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## **347-Acre Belle Vue Farm in Havre de Grace Becomes County Park**

On September 24, representatives from Harford County Government, Aberdeen Proving Ground (APG), Harford Land Trust (HLT), and the Davis family gathered at the 347-acre Belle Vue Farm in Havre de Grace to transfer ownership to Harford County and permanently preserve the historic property.

### ***Background***

Located less than three miles from the centers of Havre de Grace and Aberdeen, Belle Vue Farm sits at the center of an area of land rich in natural and cultural resources known as Oakington Peninsula. The Belle Vue acquisition completes the longstanding goal of permanently preserving the only undeveloped area of privately owned Chesapeake Bay shoreline in Harford County. The property is contiguous to Swan Harbor Farm and Old Bay Farm to the north and Eleanor and Millard Tydings Park (also known as Oakington Farm) to the south. Together, these four properties total 1,250 acres of preserved land, 90% of which is now public parkland.

### ***Historic significance***

Belle Vue is one of several properties in Harford County continuously owned and farmed by the same family since well before the revolution. Garrett Rutton was granted the land in 1661. His direct descendent Mary Garrettson later married Dr. Elijah Davis who took title to the land in 1794. Dr. Davis served in both the House of Delegates (1807 and 1811 terms) and Maryland State Senate (1813 and 1815 terms), eventually becoming president of the latter body. Victoria “Vicky” Davis, the wife of the late Griffith H. Davis, sold the property to Harford County on September 24 ensuring its permanent preservation.

Mary Garrettson’s sister, Elizabeth, married Samuel Griffith of Swansbury, another Harford County historic property and home in Aberdeen.

Belle Vue’s buildings and ground are included on C. P. Hauducoeur’s famous 1798 map of Havre de Grace, labeled simply as “Dr. Davis.”



The historic home at Belle Vue is a two-story brick house dating to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and remains in good condition. The house is in the Georgian style and has many of this style's standard features. Its main façade is Flemish bond brick with elliptical arch windows facing the Chesapeake Bay.

Tax rolls from the turn of the nineteenth century indicate numerous outbuildings including a kitchen, carriage house, two slave quarters, stable, meat house, hen house, and fish house on the shore. The 1814 tax roll notes as many as 34 enslaved people lived at Belle Vue.

The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail runs along the Oakington shoreline. The trail commemorates Captain Smith's exploration of the Bay in 1607 through 1609 and is the nation's first all-water national historic trail.

Reportedly, the property is well-known for its archeological significance, particularly for Native American relics.

### ***Natural features***

Belle Vue Farm contains a mile of undeveloped Chesapeake Bay coastline. Views from the shoreline bluffs provide a spectacular panorama over the Chesapeake Bay and the distant hills of Cecil County's Elk Neck Peninsula. The property also includes 60-acres of Chesapeake Bay Critical Area, denoting lands within 1,000 feet of tidal water bodies.

The gentle ridge of the Oakington Peninsula divides Belle Vue into two main watershed areas and ecologically significant zones. Gashey's Creek and the associated nontidal wetlands flow into Swan Creek along the western edge while the eastern portion of the property drains directly to the Chesapeake Bay.

The lower portion of Gashey's Creek, and the tributary which drains into it from the west, are designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services as critical habitat for the Maryland Darter, a nationally endangered fish species. Unfortunately, this species, which is endemic to Harford County, has not been seen for over fifty years and is thought to be extinct. Today, the riparian area is home to significant bird, amphibian, and reptile populations. The forests along the Gashey's Creek stream corridor are important for absorbing nutrients and runoff that would otherwise harm the water quality of the Chesapeake Bay.

The Chesapeake Bay shore of Belle Vue encompasses two shallow tidal coves and associated wetlands. The area contains an ecologically fragile intertidal zone made up of cobble, sand, and mud. It provides ideal habitat for two nationally rare plant species – the Maryland Bur-marigold (*Bidens bidentoides* var. *mariana*) and Parker's pipewort (*Eriocaulon parkeri*). The habitat is unusual in the upper Chesapeake Bay, making the Oakington shore among the most significant habitats in Harford County. The coastal bluffs also house numerous Bald Eagle nests and other valuable bird habitat.

More than 260 species of birds have been seen at Swan Harbor Farm, making it arguably the top birding location in Harford County. Given the similar habitats found at Belle Vue Farm, the property likely hosts well over 200 bird species. Of note are the large number of wintering waterfowl and migrating shorebirds on Oakington Peninsula.

