



STEPFATHER OF SOLEBURY CONSERVATION? HE WAS SPECIAL



PUBLIC ENEMY #4 JAPANESE KNOTWEED THE INVASIVE BAMBOO LOOK-ALIKE



FARMING IN BUCKS COUNTY SHADY FOX FARM IN DOYLESTOWN



LAND TRUST STEWARDSHIP OUR JOB NEVER ENDS

CONSERVATOR

Autumn in Bucks County

Oscar Wilde once wrote "And all at once, summer collapsed into fall." Defined in our hemisphere as the period between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice, it is a time when the pace of life shifts and all living things prepare for the winter ahead. As the leaves on deciduous trees change from



green to the vibrant colors we associate with fall foliage, many birds begin their migration to warmer climates and animals prepare by gathering and storing food. For birdwatchers and animal lovers it is a great time to observe.

Bucks County's unique combination of natural beauty, great weather, and enjoyable activities make autumn a favorite time of the year for many people.



In Bucks County it is harvest season. Time for visiting apple orchards, going on a hayride, pumpkin picking, and enjoying seasonal foods and beverages made from freshly harvested produce.

[Why do trees lose their leaves?](#)

A time for warm pumpkin spice lattes, apple pies, and foods that comfort us as the days become shorter and the temperature drops.



It is a time of festivals and holidays that bring people together such as Halloween and Thanksgiving. So don your favorite sweater and enjoy all that our beautiful county has to offer.



Bucks 100 Road Rally

On October 1st we held our annual road rally. Starting at the Solebury Township Building, participants traversed a scenic 100 km-long route through Solebury and Upper Makefield Townships.



The rally ended at Sycamore Farm, a beautiful preserved farm in New Hope, where refreshments were served and awards were presented. The rally winners were

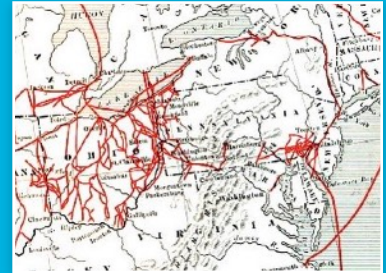
1st Place: Reb Brooks, **2nd Place:** Regina Rodwell-Bell, **3rd Place:** Adam Pitel



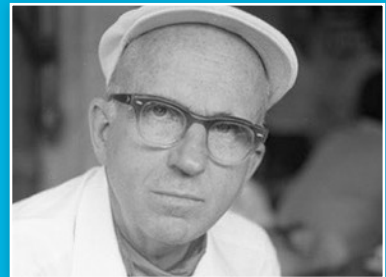
Congratulations to the winners and our thanks to all those who helped with planning and running the event. A special thanks to Debbie Brady at Sycamore Farm and Solebury Township.

Did you Know?

Click and Learn



Bucks County played a significant role in the Underground Railroad during the 19th Century



Renowned author James A. Michener resided in Bucks County



Bucks Co. has 12 covered bridges and a society dedicated to protecting and preserving them

The Stepfather of Solebury Conservation

By David Johnson

As of 2023 over 40% of Solebury Township's total land area is permanently protected from development through conservation easements. This level of preservation is an impressive testament to the work and dedication of numerous individuals. Although today conservation easements are an accepted and understood practice for preservation, thirty years ago many landowners questioned whether placing their farm or property under preservation was a wise decision due to long term financial or legal implications. Many of those pioneers who made the commitment over 30 years ago proved that preserving and being reimbursed now for the potential future sale of a farm or large property was a sound decision that would stand the test of time as well as benefiting the entire community.



While many landowners take years to finally decide on preserving their property, for some the decision is forced on them sooner rather than later by the threat of encroaching development.



This was certainly the case in the early 1990s in Solebury Township, particularly for residents along Meetinghouse Road as extremely large sections of land were under the control of developers. Many of the earliest properties preserved in the township are in this area: preserved by residents trying to protect in perpetuity their properties from the threat of large scale development encroaching along the Route 202 corridor. At the same time, Bucks County, seeing development poised to

remove thousands of acres of farmland, started preserving many farms in Buckingham through its Agricultural Land Preservation program. What caused local residents and municipalities to rally to preserve their communities from developers who threatened to construct thousands of new homes in Solebury? It is a story worth telling and goes all the way back to the 1950s and a man named Lowell Birrell.

Lowell Birrell was born in 1907 in Whiteland Indiana to a Presbyterian minister. By all accounts he was an intelligent child with a very humble upbringing. Determined not to be poor he attended Syracuse University and worked at a New York City law firm after graduating from the University of

Michigan Law School in 1928. Through a long series of complex and usually nefarious transactions, Birrell started acquiring corporations through stock transactions and insurance fraud. By the mid-to-late 1950s the New York Attorney General realized that what Birrell was doing was essentially creating ponzi schemes and attempted to indict him. Birrell fled initially to Cuba but when Castro took over in 1958 he fled to Brazil. He was extradited back to the US in 1967 and eventually found guilty of securities fraud but only served 23 months. He was then found guilty of fraud and served an additional two years. The SEC called him the most brilliant manipulator of corporations in modern times and Attorney Arthur L. Liman, who helped prosecute Birrell, called him the "most notorious stock swindler in the 1950s" and "perhaps the leading wrecker of corporations and deluder of investors in the postwar era."

