when the foundation has been set.”

Beyond observation skills, being outside also fosters problem-solving abilities. “There is not a computer algorithm anywhere in nature,” Meador points out. “It’s wild, and while some things are predictable, many things are not. There are so many variables that kids learn to deal with, just like in real life.” He illustrates this with a simple example: building a fort out of sticks. This seemingly straightforward task challenges children to think creatively and adapt to their environment — crucial skills that extend beyond the classroom.

Unfortunately, modern media often portrays nature as dangerous, fostering unnecessary fears in children. Meador has encountered kids who are “outright terrified of nature,” a fear likely influenced by exaggerated portrayals of rare incidents like shark attacks or alligator encounters. However, he emphasizes that these fears are learned and can

be unlearned through positive outdoor experiences.

Outdoor education can also be a game-changer for students who struggle with traditional teaching methods. “In many cases, teachers have told me that our program helped a child ‘come out of their shell,’” Meador says. For many kids, being in nature reduces anxiety and stress, allowing them to engage and learn more effectively. “Maybe they struggle with standard teaching methods, maybe they are visual learners. I don’t know, but some kids just learn better outside.”

As one student aptly put it: “It feels awesome to spend time outdoors and meeting new friends.”

In a world where academic success is often measured by test scores and grades, it’s important to remember that education is about more than just numbers. By supporting outdoor education programs like those offered by Mainspring, we can cultivate a generation of curious, capable and well-rounded individuals. These experiences are invaluable, and your support can ensure that more children have the opportunity to learn and grow in the great outdoors. 🌀



## 20 Fun Things to Do Outside

- 1 Go fresh-water snorkeling.** Queen Branch Preserve in Franklin, East LaPorte Park in Cullowhee, Bryson City Island Park, Valley River Heritage Park in Andrews or any of the other sites along the Blue Ridge Snorkel Trail are all great. Every access site has information about the fish and other aquatic life you may see there.
- 2 Plant a native tree** — ideally along a creek or river to provide much-needed shade and food for aquatic creatures.
- 3 Build a bird box.** Boxes and nest towers for bluebirds, wood ducks or chimney swifts are especially useful in this region.
- 4 Take a nature bath.** Turn off devices while you stand or sit in the forest, using all your senses for mindful observation. What do you smell, see and hear? Stay as long as you feel comfortable.
- 5 Make a wildflower bouquet.** Do this in spring, summer and fall and see how different the blooms look from season to season. Notice the insects you see among the flowers.
- 6 Become a botanist for a day.** Study leaves and flowers, and download the iNaturalist or Seek app to identify them. Stop by your local library and ask if they have a regional field guide to continue your learning.
- 7 Listen to birds.** The Merlin app (see page 27) is useful for identifying songs and calls.
- 8 Place trail camera(s) in your backyard** to see what critters live there.
- 9 Go swimming in a river instead of a pool.** Many waterways have access points that are great for a quick splash. What other creatures are enjoying the same spot?  
(continued on p. 17)

## Stewardship Lessons

### An eco-curriculum for concerned families

Throughout the next few pages, you'll find suggestions to encourage the children in your life to respect and appreciate the environment. Not all of these suggestions may work for your family — and that's perfectly OK! Pick one or two that might fit into your busy schedule, and revisit this list in a few months to choose a couple more.

### ENCOURAGE INDEPENDENT PLAY OUTSIDE

Time alone in nature not only boosts children's confidence, problem-solving skills, creativity and focus, but it also allows them to develop their own personal connection to the

natural world. Unstructured outdoor play lays the groundwork for a lifelong love of nature.

### Dedicate a section of your yard to your kids' activities

- Invest in playground equipment.
- Set up a kid-sized picnic table or hammock.
- Build a treehouse.
- Fill an "outdoor toy box" with equipment like shovels, nets, magnifying glasses, bug jars and buckets.

### Teach outdoor safety

- Talk about the importance of sunscreen, hats and sunglasses.



### A gallery of art about nature from local kids



- Ensure your children never swim without supervision.
- Discourage eating or touching wild plants without an adult's permission.
- Do encourage safety, but don't use scare tactics; foster a sense of responsible adventure so kids aren't afraid to explore or try new things (see article on page 10).

### BE AN ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARD YOURSELF

Children learn about the world by observing their role models. Don't just talk about environmental stewardship; demonstrate it. Discuss the importance of these considerations with your family and empower them to find value in small actions.

#### Protect natural habitat

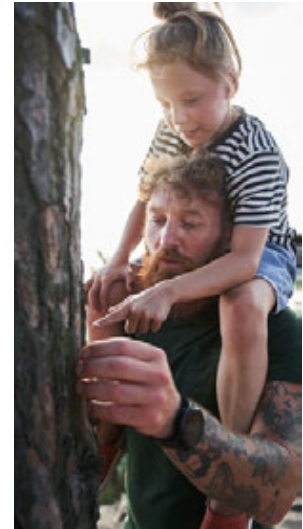
- Go beyond "Leave No Trace" principles by picking up litter during hikes.
- Walk only on designated trails.
- Return stones in visitor-made rock cairns to their rightful place.
- Keep dogs leashed in the presence of wildlife, and always pick up their waste.

### Children learn about the world by observing their role models. Don't just talk about environmental stewardship; demonstrate it.

- Support causes and organizations that are protecting wild spaces.

#### Respect wildlife

- Resist the urge to squash! Liberate insects from your home in a cup, and encourage the appreciation of bugs in their natural habitat.
- Celebrate the value of "pest" animals, and teach the importance of snakes and spiders as predators.
- Don't feed wildlife — even unintentionally. Store bird feed and pet food securely.
- Drive slowly in natural areas, especially after dark or in the rain. Help critters cross the road when it's safe to do so.
- Don't "it-ify" animals and plants. Refer to living beings in ways that give them animacy, such as "they," "she" or "he."



#### LEARN WITH EXCITEMENT

Seek out fun, age-appropriate environmental education opportunities. Our brains bookmark memories that are associated with



# GROWING UP GREEN

strong emotions, so sometimes it pays to prioritize fun over lesson objectives.

