

Town-Gown Conservation at Kenyon College

Douglas L. Givens

The Spires of Old Kenyon date to the college's founding in 1824.

It is no accident that Kenyon College, in Gambier, Ohio, appears on so many lists of America's most beautiful campuses. Since Bishop Philander Chase founded the college on a wooded hilltop in 1824, he envisioned a serene rural environment that would promote serious thought and good conduct. For 189 years, the college and those who have found their way

to it have valued this setting. Timeless rhythms in the landscape afford views that please the eye and nourish the spirit in every season, and students and faculty members use the rural acres adjacent to the campus for fieldwork in a variety of disciplines ranging from sociology to biology and chemistry. Long after graduation, alumni remember the campus, the surrounding fields and forests, and the twists and turns of the Kokosing State Scenic River. Integral to the Kenyon experience, it is this environment that captures the interest of prospective students and their parents. More than beautiful natural assets, they represent the past, present, and future for Kenyon.

As farm auctions, land sales, pell-mell subdivisions, and commercial developments accelerated, it became clear that action was required.

In the 1820s, Chase originally purchased 4,000 acres for the college and the village of Gambier plus an additional 4,000 acres as an investment for a total of \$18,000. Within five years of its founding, however, Kenyon began selling the investment acreage in response to financial difficulties. By the early 1970s, the college's land holdings had dwindled to fewer than 750 acres.

By the final decade of the 20th century, it was clear that the college could not take its charmed setting for granted. First, the owner of a property on the Kokosing River and directly across from the entrance to Kenyon announced plans to establish a recreational-vehicle park. The college purchased the property for a substantial premium and soon thereafter bought an additional 225 acres in order to quash proposals for a business district along the state highway that leads to Gambier. Concurrently, growth and development were changing the landscape in broad swaths of Knox County's rural



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countryside. As farm auctions, land sales, pell-mell subdivisions, and commercial developments accelerated, it became clear that action was required.

Philander Chase Corporation to the Rescue

In 1995, the college was in the early stage of a five-year capital campaign that included a \$1 million goal for “land acquisition to preserve the surroundings [the college] so cherishes.” The first preservation gift came from an alumnus visiting one sunny spring weekend in 1997. After walking to a hilltop overlooking the Kokosing River valley, to see what Kenyon needed to protect, he wired \$1 million to the college. By the end of the campaign, in 2000, the college had raised more than \$3 million—three times the goal for open space preservation.

The campaign showed that alumni and other donors ranked land conservation high on their charitable giving list, and the protection of land around the college would continue to enlist the loyalty and charity of Kenyon alumni. At the same time, state and federal programs were beginning to provide meaningful funding for land conservation. Because the college was ineligible to receive such assistance, the establishment of a special entity was crucial.

In 2000, the school formed the Philander Chase Corporation (PCC) as a separately incorporated nonprofit entity with a simple mission: “To preserve and maintain the farmland, open spaces, scenic views, and characteristic landscapes surrounding Kenyon College and Gambier, Ohio.” With its own 15-member board of directors, PCC’s organizational structure is unique among land trusts. It is a membership 501(c)3 organization, and Kenyon College is the sole member under provisions of Ohio nonprofit law. Even though the corporation is a separate entity operating under the direction of its board, Kenyon College is the controlling organization and ratifies the election of the corporation’s directors. The president of Kenyon and chair of PCC are *ex officio* members of one another’s boards.

PCC also serves to prevent future boards from selling off acreage and to improve town-gown relations. While interactions between Kenyon and the surrounding community were not a major problem, there was some friction; although PCC functioned under the college’s auspices, local residents generally perceived it as a separate entity with a clean slate.

Aid from Local Partners

As suggested above, PCC was lucky to have been founded at an especially opportune time, when its concerns coincided and overlapped with similar initiatives taking shape in the state of Ohio and in Knox County, providing the framework and strategies that would later help PCC carry out its work.

