

“THE STORIES TREES HAVE TO TELL”

Black Land Stewardship

IN THE NORTHEAST



Cornell University

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UMassAmherst

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“I feel really blessed to have land. You know it’s an opportunity that a lot of people don’t have.”

— Earl Ransom

“I came and all the farmers around me sort of looked at me with suspicion. It can make it tough because there’s no family culture to help, no neighbor culture that can show you things. I didn’t know anything about farming, but I didn’t expect to be a farmer, so I was able to skirt that land mine of trying to learn to do something, but having no local resources that would help me.

— Paris Qualles

My grandmother said, “They’re not making any more land.” I didn’t quite understand it when she first said it but it makes sense. Why sell it if you don’t need to?

— Sydney Antonio

I wake up every day and I go outside. And I never get tired of what I see. It just makes my heart happy to be here and I’m a person who has a very intense, strong sense of place. And this [land] feeds that sense of place.

— Tracey Turner“

I never had the depth of what legacy meant until now.”

— Charles Harrison

REVIEWERS:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

This publication includes the personal stories of forestland ownership and stewardship from the perspective of Black landowners in the northeastern United States. Through sharing their stories, our goal is for other landowners and natural resource professionals to learn from the successes, barriers, and opportunities faced on their journey stewarding the land. We hope that these stories raise awareness and provide key insights to the forest conservation community.

Introduction..... 2

 **Sydney and Evon Antonio, Haines Falls, NY** 4

“Selfishness Allows for Altruism”

The Antonios steward a rich family legacy and the land for both personal and community benefit.

 **Earl Ransom, Strafford, VT** 8

“Something that’s Mine To Fall Back On”

The Ransoms demonstrate inheriting and passing on a familial and economic tie to their land.

 **Paul and Tracey Turner, Lyndeborough, NH** 12

“Where I’m Supposed to Be”

The Turners have discovered the joy of uncrowded spaces and living in a small town through a variety of activities on the land.

 **Paris Qualles, North Brookfield, MA** 16

“Respect the Land”

Paris’ efforts to become familiar with his property and engage with its stewardship have brought both triumph and challenge.

 **Charles Harrison, Marlborough, NY & Great Barrington, MA** 20

“Stories Trees Have to Tell”

Charles Harrison demonstrates how his grandmother’s love inspired his land ownership.

Common Themes and Recommendations..... 24

Conclusions..... 27

Directory of Resources for Landowners 28

Introduction

Since colonial times, land ownership in the United States has represented a form of freedom, power, and financial security; a tradition that led to the taking of land from Native Americans, which continues today.

A valuable and flexible asset, land provides options for subsistence, enjoyment, and income. The value of the land can also leverage more assets. When transferred from one generation to another, land accumulates wealth and provides a head start for the next generation. It can help landowners access economic and social opportunities that non-landowners may not have. Beyond these financial benefits, land provides a home and a place where families find safety and security. Land ownership can also offer an opportunity to live in a rural setting and be part of a small community, all while fostering a connection to, and an appreciation for, the natural environment.

Land ownership has been instrumental to social progress for Black landowners in particular. Property ownership is closely linked to civic engagement and independence. In the rural South, Black landowners were among the first to join and support the Civil Rights Movement by providing rest and shelter for those marching from Selma to Montgomery. In the Black Belt of the rural South, where most African-American farms are located, land is still key to cultural and political power as well. We suspect parallels are true for Black-owned and stewarded land in the Northeast.

For all of the positive ways land can impact a person’s life, it’s important to recognize that land ownership in the United States brings with it a mixed legacy for Black landowners. The atrocities of slavery were centered on a land-based economy. After the Civil War, some freed slaves were told that they would be given “forty acres and a mule.” However, Reconstruction-era policies focused on wage labor and not land ownership for Black people. Almost all land allocated to freed slaves during the war was restored to its pre-war white owners. As a result, African Americans acquired land primarily

through private transactions and were the subject of threats and beatings. This forced them to leave their home and lands. Researchers have also determined that there were many lynchings of Black men and women between 1890 and 1920 as a result of white people wanting to take over their land.

Throughout most of the 20th century, a lack of economic opportunities and continued institutional racism, such as the Jim Crow laws—which enforced racial segregation, led millions of Blacks from the south to move to other parts of the country in search of a better quality of life. Historians refer to this as the Great Migration. In the Northeast, African Americans moved disproportionately to New York and Pennsylvania, with many settling in urban centers because of employment opportunities and connections to family and friends. Relatively few moved to the more rural areas of New England. This settlement pattern still influences the racial demographic of forestland ownership today.

Ongoing research of Black land ownership in the southern region of the U.S. has demonstrated a continued decline due to, among other things, the division of land through heirs’ properties. According to the 1920 Census of Agriculture, almost one million Black farmers worked on 41.4 million acres of land. In 2017, it was estimated that the number had dwindled to about 49,000 Black farmers owning 4.7 million acres, representing nearly a ninety percent loss. There are a number of reasons for this, including discriminatory programs and policies. The class-action discrimination lawsuit of *Pigford v. Glickman* between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Black farmers alleged racial discrimination against USDA’s allocation of farm loans and assistance. It was settled in 1999 and provided money for Black farmers because of institutional bias. Additionally, *Knight v. Alabama* (1995)



To gain a better understanding of Black landowners it is first important to listen to their own words.

determined that Alabama’s separate Extension programs were segregated and unconstitutional since separate but equal is inherently unequal. The decision resulted in the integration of Alabama’s Extension programs. These examples help demonstrate the tremendous challenges faced by Black people interested in acquiring, stewarding, and passing land on to their heirs.

A greater understanding of Black landowners in the Northeast is needed to ensure they have the same opportunities as white landowners. Despite the many personal and financial benefits that land ownership provides, it is estimated that Black landowners only own approximately 1% of the private forestland in the Northeast. Surveys suggest that minority forest owners have smaller forest holdings and are less likely to manage their forests and participate in assistance programs¹.

To gain a better understanding of Black landowners, it is first important to listen to their stories in their own words. Their experiences provide the foundation for a path forward. The following collection of Black land ownership stories shares personal challenges

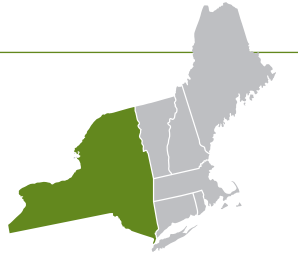
and successes of Black forest owners in owning and stewarding their land. Their testimonials identify shared experiences of land ownership and stewardship. These insights provide an opportunity for the forest conservation community to partner with Black forest owners in addressing the common challenges faced, as described in the latter sections of this publication. We also hope this publication will foster a better understanding of the unique experiences and encourage conversations among the forest conservation community about Black land ownership. This publication outlines policy recommendations to start addressing common challenges. However, to understand how we, as a forest conservation community should move forward, we must first hear their stories and continue to elevate the voices of Black forest owners as the basis for any meaningful work toward change.

