



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

Saving a National Treasure

FACT SHEET

June 2015

AGRICULTURE: WE'RE HALF WAY THERE

John Gibson, Fort Stover Farm



Marjie and John Gibson own Fort Stover Farm.

Luray, VA – John Gibson is a man of the river. He founded one of the first canoe companies on the South Fork of the Shenandoah River in 1974. He has been sharing the beauty of the river with others ever since.

In 1980 he was floating down the river and noticed an abandoned stone house on a bluff on the east side of the river. Research, perseverance, and being at the right place at the right time gave John the opportunity to buy the 1769 German Flurkuchenhaus (Hall kitchen house) just one year later.

Eventually he acquired the surrounding farm and placed both the historic house and land in an open space easement with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. These cultural and natural resources are now protected forever from development.

“I bought a subdivision and turned it into a farm,” Gibson laughs. “It can be done you know...turning it around. When we bought the farm it was divided into 243 lots, and cattle roamed all over the place. The tenant farmer’s cows would wander up and down river and cross the river onto other people’s property—it was a real nightmare.”

Fort Stover Farm has a mile and a half of river frontage. One of Gibson’s first conservation efforts was erecting a fence to keep the cows out of the river.

“As soon as we put a fence up along the river, the 1985 flood took it out. I decided then to get the cows out of the flood plain all together and just use it for hay,” he says.

Gibson converted 50 acres of pasture to permanent hay and no longer worries about a flood taking out one of his fences. To water the cows he installed two alternative watering stations. This was all done without state or federal cost-share assistance.

“Being on the river, I saw firsthand the damage cattle do to stream banks,” Gibson said, adding, “It’s a negative aspect to my customer’s adventure on the river.”

Today, Fort Stover Farm produces not only healthier cows but also cleaner water and a more pleasant float down the South Fork of the Shenandoah River.

To learn more about Gibson’s canoe company, Downriver Canoe Company, which leads trips down the Shenandoah River, visit www.downriver.com.

Keeping livestock out of streams has proven herd health benefits. It is also a clear sign to downstream neighbors and other community members of your ethics and environmental stewardship.

Try these options to keep cattle healthy by keeping them out of streams:

- Off-stream watering systems
- Stream fencing
- Stream crossings
- Buffer strips
- Rotational Grazing

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Farm Service Agency (FSA), and the state agricultural best management cost-share programs can help cover expenses for certain livestock stream exclusion projects that are built to specification.

~

This is one in a series of articles about farmers who have implemented conservation practices to improve farm operations and water quality in nearby streams, demonstrating how agriculture has achieved half of the nutrient reductions necessary to clean up local streams and the Chesapeake Bay.

The author, Robert Whitescarver, lives in Swoope, Virginia, and can be contacted at bobby.whitescarver@gettingmoreontheground.com.

~

visit cbf.org