

# TESSENTEE BOTTOMLAND PRESERVE

HICKORY KNOLL RD.  
OTTO, NC

a conservation project

of

The Land Trust  
for the  
Little Tennessee



*“Conserving the waters, forests, farms,  
and heritage of the Upper Little  
Tennessee and Hiwassee River Valleys.”*



#53 on the North Carolina Birding  
Trail - Mountain Region

## Tessentee Bottomland Preserve

### *The Vision*

The Land Trust acquired 64 acres of bottomland and river bluff at the junction of Tessentee Creek and the Little Tennessee River in 1999 and 2000 in cooperation with the NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund and the Lyndhurst Foundation. The land lies at the center of the north-south oriented Little Tennessee valley, which runs from Rabun Gap, GA to Franklin, NC, after which the river turns to the northwest as it cuts through the mountains to Tennessee.

This reach of the upper valley has been called the “true head of the Tennessee River.” Indeed, the Preserve encompasses habitat types—wetland, red cedar savannah, canebrakes, and yellow pine/blackjack oak forest—which one would more likely find in the Mississippi Valley than in the mountains of Western North Carolina. It is this diversity that we seek to conserve for the future generations of Little Tennessee River Valley residents and visitors.

### *The Land*

The Preserve is at the crossroads of two opposing landscape corridors, where a finger of the Tennessee Valley cuts between the Blue Ridge Escarpment and the Southern Nantahala Mountains. Over a ten-mile distance to the north and south, the river (at 2035 feet above sea level at the confluence with Tessentee Creek) drops in elevation by less than 50 feet while gracefully meandering through rich bottomlands on a wide floodplain. This level, north-south orientation of the valley helps it serve as a major migratory bird flyway into the Southern Appalachian Mountains. In contrast, over ten miles to the east and west, the property lies at the foot of a 6000-foot elevation change, from Albert Mountain (at 5200' in the Nantahala Range to the west) down across the river and back up to Fishhawk Mountain (at 4750' in the Fishhawk Range to the east).

The Preserve includes a large diversity of habitats, thanks in part to nine different soil types on the property. No other similar-sized area along the upper Little Tennessee has such a diversity of soils. In addition, the property has an abundance of water resources, with 4912 feet of principal stream frontage and 750 feet of secondary streams, multiple springs, and over 7 acres of wetland soils. Due to this diversity of habitats, the Preserve is an extraordinary place for viewing wildlife.

The Preserve Farm straddles a unique landform in this reach of the valley—a low ridge extending from the Fishhawk Range that rises some 60 feet in elevation above the adjacent floodplain, separating the two bottomlands areas. This windswept, quarter-mile long bluff affords spectacular views to the north and south over the historic upper Tennessee Valley.

### *The History*

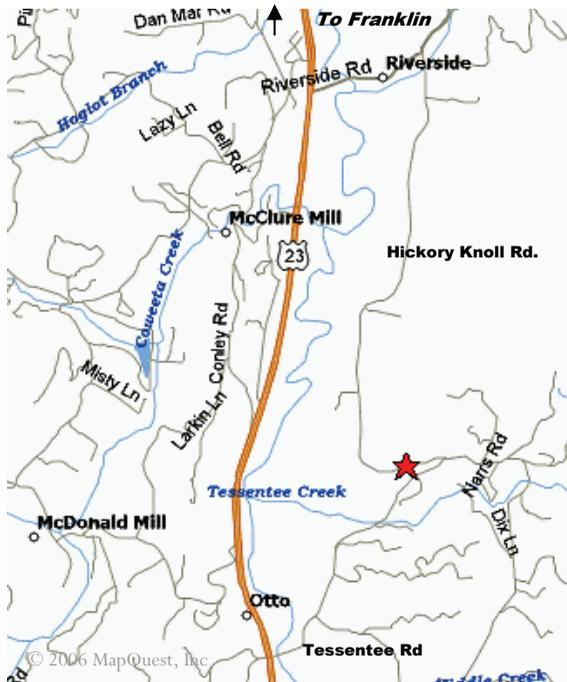
The Preserve is located at a historic crossroads in the river valley, which has long served as a trading route connecting the Mississippi Valley through the southern mountains to the piedmont and coastal plain. Multiple archaeological sites lie either on the property or within a mile of it, including the Coweeta Creek site, a 16th century Cherokee town that included an ancient earthen mound with a council house and smaller settlement sites dating back thousands of years.

The first battle of the “Cherokee Wars” may have occurred in the Tessentee Bottoms on June 27, 1760 when British and Colonial forces under the command of Col. Archibald Montgomery marched on the Middle Cherokee towns of this valley. Sixteen “Redcoats” and thirteen “Provincials” were slain and 76 were wounded in an ambush by the Cherokee.