Visit educational organizations like zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens and arboretums and nature centers.



## Celebrate curiosity

- Use a field guide to identify wildflowers.
- Quiz each other on bird songs using the Merlin Bird ID app.
- Flip rocks and admire the salamanders and pill bugs underneath. Carefully replace the rock afterward.
- Keep a family nature record for exciting or seasonal observations, like seeing a new flower or the day you first noticed the leaves changing in autumn.
- Flip the script and ask your child questions: Why do you think bluebirds are blue? Why are trees so tall?

## Make your own fun

- Attend educational programs hosted by local conservation organizations (wink wink).
- Check out interesting books from the nature section of your library.

It's OK to just flip through the pictures!

- Get cozy with David Attenborough for a "Planet Earth" marathon.
- Sign up for an outdoorsy camp or afterschool program.
- Float down an undeveloped stretch of river and play Wildlife Bingo.

## CONSUME MINDFULLY

Avoiding plastic straws isn't just about the sea turtles. Reducing consumption teaches our children that our actions have consequences, and even little changes can make a difference.

### Food

- Bring reusable bags to the grocery store.
- Take home restaurant leftovers in your own Tupperware.
- Shop at farmer's markets.
- Explore versatile veggies as your meal's main course once a week.
- Use cloth napkins instead of paper.
- Carry your own reusable water bottle, utensils, travel mugs and straws.

### Household

- Turn off lights and electronics when not in use.



- Decrease heat/AC use at night or when away from home.
- Don't let water run needlessly during showers, tooth-brushing, handwashing or dishwashing.
- Reduce, reuse and recycle — in that order! Take a family trip to the dump to understand where our waste goes.
- Mix your own cleaning supplies, such as diluting vinegar for all-purpose cleaner, instead of purchasing new bottles.
- Buy in bulk to reduce packaging use.
- Thrift common items, like mugs or tablecloths, instead of buying them new.

#### Travel

- Use public transportation or carpool when possible.
- Don't idle cars.
- Walk or bike short distances.

#### GET TO KNOW YOUR WILD NEIGHBORHOOD

Breaking down the boundary between people and nature is crucial. Many environmental challenges are born from the misconception that humans are separate from the rest of

### Reducing consumption teaches our children that our actions have consequences, and even little changes can make a difference.

nature. Find ways to engage in the “more-than-human” world to impart the lesson that everything is connected.

#### Bring nature home

- Plant a veggie garden, or grow herbs in a window box.
- Keep a compost pile and count the worms you see when you turn it.
- Steward a water source on your property, such as a tiny pond or a bird bath.
- Grow a native plant pollinator garden.
- Provide a birdfeeder. Regularly clean and refill it.

#### Bring your family into nature

- Attend a conservation workday, such as an invasive plant removal event.
- Volunteer at a wildlife rehabilitation center.
- Visit a state park to learn about the beautiful places in your own backyard. 🌀



**“W**hen we’re children, we grow up not just within homes, not just within families and communities, but within ecologies, too — encircled by clouds of birds, sharing the air with insects and pollen, our paths crisscrossing those of hedgehogs and mice; our lives are shaped and tempered by these living worlds, these embracing atmospheres into which each of us is born.”

— Richard Smyth, “An Indifference of Birds”

## A Teacher’s Take

BY AMANDA CLAPP



**Mainspring’s partnership with schools in the Little Tennessee River watershed supports our shift in understanding, an appreciation of our surface water and our effects upon it.**

Over the years, I’ve taken my students to the creek. Why, with the list of things to teach, with the stunning recent decline in literacy and basic math, would I take students to water? Because learning outside meets those needs and more. To meet the needs of students, we must recognize them as whole people nestled within their community’s web. Using science practices, math and technology, we collected macroinvertebrate data in

Cullowhee Creek for nine years, and in Bumgarner branch after that. Place-based learning connects students with their natural and human communities, fostering a sense of belonging and unity. What connects us more closely than our water?

Working with Jason Meador and other Mainspring staff, my students have measured water quality around the Tuckaseegee watershed. They have done fish surveys, visual





assessments, chemical tests and developed water quality indices based on macroinvertebrates. These experiences allow them to see the connections between human actions and water quality and to develop solutions. In developing solutions, they practice reading and communication skills, and they impact their community in a significant and positive way. For example, students at Smoky Mountain High School presented Bumgamer Branch water quality data to the principal and received permission to plant Silky Dogwood trees near the baseball field to shade the stream and mitigate erosion. Those trees are now mature, providing habitat and flood control near SMHS. Another year, high school students planted native shrubs on the creek and taught elementary students about aquatic ecology. The past few years, middle school students have teamed up with an urban school in Charlotte to compare water issues, meet at the river and present solutions at UNC Charlotte.

Water is a starting point for learning and an end point for action. Mainspring's partnership with schools

in the Little Tennessee River watershed supports our shift in understanding, an appreciation of our surface water and our effects upon it. As teachers, community members and learners, we connect with our communities to improve the quality of our lives and the quality of nature around us through our understanding of clean water. These connections with our community strengthen our ties and deepen our children's understanding of the world.

*Currently a teacher at The Catamount School in Cullowhee, Amanda Clapp has taught in Jackson County public schools for 20 years. She also teaches courses at Western Carolina University and is a teacher leader in N.C. education, participating in the Kenan Fellows program and receiving the Burroughs Welcome Fund Career Award for STEM Teachers 2020–2025. Amanda has worked as a naturalist from Tennessee to Connecticut and in primate conservation fieldwork in Madagascar. She has served on the Mainspring Board of Directors since 2023.* 🌿



## 20 Fun Things to Do Outside

### 10 Pick wild berries.

Raspberries and blackberries grow wild in our region and have no dangerous lookalikes.

### 11 Take advantage of dark skies.

Grab a thermos, blanket and night-sky app, and stargaze to learn the constellations.

### 12 Observe the fireflies in your yard, in a field or in the forest. Are they flashing in a similar color and pattern, or different from one another?

Gently catch a few in cupped hands and put them in a jar for easier viewing, but let them go before the night ends.

