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Wilkes Journal-Patriot

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Land protection celebrated

by **Jule Hubbard**

(Photo caption) Jule Hubbard/staff photo-Whippoorwill Academy and the Yadkin River are included in a conservation easement on Edith Marie Ferguson Carter's 250-acre farm in Ferguson. The land has been in her family since the late 1700s.

An event focused on protecting rural land from development through permanent conservation easements is from 3-5 p.m. Saturday at Whippoorwill Academy on N.C. 268 West in Ferguson.

The Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust (BRRLT) organized the "Celebration of Protected Lands in Wilkes County" to increase public awareness of the nonprofit's efforts in Wilkes and other counties in northwestern North Carolina.

BRRLT Executive Director Walter Clark said this includes securing permanent conservation easements, mostly donated, on 3,455 acres in Wilkes.

Clark said the West Jefferson-based land trust is in discussions with landowners involving conservation easements on another 1,200 acres in Wilkes.

He said the Stone Mountain area in northern Wilkes and the Brushy Mountains in southern Wilkes are among "focus areas" identified by "Blue Ridge Forever," a statewide consortium of 13 conservation organizations that includes the BRRLT. These "focus areas" have significant biological and scenic importance and are considered at high risk for development.

The BRRLT has a particular emphasis on preserving agricultural activities, including proper management of timberland, he noted. Its mission statement is, "Preserving rural communities and culture in northwestern North Carolina through the protection of the land resource upon which they depend."

A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency that permanently limits use of the land to protect its conservation values. It allows landowners to continue to own and use their land, and they can also sell it or pass on to heirs. It also provides tax savings and remains in effect even when ownership changes.



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Clark said Saturday's event, which includes live music and refreshments, is an opportunity for the public to learn more about land conservation.

Edith Marie Ferguson Carter, owner of Whippoorwill Academy, will be recognized at Saturday's informal gathering for donating a conservation easement to the BRRLT on the 250-acre farm that includes Whippoorwill and her home. Mrs. Carter also is co-hosting the event.

Through the Fergusons, the 250 acres have been in Mrs. Carter's family since the late 1700s. Her father, the late Thomas W. Ferguson, and her husband, the late G. Hill Carter, both farmed the land and were leaders in agricultural and other community organizations.

"I did this to preserve the family farm from development," said Mrs. Carter about the conservation easement she donated. "I have been trying to get all of my neighbors interested because I'd like to see the land here (in the Ferguson area) remain in agriculture."

She added, "I have been so discouraged about so much farmland sold and put into development" in North Carolina."

North Carolina leads all other states in farmland loss. This prompted the N.C. General Assembly to create the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, which provides money for buying conservation easements and to assist public and private efforts that promote profitable and sustainable family farms.

Mrs. Carter's 250-acre farm adjoins the south side of the Yadkin River from where N.C. 268 West crosses the Yadkin River on the west to where N.C. 268 West crosses Beaver Creek near the mouth of that creek. It's on both sides of N.C. 268 West, from extensive bottomland along the Yadkin on the north to the top of 1,500-foot Brown Mountain on the south.

With extensive forests, pasture and cropland, the property is still used for cattle and timber production.

Mrs. Carter said her daughters, Sharon Carter Underwood and Margaret Carter Martine, strongly support her decision to place a conservation easement on the property.

She said Mrs. Underwood and Mrs. Martine are interested in doing the same with extensive adjoining tracts they own where they live along nearby Tom Dula Road. This property, straddling the Wilkes-Caldwell county line, has also been in their family for generations.

With Mrs. Carter's daughters and their families in mind, her conservation easement identifies two 10-acre parcels on the farm that could be developed as residences.

The BRRLT also has conservation easements on 1,145 acres on Vannoy Road in Union Township, donated by owner Jim Jenkins of Wilkesboro; 711 acres that are part of the YMCA of Charlotte's Camp Harrison at Herring Ridge in Boomer (easement on 397 purchased and on 314 acres donated) and 616 acres in the Reynolds Blue Ridge (formerly Laurelmor) residential resort in Elk Township.

The BRRLT's other conservation easements in Wilkes include the 230-acre Sawyer property in Traphill, 203-acre Townes property in Boomer, 183-acre Mauldin property in Lomax, 160-acre Crews property in Purlear, 152-acre Church property in Purlear, 24-acre Steadman/Kocar property in Boomer and 23-acre Hubbard property in Moravian Falls.

More details on the Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust are available at www.brllt.org or by calling the land trust office in West Jefferson at 846-2758.

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