Footnote
1. Butler, Sarah M., John Schelhas, and Brett J. Butler. 2020. Minority Family Forest Owners in the United States. *Journal of Forestry*, 2020, 70–85. doi:10.1093/jofore/fvzo60



LANDOWNER STORY

Sydney and Evon Antonio



PROPERTY PROFILE

Size: 450 acres

Location: Haines Falls, NY (Greene County)

Acquired: Property acquired by Bernadine Wesley in 1959. In 1998 property placed into LPA/LLC. Original members: Bernadine Wesley; Sydney Antonio, and Sydney’s brother James S. Wesley III. Sydney was designated as the active manager on site. Current LPA/LLC members are: Sydney Antonio (95%) and her daughter Ashley Mathews (5%).

Stewardship Focus: Sustainable forestry, wildlife, aesthetics, water quality

Resources Used: New York State Dept. of Environmental Conservation, Soil and Water Conservation District, Consulting Foresters, Cooperative Extension, Northern Woodlands, American Tree Farm System, New York Forest Owners Association

“Selfishness Allows for Altruism”

The summer camp. It didn’t happen. My mother dropped me off on Sunday at the camp in Sullivan County. I took an assessment and on Monday I wrote a letter and said what I didn’t like.

The summer camp. It didn’t happen. My mother dropped me off on Sunday at the camp in Sullivan County. I took an assessment and on Monday I wrote a letter and said what I didn’t like. There was a tent that I had to share with 10 other people. It wasn’t particularly pleasant. They wanted you to swim at 10 o’clock in the morning instead of swimming at two o’clock in the afternoon when it was warmer. I just wasn’t good with structure. I wanted to swim when I wanted to swim and read when I wanted to read. Nobody interrupted reading in our family. Reading was always a good thing. I gave her until Friday to come and collect me from the summer camp. Nobody showed on Friday. So, on Saturday I hitchhiked back to Brooklyn. I was prepared to get the licking of my life. There was a three-state APB out for me! I didn’t get a licking though. I just got grounded. And here we are.

A total of 750 acres of land in Green County was purchased by Sydney Antonio’s mother and maternal grandmother as a respite from city life--450 acres of which were owned by Sydney’s mother. Growing up in Brooklyn, Sydney’s mother wanted her to experience life outside of New York City in the summers. As a child, Sydney and her cousins spent summers on the property with her grandmother where they had the freedom to explore and play in their own summer camp.

My mom, she built a house [on the land]. My grandmother would spend the summers here at the property and she would babysit me and the other first cousins—there are a lot of them, 23 in the generation. Grandma would babysit. They’d shuttle us in and out all summer long.

Now, Sydney and her husband Evon live on the land and are both New York Master Forest Owner



volunteers and Certified Tree Farmers. They are careful stewards of their woods, which are comprised of hard maple, red oak, white ash, yellow birch, black cherry, and conifer trees such as hemlock. They enjoy their woodland for the solitary and quiet environment, the tremendous views, and wildlife.

Standing in the quiet, listening to different birds and seeing the wildlife that I didn't know existed, I came across a lynx. It's just a nice thing to have. I like knowing that the animals are outside. I call them my outside pets. Over the weekend we saw a baby cub. We hadn't seen any cubs in a long time, so it was nice to see the cub, and the turkeys, and the deer. We don't have to do anything to, for, or about them other than keep the land.

When Sydney was younger, she saw how her mother sustainably managed the woodlot. She remembered how she used to laugh at her mother when she would cut a few trees whenever she wanted to take a vacation or buy a new car. Now Sydney sees how fiscally prudent her mother was in her management of their woods and has continued in the same manner. Over the last 10-15 years, Sydney and Evon have conducted three Timber Stand improvements and each time they had enough money left over to take a trip or buy a car. They improve the value of the trees that remain while also providing periodic cash flow.

We do a selective cut. We are not doing things like clearcutting or raping the asset. We try to improve the stock so that we can expand the value of the

remaining trees. We also enhance the carbon sequestration of those that remain, inducing new growth so that we can have a sustainable forest. Each time we open it up we increase the possibility for new growth. This becomes the future stock and 25 years from now when I'm not around, they will be marketable trees.

Sydney and Evon's stewardship decisions for their woodland are guided by a sound forest management plan developed by a skilled consulting forester.

There is enormous value in selling trees and managing the forest well. Quite often people look at trees and say, "Okay, seven trees is the value," but the value goes much beyond that. It is clean water, clean air, and cooling the climate. All of those things are value added by a forest to enhance wildlife habitat and the foraging that occurs. Those value-added aspects and the environmental slant, is of keen interest and the reason why we have a structured plan.

Evon's uncle taught him to see land as a working asset. Financial planners define a working asset as any item that is relatively liquid, meaning it can easily be converted into cash and be ready for use in a short period of time. Evon knows that land has a way of increasing in value. The cash flow comes from the periodic harvests and supports itself. In the meantime, trees grow at the current rate of approximately 8% a year, which means the landowner can always get an 8% return on the investment.

My uncle's philosophy of encumbering the asset while still retaining it creates the opportunity to invest that money and grow wealth. It's a living or working asset if one is prudent about it. Leverage one asset to purchase something else that will generate income and also grow in value. An asset can also generate cash flow. It's possible to have both. That's how you build wealth as opposed to having money—there's a difference.

When asked about the experience of being a Black landowner in the Northeast, Sydney shared that people are typically surprised. She and Evon do not often encounter other minority landowners.

Quite frequently you sign up to go to a seminar, and when you show up everybody's jaw drops because you're Black and they never expected it. All of my life. I just chuckle to myself and pretend I didn't notice. Otherwise, being Black hasn't made a difference. The only other [Black landowner] that I know is a relative, Hernon, in Sullivan County. He has about 120 acres or thereabouts and likes to farm.

The Antonios have been cultivating a love of the land with their daughter and granddaughter, very much like what was fostered in the maternal lineage of Sydney's family. Sydney describes their granddaughter as a city girl who is coincidentally living in a brownstone just one block away from where Sydney grew up in Brooklyn. They have taken steps to ensure the next generation can take ownership of the land. Sydney laments what happened to her grandmother's land when she passed away.

My grandmother said, "They're not making any more land." I didn't quite understand it when she first said it but it makes sense. Why sell it if you don't need to? When my grandmother died they settled the estate in 1998 when timber prices, particularly prime timber, had great value. There was a huge mountain full of black cherry. I inherited my mother's land which she had purchased, but my grandmother's executor sold her 275 acres to a stranger for dirt. The people who bought it paid for it at least two or three times over the following year by timbering it. The new owner sold it to Stickley to make furniture.

The Antonios have put a plan in place for the succession of their land to their daughter and granddaughter to continue the legacy of Sydney's mother and grandmother.

