



Celebrating 40 Years of Conservation

Part 1: 1986 - 2005

In 2026, the Francestown Land Trust marks 40 years of helping to conserve special places for generations to come. From the vision of a small group of Francestown residents, the FLT has grown to protect 3,205 acres in and around our town. And, with your support, the work continues.

The Founding: Francestown Land Conservation

The FLT was originally incorporated as “Francestown Land Conservation (FLC)” on December 1, 1986. Its stated purpose was simple and enduring: “To help preserve Francestown’s natural land areas for future generations and provide conservation opportunities for town residents.” The articles of incorporation were signed by Francestown residents: Scot Heath, Ruth Benedict, Herbert Benedict, Ellen Arnold, and Francestown-born native Constance Stuart Varnum. Their vision would shape the conservation landscape of the town for decades to come.

FLC met for the first time on January 11, 1987, at the home of John and Ellen Arnold. Scot Heath was elected Chair. Six other Directors were voted in: Fred Harrigan, Brenda Parker, Constance Varnum, Paul Lawrence, and David Connard. They voted to formally organize a non-profit organization and adopted by-laws.

FLC met again on April 9, 1987, at Fred Harrigan’s home, with Ellen Arnold, Connard, Harrigan, Heath, Lawrence, Parker and Varnum attending. The group decided that its conservation priority would be given to river frontage, lake areas, and the south side of Crotched Mountain.

Francestown resident Harriett Cope, who had already placed large parcels of her land under easement through other conservation organizations, provided a good model for moving forward. Connie Varnum described her as a “One-Woman Land Trust.”

One concern was that FLC work with, but not become confused with, the Francestown Conservation Commission (FCC). Both Connie Varnum and Scot Heath were also members of the FCC at the time. The next Board of Directors included Harriett Cope, Scot Heath, Dick Cilley, David Harper, Jennifer Byington, Bob Lindgren, and Greg Neilley.

The organization’s first conservation easement protected part of the Lord Farm. The then-owners of the Lord Farm, Fred and Lillian Harrigan, had already expressed interest in working with the Conservation Commission to protect the farm, but didn’t want to move forward unless the two abutting lots, still owned by Lord heirs, were protected as well. The FCC approached the heirs and eventually they agreed to sell the lots at what their approximate value would be if subject to a Conservation Easement (CE). Unfortunately, the Board of Selectmen at the time declined to let the FCC accept the CE. But with the help of Meade Cadot at the Harris Center for Conservation Education, that organization agreed to protect the property with a CE through the state’s agricultural protection program. The Harris Center then transferred the easement to FLC in February 1989.

The Reawakening: Francestown Land Trust

After successfully protecting the Lord Farm property and another in Whiting Meadows, the organization entered a period of dormancy. However, as the 1990s brought new development pressures, community interest in and enthusiasm for land conservation grew in the town.

In September 1998, the FLC reconvened. In attendance were Connie Varnum, David Connard, David Harper, Pat Nelson, Scot Heath, Harriett Cope, Jennifer Byington, Dick Cilley, Greg Neilley, Bob Lindgren, Sirkka Holm, and Dodie Finlayson, who was also Chair of the Francestown Conservation Commission at the time.



Several of these early members donated easements: Finlayson easement on Todd Road; Cilley easement on Poor Farm Road; Neilley easement on County Road South; and Heath easement on Dennison Pond Road. There is also a Varnum easement on Todd Road, held by the town's conservation commission.

On March 30, 1999, the board held a special meeting to address the possible purchase of a 227-acre parcel owned by Donny Hardwick. He had offered to sell it to FLC for \$235,000, less than offers he had received. The board unanimously approved signing a purchase and sales agreement and began fundraising. A letter to potential donors from Chair Jennifer Byington said, in part:

"The people of Francestown have been afforded an extraordinary opportunity! ... But we need your help. Imagine 227 acres of fields and forests, small streams traversing grassland, then plunging down hillside woods to join Rand Brook on its journey to the Piscataquog River. The Hardwicks are offering it to us at a very fair price with generous terms: half the principal down by April 30, 1999, and one year to raise the rest. The good news is that we have already raised half the amount we need by April 30th. But we need your help to raise another \$50,000. And we must do it in the next two weeks."