### 13 Become an amateur mycologist.

All mushrooms are safe to touch – even the most deadly. Break one open and notice what happens: Does it change color, produce liquid or have a distinct smell? Take a fresh mushroom cap home, lay it on a piece of paper and cover it with a box for a night. In the morning, investigate the spores it has dropped.

### 14 Observe something in nature and then draw it – bonus points if you sketch underneath a big tree.

### 15 Take pictures of nature (including the small things!)

### 16 Learn to skip rocks.

Searching for the perfect flat stones is half the fun!

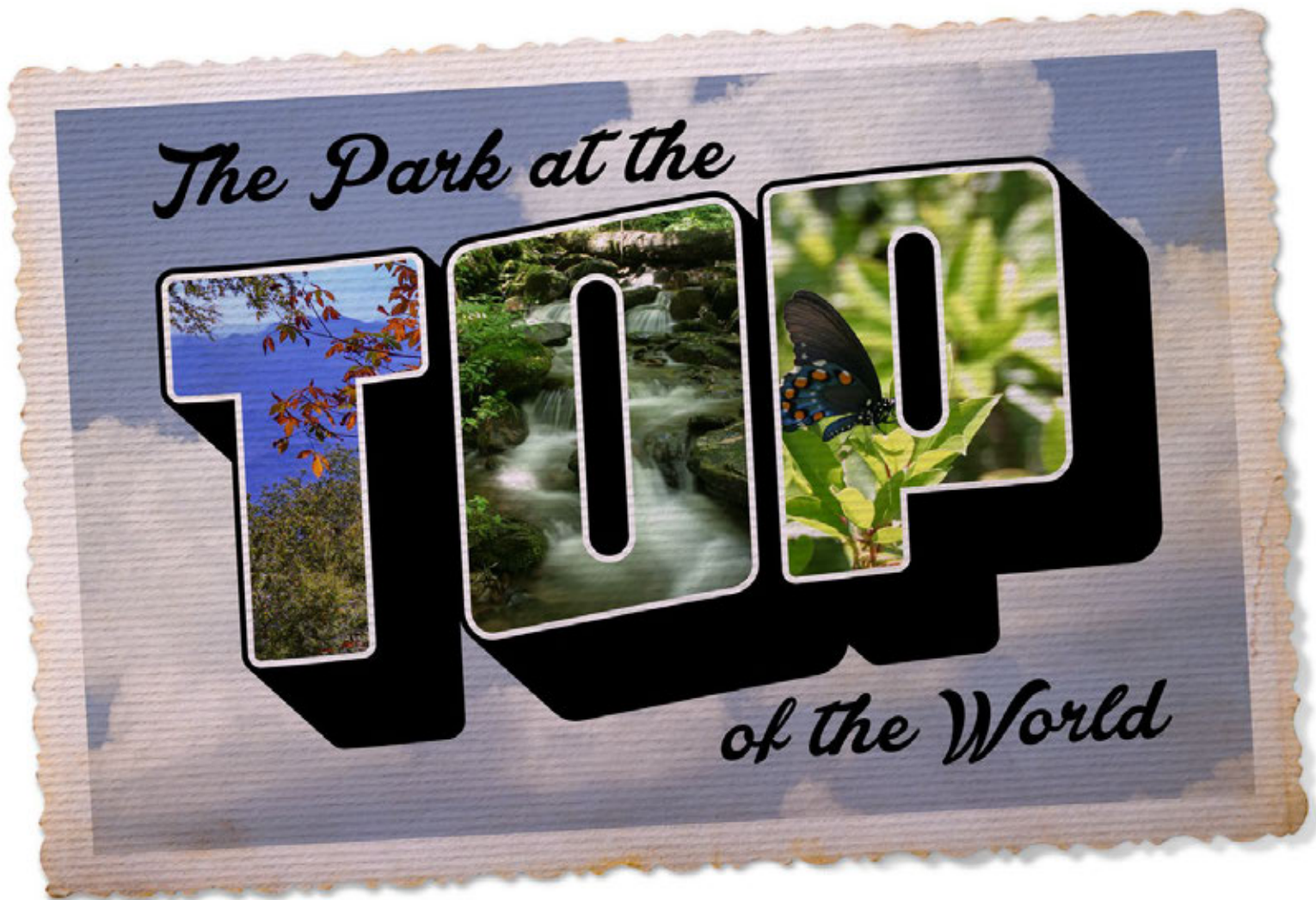
### 17 Plan a nature scavenger hunt or play biology bingo.

### 18 Hike a new trail.

There are so many places in the Southern Blue Ridge to go. Don't stick to your normal paths; see what new adventures lie ahead.

### 19 Parents: Draw a map for your kids to follow, with an X to mark an interesting sight or special prize.

### 20 Respect (but don't fear) nature.



ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR PLACES to hike in western North Carolina, Pinnacle Park in Jackson County offers serene trails, heart-pumping exercise and breathtaking views. But beyond its natural beauty, this area holds a rich history of conservation efforts spanning three decades of work by Mainspring and others.

Pinnacle Park's story began in 1912 when the town of Sylva acquired 1,088 acres to protect the town's water source. The uncontaminated water from Fisher Creek served as the town's water supply for 85 years until the Tuckaseegee Water and Sewer Authority completed its water treatment plant in 1997.

In the 1990s, Sylva faced financial difficulties and considered selling the land to developers. Led by attorney Jay Coward, the local community recognized the importance of preserving this national treasure. They created the Pinnacle Park Foundation and, working with Mainspring, then in its infancy as a land trust, secured

a \$3.5 million grant from what is now the North Carolina Land and Water Fund (NCLWF). The money was used to place a conservation easement on the park in 2007, ensuring that one of the largest remaining unprotected properties in the Plott Balsams would be kept in its natural state.

Now, the sound of Fisher Creek greets hikers at the trail entrance, which eventually splits off into trails leading to Blackrock Mountain and Pinnacle Rock. Hikers wind through diverse natural communities in the dense forest as the terrain becomes more challenging — 1,800 feet of elevation gain in 3.5 miles.