### ***Agrarian heritage***

Belle Vue Farm is an important component of the county's agrarian heritage. Its soils rank among the most productive in Harford County with two-hundred acres of the property currently cultivated for corn



and soybeans. It represents one of the few remaining active farms within the county's allocated growth area, otherwise called the "Development Envelope" of Harford County.

The fields are interspersed with forest stands, covering approximately 90 acres. The forested acreage contains species typical of the Coastal Plain including white oak, loblolly pine, sweet gum, and American holly. One of Belle Vue's American holly trees is listed as a Maryland's Big Tree, a program sponsored by the state Department of Natural Resources Forest Service. The property contains an impressive boxwood that the Davis family estimates to be more than 300 years old.

### ***Acquisition***

Efforts to acquire and preserve Belle Vue Farm began in earnest in 1994 around the same time that the county acquired Swan Harbor Farm from Johns Hopkins University. HLT, a local nonprofit land conservation organization, devoted significant time and resources to purchase the property during a generational transfer following the death of Dr. E. Hollister Davis. Griffiths Davis, the oldest of Dr. Davis's eight children purchased the property from his siblings in 1996 and lived there with his wife Vicky until his death in 2017.

HLT met with Ms. Davis and members of her family in late 2017 to express interest in purchasing the property and permanently preserving the land. While the Davis family was very amenable to preserving the land, they engaged a realtor to market the property widely to better understand their options before entertaining the offer from HLT.

Reportedly, numerous developers explored options for creating an industrial park, business complex, and a high-end residential community at Belle Vue. Despite being within the county's designated growth area, the property is currently zoned agricultural and is not planned to receive public water or septic.

Given the property's proximity to APG, HLT engaged its partners at the installation as a candidate for the Army Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) program. Through this program, for over a decade, HLT and APG have worked together to preserve land outside of the installation to reduce incompatible development and protect habitat. In late 2019, HLT and APG strengthened the preservation Old Bay Farm to the north of Oakington Peninsula with a permanent conservation easement.

HLT also made the Harford County Government aware of its intention to purchase Belle Vue Farm in late 2018. From that point forward, HLT and Harford County Government worked in partnership to pursue the acquisition of the property as a future county park.

Ultimately, the partnership entered into an agreement of sale with Ms. Davis on April 14, 2020 for a purchase price of \$6,270,000. The acquisition and transaction costs were co-funded by Maryland's Program Open Space, Harford County Government, APG, and HLT.

The property is permanently preserved by a Program Open Space conservation easement with the State of Maryland and restrictions imposed by APG through the ACUB program. Additionally, according to the wishes of Ms. Davis and her family, the property will continue to be called by its historic name of Belle Vue Farm.

### ***Public access and future plans***



Harford County's Department of Parks & Recreation, with the participation of APG and HLT, has begun assessing the condition of the historic home and developing a long-range management plan. The county will continue to lease the cropland, as it does with Swan Harbor Farm.

The preservation of Belle Vue Farm offers a variety of public recreational and educational opportunities. Further environmental study and historic research are required to determine the most compatible uses that would be suitable for the property.

Possibilities include an extension of the Lower Susquehanna Heritage Greenway from Havre de Grace south to Oakington Peninsula. The property might allow for active uses such as hiking and biking; access to the Bay for scenic views or recreational fishing; and picnic or tent camping areas.

Belle Vue's unique ecosystems could provide a living classroom for visitors to learn about tidal and nontidal wetlands. The property would also be ideal for on-farm demonstrations highlighting the area's agrarian heritage and historical interpretation detailing the indigenous people of the upper Chesapeake and lower Susquehanna.

### ***Reflections***

The protection of Belle Vue Farm, and Oakington Peninsula, is one of the most important land conservation successes in the history of Harford County. The scenic, historic, agrarian, and environmental values of the area are irreplaceable. The window of opportunity to set aside places for public access to Harford County's stunning landscapes and waterways is limited, making the preservation of Belle Vue truly momentous.

For HLT, the effort to protect Belle Vue Farm spanned nearly three decades, almost the entirety of the organization's existence. There is no better example in Harford County of the patience and determination required to conserve land. The transaction represents the longest and most expensive effort to date for the local nonprofit. Success was only possible because of the years of loyal support from HLT members and the government partners who wholeheartedly embraced and joined the preservation effort.