We have a family LPA [Limited Partnership Association] that started in 1998. The property is titled to the LPA and it owns 98% of the shares, and 2% of the shares are held by an LLC. The LLC is the managing partner of the LPA, but they don't own any assets. That was done for liability protection. The LLC is the only entity authorized to enter into agreements on contract, so they are the ones that are at risk should anything go wrong. But they can't force a sale of the asset because they only have 2% of the shares. Even though the members of both are the same, the LLC has a corporate veil and that protects the individual from those agreements. So, it's a bifurcated approach but it also provides a fair degree of liability protection in the process. The LPA says the shares may only be owned by direct descendants of Bernadine Wesley. I am in the process of transferring shares to my heirs, which will then facilitate things. When I fall off the face of the earth, they will already be partial owners and then they'll just get larger shares. So that's done already.

Sydney shared how she and Evon view the land as an investment on multiple levels: An investment in ongoing environmental benefits but also an asset in the landowner's portfolio.

Selfishness allows for altruism. If you didn't own the land, which is selfish, you couldn't have all the altruistic things like clean water. You're going to have clean water and clean air and carbon sequestration, but you are also continuing to keep a huge asset in your own pocket. It's the American way. [My goal is] to maintain it, to keep it as it is as a forested woodland. It's good for the water, good for the environment, and good for the portfolio.





LANDOWNER STORY

Earl Ransom

PROPERTY PROFILE

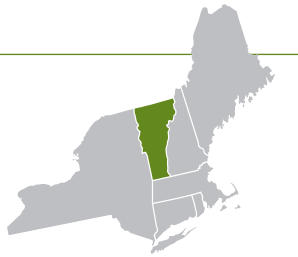
Size: 950 total acres, 575 of wooded acres

Location: Strafford, VT

Acquired: Inherited and purchased in 1994

Stewardship Focus: Dairy production, timber harvesting, firewood, hunting

Resources Used: Consulting forester, peers, friends



“Something That’s Mine to Fall Back On”

I feel really blessed to have land. It’s an opportunity a lot of people don’t have. I feel really lucky that my father was forward-thinking enough to buy land and then to teach us how to manage it and not just view the land itself as an asset.

Earl Ransom’s father first purchased the several hundred acres of Rock Bottom Farm in the 1960s during a time of transition in harvest management. The technology changed from horsepower and hand tools to mechanized equipment. Earl’s father taught him how to make a living off the land and for many years the family sustained themselves through firewood production, small-scale agriculture, and maple syrup production. In the 1970s, the farm acquired a dairy herd. Today there are 80 Guernsey cows on the property. Earl and his siblings have retained the farm and land and started the well-known Strafford Creamery. The 450-acre property is owned between the siblings, but he and his brother have also purchased their own properties independently.

That provides me with more stability. I bought property separate from my family for some independence. We get along really well, but the farm is still owned by myself, my brother

and my sister. My father has a piece as well so it gets complicated. It’s nice to have something that’s just mine to fall back on.

The matrix of properties is a mix of northern hardwoods, hemlock swamps, open fields, wetlands, and scenic views. The creamery demands most of Earl’s time, so active forest management is contracted out. The Ransoms have a great respect for their land but also rely on it as their source of income. Earl’s business mindset influences his decisions in how to purchase and steward his properties. He keeps his eye out for properties in the surrounding area that come up for sale, knowing the value of the natural resources on it. Earl only buys a property that he can afford outright and never takes out a mortgage to acquire land.

What I like most about owning land is that



there's a freedom associated with it. It is my property, and I can do with it what I want. It gives me a lot of flexibility in terms of what I can do on any given day.

Beyond the use for pasture and timber products, Earl enjoys his land for recreation and its aesthetic value. The land is connected to a network of trails operated by a nearby Nordic center, and there are snowmobile allowances with a local trails association. Earl is also an avid hunter and allows others to use the property by not posting it. Even while enjoying the land in this way, he stresses the importance of good stewardship and attention to the impact on the environment. When engaging in active stewardship, the focus is on maintaining biodiversity and following best management practices. Earl notes that he learned most of what he knows from his father but also continues to learn through his network of resources.

I picked a lot of stuff up by osmosis, and since then, I've changed my philosophy. My father was a bit more extractive at the beginning, and then he became more of a steward towards the end. He's always been pretty good and wanted to take care of the land and preserve it for future generations.

Although he is not involved with any formal landowner groups or associations, Earl has maintained a close relationship with the family's long-time forester. He also has friends that work for the state whom he can

ask questions regarding management options. When asked about the challenges he faces maintaining the properties, he points out the increasing property taxes. His woodlands are enrolled in Vermont's Current Use Program, but the state made changes that are challenging for the average landowner. As a result, he has less time to devote to forestry work, and instead, he is often burdened by paperwork related to management plans, following best management practices, and applications for the current use program.

Earl and his family are the only Black farmers and large landowners in the area. During his parents' generation, his mother worked to create a community with other Black individuals and families connected to Dartmouth College. Since that time, members of that community have either died or moved away.

Earl shared that race does not come up that much. The majority of people he interacts with have known him for much of his life, but the lack of racial diversity in the area means that there are often white people that have simply never met a Black person. In those instances, Earl is usually very upfront about who he is and what he does, anticipating any curiosities. He did recall some particularly awkward situations.

I've had a few bad experiences. I was in the woods flagging a property line during bear season in Vermont. We don't post our land, so people hunt there frequently. A man was out there, and he didn't know who I was. He questioned why I was there and I told him that I owned the land. This was more awkward for him than me. It was obvious that he had questions about why a Black guy might be walking around in the woods in Vermont? I said, "Well it's because I've lived here my whole life, and

I own this land." He seemed profoundly puzzled by my response. He was actually from Rhode Island and had come to Vermont to hunt. Hopefully, our interaction changed his worldview.

Earl still hopes to have many years ahead of him on the property. When his four sons were little, he had initial plans to keep the land in the family. As his children have grown, he has started to rethink how the assets will be divided. His oldest son is very interested in the farm, and his second oldest is particularly interested in taking over the dairy operation. It might be too early to know the interests of the younger two, but Earl hopes that all of his sons will eventually be involved in some way.

As they become older and come of age, I have to decide, at what point do they start sharing ownership? That's the way my father did it. My plan is to transfer ownership to them before I die, so by the time they are running it, they also own it. The question is whether they're interested or not. If you have wealth tied up in land, it's really hard to transfer to the next generation and still be equitable. If land makes up 60 or 75% of your



net worth, it's hard to make that work evenly with everybody. That's a challenge that's coming up as my kids get older.

Earl's story represents those individuals that have a familial and economic tie to their land. With his sons' involvement, the woodlands and dairy operations will likely continue to a third generation. With their continued stewardship and utilization of Vermont's Current Use Program, their stories and adventure as a family will continue and Strafford Creamery will supply delicious ice cream for years to come.