*(continued on p. 22)*

**For hikers and nature lovers, Pinnacle Park is more than just a destination: It's a living example of a rich history of conservation efforts.**





### Key to Map ▶



Original 1,088 acres



U.S. Forest Service land



Nature Conservancy land

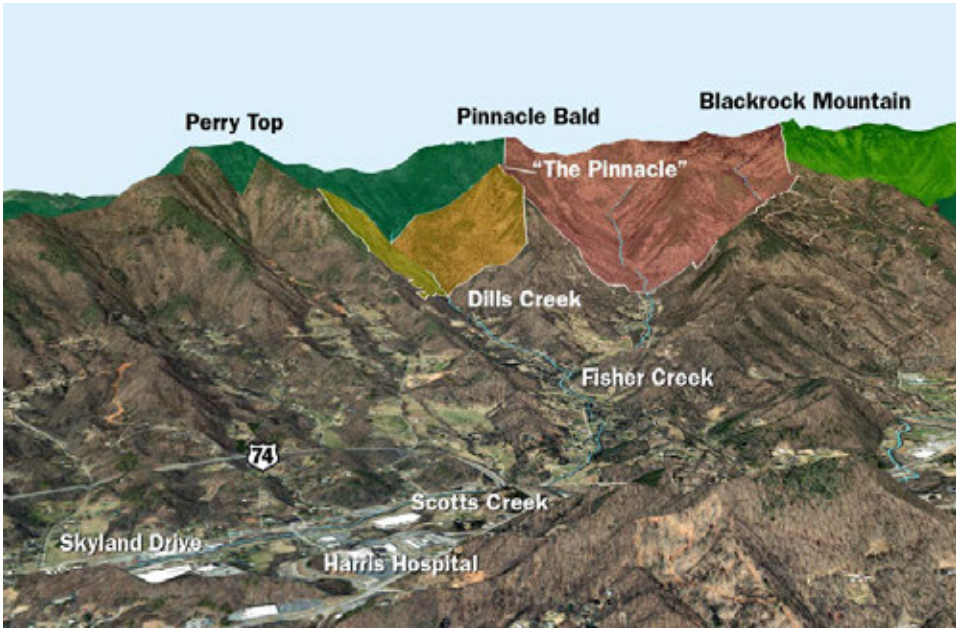
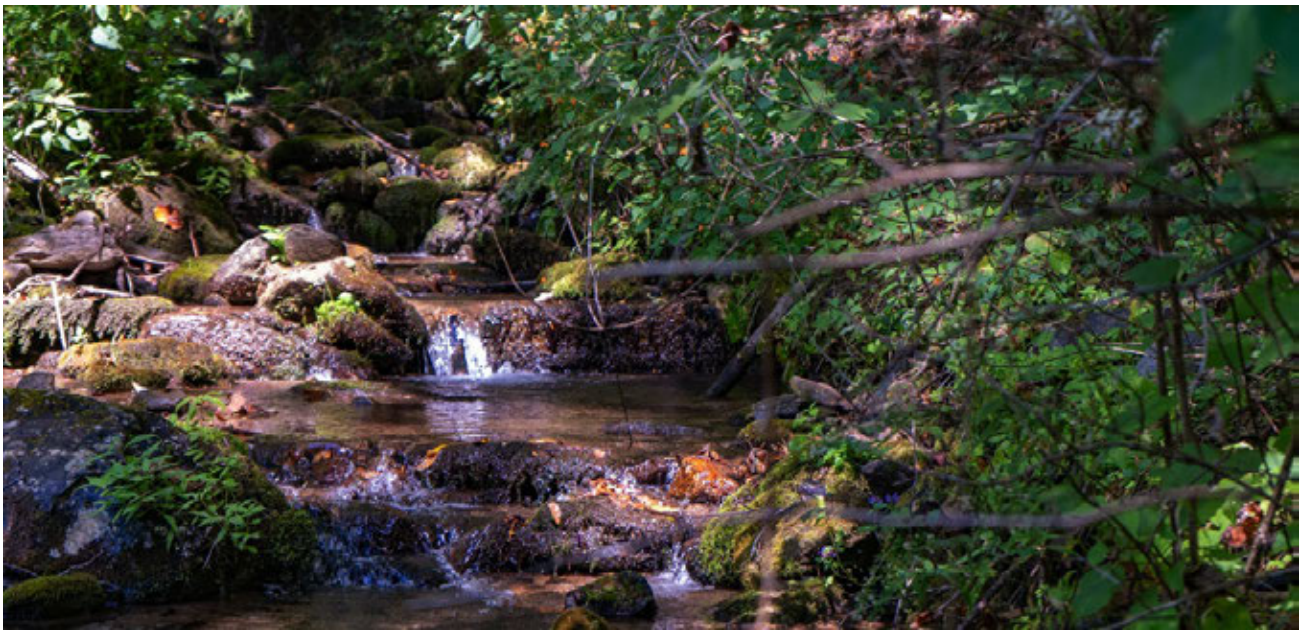


Conserved by Mainspring, 2021



Conserved by Mainspring, 2024







# Know Before You Go

Aside from the obvious — sturdy hiking boots and preparation for changes in the weather — consider these tips to best enjoy your hike at Pinnacle Park. As always, remember to respect its natural beauty and Leave No Trace of your presence.

- 1. Trail Difficulty:** The trail to the summit is challenging, with steep and rocky terrain. Be prepared for a strenuous hike, especially near the top. The trail can also be slippery after rain.
- 2. Length & Time:** The hike is about 7 miles round trip and can take four to six hours depending on your pace and fitness level.
- 3. Elevation Gain:** Expect an elevation gain of around 1,800 feet to the pinnacle, which can be tough on the legs.
- 4. Plan Ahead:** There are no restrooms or water sources at the trailhead or along the trail, so plan accordingly and bring plenty of water to stay hydrated. Also, portions of the trail are exposed, so bring sunscreen, a hat and sunglasses to protect against the sun.
- 5. Trail Markings:** The trail is well-marked, but look for blazes, especially near the summit, where it can be easy to lose the path.
- 6. Wildlife:** Bears are known to inhabit the area, so carry bear spray and know what to do in case of an encounter. Also, watch for stinging nettle, yellow jackets and other wildlife.
- 7. Parking:** There is a parking area at the trailhead, but it can fill up quickly, especially on weekends. Arrive early to secure a spot, and obey “no parking” signs.
- 8. Cell Service:** Cell phone reception is spotty or non-existent, so don't rely on your phone for navigation or communication.
- 9. Dogs:** Dogs are allowed but must be kept on a leash at all times.
- 10. Summit Views:** The view from the top is spectacular, offering panoramic vistas of the surrounding mountains. Bring a camera to capture the stunning scenery!