Thanks to the generosity of Francestown residents and grant support, the fundraising succeeded. The mortgage to Hardwick was discharged on April 26, 2000. Days later, FLC celebrated with a picnic on site. In October 2001, an easement deed was granted to the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF). This tract is the first property the land trust owned in fee. It is the foundation of what today is the Rand Brook Forest. Its acquisition marked FLC's transition from a fledgling organization to a confident land trust capable of complex transactions and community-wide campaigns.

At the same time, the board wrestled with organizational and administrative issues common to all-volunteer, non-profits, such as quorum requirements, easement stewardship, the need for baseline data, tax return requirements and confirming status as a nonprofit organization. Membership dues were set at \$15 for an individual and \$25 for a family and the organization gained a reliable base of donors. Committees were set up to address grants and easement research, education, maps, communications, and fundraising. Mike Greenberg volunteered to develop an FLC website.

In 1999, FLC began publishing a regular newsletter which serves to keep members informed and, which today, provides an archive of land trust activities. From time to time, members, in addition to board members, have contributed nature-oriented articles of interest to the membership. For example, Meredith Allen wrote a lovely article entitled "The Pond" that appeared in the Spring 2013 issue. (Back issues of most of the newsletter are available on the FLT website. We would be grateful if anyone could share a copy of Issue #1 and/or a few other missing early newsletters for the archives.)

In 2004, FLC officially changed its name to the Francestown Land Trust. Around this time, local artist Carol Sanchioni designed the iconic deer logo that has been used ever since by the FLT on newsletters, stationery, hats, and boundary markers.

Then-Chair Greg Neilley wrote:

"This organization that sat dormant until 1998, now finds itself steward of 316 acres of open land and six parcels totaling 134 acres protected by easement, thanks largely to the tireless work of our past Chair, Jennifer Byington. It is clear that we are no longer a fledgling organization."

Also in 2004, the FLT announced a major new initiative: "**2010 by 2010.**" The campaign was inspired by a challenge issued by the SPNHF to every community in New Hampshire: to conserve at least 25% of its land to help create a statewide network of parks, trails, recreation land, forests, farmlands, and other open space.



In Fracestown, 25% of the town's 30.7 square miles works out to about 4,900 acres, which was deemed an unrealistic goal. However, with this challenge in mind, the FLT, FCC, and the Piscataquog Watershed Association, now the Piscataquog Land Conservancy (PLC), agreed to work together to save 2,010 acres by 2010—which worked out to roughly an acre a day!

By 2005, the FLT owned three properties totaling 302 acres and had stewardship responsibilities on six properties with easements, totaling another 213 acres. The 2-acre Peterson tract was donated by Emma M. Peterson in 2001 in memory of her brother, Lt. (JG) Carl W. Peterson, Pilot, US Navy, who was killed in action in 1942. A commemorative plaque is on a rock along the South Branch of the Piscataquog River at the site. The Normandin fee project added 77 acres to Rand Brook Forest and the Cilley and Finlayson easements were acquired.

The Spring 2005 FLT newsletter reported on another important initiative, the **Headwaters Project**, which even today continues to define FLT conservation priorities and helps to secure grant support:

“An exciting and ambitious tri-town project to protect three tributaries of South Branch of the Piscataquog River – the Rand, Brennan, and Cold Brooks – in Fracestown, Greenfield and Lyndeborough... this project brings FLT together with six other conservation groups and numerous private landowners to preserve water quality and wildlife habitat... These three brooks drain 13,000 acres and connect over a dozen large, unfragmented areas, which create a still-wild corridor from Greenfield and Bennington to New Boston.”

