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Washtenaw County sesquicentennial farm protected forever

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The first 80 acres of the Irwin Estate was purchased in 1836 by James Irwin, the great great great grandfather of Tom and Jim Irwin. The original deeds to the land were signed by the eighth US president Martin Van Buren on sheepskin. | Legacy Land Conservancy

April 26, 2021

A Washtenaw County sesquicentennial farm — in the same family for over 150 years — is now permanently protected by Legacy Land Conservancy.

The farm, owned by brothers Tom and Jim Irwin, consists of 158 acres of rolling farmland, forest and wetlands off Grass Lake Road in Grass Lake, Michigan. In 2017 Tom and Jim inherited the farm from their late father, Richard (Dick) Irwin, who had already conserved another portion of the farm with Legacy between 2004 and 2008.

By working with Legacy Land Conservancy to protect their farm via a conservation easement, the Irwin brothers are honoring their father's wishes.

A conservation easement permanently protects private land by limiting the type and amount of development on a property and restricting other uses that would damage natural features such as rich soils and high functioning wetlands.

According to the Irwin brothers, their father taught them the value to preserve land.

Preservation of the Irwin Farm is significant because it is adjacent to other protected lands, features high-quality soil and wetlands, and was at risk for development. In addition to ensuring a farmland base contributing to local food security, the property also adds to an existing 300 acre natural "greenway" in the Sharon Short Hills area, benefiting water quality and wildlife habitat.

The Irwin Farm conservation easement exemplifies innovative land protection through local, federal, and private partnerships. Legacy worked with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Washtenaw County Parks & Recreation Commission, the Carls Foundation, and other private entities to secure a creative mosaic of funding sources to purchase the conservation easement from the Irwin brothers.

Tom and Jim will use some of that money to invest back into their family farm. While Tom and Jim currently lease the farmland out, they plan to restore the historic barn and farmhouse on the property and restart their farming business together.

"This conservation easement will allow us to continue farming and keep the farm as one huge parcel far beyond our lifetimes," Tom said. "We can imagine our ancestors smiling down on us today as we finalized our conservation easement on Earth Day."

"We're thrilled to be protecting this piece of local farming history with such dedicated partners," Diana Kern, Legacy's executive director, said. "To be helping the Irwin family return to their farming roots is an incredible win for land conservation in southern Michigan."



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At its zenith, the Irwin Farm totaled approximately 354 acres. The deeds, along with other Irwin family memorabilia, are housed at the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library.

The Legacy Land Conservancy, founded in 1971 as Michigan's first local land trust, is a nonprofit conservation organization that protects land in southern Michigan. Legacy's mission is to secure for current and future generations a land base for nature, agriculture, fresh water, and recreation in Jackson and Washtenaw counties and beyond.

Legacy has helped to protect more than 9,000 acres of land (including seven nature preserves open for all to enjoy) that enhance our community's quality of place by safeguarding water quality, conserving working farms, and protecting places to play.

In a testament to 50 years of successful voluntary conservation, Legacy is accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission for adhering to a set of standards designed to ensure the organization's work will endure forever. Legacy is based in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

For more information, visit www.legacylandconservancy.org.

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