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*Our thanks to the volunteers and the board of the Pinnacle Park Foundation, who work to maintain trails and enhance the biodiversity of the area.*

*(continued from p. 19)*

Once at the Pinnacle summit, visitors are rewarded with panoramic views of the Blue Ridge Mountains, including the Plott Balsams and Blackrock Mountain.

Mainspring has continued to lead conservation efforts around the park. In 2019, Mainspring partnered with the NCLWF and The Conservation Fund to purchase and conserve a 441-acre addition to Pinnacle Park, expanding the park to 1,529 acres. Mainspring also continues to preserve the park's picturesque views by protecting adjacent lands — 92 acres to the west in 2021 and 152 acres to the west in 2024, both of which will one day be added to the park — as well as 471 acres, now owned by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, north of the park in 2019.

“Not many people knew that only half of the rock cropping at the summit of the trail was conserved and owned by the town,” explains Emmie Cornell, Mainspring land conservation manager. “With the Town of Sylva's help, all of the land between the headwaters of Dills Branch and Fisher Creek will forever be protected.

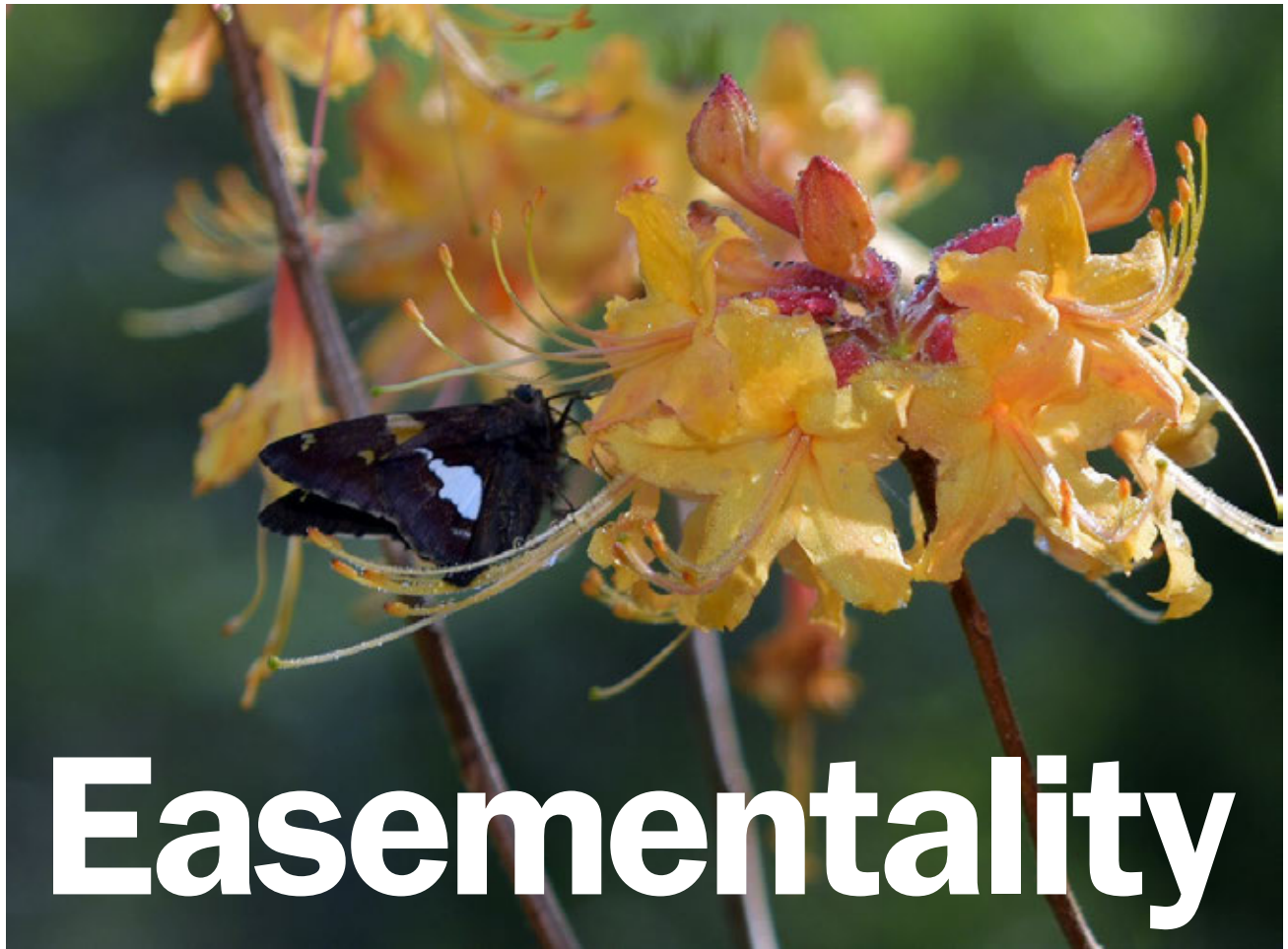
“Mainspring facilitated these projects, but all three are fantastic examples of the importance of partnerships with local governments, landowners and people like Jay, who value natural spaces for community enjoyment,” Cornell continues.

For hikers and nature lovers, Pinnacle Park is more than just a destination: It's a living example of a rich history of dedicated conservation efforts, preserving natural beauty for all to enjoy.

