Of all the towns in the Northwest Corner, the land in Kent is probably the least conducive to farming as a fulltime money-making proposition. The soil in most areas is thin. The mountains are steep and rocky and in places the hills drop straight down to narrow valleys that are in shadow for many hours of the day during the growing season. Kent’s prime farm land lies chiefly within the Housatonic River Valley, near tributary streams such as Macedonia and Cobble Brooks, and on some of the lower hillsides. Pockets of deep farming soils are also scattered up on Skiff Mountain and in Kent Hollow. Despite these limitations, farming has persisted and even thrived in Kent for more than 200 years. It is the open farm fields and the way of life that farming has imprinted here that give the community important aspects of its character and these make it a resource to cherish and protect in a changing economic environment.

Eighteenth Century Farms
When the land that was to become the Town of Kent sold at auction in Windham in 1738, it was not prime farm land that the proprietors were looking for. The western lands among the Housatonic River had been described by an early visitor as a “howling wilderness” covered in dense, virgin forest. However, surveyors investigating the area in the previous decade had discovered high-quality, easily accessible deposits of iron ore. With acres of timber from which to make charcoal for smelting the ore, and water power to run the bellows that heated the forges, Kent and neighboring towns in the Northwest Corner had the makings of a center of iron-making and investors and settlers were quick to snap up acreage when it became available.

Throughout most of the 18th century, farming was a secondary activity, but that is not to say that farming was not an important industry. In addition to providing for the family table, many early settlers sold agricultural products on a small scale, including milk, butter, wheat, and corn. Within a few decades of settlement Kent had four or five stores that used a credit system to obtain surplus products from settlers’ gardens in exchange for other items they needed. An account of Abel Wright’s 1770 store inventory lists local products such as cider, flour, and sheep’s wool.

Kent provided food and other products during the Revolutionary War, shipping grains, milk, butter, eggs, wool, hides for leather and beef and other livestock on the hoof. Indeed, all over Connecticut farming had taken hold by the end of the century, with about 94% of the population involved to some extent; the other 6% probably had gardens, fruit trees, a cow, a pig, and some chickens.

Nineteenth Century Farms
Early in the next century, however, this rosy subsistence picture changed for the worse. In relatively isolated rural towns such as Kent, where there was little opportunity for the kind of disease transmission that plagued urban populations, birth rates soared—families with having eight and more children. Mortality rates also declined in these favorable circumstances, with the result that Kent had a population explosion.

Agricultural methods remained primitive and when these methods were applied to rocky soils of diminishing fertility, the yields of food and other crops were insufficient to a growing population. Even for products produced in abundance, transportation to external markets was limited and costly. Most men worked a second job, many in the iron mines or burning charcoal, to supplement family income. Wild fish and game still filled out the diet.

Within a few decades new energy and new ideas in agriculture began to increase the productivity and predictability of farming. Crop rotation, application of manure and gypsum to enrich the soil, cultivation of root crops...
to supplement bovine diets, the selection and use of better quality seed, and improved breeding methods for livestock were adopted by better-educated farmers. Industrial ingenuity was also bringing change in the form of better mowing machines, threshing machines, cultivators, and plows, gradually turning local agriculture from subsistence into a commercial enterprise.

Agricultural schools started, including the Connecticut's first, the Cream Hill School in West Cornwall. From 1845 until 1869, about 245 young men from the region learned about scientific advances in agriculture at this boarding college. The school building is now a museum on the grounds of the Connecticut Antique Machinery Association in Kent.

As the iron industry peaked and then faded, more semi-cleared land became available. The once almost impenetrable forests had fallen to the axe and the insatiable demands of the blast furnace were gone, leaving denuded hillsides and valleys to be converted to agricultural. But every new field presented the challenge of rocks and boulders scattered everywhere. Farmers had to clear their fields before they could use the new tillers and thresher and other equipment to good effect, but the job was never-ending as frost heaves and tilling unearthed a new supply of rocks every year.

Larger rocks went into the miles of stone walls that trace Kent’s landscape, a solution that not only got them out of the way but also served to keep the animals in (or out) and to delineate property lines. Some areas were not farmed at all but served as woodlots for firewood, or as the raw materials of fence rails, barn timbers, siding and other building necessities. Woodlots could also provide grazing land when pasturage ran short.

Roads, many of them toll roads laid out by private turnpike companies, largely determined how towns related to one another and how trade of farm goods flowed. The New Preston Turnpike, built in 1802, was one major linkage. Planners incorporated an existing bridge across the Housatonic built by Jacob and Isaac Bull c. 1760. (Today’s covered structure dates from 1842.) The turnpike allowed farmers in Kent, Warren, and New Preston to drive horse-drawn carts to Poughkeepsie, NY, and to the Albany Post Rd., where there were thriving markets for farm produce. Sailing ships and steamboats plied the Hudson up to Albany and down to New York City, picking up and delivering additional produce from this corner of Connecticut.