2-Year Term Imposed On Master Swindler

Lowell McAfee Birrell, one of the master swindlers of our time, was sentenced yesterday to two years in prison on an offense unworthy of his great larcenous soul. He took a bank in Cincinnati for a mere \$5,000.

Federal Judge Frederick vanPelt Bryan said he was taking into consideration the fact that the 62-year-old Birrell had spent two years in prison on other stock swindle charges.

Birrell, who once reportedly controlled 40 corporations, has been free in 5,000 bail trying to upset a 1967 conviction involving unlawful stock sale in a Canadian oil-uranium venture he once headed. He was continued in bond, pending appeal on the new conviction.

The wheeler-dealer was convicted of having used blank stock certificates of Drug Products, Inc., of Belleville, N.J., to obtain the 5,000 loan in 1966 from the First National Bank of Cincinnati.

No Trial for Two

Assistant U.S. Attorney Walter M. Phillips Jr. said the government did not plan to try two co-defendants, Jean Hartford, formerly Sarah Naomi Belle of 155 W. 68th St., and travel agent,



Lowell McAfee Birrell
A matter of a bank loan

Pretty high praise even by today's Bernie Madoff

standards. But how did he end up acquiring over 500 acres of land between Meetinghouse Road and Route 202 in Solebury?

Interestingly enough, Birrell's partner in crime was a man by the name of Stewart Hopps who owned Blackfan Farm on Meetinghouse Road. Birrell and his third wife Merrie would visit to relax and like so many who came to the area fell in love with it and went on a buying spree. He bought an adjacent farm and called it Echo Falls Farm. Then everything behind that farm all the way to Route 202. He bought everything nearby that became available and even Hopps' holdings when he moved to California.



Lowell Birrell would throw extravagant parties inviting New York notables. He hosted horse shows that rivaled Devon. He started breeding black angus cattle and even bought Hendricks Island to raise cattle on until it flooded out in 1955 (He eventually sold the island to PECO who were looking to construct a nuclear power plant along the Delaware). He floated a small yacht on a lake on the farm that had a ship to shore telephone and always took part in the crossing of the Delaware on Christmas Day regaling himself as Colonel Henry Knox.



He threw money around locally like it was water, but eventually it all came crashing down when the feds finally started to catch up with him. He knew President Batista of Cuba through business transactions, so he first skipped town to Cuba where he would hang out with Ernest Hemmingway on his yacht until Fidel Castro took over and almost killed him. Then it was off to Brazil.

Meanwhile back in Solebury, Birrell managed to keep his properties by transferring them to family members and transferring the assets from Echo Falls Farms to another corporation called Solebury Farms, Inc. When everything finally went into receivership, Harold Katz was able to acquire the land and eventually propose it for development.

So what ever happened to Lowell Birrell? One story is that after serving his second sentence he ended up in Cape May, New Jersey working as a short order cook and driving around in one of his black Cadillacs. Whether true or not, Lowell Birrell left a lasting legacy in Solebury Township as he assembled some of the largest holdings of land in the township's history in a location that certainly had the infrastructure and zoning to support large scale development. The transfer of his properties to developers and the subsequent development proposals submitted in the early 1990s stimulated the township and its residents to preserve a large section of the township, particularly these properties along Meetinghouse Road.

Footnote: You can find out much more about Lowell Birrell at the Solebury Township Historical Society.

[Click here to visit the Historical Society's website](#)

David Johnson is a Bucks County farmer and Executive Director of the Land Trust of Bucks Co.

What is a Conservation Easement?

A conservation easement is a voluntary agreement between a landowner and a conservation organization or government that restricts the development or use of a property to protect its natural, scenic, or cultural values. It is intended to preserve the land's conservation values while allowing the landowner to retain ownership and use of the property.

Farming in Bucks County

Kaitlin Farbotnik and Ryan Burton have farming in their blood. They are farmers in Doylestown and we recently spoke with Kaitlin about farming in Bucks County.



Where is your farm located?

"We farm approximately 70 acres on our farm located in Solebury Township called Shady Fox Farm."

What do you Farm?

"We raise grass fed beef, and pasture raised pigs, chickens, and ducks."

How long have you been farming?

"Ryan and I have been farming on my family farm since 2013. This farm has been in my family since 1925 so we are coming up on being a Century Farm.

Ryan's family originally had a farm in Tullytown but later moved up to the Washington Crossing area."

What do you enjoy most about farming in Bucks County?

"The direct marketing and the interaction with the customers and the ability of being able to be a smaller operation and make a go of it. It seems you either have to be small and find a niche market or be a huge operation. It's getting almost impossible to be a mid-sized farmer with the cost of everything today and the work and time involved."

What are some of the challenges with farming in Bucks County?

[Learn more about grass fed beef](#)

"Definitely the lack of support infrastructure. You pretty much have to order everything in for farm related parts and products. Also the cost of farming is getting difficult especially when you are smaller and running older equipment. You have to start making difficult decisions when a piece of equipment breaks down and the part costs \$1500 and the implement is only worth \$2500 when it's running."

