



A Brief History of Borders Farm

by Douglas Easton Fellow

The historic Charles and Margery Borders Farm on North Road in rural Foster, Rhode Island, has been preserved as a working farm through private and public efforts, leaving its fertile soil for agriculture, its open space for wildlife, and its scenic beauty for all to enjoy.

Located 15 miles west of Providence, near the Scituate Reservoir watershed, the 200-acre former dairy farm has rocky pastures for grazing, fields for hay and vegetables, rugged stone walls, and beautiful woodlands, all along a half mile on both sides of narrow North Road.

The farm's herd of beef cattle includes black angus, herefords and mixed breeds. In addition to the hay harvest, the farm's large community garden, which is worked by volunteers, provides thousands of pounds of fresh produce each year for the Rhode Island Food Bank.

Currently being developed as an interactive museum of 20th-century New England farming, the Borders Farm hosts schoolchildren for educational visits. In warm weather, the front lawn of the farmhouse is the site of outdoor band concerts. And an annual 9/11 Memorial Ceremony is held around the flag pole across North Road on the south pasture.

In the 1980s, the farm was the site of the reintroduction of wild turkeys to Rhode Island, and it provides forest and meadow habitats for many animals, including red and gray foxes, raccoons, deer, otters and fishers.

For many centuries, Foster was part of the lands of the Narragansett Indians. In 1662, British colonists began settling in what was then part of a region known as West Quanaug. Foster, which was named after early resident, patriot, and U.S. Sen. Theodore Foster, became a town in 1781, after being part of the town of Scituate for 50 years.

The Borders Farm was known as the George Phillips farm during most of the 1800s and into the 1920s, when Charles Borders' family purchased it in 1923. Charles, who was born on the farm in 1925, has lived and worked here his entire 87 years. He and his late wife, Margery Pickett Borders, had long hoped that the farm would be preserved for future generations.

To fulfill that dream, Charles donated the farm in 2003 to the nonprofit "Borders Farm Preservation, Inc." The development



rights to the farm were sold to the Rhode Island Agricultural Land Preservation Commission, and the proceeds provide an endowment to preserve the farm. Charles has life tenancy on the farm, which will continue as community farming, gardening, educational and recreational resource.

The property's white, one-and-half-story farmhouse was built in 1840 in what was then the north end of Hemlock Village (now Foster Center) by George A. Phillips, who was said to be a sea captain in his youth. Beginning around 1817, at age 37, Phillips, a son of long-time resident Abram Phillips, ran a nearby sawmill, where furniture and shingles were also made. He was married to Marcy Stone Phillips and lived on the farm until his death in 1858.

The late-Federal-style home greets visitors with a handsome peaked portico with intricate rope-molded cornice detail. From the house, there are pleasant views of the surrounding rocky fields and woodlands. In the early 1970s, the north wing of the house was restored as a period sitting room, complete with stenciled floors and furniture. Around the same time, an east wing was added as a home office for Margery Borders, a former Foster Town Clerk for 11 years and Town Council President for 12 years.

The one-and-a half-story red barn behind the house was built around 1900. According to Charles Borders, it was used until the 1920s as a carriage barn the families of George A. Phillips and his son George W. Phillips, who was born in 1822 and married Mary Ann Sweet Phillips in 1843. Records indicate that along with being a carriage-maker, wheelwright, and storekeeper, G.W. Phillips served as the Town Clerk for 25 years. In 1874, he purchased the former Welcome Rood Tavern in what is now Foster Center. At that time, the lower part of the building was a general store, and the upper part was the Town Clerk's office.

The farm's barn was converted for dairy cows after the property was purchased in 1923 by Charles' grandfather, Edward Andrew Borders, and father, Charles Mells Borders Sr. and his second wife, Caroline A. W. Martenson Borders, continued to work the farm after Edward's death at age 80 in 1936. Charles Jr., one of six siblings, took over in 1942, when Charles Sr. died at age 56. Caroline Borders lived on the farm until her passing in 1983.

By the 1960s, the dairy farm had as many as 70 cows, according to the Charles, all milked by him using automatic-milking machines. At one time, the farm had two silos, no longer standing, which were used for the storage of feed corn. The farm also had peach and apple trees, which were devastated by the powerful 1938 hurricane and have all since died.



Charles and Margery met in 1956 at a church service in Plymouth, Mass. They married less than two years later in her family's home in Plymouth. Asked in March of 2012 if Margery had fallen in love with him or the farm, he answered with his usual good humor, "Probably a little of both." They lived and worked together on the farm for 40 wonderful years before her passing in 1999 at age 83. Toward the end of her long public service, she told *The Providence Journal* in 1996, "It's kind of hard to withdraw when you've been involved for so long," adding, "You hope the time you spend is for the good of the town and the people in it."

The Preservation of Borders Farm

[More detail required] The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, the Rhode Island Agricultural Land Preservation Commission, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy, and the Champlin Foundations joined in preserving the farm. Charles is the current president of "Charles and Margery Borders Farm Preservation, Inc."

More than 50 Rhode Island farms have been protected through the efforts of the R.I. Agricultural Land Preservation Commission and partnering agencies. Since 1985, the state farmland protection program has preserved more than 4,000 acres of farmland.

Location: Borders Farm, 31-38 North Road, Foster, Providence County, Rhode Island 02825

Sources: Charles Borders Jr., Foster Preservation Society, *The History of Foster* from *History of Providence County*, Richard M. Bayles, 1891, The Rhode Island Food Bank, Rhode Island USGen-Web Project, Rhode Island Historical and Preservation Commission, *The Providence Journal*

About the Author: Douglas Easton Fellow is the features editor of *The Providence Journal* and a lifelong friend of Charles and Margery Borders.

Additional information: bordersfarm.org
www.facebook.com/Borders-Farm-Preservation-Inc