

Land in her family for seven generations will now become a Garner nature preserve



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About 165 acres of fields and forests near Lake Benson that once belonged to the Rand-Bryan families have been bought by the Triangle Land Conservancy and the Town of Garner, which plans to open them to the public in the future. Martha Bryan Liles and her husband Robert chose to preserve land that has been in her family since the late 1700s, rather than see it developed.

**BY RICHARD STRADLING
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The farm where Martha Bryan Liles grew up along Swift Creek has been in her family since the late 1700s, about the time Raleigh became the state capital and well before the town of Garner was founded and before the creek was dammed to create Lake Benson.

As Raleigh and Garner grew, Liles and her husband, Robert, had plenty of offers from developers who wanted to put houses on the land. They always said no.

Instead, they took steps to ensure the land would remain undeveloped forever. They sold 40 acres to the [Triangle Land Conservancy](#) in 2016, then 32 acres to the Town of Garner in 2021.

Now they've just sold nearly 93 mostly wooded acres to the land conservancy, which turned it over to the town for use as a future nature preserve.

"I have had so many people tell me how much they appreciate having this farmland and forest in the midst of all the development," Liles said. "And I am happy to know that under the Town of Garner's ownership it will always remain this way."

The Lileses joined town and land conservancy officials at the [Rand-Bryan House off Benson Road](#) on Thursday to celebrate the purchase. Martha Liles grew up in the 150-year-old house and ran a wedding and event venue there for 12 years before retiring and selling to the town.

The 93 acres borders Swift Creek, just downstream of Lake Benson, and includes several smaller creeks that flow into it. Swift Creek is home to six rare species of freshwater mussels, including two — the dwarf wedgemussel and the Atlantic pigtoe — that are protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

For now, the land remains closed to the public. But eventually the town plans to open it up, with walking trails and a link to a future greenway trail that will someday connect Lake Benson and Lake Wheeler, says Ken Marshburn, the outgoing mayor.

The property is walking distance from Rand Road Elementary School and [a new Veterans Affairs clinic being built near the corner](#) of Rand Road and N.C. 50. Marshburn said the future nature center could be used for students at the school and perhaps provide "therapeutic experiences in nature" for veterans and their families.

“The idea of having space and land and clean water not only for now but particularly for future generations is important to us,” Marshburn said in an interview. “The group that’ll benefit from this the most is our children and our grandchildren.”

Love the land but also share it

Altogether, Martha and Robert Liles have sold 165 acres to the land conservancy and the town at bargain prices. The land conservancy bought the 93 acres for \$730,000 with money from the N.C. Land and Water Fund, a taxpayer-supported program that helps [buy land around the state to protect water quality and wildlife habitat](#).