“Mainspring Conservation Trust puts its money where its mouth is,” says Sylva resident Dave Russell. “The organization has played a major role in the protection of the mountains, streams, flora and fauna that make up Sylva's largest playground.” 🌀



**Once at the Pinnacle summit, visitors are rewarded with panoramic views of the Blue Ridge Mountains, including the Plott Balsams and Blackrock Mountain.**



**T**ucked into the cove in Cherokee County, Johnny and Pam Strawn's property is a hidden gem, a showcase of decades of cultivation that enhances wildlife habitat and supports horticulture. This year, the Strawns donated two conservation easements totaling 150 acres to Mainspring, ensuring that this pristine land will remain protected for generations to come.

The Strawns purchased the farm in 1983 and built their home in 1985. Over the years, they meticulously combined seven separate tracts into one cohesive property. "Instead of cutting up land like a subdivider, we're putting land together," Johnny says. Today, their property spans over 180 acres, a lush expanse of native flora and fauna.

Johnny's journey into the world of plants began after he ended a job

with the USDA, when he and Pam started a wholesale nursery business. The adage "the cobbler's children have no shoes" does not apply to these retired nursery owners whose home is surrounded by a stunning landscape of native trees.

Johnny served on the Mainspring Board of Directors for 13 years and saw firsthand the value of conservation easements on private property. "As I learned more about





conservation easements, the more I came to see them as freeing the lands and forest,” he says. “They can mature while providing a much-needed energetic, balanced and healthy ecosystem.”

Walking through the property with Johnny and Pam is an experience in itself. While some people might sniff at the idea of pulling out their smartphone during a hike, Pam and Johnny do not. For the Strawns, the devices are tools for deepening their connection with nature. Equipped with their favorite app, Merlin, they identify birds by their sounds and make frequent stops to point out wildflowers and other native plants.

Pam, with her passion for medicinal plants and flowers, and Johnny, influenced by his mother’s love for greenery, have created a

sanctuary of biodiversity. “When you grow up around something, you don’t even realize what you’re absorbing,” Johnny reflects on his lifelong interest in plants, further fueled by a transformative trip to Europe with horticulturist JC Raulston.

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*Legend has it that there are several tales behind the name “Hanging Dog,” but the most widely told centers on a Cherokee hunter named Deer Killer. While out hunting, Deer Killer’s loyal dog became entangled in vines and logs over the creek, nearly drowning as he struggled to break free. The brave dog survives and goes on to help provide much-needed food for the tribe — but the beloved pet’s brush with death never faded from the hunter’s memory.*

### **How Did Hanging Dog Get Its Name?**



**“Instead of cutting up land like a subdivider, we’re putting land together.”**

– Johnny Strawn






**This conservation easement, funded through a grant from the N.C. Land and Water Fund, represents a significant commitment to preserving the region's natural beauty and ecological health.**

The Strawns' land, with its view of McDaniel Bald and the quiet Hanging Dog Community that has resisted the tides of development seen in neighboring areas, offers a glimpse into a world that remains largely untouched by time. Pam explains that conserving it was a family decision. "Our daughters and grandchildren support and love the protection of the property that this easement provides, and it's possible that this property will be in the family for generations," she says. "We have done our best to have the land protected but still have minimal acreage set aside for housing, gardens and eco-friendly business."

Hanging Dog Creek's diverse habitat on northern-facing slopes is now forever protected. This conservation easement represents a significant commitment to preserving the region's natural beauty and ecological health.

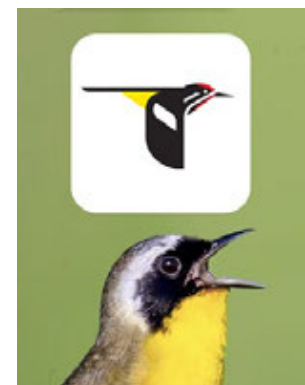
"This is a large part of our life's work, so conserving it is very special," Johnny explains. After many years reviewing conservation easements

on Mainspring's board, "I thought I was very versed in the subject," he continues. But "working on our own easement, I became more aware of how the needs of each person, each family and each tract of land make each project unique. I so appreciate Mainspring staff's patience and insight in helping us fulfill our family's wishes."

The Strawns' generous donation ensures their legacy of conservation preserves this beautiful piece of Cherokee County. 

*Developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and available for both Apple and Android, the **Merlin Bird ID** app is a powerful free tool that helps identify birds by sight and sound. Users can upload a photo, describe a bird or record its song, and Merlin will provide accurate identification within seconds. With a vast database of bird species from around the world, personalized bird lists and even migration maps, Merlin is a great way to explore and understand the avian world — and is frequently used by many avid birdwatchers on our staff.*

### **For Seasoned Birders and Newbies Alike**



# WHERE PAST IS PROLOGUE

Mainspring preps history for the future



This summer, the sounds of hammers and pry bars could be heard coming from one of the most iconic homes in the Town of Franklin, a more than 200-year-old log cabin on Main Street. Throughout the last two centuries, the Siler-Jones House has undergone many changes that, while modernizing the humble cabin for its many generations of residents, have also hidden the invaluable history at its core.

“Every generation that has lived in that house changed it in some way to meet their needs, to the best of their ability in the times and circumstances,” says Fred Jones, a member of the family that owned the home for more than a century.

In May, the Jones family gifted the historic property to Mainspring, opening the door to a future of restoration, conservation, education and a better understanding of Cherokee and early Appalachian heritage. Since then, crews have been working to strip away the modern additions for an important peek into the past.

Back in 1820, Jesse Siler, Franklin's first white settler, purchased the property from the State of North Carolina. For more than 60 years, the “house at the foot of the hill,” as it was affectionally called, remained in the Siler family. In 1888, however, Jesse's son, Julius, wanted to move to the outskirts of Franklin, but his cousin Lily and her husband, George Jones, wanted to move closer to town. The families swapped properties, and the home remained with the Jones family for the next 136 years. In 1982, it was officially recognized on the National Historic Register for its significance.

