

# Preserving the Past: Historic Preservation of Rhode Island Agricultural Landscapes



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Undergraduate Environmental  
Studies Senior Thesis

# Introduction

- Threatened Agricultural Related Resource
  - Land
  - History
  - Culture
- Central Question: *How can private land owners in Rhode Island preserve their historically important farmland?*
- My personal interest
  - Imagination Farm, Greenwood, ME
  - Ninian Stein's undergrad thesis; Lebanon Mills



# Overview of Presentation

- Historical Preservation
  - Movement
  - Rhode Island
    - Environmental
    - Historical
    - Agricultural
  - Strategies
  - Currently Preserved
- Case Study: Old Forge Farm
  - Significance
  - History:
    - Agricultural
    - Environmental
    - Family
  - Preservation
  - Concerns and Limitations
  - Resources
  - Recommendations

# Historical Preservation Movement

- What is historic preservation?
- Why is it important to preserve agricultural land?
- Preserving a multidimensional site:
  - landscape
  - family history
  - historical buildings

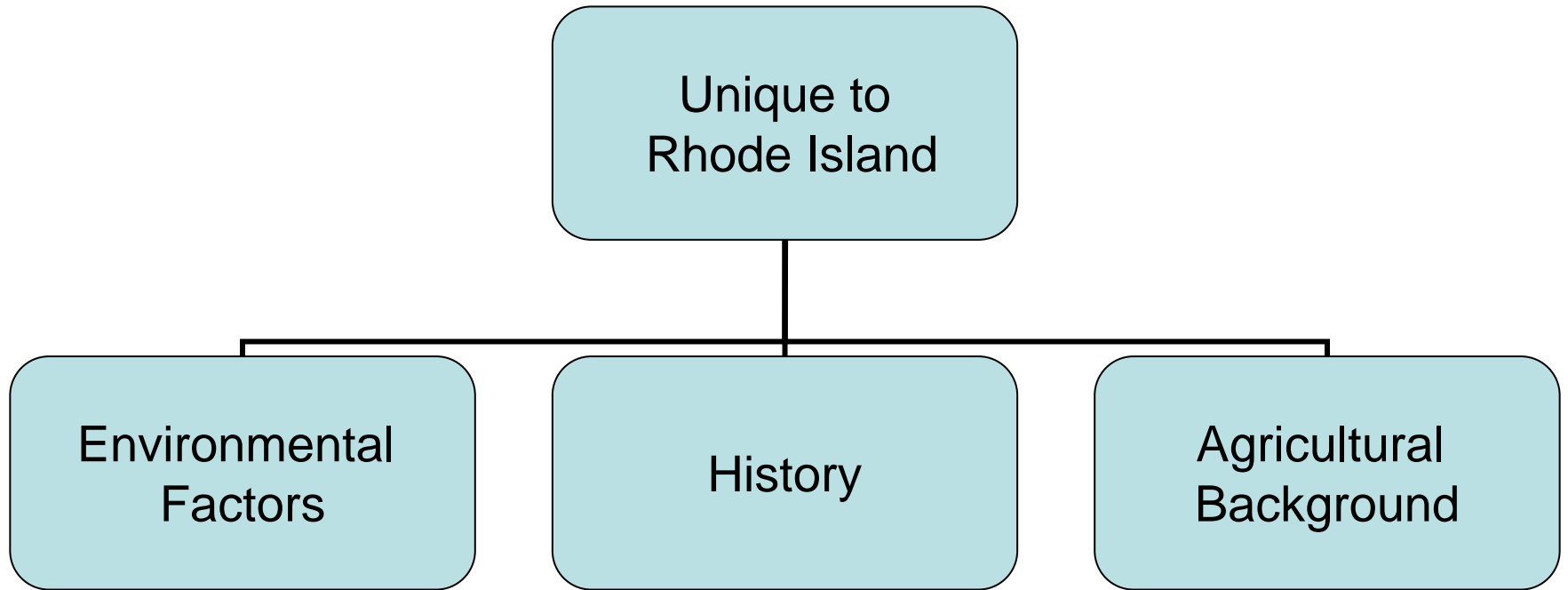


# Preservation Strategies

## 4 Main Categories of Farmland Preservation

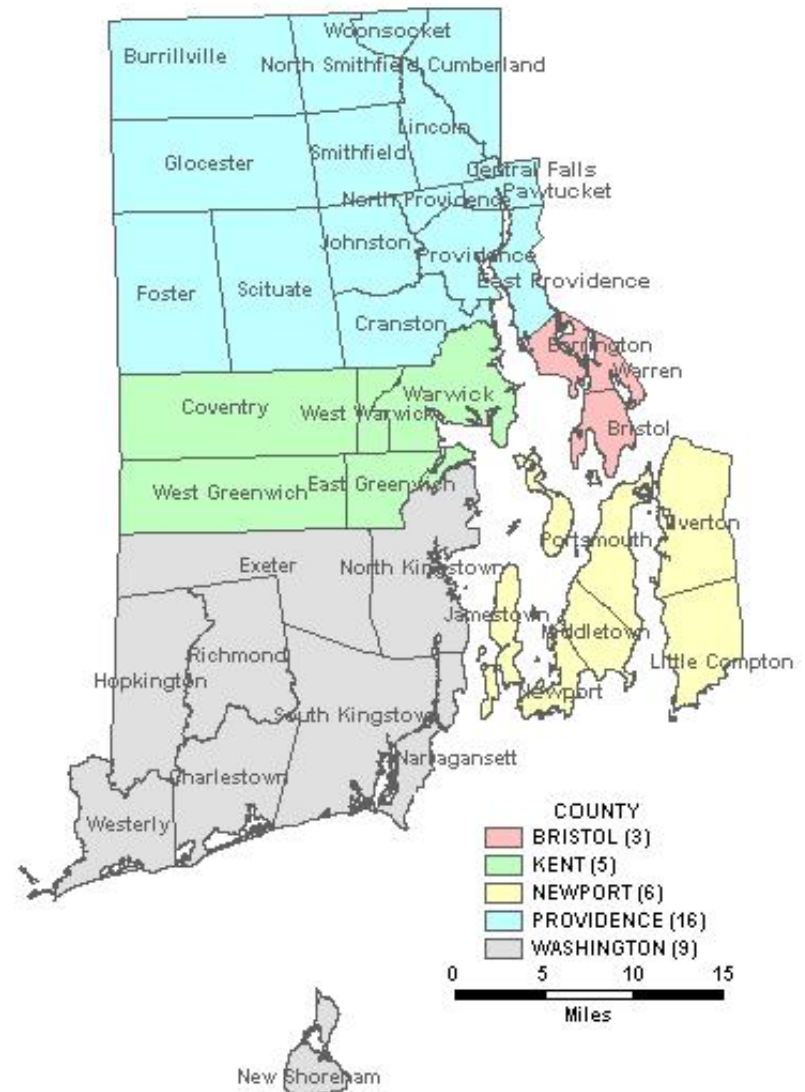
- Regulation (Command and Control Techniques)
  - Agricultural Zoning and Agricultural Districts
  - Historic Preservation Zoning: Kingston, RI
  - Environmental easements
  - Right-to-Farm
- Market-Based Techniques
  - Subsidies: Farm, Forest and Open Space Act
  - Taxes: USDA Land and Water Conservation Fund
  - Acquisition
    - Fee Simple
    - Purchase of Development Rights
    - Transfer of Development Rights
- Information-Based Techniques
  - Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
- Other
  - Private Agreements
  - Contracts