Dairy farming was the primary focus of most farms at this time, largely because it did not depend on high quality soils. Until the mid-1800s, most of the cattle raised in Kent were landrace cattle, a genetic mixture of whatever the bulls and cows on neighboring farms happened to be. Gradually, breeds of cattle known for better milk production were brought in and bred with other stock: Ayrshires in 1822, Jerseys in 1846, Holsteins after the Civil War, and Guernseys in 1874.

As production increased, new markets for milk opened up, thanks to the Borden Milk Company, which developed the technology to condense and can milk. Kent dairy farmers not only provided milk for local use, but also shipped out large metal containers of raw milk to the Borden plant in Wassaic, NY, and to nearby cities on the twice-daily milk trains that stopped at several locations in town. The foundations of Borden Creamery satellite operations are still visible in North Kent near North Kent Road and the railroad tracks as well as alongside the South...
Kent Post Office. Well into the 20th Century, road traffic in Kent was routinely held up by herds of cows being driven across the road to pasture or back again to the barn for milking.

**Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Farming**

By the time the mining industry collapsed, about 95% of the land in Kent had been cleared of trees. Many of the skilled miners left in search of better opportunities in the West, leaving farming and farm-related trades as the fulltime occupation for almost everyone else. Coincidentally, a new wave of immigration brought large numbers of Northern and Eastern European immigrants with farming skills to the area. (By 1940, two-thirds of Connecticut farmers were foreign born) Land was cheap in Kent and with nearly 95% of it cleared of trees, the new farmers—chiefly Scandinavians, Czechs and Poles in Kent—found dairy farming a viable occupation.

Many added tobacco as a secondary crop as the national popularity of cigarettes and cigars grew. Although most people think of the Connecticut River Valley as the sole source of Connecticut’s wrapper tobacco (so-called because its quality made it ideal for wrapping the outer casings of cigars), a suitable micro-climate in this part of the Housatonic River Valley allowed New Milford, Sharon and Kent farmers to grow a competitive product. It was a labor-intensive crop that required tending almost year round.

Harvesting began in late August and the tobacco leaves had to be “cured”—reducing 90% water content they had at time of picking to 10% or less. As leaves were picked they were strung up on wires that stretched the length of barn interiors. The design of ventilated barns used for drying leaves became something of an art form among farmers here and elsewhere. Many methods were devised over the years, but particularly successful was one using vertical clapboards with every other board hinged to open outward to create a flow of air.

A small tobacco barn, once part of a much larger complex of farm buildings, may still be seen in the field on the western side of Rte. 7, just south of town. Another is the ambulance barn on Swift Lane, which once served as one of two tobacco sorting barns in town. Many other barns were altered, their louvered siding nailed shut to serve as dairy barns after the industry died out.

Fruit growing became popular in the late 19th century. Peach orchards were widespread until a severe frost in 1918 killed them off. They were replaced by apple trees, making Connecticut a major apple producer thereafter.

Many other businesses helped to keep the farms running smoothly. Places such as N.M. Watson, which stood on Main Street at the site of today’s Kent Town Center, furnished grain as well as general hardware and supplies for farms. Eric Hagman’s Blacksmith Shop, on the site of the Kent Pizza Garden, Tobin’s Garage, Allan Frisk’s place at Bull’s Bridge Garage, Walt Gustafson’s Garage and other service places provided quick repairs to keep machinery running smoothly. As late as the mid-1990s, Dr. Everett Vreeland, the town’s mobile veterinarian, would come when a sick animal needed tending.

Farmers’ organizations were central to Kent’s farm scene. Farmers often relied on one another at harvest time and during major barn-building and fencing operations. In 1870 local farmers joined the National Grange movement by organizing Kent Grange, #154. It was, for well over a century, the heartbeat of the community, providing suppers, dances and other social events as well as technical assistance to the farm families of town. At its height the Kent Grange had more than 200 active members. The well-attended meetings were held for much of that time at Bull’s Hall, now the Bachelier-Cardonsky Gallery space above the House of Books.

The Kent Grange disbanded in 2005 due to an insufficient number of active members.