How has farmland preservation affected your operation?

"It essentially has allowed us to farm. We would not be able to do what we do here without this property being preserved by our family."

[Why is farmland preservation important?](#)

Would you recommend preservation to other farmers or landowners?

"Absolutely Yes. No hesitation."

What challenges does farming bring to a young couple?

"It's definitely tough. We both work off-farm jobs to support the operation and that is stressful on time especially with animals because you need eyes on everything 24/7. You need to work as a team and try and put aside the stress at the end of the day. We've gotten to the point now of at least being civil to each other after working cattle all day (laughter)."



[Click to visit the Shady Fox Farm website](#)

What would you recommend to a young person who wants to farm in Bucks County.

"Definitely develop a long term plan or strategy depending on your interest or opportunity. I would also strongly recommend taking as many business and marketing classes as you can in school since direct sales is the trend in our area and definitely seems the most profitable way to go since you can set your own pricing and not be controlled by outside market conditions."

What challenges does being a woman in farming present?

"The only thing that can limit a woman is some of the strenuous manual tasks. I have had a few sexist comments at the farmers market from some people who said I didn't look like a typical woman farmer whatever that means (laughter), but other than that I see no challenges in farming that a woman can't handle."

Tell us about your recent experience in Alaska?

"Yes, so recently I spent about 4 months in Alaska for my job managing a team of agronomists, soil scientists and crop consultants providing help for farmers throughout the state. It was an amazing opportunity to help such a variety of operations in such a beautiful and expansive area. We consulted with fish farming operations, reindeer farms (who constantly seem to lose some of their herd as the caribou move through.. Laughter) and small scale organic growers. I would say that I was surprised by the number of small scale farming operations selling direct produce throughout the state and saw many similarities to small farm operations in this area. It was a wonderful experience that I will never forget."

Public Enemy No. 4

Public enemy #4 in our series on invasive species is Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*): a highly invasive plant native to East Asia. Known for its rapid growth and ability to spread quickly, it can significantly damage ecosystems and infrastructure.



Japanese knotweed is often mistaken for bamboo because they are similar in appearance, particularly its tall, hollow stems and bamboo-like growth pattern. However, they are not the same plant and belong to different botanical families.

Unlike Bamboo which belongs to the grass family *Poaceae* and is a perennial evergreen, Japanese knotweed is a herbaceous perennial plant in the *Polygonaceae* family. It is known for its rapid growth and ability to spread aggressively.

The Problem with Japanese Knotweed

Introduced to America in the late 19th Century as an ornamental, it has bamboo-like stems with large, heart-shaped leaves that grow in a zigzag pattern along the stem. With an extensive underground root system, known as rhizomes, it can spread over a wide area and reach a height of over 10 feet in a single season.

Japanese knotweed forms dense stands which outcompete native plant life. Its rhizomes are not only extremely tough and difficult to eradicate, but can grow through pavement and foundations resulting in costly repairs.

In its native regions, Japanese Knotweed is known for its medicinal properties and used for the treatment of inflammation and infections.

It also has a culinary use. Young shoots are edible and used in a manner similar to rhubarb.



Controlling Japanese Knotweed

Once established, Japanese Knotweed is challenging to control and eradicate. The following control methods are recommended:

Mowing/Cutting should only be used in combination with herbicide applications or smothering. Cutting alone of the aboveground portion of the plant will actually stimulate more growth. Smothering is an effective alternative to herbicides.

It is recommended to wait until June, after the early season growth, before cutting Knotweed so that the plant has used its stored carbohydrates. Then do the following:

[Find out more about Japanese Knotweed](#)

1. Cut it short. Collect all the cut stems and place them on an impervious surface such as pavement or a tarp. Let them dry out. Once they turn brown they cannot regenerate.
2. Spread mulch over the mowed area and then cover with a heavy dark tarp. Place heavy objects on the tarp to hold it down. The mulch underneath should be thick enough to prevent the tarp from being punctured.
3. Keep the area covered for at least two years.

While there is currently no known biological control of Japanese Knotweed (i.e., insects), cultural and chemical controls can be effective. Cultural controls include modifying soil pH, grazing, and controlled burning. A property owner should hire or consult with a licensed herbicide applicator before using herbicides.

It Doesn't End With the Easement

Stewardship takes many forms and does not end with the signing of a conservation easement. Once preserved, a plan is put in place for each and every property to protect it. Our work really begins after the acquisition.

The Land Trust of Bucks County monitors over 240 preserved properties and 13,000 acres annually. We walk each and every property checking for things like soil erosion, the state of the wetlands, and most importantly that restrictions are not being violated. What we do is not glamorous, but it is very important.

The holiday season is a wonderful time to reflect and give thanks. We want to thank all our members—each and every one of you—for your support throughout the year. We could not do what we do without you. Thank you.

The Land Trust of Bucks County, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, was established in 1997 by a small group of local residents to protect and preserve what makes Bucks County special. It's about the land.

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land you love*

LAND TRUST
of Bucks County

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