

Late farmer's legacy protects the Darnestown Road land she loved

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Elizabeth Beall Banks' decades-long battle to preserve her family farm finally ended Jan. 17 when the 93-year-old farmer and former school teacher died at her home on Belward Farm off Darnestown Road.

Often described as a feisty advocate of the land, Banks successfully fought off developers hungry to acquire one of the last remaining large parcels of land tucked between Gaithersburg and Rockville.

It was a war of wills that once had her greeting an especially insistent developer with a shotgun after he rang her doorbell one too many times.

"Over my dead body a developer will get this land," she told *The Gazette* in 2002. "They may get it when I'm dead, but they won't get it when I'm alive."

Banks was buried Thursday at a family plot at Oak Grove Cemetery in Howard County, her gravestone already in place and engraved with a farm scene complete with cows.

Her life ended just as she lived it, in perfect order, said her friend of 62 years, Betty Shaw.

"[Banks] kept such an immaculate place, she once apologized to someone about cobwebs in the barn," said Shaw, 82, of Silver Spring.

And Banks worked equally hard to neatly tie up the future of her 138-acre farm to keep it safe from the developers she abhorred.

In 1989, she sold the farm to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore for \$5 million to develop as a research and academic center. At the time, the university valued the gift as worth nearly \$15 million, said Dennis O'Shea, university spokesman.

That move guaranteed the land farmed by her family since the 1800s would not be developed for housing or another strip mall.

"[Banks] believed in being a custodian of the land that the good Lord gave us," said Robert Hanson, a life-long friend who often consulted Banks about issues related to his own 170-acre cattle farm in North Potomac. "She didn't hate anybody, but she felt if you develop the land, do it properly."

In exchange, the university built a ranch house for Banks to move into next to the drafty old family farmhouse. There, she continued to work the farm and raise her prized Black Angus cattle.

"[Banks] gave the land to [Johns Hopkins] practically. It's worth something like \$40 [million] to \$50 million today," Shaw said. "But she hated seeing all the farms disappearing and all the houses going up. We'd drive



The white slatted fence that encompasses the 138-acre Belward Farm, which can be seen from Route 28 (Darnestown Road) and Muddy Branch Road, is a familiar sight for commuters who rarely see such large open spaces along major roads.

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around, and she'd say, 'Look at that mess, a good wind could blow it down.'"

Johns Hopkins agreed to develop just 30 acres, which it did in collaboration with the county, while Banks remained a tenant. A building did go up -- it now houses the biotechnology company Human Genome Sciences, Inc. off of Shady Grove Road -- but future plans for what the university refers to as the "Belward Research Campus" remain tentative.

"We didn't move ahead while Miss Banks retained tenancy of the property. We respected her wishes about that," O'Shea said. "About 30 percent of the property will be kept in open space, but other than that, there are no definitive plans or timeline for development."

In 1996, however, the university won county approval of a preliminary plan that allows for 1.8 million square feet of construction of academic and research office space on what still remains rolling countryside.

"Frankly, it is a little unusual to get a plan approved and for nine years nothing happens," said Nancy Sturgeon, a planner with Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

The plan ensures that a line-of-sight view of a historic home on the property is preserved from Darnestown Road. That Victorian-era house was built by Banks' great-grandfather and was once used as a post office and general store.

"It's a back-of-the-napkin type plan," said Elaine Amir, director of nearby Johns Hopkins University Montgomery County Campus, a 36-acre development on Medical Center Drive off Shady Grove Road. "There's no infrastructure in, nothing. And it was out of respect for [Banks]. She didn't want us to plan yet."

Amir met Banks in 1997 when Johns Hopkins was working on the construction of its Medical Center Drive campus, where three of the seven buildings planned for the site by the end of the decade are now complete.

"It started out as a working relationship, but she was so engaging, we became friends," Amir said. "[Banks] was an amazing storyteller and evoked the whole history of what life was like when farming dominated the county. What we know as names of real estate developments, she knew as real people."

Born in 1911 in Howard County, Banks' family moved to Belward Farm when she was a teenager. Her father went to work at a family-owned hardware store in Rockville and with other family members, worked Belward Farm.

Banks attended Maryland Teacher's State College in Towson and in 1931 began her 36-year teaching career in Montgomery County Public Schools.

"One of her former seventh-grade students sang a hymn at her funeral," Shaw said. "So many of her former students and the farmers turned out. That would have meant so much to her."

Banks inherited the farm in 1958. Even during her years teaching, she loved nothing better than to ride a horse or tractor or feed the cattle.

"She was a modest, well-educated woman and a lady in every respect," Hanson said. "But she wasn't afraid of putting on a pair of overalls and getting to work. And she loved to drive that old pickup truck."

In the decades following her retirement in 1967, she faced a changing reality as the county moved away from its agrarian past. She resisted temptation to sell out despite the energy taxes and increased farming regulations that added to her woes, said life-long friend George Lechlinder, 84, of Laytonsville.

For Banks, the farm meant life itself.

"She'd have died if she hadn't been able to keep that farm," he said.

She aided her fellow farm families, which today number around 1,700 in the county, through her membership in the Maryland Farm Bureau and by supporting the Montgomery County Fair, he said.

And when it came to Belward Farm, she never backed down from what she viewed as a threat.

In the early 1980s, she successfully fought a county tax bill of over \$750,000 being levied to help build Key West Avenue that runs by her property. The county asserted the road would aid her cattle business, an idea she refuted with a lawyer in tow.

"She fought that like a prize fighter and she won," Hanson said.

Later, when Johns Hopkins cut down some trees in the wooded buffer between her house and the Human Genome building, Banks took immediate action.

"She went out with a friend and they hugged a tree so [bulldozers] couldn't knock them down," Lechliden said. "We had to go out and talk her out of that."

Banks sued over the tree removals and following a settlement, the buffer was replanted.

That feisty attitude was balanced by Banks' inherent kindness and generosity. Aside from making Johns Hopkins essentially a gift of her land, she also established a scholarship to train its doctors.

"She was pure Americana," Amir said. "We have lost a very dear friend."