In 1996, then-Governor George Voinovich commissioned a bi-partisan Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force consisting of representatives from government, business, academia, and agricultural interests. In June 1997, the task force reported that in the previous 45 years, more than seven million acres (33 percent of Ohio farmland) had been lost to nonagricultural uses. Two specific recommendations set the stage for broader conservation efforts: the creation of an Office of Farmland Preservation within the Ohio Department of

BOX 1

Conservation Catalysts

The story of Kenyon College’s protection of the farms and fields near its campus is an exemplary case of an academic institution catalyzing large landscape conservation. As such, it is one of more than a dozen narratives being compiled by the Lincoln Institute in a forthcoming book, *Conservation Catalysts*, edited by Lincoln Institute fellow James Levitt. He reports that “the volume will give us a picture of the practice of universities, colleges, and independent research organizations around the globe that are going beyond their research and teaching missions and applying land conservation expertise, in many cases quite literally, ‘on the ground.’”

What is remarkable about these cases is not only their impact, but also the span of organizational and geographic diversity they represent. Academic and research organizations are catalyzing these initiatives well beyond Kenyon’s base in Gambier, Ohio, to places as widespread as Australia, the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Canadian boreal forest. The initiatives often encompass a broad range of interests representing the public, private, nonprofit, and academic/research sectors and involve a wide variety of disciplines in the natural sciences, social sciences, professional studies, and the humanities. The study and sharing of best practices in large landscape conservation is the focus of two ongoing efforts of the Lincoln Institute and its joint venture partners, the Practitioner’s Network for Large Landscape Conservation (www.largelandscapenetwork.org) and the Conservation Catalysts Network (www.conservationcatalysts.net).

The Briggs family donated its farmland as open space through the Ohio Agricultural Easement Donation Program in 2003.



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Agriculture and a policy statement declaring the state’s commitment to protect its productive agricultural land from irretrievable conversion to nonagricultural uses.

The state also announced a \$10,000 Community Development Block Grant program to support local “farmland preservation” plans, which led to the formation of the Knox County Farmland Preservation Task Force in 1998. I served on the local task force, charged with “evaluating the state of agricultural production in the county, exploring alternatives to unplanned development, and making recommendations for the preservation of the farmlands in Knox County.”

In 2000, state voters approved The Clean Ohio Fund, a \$400 million bond program to preserve natural areas and farmland, protect streams, create outdoor recreational opportunities, and revitalize urban areas by returning contaminated brownfields to productive use. The fund (renewed by voters in 2008) dedicated \$25 million, to be spent over a four-year period, to the Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program administered through the Ohio Department of Agriculture.

Another key county-level development at that time was the establishment of the Owl Creek Conservancy. A nonprofit private land trust, the conservancy works with landowners to conserve farmlands, stream corridors, aquifer- and watershed-protection areas, wildlife habitats, woodlands, and other ecologically sensitive areas of central Ohio including Knox County.

From the beginning, PCC determined that good working partnerships would be essential for success, and so it forged ties with policy makers at the village, township, county, and state levels. From the Knox County Commissioners to the Regional Planning Commission to the Soil and Water Conservation District, PCC established and continued to nurture productive relationships. It was also critical that, as the managing director of PCC, I was an active participant in many of these organizations.

PCC’s Preservation Strategies

Amid this dynamic environment, PCC began its operations. Before its establishment, there were reports and numerous recommendations at the local level, but PCC was an early catalyst for county-wide action. In keeping with PCC’s philosophy of helping others, the newly established Ohio Agricultural Easement Purchase Program provided the perfect opportunity for PCC to engage with

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The McPhail property in Knox County is protected in perpetuity as an Ohio Century Farm.

the local farming community to help them protect their land from adverse development.

Under the Ohio Agriculture Easement Purchase Program, landowners could not directly apply for easements; a county, township, municipality, or land trust had to apply on their behalf. Shortly after the guidelines were published in 2001, two local farmers asked PCC to act as their local sponsor. The state rewarded applicants who formed larger blocks with nearby properties, so the farmers recruited their neighbors and rallied many of them to attend workshops hosted by PCC with help from the Office of Farmland Preservation. In the program's first year, PCC was the third largest source of applications statewide. Only 24 applications were funded; PCC received one of the coveted easements.