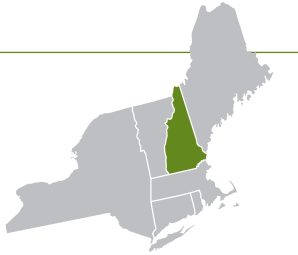
What I like most about owning land is that there's a freedom associated with it.





LANDOWNER STORY

Tracey and Paul Turner



PROPERTY PROFILE

Size: 111 acres

Location: Lyndeborough, NH

Acquired: Purchased in 1992

Stewardship Focus: Scenic beauty, wildlife, investment, privacy, hunting, non-timber forest products, recreation

Resources Used: Consulting forester, peers, friends

“Where I’m Supposed to Be”

There’s something about the aesthetic of a place that really speaks to me in a way that is just not cerebral; it is definitely just a feeling that I get when I’m there. And this place has that.

Throughout their lives, Tracey and Paul Turner have sought out open, uncrowded spaces, knowing the joy they can provide. The couple met at Middlebury College, each coming from an upbringing punctuated by camping trips, horseback riding, and memorable experiences away from their suburban homes. As avid outdoors people, they find a certain sense of peace having access to hunting, hiking, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing just beyond their back door. In fact, Tracey’s love of horses and equestrian sports has been a significant driver in their land ownership and management decisions. In 1992, they purchased an 111-acre property in Lyndeborough, New Hampshire and have been living and enjoying their life on the land since then.

I think that both of us just felt like this was where we were supposed to be. I don’t know if you’ve had that experience, but it’s powerful.

Having previously lived on a small house plot in a nearby town, Tracey had been on trail rides through the Lyndeborough area and enjoyed the scenic views and trails. As the couple looked to purchase a piece of land to host Tracey’s horses and group trail rides, they discovered the very property she had her eye on was on the market. Knowing that the property was quite expensive, they hesitated to move forward at first, but their curiosity got the best of them. During a walk around the property’s boundary, the usually chatty pair was silent in reverence to what was at their feet. They knew then that not buying it wasn’t an option. In order to afford the high property taxes, the Turners enrolled in New Hampshire’s Current Use Program.

Going from one acre to 111 acres has been an exercise in hard work and stewardship that they have carried out with enthusiasm and care. After

enrolling in the Current Use Program, the Turners built a new barn for Tracey's horses.

When we say privacy, it's not that we don't want to be around people. We like the fact that we have something that is ours that we can take care of.

Although the two enjoy the privacy that owning land provides, they have opened up their property for others to use and enjoy. They host events for Tracey's carriage racing group, allow neighbors to walk the trails, and leave the property unposted for public access to hunting. Forming a connection to the land has always been a driver in their stewardship. They invest resources in tractors and other equipment to do much of the work themselves. Since acquiring the property, Paul and Tracey have worked with a forester and follow a management plan according to the requirements of the Current Use program. The forester suggested they have a timber harvest on their lands at some point, and after 26 years, that became a reality.

When Granite State Forestry approached them after harvesting a neighbor's property, they were hesitant at first. After taking time to talk with the foresters as well as their neighbors, they better understood what active stewardship could do for their land. They decided to go through with a harvest and they were pleased with how it turned out. Trails were developed and Paul started to work for the forestry company. He enjoys sharing his own experience when talking with other landowners about upcoming harvest jobs. Beyond these professional resources, Paul and Tracey are not involved with other

woodland owner groups. They joined the fish and game club when they first moved to the town, and Tracey served on the town's planning board, which helped them feel connected to their neighbors and the community.

I love small towns. Some people say, "In small towns everybody knows your business," but I say, "So what? I have nothing to hide." I like the fact that people know and care about what is going on with you. It's a New England thing too. They say New Englanders are slow to warm up to, but once you get to know them, they'll give you the coat off their back, and it's true.

The Turners' lived experience is an invitation to reflect on the complexity of Black rural identities. Although they could not ask for better neighbors, they recognize that they are the only Black landowners in the area. When a neighbor stopped by and asked their intentions soon after moving in, their response of wanting to keep the land open, maintained and accessible to the community was well received. When another neighbor wanted to develop an ATV track through the area, they took a stand against it. Long-time residents of the town shared their support in a way that surprised them. In this case, it was less about being Black as it was about recognizing shared values.

What's interesting is that we've had a lot of discussions, especially about what's been going on over the last few years. We've had conversations with our neighbors about them probably not having a lot of Black acquaintances. I wouldn't even say friends, just acquaintances. They don't really know people, but they've come to know us. We're not that hard to know.

Reflecting upon their experience as Black landowners in New Hampshire, it was challenging for the two of them to separate what was part of their racial identities versus their general desire to succeed in life. When asked to describe their experiences of being Black landowners, Tracey felt what was more important was their desire to do well, which they should have every right to do. Through their lives together, the Turners have owned multiple properties, realizing the value that

I think our being here and how much we enjoy being here and how much fun people have when they come here has influenced a lot of our people... it's just kind of a happy place and a fun place.

think about what will be next. They recognize the value of land both now and as they think about their futures. Although they acknowledge that land is an investment, they see it more holistically as their home.

When we first bought it, I would have told you they will carry me out of here boots first. I will never leave. Now that I am closing in on my Medicare years, it's a lot of work. As I approach retirement, I don't really want to spend it doing all of that.

Paul and Tracey recently purchased a 10-acre property in South Carolina to be closer to Tracey's equestrian community and warmer winters. They are preparing to sell the New Hampshire property and, with no children of their own, they hope to find a buyer who shares their values and views on land stewardship. While the property has high development value, they would like to see it keep its rural character. The Turners acknowledge that it feels funny to be doing "the reverse migration," as they called it, to a more diverse region. The move was not something they predicted for themselves even a few years ago. Having put so much of their time, energy and resources into the property, leaving it will be bittersweet.

land ownership can have long term. Paul's mother owned property in Virginia, handed down through generations. Today, only Paul and his cousin own portions of the property. Paul suspects other young Black individuals may not see the potential for long term land ownership. The painful history of Black land loss and enslavement in the United States early agricultural history might be a barrier to others who might have considered the investment.

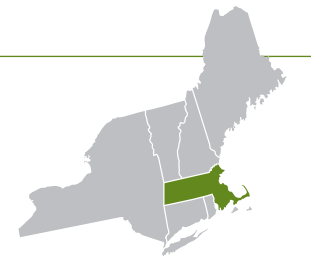
That's probably the biggest disconnect people have, assuming that if you're Black, you live in a city or want to live in a city.