**Twentieth Century Decline in Traditional Farming**

By 1930 Kent’s population had shrunk to barely 1,000. Many hillsides had been abandoned to brush and second growth...
Farming Today
Today, the once-farm-dominated State of Connecticut has only 170,000 acres still in farmland, with a total of about 4,200 farms (versus 22,000 in 1947) still operating. Horticulture is now the biggest producer, but the 152 dairy farms left in the state own or rent more than half of the farmland. Most other farms are smaller than 50 acres. In Kent there is now only one fully operating dairy farm, the Arno Farm on South Kent Rd. The Hoyenski Farm in Kent Hollow has a dairy but raises only replacement heifers. (See Map #10)
A number of people keep a few beef cattle or pigs for meat and sell some of it privately. Anne Bass on Peet Hill keeps a herd of rare Randall Cattle on her Rock Cobble Farm property, anciently the farmlands of the Samuel Peet family, more recently of the Chases. Agnes Gund leases land to a farmer raising beef cattle on her Iron Mountain Farm where the Irvings once kept prize-winning Black Angus.
Phil Lang, a Howland descendant, raises Randall Cattle and several other breeds of heritage animals, including sheep and pigs on the old Howland Homestead on Geer Mountain. The Osbornes on Sugar Loaf Mountain Farm in Kent Hollow have a few beef cattle, some show-quality Jersey heifers, and a flock of chickens. Rob Kennedy in North Kent has forest. Farmers’ grown sons were increasingly moving on to find better opportunities elsewhere and then World War II caused many more to be drafted into the military, leaving still fewer men to farm.
Post-war technological advances provided other challenges to the local dairy industry. More efficient shipping methods and competition from large Midwestern farms and industrial-scale herds made it difficult for small local farms to compete. The advent modern mechanized equipment such as pipeline systems to move the milk to bulk storage tanks made dairy farming more costly, causing many farms to go into debt.
More cows to milk, larger barns and milking parlors to construct and the need for high-protein feed crops to produce greater yields boosted costs. Automated barn cleaning systems saved the farmers weary backs but were another expense. Still another blow to farming was the ending of freight train service in the 1960s and the consolidation and relocation to more distant locales of many of the large dairies that purchased milk from the local farms.
Some farms switched to raising poultry; others raised beef—the Kurzer, Irving and Combs farms, for instance—in an attempt to keep the pastures grazed and some income flowing. But many farms closed forever. Lyman Darling’s farm on Spooner Hill closed in the 1950s. Jon Lindberg, who inherited the old Judd Farm on Bull’s Bridge Rd., closed his milk operation in 1973.
The Kent School Farm, which had since the school’s founding in 1906 provided the school with fresh milk and dairy products, shut down in the early 1970s after a disastrous fire burned down the dairy barn. William and Charlotte Newton closed their large milking operation in 1985, selling much of the land years later to a business consortium that developed the Bull’s Bridge Golf Course. That same year, Constitution Oak Farm, the Devaux family’s 200-acre dairy farm on Beardsley Rd., in operation since 1912, also ceased activities.
a herd of sheep, and the Kallstroms’ Cold Stream Farm in Kent Hollow has organically raised sheep and cattle. Bill Arnold and Stephanie Wargo provide pasturage for a small herd of Belted Galloways, Scottish beef cattle, at their Fieldstone Farm. Millard “Butch” Soule has a few beefers, as well.

Kent has a number of horse farms and riding stables. Notably, Kent School still operates a large riding stable on the top of Skiff Mountain on land once part of the huge Rawson Farm. Dexter and Joanne Hawk run a high-end breeding farm for Haflingers, a hardy breed of smaller Austrian work horses. Their Willow Brook Farm on Geer Mountain Road was once part of the large Morehouse Farm. Kent also has a couple of commercial boarding/riding stables where horses are kept and ridden for pleasure.

Feed for livestock is also grown locally, with corn and hay the primary crops. Dave Arno grows feed corn on a lot along Rte. 7 once farmed by Jack Casey and now owned by the Kent Land Trust. Arno also maintains a herd of cows on South Kent Rd. A few farmers have small truck farms selling fruits and vegetables to a primarily local market. There is a small farmers’ market operating on Saturday mornings from late May through October on the Kent Green.

Megan Haney runs an organic vegetable farm between Rte. 7 and the Housatonic River on two acres of land owned by the Kent Land Trust. Her Marble Valley Farm, which stands on land farmed since the 1700s, is an example of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation. This method of risk-sharing, an idea that came to the U.S. from Europe in the 1980s, makes farming more economically viable for today’s small farms.

As of 2009 Haney’s “community” consists of 40 shareholding families who, in return for a fixed annual fee, receive a weekly selection of locally grown produce during the growing season. Marble Valley Farm, shown below, also operates a farm stand and sells to individual purchasers and local restaurants.

In her first year her acreage yielded about $30,000 in produce or about 9,000 pounds of harvest. In 2008 the results were even better as she became more familiar with the farm’s soils and micro-climate. Haney uses environmentally sound farming practices and has as one of her goals to become certified as an organic operation.