The following year, PCC ingeniously helped raise local farmers' scores on the essay portion of the application. PCC's applicants scored highly on the objective questions, but most scored lower than other applicants statewide on the five essays. So I asked the chair of Kenyon's English department, renowned as one of the nation's best, to enlist about 20 students to assist farmers in writing their essays. Students met with the farmers in their homes, interviewed them, and helped them craft compelling essays. The effort was a rousing success. The farmers enjoyed getting to know Kenyon students, the students loved visiting the farms and talking with

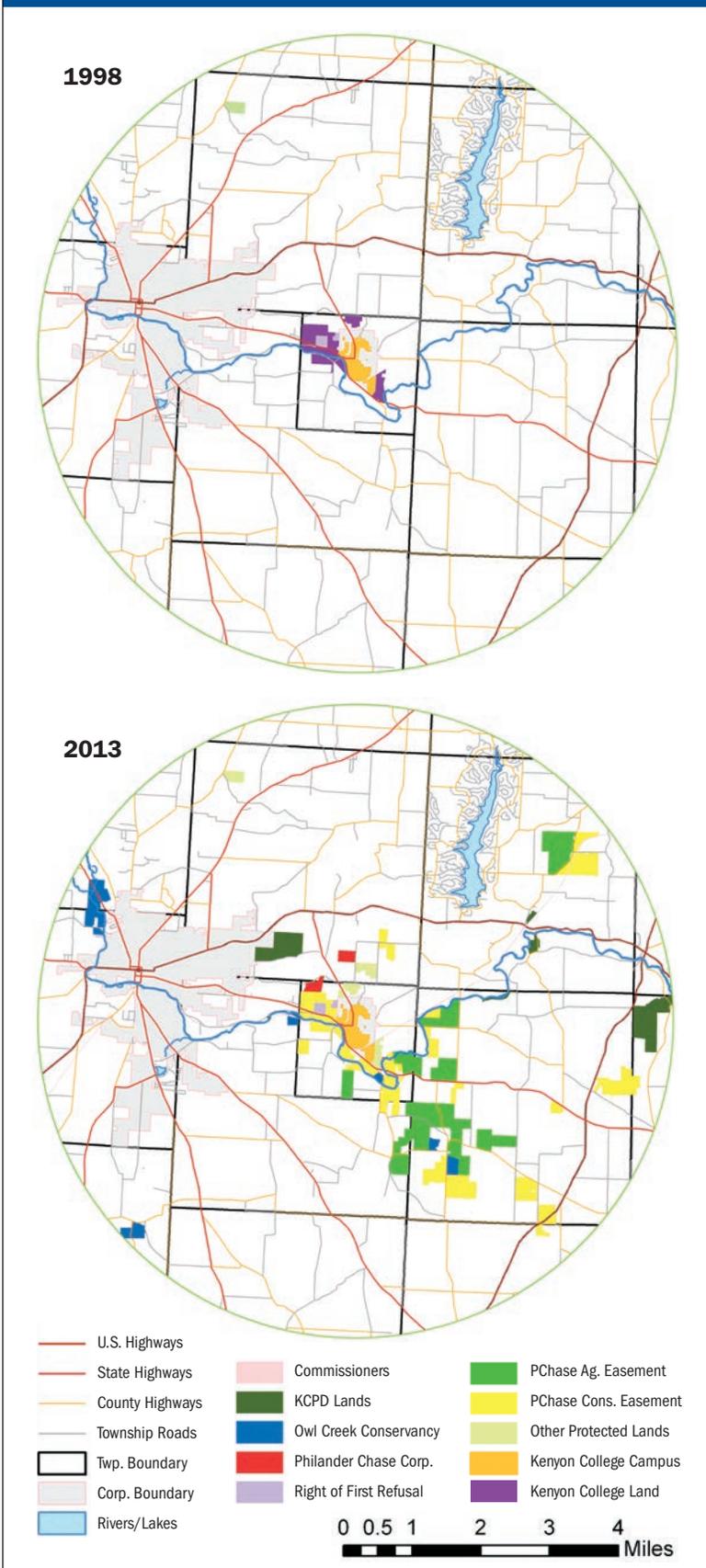
the farmers, and in following years their applications earned top essay scores.

Permanently protected property in close proximity to an applicant's farm garnered additional points, so PCC secured a conservation easement from the college on the 380-acre Brown Family Environmental Center. In a similar manner, PCC asked the Owl Creek Conservancy to apply for Clean Ohio Funds to purchase an easement on PCC-owned land. The result was a threefold win: PCC received cash for selling the easement and continued to own the land, the Owl Creek Conservancy held the easement, and agricultural easement applicants received additional points.

PCC boosted local applicants' scores by increasing its local match of state subsidies as well. Ohio funds only 75 percent of an easement's total value; the remaining 25 percent must come from the landowner or another source. If applicants volunteer to pay more than 25 percent, lowering the state's obligation, the state awards "bonus" points to the applicant. By using its own money and persuading the Knox County Commissioners to contribute nearly \$300,000 to support the program, PCC ensured more successful applications.

