

## **Blackberry Farm and Three Sisters: Efforts to Preserve Our Mountains**

### **History of Blackberry Farm and Three Sisters:**

On September 2, 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt stood in Newfound Gap in the Great Smoky Mountains and dedicated 500,000 acres of continuous ridges of forests between North Carolina and Tennessee as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. During its first full year, the park attracted approximately one million visitors. Today, it is the most visited national park in the country with nearly 10 million visitors a year. While this land is forever protected, the small communities adjacent to the park are facing special challenges as they strive to determine how to handle the large number of visitors, and the development that comes with being a tourist destination, while at the same time maintaining their cultural uniqueness and not succumbing to improper or over development.

In one of these communities, Walland, Tennessee, a 1930s dream home named Blackberry Farm evolved over the past 70 years from a private mountain estate to “America’s Number 1 Small Hotel”, as rated by the Zagat Survey. This gracious retreat was created to allow a family, the Lasiers, to experience the perfect mountain getaway in the Smokies, and today the current owners, the Beall family, welcome between 6,500 and 8,000 people per year. From the beginning, the Beall family strived to create an authentic experience for its guests; one that focused on the charm, cuisine, Southern hospitality and beauty of the area. As Blackberry Farm grew, the Beall Family carefully modeled each new addition to ensure it would blend into the existing atmosphere, while providing guests with a Smoky Mountain experience unlike any other. Blackberry Farm has become an internationally recognized model for luxury accommodations, yet it strives to stay true to the place and people of the area. This unique combination positions Blackberry Farm as a leader in sustainable tourism practices.

The beauty of Blackberry Farm, which can now house 126 guests in 63 estate rooms and cottages, inspired its owners to help preserve the land adjacent to the national park, as well as make the features of the Inn compatible with the surrounding scenery and heritage, a key factor in its success.

After seeing first-hand what planned growth and a vision created at the 4,200-acre Blackberry Farm, the Beall Family and seven other East Tennessee families came together to purchase and protect an additional 5,000 acres of Blount County, Tennessee’s Chilhowee Mountain. The property, once intended to be part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, lies on both sides of an eight-mile ridge on Chilhowee Mountain in East Miller’s Cove, near Walland. The property, referred to as “The Three Sisters” because of the view of three mountain peaks from Maryville College, was purchased by these families.

With total dedication to the heritage and natural beauty of the original Tuckaleechee Cove and surrounding Chilhowee Mountains, the Three Sisters’ owners intend to use Blackberry Farm as an example of how to utilize the Three Sisters, a piece of prime mountain property, without losing its character and the most valuable parts of the land—the views and open space. The overriding goals of the Three Sisters purchase are to protect the viewscapes of the mountains when entering the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Blount County on Highway 321, while enhancing the quality of the Walland community. Prior to this new investment, the families had already purchased three miles of ridge top land adjacent to the Three Sisters property, making a total of nine miles of mountain views that will be protected forever from improper development.

Both of these properties are, in their own unique way, preserving the character, heritage and most importantly, the viewscapes and natural landscape, of Blount County’s most valuable tourism asset—the Smoky Mountains.

## **Partnerships Create Strong Foundation for Land Preservation:**

Since strong partnerships were established to create Blackberry Farm, the Three Sisters' owners knew that it would once again take teamwork to preserve the Three Sisters tract of land. The approach with this property has been unique in every aspect. First, and foremost, the Three Sister's owners purchased the land at a premium to get it off the market before it was purchased by others who might not be as concerned about protecting the mountain views, ridgelines and overall integrity of the land. The Three Sisters' owners wanted to guarantee that any use of the land would help in protecting an invaluable resource for locals and visitors—the mountain views.

The land acquisition of the Three Sisters tract was discussed for almost three years, including consultation with many national conservation experts about the best approaches to developing the property, including Pat Noonan, chairman emeritus of the Conservation Fund and John H. Adams, chairman, Open Space Institute and Founding Director of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

With advice and technical expertise from these organizations, along with nearly a year of extensive environmental and engineering studies and planning, the families have established partnerships with experts in conservation easements, engineering, planning, environmental issues, landscape design, trail design, and regional and national developers to create a comprehensive conservation easement plan for the Three Sisters. Creating plans for the property has truly been a team effort, and through a variety of tools and public-private partnerships, involving the local and state governments, the families will evaluate the best approach for the property to insure that the conservation easement and other political uses of the Three Sister tract is done right.

“The Open Space Institute applauds the acquisition of the Three Sisters Tract and the plans to protect it,” said Adams. “OSI has long considered it essential to protect this important tract to preserve the scenic vistas as you enter the Smokies. A special thanks goes to all involved in this effort who care about our great mountain heritage.”

## **Benefits of Quality Development and Land Conservation:**

Blackberry Farm and Three Sisters are excellent examples of how economic impact, tourism and preservation can go hand-in-hand. Blount County is not unlike many other small, gateway communities—growth and development are inevitable, but by embracing low impact development that protect open space and viewscapes, communities are able to grow and prosper while preserving the mountains for future generations to enjoy.

For the past 50 years, Blackberry Farm has preserved and shared the culture of the area with guests from around the world, and this philosophy has allowed the Inn to prosper, providing significant economic impact to the tourism industry in Blount County. In addition to sharing East Tennessee's culture with visitors, Blackberry Farm has preserved open space in the mountains, ensuring its protection from future development and providing visitors with the atmosphere they come to the mountains to experience.

The families plan for the Three Sisters property to embrace the spirit of Blackberry Farm. They hope to help preserve the character of the Walland community, while at the same time significantly contributing to the sustainable tourism efforts of Blount County for years to come.

“The Three Sisters project shows how well environment and economics can work together, with beautiful results,” said Noonan. “At The Conservation Fund, we praise the families and partners behind this effort. They have protected this spectacular gateway to the Smokies for generations to come.”

By protecting this piece of land from improper development, the Three Sisters' owners have ensured that one of Blount County's most valuable tourist attractions is forever protected—the viewscapes. Protecting that which makes Blount County unique, and creating large tracts of preserved, open green space, will help the Smoky Mountain Convention and Visitors Bureau reach its goal of establishing a strong, sustainable tourism program focused on the preservation of the area's rich heritage and history.

“This is some of the most beautiful landscape in America, and an area of tremendous importance to the heritage, not only of this region, but of the nation as a whole,” said Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council. “Safeguarding the Three Sisters will ensure they are as much a part of our future as they have been our past. This is a fine addition to a great legacy of conservation, and a wise investment that will bring countless benefits to the region for many years to come.”