

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Social Sciences Institute

Locations:

North Carolina A&T State University

Colorado State University

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Royersford, Pennsylvania

University of Arizona

University of Wisconsin

Reading the Land: How to Include Historical Information about Farms in Conservation Plans

Why are Farm Histories Important?

Farm histories tell the story of a farm's development over time and its economic, political, social and cultural links to the community and nation of which it is a part. Conservation planners can provide basic historical facts about a farm to show producers through words and pictures how their actions matter. Historical information included in conservation plans can heighten landowners' sensitivity to the importance and consequences of their decisions by giving them a look backward to the origins of the land challenges they deal with today.



Farm histories move planners beyond conservation plans that describe the management practices land users should follow, to plans that may motivate them to adopt recommended strategies with a renewed sense of stewardship. Farm histories can help people understand the limits of the resource system within which they operate. Such information becomes increasingly important as farmland ceases to be passed from generation to generation and historical knowledge of the land is lost.

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Area-wide planning can also benefit from historical information. Histories can be done for entire watersheds or for several farms in critical resource areas. A historical view of the land and its people can educate planners about prior conditions in a watershed, which can improve decision-making. Finally, historical inquiry can assist planners in gathering information about cultural resources on the farm.

1. Aerial photographs are readily available and require interpretative skills that Conservation Partners typically possess. Some field offices may limit their historical inquiry to this simple step. Conservation planners can connect physical developments on the land to technological, social and political trends in 20th century agriculture, such as increasing crop specialization and land use intensification. Try copying the aerial photos for the producer and adding a description of some of the natural resource changes—

were grown, and why a certain practice changed. Use oral histories to develop a descriptive passage in the conservation plan about farm life, specific farm events, household activities, or the values and goals of the farm families. Talk with the current owner or operator and one or two others who are knowledgeable about the previous generation on the farm. Consider also interviewing someone who knows about the agricultural history of the county, such as the District Conservationist, or the Cooperative Extension Agriculture Advisor. This will help make the connection between the farm and county-wide changes in agriculture, and add information about changing community life to the plan.



3. Plat maps and (4.) county histories are available at local libraries and are easy to use. Plat maps identify some of the previous owners of the farm, drainage patterns, and vegetative conditions. County histories can put on-farm information in its county context by providing insight about agricultural practices,

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How Can Conservation Partners Do It?

Conservation planners can bring a historical perspective to conservation plans by reviewing one or more of the following resources:

- ◆ Aerial photographs
- ◆ Oral histories
- ◆ County plat maps
- ◆ County histories
- ◆ Federal Land Survey plat maps

- and management responses—they reveal.
2. Oral histories are interviews with people who are knowledgeable about past events and historical trends. While published records provide factual information, talking with individuals associated with a farm can reveal the meaning and significance of events. Oral histories can also provide information not usually available from other sources, such as who farmed the land, what crops



Where can I find more information?

Several counties in Illinois have successfully added historical information to their conservation plans. To learn more, request the booklet *Reading the Land: How to Include Historical Information about Farms in Conservation Plans* from Jody Rendziak, NRCS Sociologist, 1902 Fox Drive, Champaign, IL 61820. Phone: 217-398-5280. The booklet describes how to use the above documents to identify the character of the land prior to American settlement, identify early settlers on the farm, and show how management of the farm's natural resources changed over time. It includes an example farm history, explains how to obtain historical documents from local sources, and provides bibliographical references. Suggestions for collaborating with local amateur historians are also provided.

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community life, early impetus for community development, and biographical information about community leaders.



5. Federal plat maps are available for some areas of the country. They are maintained at State Archives, many universities and at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.. The maps were prepared by federal surveyors according to the Land Ordinance of 1785 which created a method of "surveying before settlement" of the Northwest Territory based on the standard section unit. Along with the Federal Land Survey field notes (which require rather extensive analysis), the maps provide a detailed record of the character of every township prior to American settlement. Copy the Federal Plat maps in the conservation plan to give producers a visual picture of the pre-settlement landscape.

The five resources named above will enable you to describe some of the physical, economic and social changes that played out on the farm. Depending on the availability of staff, volunteer resources and producer interest, consider exploring these additional resources:

- ◆ **Historic topographic maps**
- ◆ **Fire Insurance survey maps**
- ◆ **Federal Land Survey field notes**
- ◆ **County records**
- ◆ **Census Records**
- ◆ **Family histories**
- ◆ **Agricultural History literature**

Getting Help

Learning about the history of a farm can be as challenging as planners and producers want to make it. In less than an hour you can insert copies of aerial photos with a description of land change in a conservation plan. Or you can work with amateur historians to do an environmental history of an entire watershed.

Before embarking on the planning project, consider what the producer wants to learn about the farm's history. Focus on historical information that can add value to the conservation plan. Collaborate with local historical and genealogical societies, or seek out history students as volunteers in order to add historic insight to conservation plans on an ongoing basis. Your state cultural resources coordinator or specialist may also be able to provide information on collecting historical data.

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Product Catalog Available

Are you interested in materials that assist you in implementing locally-led conservation? Or, are you curious about the products and training available from the Social Sciences Institute?

For a free catalog, contact the SSI. Telephone (616) 942-1503. Email bwallace@telespec.itc.nrcs.usda.gov.

