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FEATURED

A Story of Stewardship

At Paint Hill Farm, Saving a Key Piece of Southern Pines

BY ANA RISANO || Staff Writer ana@thepilot.com

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Tall longleaf pines sway in the subtle spring breeze. Wiregrass rustles with birds searching for a bug snack. It's an oasis of quiet on Paint Hill Farm, which is otherwise hemmed in by growing development in Southern Pines.

But as of this past week, protections are now in place to maintain the property's natural tranquility.

On Tuesday, Paint Hill Farm owner Alison Ives formalized the sale of the 300 acres to The Nature Conservancy for \$4 million, an amount that some have estimated to be a fraction of what the farm could fetch on the open market. Instead of becoming more houses, the property is expected in coming months to be added to the neighboring Weymouth Woods Sandhills Nature Preserve.

"I wanted to ensure that the land would be protected from development," Ives said by email. "I'm doing this now so that my children would not need to do it for me later."



Paint Hill Farm consists of more than 300 acres of pristine longleaf pine forest, maintained first for wildlife conservation by the Ives family for decades and most recently by former owner Alison Ives.

ANA RISANO / The Pilot

The Nature Conservancy purchased the property with support from a Department of Defense program called “Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration.” The global nonprofit has a long-standing partnership with the U.S. Army and Fort Bragg to conserve land around the base. The base’s northern boundary is less than a mile away from the property. At over 600 feet in elevation, the farm overlooks drop zones on Fort Bragg.

For this deal, The Nature Conservancy will cover the full amount and receive \$1 million from the DoD program. The Nature Conservancy is then planning to sell the land to the state parks system later this year. The farm abuts the Paint Hill tract of Weymouth Woods.

In November, the state earmarked \$3.25 million from the North Carolina Land and Water Fund to buy the property. The federal government's contribution will allow the state to redirect about \$1.6 million of that money to other projects.

Until that sale to the state, the land will remain private property monitored by The Nature Conservancy and managed for its conservation value.

Matt Greene, a Sandhills land protection specialist with the local The Nature Conservancy office, praised Ives for her environmental commitment.

"She partnered with natural resource institutions and actively sought information as to how to be the best steward of this piece of land," he said.

"And the fact that it's going to end up, eventually, in public ownership, I think, is a testament to her as an individual and her dedication to this piece of land — leaving it better than she found it and her family's commitment to being custodians and caretakers in a thoughtful manner."

That commitment is a story in itself and spans a long arc of Southern Pines history.

Philanthropists, Diplomats

Ives' grandparents, Elizabeth "Buffie" Stevenson Ives and Ernest L. Ives, purchased their first Southern Pines plot in 1933. Over the years, they and their son, Timothy R. Ives, acquired more land to expand Paint Hill Farm to its present reaches.

Alison Ives' family has strong ties to the Sandhills. While not natives, they made a place for themselves through farming the land and giving back to the community.

Buffie Ives, who passed away in 1994, founded the Moore County Historical Society in 1946 and was instrumental in saving the Shaw House in Southern Pines. An active philanthropist, she also helped raise funds to acquire and restore the Boyd House, home to the Weymouth



A wooden sign hangs at the old driveway to Paint Hill Farm.

TED FITZGERALD / The Pilot

Center for Arts and Humanities, and the House in the Horseshoe. She received the Sandhills Kiwanis Builder's Cup in 1974 for her service to the area.

Though notable in her own right, Buffie Ives also was sister to politician Adlai Stevenson II, who was ambassador to the United Nations from 1961 to 1965 and the governor of Illinois between 1949 and 1953. He twice ran unsuccessfully as a democratic candidate for president in the 1950s. He frequently visited his sister in the Sandhills, according to The Pilot's archives.

Buffie's husband, Ernest, served in the American Foreign Service for 30 years with postings in Turkey, Denmark, South Africa, Stockholm, Northern Ireland and other stations across the globe. He passed away in 1972.

In a Nov. 20, 1942 Pilot article, he was identified as the new chairman of the Moore County Chapter of the American Red Cross. At this point, World War II was entering its third year.

"Since settling in the Sandhills, the Ives have been active in local affairs," the article reads. "Mrs. Ives has been an ardent worker in the Hospital Auxiliary and the Maternal Welfare committee, and during the Red Cross War Fund drive early this year, Mr. Ives helped to lead the Southern Pines drive over the top."

The same article identified the Iveses as settling at Paint Hill Farm in 1939, cultivating 55 acres of crops such as dewberries and sweet potatoes. In subsequent issues of the paper, its "Society and Personals of the Sandhills" section noted the Iveses lived part-time in Illinois as well.



Ernest and Buffie Ives outside their historic log cabin at Paint Hill Farm in 1956.

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When Buffie and Ernest moved to the property, they bought and moved a log cabin from West End — log by log. According to an article in The Pilot from May 3, 1978, they bought it for \$750. “We wanted a log house, not one of those suburban things. We wanted to belong to the soil,” Buffie Ives said in the article.

