

# 1,000 acres once owned by Campbell's Soup scion are now a Pa. preserve

It took 10 years, but Pennsylvania, with the help of conservation groups, acquired nearly 1,000 acres that will be protected open space as part of the White Clay Creek Preserve. But, just as it was about to make its public debut, it was shut because of COVID-19.

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER By [Frank Kummer](#) Jul. 21, 2020, 5:00 a.m. ET

Nearly 1,000 acres of rolling farmland, meadows, and forests spill around a meandering creek in southern Chester County near the Maryland line.

The land was part of a complex real estate transaction that took more than 10 years to acquire the 978-acre parcel from George Strawbridge Jr., an octogenarian scion of the Dorrance family of Campbell's Soup fame and a top horse breeder. It is situated in Elk and Franklin Townships off Strickersville Road.

The Conservation Fund finalized the sale of the property for \$32.25 million through a series of grants from the Mount Cuba Center, Chester County, and Pennsylvania. Then it deeded the property to the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources as a preserve. The transaction was completed in March.

Now, state officials have to decide what to do with it all — a task they say they are happy to have in a rare chance to preserve such a large tract in a rapidly growing area. “To get 1,000 acres donated to a state park is pretty amazing,” Lexi Rose, a park manager for the DCNR, said on a recent tour of the property. She said they’re starting with a “blank slate.”

“We’re assessing what we want to do with the property. Do we want to keep some of the history? What do we want to change?” Rose said. “It has a trail on it, but does it make sense to keep that open, or create others? We’re just in the very beginning stages of getting a master plan started.”

The DCNR will manage the land as part of the Big Elk Creek section of White Clay Creek Preserve. The property is contiguous with about 8,000 acres of preserved open space in Pennsylvania and Maryland, and provides a corridor for an array of wildlife species, some threatened.

Rose said that since the property is part of a preserve, its use will be more restricted than a typical state park. “People can still fish and hike,” she said, “but you’re not going to see too many overcrowded picnic areas or a swimming pool. A preserve is much more low-impact.”

Rose said a master plan would include input from the National Park Service, local governments, and groups such as Friends of White Clay Creek Preserve, a volunteer organization. The plan could take three to five years.

The existing 2.1-mile Springlawn trail runs through the property along Big Elk Creek, a tributary of the Chesapeake Bay. It borders a forest of oak, maple, birch, and beech trees, and flora such as ferns, wineberry, yellow archangel, and lion's foot.

“We have to ask, what's going to be good for the land? How can we preserve it while keeping in mind recreation? That's the balance we have to strike,” Rose said.

White Clay Creek Preserve is split in two. The titular main preserve is to the east, adjacent to Delaware. The Big Elk Creek section lies to the west on the Maryland line. The new addition to the Big Elk Creek section is the second large property purchased from Strawbridge.

In 2009, the Conservation Fund acquired 735 acres from Strawbridge and transferred ownership to the DCNR. The property became known as the Big Elk Creek section of White Clay Creek Preserve. It contains 2.1 miles of the Mason-Dixon line along the Pennsylvania-Maryland border and adjoins the 5,300-acre Fair Hill Natural Resource Management Area in Maryland.

More than 690 plant species have been identified on the Strawbridge properties, 15 of which are considered endangered or rare in Pennsylvania. The land provides habitat for deer, rabbits, birds, and other wildlife, such as the regal fritillary butterfly and the short-eared owl.

“This part of Chester County is like the land that time forgot — rolling farmland, quiet country roads, forest,” said Blaine Phillips, who led the recent acquisition for the Conservation Fund.

“From the beginning, we realized how important this project was,” Phillips said. “We realized the huge upside of doing this, and consequently the downside of not doing it. We had a knee-jerk reaction that this land needed to be protected.”

Phillips said it was a “once-in-a-lifetime shot” to be able to purchase land connected to so many other thousands of acres of already protected land.

Jeff Downing, executive director of the Mount Cuba Center, a private foundation based in Hockessin, Del., said the organization offered a grant toward the purchase price because the land checked off so many important boxes: size, connections with surrounding open space, and large biodiversity.

Though the foundation is based in Delaware, Downing said it was important that the land be preserved forever by Pennsylvania.

“It's just in a special place,” Downing said. “It fills a piece in a much larger puzzle.”

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