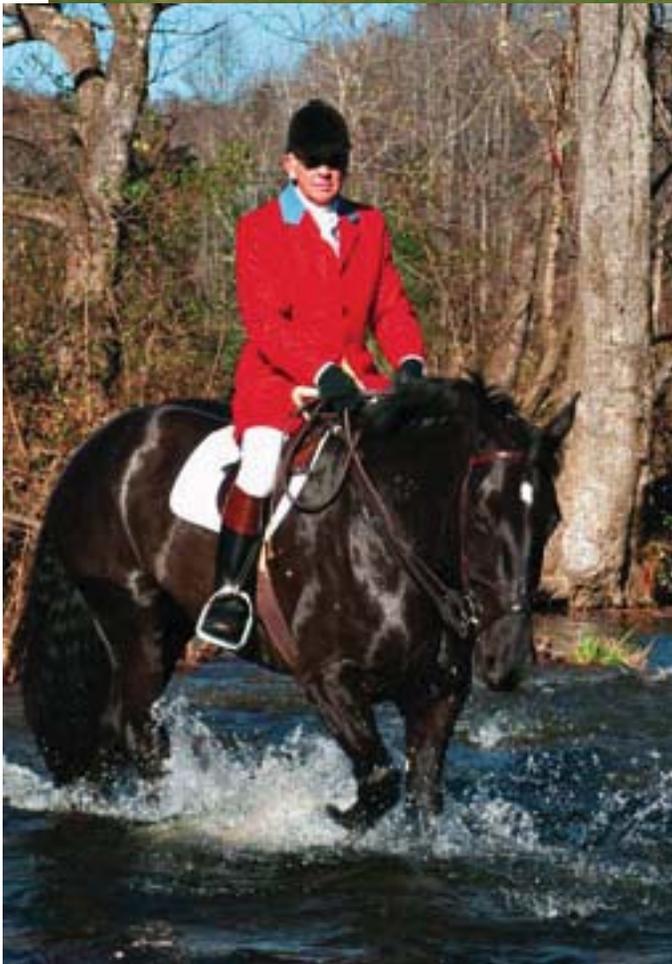
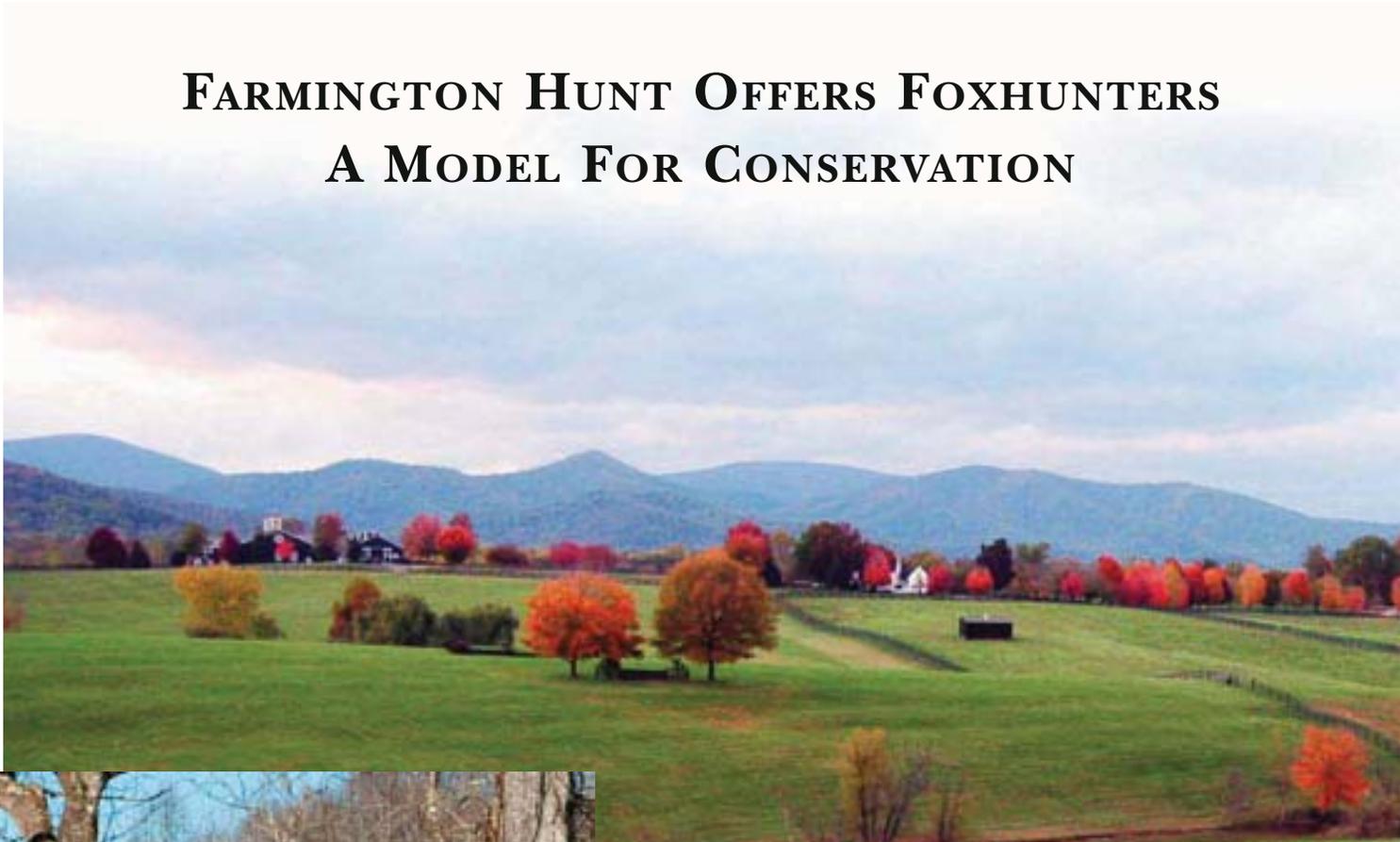