By 2006, two major Fracestown Land Trust (FLT) initiatives were well underway:

- The **2010 by 2010** campaign to conserve 2,010 acres by 2010, in partnership with the Fracestown Conservation Commission (FCC), and the Piscataquog Watershed Association (now Piscataquog Land Conservancy (PLC))
- The **Headwaters Project** to protect three tributaries of South Branch of the Piscataquog River—the Rand, Brennan, and Cold Brooks—in partnership with the Fracestown Conservation Commission (FCC) and conservation groups and private landowners the towns of Greenfield and Lyndeborough

In 2007, Alice Benedict endowed a stewardship fund for \$20,000 in honor of her parents, Ruth and Herb Benedict, who had been two of the signatories of the original FLC Articles of Agreement in 1986. This generous act helped the FLT ensure continued fiscal stability. The fund has grown and readily meets the guidelines set forth by the Land Trust Alliance, a national organization of about 950 land trusts that provides policy guidance for the operation of land trusts.

That same year, Joan Hanchett, the long-serving and much-beloved Fracestown librarian died. In honor of her memory, the FLT joined with the G. H. Bixby Memorial Library, the FCC, and *The Fracestown News* to sponsor a bi-annual series of nature talks, known affectionately as the Joan Hanchett Nature Series (JHNS). Recently, the JHNS has been expanded to include programs designed exclusively for children.

By 2010, the FLT added two new fee projects that further expanded the Rand Brook Forest: Seamans, 132 acres and Turner, 86 acres. It also completed several major Conservation Easement (CE) projects, including Jones, 56 acres—which includes the Carson homestead, the first in Fracestown—and Sanderson, 162 acres, now a favorite destination for hikers.

The focus on Headwaters protection led to several key projects—from the Rand Brook-South Branch Confluence Project completed in 2010, to the more recent Roche and Pitman easements along the South Branch of the Piscataquog River.



In its Fall 2010 issue, the FLT newsletter was able to report that the **2010 by 2010** goal had been achieved. The article broke down the accomplishment in this way:

“... of the total acreage protected, 44% is in the Shattuck Pond to Dinsmore Brook Conservation Area; 25% in the Rand Brook Conservation Area; 16% abuts the Crotched Mountain Town Forest; 13% is in the Whiting Brook – Piscataquog River Corridor; and 2% lies elsewhere in town, mostly along the Piscataquog River. The campaign created three critical areas of habitat greater than 1,000 acres and a fourth nearing 1,000 acres... (and new) conservation corridors between unfragmented blocks of open space within Fracestown and in neighboring towns.”

To commemorate this achievement, on November 6, 2010, the FLT joined with the FCC and PLC with a day-long series of hikes, capped off with a buffet supper at the Fracestown Town Hall.

25 Years and Counting

In 2011, the FLT celebrated its 25th anniversary with a party at house and land on Woodward Hill Road that had been recently donated. The house was sold and the land is now known as the Rand Brook Floodplain.

Then-Chair Dennis Calcutt envisioned the future in this way:

“As we move forward into the next 25 years, we look to strengthen our relationships, deepen our ties to the community, and further connect our protected areas in order to enhance the value of the open space we are protecting for wildlife and people alike. Wonderful relationships take time to build and nurture: The Fracestown Land Trust’s relationship with our town and community will continue to grow, as will all of our relationships with the land itself.”

In the 15 years since 2011, the FLT has added 17 new fee projects and 13 new easement projects.

In 2012, the FLT completed one of its largest projects, the Avery Brook Watershed Project. This project included 180-acres of a historic riverside farm that had been in the Avery family since the 1870s, donated by Avery grandson Rick Miller and family in support of the project. An additional 75-acres of adjacent forestland was donated by Thorvald (Skip) and Peggy Tenney. The 255-acre property includes forests, wetlands, fields, and nearly all of the Avery Brook catchment area, including the entire length of Avery Brook West (4,500+ feet), nearly all of Avery Brook East (2,800+ feet), and 1,700 feet along the South Branch of the Piscataquog River. Match conservation easement properties protected an additional 3,100 feet along Rand Brook and 2,450 feet along the South Branch.

Other major fee projects included the 68-acre Moulton Memorial Forest Project, which included a house and was donated by Ted Moulton as a memorial to the Moulton/Cleaves family. Mr. Moulton was the last surviving relative of Royal “Spike” Cleaves. Spike, mentally challenged after contracting measles encephalitis as a young boy, lived his whole life in Fracestown and was well-loved by the community. Mr. Moulton spent many happy summers on the property along with his cousin Spike and felt that this was a way to give back to the community. Another important acquisition was the 150-acre Schott/Brennan Falls Project, donated by the Schott family, which includes Brennan Falls, as well as an old cellar hole from Fracestown’s Lost Village.