That log cabin eventually burned down in 1986 after a lightning strike.

A new home for family gatherings was built on the old brick foundation. Tasteful landscaping blends the home into the natural environment, with a moss-blanketed backyard and an old magnolia tree with heavy branches dipping toward the ground. On the left side, a brick patio and swimming pool sit with views toward Fort Bragg. Some training exercises on Camp Mackall can be seen on clear nights.



A clipping from The Pilot in July 1947 featuring Adlai Stevenson with his sister, Buffie Ives.

File photo



The historic log cabin was moved to Paint Hill Farm from West End but burned down after a lightning strike in 1986. Photo circa 1940s

CONTRIBUTED



After the log cabin burned down, the Ives family decided to rebuild a home on the original brick foundation.

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Fort Bragg's northern boundary is less than a mile away from the property. Some training exercises on Camp Mackall can be seen on clear nights from the view next to the family home and swimming pool.

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Alison's father, Timothy, was a key steward of Paint Hill Farm. He also played a role in preserving the Paint Hill tract of Weymouth Woods, helping convey 115 acres to the state parks system in 1996.

"I come from a family," Alison Ives said, "with strong beliefs in both land and historic preservation."

Ives has spent countless hours walking the land, first with her father and later with her own children. Evidence of the family's caretaking is everywhere, from the hedge of cedars she remembers planting along the old driveway to the well-preserved longleaf pine forests. A favorite memory from her childhood is playing on her father's old blue Jeep while he tended to the land.



Timothy Ives stands with his blue jeep at Paint Hill Farm.

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“When he was clearing areas of large wisteria and grape vines, he’d cut the vines and we children would swing on the vines from the roof of the Jeep,” Ives said.

She moved to Paint Hill Farm full time in 2007 and spent over a decade maintaining the property, using methods like prescribed burns to enhance the natural biodiversity of the land. In 2021, she was inducted into the NC Longleaf Honor Roll for her stewardship.

“I have managed, first, for wildlife conservation and the enhancement of the longleaf pine ecosystem; second, to produce occasional income from the selective thinning of the timber,” Ives said.

‘Unusual’ Property

A 1990 report from the state Natural Heritage Program described the property as having an “unusual” natural community — from heavily eroded clay hillsides featuring deep ravines to longleaf pine savannas and hardwood habitats. That combination lends to a mix of species different from most areas in the Sandhills.

“As I understand it,” Greene said, “part of what makes it unusual is the soils that are on the property harbor an unusual mixture of what we would call ‘high ground’ species sites — plants and animals that are found on very porous, sandy, well-drained soils — coupled with things that you would typically find in very poorly drained and saturated soils.”

The report documented sightings of the now-threatened red-cockaded woodpecker as well as findings of creeping blueberry shrubs and the rare Sandhills pyxie-moss. Today, the property also harbors at-risk bird species such as the Bachman’s sparrow and loggerhead shrike.



Paint Hill Farm harbors the rare Sandhills pyxie-moss.

COURTESY MATT GREENE WITH THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

