



# Bluestem

## A Community Conservation Milestone

Ten years ago, we set out to research and imagine a conservation cemetery for the Triangle, where natural burial would be integrated with the conservation of land. We wanted to find an iconic property that allowed us to recreate native prairie and grasslands --the most endangered habitat in the Southeast-- while serving as a space of refuge and respite for humans and wildlife.

We started our research online, learning about green burial standards from the Green Burial Council, and cruising property listings in Chatham, Durham and Orange Counties. When our eyes glazed over from research, we hopped into Jeff's truck to check out newly listed potential properties. We traipsed over countless Piedmont woods, noticing delicate ephemerals in the spring, furrows from earlier farm fields, and banks covered in mountain laurel or Christmas ferns. The natural world of the Piedmont has been a longtime companion to each of us, its beauty becoming familiar over the years and decades; to Jeff, while serving as Triangle Land Conservancy's Director of Conservation for a dozen years; to Heidi, while supporting the land trust community across the Southeast.

In 2021, shortly after losing a conservation property in Durham County to another buyer, we stumbled on 1900 Hurdle Mills Road. A real estate agent invited us to visit the property with him. We pulled up to the fence line and got out of the truck. Corn stalks tall and green greeted us, a small cabin and barn sat quietly in the distance, and beyond them, rows and rows and rows of corn.

We walked around the structures, my heart pounding in my chest. I had been taught not to blurt the obvious out loud, so keeping my cool, continued past the structures and headed down a hill. An opening in the tree line beckoned, and I ducked into the woods separating myself from the men. They walked around the pond, and across a pond dam covered in Queen Anne's Lace.

Jeff and I encountered each other again in a clearing in the woods, underneath a cloister of trees looking out over the pond. We stood still. The wind picked up and blew through the topmost branches of the trees. A cardinal called. We looked at each other, and without a word, shared an answer. Continuing deeper into the property, we started to envision the possibilities:

trails meandering next to the flowing creeks, benches for gathering beneath an old beech tree, grasses and wildflowers calling the pollinators back to the fields.

That was four years ago, almost to the day.

Today, we celebrate twenty years of imagining, ten years planning a vision, and 2.5 years since Bluestem's opening to the public as a nature preserve designed as a place of reverence with a conservation cemetery for natural burial. Our vision, to share nature's rootedness and constancy, in a way that forever connects people to place, is here.

In all our dreaming and planning, we could never have imagined the level of support, enthusiasm, and dedication that Bluestem has manifested. It is in honor of countless people—those who have cared for this land throughout history, the families who have returned their loved ones to the earth in this place, and those who are forever remembered here—that we celebrate its existence and, now, its protection into perpetuity.

On March 24, 2025, Bluestem donated a conservation easement to venerable land trusts Eno River Association and Triangle Land Conservancy ensuring its permanent protection. This land will never be developed, never returned to monoculture, never extracted from for its "resources." With this milestone, we take one more important step in our collective care for the sacred lands we love.

And celebrate the power of community conservation.

Heidi Hannapel  
Cedar Grove, NC  
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