# Rhode Island Preservation



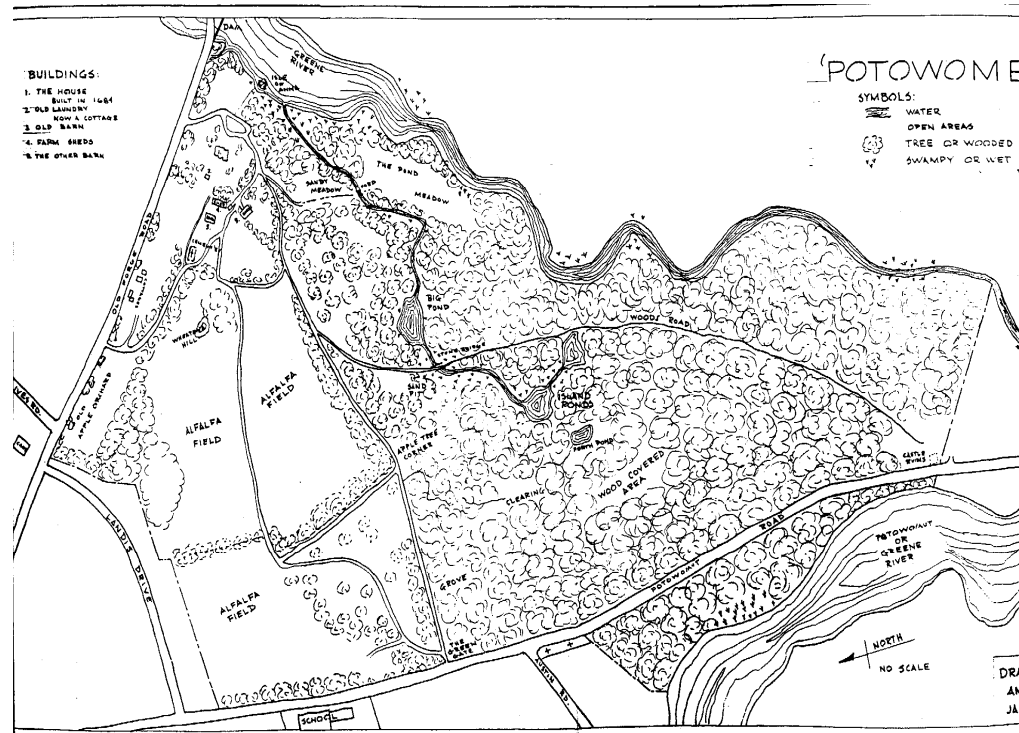
# Presently Preserved in Rhode Island

- Farms in RI:
  - 6,537 ag-acres preserved of 33,022 total ag-acres = 19% preserved in state
- Specific to Kent County
  - 43 registered “farms”, 4,718 total ag-acres = 14% of state
- East Greenwich
  - 6 registered “farms”, 455 total ag-acres = 9% of county



# Case Study: Old Forge Farm

*What historic preservation technique would be best suited for Tom Greene's farm?*



- Owner: Tom Casey Greene
- 179.9 acres
- Potowomut section of East Greenwich, RI
- Riverfront property: Hunt/Potowomut/Greene River
- Est. 1684

# Significance of Old Forge Farm

- What makes Old Forge Farm unique?
  - Rich family history
  - Interested, Educated and Willing Owner
  - Valuable Open Space
  - Diverse Landscape
  - Educational opportunities



# Old Forge Farm: Agricultural History

## Agricultural Timeline



**1684:** Land purchase and Farmhouse Construction

**1770's:** Stonewalls Erected

**1848:** Transformed into a Gentleman's Farm

**1910-11:** Chesnutt Split Rail Fence Constructed

**1917-1945:** Grew Potatoes to support war effort during WWI & WWII

**1940:** First Tractor and Snow Plow

**1940-1950:** Barbed Wire Fences

**1953:** Last Dairy Cows

**2006:** 30-35 acres of Alf-Alpha Fields

# Old Forge Farm; Environmental History

- **1720-1730:** Anchor Forge
- **1899:** Gristmill is taken down
- **4** freshwater ponds on land
- Maple Reforestation
- About **20** acres of low-lying wetlands
- River hasn't frozen over in **20-25** years



# Old Forge Farm; Family Lineage

- **1684:** Est. by James Greene
- James son, Jabez Greene, dams Hunt's River
- **1740:** Greene family cemetery established on grounds with Jabez's death
- **1742:** Birthplace of Revolutionary War General Nathanael Greene, Jabez's grandson
- **1848:** Richard Ward Greene transformed land into a working gentleman farm
- **1930:** Tom Casey Greene born



# Old Forge Farm; Preservation

- **1990:** State Farm \$
- Development and Water Rights Capped on **155.3 acres**
- SPNEA Donation written into will
- Historic New England visits
- **1989:** Restoration of old gate
- House is mostly original
- Original wallpaper (**150 yrs old**)
- Historical artifacts
- Family photos
- Preserved bedroom