## FARMINGTON HUNT OFFERS FOXHUNTERS A MODEL FOR CONSERVATION



*Left: "If we'd started sooner, there's a lot of country we might not have lost. If we'd had that enlightened outlook that we have now 15 years ago, we'd be in much better shape than we are now," said John Birdsall.*

*(Cathy Summers Photo)*



*Above:* Foxridge, a farm John Birdsall bought and then sold after putting it under easement, is the center jewel in a necklace of land that he's put into permanent conservation easement.

*One member's efforts earn the Virginia pack the MFHA's annual award for conservation.*

John Strassburger

SOMETIMES A FOXHUNT IS FORTUNATE to have an MFH or a member who's so committed to preserving their beautiful countryside that everyone else can just follow along, enjoying the benefits of their work.

Think of Nancy Hannum, for 50 years the MFH of Mr. Stewart's Cheshire Foxhounds (Pa.), or Eve Fout, for more than 50 years a member of the Orange County Hunt (Va.), whose packs are each previous winners of the MFHA's Conservation Award.

Hannum, who died in March 2010, and Fout, who died in December 2007, were legendary for their ability to convince neighbors and fellow foxhunters in Unionville, Pa., and Middleburg, Va., to place their farms in permanent conservation easements and to support their local conservation organizations. They were why their hunts' culture was uniquely preservation oriented.

The Farmington Hunt, this year's winner of the Masters of Foxhounds association Conservation Award, is lucky to have a similarly committed and influential member. He's turned the hunt's ethic into one focused on preserving the spectacular country its members enjoy west and south of the mushrooming city of Charlottesville, located in the heart of Virginia, just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

**"J.B. is a beacon for our hunt, the man that we follow. Hopefully a lot of people will follow our example."**

—Beth Sutton

Farmington is the fourth Virginia pack to earn the MFHA award, and its members can thank John Birdsall. His efforts during the last 25 years have led to more than 65,000 acres in the Farmington territory being placed in permanent conservation easement, including 23 of the hunt's 30 regular fixtures.

"J.B. is a beacon for our hunt, the man that we follow. He's a quiet, behind-the-scenes guy who's very influential," said Beth Sutton, a devoted Farmington member since 1970. "It's an unusual thing to ride for three hours without crossing your path and still be only five minutes from a shopping center.

Sutton added, "People come to Charlottesville because it's protected and beautiful, and J.B. is the reason for that. Hopefully a lot of people will follow our example."

## ► He's Always Been A Hunter

Birdsall discovered foxhunting in the early '60s, while a student at the University of Virginia, the main "industry" of Charlottesville. That was also when he was introduced to his future wife, Mary Scott, daughter of foxhunter and sportsman Everingham Blake.

"I met a girl that I fell in love with, and it was the only way to court her. I fell in love with her, and I fell in love with the sport. It was that simple," he said.

Beth Sutton Photo



## An April Event To Celebrate The MFHA Award

John Birdsall, Beth Sutton and other Farmington Hunt members are hoping to make some hay from the MFHA's Conservation Award with a celebration on April 14, featuring the premiere of the documentary film *Thoroughbred*.

