

A historic property, saved for the future

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BY LYN RIDDLE | STAFF

ONE BY ONE, many of Greenville's great estates have been subdivided and developed.

A couple of wooded tracts in the North Main area. The Williams-Earle property on Grove Road.

"Year by year, another site is torn down or subdivided," said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever.

It represents progress to some, a growing city and families disinterested or unable to hold onto the home place.

It's also a trend Judy Cromwell intends to forgo for her 20-acre Brushy Creek Estate off Augusta Street.

The bungalow offers a look deep into Greenville's past. It was built sometime between 1830 and 1850 by Vardry McBee, who owned mills for making paper, cotton and wool, two tanneries and gold mines and is most commonly referred to as the father of Greenville. McBee once owned 11,028 acres – all the land in what is now the city of Greenville. He gave the land for Buncombe Street United Methodist, First Presbyterian, First Baptist and Christ Church.

Brushy Creek Estate was his farmhouse, and he was known to hold big barbecues there.

When McBee's son, Alexander, inherited it in 1872, the tract stretched across 692 acres from Augusta Street



Greg Beckner / Staff

This home on Augusta Street was built by Vardry McBee in the 1800s. It's now protected with a conservation easement.

to Grove Road. At one point in the 1920s, during Prohibition, a speakeasy operated from the property.

The property remained in McBee's family until 1923 when Robert Woodside bought 119 acres that included the house. It went back to a McBee descendent for six years until William Jay Iselin, a New York banker who moved his family south during the Depression, bought almost 45 acres.

Iselin, who was associated with Woodside Mills, was Cromwell's father. He died in a crash of a private plane outside Washington, D.C., in 1951. Cromwell and her husband David, also in the textile business, bought the house in the mid-1960s.

Cromwell has quite a historic past herself.

John Jay, the first chief justice of

the United States Supreme Court, is a direct antecedent on her father's side; Benjamin Franklin on her mother's.

Her brother, John Jay Iselin, was a leader in public television broadcasting.

She's been involved in many of the civic efforts that have made Greenville and the Upstate what they are today: Conestee Foundation, Naturaland



Cromwell

Trust, Trees Greenville, Falls Park on the Reedy and was one of the investors in the consortium that assembled and bought the property where RiverPlace was built. At 75, she's a regular tennis player and professional artist. Her breezeway is her usual studio.

Cromwell was four when her family moved to the McBee house.

Walking the property with her is a guided tour through the lives of a spirited family. She points out where she and her four siblings ice skated ("two weeks about now each year"), where the chicken coop was and the barn. Picnic rock and the copperhead garden. A gristmill once operated toward the back of the property, across Brushy Creek from what is now the 12th hole of Chanticleer Golf Course.

They grew soybeans and corn, raised pigs, chickens and cows and swam in a pool filled with frigid water from Brushy Creek.

There are fox on the property and a family of owls, coyotes and muskrats and hawks.

Developers have made their way down her long unpaved driveway many times.

"They'd say, 'lady, we could make you a lot of money,'" Cromwell said. And her response every time was "It's not for sale to be developed."

She once had four gardens and shared vegetables with practically every one she knew. She and her husband raised their two daughters there. He died in 1985; >



THIS WEEK'S COVER

> the daughters live outside the state.

Twenty acres and a historic house are a lot to keep up. The pastures have grown up, the house needs work. Cromwell bought a house on Southland, but before she would think about putting the house on the market, she wanted to be sure the property was protected. In December, she signed the paperwork for a conservation easement, which will be held by Upstate Forever.

Wyche said it is not the usual business of his organization to hold easements for smaller tracts and homes, but the McBee property is extraordinary and significant.

"It gives you a sense of what it was like," he said.

Michael Bedenbaugh, executive director of the Palmetto Trust for Historic Preservation, was involved in executing the conservation easement and will serve as a consultant on preserving the house.

"These sorts of properties help build



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strong community - to give them a sense of place. They are irreplaceable," Bedenbaugh said.

Even though there are tax incentives for protecting the land, Cromwell estimates the easement cuts the value of the property by 70 percent. To her, that is immaterial. There are many uses remaining for the next owner - a bed and breakfast, some sort of public amenity, a private home.