The present-day conservation

**TOP LEFT: Knob-and-tube, the standard method of early electrical wiring, was likely installed during George Jones's renovations around 1900. RIGHT: An aerial view of the home highlights the now-paved road that 200 Cherokee followed during the forced removal of 1838.**



## WHERE PAST IS PROLOGUE

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Harriet Patton and Jesse Siler purchased the property in 1820. What was once a simple log cabin now features a grand entry with intricate woodwork. Siler began renovating the cabin around 1825, installing highly individualistic, elaborate mantles on both floors. In addition to the cabin, two outbuildings will be restored as part of the project.**

project's first priority was standard for any restoration: Determine any structural issues and address immediate safety concerns. But the most exciting step by far was to carefully remove the boards from the later, 19th century expansions to view the original log cabin underneath.

Because the house has remained virtually the same for the last 30 years, watching the demolition of more recent sections was bittersweet for the former owners. "We were amazed at how quickly things began to happen when we first saw the demolition work, and it was somewhat painful," Fred admits. "The

boxwood hedge in the front yard had been there for as long as anyone can remember, and even though a blight had killed most of them, such a front and center change was unexpectedly hard to see." Fred's 90-year-old father, Dick, was raised in the home and lived there with his wife, Melissa, as newlyweds. "There has been more demolition than I expected," he says. "But it is good."

The "good" he's referring to has been evident while uncovering the house's long-forgotten bones. After tearing away some of the interior walls, crews found ancient hand-hewn hardwood beams and thick, full-



sized logs, among other discoveries. Jim Byrd, the project's lead contractor and a self-proclaimed historical buff, says he's never had more fun on a site. "After experiencing the excitement and enthusiasm that Mainspring shared with me as we began to uncover the greatness of this house, I told them that I might have worked on this project for nothing," he jokes.

Thick, 30-foot-long logs run the entire length of the 1.5-story cabin, and some mud chinking remains between the walls. Byrd has been amazed and impressed by the 200-year-old carpentry.

"I could not replicate the quality of some of the half-dovetail axe-cut logs," he says. "It's like an old book that's weathered, damaged and written in another language. As we open and study it, we are gradually transported back in time, imagining children, family reunions, craftsmen, wars, slaves, the Trail of Tears and Cherokee culture. I can actually run my fingers through the grooves of the chinking installed by workers over 200 years ago. In that, history comes alive!"

Molly Phillips, Mainspring's project leader, says the land trust plans to utilize dendrochronology, a way to

***A late 1800s photo offers a glimpse of early Franklin and the "house at the foot of the hill."***



## WHERE PAST IS PROLOGUE

***After tearing away the interior walls, crews revealed the original log cabin's hand-hewn hardwood beams. The precise cuts that created the dove-tail corners of the log cabin demonstrate the talent of early 19th-century woodworkers. Flooring and other materials removed to make necessary repairs have been saved for reuse in the restoration.***

study tree rings, to date when the logs from the cabin were harvested. "Some records mention an 'improved Indian log cabin' was present when Jesse Siler bought the property, but we're not quite sure how much of the cabin was still standing and who lived there," she explains. "By sending samples from the logs to test the annual growth rings, we'll get a closer estimate of when it was built."

Jennifer Cathey, Restoration Specialist with the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), said that uncovering materials and learning about the detailing of the original log house can

also help determine its possible Cherokee origins. "Piecing that information together with other historical documentation will help us envision what form the house took and what it looked like at the time of Jesse Siler's acquisition," she says. "While we know that the Cherokee in the vicinity of today's Macon County occupied log dwellings prior to the Trail of Tears, we don't have extant log buildings authenticated as surviving from that time."

SHPO has emphasized the importance of learning as much as possible about the evolution of the  
*(continued on p. 34)*





# SEEDS FOR THE FUTURE

THE WOMEN'S HISTORY TRAIL, a project of the Folk Heritage Association of Macon County, was established in 2016 to celebrate the influential women of the Southern Blue Ridge. That year, WHT leaders placed bronze plaques at 14 sites across downtown Franklin honoring the remarkable women who shaped the area's history.

As interest in these stories grew, the WHT focused on three pioneering women from the early settlement years whose lives were intricately connected: Cherokee woman Rebecca Morris, Black enslaved woman Salley and white settler Timoxena Siler Sloan. Salley was enslaved by Rebecca's husband, Gideon, and sold to Timoxena's

father, Jesse Siler, in 1821. She helped raise Timoxena, at the "house at the foot of the hill," which was gifted to Mainspring more than 200 years later in May 2024.

These women's intertwined stories are now commemorated in a thoughtfully designed bronze sculpture, "Sowing Seeds for the Future," symbolizing their shared history and lasting impact on the community. The sculpture was created by Academy Award-winning artist Wesley Wofford and unveiled by the WHT last spring. Located near Mainspring's Franklin office at the Little Tennessee River gateway into downtown, the sculpture depicts Timoxena as both a young, pregnant woman, stepping into the future, and as a toddler in Salley's arms. Rebecca is shown pouring corn seed into young Timoxena's hand, representing the friendship and collaboration between Cherokee women and early Appalachian settlers, despite the challenging times.

*For more information about the Folk Heritage Association, visit [folkheritageassociation.org](http://folkheritageassociation.org).*



**“After experiencing the excitement and enthusiasm that Mainspring shared with me as we began to uncover the greatness of this house, I told them that I might have worked on this project for nothing”**

– Jim Byrd

cabin while it remains in this phase of construction. “This project has the potential to advance our knowledge of Cherokee history and the settlement of western North Carolina in general,” says Cathey.

Phillips adds: “We’ve discovered signatures on cloths behind the wallpaper that tell us who was alive while that particular renovation occurred, and we can see where original doors may have been.” Mainspring also plans to partner with WCU archeology professors to further study the historic homestead. “We’re lucky to have many experts living right here in our region with whom we’ve worked closely on other cultural projects,” she continues. “Tapping into their knowledge will be so valuable to this story.”

Cherokee historians have already underscored the home's cultural significance. In 2023, a Route Refinement on the Trail of Tears determined that a previously unrecognized section of the path followed the road directly in front of the Siler-Jones House. Since the home was standing and occupied at the time of Removal, that designation makes it a known Witness House on the (refined) National Historic Trail in North Carolina.