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FIGURE 1
Expansion of Conservation Land, Knox County, Ohio



Source: Justin Smith, Knox County Map Office

Over the years, PCC also raised the scores of applicants whose property qualified for the Ohio Department of Agriculture’s Century Farm designation, honoring families who demonstrated continuous family ownership for at least 100 years. Century Farms received extra points, and, with encouragement and guidance from PCC, five of Knox County’s 18 Century Farms successfully applied for easements and conserved their land.

While helping local farmers protect their properties, PCC helped create a county park at the same time. Using money generated by the college’s fundraising campaign and subsequent gifts, three

**PCC is eminently replicable
at any educational institution
in the country.**

properties totaling 202 acres were purchased and then resold subject to deed restrictions. One of these properties, the 168-acre Prescott farm between Gambier and Mount Vernon, was especially important to Kenyon as the source of Wolf Run Creek, which flows into the Kokosing River and through the Brown Family Environmental Center. A development company from Pennsylvania had already purchased land across the road from the Prescott farm and planned to build 225 homes there. Before the developer could purchase the farm as well, PCC bought it for \$626,000.

A year later, PCC agreed to resell the farm to the Knox County Park District only if the district obtained state subsidies to acquire the property and establish Knox County’s first park. Because state funding required matching grants—money the district did not have—PCC helped persuade the Mount Vernon Community Foundation and the County Commissioners to donate land they owned adjacent to the farm to satisfy the matching fund requirement. The plan worked. The park district got the funding and purchased the property from PCC, Knox County had a new 288-acre Wolf Run Regional Park, and the source of Wolf Run was protected from development.

While some successes happened without funding, many of the accomplishments directly resulted from the availability of money. In addition to donations from alumni and friends during two college

**Jegla Farm in Knox County
was permanently protected
by an easement in 2007.**

campaigns, PCC secured additional funding from state, federal, and county sources in excess of \$2.1 million. The original notion that alumni and other donors might be interested in “preserving the nature of the Kenyon experience” proved to be correct again.

**Colleges and Universities as
Conservation Catalysts**

PCC, as it has developed, is a model with the legal structure and tools needed to be an effective conservation catalyst. By 2013, PCC had outright purchased 230 acres that it manages and leases to farmers, facilitated the creation of 35 easements encompassing 4,216 acres, and, with the Owl Creek Conservancy, protected a total of 6,746 acres in Knox County. Of the county’s 339,000 total acres, those remaining 164,666 unprotected acres provide a tremendous opportunity for the local land conservation community.

While large landscape conservation is taking place nationally and internationally, local conservation activities have a valuable role to play and a great deal to contribute to grander-scale activity. According to the Land Trust Alliance 2010 Census, the 1,723 active land trusts operating in the United States had collectively conserved 47 million acres. There are 7,500 post-secondary educational institutions in the United States. If only 10 percent of these institutions engaged in land conservation using a model similar to PCC’s, it could be a major step forward in the conservation movement.

Each institution where the PCC model might be adopted would have its own unique environment. Nevertheless, the model is widely applicable; every element that led to the formation of PCC is eminently replicable at any educational institution in the country.

The Philander Chase Corporation began at a time when there was growing concern about the deal-by-deal erosion of the rural landscape. The goal was local: it related to Kenyon College and its environs. But PCC’s experience and aims were soon shared by overlapping and allied agencies in Knox County and beyond, leading to and suggesting larger possibilities. This experience demonstrates that what happened here can happen elsewhere. **L**



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▶ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DOUG GIVENS was the founding managing director of the Philander Chase Corporation. Givens also served as chair of the Farmland Preservation Committee of the Knox County Regional Planning Commission and member of the State of Ohio Farmland Preservation Advisory Board. He was a founding trustee of the Owl Creek Conservancy and president of the Brown Fund. Mr. Givens is currently the vice president, director, and member of the executive committee of the Scranton-Averell Company (a land holding company); a director of the Bradford & Carter Company (a real estate development company); and a director of the George B. Storer Foundation. For 28 years, he worked in the development office at Kenyon College, retiring from the vice presidency in 2000. He earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Indiana University and received a doctor of laws degree from Kenyon College. Contact: givens@kenyon.edu

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