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After ‘long journey,’ siblings save family’s 226-acre farm in Washtenaw County

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A barn on Locust Hill Farm in Freedom Township, protected from development and conserved for agricultural use through the Legacy Land Conservancy, dates back to the 1860s. Provided by Legacy Land Conservancy, Photo by Susan LaCroix

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By [Lucas Smolcic Larson | lsmolciclaron@mlive.com](#)

WASHTENAW COUNTY, MI - Joe Kress raises sheep and crops on a 226-acre family farm in western Washtenaw County, marked with an historic red barn bearing his family name. So did his parents, and their parents before them.

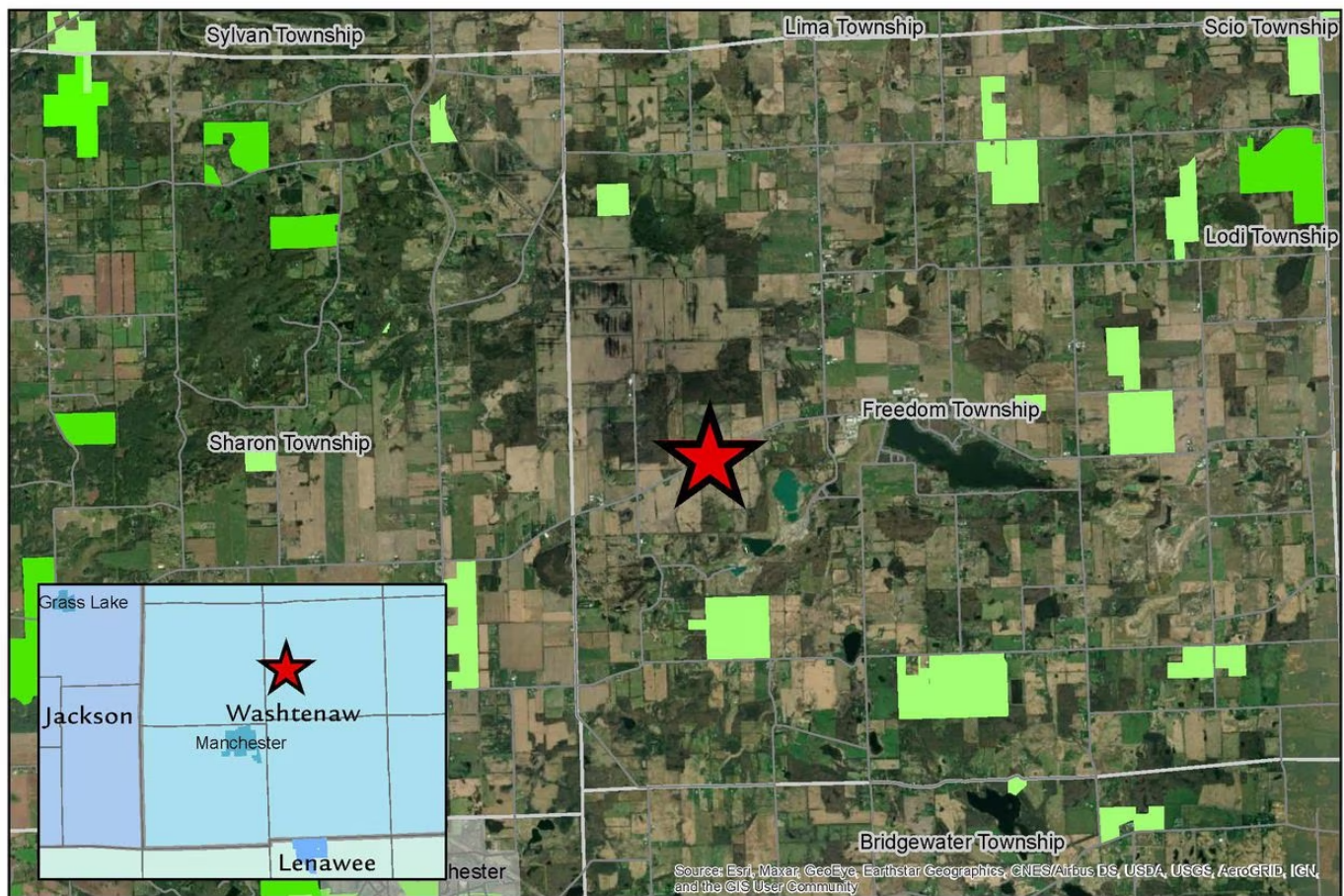
Now, thanks to a conservation deal through the nonprofit Legacy Land Conservancy — six years in the making and originating with Kress and his four siblings — the farm that's been in their family for more than a century will stay that way, permanently protected from development.