In the spring of 1775, the native-born naturalist and explorer William Bartram may have spent the night in the hut of a trader near the present-day Preserve at “the foot of the Tessentee.” The following year, on September 17, 1776, the South Carolina Provincial Army, with 1,860 men under the command of Col. Andrew Williamson, camped at Tessentee on their march to attack the Cherokee town of Cowee, which marked the beginning of the first campaign of the Revolutionary War in the South.

Records of White settlement on the farm date from 1820 when Samuel Smith, the Smithbridge Township’s namesake, acquired the property by state grant. The existing farmhouse dates from the 1890’s. The farm was in operation as a dairy as late as the early 1990’s.

*We invite you to enjoy a hike around the river bluffs and bottomlands of the Preserve to get a sense of the rich natural and cultural history that can still be found here in the “Head of the Tennessee.”*



From Franklin: Take the Georgia Rd (US 23/US 441) south for approx. 5.2 miles, turn left onto Riverside Rd and follow for 0.5 miles, turn right onto Hickory Knoll Rd and follow for approx. 1.9 miles — the Preserve is located off a private drive (2249 Hickory Knoll Rd) on the right-hand side of the road; parking area is on the left, before the farm gate.

**While enjoying the farm, please remain safety conscious. The Land Trust is not responsible for accidents or injuries incurred by visitors to the property. All visitors assume full responsibility for their property**



The Land Trust for  
the Little Tennessee

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## Tessentee Bottomland Preserve

### Points of Interest

**A. Parking area, entrance gate, and information kiosk.** The forest foot trail starts just beyond the gate, on the left.

**B. White-oak-dominated cove forest, grading into drier oak-hickory forest.** Most natural and oldest forest on property. Note the tree identification tags along newly-constructed foot trail.

**C. Former site of 4-room wooden cabin,** built by George Keener, who raised a family of 7. House abandoned in 1960's, torn down in 2005.

**D. Second-growth mixed pine/hardwood forest.** Look for trees uncommon to Macon County, such as Blackjack oak and Shortleaf pine. This stand was thinned for forest health in 2001.

**E. Tessentee Creek.** Clearer waters drain the granite rock of the Southern Blue Ridge. Look for signs of beaver along the banks.

**F. Old wagon road,** below the existing farm road. This road, which forded Tessentee Creek, was probably the original pioneer road up and down the valley.

**G. Giant rivercane canebrake.** One of North America's three native bamboo species. LTLT has an agreement with Qualla Arts & Crafts Mutual for its members to harvest cane for artisanal use. Native canebrakes now cover just 1-2% of their former extent in the eastern U.S.

**H. Tessentee Bottoms.** 12 acres of rich bottomland once used for agricultural crops, now maintained as early successional habitat for wildlife. Note white oak plantations, planted in 2006 and 2008 in cooperation with the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, for eventual use in Cherokee basketry and as a wildlife food source

**I. Montane alluvial forest.** An understory of rivercane is gradually filling in under black cherry, black walnut, sycamore, and black locust trees.

**J. Butternut plantation,** established in 2007. Related to black walnut, this tree is becoming rare due to a canker disease. Valued by the Cherokee for its dye.

**K. Little Tennessee floodplain restoration.** 250' of eroding stream bank stabilized and 1000' of river bank reforested in 2000. River channel likely area to see ducks, geese, kingfishers, and heron.

**L. Wetland complex.** The most botanically diverse wetland in this part of the valley. Here and elsewhere, LTLT has been actively controlling invasive exotic plants such as multiflora rose.

**M. Wetland restoration project.** With help from the Little Tennessee Watershed Association, the dam for a pond built by the previous owner was breached in 2008 to establish wildlife connection with the surrounding wetland.