Tracey and Paul have worked to pursue a more rural life. When Paul was employed at IBM, the company noticed that many Black people working for the company in Northern New England left their positions. Senior employees at the company asked Paul for his opinion about why those individuals didn't want to work in those areas anymore. He didn't feel he could answer for anyone but himself and Tracey. With Paul retired and Tracey getting closer to retirement, the Turners often



LANDOWNER STORY

Paris Qualles



PROPERTY PROFILE

Size: 100 total acres, 50 wooded acres

Location: North Brookfield, MA

Acquired: Purchased in 2007

Stewardship Focus: Scenic beauty, wildlife, biodiversity, water protection

Resources Used: Natural Resources Conservation Service, consulting forester, Northern Woodlands, local land trust

“Respect the Land”

Walk your property. Not just once, twice, or once a year, but walk it every season. If you do that, you will see something different. If you walk your property every day of the year through four seasons and you're observant, you will notice it changes. It's so dynamic, and that's just the nature of life.

For someone who grew up by the ocean in New Jersey and then spent most of his life as a screenwriter and television producer in California, Paris feels a strong connection to the Massachusetts property on which he now lives with his wife. A lifetime of outdoor adventuring and visiting open spaces has given him a deep respect for the natural world. Seeing large-scale clear-cutting out West gave him a visceral response to forest management. Becoming familiar with his property and engaging with its stewardship has been important for Paris, bringing both triumph and challenge. In the fourteen years he has owned his property, he has learned to interact with natural resource professionals and neighbors and has dedicated himself to protecting and understanding the landscape.

I've got deeds that go back to the 1790s. Before that, it was sacred [Nipmuc] Native American land. That appealed to me in the sense that I felt the need to preserve it. Development is never in my mind. I didn't purchase it in hopes of making any money off of it.





was here. I was curious about the invasive species and what was native.

As Paris's career in Los Angeles started to wind down, he and his wife looked for a place to be together. She had worked for many years as a studio manager for a rural recording studio, and the property it sat on was up for sale. Having no family or previous connections to New England, Paris bought the land and its buildings with little understanding of its full scale. The 100-acre property is mainly wooded with marshland, sprawling farm and hayfields, and ponds close to the house. He bought it for enjoyment and personal use as well as for maintenance and preservation. Paris shared, *"My philosophy has always been to respect the land. It was here before you, and it'll be here after. And it will give you everything you put into it."* He appreciates the diversity of the property, the changing of the New England seasons, the access to recreation, and the connection to history.

I really wanted to identify what was here. I was curious about the invasive species and what was native. I wanted to figure out what needed help and what was dying out. Even just to identify the most basic plants, weeds and trees was important to me.

When Paris first purchased the property, he reached out to Cooperative Extension and other educational resources but did not find them helpful. He wanted to

better understand the property and be in tune with the environment that surrounded him. The first connection with Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) also proved unsuccessful. His original thoughts on active forest management combined with the opinions shared by his wife and the surrounding neighbors delayed his pursuit of management of the woodlands for many years. Instead, he devoted time to restoring the pond, clearing away vegetation that covered him in poison ivy, putting a solar-powered bubbler in to oxygenate the water, and carefully watching the various animals use it to survive. An indigenous woman familiar with the land, told his wife that it would be safe as long as a certain heron kept visiting the pond. When it did not arrive one year, they were panicked. It returned a few years later, and a balance was restored in their lives and that of the property.

I paid for a very comprehensive forestry plan. I really learned a lot and it helped me gain confidence. My wife and I were still a bit skeptical, but I convinced her that it could be done right. I'm sticking my neck out so I'm taking it slow. I decided to deal with the invasives first, and then, after that, would see how it goes.

At one point, Paris was interested in setting up a hemp operation on the property. He dedicated many hours to reading, attending events, and connecting with professionals. After a couple of test plots, he decided that it was too big of an investment and that the property was not quite fit for it. Online resources allowed him instant access to information, like what equipment to buy or what time of year to do particular management. He appreciated that no one knew his identity in that space, and his race did not affect the information he could find. In reconnecting with NRCS, they encouraged him to talk with a forester and get a management plan. He still works with that forester today and enjoys being able to continually learn and ask questions.

Coming here, I was very suspicious, and I saw racists behind every tree. My wife said, "Don't be confused by New Englanders. This place has its own culture, and they can come off as very abrasive or very cool or very standoffish." I understood that and I appreciate it. I said, "Okay, so how do I tell the difference?" There are a lot of people in this area that have never interacted with Black folks.

Paris not only had to learn about his property and land management but also had to learn what it meant to live in rural New England. He knows no other Black landowners or any other Black people living in town. This is the reality of being Black in majority white rural communities today. Throughout his years on the property, he has come to appreciate the distance from the town, where he would receive stares or face political paraphernalia that showed he was not welcome. His wife, who is more familiar with Massachusetts and had lived on the property for a longer time, explained that the culture of New England is not the warmest and most welcoming. It is still hard for Paris to know where his neighbors stand. Although he has not experienced overt racism, it is clear his racial identity comes into play in how he fits into the community.



You know it's what you have to do as a person of color in this country from birth; you have to shove past the obstacles, whatever they are, if you want to get to where you want to go. The bigger the wall, the harder it is to climb, but you still got to get there, and so this was just another one of those things.

While thinking about his experiences over the past fourteen years, Paris continues to push past barriers to be the best steward he can be. Although he views his position as a Black landowner like that of being on an isolated island from other potential Black landowners, he appreciates the ability to own his property. Paris spoke to the potential differences between Black landowners in the Northeast compared to the larger concentration of landowners in the South. He hopes telling his story will shed more light on the challenges and history of Black ownership in the United States.

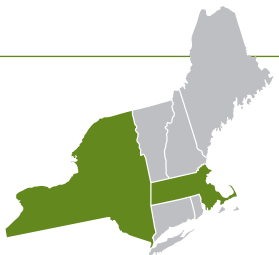
We are debating our future and what we want to do because it's obvious to all that no one's getting younger. And it gets harder and harder to maintain even what it is, let alone improve it. We know it's important that the land maintains its character and we can't envision it being developed in any way.

Looking ahead, Paris and his wife are starting to think about what comes next. Although they enjoy being stewards of the land, they recognize the financial and physical resources it takes to upkeep the property. With their children having little to no interest, they will likely sell the property. They hope to find a like-minded buyer who will maintain the character of the land. Until that happens, Paris will still be out walking his property in all seasons, enjoying the relationship he has built with the land.



LANDOWNER STORY

Charles Harrison



PROPERTY PROFILE

Size: 68 Acres

Location: Marlborough, NY (3 acres) and Great Barrington, MA (65 acres)

Acquired: Purchased in 2021

Stewardship Focus: Forest farming, scenery, wetland habitat

Resources Used: ForestConnect, Center for Heirs’ Property Preservation, Black Family Land Trust, New York Forest Owners Association, GrowNYC, Cornell Master Forest Owner volunteer program

“Stories Trees Have to Tell”

If you watch me on an average week, you’ll see a man walking around with his cell phone and looking up to take photos of trees and foliage that stumped my guess. I love being able to identify the trees. I do it no matter where I am—Central Park, Madison Avenue, the Berkshires. It doesn’t matter.

