With direction from the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust, our group compiled the histories of farms along the Cathance River through the knowledge of current farmers along the river. After finding the names of five active farms from Bradley Pond, southeast to the Cathance River Preserve, we conducted interviews over the course of the semester with Pete Karonis, Felix Favreau, Dean Cornish, Priscilla and Paula Bisson, and Florence Call. Jerome Brannigan, who acquired the Karonis’ current property from the original owners in 1872, the Malletts, was extremely helpful in providing names and a baseline history of the region’s farming.

Farmers’ knowledge of their property’s histories ranged from firsthand accounts of the early 20th century to information of how the land was first acquired in the 1870's to more direct knowledge of soil and growing conditions. As historical knowledge and perspective varied so did actual use and reliance on the river, as well as individual families’ future plans for their plots of land. A key theme that emerged from all our interviews was a growing concern that houses and developments were encroaching on an area that was once dedicated to farmland.

**Bisson Farm**

The Bisson farm was purchased in 1929 by Audile and Arthur Bisson, settlers from Quebec, from the Phinney family, who had previously grown apples and blueberries on the land. Audile and Arthur started the farm with 72 head of cattle and it has remained in the family through four generations. The farm is currently run by Andy Bisson, Arthur’s grandson. The Bissons used to own a second farm farther up meadow road, but sold it to an electric company who wanted to install power lines.

The Bissons sell their meat and dairy products (both prepared onsite) in their meat market, which was started 41 years ago. Previously, the Bissons sold their meat and milk door-to-door with a delivery truck. In total, the income from the market supports 6 families. The Bissons rotate crops every other year and as a result have encountered very few problems with soil erosion or nutrient loss. The family hopes to hold onto the farm and would like to see the youngest generation continue the family tradition.

**Bradley Pond Farm**

Bradley Pond Farm was started at the turn of the 19th century, by a man named Bradley who walked to the area all the way from New Hampshire. The farm was passed to the Tates, who ran a dairy farm and had a few beef cattle, and then to Mrs. Tate’s niece-in-law Frank Todd. In 1956, Todd began leasing the property to the Calls who inherited it after he died in 1989.

In 1991, Frederick and Florence Call placed a conservation easement on the 163 acre farm, through the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust. The easement permits recreational public access to parts of the land, yet the number one priority of the easement is to conserve the property and its ecological integrity.

In the late 1990s, the land was bought by Dean Cornish, who had been working the land since 1987. Cornish has the fields and sells the hay to local horse owners as well as sells gravel from the gravel pit and firewood from the forest. He has also started a small cranberry bog project and hopes to build a greenhouse to grow seedlings and flowers.

**Favreau Williams Farm**

For the last fifty years, Ruth Williams and Felix Favreau have farmed their 25 acres of land abutting the Cathance River, growing the majority of their own meat and produce. Over those fifty years, they’ve witnessed a profound change in both the use and appearance of the land around them: the encroachment of houses and development into an area that was once farmland and pasture.

While Favreau and Williams’ practices have changed little, they said the most important change they’ve observed in the time they’ve lived in Topsham is the development that started in the 1970s. In the past, there had been about ten small farms between Topsham and Augusta, each about 150 acres. Now, according to the Favreau Williams, this old farmland is either being enveloped into larger farms or sold for residential development, because many farmers are getting too old to continue farming, and their children are not interested in taking over.

**Karonis Farm**

Pete Karonis, his wife, son and daughter have worked their farm since June of 1995, selling his goods at a farm stand and two farmers’ markets in the area. His property consists of 26 acres of land which stretch to the Cathance River. In 1872 the farm was a large dairy farm owned by the Mallet’s. From 1971 to 1995 the previous two owners did not farm the land. In the past the family has raised chickens, but their major crops include beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, potatoes, and corn. The Karonis’ are also part of Maine’s Sustainable Forestry Program, and have also built a small spring-fed pond 1100 feet from the river that supports their overhead irrigation system. In the past years, sprawl has placed increasing pressure on the family to sell their farm. Pete Karonis sees farming, however, as an important way to conserve land as pastureland is ever being converted into development projects. Ultimately Karonis hopes to sell his land to a farmer, but only financial circumstances will tell.

**Rensenbrink’s House**

Founding leaders in the efforts to preserve the Cathance River Corridor, John and Carla Rensenbrink placed a conservation easement on their property in 2002. The Rensenbrinks granted an easement to the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay for their 35 acre property on the banks of the Cathance River in Topsham. The easement is designed to “provide a significant public benefit by protecting and preserving in perpetuity the undeveloped shoreline along the Cathance River and the associated wetland, wildlife habitat and upland habitat on the Protected Property…and to protect the scenic views of the Cathance River.” Since that time, local conservationists have been working to continue development of a “mosaic” of conserved properties along the Cathance River Corridor; the use of conservation easements on privately held lands is a centerpiece of this strategy.

**Cathance Nature Preserve**

After two years and seventeen drafts of a conservation easement, the members of Topsham’s Future and local developer John Wasileski succeeded in creating the Cathance River Preserve in the spring of 2000. The 250 acre preserve creates a 1,000 foot buffer between the river and Wasileski’s Highlands North development, in an effort to protect critical habitat and open space in the Cathance River Corridor. According to Topsham’s Future member John Rensenbrink, the agreement “illustartes that development and ecology don’t have to be at odds.” With the creation of the Cathance River Education Alliance in 2002, the preserve has also become an invaluable educational resource for local schools and provides recreation opportunities for area residents who visit the preserve’s trails.