The movie will be released nationwide on PBS on May 5.

Academy Award-winning producer Paul Wagner lives in Charlottesville, Va., at the center of Farmington Hunt's territory, so Sutton and Birdsall are putting together an evening that they hope will raise enough money to make a sizeable donation to the Piedmont Environmental Council in the hunt's name.

The event will be held at the historic Paramount Theater in downtown Charlottesville. Famous Thoroughbred breeder Arthur B. Hancock III is featured in the movie, and he'll be there to talk after the movie about the famous horses he's bred and stood at stud, the making of the movie, and more. Hancock, whose father "Bull" Hancock founded the legendary Claiborne Farm in Lexington, Ky., has garnered his own fame as owner of Stone Farm and breeder of Kentucky Derby winners Gato Del Sol (1982) and Sunday Silence (1989).

"This award is an opportunity to let people know what we're doing in conservation and about the PEC," said Sutton. "I think it could be significant for other hunts to see us as an institutional donor to the PEC and for other conservation groups to see a foxhunt supporting the PEC."

Birdsall is a director of the PEC, the leading proponent of open-space conservation and habitat preservation in Virginia.

John Birdsall (*second left*) accepted the MFHA's Conservation Award in January, along with Farmington masters (*from left*) Carol Easter, Pat Butterfield and Joy Crompton.

Foxhunting wasn't a difficult sell, since Birdsall had grown up bird hunting and fishing in Palm Beach County, Fla. After their marriage, the couple returned to Florida so John could run the family business, Tropical Shipping, from which he retired in the mid-'80s. In 1987 they moved to Charlottesville, where Mary had grown up, but before that they'd bought a sizeable parcel her father owned and needed to sell.

"We scraped enough together to buy that parcel from him with the idea that we would preserve it. That's how it started," said John.

Since then, he's placed conservation easements on 12 properties, including the family farm, Schelford, where they live. He sold one of those properties after putting it in easement, but the Birdsalls own 1,600 acres of land under easement, about 1,300 acres of which is contiguous, west of Charlottesville.

When they returned to Charlottesville, the Birdsalls found their alma mater and its town were expanding at a frightening pace. And John saw a disturbing similarity to what he'd seen happen in Florida, where sprawl had overwhelmed the land he'd enjoyed so while growing up.

"I couldn't do anything about it then, but I was going to do something about it now," he said.

Like Hannum and Fout, John bought all the land he could to place it under easement. And, like them, he also set about convincing his fellow Farmington members and his neighbors to do the same—while in the hunting field, by knocking on doors or while hosting neighborhood cocktail parties. The Virginia Outdoors Foundation, a state-supported but independently run land trust, holds all of John's easements. He's a former VOF co-chairman.

(Beth Sutton Photo)



John has also lobbied for 20 years on government policy to exempt land under easement from the federal estate tax. He's worked extensively on this with leaders of the Piedmont Environmental Council, one of the country's most active pro-conservation political-action groups, based in Northern Virginia. Fout was PEC chairman for more than a decade. A landmark change in 1997 allowed an exemption of \$500,000 for protected land, and John and the PEC are working to increase that exemption to \$5 million, as a major land-conservation incentive.

## You can see evidence of the hunt's "culture of conservation" in the level of involvement by Farmington's members in land-use planning.

"When my wife's father died, if we hadn't been able to buy his farm from the estate, it would have been sold to pay the taxes, and I'm sure it would have been intensely developed," said John. "So realizing that, and talking to a neighbor who I was trying to encourage to put an easement on her property, this bell went off in my head that the federal government, which has no other effect on land use, has a deleterious effect on it through the estate tax.

"I had the idea, and what do you do with an idea like that? Through PEC, I got an initiative started," he added.

In Virginia, a tax credit allows landowners to "transfer" (really, to sell) tax credits to others who need them to pay state taxes. This means that there is a market for land-rich and cash-poor farmers, and other landowners, to sell potentially large tax credits that they otherwise can't use and get cash. The law allows 40 percent of an easement's value to be used or sold as a tax credit.

"There are brokers who have made a business of brokering these credits, so the market is fairly liquid," said Sherry Buttrick, who has worked with John as head of the VOF's Charlottesville office and as a Farmington follower. "Landowners can get cash to put back into the farm, to pay off heirs who are entitled to value but do not wish to retain the family farm, or to pay expenses that could otherwise force a sale of a property. It's been a huge motivator for landowners who formerly gained little benefit from [an easement's] tax benefits."