Charles Harrison had purchasing land on his heart and mind for several years before finally becoming a landowner. He’s originally from Chestnut Hill in Philadelphia, where he played in Valley Green as a child, a 1,800 acre forested oasis with over 50+ trails. Charles now lives in Long Island City, New York but found his wooded lots in what he describes as rural America, situated on mountain ridges in Marlborough, NY and Great Barrington, MA. Both of his woodlots are on some of the highest elevations in their county. They are quiet and not unlike a national park setting, reminding him of the forests he used to play in as a child.

Charles credits both of his grandmothers for having the greatest influence on his interest in owning land. He remembers their focus on the importance of family and home to be the single

acts and emotional motivators of his decision to embark on being a forested landowner.

His father’s mother died unexpectedly on Christmas Eve of 2020. She was alive when he purchased his land, but he kept it a secret, hoping to surprise her once he started some work on the land.

After she passed, it made him more aggressive in the pursuit of his goals. He first purchased his land in New York State with the intention of building a home, and as he expanded his vision, he desired for it to be more civic and





think differently about those trees – not only who planted them, but what they were thinking about, what types of stories trees have to tell.

society focused. He wants his land to be an inspiring place and a productive sanctuary for community. He’s currently working on making both of his woodlots work together to offer farm to food business incubation for up and coming entrepreneurs.

In New York, he sees opportunities to grow mushrooms and medicinals whereas, in Massachusetts, he’s working on farming perennials, tackling the invasive growth, and making trails so that the land becomes a destination.

Being a woodlot owner makes you think differently about those trees—not only who planted them, but what they were thinking about, what types of stories trees have to tell. How many kids light up like the first time they’re in the Adirondacks - kids that have the maple tree in front of the housing development. Then they go back home and they have a greater appreciation for the tree.

His land in Massachusetts consists of approximately 65 acres. The property is comprised primarily of woodlands being protected under voluntary Chapter 61 conservation, as well as his future farm dwelling and two acre farm site. Much of the property is located

within an area under the guidance of the Berkshire Scenic Mountain Act. White pine, white ash, red maple and hemlock are the most common tree species on the property, with scattered sugar maple, white/black/yellow birch, black cherry, aspen, red and white oak, American elm, and shagbark hickory.

Charles’ Massachusetts land is located within the watershed of the Housatonic River. The stream on the property flows southeasterly and then northerly into Lake Buel. The outlet of Lake Buel is the southerly flowing Konkapot River, which eventually joins the Housatonic River, which travels for hundreds of miles before draining into Long Island Sound of New York State.

Once you get past the ash and the thickets of invasives, where everything is thorny, the land looks less strangled and it’s more serene. In the forest management plan I have a bird habitat evaluation. It’s beautiful.

Earlier in his career, Charles was a chef, mechanic, and researcher in academia. Learning about forestry was a new journey and over the years, he’s worked with forest

management consultants and a state service forester for the Massachusetts Department of Conservation. He’s also a member of the New York Forest Owners Association and has consulted with the Massachusetts Woodland Institute. He’s a volunteer with the Cornell Master Forestry Owner program. He’s learned a great deal about forestry in that program. Charles has even started peer advising one of his new woodlot-owning colleagues at the Daggerwig Group, where he works. Charles accredited the people at his place of work as a source of energy for his vision. His network of contacts has helped him weave together the fabric of forestry conservation as it pertains to his land and his vision for it. He conducted much of his own research, consuming over 70 hours of videos and online resources through his subscription to Cornell ForestConnect and other university forest extensions. He credits his university contacts as a doorway into this work, mentioning that he wouldn’t have known about the Black Land Trust if it wasn’t for those contacts. He also researched the information available through the Southern organization, the Center for Heirs’ Property Preservation, and attributes to it his decision to purchase 65 acres instead of less.

Charles recalls times when navigating through this new venture was challenging and sometimes uncomfortable as he sifted through various resources and tried to make sense of all of the new information. Ultimately, he determined that he would farm a small portion of his woodland because Charles started a small packaged food business just before experiencing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the biggest obstacles was finding local producers of the ingredients he needed and now the challenge has been finding capital sources to support the business.

In some ways, the web of funding opportunities is the same in every region. It centers around a few nonprofits, universities, public and private funders. The circles are small, but each potential funder wants to know your entire life story. Some grants they explicitly say be ready to devote 200+ hours of time. The barriers of entry to funding are too high for those that re already resource constrained.

Charles acknowledges the wealth of information available for educating new landowners but wishes there was more technical assistance guidance focused on helping him

and others find the appropriate funding and professional help. He has used much of his own funds for start-up costs and infrastructure.

When reflecting on his experience as a Black landowner in the Northeast, Charles recognizes the timing as being beneficial. He finds himself in a supportive environment but doesn’t know any other minority landowners and shares, that for most of his life, he’s been “the one black guy.” He’s become somewhat used to it but wouldn’t mind learning from a more diverse group of people.

It doesn’t feel like anyone has dissuaded me at all because of the color of my skin. So, in some ways that can make me naturally overlook a lot of racial tensions. But there’s more discouragement than anything because I don’t see any people like me. Everyone, all my mentors and those in my technical assistance network have been giving, wonderful and nice. But they all don’t know what it’s like personally to grow up Black, let alone a minority, doing something like this.

His newfound appreciation for forestry also has Charles thinking about what he will leave for others. When thinking about his legacy, he’s reminded of his grandmothers, particularly the one lost, and wishes she was around for these conversations.

I never had the depth of what legacy meant until now, but my grandmothers knew and were getting me ready for it. She knew and honestly it goes back to some of that old-school mentality, especially with Blacks. People owned their homes when they were 19. That’s what they did. Some of it might be coming from the upbringing of my grandmothers.



Common Themes and Recommendations

Learning the stories of Black landowners can help the forest conservation community better understand the experience of Black landowners and the ways we can help those interested in owning and stewarding forests. Though this publication features a variety of Black landowners from the Northeastern region, their stories illuminate some common themes that can be used to guide the efforts of the broader forest conservation community.



DECISIONS ABOUT FUTURE OWNERSHIP

Keeping forests as forests is a common aim of the forest community. Often this means working with families on conservation-based estate planning so that they are able to leave a personal and financial legacy to the next generation. The personal legacy is the fulfillment of current landowner wishes, and the financial legacy is often a significant economic advantage for the next generation. Each family in the case studies is interested in ensuring that their land helps them achieve their legacy in their own way.

RECOMMENDATION: *The low amount of existing Black land ownership regionally, combined with the tremendous loss of Black land ownership nationally, makes conservation-based estate planning for Black landowners especially imperative. This work can help maintain properties in Black ownership and may increase ownership over time as accumulated wealth is passed to the next generation, allowing for increased opportunities for land ownership. Research on the specific needs of Black landowners and effective policy approaches can increase the impact of this work.*

PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING

Though each landowner discussed their interest in talking to other Black forest landowners, none of them knew other Black landowners in their area that they could connect with as peers. In search of these connections, one landowner sought information from a Black forest landowner network in the Southern U.S. Research has shown the importance of peer-to-peer networks to forest landowners. Shared experience can often be more helpful to learners than simply receiving information from a professional.