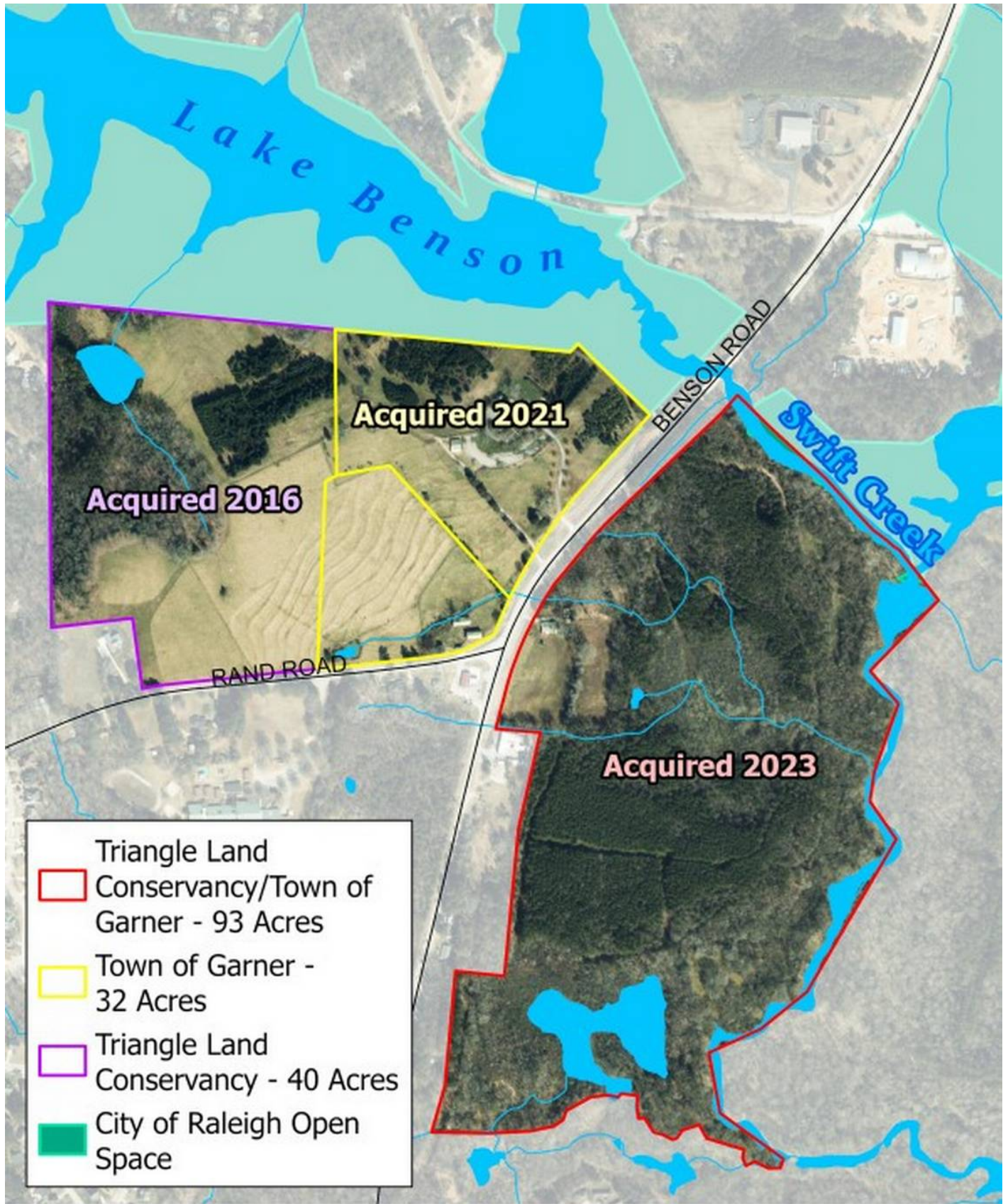
Martha Liles says her father, Philip Rand Bryan, raised dairy cows on the land when she was young and later grew Christmas trees that people could come and cut. Some of the survivors of the tree operation are now 30 feet tall, while the fields where cows once grazed are still open and regularly hayed.

Liles said she was raised not only to love the land but also to share it.

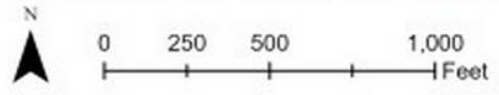
“That’s what my parents did,” she said. “There were always gatherings, and they were always letting people do things here. It was a great source of joy and pride to my dad particularly. And that was kind of instilled in me.”

Liles admits to a bit of selfishness in her decision to sell to the town and the Triangle Land Conservancy rather than a developer. She and her husband live next door, atop a hill overlooking the fields that are now preserved.

“I didn’t really want to look at condos or houses,” she said. “It’s nice to know it will keep looking like this.”



- Triangle Land Conservancy/Town of Garner - 93 Acres
- Town of Garner - 32 Acres
- Triangle Land Conservancy - 40 Acres
- City of Raleigh Open Space



TRIANGLE LAND CONSERVANCY
 Martha and Robert Liles have sold 165 acres near Lake Benson and Swift Creek to the Triangle Land Conservancy and the Town of Garner for conservation. The land has been in Martha Liles' family for seven generations.