"I feel very fortunate to have lived here," Cromwell said. "I've had my turn. It's time for someone else to come see what they can do with it."

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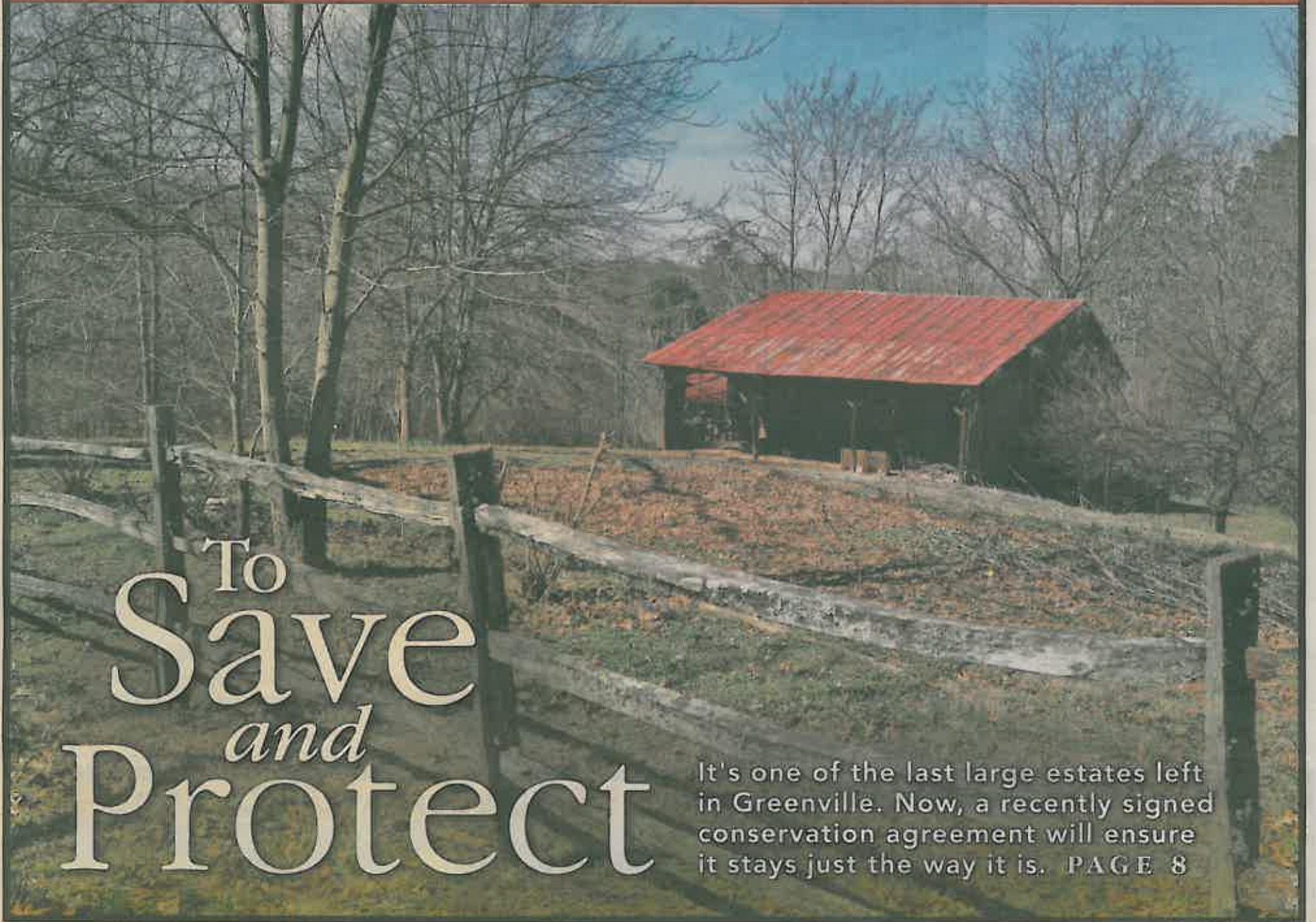
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To
Save
and
Protect

It's one of the last large estates left in Greenville. Now, a recently signed conservation agreement will ensure it stays just the way it is. PAGE 8

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