RECOMMENDATION: *Facilitating a network of Black landowners in the Northeast would allow peer-to-peer learning and give those interested in acquiring forestland a network to reach out to for advice. Though the forest types and stewardship practices may differ, connecting Black landowners from the Northeast with networks in the Southern U.S. would allow them to benefit from these more mature efforts and explore shared experiences of Black land ownership.*

RURAL IDENTITY

A common stereotype mentioned by the profiled landowners was the misconception that Black individuals and families prefer living in urban areas. The landowners often experienced surprising reactions from white people after learning of their interest in living in rural spaces and communities. Owning a home and property is a common aspiration and key for wealth accumulation, access to opportunities, and the ability to transfer assets to the next generation. A desire to do this in a rural setting, engage with nature, and be part of a small town is not unique to a particular racial identity. Instead, the disparity in racial ownership patterns in the Northeastern U.S. is a result of the history of settlement, migration, and institutional racism that prevented Black Americans from owning homes and land. The stories illustrate the many ways Black landowners enjoy living on their land and intersecting with small towns. Their lives focus on their properties for financial gain, personal satisfaction, and the well-being of the community.

RECOMMENDATION: *Anyone interested in the many benefits of land ownership and rural living should have equal access to this opportunity. Connecting interested people with assistance programs can help increase access. A review of these programs can help identify institutional barriers that may still exist. There are also a growing number of examples in which land protection has been used to increase land access to landowners of color. These types of efforts not only conserve essential ecological function but also help address this social issue. These efforts should be expanded and pursued vigorously.*

DIVERSITY OF ENGAGEMENT

The compiled stories demonstrate a wide diversity of engagement landowners have with their forestland ranging from traditional land uses such as farming, forest management, and hunting to less traditional uses such as growing forest crops for profit and driving horse-drawn carriages. Regardless of how they used it, each story demonstrated their deep engagement with the land.

RECOMMENDATION: *Engaging a diversity of landowners necessitates encouraging a multiplicity of ways to engage. Many forestry incentive programs have a very narrow definition of engagement and typically focus on timber management. Learning more about the ways in which Black landowners hope to engage with their land can help re-focus programs to ensure they are meeting landowners’ needs.*

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Maximizing the benefits of forest ownership necessitates an understanding of forests and the people and programs that can support a landowner’s efforts to steward them. The stories demonstrate that these landowners have vigorously pursued the information they need to make informed decisions, using various sources ranging from people, government programs, and YouTube videos. Throughout the examples, we see landowners wanting to understand their forests and have the know-how to talk with professionals. In some cases, the anonymity of the internet was more comfortable in both digesting information at a self-imposed pace and as an equalizer where race is a non-factor. Each of the landowners benefited greatly from the information they sought out and found.

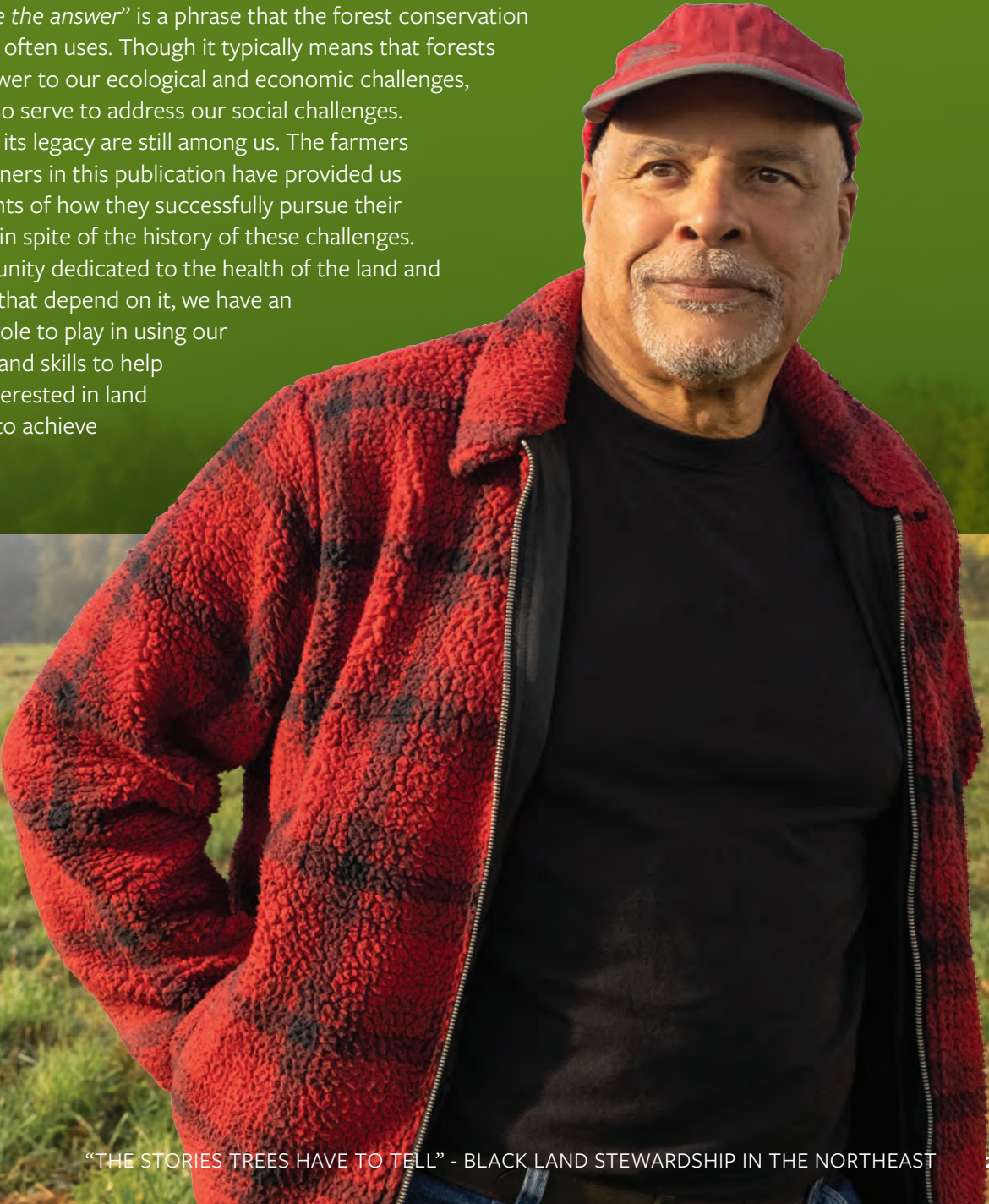
RECOMMENDATION: *Access to the right information is key for any forest landowner. Research has shown that Black forest owners are less likely to participate in government programs. This could be due to a lack of knowledge about available programs, a lack of trust in the government, uncertainty about how to access information, or other reasons. Our efforts to identify Black landowners for this publication using standard pathways (e.g., landowner organizations, foresters, government programs, conservation organizations) proved difficult, suggesting that we need to think beyond our typical strategies. We must do better to ensure the opportunities we offer as a forest community are available to all. Research to identify the types of forest stewardship information that is most helpful, along with identifying the challenges Black landowners face in accessing it, is necessary.*

Conclusions

The United States finds itself in an essential and overdue conversation regarding race. As a forest conservation community, it is our responsibility to reflect on these conversations within the context of our work, ask ourselves hard questions regarding our past, and find a way forward.