Until she retired, Joan Larned had a thriving fruit farm on Beardsley Rd. The Dubray family’s Peaceful Hollow Farm near the junction of Rte. 341 and South Kent Rd., which went from dairying to raising vegetables and finally to fruits and berries, was recently sold; the new owners reportedly plan to continue farming. Lloyd Albin, Butch Soule and several others sell, plant and harvest Christmas Trees. South Kent School runs a maple syrup operation in spring. The Kent Greenhouse, while mainly a retail plant and landscaping operation, grows some specimen trees commercially. Vince and Maria LaFontan raise a variety of produce for sale on their Mountain View Farm on Fuller Mountain Road.

Timber, although not necessarily thought of as a farm product, is considered one by the State of Connecticut and
a significant number of board feet of hardwood lumber are currently harvested in Kent. (See Chapter Seven, Forest Resources for more information.)

The Economic and Human Arguments for Protecting Farmland

Connecticut is losing roughly 7,000-9,000 acres per year to residential and commercial development and to vegetation succession. Litchfield County alone lost 8% of its farmland between 1997 and 2002. The state has attempted to stem this tide with a number of programs. In 1963 the state legislature enacted Public Act 490, an incentive program that allows lands containing farms, forests or open space to be taxed based on the land’s value at its current use and not its market value.

This legislation eased the financial burden on active farmers and helped older farmers retain their land even as they dispersed their herds while keeping a few animals for their own milk and meat. It also provided an incentive for neighbors to offer their own underutilized farmland to others willing to use it for agricultural purposes. Good as the PA-490 tax strategy is, it is not permanent and thus does not provide open space protection beyond a certain date (sooner if the owner chooses to dissolve the arrangement and pay a penalty).

In the 1970s Connecticut instituted a more far-reaching tool, the Farmland Preservation Program (FPP), with the goal of eventually protecting 130,000 acres of mostly prime and important farmland soils in active farm operation. No target date was set, but to date only about 31,000 acres have been preserved. That averages 1,100 acres secured by FPP per year. (One example of what FPP can accomplish is the protection of the Lorch farm in South Cornwall, completed in 2003. Eighteen of those acres lie in North Kent.) Both the state and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have a number of other farmland protection programs. They also have various grant and technical support programs to increase farm viability.

The public often fears regulations that limit development as costly to local tax bases and ultimately to the individual taxpayer. But protecting farmland does not typically “cost” towns, as economic analysis shows again and again. In several “Cost of Community Services” studies done by the American Farmland Trust in Connecticut, the results indicate that, even when farmland is assessed at current use value, it generates about three times more in tax income for a town than it costs in public services. By contrast, residential development costs more in services (per student school costs, public safety, road maintenance, and the like) than it generates in property taxes.

Protecting agricultural resources has long-term value in providing better and more sustainable options for the food we eat. Our food, when the typical range of products consumed is analyzed, now travels an average of 1,500 miles from farm to fork. Where the food has been grown and under what conditions are factors virtually unknowable to the diner. As concerns grow about food quality and more people demand farm fresh and organic products, consumers are becoming more willing to pay the marginally higher costs of locally grown foods. This, in turn, creates a real opportunity for specialized smaller operations that farmers in Litchfield County could provide if the land and the regulatory and service supports are there as well.

Right now, it is unclear whether there is a future for farming in Kent, and the degree of interest that exists within the community in encouraging and conducting such activities. However, there are signs that agricultural ventures will remain important to local culture, at least on some level. At Housatonic Valley Regional High School, the Vocational-Agriculture Department is experiencing a rise in students. The curriculum has changed significantly, shifting from an
emphasis on dairy farming to an ever-broader range of topics including agribusiness, horticulture, veterinary science, small animal care, fish farming, flower arranging, forestry, hydroponics and a new focus on ecology and sustainable organic farming.

RECOMMENDATIONS
1. Study land use regulations and ordinances to identify regulatory obstacles to farming and farm businesses, and study the use of local tax incentives to encourage local small scale agriculture.
2. Preserve prime and important farmlands, especially farmlands still under cultivation or those that can easily be brought back under cultivation.
3. Encourage the purchase of locally grown produce. Encourage local restaurants, schools and nursing homes to contract with local farmers.
4. Adopt a Right to Farm ordinance, as allowed by state enabling regulation, to show local support for farmers and protect them from nuisance complaints.
5. Support compatible commercial enterprises on farms, such as harvest festivals, corn mazes, pick-your-own, farm stands, and commercial composting.
6. Encourage farmers to adapt their methods and timing to wildlife needs where applicable; encourage them to adopt a conservation plan to limit the impact (especially of livestock) on wetlands and watercourses (most farming activities are exempt from local Inland Wetlands regulations); and encourage livestock owners to adopt a manure and waste management plan; with technical and financial assistance from the US Department of Agriculture/Natural Resources Conservation Service.

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