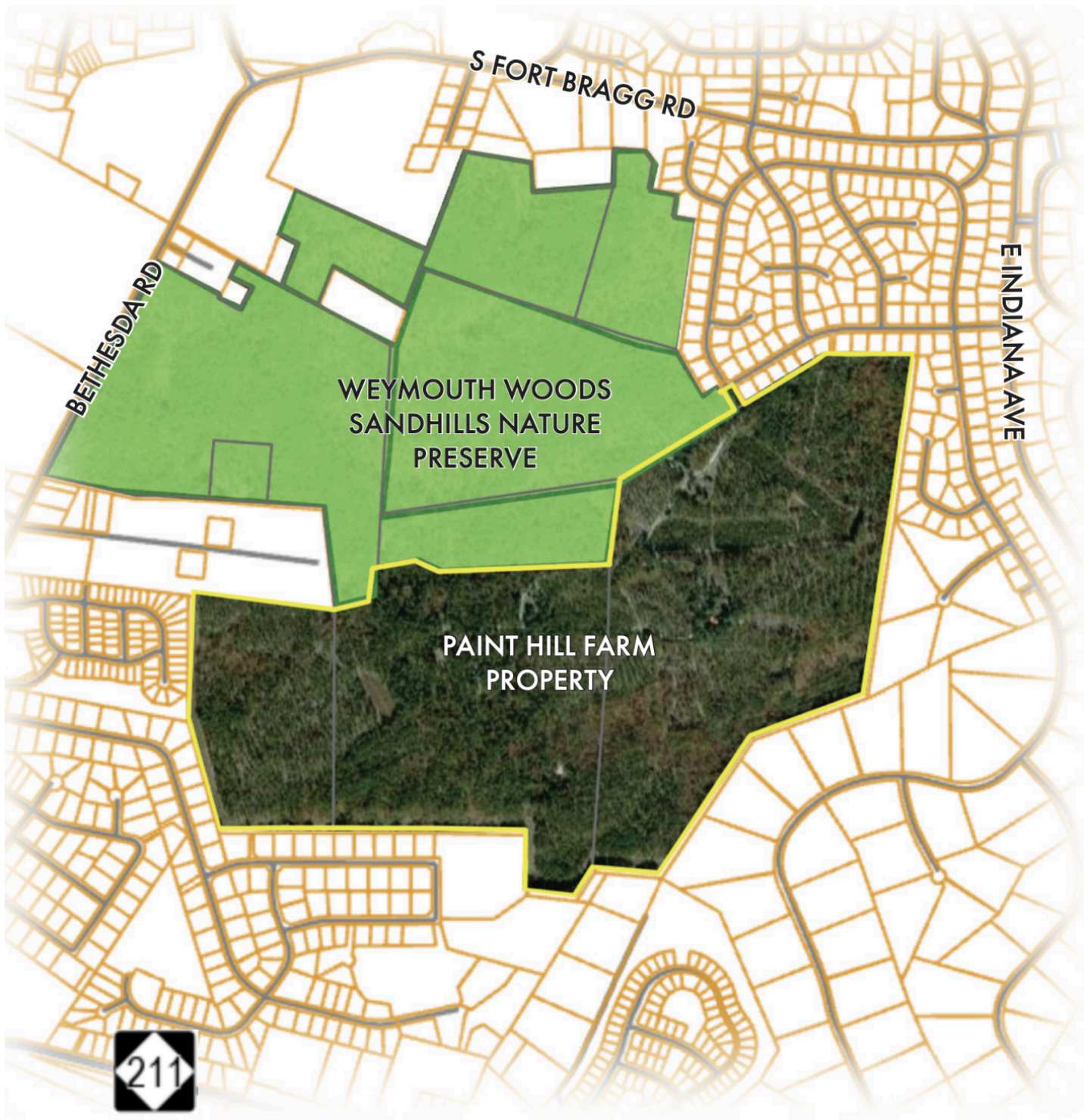
Greene emphasized the importance of preserving this property because of its conservation values, which flourished under Ives’ stewardship.

“As part of Allison’s stewardship journey, she created the habitat that would make the property suitable to red-cockaded woodpeckers utilizing the property,” Greene said. “And after she had put in all of the management work over a series of a decade, she partnered

with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other conservation organizations, and she has installed artificial cavities.

“And within a relatively short period of time, maybe two months, birds from Fort Bragg found this newly created habitat and immediately set up shop and began building a family. Once they were successful, some of those birds, we believe, then colonized Paint Hill, under state property, and reactivated those historic cavities.”

The land is also identified as a Significant Heritage Area by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program, which documents terrestrial and aquatic areas with biodiversity significance, like longleaf pine savannas, that indicate a need for conservation.



A map showing the location of Paint Hill Farm next to the current Weymouth Woods Nature Preserve and hemmed in by residential development.

Photo Illustration by Lauren Ellis / The Pilot

During a tour of the property, Greene pointed out neighboring properties and two subdivisions under construction. A third subdivision also abuts Paint Hill. Being zoned residential, Greene did some quick math. He said the acreage could accommodate a couple of hundred homes if not preserved.

“By acquiring this property, we are securing its values well into the future,” Greene said.

On top of the land’s unique habitats, it also features a circa-1830 cotton gin, which was moved from Mt. Gilead. The wheel once powered by mules is smooth from age. Above it, a closed-off shed sits. Greene said that’s where the cotton was processed.

The property is also dotted by outbuildings. A packing shed once used for a failed peach orchard and dewberry crops sits near the main driveway, its red metal siding rusting. Two homes on-site are planned to be used by state park rangers and seasonal workers.

A significant geological finding was also discovered recently on the property and is pending publication in the Southeastern Geology journal. Geologists found deposits from what was likely an asteroid impact that struck the Chesapeake Bay area in Virginia 35

million years ago. Ash-fall, tsunami deposits and particles ejected from the impact site were found preserved in rock layers of an ancient paleo-channel or inactive river or stream system. It includes marine fossils. The findings are forthcoming in the scientific journal and subsequent reporting by The Pilot.

The Nature Conservancy’s Role

For this transaction, The Nature Conservancy’s role is, in part, due to happenstance. Greene said it was the first group Ives called expressing an interest in further protecting her land. After multiple conversations, it was decided The Nature Conservancy would act as a “middle man” before the property goes to the state.

The nonprofit has a long history in the Sandhills, helping with the sale of Weymouth Woods tract in the 1960s and the portion of the Paint Hill tract alongside Timothy Ives. Today, that park spans over 900 acres.



Paint Hill Farm features a circa-1830 cotton gin, which was moved from Mt. Gilead.

ANA RISANO / The Pilot

Once Paint Hill Farm transfers from private ownership under The Nature Conservancy to public with the state parks system, Weymouth Woods will be over 1,200 acres of preserved forest in Southern Pines.

Ana Risano