Owning forestland is a unique experience. It comes with a pride of ownership, financial security, amenity benefits, and the knowledge that one contributes to the greater good. Due to historical and contemporary discrimination and institutional barriers, Black forestland ownership in the Northeastern U.S. is rare. All those interested in the experience of forest ownership deserve equal opportunities to acquire, steward, and pass on land.

“Forests are the answer” is a phrase that the forest conservation community often uses. Though it typically means that forests are the answer to our ecological and economic challenges, they can also serve to address our social challenges. Racism and its legacy are still among us. The farmers and landowners in this publication have provided us with accounts of how they successfully pursue their aspirations in spite of the history of these challenges. As a community dedicated to the health of the land and the people that depend on it, we have an important role to play in using our knowledge and skills to help all those interested in land ownership to achieve their goals.



Directory of Resources for Landowners

GENERAL RESOURCES

American Forest Foundation <i>forestfoundation.org</i>	Hunters of Color <i>huntersofcolor.org</i>	Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust <i>nefoclandtrust.org</i>
Black Farmer Fund <i>blackfarmerfund.org</i>	Land Trust Alliance <i>landtrustalliance.org</i>	Northern Woodlands <i>www.northernwoodlands.org</i>
Call Before You Cut Programs <i>callb4ucut.com</i>	Master Gardener Programs <i>mastergardener.extension.org</i>	Sustainable Forestry and African-American Land Retention Network <i>sflrnetwork.org</i>
Center for Heirs Property Preservation <i>heirsproperty.org</i>	Master Naturalist Programs <i>(Alliance of Natural Resource Outreach and Service Programs)</i> <i>anrosp.wildapricot.org</i>	Where is My Land <i>whereismyland.org</i>
Cornell Small Farms Program Online Classes <i>smallfarms.cornell.edu/online-courses</i>	National Black Farmers Association <i>blackfarmers.org</i>	Women Owning Woodlands Network <i>womenowningwoodlands.net</i>
The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/ Land Assistance Fund <i>Federation.coop</i>	National Young Farmers Coalition for Racial Equity <i>youngfarmers.org/racialequity</i>	

FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) This USDA Forest Service program helps owners of forestland where good stewardship, including agroforestry practices, will enhance and sustain multiple forest resources and contribute to healthy and resilient landscapes. The program offers resources for landowners interested in active stewardship to develop a management plan.	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) program provides financial and technical assistance to address concerns regarding environmental and natural resources. The program is funded through the Farm Bill. Contact your local NRCS office to learn more.
Forest Legacy Program (FLP) This USDA Forest Service program encourages privately owned forests through perpetual conservation easements or land purchases. This program looks to encourage sustainable forest management through forestland protection.	Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) This Farm Service Agency program focuses on land conservation. In exchange for a yearly payment, farmers/landowners agree to remove land of environmental interest from production and instead plant native species to improve the environmental health and quality of the area. Contracts are 10-15 years, and the long term goals are to improve water quality, prevent erosion of soils, and preserve wildlife habitat.

STATE LEVEL RESOURCES

CONNECTICUT CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), Forestry <i>portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Forestry</i> Find a Consulting Forester <i>portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Forestry/Forest-Practitioner-Certification/Forest-Practitioner-Certification</i> Find a Land Trust <i>ctconservation.org/findalandtrust</i> Service Foresters for Connecticut Landowners <i>portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Forestry/Landowner-Assistance/Service-Forestry-Program-for-Connecticut-Landowners</i> UConn Extension <i>ctforestry.uconn.edu</i>	MAINE Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, Maine Forest Service <i>maine.gov/dacf/mfs</i> District Foresters for Maine <i>landowners maine.gov/dacf/mfs/policy_management/district_foresters.html</i> Find a Consulting Forester <i>maine.gov/dacf/mfs/policy_management/selecting_a_consulting_forester.html</i> Find a Land Trust <i>mltn.org/trusts</i> University of Maine Extension Service <i>extension.umaine.edu/woodland</i> Woodland Owners Resources Page <i>maine.gov/dacf/mfs/woodland_owners.html</i>	NEW YORK Cornell Extension, Forest Connect <i>blogs.cornell.edu/ccforestconnect</i> Black Farmers United NYS <i>blackfarmersunited.org</i> DEC Stewardship Foresters for New York Landowners <i>dec.ny.gov/lands/97398.html</i> Find a Consulting Forester <i>dec.ny.gov/lands/5230.html</i> Find a Land Trust <i>findalandtrust.org/states/newyork36</i> New York Department of Environmental Conservation, Division of Lands and Forests <i>dec.ny.gov/lands/309.html</i> Rapp Road Historical Association <i>rapproad.wordpress.com/about-us/rapp-road-historic-district</i> Soul Fire Farm <i>soulfirefarm.org</i> Your Land, Your Legacy: Planning for Every New York Landowner <i>yourlegacyny.org</i>
MASSACHUSETTS UMass Extension/MassWoods <i>masswoods.org</i> Find a Consulting Forester <i>masswoods.org/professionals</i> Find a Land Trust <i>masswoods.org/professionals</i> Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation Bureau of Forestry <i>mass.gov/orgs/bureau-of-forest-fire-control-and-forestry</i> Service Foresters for Massachusetts Landowners <i>mass.gov/service-details/service-forestry</i>	NEW HAMPSHIRE County Foresters for NH Landowners <i>extension.unh.edu/countyforesters</i> Find a Consulting Forester <i>extension.unh.edu/resource/directory-licensed-foresters</i> Find a Land Trust <i>nhltc.org/find-land-trust</i> New Hampshire Division of Forests and Lands <i>nh.gov/nhdfl</i> UNH Extension Service <i>extension.unh.edu/topics/natural-resources</i>	VERMONT County Foresters for Vermont Landowners <i>fpr.vermont.gov/forest/list-vermont-county-foresters</i> Find a Consulting Forester <i>fpr.vermont.gov/forest/managing-your-woodlands/working-professional</i> University of Vermont Extension, Our Vermont Woods <i>ourvermontwoods.org</i> Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation <i>fpr.vermont.gov/forests</i>



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