Said Sutton, "Every time we hunt, we have

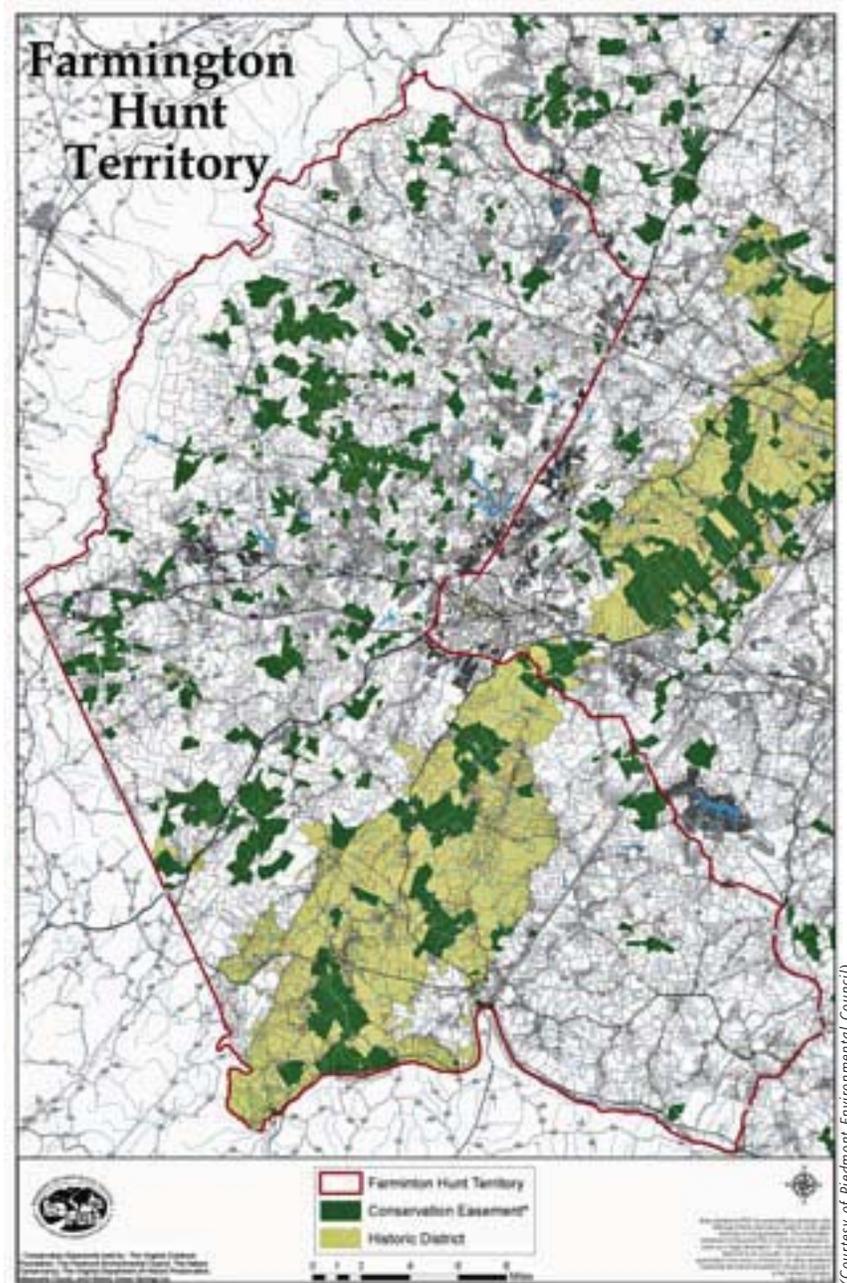
A map of the Farmington Hunt's territory shows its proximity to Charlottesville, Va., (center), the wide distribution of the 65,000 acres of easements and how much more countryside could still be protected.

J.B. to thank for it. We're still here because of him. He's helped influence a culture of conservation by allowing us to see the fruits of it."

### ► "More To Do"

You can see evidence of the hunt's "culture of conservation" in the level of involvement by Farmington's members in land-use planning. One member is chairman of the Albemarle County Acquisition of Conservation Easement program, and three members have served on the county's Board of Supervisors. All told, 13 members currently serve on a county or a conservancy board. Albemarle County, which surrounds Charlottesville, ranks second in the state in percentage of land preserved under conservation easement.