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"All of us had ridden a tractor by the time we were five and we spent most of our childhood helping dad on the farm," Kress said in a statement. "Knowing we banded together to permanently protect the farm would make him proud."

The farm, some 15 miles west of Ann Arbor on Pleasant Lake Road in Freedom Township, is made up of fields where Kress grows hay, corn, wheat, soy, alfalfa and clover, as well as a German-style dairy barn dating back to the 1860s, a farmhouse and forested areas.

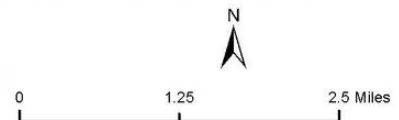


Locust Hill Farm

- ★ Locust Hill Farm Easement
- Private Conserved Land
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A red star on a map designates the 226-acre Locust Hill Farm in Freedom Township, protected from development and secured for agricultural use through the Legacy Land Conservancy. Provided by Legacy Land Conservancy

Like so many rural Washtenaw County farmsteads, it has its roots in the arrival of German immigrants.

The farm was established by the Dresselhaus family, who arrived from Germany in 1842, according to [the Washtenaw County German Heritage Tour](#). Frank and Christina Kress, grandparents of the Kress siblings behind the conservation effort, purchased the property in 1920, and James and Geraldine Kress, the siblings' parents, added to the original acreage in 1958, according to the Legacy Land Conservancy.

"We're thrilled to protect another piece of local farming history," said Legacy Executive Director Diana Kern in a statement announcing the conservation deal on Friday, June 9.

"Family farms are increasingly disappearing as farmers age out of their work and sell their land to developers, making preserving farmland a critical part of land conservation. To help the Kress family continue their family farming tradition is a wonderful feeling."

Securing development rights from the Kress family cost more than a half-million dollars, and the above-average sized farm represented one of the nonprofit's largest projects in its 52-year history, according to the organization.

Legacy assembled funds for the purchase over several years through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission and other private entities, according to group.

The Kress family had to be patient to make the project a reality. The siblings — Joe, Jean, Jeff, Jana, and John — began working to secure the conservation easement for the property, now named Locust Hill Farm, in 2017.

There were slowdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conservation group said, but another discovery in a routine due diligence search also led to delays.

Legacy found a blanket pipeline easement on the Locust Hill Farm property, requiring lengthy negotiations between the group, its legal team, the Kress family and the pipeline company.

"Legally, a blanket pipeline easement gives the company the right to use the entire property. This conflicts with the goals of the conservation easement," said attorney and Legacy Trustee Sandra Sorini Elser in a statement. "Legacy can't commit to conserving these rich farm soils forever if another company could put infrastructure anywhere on the property."

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Eventually, the company agreed to remove its right to maintain, remove and replace equipment throughout the entire property and narrow it to a smaller corridor surrounding the pipelines, according to the conservation nonprofit.



Sheep on Locust Hill Farm in Freedom Township, protected from development and conserved for agricultural use through the Legacy Land Conservancy. Provided by Legacy Land Conservancy, Photo by Susan LaCroix

The Ann Arbor-based group, founded in 1971 as Michigan's first local land trust, says it has worked to protect more than 10,000 acres in southern Michigan, including land available for recreation and farming.

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The Kress family farm is another addition to that total.

"It's been a long journey together, but we are pleased to see this through," Joe Kress said. "I'm proud to keep the family farming tradition going."

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