While future use of the restored home has yet to be determined, Mainspring has spent time with the Jones family discussing their intent. “The dream that the home will be a place where people across the ages can connect and discover relationships has already been realized,” Fred says. At the 173rd consecutive annual Siler Family Meeting, held in August, “Mainspring gave a short talk about the project and then opened the house to family members for a look around. The energy and enthusiasm were just incredible. Watching 91-year-old Caroline Henry walk down

the main staircase with a huge smile on her face — telling all those around about her days as a young woman visiting the home to see my grandparents, while witnessing Cory McCall’s three young children run through the house, exploring nooks, crannies and passageways that kids have explored for almost 200 years — was so gratifying.”

The Jones family has emphasized to Mainspring how this place has been a central site for people to gather, work together and solve problems to enhance the community. And, Phillips says, “we hope to honor that legacy of unity and action that has defined the Siler-Jones House for generations. As Fred has told me: ‘It has always been a home, but may it also serve as a bridge.’”

Byrd, the project contractor, agrees, telling every visitor that the Siler-Jones House is a one-of-a-kind cabin in this region. “No structure in Macon County illustrates the culture that was, and the culture that has developed, over the past 200 plus years more than this house,” he enthusiastically explains. “It stood before Franklin was a town, and now, with the Jones family donation and the investments that Mainspring will make, it will continue to have a positive impact here.”

Fred admits that waiting for the final product is hard. “Our family is anxious for the ‘prettier’ part of the visible restoration to begin, but we know we must be patient,” he says. “Mainspring is the perfect partner for this special place, as its whole purpose is to preserve our natural and cultural resources and to make our region a place with deep roots and far-reaching branches. We are so pleased to partner with them and cannot wait to see what the future will bring. We are very confident that the ‘house at the foot of the hill’ is in good hands.” 🌀

# The Last Word

MOLLY PHILLIPS  
*Communications Director*

I'm writing this after another family college visit. With my daughter set to graduate high school in 2025, we're deep in the process of finding a place that fits her next chapter. Like most 17-year-olds, Kate is feeling a mix of excitement, anxiety and that irresistible urge to leap into the unknown.

Like many teenagers, she is eager to escape the small-town life she's known in western North Carolina. After a childhood spent hiking, paddling and exploring nature, she's ready for a concrete jungle experience.

While driving home, I found myself reflecting on the journey we've taken, especially in fostering her love for the environment. I started working at the land trust when Kate was in first grade. An assignment she did then is still hanging in my office, her six-year-old handwriting explaining what she thinks her mommy does. It's my daily reminder of why conservation matters.

Over the years, Kate has grown into someone who not only appreciates nature but understands the importance of preserving it. She's spent countless hours in the woods, learning about ecosystems, participating in river cleanups and helping plant trees with Mainspring.

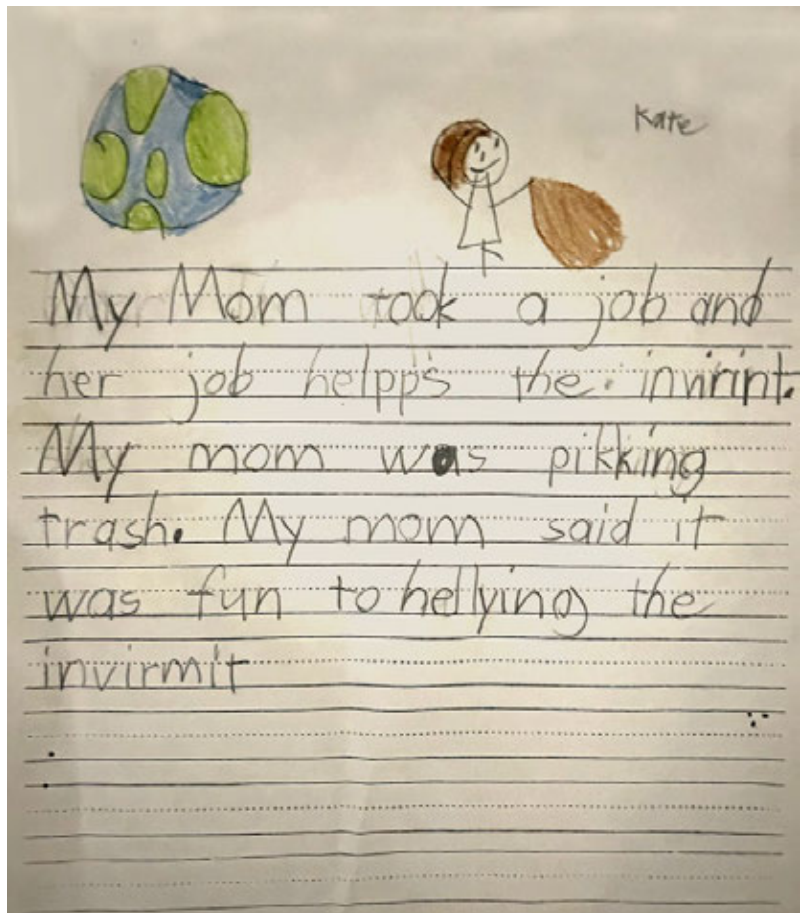
Now, as Kate prepares to leave for college, the idea of her trading mountain views for skyscrapers is bittersweet. My hope is that, even in the city, she'll remember the value of spending time outdoors. I hope she'll seek out green spaces, stay connected to the earth and carry with

her the importance of environmental stewardship that has been so central to her upbringing.

As the days fly by, I feel a mix of pride and nostalgia. I'm proud of who Kate is becoming and excited for her future, but I also cherish the days when we searched for big leaves in the woods or played in the mud beside the creek. No matter where she goes on life's journey, the roots we've planted in western North Carolina will always be with her. 🌀



**The idea of her trading mountain views for skyscrapers is bittersweet. My hope is that, even in the city, she'll remember the value of spending time outdoors.**





# MAINSRING

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Stewards of the Southern Blue Ridge

P. O. Box 1148, Franklin, NC 28744

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