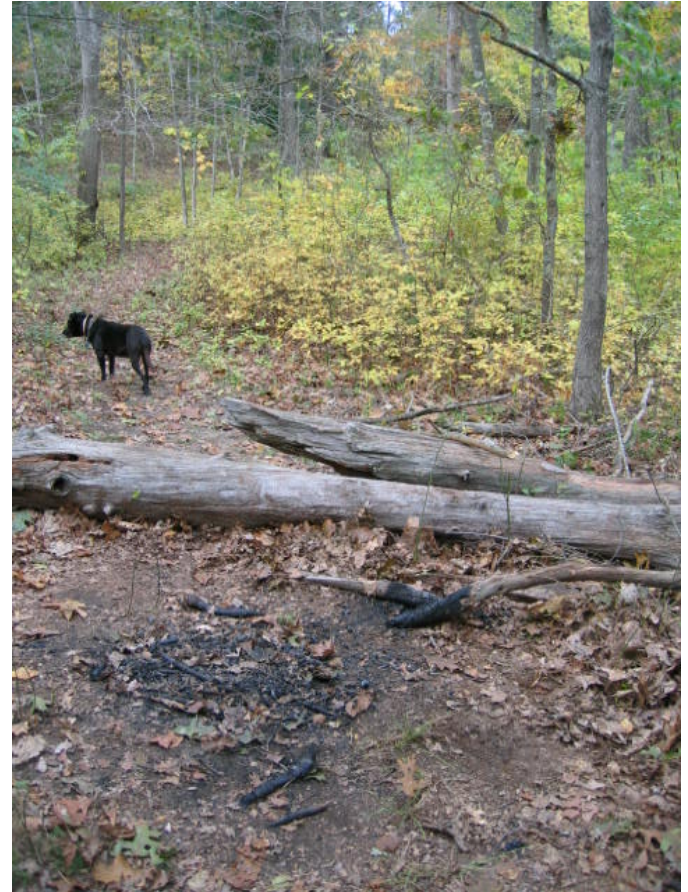
# Site Limitations for Preservation



- No direct heir
- 3 rental units
- Security concerns
- Funding and Qualification
- High Taxation Level
- Historic House in need of renovation

# Tom's Concerns about the Future of Old Forge Farm

- Museum
- Biased Preservation of Organizations/Curators
- Parking
- Property Rights
- “Preserving Ownership”
- Vandalism and Trespassing
- Changing Historic House



# Resources Available for Rhode Island Farmers

- RI Specific
  - Organizations
    - SPNEA
    - Historic New England
    - RIIHPHC
  - Legislation
    - Farm, Forest and Open Space Act
    - Rhode Island Greenways Plan 2020
    - Rule against Perpetuities

# Casey Farm: RI Historic Agriculture Preservation Model

- Saunderstown, R.I., 300 acres
- Stewardship Program
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program
- Established in 1993
- Farm 200+ shareholders
- Feeds 1,000+ people
- 60+ kinds of vegetables and fruit
- Open to tours of the historic house, cutting garden and family graveyard



# Casey Farm Model vs. Old Forge Farm: Barriers and Opportunities

- **Barriers**

- Tom's hesitation with government regulation
- Degradation of site with use
- Tom's fear of improper renovation
- High Taxes
- Low Income
- "Wasteland"

- **Opportunities**

- 30-35 acres of active farmed land
- USDA funding
- Wetlands classification
- Farm, Forest or Open Space qualification
- Life Estate
- National Heritage Farm
- Educational/Recreational

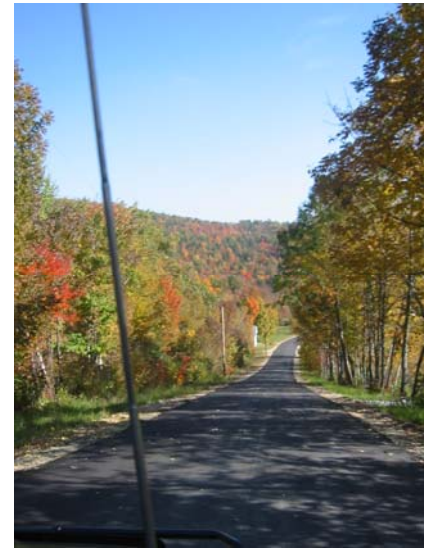
# Conclusions & Recommendations



- Preservation is Trial and Error
- Focus on Assets of Land to Exploit
- Flexibility of Landowner
- Examine Federal, Local and Private Funding
- Involve the Community

# Thank You's

- Ninian Stein (secondary advisor)
- Caroline Karp (primary advisor)
- Tom Casey Greene
- Nina Townsend
- Prof Steven Lubar
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- Brown Track and Field



# Questions or Comments?