But John believes commitment like this is just the begin-



(Courtesy of Piedmont Environmental Council)



Yadkin Farm, home of Farmington Hunt Club President Reynolds Cowles at the foot of Buck Mountain, is one of the hunt's 23 meets protected by a permanent conservation easement. *(Evie Cowles Photo)*

ning for foxhunters. When he accepted the MFHA's award in New York City on Jan. 28, he issued a challenge to the masters assembled from all over the United States.

"My challenge is for every single foxhunter and every single hunt to fully and truly support their local land trust. And if there isn't one, they should start one," said John.

"Everyone should do it, and it's an enigma to me why more people haven't," he added. "I think a lot of foxhunters have

done it, but why more haven't is one of those things that those of us who've been involved in land conservation struggle with."

Too often, John said, masters have been unwilling to take up the preservation banner and have resorted to just moving their country farther away from town, a strategy members have largely accepted as inevitable. But it doesn't have to be that way, he continued, pointing out that the MFHA award was established by Jimmy Young and the late Charlie Whitehouse,

## The Legacy Of MFH Jill Summers

The Farmington Hunt Club was established in 1929, succeeding the Albemarle Hunt Club, whose members followed hounds over mostly the same territory they still hunt today, in Virginia's Albemarle, Greene and Fluvanna counties.

One of the hunt's most influential masters was Jill Summers, MFH from 1968 until she died in 2008. Her son, A. Burks Summers, is now a jt-MFH. It was under Jill's leadership, said Farmington member Beth Sutton, that the hunt's followers began to discover that they could influence Charlottesville's sprawl. Jill saw how suburban sprawl was endangering the life she cherished.

"Her legacy is the example she set for all of us," said Sutton. "Always immaculately turned out, no matter what the weather or circumstance, she served the hunt first as a fieldmaster and later was able to give that job to others and whip in. Working with the hounds was her primary interest. She

loved the hounds and was intensely interested and involved in the breeding program that she developed over her long career as MFH."

Sutton, who moved from Kentucky to Charlottesville in 1970 to attend the University of Virginia, spent a summer as a working student in Jill's stable in 1974. "She was a lovely, tiny person who rode beautifully, and she was a shining example of a great horsewoman and foxhunter," said Sutton.

Jill conveyed a great respect for the natural world. "She loved her horses, her family and her hounds, and she loved and protected the land, all the creatures that lived on it, and the plants and flowers (her passion) that grew there," said Sutton. "She treated the landowners with due respect and a sense of responsibility typical of a true Southern lady. We were all proud to be in her company and a member of her hunt."



two masters of the Orange County Hunt, after they (and Fout) played major roles in fighting off a Disney theme park at the edge of their hunting country in 1994.

## “We’ve achieved a lot, but there’s still a lot to do.”

—John Birdsall

“If the master isn’t banging on the drum, then no one is listening—even Farmington has really just started to bang on the drum,” he said. “It’s got to start at the top for the rest of the club to be engaged. The MFH has to be a champion—there’s no way around it.”

John believes especially strongly that all foxhunters—indeed, all horse owners—who own sizeable properties should either donate an easement on their property to their local land trust or participate in their county’s purchase of development rights program, if their county offers this program.

While he realizes that some landowners are wary of encumbering their land with a conservation easement, especially if they have several heirs, John points out the estate-tax exclusion for property under easement usually makes the property more valuable than if it were divided up and sold.

“It may not be perfect, but I don’t know of any better conservation tool, because it’s what we can do privately,” he said. “I think it’s the only option we have right now, and I think it’s

a good one. I can’t imagine any other design that would work better.”

He regrets that he didn’t start protecting Farmington’s territory sooner and wishes his comrades had been quicker to see the light he’s long seen. “If we’d started sooner, there’s a lot of country we might not have lost. If we’d had that enlightened outlook that we have now 15 years ago, we’d be in much better shape than we are now,” said John.

“We’ve achieved a lot, but there’s still a lot to do,” he added. ◀

### CORRECTION

In the article “Sylvia McDonald Has Always Believed In Being Correct” (Jan. 24, p. 52), the author incorrectly reported that Dr. G. Marvin Beeman will be retiring. While he said that his scarlet coat was “ready for retirement,” Beeman himself is not. He’s worn out four or more scarlet coats in his 67 years of wearing them, and his current coat is now threadbare—and ready for retirement. But he plans to continue in his current role as MFH and huntsman for Arapahoe Hunt (Colo.) for the foreseeable future. Beeman, 77, is also a past president and current director at large of the Masters of Foxhounds Association.



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