Other major easement projects over the last 15 years include the 117-acre Arnold Family Conservation Easement and the 41-acre Carey Easement. The latter helps protect the iconic view of the fields and the beautiful old dairy barn when entering Fracestown from New Boston.

In May 2022, Fracestown lost Abigail Arnold who was a huge presence in the town and in the FLT community. In addition to her volunteer work serving on the Select Board, Planning Board, and for other organizations, she served on the FLT board for more than 12 years. In that role, she worked with landowners on prospective conservation projects, applied for grants, and wrote articles for *The Fracestown News*. She secured private donations, drafted easements, prepared policy positions and countless other tasks.



She had a prominent role in both the **2010 by 2010** campaign and the **Headwaters Project**. The Arnold, Arnold Family, and Wicklow/Arnold easements are perhaps the most tangible part of her legacy. The FLT has named its Legacy Society in honor of her memory.

In addition to Abigail Arnold, other significant contributors to the FLT over the past decades include: Scot Heath, who was present at the creation of FLC; Greg Neilley whose tenure on the board dates to 1997; Ben Haubrich and Barry Wicklow who have been on the board since 2003; and Betsy Hardwick, who proved an especially persuasive advocate for conservation in Francestown and who has served lengthy tenures on both the conservation commission and land trust. Each of these individuals has left an indelible stamp on the FLT and provides a real role model for those who will carry their mission forward.

In 2023, the FLT and FCC updated their *Saving Special Places* program, originally created to support the “2010 by 2010” campaign, by running a series of *Celebrating Special Places* articles in *The Francestown News*. The series continued as *Special Places Matter* in 2024, when the FLT and FCC also collaborated on two new community outreach programs: “Exploring our Trails” with group hikes to encourage the public to get out on protected properties; and “Lessons in the Forest” which offers guided presentations on the land’s history, landscapes, flora and fauna.

Also in 2024, the FLT created the Robin Haubrich Volunteer award in recognition of Robin’s decades of volunteer work designing and managing the FLT Newsletter. The FLT also formally designated an area of Rand Brook Forest as a developing old growth forest in 2024.

In 2025, FLT successfully completed the “Green Corridor Campaign,” which raised the funds needed to acquire a conservation easement on a critical 55-acre parcel surrounded by other conserved land. This keystone property creates a “green” corridor of hiking trails within Francestown, and the region, by linking together major conserved blocks of land, including the Shattuck Pond Town Forest, St. Jean / Turnpike Trails, and the Crotched Mountain Town Forest.

In 2025, the FLT completed its most recent fee acquisition, the 75-acre Ames New Hampshire Land Trust, donated by Larry and Rob Ames. The land, which abuts both Poor Farm Road and Bible Hill Road Extension, conserves important habitat and is open for public pedestrian use.

Looking Ahead

Today, at age 40, the Francestown Land Trust remains true to its founding purpose to preserve Francestown’s natural land areas for future generations.

We recognize that our past and future successes depend not just on our own efforts, but on partnerships with other organizations, first and foremost the Francestown Conservation Commission, and notably the SPNHF and PLC.

Over the years, essential grant support has been received from: the Land and Conservation Heritage Investment Program, Fields Pond, Aquatic Resource Mitigation Fund, the Davis Conservation Foundation, the Russell Piscataquog River Watershed Foundation, the Verney Foundation, Trout Unlimited, the McIninch Foundation, and project transaction funding from the Merrimack Conservation Partnership Program.

And, of course, FLT could not have succeeded without the ongoing support of its dedicated members, generous donors, and easement grantors.

What began in 1986 as a small gathering around a kitchen table has grown into a mature land trust protecting thousands of acres, safeguarding water quality, sustaining wildlife habitat, and offering meaningful opportunities for recreation and community engagement. As of March 2026, FLT owns 24 fee projects totaling 1,334 acres and holds 37 easements covering 1,871 acres for a total of 3,205 conserved acres.

And, with your support, the work continues.