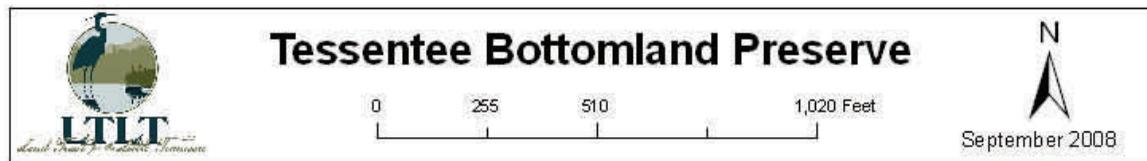
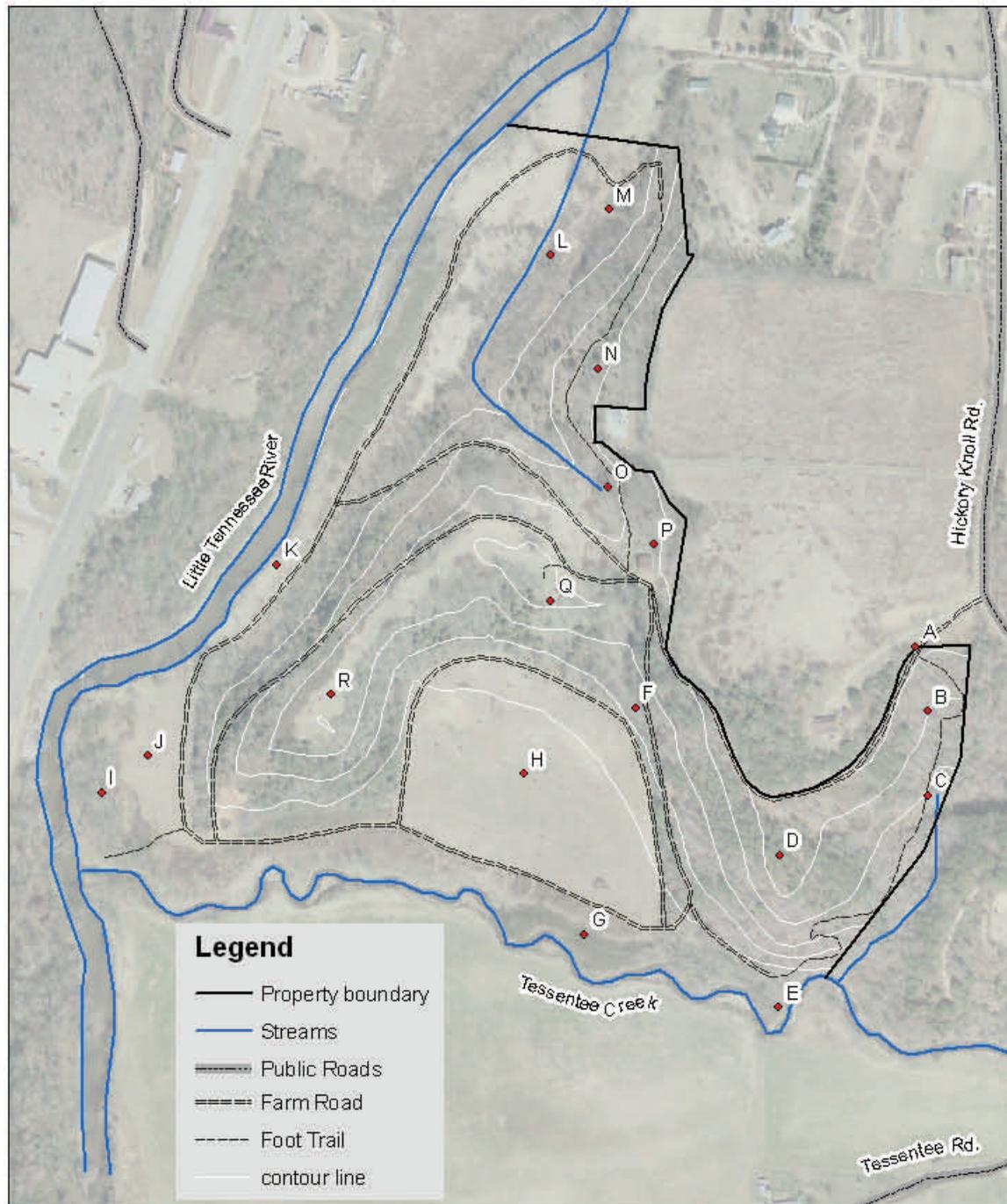
**N. Red Cedar Savannah.** Rocky soil was never plowed. Native grasses and flowers.

**O. Old-growth oak trees** (the largest trees on the property) and spring heads.

**P. Farmhouse built around 1890.** Stone smokehouse, 2-story root cellar and apple shed, chicken coop, and outhouse. Old wagon road passed between house and root cellar. (A collapsed blacksmith shop next to the cellar was removed.)

**Q. Silo built in late 1940's.** View of historic Little Tennessee Valley: south, across Tessentee Bottoms (possible site of the 1760 battle); north to Cowee Bald. Includes picnic area. A barn and corn crib also used to be located in this area.

**R. Mosaic of open and wooded bluff lands.** Grassed ridgetop with scattered shrubs, mixed with wooded side slopes. Good habitat for birds, rabbits, deer, and other wildlife.



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