

**PROFILES OF CONSERVATION EASEMENT DONORS
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INC.**

ALL PROFILES WRITTEN BY FRANK MCINTOSH

STANLEY FARMS

SIX GENERATIONS WORK THE LAND IN GEORGIA

Six generations of Stanleys have worked land in Georgia's Toombs and Tattnall counties, and another generation is learning to love the land and how to work it.

The Stanley family has been living and farming in the Toombs County area longer than there has been a Toombs County, which formed in 1901, and almost as long as nearby Tattnall County which officially became a county in 1801. The family's history mirrors the history of the community.



Bryan, Terry, Vince and R.T. Stanley

One of the Stanleys helped start the local hospital, and current conservation easement owner R.T. Stanley was president of the local farm bureau for 30 years (although he notes, "I don't like politics").

The real history of the Stanleys is their work on the land, including the 1,635-acre tract in Tattnall County the family preserved in 2009 with a conservation easement held by Georgia Land Trust.

"I started out sharecropping with my great uncle," R.T. says. "Some of the land we worked, the family now owns. In share-cropping, we'd receive equipment, the use of land, and fertilizer in exchange for working the land and a share of the crops brought in. Our land was mainly in cotton and tobacco back then; cash crops but hard on the land. Most of our land is now mainly in onions and some soybeans."

R.T. says that sharecropping helped strengthen his determination to own land. "As I was growing up, I always wanted to buy land and own it. It's in my blood. It's always better to own it; you never know what will happen when you lease it." The land in the conservation easement, which features around two miles of frontage on the Ochoopee River, is a more recent acquisition.

"The downturn in the economy was a two-edged sword. It hurt some people, but it helped make this tract available," says R.T., whose sons Vince, Brian and Tracy joined him in donating the easement. "Buying this tract is the biggest transaction in my life; it's a big step—a big chance to take."



*Bottomland along the Ochoopee
during record flooding*

All the Stanleys agree that it was chance worth taking. “It’s just so big and diverse,” Vince says. “There are a couple of hundred acres of longleaf and wiregrass, and we planted another 150 acres of longleaf. There’s a variety of hunting and fishing, and the land is good.”

Good indeed: 43 percent of the property is rated either prime soil or soil of statewide importance. Almost 300 acres are Tifton soils, highly desirable for production of sweet Vidalia onions. Much of the fine soils on the property are also under irrigation, highly important given a few recent periods of prolonged drought in Georgia. “We know that when you’re messing with Mother Nature, you never know what she’ll throw at you,” Brian noted.

In addition to growing onions, the Stanleys now operate Vidalia Valley Farms, which produces Vidalia Valley Onion® products, including salad dressings, barbecue sauce and even a Vidalia Onion Slow Burn Peach Hot Sauce®. Recently Vidalia Valley’s Organic Vidalia Onion Tomato Basil Dressing® won the Taste of Georgia award.

“It’s vertical integration. We get more use out of all of our onions. We grade them as they come in and some grades used to just be taken back to the fields and harrowed in. The number 2 grades have some sort of visual defect that would keep you from selling them, and they could be up to 20 percent of the year’s yield. Now, we use them for our sauces and other Vidalia Valley® products.”

When asked who created the recipes for the sauces, Vince reports that is another aspect of vertical integration, combining his entrepreneurial and culinary abilities. Who created the recipes? Vince says simply, “I did.” His inspiration? “Well, I do like to make money. And they taste real good, too.”

Not long ago, onions were the new crop for the Stanleys. Now, the family is trying other things to diversify Stanley Farm’s crops. Some of their property is now in kanaf, a fibrous plant native to the Middle East. The fibers found in kanaf’s core are blended with plastic to produce a strong plastic useful for pipes and other applications needing exceptional rigidity. The crop, recommended to them by USDA, revealed another important use in the wake of the Gulf oil spill. The plant’s fibrous core is highly absorbent, and kanaf plastics were used extensively in the cleanup efforts.

The Stanleys’ conservation easement with Georgia Land Trust will ensure that the Stanleys will always have a place not only to continue working the land but also to gather the family in some of their favorite pursuits. Much of the property is used for hunting and abounds with deer, dove, and turkey. It also features man-made ponds that support healthy populations of bass and white perch.

Vince says, “I handled a lot of the work on the conservation easement. When you’re talking forever, and trying to keep land in the family forever, you look at everything very closely.

“Working with the land trust, we feel like we covered everything. We kept changing the easement around a good bit and got it where it was a win-win. We can continue using the land, mixing in food plots, timber and crops on a lot of the property, but there are over 140 acres of well over 100-year old bottomlands that will never be touched.”

And even more important to the sixth generation of Stanleys is what the conservation easement means to the seventh generation. “Now, we know our kids will grow up on this land. They love to go out on it with us. They all say they want to go to ‘The Plantation.’”